

Asian Women in Australian Soap Operas: Questioning Idealized Hybrid Representation

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Received: February 15, 2011

Accepted: March 22, 2011

doi:10.5539/ass.v7n8p3

Abstract

Representations of Asian women in Australian soap operas and television dramas contribute to debate about the incorporation of 'ethnic' identities within multicultural Australia. As an alternative concept for analyzing representation, notions of hybridity as the mixing of cultural and racial identity have come into prominence. Hybridity is a complex concept and is not simply a progressive means of representing Asian women. Key criticisms of the hybridity theory are that it promotes a happy, safe and simplified vision of multicultural harmony, or that it leads to violence and alienation. In this paper, hybridity is further divided into bounded culture and translocal culture categories which together cover the range of meanings invoked in discussions on representation. The complex nature of hybridity then illustrated by an analysis of two television dramas with Asian women characters, *Heartbreak High* and *Bondi Banquet*. The analyses of these characters show that the contradictory elements of melodrama and realism are limiting and can still have the effect of representing Asian women as controversial figures within a multicultural Australian identity.

Keywords: Asian women, Representation, Television, Soap opera, Australia, Hybridity cultural theory

1. Introduction

The relationship between television and national identity is a two-way interaction. Television both constructs and creates understanding of national identity, and reflects this identity. It is now impossible to understand a society and how that society exists without recourse to its cultural artifacts like television. In comparison to other cultural forms television has a significant reach into people's lives and homes. Due to their constancy, television serials, such as soap operas and television dramas, especially, have the profound effect of mirroring viewers' ongoing daily experience due to their constancy. Viewers can follow and feel attached to the daily or weekly depictions of the lives of a group of characters. The critique outlined here is that the popular television programs analysed are all struggling with the notions of Australian multicultural identity and what this identity is. Specifically programs with Asian female characters are advertised and exported overseas as depicting 'Australian lifestyle'.

In the United Kingdom, where Australian soap operas and television drama such as *Home and Away*, *Neighbours* and *Heartbreak High* are popular (Acquila, 2001; Crofts, 1995; McEwan, 2001), controversies have arisen over British dramas that do not have any 'ethnic' characters at all. A show producer has recently been suspended for commenting that they don't have ethnic minorities involved, because he said "It wouldn't be the English village with them, it just wouldn't work. I am trying to make something that appeal to a certain audience" (British Broadcasting Channel [BBC] News Magazine, 2011). Questions of other races besides white-only actors representing 'Englishness' for majority white audiences, was answered in terms of accurately representing rural lifestyle versus the urban environment (BBC, 2011). One argument against this depiction, by Judy Ling Wong, UK Director of Black Environment Network, is that even in rural areas certain professions would have ethnic minorities such as a Filipina nurse (BBC 2011). This paper thus looked at another predominant Anglo culture that of Australia, where in the imagined communities of the television serials an Asian female character is used as an essential figure within a constructed notion of a multicultural national identity.. (Note 1)

Literature on Australian ethnic representations in the media has been more positive than its United Kingdom counterpart, citing an increase in mixed-race 'hybrid' actors (Acquila, 2001; Jacka, 2002; May, 2001, 2002).

Moreover, there are discussions on ethnic representation in Australia which have focused on the concept of hybridity as a mixing of cultural categories, such as Asian-Australian (Ang, 1996, 1999, 2000, 2000, 2001 and 2001; Lo 2001). However, the theory of hybridity is more complex than a simple assumption of a progressive form of representation. Analysis of portrayals of hybrid identity in soap opera reveals the complexity of hybridity and its various forms. In this paper, hybridity is analysed further into the categories of translocal culture type or bounded culture type. However, in its various hybrid forms, the analysis of Asian women characters also shows that limitations exist in the genres of soap opera and television drama itself.

Furthermore, this paper argues that Australian television drama and soap opera like its United Kingdom counterpart, is created for the consumption of the majority white Anglo viewers who are comfortable with Asian female character who reflect of a safe, simplified multicultural national identity.

