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## What's Sex Got to Do With It?: The Sex and The City Pipedream

by Lisa Macabasco

Like most girls coming of age in the DVD era, my three best friends from high school and I were weaned on HBO's massively popular *Sex and The City*. We would laugh at Samantha's sexual antics, cover our faces in shame from identifying with embarrassing intimate moments, swoon at Aidan's small gestures of chivalry, and debate whether those pants really match that top (usually not). We even figured out that each of the *SATC* characters mirrored each of our own personalities: there was the sexually uninhibited one with a different man every month, giving the finger to monogamy; the stringently independent one, focused on her career and shunning romantic clichés; the more conservative, optimistic one, with a steadfast belief in traditional romance and proper dating manners; and the charming, inquisitive one, with an open heart and a closet full of designer clothes.

But, recently, I've started to question how similar

we, as four Asian American women, really are to Carrie et. al. Like Carrie, sitting at her iBook in a negligee, sipping a martini and biting her lower lip, I couldn't help but wonder: can women of color actually live the *Sex and The City* lifestyle, or are we merely being brainwashed by cosmos and clavage? (blinking cursor)

While Sarah Jessica Parker has shied away from labeling the show as feminist, she admits that it has benefited enormously from the women's movement: "The characters have sexual freedom, opportunity, and the ability to be successful. They have the ability to be leaders and to be strong, assertive, and confident. If you grow up with the right to choose, vote, dress how you want, sleep with who you want, and have the kind of friendships you want, those things are the fabric of who you are" (*Sex and The City: Kiss and Tell*, 2002).

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As much as Parker may dance around the feminist label, many women of all races do embrace the series as empowering. But, is this merely faux feminism? After all, some Asian American women will only cry "Female Empowerment!" when it's packaged in a pair of Manolo Blahniks and a Birkin bag. Sure, you're all about female empowerment in front of the TV, but back on campus, we're ready to fight each other for the crumbs of manhood walking around, ready to stab our sisters in the back for a good man. I'm reminded of high school, when the Spice Girls revived teenage feminism, and mallrats walked around with "Girl Power" baby tees without knowing what it really was or how to put it into practice. Like the Spice Girls, *SATC* is primarily about the *spectacle* of independent single women. The show glamorizes female empowerment without linking it to ethnicity and class, making it difficult for viewers of all races to link those things in real life where indeed they are inextricably bound together. Like the feminist movement of the 1960s, the show is probably most effective in empowering white heterosexual upper class women. The show's depiction of happy and well-adjusted single women can be empowering for women of color as well, but only if they are able to embrace that message without falling into an idolatry of white women and, by extension, their primarily white male lovers. Women of color who genuinely aspire to such a lofty lifestyle are not only bound to be disappointed, but have probably also internalized the white standard of beauty to the point of hoping to achieve honorary white status through such a lifestyle.

The show's massive popularity is largely due to the (white upper-class heterosexual) female viewers' ability to identify with the friendships and romantic relationships of the protagonists. But, I suspect that some women of color, not to mention lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/queer women, while also able to identify and empathize with these same things, cannot help but hold the show at arms length. This goes beyond media representation and lack of diversity on the show. What I'm talking about has less to do with the fact that Carrie would never be able to afford all those shoes or that apartment on a writer's salary and more to do with women of color deceiving themselves into thinking that the *SATC* lifestyle could be theirs. Some may argue that few women actually believe the show is a realistic portrayal of single urban womanhood, but that has not stopped many of them from aspiring to certain aspects of that life, which means that on some level women do feel the show is realistic. However, some women of color who aspire to a *Sex and The City* lifestyle are latently wishing for the fantasy of upward

mobility and/or sexual agency.

What it boils down to is that being single in the *SATC* world is very different from being single in, say, Asian America, that land that is both nowhere and everywhere at once. Unlike many Asian American women, Carrie and her friends have never met a white man and wondered if he secretly harbored an Asian fetish; never had to deal with parental pressures to marry someone of the same ethnicity; never had to agonize whether or not they were "Asian" enough for a boyfriend's immigrant parents; never had to deal with the stereotype of the sexually voracious Pilipina; never had to feel insecure about being compared in a man's eyes to that paragon of womanhood, the blonde bombshell. All these things are issues for single heterosexual Asian American women, and women from all communities of color deal with similar issues, yet all are absent from *SATC*.

One of the biggest differences between women of color and the women of *SATC* is sexual agency, which Carrie and her friends can take on or off as quickly as their designer underwear. They are sexual beings when convenient, but can be also be successful as a lawyer, writer, public relations executive, and art gallery owner and taken seriously and respected by their male counterparts. In contrast, the specter of sexuality is always hanging over all women of color. From the time when slave owners slept with female slaves to today when women of color are thrust into the media spotlight by being raped by a basketball star or chastised for showing their breast at the Super Bowl, women of color have been and continue to be little more than sexual objects, something that the women of *SATC* are never portrayed as.

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While the show does a good job of exploring the different relationships to power that women today have and depicting socially constructed sexuality and gender roles as complex and fluid, it fails to show ethnicity and class as major components of these women's identities. This may be what is particularly alienating to women of color, many of whom see these traits as essential parts of their lives. Women of color need to be proud of and confident about their own lifestyles instead of making futile attempts to emulate the ones on TV. I think even the creators of the show would embrace this idea, based on their open-minded attitudes about sexuality and gender roles. We need to watch TV shows with a critical eye, especially those with such a huge following and influence as *SATC*, and take care not to be won over by images of high heels and high rises. Women of color don't have to fit into preexisting definitions of feminism or independence or sexuality; we must only have the courage to re-imagine new definitions and lifestyles beyond what the media feeds us.

So, go ahead and debate first generation vs. second generation, engineers vs. activists, parental expectations vs. your personal preferences, topics that Carrie would know nothing about. And you can even do it in style — like me, you can be your own version of the Miranda of your group, with a mojito or Ocean Beach Iced Tea in hand and three strong, independent, and fabulous Asian American girlfriends beside you.

Lisa Macabasco is a San Francisco-centric Chinese-Pilipina feminist who hopes to find her own Steve Brady someday.