Asian American Humor
The Power of Disruptive Laughter in Literature and Media

by Elizabeth Moser

B.A. in English, May 2009, Boston University
M.A. in English, October 2012, Rutgers University

A Dissertation submitted to

The Faculty of
The Columbian College of Arts and Sciences
of The George Washington University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

May 19, 2019

Dissertation directed by

Patricia P. Chu
Associate Professor of English
The Columbian College of Arts and Sciences of the George Washington University
certifies that Elizabeth Moser has passed the Final Examination for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy as of April 10, 2019. This is the final and approved form of the
dissertation.

Asian American Humor
The Power of Disruptive Laughter in Literature and Media

Elizabeth Moser

Dissertation Research Committee:

Patricia P. Chu, Associate Professor of English, Dissertation Director
Kavita Daiya, Associate Professor of English, Committee Member
Gayle Wald, Professor of English and American Studies, Committee Member
Dedication

To my family, whose stories taught me that laughter is, indeed, the very best medicine.
Acknowledgments

Like laughter itself, projects like this are only possible because of others. I want to thank my dissertation committee for their understanding and unending support. Over the past five years my director Patty Chu gave me the inspiration to tackle the neglected subject of humor, guided my research, helped me polish my ideas, and whittled away hours together sharing our love of stories. My first reader Kavita Daiya always paired her insightful feedback with support and enthusiasm for my project. Gayle Wald, Christine So, and Marshall Alcorn volunteered their time and ideas and provided guidance that helped me sharpen my ideas and strengthen my argument.

I also want to thank the faculty and university staff for providing the support to make this project a success. Connie Kibler and Linda Terry always lent a hand and answered my questions, Tara Wallace and Nicole Davidson guided me through the dissertation process, and Alexa Joubin helped me see the big picture of my project. Much thanks to my colleagues in the 2016-2017 Postcolonial, Race, Gender and Migration Reading Group for giving me advice on how to adapt my ideas for conferences and to the Association for Asian American Studies for giving me a venue to present my ideas over the past three years. Thanks to all of my colleagues, especially Patrick Henry, Vicki Barnett-Woods and Alan Montroso, for being such fantastic guides and models. Very special thanks to Sam Yates, my Ph.D. partner, who helped me keep pace throughout this marathon. Thank you to the students of my "Protest and Resistance" class, who responded to my ideas with profound creativity and insight. And thank you to George Washington University for its generous financial support; through their stipends and fellowships this project was made possible.
Finally, thank you to my family, who has never once doubted me on my journey. Thank you, Chris Moser, my father, and Carol Sands, my mother, for your support, inspiration, and for teaching me to set my eyes on the stars.
Abstract of Dissertation

Asian American Humor
The Power of Disruptive Laughter in Literature and Media

This project aims to increase interest and awareness of Asian American humor in literature and media, a subject that has so far been neglected by critics and the general public. "Asian American Humor" expands upon the work of established Asian American literary scholars and their efforts to analyze and promote texts of political and cultural resistance. This dissertation widens the field's scope to include humorous works and to provide critiques and remedies to political, social and literary problems. On one hand, the project demonstrates how humor resists dominant nationalist power structures, racial stereotyping, and limitations imposed by traditional literary conventions and entertainment distribution methods. On the other hand, it argues that humor offers remedies to these issues. Humor can be a reparative tool that helps individuals and communities heal colonial wounds and reclaim agency. Humor can create opportunities for representational resistance through new genres and politically progressive counter memories. And lastly, humor can cultivate a safe and validating environment in order to share painful experiences and create opportunities for understanding and solidarity with others. More broadly, this project seeks to do more than just analyze humor through the lens of major Asian American literary debates. It also investigates ways to use humor to bolster the voices of writers and performers and create opportunities for healing and recovery, agency and growth while still promoting the reformation of political and social institutions.
# Table of Contents

Dedication ........................................................................................................................................ iv

Acknowledgements ......................................................................................................................... v

Abstract ............................................................................................................................................... vii

List of Figures ..................................................................................................................................... ix

Introduction ........................................................................................................................................ 1

Chapter 1: Mythic Resistance: The Reparative Comedy of the Philippine Trickster Hero

Chapter 2: Laughing Under Duress: Representational Resistance in Detention Narratives

Chapter 3: American Sitcom 2.0: Racial Visibility and the Future of Television

Chapter 4: Breaking the Fourth Wall: Affective Connections and the Writer-Reader Relationship

Bibliography ......................................................................................................................................... 216
List of Figures

Figure 1: Chris Anderson’s Long Tail Hypothesis .....................................................173
Introduction

In an opinion piece in *The New York Times*, Adam Conover, a popular College Humor web comedian, addressed the widespread criticism of Michelle Wolf, the comic who bravely took the stage at the 2018 White House Correspondents' Association dinner. Conover reports that Wolf was criticized not only by partisan defenders of President Trump but also by members of the press, whom Wolf accused of benefitting as much from the 24/7 news coverage of Trump as the president did himself. In his defense of Wolf, Conover also summarized what he claimed to be the central tenets of comedy. "Comedy has no rules, per se," Conover writes, "but in my 15 years of writing and performing, I've come up with a few guidelines that I find helpful: 1. Be funny. 2. Tell the truth. 3. Make people in power uncomfortable" (Conover). The people in the studio or audience don't matter, Conover argues. The only audience that counts are the "folks at home," who don't want comedy that's "polite and tasteful" but instead "want comedy that stands on the rooftop and calls out hypocrisy and deceit at the top of its lungs." In a post-truth age, it can seem impossible even to agree on the facts, much less break through the partisanship that divides our nation. But in times of crisis, comedy may be our last bastion of hope in a darkening world. Comedy helps us speak truth to power by denouncing the lies and deception perpetrated by our leaders and institutions. In a nation that has been facing the steady erosion of its civil liberties, comedy gives us the chance to rattle the thrones of our leaders while raising the morale and inspiring the support of our allies. Wolf bravely excoriated the presidential administration and the press in person,
and the critical backlash she faced only underscores the effectiveness of her truth-telling comedy routine.

This project arises at a crossroads where our nation, once again, has resumed amending its immigration policies and rolling back protections for some of its most vulnerable, including refugee women and children. These political changes have been accompanied by a rightward cultural shift; rising demands for assimilation and heated debates over language, culture and national character arrive daily on a wave of headlines and tweets. Archaic stereotyping and hate speech have become commonplace on our televisions and in our schools, and hate crimes along racial lines are on the rise.¹ In these bleak times, I hope that this project, through its focus on the political resistance of Asian American comedy, can be a model for future acts of resistance for communities that find themselves under siege by the US legal system and cultural nationalism.

This project aims to increase interest and awareness of Asian American humor in literature and media, a subject that has so far been neglected by critics and the general public. "Asian American Humor" expands upon the work of established Asian American literary scholars and their efforts to analyze and promote texts of political and cultural resistance. This dissertation widens the field's scope to include humorous works and to provide critiques and remedies to political, social and literary problems. On one hand, the project demonstrates how humor resists dominant nationalist power structures, racial stereotyping, and limitations imposed by traditional literary conventions and entertainment distribution methods. On the other hand, it argues that humor offers remedies to these issues. Humor can be a reparative tool that helps individuals and

¹ US hate crimes reports increased 17 percent from 2016-2017, the third rise in three years. See Eligon.
communities heal colonial wounds and reclaim agency. Humor can create opportunities for representational resistance through new genres and politically progressive countermemories. And lastly, humor can cultivate a safe and validating environment in which to share painful experiences and create opportunities for understanding and solidarity with others. More broadly, this project seeks to do more than just analyze humor through the lens of major Asian American literary debates. It also investigates ways to use humor to bolster the voices of writers and performers and create opportunities for healing and recovery, agency and growth while still promoting the reformation of political and social institutions.

In this survey of Asian American humor from the past seventy-five years, we will discuss a wide variety of texts and performances, including short stories, novels, sitcoms and standup comedy. My choices reflect both popular works whose comic elements critics have neglected to discuss and newer or understudied works. Furthermore, this trans-genre scope lets us fully sample the breadth of Asian American comedy and shows us how comedy lends itself to nearly any genre and introduces elements that can destabilize genre conventions to produce new art. Likewise, my selection covers authors and performers from many different backgrounds, including Chinese, Indian, Korean, Vietnamese and Filipino American contributors. Although the US legal system has historically lumped these groups together under the term Asian American, each ethnicity—indeed each individual—has a unique story to tell informed by his background, and my dissertation strives to include as many different voices as possible. With these ideas in mind, I have done my best to select authors and performers from a wide variety of nationalities to show the vast scope of Asian American literature and
performance, while giving special attention to Southeast Asian Americans, who have faced greater economic discrimination than their peers.\(^2\)

Like much of Asian American literary criticism, this project seeks to overturn harmful racial stereotypes associated with Asian Americans, particularly those present in American comedy. Eleanor Ty writes about the stereotypical qualities historically ascribed to Asians, including "femininity, docility, mystery, delicacy and dangerous sexuality," attributes that bolster Anglo-European masculinity through contrast (*Politics of the Visible* xii). Only by "returning the gaze," or "re-presenting, that is…present[ing] again through filmic or textual narratives" can Asian Americans "re-orient and 'dis-orient' contemporary and prevalent myths about the Orient" (xiv). Comedy, more than any other genre, gives Asian American writers and performers the opportunity to invert traditional power dynamics and to become agents rather than objects. We only need to look to the comic onstage who turns racist jokes around to mock his accusers or the writer who convinces the reader to laugh, cry and affectively share experiences on an egalitarian rather than hierarchical level to see these reversals at work.

**History of Asian American Humor**

The Asian American literary comic tradition reaches back surpassingly far with Sui Sin Far’s *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* (1912). This collection of stories was written in the midst of a long period of Chinese immigration exclusion, which remains an important facet of the text. Much has been written on Sui Sin Far’s short stories, but I have discovered little scholarship focused on her stories’ humorous elements, as most critics

---

\(^2\) According to Tang, Southeast Asian Americans, including Vietnamese, Lao, Hmong and Cambodian immigrants receive the most public assistance out of any race or ethnic group in America, largely due to their history as refugees (Tang 454).
focus on the historical and political background of the work. In fact, there seems to be a
general distaste for performances, particularly during the Cold War period, as in the case
of Roger and Hammerstein’s *Flower Drum Song* (1958) and *The King and I* (1951). In
the case of *Flower Drum Song*, the negative critical reception has even caused many
scholars to shy away from discussing C.Y. Lee’s original novel of the same name. The
humor generated in these texts often relies on Asian racial and gendered stereotypes that
we can see with the imperious King Mongkut of Siam and the Madonna-whore
dichotomy of Mei Li and Linda Low. The embarrassment caused by these works may
have caused Asian American literary scholars to abandon the study of humor entirely.
Even satirical texts that have been critically praised, such as Carlos Bulosan’s *The
Laughter of My Father* (1944) and Milton Murayama’s *All I Asking for Is My Body*
(1975), were not necessarily valued for their comedy. In fact, when critics did praise his
witty humor in *The Laughter Of My Father*, Bulosan responded with a scathing editorial
response, claiming flatly, “I am not a laughing man” (Balce 48). Clearly, humor is and
has remained a controversial subject for Asian American authors and critics alike.

As a result, Asian American literary scholarship has developed in a much
different direction, tackling a number of different political, sociological and genre areas.
In terms of politics, immigration, imperialism, globalization, and citizenship are four
healthy areas of study that scholars such as Rachel Lee, Lisa Lowe, Christine So, Iyko
Day and Mai Ngai have contributed to by analyzing present and historical political and
economic trends that have shaped the Asian American community. Sociological inquiries
into trauma, melancholia, gender performance and filial piety and guilt are critical
mainstays explored by Min Song, David Eng and Shinhee Han, Daniel Kim, Anne Anlin
Cheng and Erin Khue Ninh. Finally, Rocio Davis and Patricia P. Chu have explored genre conventions and done much work on memory and memoirs.

These fields of research highlight the importance of a transnational scope, emphasize the importance of sociological inquiry into group and individual feelings and emotions, and underscore the importance of autobiography and self-expression. These three aspects are critical pillars of my dissertation project, which explores issues of transnationalism and citizenship, feelings and affect, and memoir and self-representation. Nevertheless, none of the above scholars have applied their analyses to comedy so far. This is a troubling omission, especially considering the great number and variety of comic texts and performances that have been produced in Asian American literature, particularly in recent decades. I believe that my dissertation can help open up the neglected field of humor scholarship in Asian American literature where it can then benefit from the great theoretical work that has been done by major scholars.

**Key Terms: Comedy and Humor**

In this project, I routinely use the term "humor," and related terms "comedic" and "comic" to refer to instances where the author or performer intends to provoke laughter from his readers or audience. Humor is to a great extent subjective, and its ability to make us laugh depends on our background, personal experiences, current mood and other factors. Writers as early as Aristotle (Hong 5) and as recently as humor scholars today, including James Wood, Leon Rappoport, and Nerissa Balce have done much work categorizing types of laughter and studying their mechanics and their work informs my

---

3 See Medhurst and Mills for categorizations of laughter. For mood’s effect on humor, see Brett Mills’s concept of cue theory (*The Sitcom*).
interpretation of humor. Mikhail Baktin's concept of the carnivalesque also contributes greatly to the study of humor and laughter that challenges social conventions.

James Wood discusses the emotional exchanges that occur within tragicomedy in his critical text, *The Irresponsible Self*. Wood explores how certain types of comedy create sympathetic emotions and lead to the physiological reaction we recognize as laughter through tears. Crying while laughing is more than a phenomenon of crossed wires, Wood argues, for it often occurs when performers elicit two emotions at once, such as the sadness and laughter caused by tragicomedy. These sympathetic emotions also create a special bond between the performer and the audience; when we laugh during the show we laugh at the performer, but we also laugh at ourselves because we have come to identify with the comic. Audiences and readers crave to identify and personally connect with others, and humor helps facilitate that connection through texts and performances.

Leon Rappoport's *Punchlines* presents a defense of humor and its role in human society. On one hand, Rappoport discusses humor's relationship to stereotypes, both how humor historically reinforced negative stereotypes and how stereotype humor today forces audiences to recognize and address their biases with the hope of amending them. He also discusses the use of irony and satire by black and Jewish comedians as an effort to shift humor "from prejudice toward pride" (xiv). On the other hand, he also argues that humor is a "unique human quality" that, like Wood suggests, facilitates relationships between people and is a central cultural value in many societies. Rappoport discusses Baktin's concept of the carnivalesque, a term drawn from the medieval rites that mocked authorities, overturned societal norms and profaned the sacred. Like Baktin, who argued
that carnival’s acts of resistance were crucial release valves for societal pressures, Rappoport updates the metaphor to include contemporary "celebrity roasts" where stars are publicly mocked and their humiliation elicits laughter from the crowd (Rappoport 7). Rappoport coins a term, “sudden glory” for the feeling of exhilaration experienced by the audience when people in high positions are laid low. \(^4\) (This is, of course, a form of schadenfreude.) Like Baktin, whose concept of “carnivalesque” releases the emotions of those involved through burlesque and bawdiness, these celebrity roasts free the audience by overturning well-established power dynamics, unleashing the possibility of radical socio-political change.

Finally, Nerissa Balce gives us a final look at humor’s politically progressive potential through her analysis of postcolonial satire. Her article “Laughter Against the State: On Humor, Postcolonial Satire and Asian American Short Fiction” suggests that while some humor can be harmful, satire always aims to undermine established power structures to give voice to the powerless. She defines postcolonial satire as “an aesthetic response to colonial amnesia by examining the wounds of history not through racialized spectacles of human suffering but through humorous narratives on the aftermath and legacies of imperial conquest in ‘the mundane and the quotidian’” (53). Instead of addressing the wounds of colonialism through trauma theory, postcolonial satire offers an alternative path to make colonial failures more visible through humor and critique. Here, humor does not condemn colonialism’s victims, but rather the entrenched imperialist institutions that have conducted and condoned past and present exploitation and violence of minority populations.

\(^4\) Michelle Wolf’s routine at the White House Correspondence Association’s dinner is a perfect example of sudden glory.
Theoretical Scope

This project lies at the intersection of Asian American studies and humor studies and several other theoretical areas, including affect theory, audience studies, and postcolonial studies. Each of these theoretical lenses gives us insight into a different aspect of humor. Affect theory gives us the tools to analyze the way that humor transfers feelings from the performer to the audience through jokes. It also helps explain what we get from humor besides laughter in the moment and suggests motivations behind our desire to laugh with others. Audience studies dives deeper into how humor is received by explaining how we can measure viewer reactions to comedy and how the changing demands of contemporary audiences might shape the future of entertainment. In postcolonial studies, Homi Bhabha's theories of mimicry help us understand the prevalence of brownface and racial misrepresentation in American TV and film and the way that the permeation of racial stereotypes in entertainment shapes the way audiences view Asian Americans onscreen, onstage and in general.

Affect theory has been pioneered by critics including Sarah Ahmed, Benjamin Anderson, Lauren Berlant, Lone Bertelsen, Anna Gibbs, Eve Sedgwick and Silvan Tompkins. Theorists have defined affect in various ways, from a "pre-personal" force, to emotion or feeling, to the Spinozan "power to affect and be affected," where objects and people transitively affect one another (Bertelsen 140). Sara Ahmed in “Happy Objects” suggests that affect is contagious, and that bodies can catch affect just as they can catch the common cold (“Happy Objects" 36). Once affect has been transmitted from one body to another, it can grow into full-grown feelings, including rage, fear, joy, shame, or any

---

5 Felix Guttari defines affect as “transitive, as the movement of the impersonal, or…‘pre-personal’…affect…[is]…what the human shares with everything it is not.” See Genosko 158.
other number of fully developed emotions. One can see this situation play out in stand-up comedy. At first, the comic must "warm up" the audience to purge any suspicion, skepticism, or other negative states that might prevent the audience from laughing. After priming the audience for laughter, a successful performer can use the power of affect to shrink the gap between him and his audience and allow them to share positive affective exchange through jokes and laughter.

Audience studies introduces theories that allow us to ascertain how audiences, both physical and virtual, react to entertainment in order to tell how well different genres and trends meet audience’s changing tastes. In particular, Chris Anderson's long tail hypothesis explaining how the rise of video-on-demand (VOD) services, such as Netflix, would affect what entertainment would be produced in the future. Anderson argues that cheap data storage and efficient search algorithms should lead to a proliferation of TV shows and movies aimed at niche markets rather than blockbuster hits geared for general audiences. Although Anderson's ideas have not come to fruition—big hits still dominate the entertainment industry even with the tremendous success of VOD services—the rising popularity of foreign TV series and movies in America and across the globe suggest that VODs may be loosening Hollywood's grip on the global entertainment market.⁶

Lastly, Homi Bhabha's concept of colonial mimicry helps us understand racial performance and its relationship to culture and national identity. Bhabha argues that in order to incorporate the colonial subject into the nation, countries instruct their subjects to "mimic" or approximate whiteness in order to be considered a properly assimilated

⁶ For the promising results of Netflix’s diverse content and international expansion, see Hopewell.
citizen. However, since such mimicry can only be an approximation, the failure of the subject to perfectly imitate whiteness forever brands the minority subject as "other" (Bhabha 126). Nevertheless, according to Bhabha, the subject's desire to be seen as an authentic, full citizen fuels the process of mimicry and crowds out mimicry-free racial and cultural expressions. Literature and entertainment are full of successful stories of immigration and assimilation, but these fictions only serve to perpetuate colonial mimicry and the marginalization of non-white subjects.

Along with its theoretical scope, this project also examines two literary tools that employ humor. The first is the *tragicomedy*, a hybrid genre that is more than a sum of its parts. Verna Foster in *The Name and Nature of Tragicomedy* suggests that the genre "evoke[s] in its audience a more complicated response, pleasurably tragic, painfully comic," than either genre on its own (Foster 1). Tragicomedy strikes its readers and audiences as profoundly natural and true to life and embodies the variability and volatility of contemporary society and the complexities of human experience. Likewise, its alternating moments of humor and sadness both prime the reader for emotion and offer him a respite from becoming overwhelmed or numb by experiencing too much of one emotion.

The second tool that I discuss is the *detention narrative*, a term I have coined to describe tales where the majority of the story occurs in the past, which is later recounted by the narrator from the cell where he is detained. At the start, detention narratives may resemble the popular coming-to-America tale, but instead of the immigrant narrator being given the opportunity to fit into their new country's sociocultural landscape, he is detained, interrogated, often tortured and ultimately deported. Even though the narrators
are coerced into confessing their life story, they use the opportunity to address a broader audience beyond those of their captors, such as other members of their race or nationality, those who are oppressed or detained, or even the nation as a whole. Detention narratives raise awareness of political abuses that governments try to hide, create opportunities for the detained to be heard and use their stories to promote political change.

**Chapter Roadmap**

In summary, humor gives writers and performers a unique set of tools to amplify minority voices, challenge repressive institutions and advocate for progressive political and cultural changes. The following chapters, which will explore these issues, have been arranged in order to map increasing levels of resistance and agency in the texts that they discuss. Beginning in the Philippines, a setting characterized by deep colonial authority and rife with political corruption, readers will discover increasing power and liberation by characters and authors on their journey and end in an environment of safety and solidarity in contemporary standup comedy. I intend these choices to reflect the progress made by authors and performers, to give voice to their experiences and to signal the need for continued efforts to press for political and social changes into the future.

The first chapter, "Mythic Resistance: The Reparative Comedy of the Philippine Trickster Hero," examines the importance of the trickster hero in Filipino history and literature. Tricksters serve a crucial function in many societies, acting as a pressure release valve for social tensions and preparing society for dramatic changes. Over centuries of foreign occupation, tricksters were adopted into Filipino anti-colonial resistance movements. Tricksters acted as folk heroes that raised the people's morale. Their popularity led them to be incorporated into "colorums"—mystical movements
influenced by Catholic ideology, who viewed their leaders as part revolutionaries and part messiahs. Carlos Bulosan's tragicomic short story collection *The Laughter of My Father* features several tricksters whose antics resist and subvert colonial power structures. By combining the genre of tragicomedy with the trickster heroes of Filipino tradition, *Laughter* heightens awareness of the Philippines' traumatic colonial history, strengthens Filipino communities, and addresses the colonial wounds inflicted on the Filipino people in order to mend them.

The second chapter, “Laughing Under Duress: Representational Resistance in Detention Narratives,” explores the importance of creating new genres in order to resist dominant national narratives. In the act of nation building, countries promote the illusion of a unified state by constructing a common history, and in turn repress or silence narratives that run counter to the norm. Foucault’s concept of counter-histories provides us with model for undermining repressive national histories to pave the way for resistance narratives by formerly voiceless minority groups. I read Viet Than Nguyen’s *The Sympathizer* and Alex Gilvarry’s *From the Memoirs of a Non-Enemy Combatant* as detention narratives that take up the important work of creating counter-histories. These novels laugh in the face of the absurdities of nationalist discourse, and they pioneer narratives that turn the coming-to-America tale on its head. By doing so, they pave the way for future counter-histories and alternate narratives that resist national myths and state oppression.

The third chapter, “American Sitcom 2.0: Racial Visibility and the Future of Television,” focuses on racial visibility and discrimination in American sitcoms. The

---

7 See Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended* 70 and Medina 14.
chapter addresses the role that video-on-demand (VOD) services, changing audience preferences, and the rise of Asian American producers, directors and entertainers have played in challenging discriminatory norms in the industry. ABC’s *Fresh Off the Boat* (2015-present) and Netflix’s *Master of None* (2015-present) both tackle racial discrimination through the sitcom form to great success. Both shows also put an end to the two-decade-long drought of Asian American sitcoms since the cancellation in 1995 of Margaret Cho’s *All-American Girl*, the first Asian American sitcom on television. But Aziz Ansari took the next step with *Master* by using his directorial freedom under Netflix to directly confront American entertainment’s long history of brownface, simultaneously critiquing the industry’s prejudices and using the show as a remedy by featuring a broad Asian American cast. Although critics today no longer believe that VOD services alone launch a burst of niche genres and minority-led content, the rising influence of Asian Americans in traditional and digital entertainment along with audience demands for diverse casts and international content may signal a sea change in the future of American entertainment.