2. Australian Multiculturalism and Asian women's representation

To understand the analysis of Asian women characters and their relationship to an Australian multicultural national identity, one must draw upon the origin of migrant practices in pre-multicultural Australia. From Federation in 1901, Asian immigration to Australia was prohibited under the White Australia policy. After the end of World War II to the late 1960's the Assimilation policy expected migrants to abandon their cultural practices, integrate and adopt the language, values and norms of the mainstream Anglo Australian culture. From the White Australia policy era until the end of the Assimilation policy, as analysed in Alison Broinowski's (1992) book *the Yellow Lady*, representations of Asian people were of the feared alien opposite 'other'. For example Broinowski describes how different texts including novels, plays, poems, travel books, newspaper articles, cartoons and film represented Asia as the Yellow Peril, the Yellow Menace, the Yellow Wave, the Yellow Agony, the Yellow Lady, the Pestiferous Insect Plague, the Oriental Dragon, and the Mongolian Octopus (1992, p.56). Asians are depicted as exotic, lazy, feminine, dangerous, evil, cunning, myopic, stunted, depraved, indolent, hysterical, lacking in moral fibre, detestable and lascivious (1992, p.56). Asian women in particular were used to symbolize the continent of Asia, and in a historical context, Asia feminised was thus able to be subordinated, controlled and managed.

I argued that representations of Asian women as the feminised and feared 'other' persisted in the following soap operas and television dramas from the mid 1990s on wards: *Sea Change*, *Home and Away*, *Neighbours*, *White Collar Blue* and *Stingers*. In these dramas Asian women are highly sexualised and problematic, being portrayed as: lascivious partners, a love interest with a deadly contagious disease, a demanding woman pregnant from a one night sexual encounter, porn stars, prostitutes and mail-order brides. Asian women are thus represented as sexual objects for the commodification of soap opera and television drama viewers' commodification. Furthermore, as has been analysed in other literature on Asian women's representation in Australian media (Hamilton, 1989; Saroca, 1997, 2002), these negative stereotypes are normalised and naturalised in a form of dangerous sexual politics. More specifically, in the examples of police dramas *White Collar Blue* and *Stingers*, dangerous sexual politics exist in the stereotypes of Asian women, because the portrayals of violence occurring to them are normalized as the result of their combined racial and gender profile.

Furthermore, analysis of their representation in soap opera and television drama points to the lure of the Asian woman inherent in her depiction both physically and behaviorally as opposite to the Anglo Australian woman; the Asian woman is constructed as 'really feminine', docile, undemanding and childlike. Moreover, the areas of Asian female characters' rights and equality with men are not touched upon. Where these rights are discussed, they are revealed to the Asian women characters, or fought for on their behalf, by Anglo characters (female or otherwise). Thus the Asian female characters can only reflect the 'problems' and issues faced by Australia's ethnic minorities.

Jon Stratton (1998) in a similar textual analysis of Australian films produced during the multicultural era (late 1990s) argued that Asians still have limited and problematic representation as the racially 'other' of the national imagery. Although not making a gender distinction, his examples of Asian female characters are of a sexual performer, Cynthia in the movie *Priscilla Queen of the Desert*, and one of the victims of racial violence in the movie about a neo-nazi group called *Romper Stomper*. More focused on Asian women's roles, Ien Ang (1996) argued that during the multiculturalism era the concept of 'Asian woman' was also used as metaphor to represent a safe version of multiculturalism. Ang illustrated her argument with an account of the smiling Asian woman on an Australian government immigration poster bearing the caption "Come and join our family." Ang questioned the Asian woman's positioning in Australia's national space and concluded that this depiction still 'others' the Asian woman while her non-threatening smile symbolically becomes a metaphor for a tolerant Australia that enjoys simplified cultural diversity with hybrid Asian-Australian identities.