The final chapter, "Breaking the Fourth Wall: Affective Connections and the Writer-Reader Relationship," discusses how emotionally intimate relationships develop between performers and their audiences and writers and their readers through humorous texts and comic performances. By analyzing both textual and performance art, we can see how humor as a unifying force works across modes of expression. The chapter uses affect theory as a critical lens to examine the exchange of feelings between humor’s producers and consumers. Margaret Cho in the standup performance *I'm The One That I Want* (2000) structures her routine to loosen up her audience with laughter and draw personal
points of connection before delving into the tragic tale of her struggles with discrimination and weight loss. By creating feelings of sympathetic identification and understanding in her audience, Cho is rewarded with audience support when she exposes her own vulnerabilities, ultimately creating an emotional bond that fuels the performance. Ruth Ozeki creates a similar sense of identification between the two protagonists of her book, the teenage diary writer Nao and the reader Ruth, who connect with one another through Nao's lost diary even though the two are thousands of miles and a decade of time apart. Ruth and Nao's deep connection allows Ruth to reach back through time to rescue Nao from suicide. In both cases, through the affective connections forged by humor, writers and performers and their readers and audiences can confront negative feelings and share moments of vulnerability in a safe environment and expect to receive understanding and validation from each other.

"Asian American Humor" seeks to reaffirm values present in Asian American studies, postcolonial studies, transnational literature and other minority literatures. The project emphasizes awareness of stereotypes, discrimination, violence, and detention; promotes acts of political and cultural resistance through literature and performance; and advocates for reparative efforts for individuals and communities who have been subject to oppression. Through its chapters, we can see how humor grants agency to its writers while simultaneously informing and uplifting its readers. Taken as a whole, “Asian American Humor” aims to fill the gap of humor studies in Asian American literature while adding to the politically and culturally progressive aims of the discipline.

Readers are certainly familiar with the well-known survival strategies of flight and fight, but few consider laughter as another coping method that we use to deal with
stressful situations and to purge ourselves of anxiety. In times of crisis, we often turn to comedy to soothe our fears, to express our outrage, and even to reassert our solidarity with our allies. In addition to the political aims above, this project offers a way of incorporating our instincts toward soothing laughter and our desires for social connection to strengthen our connections with those around us in the face of uncertain times.

---

8 Slavalitz writes about laughter’s ability to reduce physical pain. Provine summarizes studies on laughter’s stress reducing effect and suggests that more research on the subject is necessary. Seaward presents the clinical perspective of laughter as stress reduction.
9 Aronstein discusses liberal TV satirists like Jon Stewart and David Letterman after 9/11 giving heartfelt monologues on comedy’s ability to heal emotional wounds.
Chapter One

Mythic Resistance: The Reparative Comedy of the Philippine Trickster Hero

We are all familiar with the contradictory experience of laughter through tears. This combination of seemingly opposite physical reactions gives us an idea of how humor can function across affective boundaries, both by priming us for emotion and by connecting us with other readers or audience members through shared affective experiences. The tragicomic genre expertly takes advantage of such a contradiction, balancing both comedy and tragedy by lightening the mood of serious scenes and by tempering funny scenes with sobering reality. At other times, tragicomedy serves to heighten the drama of the comedy or tragedy to follow by dramatically increasing the magnitude of the affective register of the text or performance. This affective fine tuning results in a work that carries readers or audiences on a roller coaster ride of emotion. Whether the story ends with a comedic, tragic or bittersweet conclusion, the reader or audience member becomes inextricably invested in the outcome the tale.

Carlos Bulosan takes advantage of the affective impact of tragicomedy in his short story cycle *The Laughter of My Father* (1944). Bulosan’s short stories employ tragicomedy to address the struggles of rural Philippine communities under US colonial rule by pairing the tragedy of the exploitation of the Filipino working-class with the comedy of the trickster hero who works to liberate workers from oppression. *Laughter* demonstrates how colonial subjects can resist and relieve pressure from the effects of colonial rule through literature and performance. With these ideas in mind, this chapter has two aims in its analysis of Bulosan’s tragicomedy. First, it examines how disruptive

---

10 For a more detailed explanation of affect theory’s effect on audiences, see chapter four.
laughter functions as an anti-colonial and anti-elite form of resistance that ultimately constructs a vision of pro-working class nationalism. Second, it explores the role of laughter as a reparative force that rebuilds communities and reclaims history, mythical traditions and folklore. We can see laughter’s mechanisms at work both inside the text itself and outside in regards to Bulosan’s intended audience. Within the text, fictional tricksters strengthen their communities and resist corrupt colonial authorities by continuously outwitting their superiors. Their stories conclude with the trickster humiliating or driving away the offending authorities and sharing the spoils of his antics with his family and neighbors. In this context, we can read Bulosan’s stories as a playbook for anti-colonial resistance. But we must also recognize that Bulosan’s stories are not written for his peasant countrymen, but instead primarily for elite English readers in the US and only secondarily for educated Filipino writers and readers. Therefore, we must adopt a different reading of tragicomedy and tricksters for readers and communities outside of the text. Instead of giving us a model for how to resist authorities ourselves, we must read these stories as analogues of the ways that the Filipino people resisted centuries colonial rule under the Spanish and Americans. Bulosan’s stories address these historical traumas by capturing the spirit of Filipino working class resistance through his fiction, and by doing so creates a sympathetic connection between the reader and the characters that ultimately encourages a greater understanding and acceptance of Filipino Americans and their communities.

The Genre and Scope of Tragicomedy

Before delving into an explanation of how tragicomedy acts as a reparative tool, it’s important to first define the genre and scope of tragicomedy, as well as how the genre
fits in with the theoretical framework that we have established so far. Verna Foster in her 2004 book *The Name and Nature of Tragicomedy* discusses tragicomedy as force that surpasses its traditional theatrical definition. She suggests that tragicomedy at its best accomplishes two goals: “to offer a more comprehensive and complex understanding of human experience than either tragedy or comedy and to evoke in its audience a more complicated response, pleurally tragic, painfully comic, to that experience” (Foster 1). In other words, tragicomedy is more than just the sum of its parts. It creates a stronger affective response than either tragedy or comedy on its own, and the nature of that response is far more complex, eliciting pleasure from what is ordinarily painful and pain from what would normally generate pleasure. It would not be a stretch following Foster’s statement to suggest that tragicomedy across genres, in both texts and performances, may strike readers as much more natural and true to life than the either pure comedy or tragedy. Tragicomedy more closely resembles the alternating pleasurable and painful experiences of real life and the variability and volatility of contemporary society. The very “realness” of tragicomedy allows the hybrid genre to explore the complexities of human experience more effectively than other genres, even when the setting or background of the characters may be foreign to the reader or audience member. This, in turn, may swiftly create a robust affective bond between the reader/audience member and the text/performance. This bond is essential for texts such as *Laughter* to function, so that the challenges of the colonial setting to translate clearly for the reader and for the struggles of the characters to appear sympathetic and legitimate, even when the characters themselves make morally questionable choices.
Bulosan’s text explores instances of humor juxtaposed directly with moments of heartbreak. In fact, Foster’s definition of tragicomedy relies precisely on the tools that *Laughter* regularly employs: the interplay and interdependence of juxtaposing emotions. Foster argues that “a tragicomedy is a play in which the tragic and comic both exist but are formally and emotionally dependent on one another, each modifying and determining the nature of the other so as to produce a mixed, tragicomic response in the audience.” This relationship between tragic and comic is essentially “organic” in form and feeling (11). According to Foster, in the genre of tragicomedy, tragedy and comedy rely on one another both in terms of form and in the production and mediation of affect and emotion. A successful tragicomic text should use contrasting feelings to create and resolve tensions within the texts, shaping the plot and driving the pace of the story, all the while drawing the reader along the emotional ups and downs of a deeply involving journey. Reinforcing this idea, G.E. Lessing, a German theorist of art and performance, notes in his definition of the tragicomic that “contrasting emotions are experienced almost simultaneously and, more importantly, because of one another” (25). The overlapping of the tragic and comic in tragicomedy create the contrary but very human conditions of both tears of laughter and the painful pangs of the self-deprecating comic or the sad jester or clown. These affective conditions are deeply challenging to unravel, and through our exploration of the texts in this chapter we will analyze the complex mechanisms at work in scenes where both tragedy and comedy show themselves in full force.

**Tricksters and Their Role in Tragicomedy**

One of the central ways that tragicomedy is expressed in *Laughter* is through the figure of the trickster. Sometimes a clever jester, sometimes a silly buffoon, the trickster
plays a confusing and often controversial role in tragicomedy. To complicate the matter, the trickster has been interpreted variously in Western social sciences, as William Hynes and William Doty document in *Mythical Trickster Figures*. Jungian psychologists interpret the trickster as a universal archetype within most belief systems, while anthropologists have sought to eliminate the broadly applied term trickster to avoid the conflicts and pitfalls of comparing trickster figures between cultural groups (Hynes and Doty 4-5). It is certainly important to avoid cultural relativism here, but I believe that there is much to be gained from studying trickster figures in tragicomic narratives, particularly the way that they interact with and shape their communities. These explorations can unearth productive models of the different ways that trickster humor can address and ameliorate traumatic colonial histories.

Tricksters always keep readers on their toes, alternatively challenging and reasserting social rules and customs in their tales. Hynes remarks that while trickster stories “are often entertainments involving play and laughter, they are entertainments that are instructive. Tricksters map for some societies how one ‘ought’ to act” (7). Likewise, Brian Street notes that trickster tales “can be seen as moral examples re-affirming the rules of society; or rather, they serve as the model for these rules, demonstrating what happens if the prescriptions laid down by society are not observed” (Street 85). For example, Prometheus, a classic Greek god-trickster figure, fools Zeus and delivers fire to mankind, only to face the punishment of being chained to a rock in order that an eagle might devour his liver each day. The fact that Prometheus is brutally punished for his disobedience reinforces the power of Zeus and his place at the head of the pantheon, yet
Prometheus’s actions also allow mankind to evolve into sophisticated civilizations, underscoring the ultimately positive contribution of his anti-social actions.

In fact, by working against society’s rules and regulations, tricksters can question the social order in order to keep social systems flexible and promote change over time. Hynes agrees with this assertion, proposing that “frequently the breaching and upending process initiated by tricksters in their challenges to the accepted ways of doing things highlights the possibilities within a society for creative reflection on and change of the society’s meanings” (Hynes and Doty 8). This is not to say that the trickster is the best figure to promote immediate, dramatic change. Rather, by introducing controversial social change alongside humorous antics and laughter, tricksters sweeten the pot for traditionalists in order to allow for the progress of gradual social change. Karl Kerenyi discusses this subtle strategy, arguing that “the trickster in archaic society serves primarily ‘to add disorder to order and so make a whole, to render possible, within the bounds of what is permitted, an experience of what is not permitted’” (185). Most interestingly, Karl Kerenyi and Paul Radin paint the trickster as a “tension-releasing function in societies,” carefully releasing the pressure valve created by the marginalized subset of the community by introducing the idea of change while maintaining the security of the existing social structure (Kerenyi 185). Brian Street also remarks on this balance between old and new:

To question everything in society would lead to anarchy; to preserve everything would lead to stagnation; the conflict is presented, and the balance achieved, in the trickster tales which so many societies possess. And in all of them a universal feature of the trickster is his role as both revolutionary and savior (Street 72).
While “savior” certainly sounds like a distinctly Western and Christian conceptualization of the role, the trickster certainly saves or preserves the structure of the existing social order while promoting a society flexible enough to change and adapt with the times.

Indeed, the trickster figure’s focus on flexibility stems from the nature of laughter itself. Hynes remarks that trickster stories “provide a fertile source of cultural reflection and critical reflexivity that leaves one thoughtful yet laughing; and what a culture does with laughter reflects its vitality, flexibility and creativity” (Hynes and Doty 4). In summary, trickster figures support the existing social structure while promoting social flexibility and gradual change, all leavened with the addition of jokes, tricks and laughter.

Although tricksters appear in Asian American literature and are extensively studied in other disciplines, there is a marked dearth of research in literary criticism on the subject.11 This certainly may stem from the neglect of humor studies in literary circles or the division between mythological studies and the contemporary focus of Asian American literary studies. However, Filipino poet and essayist Mila Aguilar discusses Filipino tricksters in her paper “Fighting the Panopticon: Filipino Trickster Tales as Active Agency Against Oppressive Structures.” Her paper supports the argument that tricksters resist colonial authorities and grant agency to the subjugated working class.

Aguilar is exceptionally prolific, having written over one hundred essays for the Manila since 1995, including some about her experiences with detention, interrogation and torture by Filipino authorities in the eighties. However, because of her lack of connections to American academic institutions, her work is little known outside of the

11 Although research is limited about tricksters in Asian American fiction, Kingston does mention the trickster god Maui in *China Men*. There is more discussion on authors themselves as tricksters. Ammons and White-Parks analyze Sui Sin Far as a trickster figure (*Tricksters in Turn-of-the Century American Literature*). Rei Magosaki discusses authors as tricksters more broadly (*Tricksters and Cosmopolitans*).
Philippines and has not made an impact on Asian American literary criticism. There is certainly much room for discussing tricksters and their role in tragicomic Asian American literature, especially in the way that they illuminate and interrogate power relations, which fits neatly into existing avenues of debate in Asian American studies.

The Role of Mystical Movements in Filipino Colonial History

If tricksters are figures that support the adaptation of social and cultural change, then where can we place them in relation to Laughter’s historical background and two competing forces in the Philippines: the paternalistic colonial structures of Spain and the United States and the persistent revolutionary forces that oppose foreign government control? Certainly Carlos Bulosan’s personal politics suggest that his texts should strongly support the Philippine revolutionaries through his role as an organizer in the militant Seattle branch of the International Longshore Warehouse Union (ILWU) and his vocal support of the Huk peasant movement in the Philippines (Baldoz). Bulosan expressed his revolutionary ideas in writing through his pro-socialist essays and his best known work, his 1946 novel America Is in the Heart. However, the controversial choices of revolutionary leaders, the frequent corruption innate to many Philippine resistance movements, and the subtle politics of Laughter paint a more complex picture than Bulosan’s fiery politics initially indicate. As we explore the political and cultural dimensions of the US colonial takeover and rule of the Philippines, we should keep in mind the alternating roles the trickster plays in alternatively tempering and augmenting warring colonial and revolutionary forces. Furthermore, as a figure representative of the people, the trickster’s unsettled position in relation to Philippine history is an excellent

12 See Bulosan, On Becoming Filipino.
metaphor for the fluctuating positions the Philippine people were forced to adopt throughout the country’s centuries-long colonial past.

Before discussing the United States occupation of the Philippines, it’s important to establish precisely why the US decided to make the country its first colonial acquisition. Historian Rebecca McKenna argues that, shortly after the US occupation of the Philippines began in 1898, Indiana Senator Albert Beverage justified the takeover by bringing up the model set by European countries and their colonies, whereby the colonies acted as both producers of raw materials and consumers of manufactured goods from their colonial overseers. Turning to America’s economic needs, Beverage mounts a defense of colonial occupation:

“Where shall we turn for consumers of our surplus?” [Beverage] asked…[then] offered an answer: “Geography.” “China is our natural customer…Most future wars will be conflicts of commerce. The power that rules the Pacific, therefore, is the power that rules the world. And with the Philippines, the power will be the American republic” (McKenna 4).

During its period as a US Territory from 1896-1946, the Philippines was not merely a site for America to replicate the European model of economic exchange between home country and colonies; it also acted as a portal to the lucrative markets of China and the Far East, replicating the role that Manila had held during the Spanish colonial period (1521-1898) as a lucrative port where ships traded “silver for precious goods like ‘spices, ivory, porcelain, lacquerware, and processed silk,’” between Mexico and China (McKenna 4). By extending its long arm to control the Philippines, the US planned to edge out its European competitors by gaining a dominating share of East Asian markets.
At the same time the US hoped to create greater demand for its own goods in order to address economic tensions at home, one such example being the 1893 depression, which many historians suggest as having been caused by domestic overproduction (5).

However, America’s first foray into colonialism, driven by economic goals in China and East Asia, proved markedly different than European colonialism, which largely grew from a desire for the land and resources of the colonialized country, rather than the colonized country’s relationship to its neighbors. McKenna cites historians Neil Smith and US historian Walter LaFeber to draw distinctions between US and European colonial aims. Neil Smith describes twentieth century American imperialism as demonstrating “power in the first place through the more abstract geography of the world market rather than through direct political control of territory.” In comparison with earlier European forms, American imperialism “represents a long-term strategic rebuttal of European colonialism and anti-colonial movements alike. According to the logic of this imperial formation, territory was less of an end and a signifier of supremacy than a means” (5). Rather than posing colonial takeovers as a way to expand the empire through land acquisition, US colonial supporters posed the imperial project as one that would enrich the US by allowing it to tap into other markets, while at the same time increasing the fortunes of the colonial state by opening it to free trade between foreign markets. LaFeber describes this American style of economic imperialism as “new empire.”

Although this idea of a “new” form of empire was certainly a departure from the European model, and insinuated that this new American colonial power was “dematerialized”, “invisible” or even “anti-colonial” compared to its predecessors’ “direct political control of territory”, in the end its implementation did not differ much
from traditional European imperialism (5). Colonial states were still politically and economically controlled by foreign governments, whose interests were always secondary to the prosperity of the home country. But as we will discover, the illusion of liberty and freedom under America’s new empire was crucial to the defeat of Spanish rule in the Philippines and the construction of the US colonial government in its place. American rhetoric position the nation as an ally to the Philippines and an enabler of its liberation against colonial enslavement, even as the country took steps toward securing itself as the head of the new Philippine political order.

According to historian Renato Constantino’s *A History of the Philippines*, in contrast to Spain’s colonization nearly four centuries before, the United States took pains to present itself as an ally to the Philippine people, rather than a conqueror. The US supported Filipino revolutionaries, led by Emilio Aguinaldo, in overthrowing the Spanish colonial government and promised to provide troops, supplies, and support for the future independent Filipino government. Unfortunately, these supportive actions by the US government were merely expedient ways of expelling the Spanish from the islands in order to set up its own colonial rule. General Thomas Anderson, in separate testimonies before the US Senate Committee, admitted as much. When asked by Aguinaldo about US intentions in the Philippines, he at first replied that “in 122 years [the United States] had established no colonies”; then, in a later meeting with Aguinaldo absent, Anderson described the inequality of his relationship with the revolutionary leader, bragging,

I knew what he was doing. Driving the Spaniards [back] was saving our troops…Up to the time the army came, Aguinaldo did everything I requested. He
was most obedient, [sic] whatever I told him, he did. I saw him almost daily. I had not much to do with him after the Army came” (Constantino 208).

Anderson’s paternalistic attitude toward Aguinaldo parallels greater US policy toward Philippine revolutionaries as Philippine forces continued to liberate territory from Spanish forces. As Aguinaldo’s army gained ground, US Generals used their power to order Filipino troops to vacate areas that they had worked hard to capture. The turning point occurred in the Battle of Manila in 1898, where instead of letting Aguinaldo’s troops assault the city, US and Spanish negotiators met and secretly came to a deal to “stage a mock battle which would be quickly followed by the surrender of Manila to US Troops, provided no Filipino troops were allowed into the surrendered city” (208). This secret agreement between colonial powers allowed the US to claim the decisive, and heavily symbolic victory over the Spanish government, while at the same time selling out its Philippine allies, who could only watch the takeover of Manila from the sidelines. Just as Aguinaldo’s troops were relegated to the position of witnesses to the conclusion of their own revolution, so would the budding Philippine-led government be relegated to symbolic rule as the US government took on the role of colonial overseers in control of all important Philippine government functions.

Nevertheless, after the defeat of Spain, Aguinaldo and his allies persisted in trying to form an independent Philippine government, despite all the signs that pointed toward American colonialization of the country. Through the Treaty of Paris on December 10th, 1898, the US purchased the Philippines from Spain for $20 million.\(^{13}\) Eleven days after signing the treaty and hearing Aguinaldo’s inaugural speech as the Philippines’ first

\(^{13}\) Adjusting for inflation, this equates to $606 million in 2019 US dollars (“US Inflation Rate Calculator”).
president, on December 21st President McKinley issued his “’Benevolent Assimilation’ Proclamation, which, despite its honeyed words about the Americans coming ‘not as invaders or conquerors, but as friends,’ instructed the American military commanders to extend the sovereignty of the United States over the whole country, by force if necessary” (217). With the Americans abandoning all pretense, Aguinaldo and the Philippine people finally had to admit the duplicity of their American allies, who promised the country freedom while at the same time plotting its takeover. Aguinaldo replied to McKinley in an impassioned manifesto, accusing the US of abandoning its historical devotion to liberty and its repudiation of slavery:

It was taken for granted that the American forces would necessarily sympathize with the revolution which they had encouraged and which had saved them much blood and great hardships; and, above all, we entertained absolute confidence in the history and traditions of a people which fought for its independence and for the abolition of slavery; we felt ourselves under the guardianship of a free people (217-8).

Aguinaldo’s speech calls on the values of liberty, independence and self-governance on which the United States had prided itself, having enshrined these ideals in its Constitution and gone to war when such values were put into jeopardy. Yet McKinley’s choice to occupy the Philippines is another example of how the values of the United States were not immune to the forces of economic and political power and ambition. Later, President Theodore Roosevelt justified the US Philippine takeover in terms of American acquisition of former Native American lands, stating “if Americans were ‘morally bound to abandon the Philippines…we were also morally bound to abandon Arizona to the
American imperialism, in the eyes of Roosevelt and his pro-imperialist allies, was justified purely by American superiority over weaker, less civilized peoples.

Roosevelt’s strong support for imperialism contrasts sharply with General Anderson’s weak defense of the purity of US intentions in stating that the country had, to date, acquired no colonies. American claims about their lack of imperial ambitions could not possibly account for Aguinaldo’s persistent trust in US democratic values, especially in the face of the country’s growing duplicity. It is hard to believe that Aguinaldo and his allies were led to trust the US by their own naiveté. Rather, evidence shows that the new Philippine government, even as a colonialized state, had much to gain from the US takeover. After the revolution, Philippine elites quickly moved to solidify their position in the US-led government and profited from their elevated status. As we will discover, although the Philippine Revolution was won on the backs of its people, US colonizers and Philippine elites worked together to profit at the expense of the masses, all the while promising independence to satiate the people’s thirst for liberty.

After the institution of the new US-led Philippine government, Aguinaldo quickly filled the cabinet positions in his government from the “illustrados”, the Philippines’ wealthy and well-educated elites. Although many of the illustrados in office professed to support Philippine liberation from US colonization, in truth they used their positions to further entrench the status quo and enrich themselves through the free trade and political stability of US rule. For example, the Philippine government set up laws to make it easier for individuals and corporations to acquire agricultural land and protect it by land titles.

---

14 See Constantino 282.
Unfortunately, small farmers, due to poverty and ignorance, were often unable to protect their lands, and the law largely benefitted landlords with large holdings, who were able to consolidate their properties, often through fraudulent means. According to Constantino, “almost all of the titles granted by the Court of Land Registration up to 1910 were for large private landholdings (Constantino 299). These absentee landlords were a strong source of civil unrest, collecting heavy land taxes on tenant farmers for the use of their land” (345). Absenteeism was particularly prominent in the province of Luzon, the area where *Laughter* takes place, and its proximity to Manila made it one of the hotbeds of resistance activity.

Many illustrados also supported US rationalizations for colonialization, agreeing that the Philippine people were too primitive for self government. T.H. Pardo de Tavera, a high-ranking official in the Malolos Congress, appointed by Aguinaldo, wrote in a letter to President McKinley, “I have completely and most actively occupied myself in politics, employing all my energies for the establishment of American sovereignty in this country for the good of these ignorant and uncivilized people” (qtd. in Constantino 233). Of course, while in office these same men professed to support Philippine liberation. American officials in the Philippines noted many examples of illustrados in government contradicting themselves between their public and private opinions. Governor-General William Cameron Forbes noted that before even the first Assembly elections, leaders of the Nationalist party who publicly stated that they would push for independence privately “admitted…that it was really a catchy of getting votes; that what they wanted was office, not independence” (qtd. in Constantino 233). Governor-General Smith made similar observations of Philippine politics, stating,
…the first and only genuine political parties that have ever lived and had their being in the Philippines since the establishment of Civil government — (are) the Ins and the Outs. The Ins are generally conservative, the Outs are always radical — until they get in. The Ins are conservative from conviction, the Outs are radical for convenience. (qtd. in Constantino 322)

This self-perpetuating political cycle secured lucrative positions for the illustrados and US colonizers, while at the same time giving the Philippine people the illusion of choice and perpetuating their hopes of liberation. Illustrados would “resolv[e] the contradictions between their two ‘masters’ by deluding one with oratorical platitudes while entering into compromises with the other for personal advantage” (318). This technique of verbal skill and trickery is often the tool of choice for tricksters, and is the main tool that characters use in Laughter to gain advantage over others. By adopting the methods of the elite, humble farmers such as Father from Laughter can gain the upper hand. Yet even father’s trickery is not enough to improve the lot of his family forever. Aguinaldo and the illustrados’ compromise with the Americans often led to disastrous consequences for the Philippine people, especially farmers, who found themselves squeezed on both sides, we will discover, both from US colonial policies and militarism and from resistance movements who relied on rural villages for monetary support.

Constantino and McKenna have addressed to some extent the dissolution of farmers’ lands and the land grabs by wealthy landowners, which took place throughout both the Spanish to the US colonial rule. These exploitive policies were accompanied with US military restrictions aimed at eliminating resistance movements, which further oppressed and impoverished local farmers. Anti-colonial uprisings provoked the US
government to sent troops to rural towns in order to quell bands of resistance fighters by force. Rural communities found themselves caught in the middle of two warring forces. In particular, General Bell’s campaign against rebellion fighters included the burning of towns near areas of guerrilla operations, robbing the people of their homes, farms and means of survival. One traveler described the effects of the campaign as follows: “Batangas was the garden spot of Luzon. It was covered with fine haciendas of sugar, coffee, tobacco and rice. Now it is a jungle. We did not see a man working between Batangas and Tail, nor a cultivated field” (qtd. in Constantino 244-5). Beyond the burning of their homes and farms, victims of these anti-guerilla campaigns were often subjected to the Reconcentration Act of 1903, which gave local governments the power to re-concentrate the residents of outlying towns into a central area in order to root out guerrillas who were hiding among the townsfolk. As many as 300,000 in the Bicol provinces were reconcentrated, a practice that caused many farms to fall into neglect, which resulted in food shortages, while overcrowding in camps simultaneously increased the prevalence of disease (246). At the same time, rebel groups often taxed the people whose lands they controlled. Montalan, a chief officer of General Sakay, instituted a 10% income tax on all merchants, farmers and laborers, enforced partially by fear, but also promoted by others who voluntarily supported them and their cause (258). The US government additionally taxed the Philippine people for education, sanitation, and government upkeep, in essence forcing the Philippine people to support the forces that maintained their exploitation (295). These double taxation measures, joined with the existing exploitive landlord-tenant system, perpetuated the debt and dependence of tenants and their families. Constantino summarizes the result of these policies:
It was not unusual for a tenant to have nothing left of his share after he had settled accounts with the landlords. In fact, more often than not, he sank deeper and deeper into debt. It became customary for his children to serve the landlord as domestic servants to help pay the interest on these debts. Moreover, since only the landlord kept accounts—most tenants being illiterate—the latter could be cheated mercilessly. And if the tenant knew he was being cheated, there was nothing much he could do about it. (347)

Tenant farmers faced a future of debt to which their families would be inevitably tied to from generation to generation. It is no wonder that so many of the Philippine people passionately believed in liberation from US colonial rule—such a radical idea might offer the only possible way for them to escape the cycle of exploitation that had been in place for hundreds of years since Spanish colonial rule. Unfortunately, with their own elected officials pandering to US interests, the only hope that the Philippine people had for change was rebellion. Although ultimately unsuccessful, several mystical resistance movements gained strong popular support among the Philippine people and represented one of the few ways that they could fight back against their colonial oppressors and the corruption of illustrado officials.

The growth of Philippine mystical organizations devoted to revolution and independence grew from several centuries of Spanish colonial rule. In order to protest the desperate economic conditions of the peasant population, rebellions took on “mystical, nativistic forms” that “contrasted [the] old gods to the god of their conquerors,” a particularly salient choice since the local Spanish priest was often the most visible symbol of Spanish power in Philippine communities (387). These mystical movements
looked back favorably on an idealized past and contrasted this nostalgic historical view with the current oppressive conditions that characterized Philippine society. However, it was not long before the same mystical organizations began to adapt Catholic traditions and rites into their practices, combining them with original native beliefs (387). This unusual amalgamation of original and adopted beliefs characterized the mystical protest movements during US colonial occupation. One such example can be found in the rise of the colorum movement, which began in the mid 19th century and lasted well into the early 20th century. The term “colorum” derives from Christian prayers ending in “in amnia et secular saeculorum” or, “forever and ever” (“Colorum Movements”). Although the colorum movements were in reality a series of groups rather than a unified movement, all of these movements shared several common traits, including “religious fanaticism” expressed through “a mélange of Catholic devotion, hero-worship and folk superstition” (Constantino 350). Followers, largely peasants and members of the urban poor, worshipped the movement leaders as messiah figures. For example, in the Surigao province, Filipino writer and national hero Jose Rizal’s colorum followers believed that he had been resurrected from the dead, that he would one day rule the Philippines and that he would uphold his promise that the territory confiscated from their enemies would be split among his colorum members. Many colorum groups also armed themselves with anting-actings, artifacts, frequently in the form of engraved amulets, that purportedly imbued with supernatural religious power that would render them immune to bullets or, if killed, would cause them to rise and live again within five days. US government forces

---

15 Jose Rizal (1861-1896) was a Filipino nationalist who argued for political reforms under Spanish rule. He was executed in 1896 by the Spanish colonial government for rebellions inspired by his writings. After his death, he was heralded as a national hero and became a figure of worship for colorum organizations (Halili).
took these mystical threats seriously. Upon capturing the town of Socorro, Colonel H. Bowers burned the town and let the corpses of colorum members “rot where they were killed in order to prove that colorums did not in fact come back to life” (351). In addition to government condemnation of colorum movements, Governor General Wood prohibited the display of pictures of Filipino heroes in public schools in the province of Mindanao in order to try to stem the power that iconography of folk heroes had over the minds of the Philippine people. Although the colorum movements and other mystical movements were ultimately unsuccessful in returning the country’s power to Philippine leadership, the condemnations and violent reactions by the US government such as those mentioned above demonstrate mystical movements’ ability to disturb colonial rule and their power to inspire anti-imperial thoughts and actions in the Philippine people.

The very real power of mystical movements drew from their use of symbolism deeply steeped in Catholic iconography and folk beliefs, just as much as it lay in the promises of land and wealth restitution for the Philippine people. Reflecting on our discussion earlier of the role of trickster heroes, we can see similarities in the ways that trickster heroes and mystical movements shape society. Tricksters traditionally test boundaries of the status quo, balancing the preservation of social order with needs for socio-cultural change. Their flexibility and ability to adapt and introduce new ideas into traditional culture parallels the flexibly changing nature of colorums, whose adoption of Catholic symbology into their movement resulted in an even more devoted anti-colonial following during US rule in the 20th century. In fact, Street’s earlier remarks that the trickster is “both revolutionary and savior” is surprisingly analogous to the role played by mystical leaders such as Rizal, who combined the roles of popular revolutionary and
messiah, in turn creating a belief system that fueled the fever of their anti-colonial movements. But rather than fueling future-looking social change, Rizal and other mystical leaders relied on an idealized view of the past as the model for the future of the Philippines. These past-leaning mystical movements relied on rosy views of pre-colonial Philippine history that drew on the people’s nostalgia for a pastoral Philippines of the past. In contrast to these pastoral yearnings, the next section will explore the role of the trickster hero and how tricksters metaphorically represent a more reparative and realistic approach to Philippine socio-cultural change.

**Problematizing the Pastoral in the Philippines and Abroad**

For many in the Philippines, America and the United Kingdom, the pastoral represented a nostalgic yearning for a long-lost past. Times of swift social, political and economic change only increase desires of societies for the stability and powerful traditions and beliefs of earlier times. Idealized views of the history emphasize the pastoral contrast between the corruption of the city and a “‘happier past’ or more ‘innocent’ place signified by the country,” which McKenna terms “retrospective radicalism” (McKenna 12). Unlike many cases of radicalism that support future-looking reforms, in this case radicalism emphasizes a return to past traditional values. In his study of American writers on industrialization in the 19th and 20th centuries, Leo Marx writes about how writers like Hawthorne, Emerson, Thoreau and others “employed the pastoral to make sense of and cope with their tumultuous circumstances” and longed for “an existence ‘closer to nature’” which Marx argues “is the psychic root of all pastoralism” (Marx 13). An embrace of the natural often meant the wholesale repudiation of man-
made structures and institutions, and with this rejection came a purging of the societal changes that damaged marginalized subsets of society.

Unfortunately, a wholehearted embrace of the pastoral often overlooks systems of inequality that fuel the same exploitive structures that marginalized populations sought to abandon. In addition to Marx’s analysis of the pastoral in America, Raymond Williams analyzes prevalent pastoral imagery by writers from the United Kingdom from the 16th century onward in his book *The Country and the City*. Williams discusses the danger of views promoting the contrast between the idyllic past and the corrupt present, arguing that,

Not only does [this contrast] obscure the relations of power and dominance that prevailed in that supposedly “happier” feudal or post-feudal past, but it also cloaks the relations that link country and city, the connections “between the processes of rural exploitation” and “the register of that exploitation, in the law courts, the money markets, the political power and the conscious expenditure of the city” (Williams 12-3).

Even in functional feudal systems where rural communities had relative autonomy to produce enough crops and goods to support their families and generate income, political and economic systems often sanctioned the domination of urban centers over rural communities. In the case of the Philippines, the rise of centers of trade such as Manila throughout the Spanish colonial period led to the gradual escalation of the exploitation of farmers at the hands of the Spanish government and clergy. These steps paved the way for continued economic domination and political suppression during US occupation.

Returning to our earlier discussion of mystical movements from the mid-19th to early 20th
century, we might now realize that their broad use of Catholic iconography is a clear sign of a troubling trend: at the same time that protesters decried colonial occupation in favor of a simpler past, they had forgotten that their idyllic past suffered from the same systems of domination and exploitation that they sought to escape.

Furthermore, pastoral ideals were ripe for adoption by colonial regimes who used them to support the political and economic aims that the pastoral originally opposed. Furthering his argument about the pitfalls of pastoralism, Williams argues that “one of the last models of ‘city and country’ is the system we now know as imperialism,” thereby positioning imperialism as the modern successor of backwards-looking pastoral movements. Because pastoralism supports “a deep desire for stability,” it easily fits the mold of imperial systems that promise stability in exchange for exploitation of the masses to benefit the elite few (14). Anthropologist Rosalind Morris takes this argument further in her exploration of the implications of the “imperial pastoral\(^\text{16}\)” in British colonies in Southeast Asia, stating that the pastoral “rested on the conflation of the ideas of native and nature, and it worked to hierarchize the populations of colonized territories in a falsely temporalized sense, with rurality and peasantry assuming the place of the primordial” (Morris 159). Pastoral systems defined “nativeness as a primordial connection to the land, but one that could be distinguished from both ownership and title” (15). In other words, according to the government, colonized peoples maintained a crucial and undeniable connection to the land, but one that was primitive, disorganized and not suited for governance. With these beliefs in place, colonizers could easily step

\(^{16}\) Morris uses the ideas of Karl Marx in her reading of the romanticization of the pastoral landscape of imperial colonies. She studies L.A.S. Jermyn’s translation of Vergil’s *Georgics* during the waning period of British rule as an example of the destructiveness of British imperial fancies (“Imperial Pastoral”).
into the position of paternalistic rulers, optimizing labor and goods and maintaining title and economic domination over the land, all the while letting the native population work the fields according to their “nature”. We can see the same language repeated in the justification for US rule in the Philippines by politicians and generals, who viewed US colonization as a civilizing mission meant to teach the Philippine people how to build and run a modern society. Although the US never intended to give the Philippines self-governance, it is fair to say that many high ranking officials honestly believed in such a mission of stewardship. This internalization of dependency, further reinforced by the US-led education system of the Philippines, added to the beliefs by elites such as the illustrados that the Philippine people were not up to the task of self-governance. In the hands of US colonizers, the idealization of the pastoral fed into existing, entrenched concepts of Philippine dependency and turned a tool used by revolutionary movements into a line of thought that perpetuated the status quo.

If the ideal of the pastoral is a problematic model for the liberation of colonized peoples, then what other paradigm can we find for a future free of colonial power structures? One possibility is the reintroduction of narratives featuring tricksters, for tricksters have the potential to disrupt the existing political structures in order to make way for something new. We have previously discussed how tricksters often model for societies how one “ought” to act in order to conform to the status quo, as well as how they conversely question social structures to keep social systems flexible and adaptable to change. Kathleen Ashley adds to the progressive potential that tricksters personify, suggesting,

---

17 In addition to T.H. Pardo de Tavera, other politicians who pledged early allegiance to the Americans included Cayetano Arellano, Gregorio Areneta and Benito Legarda (Constantino 232).
Tricksters make available for thought the way things are not but might be; their stories can function as critiques of the status quo as well as models for other possible arrangements. Whether and how such stories activate those functions depends on the interpretive community in which they are told. (Ashley 113)

In other words, trickster stories are very much a double-edged sword. They can be an effective tool for progressive movements when demonstrating the trickster cleverly thwarts authorities, thereby exposing the absurdity of divine or mortal systems of power. On the other hand, trickster tales can be used by colonial governments to suppress popular movements if the trickster, failing to subvert the system, is punished or becomes resigned to existing systems of rule. Whether trickster stories represent a progressive force or a continuation of current values and trends depends on the community that musters them for their use.

In the next section, we will explore Bulosan’s deployment of trickster figures in his short story collection, The Laughter of My Father. Peppered with humor but fundamentally tragic, Laughter combines the emotional tides of the tragicomic genre along with clever, flawed, but deeply relatable trickster heroes. The resulting text performs much needed reparative work for Filipino readers, particularly those in America. Far more so than traditional protest novels, Laughter harnesses a new kind of resistance with its use of tricksters and the tragicomic: by laughing at the absurdities in their lives rather than simply accepting their positions as exploited colonial subjects, Laughter’s characters soothe old colonial wounds, reclaim agency, and seize narrative power through the text.

**Tricksters and the Tragicomic in Bulosan’s The Laughter of My Father**
Upon the publication of Carlos Bulosan’s short story collection *The Laughter of My Father* in 1944, critics praised the tales’ wit and humor. In response, Bulosan wrote a scathing editorial, declaring, “I am not a laughing man,” before plunging into an angry but heartfelt description of his own struggles to survive in America (*On Becoming Filipino* 138). Since *Laughter*’s publication, many scholars have explored the text’s biting political satire of the Philippines’ colonial government, which left peasants impoverished while concentrating the country’s wealth in the hands of the few.

Postcolonial critic Nerissa Balce focuses on Bulosan’s use of satire in her essay “Laughter Against the State: On Humor, Postcolonial Satire, and Asian American Short Fiction.” Balce writes that Bulosan described his short fiction as satire, which she argues indicates his distaste for “the frivolity of humor” (Balce 47). Balce reads Bulosan’s stories alongside the work of other writers in order to develop her concept of “postcolonial satire,” which she argues “mocks the sacred image of the heteronormative family and the ideology of patriarchy as forms of the modern state.” Postcolonial satire, she concludes, “revolt[s] against these forms of state, through the language of humor” (49).

Delfin Tolentino, a literature professor at the University of the Philippines, also discusses Bulosan’s use of satire, but observes that the author specifically aims his cutting satire at the new US imperial institutions (Tolentino 461). Tolentino argues that Bulosan belies a “romantic attachment to his rural past” and uses his stories to criticize the dehumanizing forces of American rule. Conversely, literary critic L.M. Grow reads Bulosan’s stories as a “handbook for peasant survival,” (Grow 1) but one which equally applies to oppressed Filipinos both in the Philippines and in America (2). Contrary to Balce and Tolentino, Grow argues that Bulosan also derides peasant “folkways” rather
than the rule of authorities, and surmises that Laughter opts for survival over the
dangerous option of protest (3). While other critics illustrate the feminist and anti-
American aspects of Laughter,\(^\text{18}\) the central role of humor in the short story collection
remains the center of critical debate.

Grow argues that very humor that Bulosan rejects in his editorial represents a
critical survival tool, not only for the narrator’s family and community within the text,
but also for Filipinos under US occupation in the Philippines along with those who live in
America like Bulosan (2). My ideas develop upon Grow’s research and explore precisely
how Laughter demonstrates cunning survival tactics for Filipino readers. But my
argument ultimately moves past reading Laughter as simply a survival tool and positions
the text as a balm for the injuries inflicted by colonial rule. The remainder of the chapter
will delve into how Laughter’s tragicomedic moments forge affective connections
between readers and the stories’ characters, examine how characters act as trickster
heroes in order to resist and subvert socio-political power structures, and explore how
these two forces work in tandem to heighten awareness of the Philippines’ traumatic
history, strengthen Philippine communities, and begin to mend the wounds inflicted on
the Philippine people throughout their centuries-long history of colonialism.

Laughter uses tragic moments to create affective connections between its
characters and readers; however, these tragic scenes are unexpectedly accompanied with
and often blended with scenes of humor and laughter. The presence of humor, as well as
the notable lack of humor in places, creates a complex emotional landscape for readers.
We are lured in by the laughter, joining in to celebrate with the characters, yet when the

\(^{18}\) For a feminist and class-based reading of Laughter see Alquizola and Hirabayashi. For a reading of
Laughter as an anti-American text, see San Juan Jr.
humor ends abruptly it is as if the cheerful music cuts off with a record-scratching stop. Left suddenly in silence and tragedy, we readers are deeply affected. But rather than leaving us with the bitterness of tragedy, as seen with many satirical texts, Bulosan brings us back into the cycle of laughter, this time a mixed one of both cheer and sorrow, a weary laughter, but one that is ultimately necessary. Through our exploration of the power of laughter we will discover how laughter is empowering and how it transforms victims into agents while at the same time critiquing heavily entrenched colonial structures.

Humor’s ability to strengthen and enrich communities and families is no more apparent than in the first chapter of *Laughter*, “My Father Goes to Court,” where the narrator’s father is brought to court by his neighbor with the accusation that he and his family have been “stealing the spirit of the complainant’s wealth and food.” The neighbor is described as a rich man with a large house, fine food and servants. By contrast, the narrator’s very poor family enjoys only the delicious smells wafting from the kitchen of the house next door. But instead of growing envious, the narrator’s family feeds on their own laughter, amusing themselves by making faces at each other and playing pranks on one another. While the neighbor’s family is shut up inside the house, the narrator’s family plays together both outside and inside their house, always supplementing their games with jokes and laughter. The narrator recalls,

> Sometimes we wrestled with one another in the house before we went out to play. We were always in the best of spirits and our laughter was contagious. Other neighbors who passed by our house often stopped in our yard and joined us in laughter. Laughter was our only wealth. (*Laughter* 7)
Rather than material wealth, the family trades in laughter. In fact, the exchange of laughter is a form of mutual gift giving. The narrator’s family is not miserly with their laughter; instead, they give it freely to each other as well as to others in the community. As a result, their laughter becomes “contagious” and multiplies, thereby increasing the lot of laughter and joy of the family as well as the larger community. These practices of free giving contradict the capitalistic practices of Spanish and US colonialism, where laws dictated trade and exchange of goods, almost always in favor of the wealthy illustrados and landowners. If laughter can be freely given and multiply so readily in the hands of the working class, then the government and landowners cannot skim off profits from its exchange.

To represent these establishment forces, Bulosan carefully characterizes the neighbor’s family in sharp relief to the narrator. The greedy neighbor shuts all of his doors and windows to try to keep the “spirits” of his wealth and the smells of his food from being enjoyed by others. The neighbor’s covetousness mimics the colonial government’s parceling of the Philippines’ agricultural land amongst the wealthy establishment without giving a share of the land’s wealth to the people who work the land. Over time the neighbor and his family grow pale and ill while the narrator’s family remains hale and healthy. Nevertheless, the neighbor is filled with jealousy over how laughter rather than food has nourished the children of the narrator’s family: “He looked at my sisters, who had grown fat with laughing, then at my brothers, whose arms and legs were like the molave, which is the sturdiest tree in the Philippines” (6). The narrator’s family maintains a healthy connection with the land; they play outdoors and draw strength from their natural surroundings, incorporating the wealth of the land into their
very bodies despite the fact that they have little physical nourishment. On the other hand, the neighbors only have their monetary wealth to feed on, money that has been extorted from the land but has lost its healthful properties. As a result, their health wanes, and jealousy prevents them from taking the more sensible path that the narrator’s family demonstrates.

It is no surprise that when the neighbors seek revenge against the narrator’s family; they take the family to court, hoping that the same legal system that brought them wealth will also help them win back the health that they believe the narrator’s family is stealing from them. The neighbor claims in his legal suit that the narrator’s family has become “a laughing family” by “stealing the spirit of his wealth and food,” thereby causing the neighbor’s family to become “morose and sad” (7-8). Surprisingly, instead of representing the court as wholly corrupt, Bulosan introduces a courtroom that is as much steeped in local traditions as it is in formal law. The judge gives the narrator’s father a tremendous amount of leeway, allowing him to represent himself without an attorney and to step out of the courtroom for a few minutes in order to set up the clever performance, one that allows him to repay the wronged neighbor using the same illogic that brought him to court in the first place. A more formal court proceeding would not allow Father these liberties and would give the neighbor, along with his accusatory attorney, an unassailable advantage over the narrator’s family. But the conclusion of the tale clarifies that the judge understands the power of laughter, and therefore accepts Father’s unorthodox legal tactics. Furthering this line of argument, after the trial, the judge comes down from his high seat and shakes hands with Father to congratulate him, and whispers, “I had an uncle who died laughing.”
“You like to hear my family laugh, Judge?” Father asked.

“Why not?”

“Did you hear that, children?” Father said.

My sisters started it. The rest of us followed them and soon the spectators were laughing with us, holding their bellies and bending over the chairs. And the laughter of the judge was the loudest of all (9-10).

The judge’s behavior reinforces the power of laughter and demonstrates that all classes of society in the community, from farmers like Father to well educated elected officials such as himself, believe in the importance of laughter and its healthful influence. Those who do not, like the rich neighbor, not only face poor health, but also lose the support of their local communities, both legally and socially. The spectators and judge demonstrate through joining in with the family’s laughter that they support the Sampayan family over the wealthy landowners who, while holding much economic power, are culturally disconnected from the land they inhabit and the people they live among.

In addition to the support of the power of laughter that the judge demonstrates, his acceptance of Father’s unorthodox legal defense allows Father to channel the powers of the trickster in order to subvert his neighbor’s authority. When the judge allows Father to play the part of the trickster in his courtroom, Father upends the traditional power dynamics of the legal system, acting not only as a defendant but also his own defense attorney. He begins by crossing the plaintiff and establishes the parameters by which the plaintiff claims that the Sampayans stole the spirit of his food. Father then offers restitution for the theft, claiming that he will pay the neighbor back immediately. Picking up his son’s straw hat, Father fills it with centavo pieces and silver coins from his family
members, then asks the leave of the judge to step into the room across the hall for a few minutes, which the judge grants. Father walks out of the courtroom, leaving the doors of the courtroom wide open to set the stage for his performance. The following scene uses the power of sound to transfer agency, formerly associated with the wealthy neighbor and his attorney, to Father through an unorthodox performance:

The sweet tinkle of the coins carried beautifully into the courtroom. The spectators turned their faces toward the sound with wonder. Father came back and stood before the complainant.

“Did you hear it?” he asked.

“Hear what?” the man asked.

“The spirit of the money when I shook this hat?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Then you are paid,” Father said.