3. Hybrid representation and its limitations

Hybridity, as an alternative concept of understanding Asian women's representation in Australian soap opera and television drama was originally used in cultural theory by Homi Bhabha (1994). Bhabha's use of hybridity arises out of his idea of the 'in between space' occupied by subjects of cultural difference. Floya Anthias (2001) interprets 'subject' as the "cosmopolitan who lacks a central cultural narrative". Cosmopolitans are people who transgress national or ethnic borders, such as "migrants, artists, poets or intellectuals". (2001, p. 626) These people have dual perspectives from their two cultures, and consequently they are able to express themselves and their ideas, in art and speech, from two places simultaneously. But they inhabit neither place, as they occupy an 'in between (third) space' which is not only between the two cultures but it is also "the space of liminality, of 'no place' of the buffer zone of 'no man's land'." (2001, p. 626)

For Bhabha, those who inhabit this third space can "elude the politics of polarity and emerge as others of ourselves." (1994, p.39). A hybrid position is thus fluid; differences, be they class, gender, race or culture, are not fixed or set one way or the other. For example, a migrant does not have to assimilate with a majority Australian Anglo identity or try to maintain an essentialist identity from an Asian country, but instead can identify as something else besides, an 'in-between'. The representation of a hybrid, 'hyphenated' identity of Asian-Australian women in the television medium is what is at the heart of this paper's analyses.

Literature on Asian-Australian representations has criticized how hybridity was used in positive terms (Ang, 2001; Lo, 2000,). Jacqueline Lo (2000) criticizes what she calls a celebration of happy hybridity; juxtaposing this notion with a more reflexive intentional use of hybridity exemplified by Asian-Australian performing artists making political statements about their multiple and contextual identities. Ien Ang (2001) criticizes hybridity in its cultural context as being applied too easily to justify multiculturalism in positive terms, without questioning its ambivalent nature:

The rhetoric of hybridity can easily be put to political abuse if it is co-opted in a discourse of easy multicultural and multiracial harmony... This harmonious discourse reduces the concept of hybridity to a depoliticised version of a happy fusion and synthesis. (Ang, 2001, p.197)

Both Lo and Ang recommend that closer investigation into the specific contexts and conditions in which hybridity operates is needed. Lo and Ang's arguments can be related to how Asian women in Australian soap opera and television drama operate as a token 'other', to represent a harmonious Australian multicultural community. However, their identity as hybrid also positions them as ambivalent characters, simultaneously inside and outside the homogenous dominant communities.

Floya Anthias argues that hybridity provides a 'gloss' over existing cultural hierarchies and hegemonic practices (2001, p.628). Drawing on the work of critics such as Rattansi, Sara Ahmed and Cornel West, she details that racism may be hybrid, and fascism may be a reactionary version of extremism against hybridity. Being positioned as hybrid can have the effect of being inadequate to deal with any prevailing cultural identity. Moreover, hybridity can be tied to violence and alienation both as receivers or producers. These criticisms are useful in determining whether or not representations of Asian women's hybrid identity depict the existence of cultural hierarchies and hegemonic practices of the majority Anglo Australian culture. Story lines can also be analysed to see whether they show negative consequences of hybrid identities, including alienation and racism.

To address these negative elements in hybridity, Anthias gives an alternative concept to the hybrid condition which she terms translocational positionality. She argues that translocational positionality more accurately reflects the hybrid condition in terms of social relations and resource struggles rather than being merely a mixing of culture and race. Anthias stresses the importance of addressing social relations along the lines of gender, race and class that create 'othering' practices. These interplay with one another to produce complex forms of hierarchy, while the resource struggle that reflects the hybrid condition is over economic, political, cultural and representational conditions.