The rich man opened his mouth to speak and fell to the floor without a sound. The lawyer rushed to his aid. The judge pounded his gavel.

“Case dismissed,” he said.

In a court of law, power often lies with the one who has the most oratory prowess. The one who has control over the sonic landscape in the courtroom is usually the one who maintains his authority. In most cases, speech within the courtroom is restricted by systematic legal procedure. These practices would traditionally give the neighbor and his legal representative an easy victory over Father, who is most likely unacquainted with courtroom procedure. But when the judge allows Father to perform, Father dominates the sonic landscape of the courtroom and easily entrances the entire room with his bold
performance. Father leaves the room in silence, and when he reenters the first thing the spectators are greeted with is the sound of tinkling coins within the straw hat. The sound is described as “sweet” and fills the audience with “wonder” at the power that so many coins represents. The audience’s awe sets up the inevitable outcome of the dialogue that follows when Father asks the plaintiff if he heard the spirit of the money as he entered the room jingling the coins. The plaintiff echoes the response of the audience, assenting, only to discover that the very words he used to initiate the suit, “the spirit of wealth” have been returned to him without any substantive monetary recompense. As a result, not only does the neighbor not receive a single coin in damages, but he also has his speech stolen from him—he falls to the floor speechlessly and his attorney rushes to help him but he is unable to utter a single word against Father. Only the judge retains a superior hold on the sonic landscape, but his gavel pounding inevitably closes the case in Father’s favor.

In this vignette, Father has demonstrated his sonic superiority through the deployment of his family’s laughter and the clever coin jingling performance. He has also proven his linguistic flexibility by turning the words of the neighbor’s suit against him, and although he is untrained, he cleverly imitates legal proceedings by using the language of cross examination when pressing the neighbor to clarify the nature of his complaint. These points of imitation and reversal are common tools in the arsenal of the trickster, who mocks existing systems and procedures by addressing and then turning them on their heads. Victor Turner in his book *The Ritual Process* addresses the role the trickster plays in his community. His argument relies on the concept of “communitas” or “the ideal social sharing of common values and regard for one another” (Hynes 128). Turner argues
that through ritual performance, the trickster suspends the traditional rules of society and allows for new growth:

As the ritual participant moves through the liminality of communitas, the usual social restrictions are in abeyance, new metaphors are born, and the usual perceptions of the world are reenvisioned creatively. The liminal trickster, the court jester, and the clown are related, according to Turner (125) in that they possess marginal status and bring into the social institution new possibilities for action and self-understanding. (Hynes 20)

Turner notes that liminal figures like tricksters, jesters and clowns move along the liminal boundaries of social communities. Through ritualistic performance, they evade societal restrictions and open up progressive possibilities for themselves and the communities that they have formerly subverted. Father undertakes such a liminal journey in the courtroom by playing the role of his own defense attorney, thereby crossing the boundary that exists between uneducated farmers and well-educated, legally trained attorneys. His ritual act temporarily breaks down the social barriers between the working and educated classes of the Philippines and allows the workers to score a victory against the wealthy landowners. At the same time, although Father plays with the rule of law, he ultimately upholds the ideal of communitas, the spirit of the community, by fighting to win the case not only for his family but also so that he can continue to share his wealth of laughter with his community. The neighbor’s lack of communitas and his destructive individualism brings about his ruin as Father easily wins the hearts and minds of the judge and court spectators. Through trickster play and laughter, Father gives the powers of speech and agency to his family and working class community, strengthening community bonds and
standing as a bulwark against the tyranny inflicted on his family and others by wealthy landowning illustrados.

The story of Father’s victory over his wealthy neighbor is the first short story of the collection, and one of the most positive and uplifting accounts. With so much laughter and play involved, one might question how such a story embodies the “tragic” component of the tragicomic. While Father is being cross-examined by the neighbor’s attorney, the attorney questions Father about whether he agrees that “the complainant and his children grew sickly and tubercular” while Father’s own children thrived. As evidence, the attorney brings in the neighbor’s children, whose sickly appearance shocks the court: “They came in shyly. The spectators covered their mouths with their hands, they were so amazed to see the children so thin and pale. The children walked silently to the bench and sat down without looking up. They stared at the floor and moved their hands uneasily. Father could not say anything at first” (Laughter 8). The neighbor’s children are not only sickly and pale of complexion, but they also seem to lack the life and vivacity, and certainly the laughter that the Sampayan family thrives on. And although Father successfully defends himself against the neighbor’s suit, the fate of the sickly, sympathetic children is unknown. Even if the neighbor were to win the case, it is unlikely that the family’s health would recover with their continued practices of physical and social isolation. It seems clear that the disease-like effects of the colonial system are not only damaging to workers like Father, but they are also damaging to the wealthy members of the community who face alienation from the communities in which they are embedded. Wealth, particularly in the hands of colonial elites, is a barrier that separates people from their communities and leads to ailments and ostracization. In this tale, at
least, the folk emphasis on the power of laughter, specifically its power to promote health and strengthen community bonds, is prized over the accumulation of material wealth, even though such wealth, if shared, might ameliorate the poverty of the community. Laughter and community bonds are more important than luxuries, and no amount of wealth can compensate for their loss.

Although laughter is plentiful in the first story of Bulosan’s collection, laughter is restricted and at one point even weaponized in the short story, “The Soldiers Came Marching.” This tale follows the affective journey of Filipino ex-servicemen from melancholy to merriment with the help of Father’s ingenuity. The story begins with the demobilization of the Philippine National Guard with the conclusion of World War I. Polon, one of the narrator’s older brothers, was one of the 25,000 Philippine volunteers for the war effort (11). Out of the eleven volunteers from the town only three returned, including Polon. Although it is true that Polon escaped the great harm that befell many of the other young volunteers of the town, he nevertheless returns a changed man. Penniless and purposeless, he and the other two young men loiter around the lawn in front of the presidencia, the city hall, highly visible but entirely socially isolated. Unwilling to sit and watch his son’s “wonderful head going to pot,” Father comes up with a clever plan to give his son and the other ex-service men a place to belong (12). He sells the family carabao and constructs a wine store, one that distinguishes itself by a sign in front that reads “Ex-Service Men Only” (15). Polon and the other two ex-soldiers move from the presidencia lawn to the benches in front of Father’s liquor store. Father’s store is a place that is specifically set aside for them, far different than the presidencia, a space owned by a government that no longer has a purpose for former soldiers.
The opening of Father’s store results in a swift and dramatic affective change in Polon and the other ex-servicemen. Before, the trio “sat all day and part of the night without talking to anybody. They pulled blades of grass and looked into the sky, moving only when ants bit their ears and flies stepped on their noses” (11). At the beginning of the tale, they are nearly comatose figures, barely living statues decorating the presedencia lawn. But at Father’s store and with the addition of alcohol, the three “were always gay. They were always laughing and singing. When they went home at night, Father accompanied them. They sang and marched down the road, disturbing the sleep of the old men” (15). With liquor and a space of their own, the young men are brought back to life. No longer silent and statue-like, they laugh and disturb the sleeping town. Unlike their time at the presidencia, where they were highly visible but easily ignored, their newfound raucous revelry makes it impossible for them to be ignored. In fact, the narrator describes them aptly, noting, “they lived in a world of their own making” (15). The world of their own making is unique and informed by their wartime experiences on the front; in a sense, they have brought home a piece of the front with them and have installed it at the heart of their sleepy hometown.

Yet, bringing a piece of the front home causes a series of problems for the soldiers and townsfolk. The story highlights the dramatic divide between soldiers and civilians caused by wartime trauma. The ex-servicemen, irrevocably altered by their experiences, are unable to return to the roles that they held before they volunteered to go to Europe, and the townspeople are unable to accept them as they are in order to find a place for them among their ranks. As a result, the soldiers are initially abandoned on the steps of the presidencia and utterly ignored by their former neighbors, families and friends.
Interestingly, when Father designates a space for ex-servicemen only and the three men indulge in laughter and merrymaking, it causes the townspeople to become interested in the soldiers instead of continuing to treat them like pariahs. Yet on the occasions when a civilian tries to join the group, his intrusions are promptly rejected. The narrator describes the tense but simultaneously comical clash between soldier and civilian:

When a man sat among them because he was attracted by their merriment, they suddenly stopped laughing and singing. If the man tried to talk to them, they sat quietly and looked at one another. Sometimes the man was a stranger, and he did not understand. Sometimes he tried to buy wine for them. They looked at the glasses and poured the wine in the dust. Then the man became apprehensive and drank his wine quickly. When he was gone, the soldiers continued laughing and singing.

(16)

Unlike the Sampayan family in the previous tale, the soldiers do not share their laughter when they are joined by a stranger. Their silence is downright hostile, and they blatantly reject the offers of liquor, dumping the wine on the ground and waiting until the stranger goes away to continue their laughter and talk. Only Father is permitted to talk and share in laughter with them because he sacrificed his family’s income by selling their carabao in order to give the soldiers a place of their own. From the soldiers’ perspective, the offers of liquor from strangers are only excuses for the intruders to join the exclusive club that Father has created. These strangers don’t intend to give anything to the soldiers for the sake of charity, but rather want to enjoy the entertainment and the feeling of being part of something unique. Furthermore, offers of liquor cannot make up for the fact that
the community keeps the soldiers at arms’ length, nor can liquor overcome the affective distance created by the soldiers’ wartime traumatic experiences.

Once again, as with the first tale, the presence of laughter and merrymaking, now in Father’s exclusive venue, draws the jealousy and ire of the town’s rich community. Don Rico, the richest man in the town, sends his head-servant to purchase wine from Father, perhaps to gain some of the exclusive cache associated with the shop, or perhaps just as an excuse to show off the power he maintains through his wealth. As expected, Father refuses to sell to the servant, prompting Don Rico to confront Father himself. In a public exchange, Don Rico and Father initiate a power struggle that exposes class tensions and overthrows conventional societal expectations:

Don Rico went to the store in his big car and parked it in the street. He ordered a glass of wine, but Father refused to sell it to him.

“Can’t you read, Don Rico?” Father asked.

“What’s gone into your head, Simeon?” he said.

“I don’t need your money,” he said. “That’s what I mean.”

“I’ll buy two gallons,” Don Rico said.

“My wine is not for sale,” Father said. “Go away.”

“I’ll buy the whole store,” he said. Many people had already gathered in the street, and he was angry because his authority was challenged. “I’ll buy your whole life, Simeon!” he shouted.

“I don’t want your money,” Father said, pushing away the face of the richest man in our town from the door and closing the store.
Just as in the previous tale, Father is confronted by a wealthy neighbor, this time the richest man in town, and Father refuses to stand down in the face of aggression. Rather than taking Father to court, Don Rico challenges Father face to face in the public venue of Father’s liquor store. When Don Rico tries to purchase a glass of wine, and Father refuses him, pointing to the “Ex-Servicemen Only” sign and questioning whether Don Rico can read. Don Rico’s response, “what has gone into your head, Simeon?” highlights the absurdity of the situation before him: an illiterate farmer posts a sign that he himself cannot read to regulate who can and cannot purchase wine from his store. Father’s creation of an exclusive space seems like an absurd mimicry of the US government, which created exclusive vacation spots for politicians and military leaders using tax money drawn from the Philippine people. Instead, Father turns this practice on his head, excluding the wealthy and well-to-do and creating an inclusive space for the marginalized soldiers. Father’s actions defy the established socio-economic hierarchy, which ordinarily accepts the fact that Don Rico, because of his wealth and influence, is not subject to the usual laws and restrictions of the less fortunate townsfolk. Thus, when Father claims that he doesn’t need Don Rico’s money, Don Rico ups the offer three times, each more angrily, demanding to buy two gallons, the whole store, and even Father’s “whole life.” These three demands are attempts to make Don Rico’s superior status and power more “legible” to Father, whose inability to read words seems to extend to his inability to read social convention. Yet as a trickster figure, Father reads but in the end revolts against social norms, including Don Rico’s outsized influence. In fact, it is Father who explicitly questions Don Rico’s ability to read. On the surface, this seems to be simply a way to make Don Rico leave, and perhaps make him look foolish in front of the public. But as
we will discover, Don Rico’s inability to “read” the necessity of having a place in society for ex-soldiers leads to his undoing. This, in addition to their lawful protests fueled by their laughter and singing, overrides Don Rico’s ability to manipulate the legal system in his favor.

As a result of Father’s rejection, Don Rico and the soldiers begin a process of escalation, each of them using the tools at their disposal to gain the upper hand. Don Rico convenes a special council meeting of council members, all of whom are under his pay, presumably in order to find a way to either expel the soldiers or force Father out of business. But before Don Rico is able to put together a plan, the three ex-soldiers leave town and return with hundreds of their comrades. The soldiers set up tents near the river of the town, and rather than simply loitering around, reinstitute the regimented life they once had in the military. They “marched up and down the street, singing and laughing among themselves” and “had an enviable, organized life. They worked and rested in cycle. They had their own orchestra and they danced among themselves” (17). With hundreds of them in the town, the soldiers establish themselves at the center of the town’s social life. Their attitude towards the townsfolk changes dramatically as well. Rather than shooing away strangers, the soldiers let men and young girls into the tents to dance with them, and both the soldiers and townsfolk celebrate with singing and dancing together. The soldiers are not only welcoming to the people of the town, but they also respect their property and even shoo off the chickens that try to pilfer people’s gardens. Due to Don Rico’s meddling, the soldiers are not only welcomed in Father’s wine store, but are now welcomed and celebrated by the entire town.
In a reversal of events, the townsfolk’s acceptance and celebration of the soldiers melts their reserve, and they are once again fully accepted back into the community. The only one who remains resistant to the soldiers is Don Rico. When Father’s wine store is burned to the ground by an unknown stranger, the whole town recognizes the culprit as Don Rico. Yet instead of taking up arms against the man, the soldiers instead weaponize their laughter, forming gangs and standing under Don Rico’s house to sing all day and night, preventing him from sleeping. When Don Rico goes to the presidencia to try to find a law that might stop them, he finds that there are no laws on the books concerning disruptive singing in public; the council members also refuse to help him, fearing that they might also suffer from the soldiers’ melodic retaliation. After a few days, Don Rico emerges from his house and begs for forgiveness to Father, in return offering to pay for the expenses of the soldiers and the damages for Father’s lost wine store. Father uses the money to buy a new carabao to replace the one he sold; since the soldiers have been successfully reintegrated into society, there is no need to rebuild his wine store. The soldiers eventually leave the town after a few weeks and never return, heading off to find a new place and new lives for themselves elsewhere on the island.

The soldiers’ choice to weaponize their laughter rather than resorting to physical retaliation is an explicit rebuttal of the argument that ex-soldiers are more prone to antisocial and violent behavior because of their traumatic experiences. Further, their ability to laugh and dance proves to the townsfolk that the soldiers still have a capacity for affective expression and have not been robbed of such a crucial social tool by their experiences on the front. It becomes clear that laughter is both the test of and tool through which the soldiers reclaim their lives as part of Philippine society. Their choice to use
laughter against Don Rico also demonstrates a clever trickster-like subversion of authority. Unlike the historically violent anti-colonial protests like the colorums, these soldiers’ around-the-clock singing below Don Rico’s house is a form of nonviolent protest. Because their protest is one that is not restricted by law, they eliminate the tools that Don Rico can manipulate to dismantle their opposition. Their protest also produces a model for the town’s working class to use in order to resist exploitation by their wealthy landowners: through laughter and close-knit ties, communities can guard themselves to an extent against the impersonal forces that threaten to reduce them to lifeless, statue-like figures like the soldiers in front of the presidencia. By embracing laughter in the face of tragedy, the soldiers reject the forces of alienation and reintegrate themselves into the fabric of society.

While the soldiers meet a somewhat happy ending, the story itself ends on a bitter note for the tale’s antagonist. The narrator remarks at the very end of the tale that “Don Rico became insane and hanged himself with a rope. His tongue was sticking out when the servants found him” (18). Unlike the previous tale, where the fate of the wealthy neighbor is unclear, here Don Rico dramatically commits suicide. Bulosan does not explain the reasons behind Don Rico’s suicide, but we may assume that he takes his life either because of his damaged reputation and humiliation, his loss of influence over the special council or over the community, or simply because of complications from lack of sleep from the guilty conscience that keeps him up at night. His death brings into relief the foreshadowing of his confrontation with Father, where he exclaims “What’s gone into your head, Simeon?” In the end, it is Don Rico who loses his head, and Father who is victorious, despite the absurd appearance of his actions. Yet, in some ways, Don Rico’s
death visage echoes the imagery we have seen in the courtroom scene of the previous
tale. Previously, the wealthy neighbor and his attorney were shocked into silence and
unable to speak when the judge declared their case against Father dismissed. Here, Don
Rico’s lolling tongue, which symbolically stops his mouth, provides a haunting image of
silencing. On the other hand, a tongue sticking out is often viewed as a silly, clown-like
gesture. In this light, in the end, even Don Rico has to submit to the power of laughter,
which transforms his death mask into a clown’s face. Tragedy and comedy are
inextricably wedded in Laughter’s tales, both as a tool of resistance and a part of the
social landscape of Bulosan’s Philippines.

In the two previous tales we’ve explored the ways that trickster heroes overcome
abuses by wealthy landowners, and have observed the way that wealthy families,
regardless of their influence, face punishment for abusing their power. It may be then
easy to claim that the accumulation of wealth is frowned upon in Laughter, but this is not
always the case. Rather, becoming wealthy, especially through cheating or cleverness, is
celebrated, particularly if it benefits the family or community. One such case lies in the
chapter “The Capitalism of My Father”, which tells the tale of brother Osong, the most
business-savvy member of the Sampayan family, who cheats farmers out of their goods.
In the end, he is eventually outdone by Father, who retains his position as chief trickster
by cheating his cheating son. The story puts a unique spin on the exploitation of local
farmers at the hands of large, American-owned agribusinesses. Bulosan exposes
Philippine complicity with powerful foreign interests through Osong’s role as company
agent, yet at the same time creates points of resistance through Father’s power-reversing
trick that allows him and the other farmers to in turn cheat the cheating businessmen in
order to reclaim economic power and agency. It becomes ever clearer that in Bulosan’s Philippines it is necessary to embody the adaptability and cleverness of the trickster in order to survive. Honest farmers who simply accept their lot face terrible exploitation, not only at the hands of agribusinesses, but also at the hands of their fellow farmers, all of whom are fighting to survive in a deeply adversarial environment.

From the outset of the tale, the narrator’s brother Osong is described in alternatively reverent and lightly critical terms. From age twelve, Osong sold bundles of rice from the family’s stores, and even after he left home to start a life of his own, every time he would return home to visit the family he would bring his parents gifts only to secretly make off with some of the family’s property upon his departure. Despite the fact that Osong steals the family’s food and property, the narrator still compliments him, repeating that Osong “was a good salesman” (52). The narrator admits that Osong “had plenty of experience in selling things that did not belong to him”, but explains the context of his brother’s behavior by arguing that “he was also expert in cheating and lying, because it was the way he had earned a living when he was away from home” (53). Osong is forgiven for his cheating and stealing because in Bulosan’s Philippines it would be impossible to survive on his own at so young an age without the ability to trick others in order to get ahead. The narrator goes on to remark on the ubiquity of cheating behavior in his hometown, remarking that, “It was like that in our town when I was growing up. You had to be a good cheat or nothing at all. Every boy and girl grew up with the desire to cheat or tell a lie. It was part of our education into life” (53-4). In such an environment, if you are not stepping on others in order to advance, then you are inevitably going to fall behind and become a victim to other cleverer opponents. In a sense, the entire Sampayan
community is full of potential tricksters who were raised always to look for ways to game the system. However, in a town full of tricksters, Osong makes a name for himself by being the trickiest of all.

The plot of the tale begins when Osong picks up a job as a local agent for the tobacco industry, the Tabacalera Spaniola, a Spanish company now run by American and native business men. Osong’s strong business sense alerts him to the vast profitability of the venture; with the company buying farmers’ tobacco harvests before they are even harvested, Osong sees the opportunity to skim some profits for himself off the top at the expense of both the farmers and the company. In his new, elevated position as the company’s agent in his hometown, he cooks up a plan to leverage his authority for profit. He opens up the iron weights that he is given to weigh the farmers’ tobacco bales and replaces them with heavier weights. As a result, the farmers’ tobacco bales appear to weigh far less than they do in reality, allowing Osong to purchase them for less than they ordinarily would cost. This trick succeeds because the farmers, although usually savvy with their produce, are new to growing tobacco and do not immediately discover how much they are being cheated. By putting down the real values in the company book, Osong can pocket the difference, adding the profits from his cheating to his existing agent salary and profiting from both the farmers’ and the agency’s ignorance.

Although Osong is able to trick most of the farmers, Father catches onto his tricks quickly. After harvesting and drying the tobacco leaves, Father begins to soak a number of the leaves in water before baling them, causing his bales to weigh twice that of the other farmers’ (54). Osong immediately realizes that Father must be tricking him, but to expose him might also mean exposing his own cheating and thereby harm his ability to
rake in exponential profits. Instead, Osong is bitterly forced to pay Father for his cheating. Yet Father cannot help but continue to pressure his own son, and in addition to wetting the leaves he begins to insert pieces of iron into the bales to make them even heavier. The iron-weighted bales quickly tire out Osong’s labor assistants, who collapse with exhaustion due to their weight. When Osong, exasperated, tries to step in to hurry the process up, he accidentally breaks the rope tying the bales together, letting loose the heavy pieces of iron buried inside them. Although Osong doesn’t immediately confront Father for his treachery, when the iron pieces are revealed the farmers catch onto the ruse immediately. Rather than complaining that Osong is favoring his own family by encouraging them to stuff their bales with weights, the farmers instantly begin to employ the trick themselves and win back the money they had lost from previous harvests by adopting Father’s cheating methods. Inevitably, with so many farmers cheating him, Osong is fired from his position by the Tabacalera Spaniola; for all of his cleverness, his trickery is exposed and he finds himself out of a job. In the end, Osong is tricked with his own trick—his idea of loading up the iron measuring weights is foiled by the counterbalancing deployment of iron weights in the farmers’ bales, and his failure to wring profits from the farmers leads to his expulsion from the company ranks.

The primary source of the humor and absurdity of the tale comes from the competition and escalation of the two competing tricksters, Osong and Father. While Osong initially profits at the expense of the family, Father catches onto his antics quickly. The narrator observes that “Father found it funny and profitable to cheat his own son.” Their competition becomes an arms race where both father and son hope to emerge wealthier and appear cleverer than the other. Their actions appear to exemplify the
narrator’s previous assertion that all of the members of his community learn from a young age that cheating and trickery is the only way to survive. At the same time, the fact that the competition is occurring between family members is troubling. Interestingly, when the narrator questions Father’s motivations, the following dialogue between them reveals that Father’s motivation to trick his son is more complicated than simply a survival skill. When the narrator questions why Father always laughs when inserting iron into the tobacco bales, and Father responds,

“It’s the day of reckoning, son,” Father said. “Like it says in the Bible, that son of mine is paying for his sins. Go around and look for some pieces of iron.”

“You are cheating my own brother,” I said.

“Did he not sell my prize goats and carabao?” Father said.

“He needed the money in the city,” I said.

“I need the money too, son,” he said.

“You don’t need any money in the village,” I said. “The peasants don’t sell anything. They just give anything away. Why do you accumulate so much money?”

“I would like to hear the jingle of coins in my pockets,” he said. “Call your cousins and look for some pieces of iron.” (55)

Father runs through a series of defenses for his behavior, changing his explanation each time to attempt to evade the narrator’s pointed questioning. To begin, Father’s initial biblical reference to the Day of Judgment seems out of place. He appears to call Osong out on his cheating behavior, while at the same time continuing to commit the same sins himself, a fact that the narrator points out in the following line. When the biblical
invocation does not persuade his son, Father defends himself by claiming that Osong stole from him first, but the narrator defends his brother, citing that he needs the money in the city, as Osong lives away from home. When Father attempts to argue that he needs the money in town, the narrator shoots him down, pointing out the economic differences between the town and the city. Unlike the city, probably nearby Manila, which is controlled by American interests and deeply rooted in capitalism, the local village does not require currency for every transaction. Rather, the villagers bargain or even give things away, the narrator claims. On one hand, the narrator’s description of the village might make it seem like a communal paradise where community members freely share goods, much like the Sampayan family does with laughter in the first tale that we discussed. On the other hand, it also represents a direct reference to the way that farmers seemingly gave away land to wealthy landowners and government-protected agribusinesses, both through the courts due to lack of education or, in some cases, through direct force. With their economic agency stripped away from them, the small amount of monetary recompense Father receives for his crop is essentially valueless.

What is the point of accruing capital when it is much easier to simply trick others out of their property? According to the narrator, Osong is the only one who would benefit from the family’s wealth. In the end, Father concludes the discussion with an unusual claim: he simply likes hearing the jingle of coins in his pocket, nothing more. Father’s word choice directly references the trick he played on the wealthy neighbor in the first tale, when he used the jingling of coins in his hat to pay back the neighbor after he claimed the Sampayans stole the spirit of his wealth. Here, it seems as it Father has fallen for the pleasure of the jingle of coins, desiring the accumulation of wealth for its own sake, even
though he cannot spend the money on anything. For a moment at least, it seems as if Father has fallen in the same trap as the rich neighbor, sacrificing his relationship with his son for the accumulation of wealth. The fierce competition, too, seems to indicate that Father’s pride is on the line. But in the end, Father’s trick benefits the farmers at the expense of the agency, even though it meant hurting the prospects of his own son.

This seems like a setup for a bittersweet ending, but in the end, the conclusion of the tale reassures readers that Father has not forsaken his own son for the sake of the community or for his own pride. When Osong accuses Father of making him lose his job, and along with it, his “dreams of becoming rich without working hard for it,” Father tries to defend his actions by dropping the platitude, “there is nothing better than honest work” (57-8). Father’s statement is doubly laughable, coming from a man who brings profit for his family, his community and himself through his wits, not through his work. Osong’s statements use Father’s own philosophy against himself, and Father’s seemingly insincere response aggravates his son, who replies, “And be like Uncle Buricio…He had worked for thirty-five years straight—but where is he now? Under the grass—dead. Only dishonest men rise to riches and power in the world. Dolts and idiots and men like that work for them.” Osong brings up the tender subject of his late uncle, a man who is described as a foil for Father’s trickster nature. Uncle Buricio represents the farmers who fail to pick up tricks such as Father’s iron bales. While his neighbors are profiting, Uncle Buricio continues to work hard until his health fails him, leaving him with no family and no legacy. According to Osong, it is better to embrace dishonesty and get ahead than try to follow honest virtues and become a victim. But Father’s response offers a third option
that lies between Uncle Buricio’s naiveté and Osong’s ravenous desire for riches and power. Father reveals to Osong the real purpose of his cheating:

“Do you remember the land adjoining mine?” Father said. “It’s a nice tobacco land. I bought it with the money I got from you. I bought it for you, son.”

“You bought it for me, Father?” my brother said. “I can’t believe such things happen in our family. Anyway, I’ve always wanted to go into farming…I wonder how much I shall get for my tobacco.”

Contrary to the conflicting explanations Father gave the narrator about his reasons for cheating Osong, Father uses the money he gains from cheating his son to invest in a plot of tobacco for his son to farm. By doing so, Father converts Osong from company agent, representative of the colonial forces that victimize Father and the other villagers, to a fellow farmer, connected to the land and his community, rather than their antagonist. At the same time, Father convinces his sons that he was acting unselfishly by using the money to benefit his family rather than spending it all on himself. Osong responds joyously, but also demonstrates a somewhat mixed reaction; he shows surprise at Father’s generosity, struggling to grasp Father’s transformation from trickster and competitor to benefactor and ally. Still, he immediately understands that he can use the same tricks and cleverness he once used as an agent as a farmer, this time to cheat the Tabaclera Espanola, rather than his fellow farmers. He knows better than to follow in the footsteps of Uncle Buricio and become a victim of his circumstances. At the same time, Father has persuaded him to use his trickster tactics against the colonial government and its agribusinesses, rather against his own people.
Despite the happy conclusion of the tale, the dark specter of Uncle Buricio continues to haunt the text. Even though Osong accepts the farming life, we might reasonably expect him to avoid many of the burdens experienced by his uncle due to the cleverness he inherited from his father. But Osong still faces challenges from both sides—as a farmer, he risks exploitation from other clever tobacco industry agents who want to cheat him of his wares. On the other end, he also risks cheating other honest, less guileful workers like his Uncle in his constant search for profit. Only by cheating and trickery can Osong stand a chance to succeed, but by doing so, he’s forced to adopt the unsavory tactics practiced not just by the community, but by the government that eventually strips the family of their wealth and land throughout the course of Bulosan’s tales. Father’s middle-of-the-road approach may be the only way for the Sampayans and their community to survive, but its resemblance in colonial extortion shows how deep the roots of imperialism are in the Philippines. From this perspective, tricksters in the Philippines not only have roots in folklore, but when their tricks are turned against their own people, they resemble the oppressive imperial government more than they do the heroes of Philippine folktales.

Bulosan’s tales in *Laughter* demonstrate how the genre of tragicomedy can be mustered to critique colonial practices while at the same time offering ways that marginalized Philippine communities can not only address but also begin to ameliorate the trauma caused by centuries of Spanish and US colonialism. The hot and cold combination of humor and tragedy also encourages readers to form sympathetic connections to the characters of the tales, increasing their persuasiveness and the dynamics of their emotional tenor. At the center of these textual dynamics lies the figure
of the trickster hero. The trickster hero pushes the limits of the status quo and manipulates society to accept progressive change. Yet unlike the trickster heroes throughout much of literature, such as god tricksters like Prometheus and animal tricksters such as Br’er Rabbit who appear individually, in *Laughter* tricksters are everywhere, from Father to the soldiers to Osong and the farmers, and every man has the power to trick and resist, to laugh and subvert in order to survive and thrive.
Chapter Two

Laughing Under Duress: Representational Resistance in Detention Narratives

In *Nothing Ever Dies*, an exploration of post-Vietnam War memory-making, writer and critic Viet Thanh Nguyen recounts his experiences visiting the museum on the grounds of S-21, a Cambodian high school that was turned into an execution center under the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime. During his visit he encountered a sign depicting a laughing face with a circle and slash through it, with the words “keep silent” (*Nothing* 94). Nguyen remarks that, despite its prohibition, during his visits he did indeed hear the laughter of other tourists. Nguyen speculates about the source of the prohibited laughter, writing, “The laughter covers up the tears or the disbelief, a polite way of hiding how distraught or uncomfortable one may be. Perhaps what laughter mocks is not the dead, but the authority embodied in memorials (94). This laughter, even if expressing guilt or discomfort, shocks the listener, since in these memorialized places such sounds are considered morally outrageous and are explicitly forbidden. But throughout the course of *Nothing Ever Dies*, Nguyen asserts that these war museums deserve closer scrutiny and that the motivations of the states that create them should be put into question. Even memorials admitting the nation’s culpability in the act of genocide have the potential to represent the nation in a more favorable light. The urge for disruptive laughter, too, deserves exploration, both to try to understand its root cause and to uncover its potential to subvert authority and nationalistic ideology. Whether a nation’s dominant histories are perpetuated through museums or movies, history texts or literary texts, laughter has the
potential to undermine their foundations and introduce new, resistant histories that complicate established nationalistic discourses.\textsuperscript{19}

The competition between national ideologies and resistant histories have dominated discussions of transnational history and literary criticism. Literary critics Lisa Lowe and Kandice Chuh both discuss the limits that nations impose on their subjects. Lowe argues that capitalism necessitates inequality, while the nation’s principles conversely demand that the country uphold its liberal ideology (Chuh). Kandice Chuh furthers Lowe’s argument by discussing how poststructuralism challenged the legitimacy of master narratives, forcing the US to adopt the idea of multiculturalism in order to respond to growing critiques against the nation (5-6). However, multiculturalism refused to recognize America’s long history of racist, exclusionist national policies, and like its former master narratives, continued to use subjecthood and citizenship as a tool to control its racialized subjects (6, 10). The historian Dipesh Chakrabarty offers an alternative to exploitive national narratives in the form of the memories of marginalized populations. Chakrabarty writes about how historical knowledge traditionally depended on written records, but in the case of subaltern groups, recorded histories were often absent.\textsuperscript{20} In order to access subaltern histories, we must rely on memory to fill in these missing accounts.

Stemming from the analysis of the failures of nationalism by Lowe and Chuh and Chakrabarty’s subaltern memory alternative, this chapter extends their arguments by considering the representations of detention and refugee experiences in Viet Thanh Nguyen’s \textit{The Sympathizer} and Alex Gilvarry’s \textit{From the Memoirs of a Non-Enemy}

\textsuperscript{19} For more on national discourse, see Lyotard, \textit{The Postmodern Condition}.
\textsuperscript{20} See Chakrabarti’s “Politics and Possibility” 245 and “Public Life” 143.
*Combatant*. We can read Nguyen and Gilvarry’s novels as a rejection of nationalist narratives and fictional subaltern histories for refugee and immigrant communities in America. In order to counter official national histories of the post-Vietnam War and post-9/11 periods, these novels adopt what I term the “detention narrative”: a genre in which the narrator recounts his personal history from the cell where he is detained. Detention narratives often begin as coming-to-America narratives, but their immigrant narrators are detained and deported long before they have a chance to fit into their new country’s sociocultural landscape.21 And unlike memoirs, detained narrators are compelled to tell their story by their interrogators. Any evidence they reveal will certainly be used against them.

Even though these detention narratives are quite literally “policed,” their narrators nonetheless speak to a broader audience beyond those of their captors, such as to the members of their race or nationality, other oppressed groups, or the government or nation as a whole. In the case of *The Sympathizer*, the narrator repeatedly breaks from the recollection of his personal history to address his fellow Vietnamese refugees, who, at the end of the novel, are incorporated into the detention narrative, transforming it from a personal narrative into a unified refugee history. In *Memoirs*, Gilvarry’s narrator writes directly about the struggles of the immigrants he encounters in New York City, and how, counter to the American mythos, their dreams were destined to be crushed by the city’s ruthlessness and “hard-boiled reality” (*Memoirs* 15). The narrators’ manuscripts, and by extension the detention narrative genre as a whole, gives voice to the invisible detained who do not have the opportunity to tell their own stories. As a result, the detention

---

21 For more on the similarities to the detention and torture scenes between *The Sympathizer* and George Orwell’s *1984*, see Gorder.
narrative’s counter-histories produce stories that better represent refugee memories and experiences.

This chapter will demonstrate how detention narratives use humor in order to undermine the seriousness surrounding national histories win over their readers. Although on the surface the themes that these novels evoke—incarceration, torture, terrorism, and assassination—seem like unusual food for comedy, the very moments when the narratives struggle with unresolvable paradoxes, language failure, and emotional extremes are often the moments when humor emerges. Studying these passages through a critical lens allows us to better understand how laughter occurs in the face of absurdity and how laughter functions as a political critique and instigator of social change.

*The Sympathizer in Context*

Yet these counter-histories cannot emerge without first challenging the dominance of official narratives that seek to silence refugee accounts that directly dispute their claims. To accomplish this, *The Sympathizer* uses humor to interrogate both Vietnamese and American national histories. The speech-act of the narrator’s laughter undermines dominant histories that portray the Vietnamese as either helpless victims or vicious torturers. In the place of these repressive categorizations, the novel’s humor offers the potential for liberation and self-actualization outside of the victim-villain binary. In the end, the narrator abandons the parts of his personal identity that have been defined by his split East-West loyalties. When he is finally relieved of these competing political and cultural burdens, he is free to shape his identity on his own terms. The change in form and tone that accompany these revelations signals the liberatory potential
of the detention novel. In the case of *The Sympathizer*, it illustrates a future for Vietnamese refugees and immigrants beyond the influence of postwar national political and cultural conflicts. This liberation is only possible by harnessing the power of disruptive laughter, which undermines national histories and allows writers to create a more nuanced and complex portrayal of refugee and immigrant lives.  

Nguyen’s 2015 novel *The Sympathizer*, a fictional account of a spy caught between American and Vietnamese loyalties, languages and cultures, performs the work of navigating between laughter and tragedy, and between official history and alternate history. Although on the surface the experiences that *The Sympathizer* addresses—incarceration, torture and assassination—seem like unusual food for comedy, the very presence of humor suggests that there is something unusual going on within these narratives. Moments when the novel struggles with unresolvable paradoxes, language failure, and emotional extremes are precisely the moments when humor emerges, and these moments reveal how laughter critiques the absurdity of national ideology. In its place, the detention narrative elevates refugee experiences so that their stories can be recognized, reproduced and remembered.

Viet Thanh Nguyen, a professor at the University of South California, is the author of the 2017 novel *The Refugees*, editor of the 2018 short story collection *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives*, and writer of two nonfiction critical works along with the Pulitzer prize-winning novel *The Sympathizer* (2015). Nguyen was born in Buon Me Thuot, Viet Nam and came to the United States as a refugee in 1975, living first in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania before moving to San Jose, California. *The Sympathizer* met

---

22 Nguyen discusses the pressure to represent his community positively in his interview with Stacy Nguyen (*University Wire*).
with high praise from periodicals including critics at the *New York Times*, who called it a “remarkable debut novel” that “giv[es] voices to the previously voiceless” (Caputo) and at the *Washington Post*, who deemed it “extraordinary” and “surely a new classic of war fiction” (Charles). Although occasionally critiqued for overwriting and academic language (Caputo, Boyagoda), the novel was proclaimed by *The Guardian* to be “a bold, artful and globally minded reimagining of the Vietnam war and its interwoven private and public legacies” characterized by an “impressive…Whitman-like multiplicity” (Boyagoda). In its March 2018 issue, *PMLA* released ten articles on Nguyen’s *The Sympathizer, The Refugees, and Nothing Ever Dies*, an unprecedented response to fiction by an Asian American author. Several critics in the edition approached *The Sympathizer* by analyzing its doubled narrative voice, praising its primary focus on nonwhite audiences and articulating the novel’s legitimization of genre writing. Others pointed out its American literary homages, particularly to Ralph Ellison’s *The Invisible Man,* while critic Min Hyoung Song read the novel as a commentary on the state of the academy. At the conclusion of the section, Nguyen himself responds to each of the articles of the collection in addition to explaining his transition from an academic writer to a “writerly one,” his struggles within academia to legitimize critical study of Vietnamese Americans, and his decision to turn to fiction to “write the modernist European version of the realistic American novel as grafted onto the Vietnamese refugee body” (“Dislocation” 430, 432). Nguyen’s hybrid literary project speaks to his ambitious approach toward complex issues of genre and audience in Asian American literature.

---

23 See Chihaya, Xiang, Tran, Chong, and Huang.
24 See Rody, “Between ‘I’ and ‘We.’”
25 See Song, “Scholar-Public Intellectual.”
In a reading at UC Berkeley for *The Sympathizer*, Nguyen spoke about the pressures as a minority writer to represent his community in a positive light and to create sympathetic characters who could be portrayed as either victims or heroes (S. Nguyen 2). In order to achieve full equality with majority writers, Nguyen explained, it was important to be “unafraid of the antiheroic” and “the evil of which we’re all capable” (2). These claims are reinforced in *Nothing Ever Dies*, in which Nguyen examines the global post-Vietnam War landscape and the industrialization of memory-making and selective forgetting in the service of national interests. He argues that this “low-intensity conflict” over memory and forgetting—controlled by nations by various mechanisms of influence and surveillance, from the military and police force to academics, pundits and think tanks—shapes the media and the minds of the public (*Nothing* 11). *The Sympathizer* dramatizes this conflict of competing national interests between the US and Vietnam in the postwar period. Nguyen’s novel forces readers to recognize both nations’ desires: America’s desire to rewrite their wartime failure into a narrative of heroism, and Vietnam’s desire to define itself as a realization of Ho Chi Minh’s Communist ideals, free from the capitalist oppression of its former colonizers. This battle of representation, and the narrator’s final refusal to be defined by either national power, exposes the complexities of a multilayered conflict that has defined both nations for over forty years.

*The Sympathizer* opens with the frantic evacuation of US troops and their allies just before the fall of Saigon to the Viet Cong. The nameless narrator, the son of a Vietnamese peasant and a French priest, works as an assistant to “the general,” the leader of the American-allied South Vietnamese National Police, while at the same time acting as a mole for the communist Vietnamese forces. The narrator is close friends with
Bon, a C.I.A-trained assassin, and Man, his Northern Vietnamese comrade, both of whom were high school classmates and sworn blood brothers. These competing alliances characterize the framework of the book, where the narrator contends with contested loyalties to both America and Vietnam, beginning with his task of selecting who will be evacuated to America and who must be left behind. After evacuating officers and other high ranking personnel from Saigon, the narrator witnesses Bon’s wife and child killed on the tarmac before they can reach the plane. Once in America, the narrator continues his espionage by sending messages to Man in invisible ink about the general’s plans to return to Vietnam and liberate it from the Communists. Life in America is a struggle, especially when the narrator takes on a job as a consultant for a director producing a film that closely resembles Francis Ford Coppola’s 1979 *Apocalypse Now*. He is further disillusioned when his attempts to humanize the South Vietnamese in the film are entirely ignored by the director, who prefers to indulge his desire for pro-American Hollywood war spectacle. In order to protect his cover as a double agent, the narrator participates in two murders, one of a former Vietnamese major and the other of a local journalist. The narrator then accompanies the general, Bon, and a band of South Vietnamese soldiers on a suicide mission back to Vietnam. After being captured and taken to a reeducation camp, the narrator recounts to his confessor the events of the narrative. He is then tortured by the commissar (revealed to be Man) who forces the narrator to admit to his crimes, including his complicity in the torture and rape of a female communist agent and the murder of the narrator’s own father. The narrator, forced to abandon his faith in the fight for independence, discovers relief and a sense of freedom in unshackling his sense of self from nationalist narratives. The novel ends on a hopeful note as Bon and the narrator look
forward to a journey back to America by boat, joining many other refugees in their flight from Vietnam towards an uncertain but promising future.

*The Sympathizer’s* cryptic but liberatory conclusion arises from the detention narrative upending genre expectations and its humor rejecting national demands. By evoking and then disrupting American and Vietnamese national histories throughout the course of the novel, Nguyễn’s narrator untangles his personal identity from his political allegiances and offers a path for other refugee writers and storytellers to do the same. The following analysis will trace the narrator’s steps through the postwar cultural landscape, from his struggles with Vietnamese representation in his role as an American film consultant to his resistance to the cultural and psychological controls of a Vietnamese internment camp. The narrator’s eventual rejection of nationalistic discourses and his embrace of counter-histories and self-representation relies on laughter’s liberatory power: its ability to refute national master narratives and grant agency to refugees and power to their narratives.26 Nguyễn’s narrator’s hard won freedom from both physical internment and representational control contends that Vietnamese refugees must reject the roles imposed upon them by political interests in order to shape their own personal and communal identities and histories.

**The American Perspective: The Cinematic Battle for Representation**

America’s withdrawal from Vietnam in 1975 did not result in the end of conflict; instead, it changed the grounds of warfare from military to cultural. Rather than fighting with ground troops or air support, after the war America turned to the production of films, novels, history books, memoirs and museums to redefine its role in the conflict as

---

26 See Lyotard’s chapter “The Nature of the Social Bond.”
well as the war’s outcome in the eyes of other nations as well as its own. Unlike the difficulty that American troops faced in Vietnam’s unfamiliar jungles, in the landscape of media warfare America found itself in comfortable territory and at a great material advantage due to the country’s affluence and global cultural capital. What resulted in the postwar period was a cacophony of competing discourses: official, unofficial and personal. Official discourses included documentation such as the Office of the Historian and U.S. Department of State’s *Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUS) series on the Vietnam War.\(^{27}\) Better known to the public were unofficial histories, such as films like Francis Forc Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and metafiction such as Tim O’Brien’s semi-autobiographical short story collection *The Things They Carried* (1990). In these narratives, America admitted to the horrors of war but justified its actions during the Vietnam War by portraying it as part of the global battle against a faceless Communist evil. Competing narratives, such as Lan Cao’s novel *Monkey Bridge* (1997), focused instead on the psychic damage experienced by Vietnamese refugees during the war and their subsequent flight to America. Scholars such as Renny Christopher have produced comparative histories that include the personal accounts of Vietnamese exile writers.\(^{28}\) However, these competing narratives are few in number in comparison to the vast canon of American military histories that favor the perspectives of American generals and soldiers over Vietnamese refugees.

Nguyen’s novel confronts the power of America’s memory industry when the narrator of *The Sympathizer* takes a job in Hollywood as a cultural consultant for a film that closely resembles Coppola’s 1979 Vietnam war film *Apocalypse Now*. Working

\(^{27}\) For an overview of U.S. Department of State documentation on Vietnam, see Keefer et al.

\(^{28}\) See Christopher, *The Viet Nam War/The American War*. 

79
under a director named only “the Auteur,” the narrator at first prides himself on giving voice to the nameless Vietnamese extras on set. But he soon enters into a struggle with problems of representation when he realizes that he had failed to deter the director from representing the Vietnamese civilians as little more than helpless victims to be rescued by American heroes. Instead, his hard work only lent an authentic veneer to a film that treated the Vietnamese as no more than “raw material for an epic about white men saving good yellow people from bad yellow people” (Sympathizer 133-4). In the Auteur’s imagination, the complexities of a war between the Vietnamese military factions, the NVA, NLF and the ARVN, are overwritten in order to create a film about American resistance against Communism. In the film, South Vietnamese and Viet Cong alike are treated like cannon fodder for showy Hollywood explosions, and America’s failure in Vietnam is rewritten in favor of a sweeter narrative about American sacrifice. Despite falling prey to these fictions, the Auteur insists on the authenticity of his production during the final week of filming by preposterously claiming that the very act of making the movie was the same thing as going to war itself. The Auteur brags to his assembled crew,

> When your grandchildren ask you what you did during the war, you can say, I made this movie. I made a great work of art. How do you know you’ve made a great work of art? A great work of art is something as real as reality itself, and sometimes even more real than the real. Long after this war is forgotten, when its existence is a paragraph in a schoolbook students won’t even bother to read, and everyone who survived it is dead, their bodies dust, their memories atoms, their

---

29 The North Vietnamese Army (NVA), the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NLF) and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN).
emotions no longer in motion, this work of art will still shine so brightly it will not just be about the war but it will be the war. (178)

The narrator at first deems the Auteur’s claims absurd, but he later admits that there is truth to what the director has said. What can be reproduced and represented survives, and what cannot is easily erased and forgotten. As a result, art that stands the test of time can eventually become more “real” than the original memories and experiences of Vietnamese soldiers and civilians. After the fall of Vietnam, what is destined to become ingrained in collective memory, in lieu of the horrifying stories of wartime trauma, is the brave narrative of American intervention on behalf of a helpless, victimized population. In this way, art displaces and eventually replaces reality itself.