Chris Barker's (2000) account of two types of hybridity- bounded culture and translocal culture- provides a useful way of thinking about the complex nature of hybridity as different forms of cultural juxtaposition, with reference to the specific circumstances of particular social groups. In the bounded culture category, the cultures are perceived as a fixed entity, regardless of whether they are separate or juxtaposed in time and space. Whereas, in the translocal culture category, cultures are described as: fluid, moving and changing, and strategically forging new identities. Barker describes two forms of translocal hybridity. The first is a forging of new identities along an anti-essentialist axis such as class, ethnicity, gender, age (2000, p.203). The second is the outcome of recognition of difference, producing a new category such as a hyphenated Chinese-Australian hybrid identity. Translocal

culture is similar to Anthias' notion of translocational positionality in that both form anti-essentialist positions out of social relations and resource struggles.

Barker's (1997) qualitative analysis of non-Anglo characters in soap operas, from the viewpoint of girls he categorized as British-Asian, further develops the bounded or translocal hybridity distinction. Barker concentrates on translocal forms of hybridity that emerged most strongly in his study. Interestingly he found that the British-Asian girls identify themselves as being in the translocal category unlike the 'Asian' characters on the soap opera and television drama they talked about. The girls identify as translocal because they feel themselves to be living a mix of British and Asian traditions, feeling just as strongly about Birmingham, their place of birth or residence, as they do about their Asian cultural heritage. The girls forge alliances with other minority groups like the 'Blacks', by expressing similar feelings of being on the periphery of the British society, and in terms of both quantity and quality, not represented adequately on television (1997, p.617). For example, the British-Asian girls criticize as negative and stereotypical the depiction of the Indian girl character 'Lahta' in *Neighbours*. This character came directly from India, wore a sari, and had a controlling brother. Indeed, one of the girls sees the representation of 'a typical Asian' in the soap operas and television dramas as "taking the mickey" and "taking the piss". Barker's analysis of Asian characters, like Lahta, demonstrates how representations of Asian women can be both bounded and translocal forms of hybrid identities.

Other studies of texts of television dramas reveal different aspects of hybridity. An informative Australian example is Ien Ang's (2001) analysis of the SBS series *Hybrid Lives*. This series includes documentaries and fictional short film dramas made by non-Anglo-Australians expressing their understanding of their hybrid identity. Ang describes *Hybrid Life* as:

the new reality of people's lives, shaped by a mixture of cultural influences and backgrounds. Living with difference - of language, values, rituals, beliefs, religion, looks, memories - is a formative and integral part of these people's personal histories, their sense of who they are and how they relate to the world. (2001, p.14)

An argument can be derived from Ang's analysis in that it is possible these representations enter into a translocal form of hybridity that recognizes similarity and differences forged between various cultures and social structures.

The *Hybrid Life* series not only shows a translocal type of hybridity, but it is also successful in representing complexity by demonstrating the co-existence of different forms of hybridity. For example, in one fictional story, a Vietnamese immigrant, a mother and garment worker, is portrayed as remaining within her bounded Vietnamese culture due to her lack of English language and adaptation skills. The main focus of the story, however, is on the life dramas and problems facing her children as they negotiate between their Vietnamese and Australian cultures. Their hybridisation is translocal because it occurs out of recognition of difference and produces something new: a Vietnamese-Australian. The mother and children in this story illustrate how different hybrid identities can co-exist in one milieu.

Barker's differentiation between the hybrid identity presented on soap opera and television drama and the hybrid identity lived by British Asian girls can be further analyzed using Ghassan Hage's description of the 'multicultural real' (Hage, 1998). The 'multicultural real' is a result of the complex relationship between the fantasy of multiculturalism, as an exhibition of cultural diversity, and a representation of a multicultural society. The fantasy of multiculturalism is enacted through the fictional and melodramatic depictions of soap opera and television drama. In comparison, an example of a presentation of a multicultural society is the mundane reality of everyday life with which the British-Asian girls interviewed have identified, and which they feel reflects their translocal hybridity.

Hage's (1998) theory on the 'multicultural real' introduces another argument about the constraints on the soap opera and television drama genre. This genre produces tensions between the conventions of realism and melodrama. The real in this genre is about emulating the mundane daily activities with "motivated characters, recognizable locations and believable social problems" (Chris Barker, 2000, p.266). While the melodramatic aspect stretches the credibility of a realist narrative, the dramatic acting, story lines and visual effects propel viewers into an emotional journey. The melodramatic aspect of soap opera can be criticized as depicting an unrealistic representation of Asian women's hybrid lives. For example, Lahta from *Neighbors* who is represented as having a bounded form of hybridity, has the melodramatic story line of being oppressed by her brother, and is stereotyped as having to remain a good traditional Indian girl.

In comparison to Barker's soap opera examples, the *Hybrid Life* series, as seen in Ang's analysis, better portrays the complexity of hybrid identity. This might be due to the documentary nature of the series, or to the fact that it was created by individuals living a hybrid life. Bill Nichols, however, argues it is not in their construct as texts that

documentaries differ from fictions, but in the representations they make (1991, p.111). The difference is that a documentary makes an argument that it is representing a world, not a fictionalized, imagined world, and it does so by producing 'evidence' to strengthen its argument, such as using interviews and news footages. Therefore, the documentaries in *Hybrid Life* seem to depict a more 'real' account of hybrid lives because they ask the viewer to consider it as a representation of the real world, rather than the imagined world of soap opera and television drama.

3.1 Hybridity and Asian women characters in *Heartbreak High* and *Bondi Banquet*

Heartbreak High is an Australian series that has been hailed as an exemplary representation of 'real life multicultural Australia' by television critic Peter Aquila (2001). Aquila uses Hage's concept of White Multiculturalism arguing that this concept is in fact a positive force in multicultural representation. He points out that white multiculturalists like Ben Gannon and Michael Jenkins, the producer and director of *Heartbreak High*, succeed in contributing to the development of cultural diversity in film and television. Aquila praises *Heartbreak High* for bestowing, since the early 1990's, mainstream acceptability on non-Anglo characters. He states that "its success proved that multiculturalism could work in mainstream film and television, while at the same time raising important ethical issues" (2001, p.105). He does acknowledge that many critics argued that it failed to address these ethical issues seriously (2001, p.105). Furthermore, *Heartbreak High* lost its ratings in 'mainstream' commercial television during its first season, and was consequently moved to the government-owned Australian Broadcasting Channel (ABC) television station.

At first glance *Heartbreak High* appears to succeed in depicting a 'real life' situation through its 'multicultural' characters. Overcoming the constraints of the soap opera and television drama genre is, however, another question. The setting is an urban High School, and the drama that revolves around second generation multicultural students and their teenage problems seems to depict 'real life' multiculturalism. The students have a translocal identity through a non-essentialist and strategic identification of their age and social background. Depictions of a hybrid identity are assumed from a second generation non -Anglo-Australian perspective.

The character of Stephanie Tan, nicknamed Mai Hem, however, can not be clearly identified as a hybrid Asian-Australian, although she is clearly described as 'Asian'. Mai Hem's father, a Hong Kong businessman, left her in Australia to study, initially at a boarding school. She then moved to Hartley High school. Mai Hem has an ambivalent identity, and does not fit into the popular notion of an Asian-Australian either as an economic immigrant or refugee. It is not made clear whether she has Australian citizenship. Even though she is not acknowledged to have a hyphenated identity, her mannerisms and her accent identify her as a typical Australian teenager, little different from other Anglo characters. Her English is good enough to work on the school newspaper and she is depicted debating and contributing to class discussions. She is represented as being able to adapt and assimilate to the majority Anglo culture. For most of the series, the only marker of Mai Hem's 'Asian' identity is her physical appearance. The form of her assimilation is regarded as a hybrid identity reflected in the bounded culture category. She does, though, move between her two separate cultural traditions, and defines herself as Asian. Therefore she depicts the various forms of both bounded and translocal types of hybridity.