The narrator expresses his disgust for the rewriting, commodification, and erasure of his people’s history. In order to reframe these repulsive ideas, he turns to Communist thought, quoting and incorporating Marx to contextualize the West's appropriation of the Vietnamese right to represent their own stories: “They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented. Marx spoke of the oppressed class that was not politically conscious enough to see itself as a class, but was anything ever more true of the dead, as well as the extras?” (178). Like Marx’s proletariat, the film’s Vietnamese extras— as well as the country’s dead soldiers and civilians—lack the understanding that their stories are being rewritten by foreign powers who have the power to craft the dominant narrative. Rather than fight for their rights, the actors drink away their earnings, bought at the price of the erasure of their histories. The narrator

---

30 See Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*.
31 The extras in Nguyen’s novel are Vietnamese, in comparison to Coppola’s Filipino extras standing in for Vietnamese actors. See Coppola.
admits that he has also fallen into the trap of letting Americans rewrite Vietnamese history. He concludes that the “wealthy white people of the world…[own] the means of production and therefore the means of representation, and the best that we [can] ever hope for [is] to get a word in edgewise before our anonymous deaths” (179). Just as Marx’s proletariat cannot lead on their own but must be represented by those educated in Communist principles, the narrator believes that many Southern Vietnamese have resigned their representation to their former allies. But given that they have placed the burden of their representation into the hands of untrustworthy allies, the Americans’ choice to erase their own wartime failures also leads to the obliteration of the Vietnamese people’s wartime roles as well as the narratives of their wartime experiences. Nguyen further addresses this in Nothing Ever Dies, arguing that memories “are also corporate and capitalist. Memories are signs and products of power, and in turn, they service power. Furthermore, just as countries and peoples are not economically at the same level, neither are their memories” (Nothing 15). The memory-making industry converts people’s organic memories into capitalist products that further nationalist outcomes. Those whose memories do not support national interests, such as the South Vietnamese refugees, are marginalized and forced to adopt their new nation’s principles. In the case of the Vietnamese movie extras, their memories are erased as they are forced to play the parts of inarticulate civilians who have no spoken lines in the movie’s script. Additionally, the profits of their labor are fed back into Hollywood, a moviemaking industry that continues the process of patriotic historical revision and wartime erasure.
The end of the narrator’s monologue does not neatly tie up these issues of representation, but rather shifts the text away from the past into the present, connecting the narrator’s history with his present act of narrative confession. The narrator writes,

I spent the entire trip brooding over the problem of representation. Not to own the means of production can lead to a premature death, but not to own the means of representation is also a kind of death. For if we are represented by others, might they not, one day, hose our deaths off memory’s laminated floor? Still smarting from my wounds even now, I cannot help but wonder, writing this confession, whether I own my own representation or whether you, my confessor, do.

(\textit{Sympathizer} 194)

The narrator’s conflation of Communist principles with problems of representation is here combined with violent imagery drawn from postwar atrocities. Abdication to capitalist enterprise leads to disenfranchisement as workers are exploited, both for monetary profit and to satisfy the American cultural narrative. Such disenfranchisement causes not only the death of the body but also the death of the voice, as Vietnamese stories are erased and replaced by fictional “artistic” representations through the American media. The narrator likens these physical and representational deaths to the hosing of blood off of a laminated floor, echoing the sterilization procedures of detention camps that followed the execution of detainees, a procedure similarly enacted to suppress the voices of survivors and shock them into silence.

In addition to the passage’s disturbing metaphor for silencing dissent, the narrator forces the novel’s reader from the past into the "present" of the narration by reminding us that the entire narrative that we have been reading has been produced for the narrator’s
confessor, not for us. For a moment, the text breaks the fourth wall and questions who the narrative is really for. Through this jarring meta-interruption, the text suggests several provocative questions: unlike the film extras, can the narrator own the means of his own representation, or is he forced to represent himself the way that his confessor commands? If the later, is his confession also a fiction like the Auteur’s film? Does it simply repeat the dominant narrative, or does it offer an alternative narrative that undermines the confessor’s demands? The passage indicates the narrator’s transition from a critique of America to a critique of communist Vietnam and its policies for policing the minds of its people. In what follows, I will show how the novel’s critique of American cultural narratives about the war is tied to critiques of how Vietnamese nationalism portrays the war. Rather than using a media empire to alter the minds of its audience, postwar Vietnam instituted internal cultural changes through the forceful “reeducation” of its dissidents and redefined its wartime struggle as a fight against capitalist imperialists. Through these methods, the Vietnamese allegedly sought to reinforce their independence by defining themselves without relying on the systems and ideologies put in place by their former oppressors. But in The Sympathizer, the narrator’s detention and torture is ultimately enacted in order to convince him that, despite their claims to the contrary, both America and Vietnam took advantage of Vietnamese citizens in order to maintain political control and support their own patriotic narratives. Although their methods differ, the fact that both nations shared the same aims convinces the narrator to abandon his dedication to political revolution and instead work towards an agential future for Vietnamese refugee and immigrants beyond the polarizing influence of the two nations.

The Vietnamese Perspective: Linguistic and Bodily Breakdowns
Unlike America’s postwar self-imagining which took place far from the grounds of the conflict, the Vietnamese during the postwar period had to deal with the material reality of both a ravaged landscape and economy and destroyed buildings and bodies during their process of recovery. In order to address postwar Vietnam’s battle for representation, *The Sympathizer’s* narrator does not limit his critique to America, Western politics and its cultural apparatuses. Above, the narrator only accuses the West of controlling his people’s representation; later in the novel the narrator pushes back against his confessor, the commandant, who claims that he and the Communist Vietnamese government exercise powers of both representation and transformation. The confessor attests,

But rest assured, [the commissar] will treat you for your elitism and Western inclinations. He has built a state-of-the-art examination room where he will personally supervise the final phase of your reeducation, when you are transformed from an American into a Vietnamese once more.

I’m not an American sir, I said. If my confession reveals anything isn’t it that I’m an anti-American? I must have said something outrageously humorous, for he actually laughed. The anti-American already includes the American, he said. Don’t you see that the Americans need the anti-American? While it is better to be loved than hated, it is also better to be hated than ignored. To be anti-American only makes you a reactionary. In our case, having defeated the Americans, we no longer define ourselves as anti-American. We are simply one hundred percent Vietnamese. You must try to be as well. (319)
The commandant’s laughter here signals a radical re-reading of the narrator and the role of his confession. While the narrator’s biting satire of the American military, government, and culture has certainly been retaliatory, his anti-American stance has in turn paradoxically caused him to view Vietnam solely through an American lens. These biases are metaphorically mirrored in the narrator’s earlier role as the Auteur’s film consultant when he tried to craft genuine representations of the Vietnamese civilians, roles that would only inevitably be warped through Hollywood’s self-aggrandizing lens.

To be anti-American is still to define oneself in relationship to one’s enemy, one’s oppressor. In the commandant’s eyes, America represents not only a colonial power but also the leader of Western capitalism. Nguyen expounds upon this point in *Nothing Ever Dies*, explaining that even artistic and cultural works that criticized America’s role in the Vietnam War still placed America “firmly and crudely at the story’s center” (*Nothing 77*). Even if America is vilified, if it remains at the center of discourse about the war then it retains some power over how the conflict is portrayed. Nguyen continues,

> Remembering one’s side, even when they do terrible things, is better than ignoring them altogether. Nothing is worse than being ignored, erased, or effaced, as the losers of any wars can affirm. In memory wars, a victory is had in simply being remembered…even if one’s self and one’s own appear troubled, tortured, even demonic. (32-3)

To be criticized, as America has been throughout the Vietnam war, and several subsequent international conflicts since, is far better than being ignored. And so even though America and communist Vietnam faced condemnation for their wartime atrocities, they still retain influence over their own representation, far more than many
South Vietnamese who, either as refugees in America or detainees in Vietnam, have been forced to adopt nationalistic views and abandon their own memories in order to survive.

Just as America has defined the Vietnamese people through film and entertainment, so has communist Vietnam defined its people—not through entertainment, but through reeducation. The commandant refers to the narrator’s pending reeducation in clinical terms, claiming that the commissar will “treat” him as a doctor and cure his Western afflictions in a specially crafted examination room. Also, like a teacher, the commissar will “supervise” his reeducation. By playing doctor and teacher, with the preparation performed by the commandant acting as confessor, the commandant argues that the narrator will be magically cured and thereby transformed from an American into a true Vietnamese citizen. Through this alchemical transformation, there is no longer a need to argue about mere representation. If citizens can be magically transmuted from one identity to another, rather than just represented in indirect and inauthentic forms such as propaganda or entertainment, then the narrator’s East-West identity crisis has been solved. Vietnamese identities can be reclaimed through psychological rehabilitation, a process that cures and vaccinates them against Western ideological contamination.

Unfortunately, the process of reeducation is not as transformative as the commandant claims. Historically, reeducation camps were not meant to transform radicalized Vietnamese into conforming communist-educated citizens, but to separate dissidents and former members of the military from the civilian population indefinitely until they died from poor conditions or fled the country. By transforming Vietnam into a socialist state, the reeducation process led to a loss of persons through detention camps.

32 For more on postwar Vietnam’s reeducation camps, see Luan, Nationalist in the Vietnam Wars and Nguyen, Viet Canh, Vietnam Under Communism.
and emigration, material culture through the destruction of goods, property and enterprises tied to the former regime, and interior culture through the replacement of capitalist ideas and values with communist ones. All of these losses were necessary for the proper institution of the communist state, and they demonstrate that while the transformative effects of reeducation were rarely successful on the individual level, its effects on the state level were tremendously successful.

Yet, in the end, regardless of Hollywood and Communist Vietnam’s attempts to control the representation of the Vietnamese people, *The Sympathizer* suggests through its depiction of the East-West struggle that neither state solely or wholly controls Vietnam’s image and reception. This leaves open the possibility for a third choice, a form of representation free from nationalistic narratives. In the final chapters of the novel, narrator actively resists the competing dominant narratives of America and Vietnam and seeks to express his memories, experiences and self-identity independently. The narrator’s quest for self-representation is also a quest for “counter-histories”—narratives that push back against hegemonic discourses, offer alternative memories, and give voice the experiences of refugees and immigrants. In the case of *The Sympathizer*, these counter-histories detail the lives of refugees like the narrator, whose allegiances are torn between two countries and who cannot side with the nationalist aims of either country without betraying a part of themselves. By throwing away both nationalist ideas and genre conventions, *The Sympathizer* embraces the possibility of crafting an identity unmoored from nationalist rhetoric in favor of a counter-history that better represents refugee memories and experiences.

**The Counter-Historical Perspective: Stylistic Resistance to Dominant Histories**
If neither state can fully control the powers of representation, as *The Sympathizer* and *Nothing Ever Dies* suggest, where does that leave the narrator’s story? Can the narrator’s confession harness the powers of representation to speak on behalf of the Vietnamese people? Can he even adequately represent himself in the face of the dueling Eastern and Western propaganda machines? Until the linguistic breakdown at the conclusion of the novel, the narrator claims only to speak for himself. But late in the novel, readers are given an outside look at the narrator’s confession; we discover that the tale we have been following is only one of many versions: the commandant has read everything the narrator has written and given his editorial input, prompting the narrator to delete, reword, and add to his confession (*Sympathizer* 308). Still, the narrator refuses to follow the conventions demanded by these self-criticism sessions, which only serve to delay his reeducation and prolong his internment (310). Replying to the narrator’s complaint, the commandant responds,

> It is not my fault that you took a year to write this confession, one that is not, in my opinion, even very good. Everyone except you has confessed to being a puppet soldier, an imperialist lackey, a brainwashed stooge, a colonized comprador, or a treacherous henchman. Regardless of what you think of my intellectual capacities, I know they’re just telling me what I want to hear. You, on the other hand, won’t tell me what I want to hear. Does that make you very smart or very stupid?…

> Haven’t I confessed to many things, Commandant?
In content, perhaps, but not in style. Confessions are as much about style as content, as the Red Guards have shown us. All we ask for is a certain way with words…

Even in this latest revision, you quote Uncle Ho only once. This is but one symptom, among many in your confession, that you prefer foreign intellectuals and culture over our native traditions? Why is that?

I’m contaminated by the West?

Exactly. That wasn’t so hard to admit, was it? Funny, then, how you can’t put it into writing. (311-2)

It is quite obvious that the narrator knows the true purpose of the self-criticism session, whose aims are not to elicit the truth of the detainee’s history and misdeeds but to prompt him to confess and repent for imaginary transgressions. The details of the narrative do not matter as long as the detainee admits to his crimes, whether large or small, turns his back on his dark past, and embraces the rhetoric and principles of communism. Although the narrator has admitted to many crimes in his account and bitterly criticized America, he still refuses to employ the style that, according to his captors, would meet the requirements of a confession. Even though he intellectually understands that he needs to parrot Ho Chi Minh’s principles in order to be released, he refuses to incorporate them into his writing, preferring to critique and rail against Western intellectualism. Although the narrator readily admits his faults in his discussion with the commandant, there is something that keeps him from writing over the voice of his own narrative with state-mandated speech. After penning several communist state slogans, the narrator admits,
I believed in these slogans, but I could not bring myself to write them. I could say that I was contaminated by the West, but I could not inscribe that on paper. It seemed as much a crime to commit a cliché to paper as to kill a man, an act I had acknowledged rather than confessed, for killing Sonny and the crapulent major were not crimes in the commandant’s eyes. But having nevertheless acknowledged what some might see as crimes, I could not then compound these deeds through my description of them. (318)

For the narrator, to mar his own writing with the words of Ho Chi Minh is a crime on par with first degree murder. He refuses to undermine his own narrative, even though his refusal means that he must remain a captive. By making such a choice, the narrator makes it clear that his writing must not be for the purposes of confession; indeed, his choice strongly suggests that the narrator’s tale may not be intended for the commandant at all. Rather than using his time to write his way to freedom, the narrator writes to an audience beyond the bounds of his prison, and by refusing to adopt communist rhetoric or American principles, he attempts to create a text as free of Vietnamese and American influence as possible.

To understand the how alternative narratives can compete with traditional narratives, we must address Foucault's exploration of counter-history and counter-memory. Critic and philosopher José Medina addresses the Foucault’s theory of counter-history, explaining that, in the act of nation building, countries promote the illusion of a unified state by constructing a common history, and in turn repress or silence narratives that run counter to the norm. In contrast, "counter-histories try to undo these silences and to undermine the continuity that official histories produce," creating pushback against
dominant narratives and complicating the creation of a harmonious and homogeneous state (Medina 14). Counter-histories are histories and narratives denied by the state, including "the dark history of those people who have been kept in the shadows, a history that speaks 'from within the shadows'" and "the discourse of those who have no glory, or of those who have lost it and who now found themselves, perhaps for a time--but probably for a long time--in darkness and silence" (Society 70). In other words, history is written by the victors, but counter-histories are written by the defeated (Medina 15).

These concepts could hardly be more aptly applied to the narrator's tale, which is more a personal history than a confession. As the child of a Vietnamese woman and a French priest, an American immigrant, and a spy, the nameless narrator lurks in the shadows, belonging to no one country, nationality or regime. He and his defeated comrades fled to America only to face gradual psychological disintegration when they found themselves jobless, mistrusted, and excluded. From this position of defeat and exclusion, the narrator rejects the histories that America and Vietnam have tried to craft about the war in postwar period. He both condemns the popular rhetoric and Hollywood filmmaking portraying America as Vietnam’s savior and refuses to incorporate Ho Chi Minh’s communist principles into his writing. As a result, he drafts a narrative of resistance, a counter-history to push back against the official histories of both sides.

One of the dangers of recording counter-histories, however, is that these narratives could be twisted further to support the status quo. Foucault warns that “insurrections of (de-)subjugated knowledges and their critical resistance can be co-opted for the production of new forms of subjugation and exclusion (new hegemonies) or for the reinforcement of new ones” (Society 1). Although marginalized populations may use
counter-histories to alter official histories, there is a far greater chance that if the state is no longer able to deny such accounts, they will twist them to conform to or even support official narratives. The commandant attempts to edit the narrator’s confession and insists that he bend it to reflect the communist party line. These forced changes to the narrator's story betray the commandant's desire to subsume counter-histories and make them work for the state. Likewise, the Auteur mocks the narrator’s efforts to make his film better represent Vietnamese civilians. Much like the commandant, the Auteur deters the narrator from producing a counter-history that would complicate a fantasy-dominated, propaganda-filled American war film.

However, the narrator refuses to let his story be co-opted by his captors, refusing to change either the content of the text by incorporating propaganda or state speech or to adopt the style of a confession, as his captors demand. Instead, the narrator chooses to craft a new form of narrative, which I will call the detention narrative. This new genre resists both dominant nationalist and literary conventions in favor of an alternative narrative free from the biases and restrictions of ideological and narrative norms. Although much of the *The Sympathizer* is devoted to resisting the nationalist ideals and literary conventions of both countries, the novel’s resolution and denouement demonstrates the progressive potential of the detention narrative once it becomes unshackled from nationhood and ideology. The novel incorporates laughter in the face of death to undermine the war machine. By mocking the seriousness of state speech, the detention narrative refuses orthodox political rhetoric and gives readers the language to address experiences that do not conform to patriotic citizenship.
This radical shift of the novel from anti-American and anti-Communist satire to liberated laughter involves sudden changes in the novel’s form along with a rapid breakdown of language. The narrator begins to conflate past and present and loses a grasp of his sense of self, jumbling up the novel’s Ellison-inspired opening lines “I am a spy, a sleeper, a spook” by babbling “I am a lie, a keeper, a book. No! I am a fly, a creeper, a gook” (Sympathizer 1, 338). These abrupt alterations of the text’s structure accompany not only the narrator’s psychological torture, but also the novel’s shedding of formal conventions. The novel’s abrupt addition of lines of dialogue that are formatted like a play script embrace the experimental latitude of the detention narrative. Most notably, as the text becomes more and more unbound, logic is replaced with illogic and words are replaced with laughter, leading to the narrative's emotionally volatile high point at the novel's climax. These breaks occur where the structures of language are too limited to express such intense feeling, and the rules of language are inadequate to represent the unspeakable. Yet even as we follow the narrator to the depths of despair, the text buoys us up with fits of laughter. Through laughter’s ability to generate emotional and narrative reversals, we can begin to understand the powerful potential of the detention narrative—a genre relieved of the burdens of traditional literary conventions and free to explore new modes of expression. A detention narrative’s laughter not only undercuts traditional histories dominated by nationalistic interests, but it also offers new counter-histories and uses them to illustrate a future unmoderated by the repressive wartime politics and postwar international conflict.

Enlightenment through Comedy: The Power of Transformative Laughter
The concluding chapters of *The Sympathizer* represent a hard break from the rest of the novel in terms of tone, structure and logic, as the detained narrator’s reeducation and torture intensifies. After the narrator finishes recounting his story through his confession, a confession that the commandant claims “is the necessary prelude to the cure,” he is blindfolded, gagged and deprived of sleep (311). After an indefinite amount of sleep deprivation, he is brought into an examination room where he confronts the commissar, whom he recognizes as Man, the close friend who had been maimed in a napalm bombing by an allied plane. Man interrogates him and forces him to remember what he has forgotten, including the fact that the narrator allowed the police to interrogate and rape one of Man’s female Viet Cong agents, as well as the fact that he wished for his father’s death, which was in turn carried out by one of Man’s assassins. Man then gives his own confession, admitting that he did not believe in the reeducation process and that the Vietnamese were as much a part of their country’s exploitation as the French and Americans. At first Man points a gun at the narrator’s head, but after his own confession he unexpectedly turns the gun on himself, stating that he cannot teach what he does not believe in and cannot live seeing the narrator suffer at his hand. This scene begins with horror and terror, elicited by the dual confessions and the threat of execution. But rather than remaining in a dramatic mode, the scene inexplicably dissolves into laughter as both men are psychologically liberated after confessing their misdeeds:

I think I said I would rather shoot myself first, but I could not hear myself, and when I tried to pull the gun away from his head and turn it toward my own, I did not have the strength. Those relentless eyes stared down at me, now dry as bones, and from somewhere deep inside of him came a rumble. Then the rumble burst
forth and he was laughing. What was so funny? This black comedy? No, that was too heavy. This illuminated room allowed only a light comedy, a white comedy where one could die from laughter, not that he laughed that long. He stopped laughing when he let go of my hand, my arm dropping to my side and the pistol clattering on the cement floor. Behind the commissar, Sonny and the crapulent major stared with longing at the Tokarev. Either one would have been happy to pick it up and shoot me if he could, but they no longer possessed their bodies. As for the commissar and I, we had bodies but could not shoot, and perhaps that made the commissar laugh. That void that had been his face still loomed above me, his hilarity having passed with such rapidity I was not sure I had heard correctly. I thought I saw sadness in that void, but I could not be certain. Only the teeth and eyes expressed any emotion, and he no longer cried or smiled. (354-5)

In this powerfully emotional scene, the narrator and the commissar dangle on the precipice of death as the commissar turns the pistol away from the narrator to himself, even as the narrator tries ineffectually to wrest control of the weapon away from him. The tension in the face of death grows so extreme that, against both the reader and the narrator’s expectations, the room suddenly fills with the startling and unexpected sound of the commissar’s laughter. The narrator wrestles with confusion, unsure how to interpret this nonverbal eruption. At first, the laughter seems to be a response to the black comedy of the situation, a comedy of taboo or unspeakable subjects (O’Neill 86, 91-3). But the narrator quickly dismisses this possibility, suggesting that the laughter emanates instead from a light comedy, a white comedy where no subject is taboo and where all is laid bare within the walls of the interrogation room. Even though black comedy, or
gallows humor, eventually ends in the gallows, white comedy must be a comedy whose end goal is that the audience dies from laughter, demonstrating that both types of humor harbor the same lethal consequences. In the end, as the laughter suggests, the inevitable result of reeducation is not physical death, but a social and psychic death: in the narrator’s case, the death of an identity based on the conflicting allegiances to America and Vietnam. The commissar, whose body only expresses emotion through his eyes and teeth, and whose face returns to an affectless void after laughing, has already experienced such a death, as he has lost his family, his friends, and his face to the war. Man’s participation as a commissar in the reeducation system is not only against his personal beliefs; his continued actions to feed the war machine lead to the loss of everything meaningful in his life. In this scene the narrator stands before Man at the final step of reeducation, at the physical, psychological and metaphorical executioner’s block, facing an executioner who has already died long ago.

The narrator suggests that the commissar’s laughter stems from the absurdity of the pistol and the inability of all the men in the room to fire it. In wielding the pistol, the commissar brandishes a weapon that neither the narrator nor the two murdered men have the ability to wield. The two ghosts who have the will to wield the weapon cannot do so because they are disembodied; the two men who have the bodies to wield the weapon no longer have the will. The resulting laughter stems from this paradox and creates a frisson when the outcome—the punchline—reverses our expectations.33 We readers are also inextricably drawn into this affective about-face. We do not expect the commissar to use the narrator’s hand to turn the gun on himself; we do not expect the ghosts of the

33 Rappoport 16, Nilsen 246.
narrator’s victims to be an audience to the execution, we do not expect the scene to end without the gun killing someone, and we do not expect the outburst of outrageous laughter in the face of violent death. Where we expect death, we only receive laughter—the last thing that we expect in such a situation. But before we can get our bearings, the affective explosion is gone, and the commissar becomes emotionless and expressionless again. This rollercoaster ride of emotion leaves both the narrator and the reader disoriented, as they both try fruitlessly to read the affectless commissar’s features and their inscrutable contrast to his belly-deep laughter.

Yet even as it seems that the commissar’s affect has disappeared, the reader soon realizes that his mirth has been transmitted to the narrator, who finally grasps the goal of his reeducation. Realizing the cause of the commissar’s laughter, the narrator undergoes a nonverbal explosion, screaming, crying, and ending with hysterical laughter:

Why did I have to be educated and reeducated for so many years…in order to see, at least, the word that was there at the very beginning? The answer was so absurd that now, months later…I laugh even as I reread this scene of my enlightenment, which itself devolved—or is it evolved?—from screams to laughter…There, there, [the commissar] said in the dark examination room, silent at last except for my sobbing. Now you know what I know, don’t you? Yes, I said, sobbing still. I get it. I get it!