However, Mai Hem's position in the community still remains on the periphery, similar to the characters discussed earlier who reproduce orientalist or assimilationist discourse. This is not because of her ambivalent identity as an international student, but in her extreme behaviors and views. One reason why she is on the periphery of the community is because she is described as eccentric with orientalist exotic undertones. Here is where the constraint of the soap opera/television drama genre with its melodramatic aspect is revealed. Her character is described as, "a feisty Asian girl with a mysterious past, she is part artist, part stirrer, an anarchist with colorful hair and bohemian clothes; sharp and sassy, Ryan is instantly attracted to her, the others are more wary to begin with." This is exemplified in the story when she first arrived at Hartley High wearing a cat suit and was arrested by policemen for staging an animal rights protest. She is always involved in political issues and in asserting her rights, which is why she calls herself Mai Hem (mayhem), in reference to her ability to stir up trouble. Thus she can not be defined simply in stereotypical terms that see Asian women as the exotic oriental, really feminine, or passive and obedient. Therefore, Mai Hem has a complex hybrid representation that is not fixed in an essentialist or assimilationist category only.

Although Mai Hem's behaviors and story line are melodramatic, they also produce a more hybrid translocal identity. Her identity is strategically aligned to the different political causes taken up by students of the same age, such as gender issues, student rights and animal rights. These behaviors of her storyline and character reading slowly become acceptable to the Hartley High community. As the website states "Mai's honesty, straightforward attitude and her love of worthy cause has endeared her to the Hartley gang." She also experiences typical teenage problems to do with relationships and school.

However, as discussed in previous chapters, it is the constraint of the soap opera and television drama genre that the Asian woman's membership of the community is determined by her position as a love interest. Mai Hem's acceptance into and membership of the community became secure through her relationship with the main male character Ryan. Just as easily as Mai Hem's position in the community was secured by a relationship, her relationship became a way for her to be pushed back to the periphery as a 'problem' character. After two years in the series as a permanent character, she became a problem character through the formulaic device of a love triangle, depicted as the 'other woman' with whom another main male character, Drazic, is unfaithful.

Mai Hem's cultural identity as an Asian woman from Hong Kong was dealt with, albeit in one significant story only. The story revolves around the importance of family in her culture, and the problems with her father who she feels had abandoned her. She is also a character who operates as 'a vehicle of racial issues'. There are stories about the racial prejudice she encounters in her social life, at her part-time work and at school. Racism, as Anthias argued, is one of the negative consequences of hybridity. It is closely related to how hybridity occurs in social relations and the resource struggles that ensue. In episodes where racism is experienced by Mai Hem and others, the explanation given is that it is caused by someone with a lack of knowledge about social conditions who then resorts to bullying in order to assert social superiority over those who are different. Other explanations given are those of resource struggles over money and housing. On most occasions her cultural identity is not focused upon and she is like any of the other Anglo characters. The producers of this television drama specifically stated that they wanted to concentrate more on the experiences of a typical teenager and only show occasional racial stories, as cultural identity is only one form of their identity.

A reading of the Mai Hem character's identity indicates that she moves from a translocal hybrid culture category, which forges alliances along the axis of gender, age and social causes, to a bounded culture category, by either identifying as 'Asian' or being depicted as assimilated and indistinguishable from the other Anglo characters. Even though Mai Hem's character had illustrated to a degree the complex nature of a hybrid identity, she is still in the position of being on the periphery of a majority Anglo-Celtic multicultural representation. Having Mai Hem depicted as a 'colorful' character at the fringes and adding 'spice' to the melodrama shows the dilemma of representing multiculturalism using Asian women as a safe site of 'difference' without resorting to stereotypical gender and racial profiling or obliterating any cultural characteristics.

Turning to a different genre, the next analysis is of the characters Ikuko Kamonohashi, Suzie Ling and Yao Wang Yin from the SBS 'mockumentary' series *Bondi Banquet* (2002). As a mockumentary, or fictional documentary, *Bondi Banquet* appears to be portraying real life. It is created to look like a documentary, as opposed to fitting into the standard format of a soap opera and television drama like *Heartbreak High*. *Bondi Banquet* is a story about a group of tenants living in a three story apartment block in Bondi, and their dinner parties. It documents the preparation of the dinner parties and the drama that unfolds. Each week the story moves between the nine tenants living in the apartment building.