What was it that I got? _The joke_. Nothing was the punch line, and if part of me was rather hurt at being punched—by nothing, no less!—the other part of me thought it was hilarious. That was why, as I shook and shuddered in that dark examination room, my wailing and sobbing turned to howls of laughter. I laughed
so hard that eventually the baby-faced guard and the commandant came to investigate the cause of the commotion. What’s so funny? the commandant demanded. Nothing! I cried. I was, at last, broken. I had, at last spoken. Don’t you get it? I cried. The answer is nothing! Nothing, nothing, nothing! (Sympathizer 369-70)

The commissar pulls back the curtain and reveals to the narrator the true joke behind Vietnam’s bloody history, that despite freeing itself from French imperialist control and American wartime occupation, the Vietnamese people have committed atrocities against their own people just as damming, if not more damming, than their colonizers had. Through his experience of detention, confession and torture, the narrator is forced to recognize that not only the French and Americans, but even the Vietnamese have exploited Vietnam, for the Vietnamese have adopted the same methods as their colonizers to “take away our freedom in the name of saving us” (376). In this light, the revolution and overthrow of the capitalist government and the embrace of Ho Chi Minh’s communist philosophy did more damage than the century of control by Western powers—and accomplished it in a fraction of the time (376). High-minded ideals are easily turned into tools to repress and control the population, even when such ideals were first implemented to liberate them. Such black comedy, taboo sentiments that would ordinarily lead to the narrator’s execution, are in the torture room transmuted into white comedy, comedy that kills not literally, causing the speaker to die by execution, but metaphorically through nonverbal, self-inflicted laughter. Under a surfeit of emotion, the victim suffers the death of his ideals.
The narrator’s reaction to this revelation is profoundly physical, causing him to scream, to cry, to shudder and sob. Readers expect these naked physical responses to acts of physical torture, and so it is even more jarring to see these extreme reactions to purely psychological stimuli. Literary critic Elaine Scarry discusses similar psychological effects of pain in her 1987 book *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Although much of her work focuses on physical pain, Scarry also mentions that sometimes psychological pain can act similarly to physical pain, that “often a state of consciousness other than pain will, if deprived of its object, begin to approach the neighborhood of physical pain” (Scarry 5). In other words, psychological pain that is unmoored from its cause can increase and even manifest itself as bodily pain. In the narrator’s case, it is not the objects in the torture chamber that cause him the most pain. Rather, his most cherished ideals, the idea that he could play a part in the liberation of Vietnam, whether as an informant, an assassin, a film consultant, or a writer, are the instruments that torture the narrator. When Man destroys the narrator’s faith in his ideals, it deprives the narrator of an object on which to base his sense of self. As a result, this dramatic psychological realization causes a violent physiological reaction as if he was subject to physical torture. His coherence breaks down completely into nonverbal utterances. Scarry describes such intense pain as “language-destroying: as the content of one’s world disintegrates, so the content of one’s language disintegrates; as the self disintegrates, so that which would express and project the self is robbed of its source and its subject” (35). Without the ideals essential to his formulation of self and sense of self-worth, the narrator cannot even remain a speaking subject. His world and selfhood are utterly destroyed, and it is impossible to articulate the feelings he experiences without
these tools to position himself. When language is destroyed in this way, the subject experiences “an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human baby makes before language is learned” (4). Not only does the narrator scream and cry like a child, but he allows himself to be cradled against the commissar’s chest like an infant, returning to a time before his concept of self had been determined.

What then occurs is what the narrator describes as a division of self—half of his self experiences pain, leading to his sobs, while the other half experiences the destruction of his selfhood as a “joke,” a clever riddle that is food for comedy. As a result, his howls of pain turn into howls of laughter. Only by passing from cries to laughter is the narrator able to reclaim his powers of articulation. Although the narrator is now “broken” by experiencing a loss of self, he finally has “spoken” by articulating the answer to the joke. By announcing that the answer is “nothing,” that the violent struggles over his home country and his own struggles over his role in the country’s representation and liberation have been meaningless, he is finally able to articulate these losses and therefore begin to mourn them.34 Humor is the only tool that the narrator can use in order to engineer his own change of emotion, to move from wordless screams and cries to agential laughter. No longer is he simply an object of the world-destroying revelations; instead, through humor he claims the power to iterate and create meaning. When the commandant bursts into the room and demands that the narrator tell him what is so funny, the narrator asks, “Don’t you get it?” Astonishingly, through the commissar’s process of reeducation, the two characters have reversed roles, and the commandant, who has so far been the narrator’s questioner and interrogator, is now subject to the narrator’s question. It is clear

34 For more on mourning and the loss of ideals, see Eng and Han 667-698.
that the commandant does not understand the joke—that he is part of the regime that believes in the truth and legitimacy of its claims of Vietnamese liberation. But the narrator, through the process of reeducation, through an affective gear change from cries to laughter, breaks away from his definition of selfhood based on American and Vietnamese ideologies. Reflecting on this moment from after his incarceration, the narrator describes this process as his “enlightenment” and his “devol[ution]” or perhaps “evol[ution]” from screams to laughter. The narrator devolves into an infantile state, but his renewal through laughter is an evolution—from a self based on nationalistic creeds to an independent self untethered from both Eastern and Western values, capitalist and communist principles. Although his mother country, Vietnam, appears to be denied liberation, the narrator himself is able to attain liberation and clarity by casting off the political, cultural, historical and linguistic trappings that have previously bound him.

Just as the narrator is able to free himself from these constraints, his narrative is similarly able to free itself from literary conventions. In *The Body in Pain*, Scarry asserts that after a traumatic period of wartime, a defeated nation must reinvent itself, to “re-imagine itself, re-believe in, re-understand, re-experience itself as an intact entity” (92-3). We can see this, not only as we explored earlier with the postwar historical transformation of Vietnam, but also in regards to the representational agency of Vietnamese refugees. Just as *The Sympathizer*’s narrator resisted the demands to make his narrative conform to the proper confessional style, such detention narratives argue that writers must re-imagine their works free from the influence of the powerful tides of
outside forces who seek to influence their representation,\textsuperscript{35} even if that means risking the censure of critics and the alienation of their readership.\textsuperscript{36} Nguyen’s \textit{The Sympathizer} is one example of a text that paves the way for autonomous representation through the genre of the detention narrative. While certainly not the first, \textit{The Sympathizer} boldly explores the progressive potential of the detention narrative, using it to carve out a counter-history to contest entrenched narratives of the Vietnamese people as helpless victims or vicious torturers. In its place, \textit{The Sympathizer} institutes a complex narrative of dual identities, contested loyalties, and the ultimate liberation of the self from toxic alliances. Rather than simply attacking existing dominant narratives, and therefore tying itself to them, the text argues that the answer to the problem of representation is writing beyond the walls of internment, beyond the competing nationalistic discourses into a new, liberated space with the boundless potential for the creation of progressive counter-narratives. \textit{The Sympathizer}’s success in the literary community and its subsequent Pulitzer prize demonstrate that this detention narrative is successful in terms of expanding the horizons of representation for refugees, encouraging subversive thought, and satisfying many readers and critics’ desires for resistance in America’s politically charged climate.

\textit{The Sympathizer} concludes on a hopeful note that matches the hopefulness embodied by the new horizons offered by the detention narrative genre, and one that

\textsuperscript{35} See \textit{Nothing Ever Dies} 202-3. Besides the influence of publishing houses and critics, Nguyen also writes on repressive creative writing programs. See “Viet Thanh Nguyen Reveals How Writers’ Workshops Can Be Hostile.”

\textsuperscript{36} Palumbo-Liu notes that Maxine Hong Kingston’s novel \textit{China Men} interjects a critique of American racism and imperialism and activist rhetoric into the end an otherwise personal account. He argues that this choice accounts for the novel’s relative lack of success compared to \textit{The Woman Warrior}. See Palumbo-Liu 406.
speaks directly to the power that counter-histories hold in the face of dominant oppressive narratives. On the eve of his departure from Vietnam, the narrator writes,

Now it is the evening before our departure. We have paid for Bon’s fare and our own with the commissar’s gold, hidden in my rucksack’s false bottom. The cipher that we share with the commissar has taken the gold’s place, the heaviest thing we will carry after this manuscript, our testament if not our will. We have nothing to leave to anyone except these words, our best attempt to represent ourselves against all those who sought to represent us. (*Sympathizer* 380)

The narrator’s text has finally reached the present and we stand with him at the edge of an unknown future. Whether or not the narrator will survive the dangerous sea journey to escape Vietnam is never addressed in the text. And so on the eve of a final dangerous journey, the narrator’s last words represent not only his psychological will, but his last words, and his will, testament, and testimony. Just as the narrator has exchanged his failed principles for liberation, the group exchanges the heavy gold of their boat fare for a “cipher”  

—[131] the knowledge of the joke, a burden that weighs on them as heavily as the gold metal. This cipher and the knowledge it represents, through the transformative force of laughter, is translated into text in the form of the narrator’s manuscript. The narrator’s text, much like the speech-act of laughter at the conclusion of his reeducation, encapsulates the narrator’s journey and uses its affective power to fashion a counter-history that he hopes will help counteract the false representations of dominant discourse. These final lines carry both hope and uncertainty, for the counter-histories of detention narratives are relatively new contributions to contemporary literature. While one novel is

---

37 For observations of *The Sympathizer*’s similarities to Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, see Boyagoda.
certainly not enough to counteract a long history of damaging representation, the collection of multiple counter-histories may lay the groundwork for a body of resistance literature that can certainly complicate and may even subvert existing entrenched dominant histories.

**Gilvarry’s Satirical Post-9/11 Critique**

After our analysis of *The Sympathizer*’s liberatory power of laughter and the reparative potential of counter-histories, we now turn to Alex Gilvarry’s bitingly satirical, no-holds-barred novel *From the Memoirs of a Non-Enemy Combatant*. Following fictional events that take place in an America twenty-five years after the events of Nguyen’s narrative, it is discouraging but unsurprising to discover the same struggles of agency and representation present in the experiences of Gilvarry’s Philippine narrator, Boyet “Boy” Hernandez. In some ways, the two narrators could not be more different—rather than a half-Vietnamese spy who struggles to reconcile Western and Eastern values and demands, Boy immigrates from the Philippines to New York City with the genuine hope of becoming a major player in the fashion industry. And unlike Nguyen’s narrator, whose sharp tongue satirizes American culture and Hollywood cinema, Boy begins the novel fiercely determined to live out the American dream. He imagines his first day in the US as if his life was a film biography and he a rising star in the art world, and he instructs his cab driver to drive past the Statue of Liberty, a symbol he believes should mark every aspiring immigrant’s beginnings in the United States. But the statue’s face is covered with a veil, presumably for repairs, and by the end of the chapter Boy realizes that he has far more in common with the Filipino minimum wage restaurant worker he encounters in Bryant Park than with the esteemed white fashion designers whom he tries to emulate.
*Memoirs* traces Boy’s fall from innocence and foreshadows his descent by combining the voices of the hopeful past Boy of New York City and the jaded present Boy of Guantanamo. Through Boy’s journey from New York City to Guantanamo and back to the Philippines, the novel forces us to realize that twenty-five years after Vietnam, immigrants are still denied a place in America; indeed, after the events of 9/11, many find themselves even further away from achieving social acceptance and economic independence than their predecessors. Although Nguyen’s narrative ends with a ray of hope, Gilvarry’s novel ends with the alienation and exile of its protagonist. Yet if we adopt an optimistic reading of *Memoirs*, we might argue that Boy’s internment and deportation paves the way for further scrutiny and criticism within the novel of the US government’s treatment of immigrants and detainees, prompting the American citizens of the novel to see beyond their country’s nationalistic fervor and to recognize the injustices and atrocities committed by their government in the name of freedom.

In the previous sections of the chapter, we explored the detention narrative genre’s contribution to national and extranational concepts of representation. In the remaining sections of the chapter we will focus on something far more specific: the detention narrative’s ability to change the opinions and expectations of readers. Our analysis of *Memoirs* will examine how the novel critiques ordinarily well-regarded but ultimately exploitative American institutions, and by exposing their abuse, undermines the audience’s willingness to believe in them. To do so, Gilvarry employs sometimes humorous but often biting satirical passages that arise from the Boy’s confrontations with the New York fashion industry and US immigration policy. Instead of choosing to criticize US policy but not its persons, *Memoirs* forefronts readers’ accountability in supporting,
through words, votes, or tax dollars, America’s destructive immigration laws and foreign policy. When novels expose the destructive nature of institutions that many Americans hold in high regard, as well as the audience’s role in these institutions’ perpetuation, they cause readers to lose faith in them and become more willing to revise their personal and political beliefs.

With these seeds of doubt in place, Gilvarry’s novel then undermines narrative conventions, upending reader expectations for the genre of the fictional autobiography. Instead of rewarding the audience with a clear cut narrative of Boy’s capture and detention as they expect, Boy’s narrative becomes more confusing and harder to follow as the novel goes on, undermining the reader’s desire for a straightforward truthful confession. The detention narrative’s denial of clear-cut notions such as truth push back against the audience’s desires to ascertain the “facts” of the text. Instead, the novel gives the reader a multitude of different texts to interpret, destabilizing notions of the fictional autobiography as the primary source of Memoirs’s information. This postmodern multi textual approach blurs the line between fiction and history, drawing upon what critic Linda Hutcheon terms “historiographic metafiction” to question genre conventions and undermine the reader’s belief that an individual can adequately recall and represent the past (Hutcheon 113).

Lastly, with their beliefs in American institutions and textual conventions shaken, Gilvarry’s detention narrative leaves readers no choice but to adjust their beliefs in nationalistic ideals that they had previously thought to be undeniably true. Unlike Nguyen, Gilvarry refuses happy narrative closure, thereby confronting readers with the impossibility of immigration and assimilation and forcing them to face the destructive
effects of contemporary US immigration policy. Gilvarry’s choice to have Boy end his story in exile, rather than grant him the hope of finding a place for himself in America, expresses the grim truth behind the rise of contemporary detention narratives: progressive political and socio-cultural change is possible, but it requires the sacrifice of many lives to even begin to rouse the nation to action. When writers expose the idea of peaceful American immigration and assimilation as the fiction it is, the reader conversely yearns for greater American immigrant acceptance. Therefore, Gilvarry’s detention narrative elicits audience activism in a stronger way than many other fictional and nonfictional autobiographies. Through Boy’s failure and its activist effects on the reader we can better understand the capabilities of the detention narrative form and its ability to illicit activism in an otherwise complacent readership.

*From the Memoirs of a Non-Enemy Combatant, Summary and Reception*

Alex Gilvarry is a creative writing professor at Monmouth University and author of two novels, *From the Memoirs of a Non-Enemy Combatant* (2011) and *Eastman Was Here* (2017). He received the Hornblower Award for his first novel, which was also selected by the New York Times as an Editor’s Choice. He was also included in the National Book Foundations “5 Under 35” list in 2014. In an interview with *The Wall Street Journal*, Gilvarry speaks about his desire to write about Filipinos and the Philippines. He was motivated by his mother's upbringing in the Philippines and was astounded when he first visited the country in his twenties and discovered that everyone he encountered spoke English, despite the fact that the country was a part of Southeast Asia (Lau). Drawing upon his personal experiences, Gilvarry's portrayal of Boy as highly Americanized even before his arrival in America acts as an analogy for America's long
history of colonialism and cultural influence on the Philippines. Since many Americans today are ignorant of their country’s colonial occupation of the Philippines, Boy’s Americanization exposes a dark past that many readers may be encountering for the first time.

Memoirs tells the tale of Boyet Hernandez, a Filipino fashion designer who journeys to New York City in 2002 to become a star in the industry. Boy strikes up a friendship with his neighbor, Ahmed Qureshi, who initially hires him to design bespoke suits for him. But before long, Ahmed begins coaxing Boy into a business relationship. Ahmed purchases equipment and rents a factory studio in Williamsburg to produce the first line of the designer’s fashion label, (B)oy, allegedly for a share of the profits. Despite his suspicions about Ahmed’s other business activity, Boy takes the opportunity to work with him in order to get ahead in the cutthroat fashion industry. His romantic relationship with a college student, Michelle Brewbaker, goes downhill just as his business begins to pick up. Only long after Boy’s finances are entwined with Ahmed’s does he discover that his benefactor is selling fertilizer to Somali terrorists for the production of explosives. Not long after Ahmed is taken into custody, Boy is also arrested by an anti-terrorist police force and flown to Guantanamo where he is detained for five months, the period in which he allegedly writes the text of the novel. During his detention, Boy learns that his ex-girlfriend has written a play about him, The Enemy at Home: How I Fell for a Terrorist, an off-Broadway production featuring Guy the Fashion terrorist, an editorial choice that removes Boy from the context of his own life entirely, much to his frustration. Boy fears that he might be held in Guantanamo indefinitely, but a cell phone picture taken of him by one of the anti-terrorist police force members suddenly
surfaces and becomes a viral sensation. The public seizes on the image of Boy, artistically altered and satirically slapped with the label “BEHAVE,” as a symbol of the American government’s inhumanity. With public opinion in his favor, Boy’s case is expedited and Boy is moved from Guantanamo to Camp Echo, where he is put in solitary confinement and subject to days of intense interrogation. After he attempts suicide, the administration finally lets Boy’s lawyer meet him to prepare him for his Combatant Status Review Tribunal, which Boy will have to attend without representation. The evidence that Ahmed levels against Boy, and his claims that Boy had financed his fertilizer-selling operation, are revealed to be insubstantial. Boy is declared a non-combatant and is deported back to the Philippines, where he is driven by paranoia to remain incognito by dressing in women’s clothing for the rest of his life.

*Memoirs* situates itself as a satirical fictional autobiography that takes aim at American post-911 paranoia. The novel critiques the country as an anti-immigrant police state that is all too eager to detain, torture and deport suspected terrorists under the guise of national security and in order to get revenge for the September 11th terrorist attacks against the nation. The novel also certainly responds to *Enemy Combatant: My Imprisonment at Guantanamo, Bagram, and Kandahar* (2006), a memoir written by British Muslim Moazzam Begg about his three years of detention in American military prisons before his release without charge (“Enemy Combatant”). *Enemy Combatant* was praised for humanizing the detention camps’ operatives and instead critiquing the American government and its military detention system (Alibhai-Brown). But while Begg’s memoir focuses candidly on the horrors of detention, Gilvarry takes a satirical tack, borrowing the “light-and-dark satirical style,” “the ironic tone, the sharp social
commentary, [and] the stream-of-consciousness narration” of his mentor Gary Shteyngart, whom Gilvarry admits “made a big impression on me” (Gersen, Grouverman). Unlike *Enemy Combatant*, *Memoirs*’ satire does not spare the Guantanamo operatives from critique and Gilvarry even goes as far as to implicate the American public in playing a part in supporting, or at least willingly turning a blind eye toward their country’s violent anti-immigrant policies. An attack rather than an apology, *Memoirs* confronts America’s hostile approach towards immigrants and exposes the country’s ideals of egalitarianism and the “American Dream” as nothing but nationalistic myths.

*Memoirs* largely received praise by critics, described by the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette as an "original, funny and disturbing book," "a breezy, nervy novel," and "a sparkling onion" in terms of its layers of irony (Wolff). *The New York Times Book Review* focused on *Memoirs*’ humor, calling the novel "a left-handed love letter to America" and said that "Gilvarry shows that he cherishes a country he clearly feels is at risk" (Rose). The Boston Globe gave *Memoirs* a more mixed review, describing the novel as "lively" and a "whirligig," while at the same time critiquing Gilvarry's uneven portrayal of Boy's voice as alternately knowing and naive, complaining that his female characters were "desperately thin" in their characterization, and claiming that the book's "saggy middle section" failed to move the plot or move its readers (Freeman). Nevertheless, the Globe highlights the thematic strengths of *Memoirs*, pointing out how it criticizes the similar way that we mythologize stars and terrorists and praises the way that Boy's humor becomes "eclipsed by a need to witness" the horrors of Guantanamo near the end of the book (Freeman).

*Memoirs as Historiographic Metafiction*
As with many recent novels, *Memoirs*, published in 2012, has not yet accrued an extensive critical body of work. Outside of a number of book reviews, Eleanor Ty provides the most extensive analysis of the novel in her 2017 book *Asianfail*. Ty delineates Boy’s racial misreading as a Middle Eastern undercover terrorist and his gradual emasculation by American culture and the US legal system. The emasculation of Asian American men is a frequently studied subject of critical analysis in Asian American studies, and Ty’s argument is well supported by the text, particularly by Boy’s crossdressing at the end of his book during his exile in the Philippines.

More useful to our analysis, however, is Ty’s exploration of the postmodern elements of the text, its “Kafkaesque” feel and its exhibition of the attributes of historiographic metafiction, a genre that Canadian critic Linda Hutcheon defines as “well known and popular novels [that] are both intensively self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” (Ty 5). Ty notes that Gilvarry employs several postmodern devices, including extratextual magazine articles, footnotes and nonfictional names, and notable redactions and footnoted explanations of Boy’s specialized vocabulary and errata. The redacted words from Boy’s narrative also emphasize that the confession is not coming to us firsthand, but secondhand or thirdhand, after it has already been thumbed over and altered by various sources with competing interests. Ty explains that these extratextual additions lend the text a surrealist quality, and along with a narrative that switches back and forth between the past in New York City and the present in Guantanamo, the novel generates a “Kafkaesque, nightmarish atmosphere” (118). Ty quotes Kafka’s biographer, who explains “Kafkaesque” as when “a surreal world in which…the whole way in which you have configured your own
behavior, begins to fall to pieces, when you find yourself [sic] against a force that does not lend itself to the way you perceive the world” (Edwards). Ty claims that the surreal “misrecognition and misidentification” that Boy experiences is undeniably Kafkaesque. But perhaps more than that, it is the breakdown of Boy’s behavior from a smart satirist to a broken man—one who has given up fighting for agency and representation—and the effects that this defeat has on the shape of the narrative that truly captures the sense of the surreal. As Boy gives up hope of ever completing a genuine account of his experiences, and as he comes to believe that he will never be free from No Man’s Land, his presence in the narrative diminishes and he becomes more and more a symbol rather than a participant in his own life.

Ty furthers this line of argument by suggesting that the clutter of postmodern devices makes it difficult to determine what parts of a text are true at all, particularly in the post-9/11 landscape (Ty 123). Her recognition of the novel as historiographic metafiction makes the possibility of discerning truth even more remote, for as Hutcheon explains, the genre assumes that “there are only truths in the plural, and never one Truth; and there is rarely falseness per se, just others’ truths.” Moreover, the hybrid genre rejects “both ‘authentic’ representation and ‘inauthentic’ copy alike, and the very meaning of artistic originality is as forcefully challenged as is the transparency of historical referentiality” (Hutcheon 109-10). In the genre of historiographic metafiction, both historical and personal accounts are treated with the same degree of value and skepticism. Under this lens with its the elision of truth, Boy’s loss of his grasp on his own narrative becomes all the more understandable, as his own felt experiences appear to be no more true than the play written about him by his ex-girlfriend, the account by the men
who arrested him, or the protests of his supporters who lobby for his freedom. In *The Sympathizer*, Nguyen’s narrator discovers the fallacy of truth through his detention and torture, which finally provides him psychological relief. Similarly, by the end of his account, Boy accepts his own elision from his story and submits his narrative to his audience to make of it what they will. We can see this demonstrated in the acknowledgements section at the beginning of the book that has been written from the perspective of Boy who, upon his release, has finally delivered his narrative to the American people through the help of his editor Gil Johannessen. He writes, “to you, dear reader, my life is in your hands,” and by relinquishing his narrative to his audience, he admits that he is helpless when it comes to guiding its reception (Gilvarry xiv). He likewise recognizes the power that the audience has in shaping his story’s future. Then, as a perfect complement to the line, he concludes, “To my enemies: It ends now,” a line that mocks his accusers by adopting a threatening attitude to match the dangerous persona that his accusers have characterized him as having. Boy’s bold words also convey a powerful sense of agency by alluding to his narrative’s potential power to influence the US legal system.

One way to influence US politics is to take advantage of the genre of the detention narrative, and perhaps more importantly, to use the narrative’s reception by its readership. Just as comedy derives its force from the positive feedback of the audience, detention narratives rely on their readership to turn the narrator’s experiences into substantive social change. In the remaining pages of the chapter we will explore three main components of *Memoirs*. Throughout the novel, Gilvarry’s use of postmodern satire and irony undermines anti-immigrant US policies and institutions. Along with his
thematic attack on US immigration policies, Gilvarry rejects narrative conventions that support his audience’s search for truth and certainty in Boy’s tale. Ultimately, Gilvarry denies his readers’ beliefs in institutions and their desires for truth and justice, exposing and critiquing entrenched myths of immigrant assimilation and the danger that unassimilated immigrants pose to the safety of the nation. Through these critiques, Gilvarry’s novel forces readers to recognize their own biases and convinces them of the necessity of drastic legal and social change to protect the lives and futures of American immigrants.