These characters do have hybrid lives as described in the definition of a translocal category of hybridity. They fit both descriptions of a translocal form of hybridity where hybridization occurs out of recognition of difference or similarities. Ikuko, as a passionate surfer, has a strategic and created position of similarity with Anglo characters in terms of surfing and a love of the Australian beach lifestyle. She does not embody the stereotype of a Japanese character that would perpetuate negative stereotype of Asian women nor is she completely assimilated to Australian culture, thus any representation of her difference is obliterated. However, Ikuko is not an Australian; she is only visiting this country to enjoy the surfing life with her Irish surfer boyfriend whom she met in Bali. Thus, she does not have a hyphenated Japanese-Australian identity. Her identity is more that of an international traveler depicting ease in global movement and transcendence over national and cultural boundaries.

Suzie Ling and Yao Wang Yin on the other hand, are Chinese migrants who are presumed to be Australian. However, they are still analyzed as having a translocal form of hybridity forged out of differences in culture; the hyphenated identity of a Chinese-Australian. Suzie Ling is married to Yao Wang Yin's brother and the two couples live together in one of the apartments. They have not assimilated completely leaving no trace of difference or cultural characteristics; they have an accent, different mannerisms and converse in Chinese. Their 'Chinese-ness' is also represented through their love and re-enactment of Chinese opera, as well as the Chinese food they create for the series. They are also represented in a very happy and harmonious multicultural festival way through representations of their cultural difference being embodied in performance and food.

This multicultural festival atmosphere has been criticized by Hage as not depicting 'real life multiculturalism'. In agreement with Hage, representation of real life multiculturalism should be about the mundane everyday activities beyond a festival atmosphere. This argument is also close to Lo and Ang's criticism of hybridity as happy fusion

and multicultural harmony, which a multicultural festival of food and performance offers. However, this particular series does go beyond presenting multiculturalism in a festival manner. A multicultural dinner preparation is the ultimate subject of *Bondi Banquet*, but the series also depicts believable real-life drama and complex hybrid issues.

As Uma Narayan argues there are positives in the presentation of multicultural foods. She coined the term 'food colonialism' (1997, p.178), which is understood as Western eaters of 'ethnic foods' cultivating a more reflective attention to the complexities involved in the production and consumption of the 'ethnic foods' they eat. Examples of what Western eaters could reflect on are such things as: the material and political realities of immigrants who prepare these foods, and the race and class structures they deal with, all of which are inherent in the story lines of *Bondi Banquet*. Therefore, *Bondi Banquet* arguably enhances understanding of an immigrant's life by representing their social realities alongside the preparation of 'ethnic foods'. However, the fact that *Bondi Banquet* is shown on SBS (the Australian government-owned Special Broadcasting Services), the 'ethnic' television station, limits its effect on mainstream viewers who prefer to watch commercial television and who regard the channel as catering for 'ethnic' viewers.

There are examples of hybridity reflected in the complexity of social relations and resource struggles. In the Suzie Ling and Yao Wang Yin story, there is the issue of how hard it is being a migrant, with their husband/brother having to work as a taxi driver when in China he was an opera director. While preparing the Mongolian fire pot and Flower rolls dish, they talk about their change in status and lifestyle, especially the burden of bringing a baby into the world. Yao Wang is pregnant, the baby is overdue and they worry about their financial situation. In Ikuko's story, the hybrid issue is about the negative alienating aspects of being different; as a translocal hybrid she does not belong to one culture or another. While preparing Japanese poached eggs in fish broth, Ikuko is dealing with her love life. Her dilemma is over her Irish boyfriend's proposal to her and her fear of ending her traveling nomadic surfing lifestyle. These story lines also negotiate the tension inherent in dramas between representing real life multiculturalism alongside the heightened drama of the characters' dilemmas, without being overtly melodramatic.

One must remember, however, that *Bondi Banquet*, as a fictional documentary or mockumentary, shows the blurring of lines between what is fiction and what is real. It also shows how documentary is but one style of representing the world. As Nichols states, a documentary is fiction with plots, characters, situation and events like any other (1991, p.107). Documentaries offer introductory, challenges, or dilemmas, they build heightened tension and dramatically rising conflict and they terminate with resolution and closure, similar to the characteristics of a soap opera/television drama. A mockumentary is fiction with an illusion that it is representing a world we are currently living in rather than the imagined world of soap opera and television drama. The documentary style of presentation in *Bondi Banquet* is achieved by having the camera follow the characters, interviewing them and at times employing hand-held, amateur camera work. These techniques are used to convince the audience that it is viewing a real life drama as it unfolds as opposed to a staged, scripted fictional story.

In comparison to *Heartbreak High*, *Bondi Banquet*, with its mockumentary style does give the illusion of depicting a more real-life multicultural situation, even though the emphasis on performance and food can be problematic. The limitations on the *Heartbreak High* series are due to the formulaic nature of the fictional stories in soap opera and television drama, with viewers having expectations and knowledge of character settings and plot lines that recur. This is despite Mai Hem's character being represented in *Heartbreak High* as having a hybrid life that moves between a bounded culture category and a translocal category. However, what these limitations in the genre suggest is that Asian women characters can still be 'othered' when analyzed. 'Othering' of Mai Hem occurs through her position remaining at the periphery of the community. 'Othering' of the women in *Bondi Banquet* is achieved through their being equated with the festival aspects of multiculturalism; of exotic dishes and food.

By examining the complexity of hybridity, this paper shows there will always be limitations to representing real-life accounts of Asian women negotiating their hybrid multicultural lives in the soap opera and television drama genre. There are translocal culture categories within hybridity that seem more progressive and depict a closer representation of reality. However, the examples from *Heartbreak High* and *Bondi Banquet* show that both bounded and translocal forms of representation are limited by the genre's opposing conventions of melodrama and realism that exist simultaneously. Closer examination of the specific contexts and conditions in which hybridity operates, such as the television serial genre, is thus a useful step to further show its inherent limitations that still allow the depiction of Asian women as the opposite 'other' of an Australian multicultural representation.

4. Conclusion

Reviewing representations of Asian women in soap opera and television drama is vital to the debate on representations of 'ethnic' identity in Australian multicultural television. Asian women are still used to represent

the 'other' of Australian national identity through their stereotyping as feminine, exotic and lascivious. Arguably, Asian women are used to reflect a regressive Australian multicultural national identity that cannot tolerate difference beyond the superficial or physical depictions of 'Asian-ness'.

Although hybrid representation is a more complex account of Asian women's position in the imagined and fictional depictions of Australian multicultural community, it cannot be viewed as an ideal representation. Evidence for these arguments has been presented through textual analysis of the Asian women characters: Mai Hem from *Heartbreak High*, and Ikuko Kamonohashi, Suzie Ling and Yao Wang from *Bondi Banquet* - all provided evidence of hybridity's complex forms of representation. Furthermore, their representations point out the limitations of the soap opera and television drama genres with their contradictory qualities of trying to represent everyday reality with the need to create a melodramatic situation.

Finally, there is a need for more complex representations of Asian women characters to reflect the true nature of their existence in Australia. They can no longer be merely token 'ethnic' characters, but they need to be depicted as an active subject, a member of society who is not marginalized. More in-depth study about the representations of ethnically diverse characters in these television genres, with an added awareness of the correlation between gender and race, is needed to continue the discussion further.

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Note

Note 1. I would like to acknowledge the following people for their input into the creation of this paper: my Honors supervisor Dr Helen Keane, Head of Gender, Sexuality and Culture Dr Rosanne Kennedy, as well as Gabrielle Breen, Sally Quartermaine, Edwin Jurriens and Carole Herriman.