**Satirical Critiques: The West Versus the Middle East**

*Memoirs’s* satirical critiques of American immigration and foreign policy distinguish the novel from other, more mediated humorous commentaries on American immigrant life. From its very first pages, the novel develops its characteristic tone by contrasting Boy’s original naive assumptions with his later bitter commentary on the events of his first few years in America. Boy’s narrative begins with an optimistic tone as Boy, the newly arrived immigrant, eagerly throws off the trappings of his mother culture in order to wholeheartedly embrace American life. Indeed, at first it seems that Boy will reference the conventions of immigrant novels and films in the beginning of his narrative, writing,

> I had always dreamed of seeing the Statue of Liberty on my first day in America, no matter how impractical it was from my point of arrival. I wanted it to be part of my first memory. Just like in the immigrant narratives I had read as a teenager. Oscar de la Renta, Diane von Furstenberg, etc. “Give me your tired, your poor,

---

38 For positive humorous memoirs on American immigrant life, see Dumas, *Funny in Farsi* and Hai’s analytical article, “Laughing with an Iranian American Woman.”
your huddled masses yearning to breathe free...” I was being sentimental, I know. But what rebirth is complete without a proper baptism? Seeking out Lady Liberty was my way of christening myself an American, and a New Yorker to boot. (6) Boy’s description of seeing the Statue of Liberty as his first memory is telling, for it entirely discounts his upbringing in the Philippines as anything worthy of memory. Boy relinquishes the relics of his upbringing in favor of a rebirth shaped by Western fashion heroes who he lists as immigrants, like him, who came to America to make their mark on its culture. Likewise, it is unsurprising that when Boy cites immigrant narratives, he is unfamiliar with major Asian American writers of immigrant narratives like Kingston, Chin, Tan, Sui Sin Far and others. Instead he substitutes the giants of the Asian American literary canon for fashion icons, such as the Dominican American designer Oscar de la Renta who famously outfitted Jacqueline Kennedy (Ahmed and Ford). Boy, a designer, does not see himself as part of a long line of immigrants who struggled to make ends meet in America. Rather, Boy considers himself exempt from the difficulties of his predecessors and plans to use his English fluency, specialized design skills and industry connections in order to skip past these struggles to achieve success. In this way, Boy characterizes his transformation from immigrant to American as less of a slow transition than an immediate, symbolic baptism. By literally following in the footsteps of his fashion icons, he hopes to become an assimilated American like them and to replicate their dramatic rise to success. In this manner Boy’s plans are less a baptism than an act of alchemy as he tries to transform himself from Filipino to American, from an amateur designer to a world-renowned artist.
But even from the very beginning, Boy’s narrative betrays the jaded tone of its writer, who comments that his past self was being “sentimental” and claims that his invocation of the Statue of Liberty’s inscription seems naive and misplaced. In his excitement, Boy initially overlooks the case that even Oscar De la Renta, an immigrant from the Dominican Republic, benefitted from the affluence and well established social and political connections of his mother’s side of the family rather than achieving success based on his hard work alone (Mower 11). In fact, the immigrant designers Boy cites in the above passage are not the “tired” and “poor” but the well heeled, in both the colloquial and fashion senses. Yet Boy’s optimism soon faces a challenge—by the end of the first chapter, Boy’s naiveté is dashed when he finally encounters the true tired and poor of America’s immigrant class, and he finds his face reflected in their own:

When I looked up to get my bearings, I saw a man about my age, a South Asian. Our resemblance was remarkable…But it was looking down the length of the cardboard menu—2 EGGS, HAM, SAUSAGE, OR BACON $2.95—that I saw the biggest tell of all, a trait which bound us together as brothers of this world.

His hands.

His small, dexterous hands.

His hands were just like mine. And in his hands were menus, replicas of the giant board he wore like armor. “Take one, take one,” he said, rapidly. “Take one.” And then, “Please.” This was his job, to stand in front of the Sovereign Diner distributing menus. Had he come here hoping for something better? Of course he had. What he got served, however, was hard-boiled reality, the city’s ruthlessness, and he had to wear it every day, bearing the brunt over his shoulders as a sign.
PANCAKE SPECIAL $4.95.

I took one of his menus and at the next corner threw it away with a hundred others. Bryant Park had suddenly lost its appeal. (Gilvarry 15)

For all of the class markers that Boy has donned to fit into the wealthy fashion world that he aspires to join, he is still betrayed by the character of his working hands. This tell not only betrays Boy’s ethnic and class origins, but also binds him inextricably with the poverty that he hopes to escape and with the immigrant brother whom he has attempted to deny in his desire for fame. Facing the diner worker impresses upon Boy the tenuousness of his position: one misstep and he could be forced to exchange his designer clothes for a sign board, his sewing machine for menus. In this brief scene, the weight of potential immigrant failure passes from the diner worker, who wears the burden physically through the heavy sign, to Boy, who is finally forced to consider that his dreams, too, may fail, and he, too, may be reduced to handing out menus. Although Boy’s trashing of the menu at the end of the scene suggests his continued resistance to this grim possibility, Bryant Park is forever tainted for him by the encounter.

Furthermore, the kinship of Boy and his “brother’s” bodies foreshadows the later misreading of Boy’s brown skin as a Middle Eastern racial marker. It becomes clear that no matter what clothes Boy wears, his skin color designates him an outsider, denying him the cultural protections of lighter-skinned immigrants and making him vulnerable to the same illegal detainment that the US government forces upon immigrants deemed dangerous and violent anti-American dissidents.

39 See Ty 120.
We revisit the naked honesty of this scene at the end of the chapter when Boy, the writer, reflects again on the encounter in Bryant Park, this time with a sharp bite of sarcasm. Boy now shares his current views rather than retelling his thoughts at the moment of the encounter. Lambasting the cruelty with which America treats its immigrants, he writes,

The city wasn’t hard on its newcomers—it was goddamn relentless. Don’t believe me, take a look outside Sovereign Diner, and surely a walking, talking menu will be there—feast your eyes! Under that menu is a human being whose English is good enough to have any job, but too many obstacles stand in his way, poor menu…dreams were crushed in this city (menu man prime example). Ninety-nine percent of the time.

I knew a sign when I saw it, all right. (16-7)

As if the earlier passage was not a strong enough message to his audience, Boy finishes off the chapter by viciously criticizing the American nation for stealing the personhood of its newcomers and reducing them to living menus. This time the audience is implicated as well when Boy demands us to feast our eyes on the downtrodden worker, both by commanding us to “look” and by pulling the narrative itself back to the scene twice, forcing us to revisit the moment. Most convincing is the fact that he was once in the audience’s position, trying to avert his eyes from the diner worker and trying, futilely, to ignore their commonality. On one hand, it is hard for readers to believe Boy’s statement in last line of the passage where he claims that at the time he “knew a sign” when in fact he had not yet experienced the discrimination and the physical toil inflicted upon American immigrants, nor did he want to believe that the sign the worker wore would presage his own fall into infamy. In the “present” of Boy’s narration, he understands the
depth of his kinship to the diner worker, for he has experienced impossible obstacles and crushed dreams, which he admits were inevitable due to a system that gives immigrants like himself little chance to accomplish much more than simple survival. On the other hand, the fact that in order to criticize America he must also criticize his past self does not undercut his argument; rather, his ability to implicate himself in the delusion of the American dream and his initial refusal to recognize the plight of fellow immigrant demonstrates that he is willing to even expose his own shortcomings in order to impress his hard-earned lessons upon the reader.

This broad critique is compounded by Gilvarry’s clever use of irony throughout the first chapter, and the novel’s subtle development of irony critiques entrenched ideas of assimilation and the myth of the American dream. The first passage we explored soothes readers with the cliché imagery of the Statue of Liberty, a symbol of the freedom that undeniably characterizes American ideals, even if it says little about its actions. In the first chapter Gilvarry stokes Boy and the readers’ idealism until we catch a glimpse of the statue itself, which Boy describes as “in mourning. A black veil covered her face” and yet at the same time, “she held her torch high, uncovered, as if leading a fleet of ships into battle away from industrial New Jersey” (8). Lady Liberty, through her mourning, is transformed from a protector into a warrior, and instead of welcoming immigrants to its shores she sends her troops abroad to fight back the tides of foreign migrants. Her veiled face also foreshadows the symbolic acts of blinding and blindness that follow in the novel, such as America’s blind eye toward Guantanamo detainees, and Boy’s blindfolding when he is violently apprehended by the SMERF (Security Military Emergency Reaction Force) squad and taken into detention (Gilvarry 252). According to
Linda Hutcheon, these examples of intertextuality, such as Gilvarry's incorporation and overturning of the symbolism of the Statue of Liberty, are postmodern conventions that challenge the solid foundations of its referents. Hutcheon explains that postmodern intertextuality "directly confronts the past of literature" by "using and abusing intertextual echoes, inscribing their powerful allusions and then subverting the power through irony" (Hutcheon 118). At first, Gilvarry's invocation of the Statue of Liberty may seem cliché with its overt references to America's merciful policy toward immigrants, but these conventions are swiftly subverted through the ironic reversal of Lady Liberty's transformation from shelterer into soldier. From the very beginning of the novel, Gilvarry prepares his readers to distrust their dearly held symbols in a novel that seeks to undermine the foundations of America's immigrant mythology. It is easy to be drawn into Boy’s naiveté that Lady Liberty represents America until we are faced with the South Asian diner worker whom we realize represents the true face of America. Unlike the statue, the worker’s face is bare, but his body is hidden and armored behind the advertising signboard. When Boy demands that we feast our eyes on him, Gilvarry’s irony hits us with full force. We must admit that we, too, have paid attention only to our ideals while refusing to recognize the physical signs before us that these same ideals have failed spectacularly. By drawing the reader in with lighthearted humor and then subjecting him to the caustic force of irony, both Boy and the reader are forced to reevaluate their beliefs and face the reality of immigrant life in America.

Later in the novel, Boy demonstrates his development from naiveté to skepticism through the irony embodied in his politically-charged fashion collection. Presaging the jaded and angry Boy of Guantanamo, Boy’s Middle Eastern-inspired fashion designs
explicitly criticize Bush-era politics and the American public’s complicity in shaping the region’s politics and culture in their Western image. The memoir embeds an article by Gil Johannessen, a fashion journalist and future editor of Boy’s memoir, who describes Boy’s first and only fashion collection released before his detention. Johannessen writes,

For his first collection in 2004, Hernandez included a black burka that was completely transparent. The model, tastefully visible underneath, wore a sequined G-string and matching pasties. I happened to be at that first show. The patch of sequins down below shimmered like diamonds in the ruff. But at the time, no one quite knew what to think.

Political statement or sign of the times, Hernandez was playing with the possibilities of the silhouette, subverting our image of sexy, and calling attention to those parts of the world where women lack the most basic freedoms. The see-through burka added a context to a collection that was otherwise off everyone’s map. (Gilvarry 188-9)

The passage drips with satire pointed at many targets: the shallow fashion industry, the ignorant American public, and the Western exploitation of Middle Eastern culture. The language of the passage mimics the shallow, ornamentally descriptive language of fashion magazines where the smallest details of a designer’s collection are mined for foundation-shaking cultural significance. But the audacity of Boy’s designs explode the conventions of fashion, and as a result the language of the passage struggles to contain his divisiveness, describing the model as “tastefully visible” when she is nearly naked, and punning lamely on the word “ruff” to describe the model’s bejeweled privates.

Indeed, not only the public but the writer himself seems to not know what to think, or at
least, not know how to describe such explosive politics in the mild, unprovocative terms of Western fashion. The writer’s hemming and hawing further manifests itself in the tone-deafness of its politics. Johannessen describes Boy’s intentions to call attention to places where women “lack the most basic freedoms,” but he completely skims over the long, tempestuous history of gender discrimination in many parts of the Middle East. Furthermore, Johannessen explains that Boy’s collection gave context to “a collection that was otherwise off everyone’s map,” which not only reveals the writer’s ignorance of Middle Eastern gender politics, but also exposes the American public’s ignorance of a culture that they only know through the superficial context of their country’s invading military forces.

In fact, the dual American invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan are contextualized in Boy’s collection, which criticizes the Western invasion by exposing its appropriation and revision of Middle Eastern cultural conventions. Boy mocks America’s imposition of Western standards by reversing the signifiers of the burka, trading its opaque fabric for transparent cloth and its symbols of chastity for symbols of sexuality. These choices are entirely at odds with Johannessen's interpretation that the remodeled burka works the other way around and “subvert[s] our image of sexy.” Boy’s choices, in fact, sexualize the unsexy and force us to recognize America’s role in exploiting and undermining the region’s culture and traditions. Clearly, as Johannessen demonstrates, the New York fashion industry has entirely missed the point of Boy’s collection.

The imagery used in Gilvarry’s description of Western sexualization and exploitation of women is also echoed in Nguyen’s novel, which describes the GIs in Vietnam transforming their women from chaste to chattel: “girls who had never so much
as danced to a rock song before the pimps we called cowboys slapped pasties on their quivering country breasts and prodded them onto the catwalk of a Tu Do bar” (Sympathizer 38). In both novels, Western over-sexualization is satirized, in both cases to the point of absurdity. Through the ridiculousness of the transparent burka, readers are forced to admit what Johannessen cannot: not only have American troops exploited the Middle Eastern countries that they have invaded, but their forced imposition of Western cultural norms onto the population only served to exploit the women it purported to liberate. The fashion industry struggles to grasp the irony of Boy’s collection, but Boy, who has begun to abandon his naive beliefs for the far more effective tools of satire and irony, begins to use them to expose the dark side of American democratic idealism. Although Boy is eventually arrested for his association with a known terrorist, his critiques of Western exceptionalism and cultural imperialism are likely another reason for his detention and exile. Immigrants are welcome in America as long as they quietly toil as diner workers, but there is no place for a legal and cultural outsider to critique America to such an extreme. The audience of Boy’s memoir and his fashion collection demonstrate the same xenophobia as America’s security forces as Johannessen, the fashion industry and the American people betray their willful ignorance and refusal to read the “signs” of immigrant exploitation. Furthermore, not only does their willingness to maintain the status quo show their disregard for immigrants, but it also distracts from a deeper and more disturbing fact: the fashion industry exploits marginalized minorities in order to both shallowly "inspire" their fashion designs and, in turn, serve as a base of consumers for their designer products. Johannessen’s shallow, apolitical reading of Boy’s
collection is more than representative of America’s penchant for exploiting non-Western cultures for capitalist needs.

**Challenging Truth-Telling and Narrative Conventions**

So far we have explored several specific topical examples of Gilvarry’s satirical critiques of American culture and politics. But Gilvarry’s criticisms run deeper than simply the surface issues of the text itself; rather, the novel also includes an intriguing text-level critique of audience ideology and demands. The novel’s challenge of traditional narrative conventions, such as its denial of the clear-cut nature of truth telling, work together to undermine the audience’s desire to ascertain the “facts” of the text. Specifically, Boy’s struggle to recount the events of the past in his own narrative leave the reader unable to determine whether they should believe his story. The undermining of ordinarily trustworthy narrative sources as well as the novel’s inclusion of contradictory extratextual sources leaves readers in an uncomfortable situation: they must abandon the search for truth and unbiased accounts in order to cobble together a coherent narrative from a collection of flawed and competing counter-narratives.\(^{40}\)

By forcing readers to abandon their faith in the narrative truthfulness of the autobiographical novel, and by eventually broadening the novel’s focus beyond Boy to include his fellow detainees, Gilvarry’s detention narrative complicates the fiction-nonfiction divide. Through both its satire and its textual uncertainty, Gilvarry’s novel unlocks the activist potential of the detention narrative, encouraging readers to overturn their expectations regarding American institutions and literary conventions in order to embrace progressive political and cultural change.

\(^{40}\) For more on counter-histories and counter-memory, see Medina 14-15.
As the reader follows Boy’s account of his time spent in New York City, the voice of Boy the narrator occasionally breaks the fourth wall and addresses the reader, forcing him out of the comfortable space of linear storytelling and drawing his attention to the act of textual production unfolding before his eyes. On the fourth page of the novel, Boy mocks the news headlines that describe him as “émigré candy ass turned hater of Americans” and a “financier of terror” (Gilvarry 4). To these accusations, Boy enigmatically replies, “I was a fiction from the beginning. We see only what we want to see, do we not? And when what we want to see isn’t there, we create it. Tah-dah!” Boy’s tone of levity enhances his sarcastic mockery of the sensationalist headlines that construct contradictory fictions characterizing him both as a scheming terrorist and an effete coward, both a fearsome enemy and a bitter loser. Boy’s accusations are leveled not only at the press but also at his readers, who buy into the fictions that the news has spoon-fed them. On one hand, Boy’s reproduction of the damning headlines risks convincing his readers that he is just as dangerous as the press claims; on the other hand, Boy simultaneously makes his readers conscious that they, like the press, also ignore evidence and fabricate claims in order to fit their own existing political views. As for Boy’s readers who have already condemned him as a terrorist, he has already lost them. But for those who acknowledge their own part in creating and adopting fictions that support anti-immigrant narratives, Boy’s humorous, irreverent critique grants them the self-consciousness that enables them to accept a counter-narrative that they might ordinarily reject out of hand.

Intriguingly, even though Boy points out the barefaced contradictions of the press, at the same time he never claims that his own account is any more truthful. In the middle
of his narrative, Boy takes an aside and explains the problems inherent in his retelling of past events, as well as the impossibility of truly representing what has happened:

One of the problems I’m having with the construction of this true confession is the remembrance of actual thoughts at the moment of their occurrence. It is impossible to remember exactly what I was thinking when I was thinking it…I wish I could just bite into a macaroon like Flaubert and poof, it would all come flooding back to me like some irresistible dream. But I can’t. This confession is composed of thought thoughts—those things we think we thought at the time we thought them. They are re-creations, composites of ideas we have reasoned and not the actual thoughts themselves. Because to remember an actual thought at the exact time it occurred in the brain would be utterly inconceivable. That is, unless I had that magical French cookie, but real life doesn’t happen like it does in the books. In my world they shackle you to the ground and pump death metal into your ears till you recall being in your mother’s womb, quite vividly, and that it was Dr. al-Zawahiri who did the C-section. (38-9)

Boy’s observations draw attention to the metatextual nature of the detention narrative and its flawed attempts at recreating past events. Boy borrows the paradoxical, cyclical language of the U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld’s defense of the tenuous connections between Iraq and weapons of mass destruction,\(^41\) not only to mock him, but also to point out the impossibility and absurdity of constructing the “true confession” that the FBI demands from him. The qualifying phrase “thought thoughts” twists the idea of recollection around to make ideas seem genuine when they are truly nothing but smoke

\(^41\) See Graham, “Rumsfeld’s Knowns and Unknowns.”
and mirrors, just as America’s justification for the Iraq War—its alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction—eventually proved unfounded. In addition, Boy’s mistaken invocation of Flaubert's macaroon instead of Proust’s madeleine demonstrates the exact point that he is trying to make—that perfect recollection is a fiction and that our memories, however imperfect they are, are the only sources of narrative that we can rely on. To act as if a text, whether a fictional or a historical one, is a perfect representation of an event is to delude ourselves. Whether an impartial-sounding historical account or a first-person narrative of a witness, postmodern texts make the case that no one narrative has more claim to truth than the other. To further complicate matters, as Hutcheon writes, postmodernism "establishes, differentiates, and then disperses stable narrative voices (and bodies) that use memory to try to make sense of the past" (Hutcheon 118). Postmodern texts undermine the tools the reader uses to recall and represent the past, at first stoking our hopes of a neatly realized narrative before dashing our them by undermining our faith in the narrator and even the act of textual production itself. *Memoirs’s* destabilization of narrative accounts begins with Boy's dual narratives and the text’s footnotes and revisions by its editor. The novel only furthers our doubts about its accuracy through the revelations of Boy's fragmented memory and the biased government accounts of Boy's past behavior. These acts prove to the reader that truth-telling is undeniably an impossible endeavor, even for Boy, who has trouble recalling the events of his life when he has experienced them firsthand.

Furthermore, Boy’s grim conclusion about the truth of truth-making makes plain that in 21st century America, recollection is not elicited through magical cookies but through acts of torture. Contrary to the defenses of torture upheld by the US military,
Elaine Scarry suggests that such torture sessions are not instituted to elicit truth at all, but rather to force the inmate to produce a pre-rendered response that suits the needs of the torturer (Scarry 29). In Scarry’s view, interrogators are not trying to discover evidence, but instead seeking to convince the inmate to make a false confession, which will then consequently their violence. Indeed, Boy’s farcical recollection of his birth scene proves that a confession does not even need to have the veneer of plausibility to it. Just as he claimed at the beginning of the narrative regarding the biased news headlines, stories and accusations do not need to appear truthful because the public is so desperate to hold onto their entrenched political ideas that they are willing to accept obvious fictions or even create fictions themselves to avoid facing a challenge to their beliefs. Especially in the case of post-9/11 America, the atmosphere of paranoia surrounding Middle Eastern terrorism persisted even as revelations about the inhuman conditions of American detention camps and the acts of torture that inmates endured began to hit the news. The American public continued to believe in the danger of brown-skinned American immigrants and even accepted erosions of their own civil liberties such as though the Bush-era Patriot Act—all in order to secure their fantasy of national safety.42

At the same time that Boy throws the purported purpose of the detention confession into doubt, he also continues to undermine both the reader’s faith in the truthfulness of his own narrative, and their faith in his ability to control the narrative's direction. Boy cannot remember his own thoughts accurately, and if the narrator cannot trust his own text, how can the reader be expected to do so? Boy repeatedly mentions that he is afraid that his narrative will be misconstrued in a way that will incriminate himself,

42 See Friedersdorf, “A Patriot Act History Lesson.”
even though he is entirely certain of his own innocence (Gilvarry 37). Through the process of writing, the stress of his detainment, and his own imperfect recollection, Boy’s words become unhinged from reality and take on their own life, one that Boy cannot control. Near the end of the novel, Boy foresees his own erasure and speaks directly to the reader on the nature of his own narrative and his own goals in writing it:

Now that I approach the end of my confession, I find that I am beginning to lose hold of my character. I have become removed from the hero of my own story, you see. To lose hold of your character must be part of the natural order of things in No Man’s Land. All the same, I have tried to capture myself, or my character, as sincerely as possible. To re-create what it was like to live in my skin. (267-8)

Boy’s reflection of what he has become in his own autobiography is deeply troubling. What began as a retelling of his own experiences has spiraled out of control, partially due to the pressures put upon him by his FBI interrogator, who demands a full and accurate account of Boy’s experiences, including details that he cannot be expected to remember. In addition, the dire conditions of his detention, including an incident where Boy witnesses another detainee commit suicide in the showers, influence the nature of his narrative profoundly, causing it to slip from sarcasm into utter hopelessness (226-8).

Boy’s narrative only continues for five pages after he reflects on how he has been removed as a hero from his own tale before it abruptly ends and Gil Johannessen’s afterword begins. In those five pages, Boy recounts his blindfolding and photographing by the SMERF squad, followed by a brief conversation in which a colonel tries to convince him to forego legal council in his upcoming trial. Both scenes are reported matter-of-factly, as if Boy has finally given up trying to present himself in a positive
light. Perhaps Boy’s disappearance as the story’s hero has to do with his internalization of his negative reception by the press, who glibly refers to him as a “fashion terrorist,” (4) or by his ex-girlfriend Michelle Brewbaker, who profited from their relationship by writing a play about dating a terrorist (1). Boy’s disappearance could also simply be due to his weariness from his six-month detention in the "No Man's Land" of Guantanamo without any contact with the outside world. But it is just as likely to be caused by the subsumption of his individual story by larger issues, specifically by the fact that he is only one detainee among many who are held indefinitely in legal limbo without rights or representation, overlooked and ignored by America and the rest of the world. As Boy recedes as a character, these other violations of due process come to the fore, even as Boy persists trying to write himself, mentally and bodily, onto the page. From a narrative perspective, we can view these textual choices as the novel intentionally defying conventions of the autobiographical novel to closely follow the life of its subject, and instead focusing more broadly on the plight of the other Guantanamo detainees. By transitioning to an eagle-eye narrative approach, Gilvarry questions the fiction-nonfiction divide that separates the autobiographical novel from other explicitly political genres such as the documentary and the editorial. And so at its conclusion we must ask, can Memoirs still be called an autobiographical novel? Or do its choices to abandon its subject and draw so strongly from real-life politics make it exceed the boundaries of fiction altogether? If so, what are the effects of a novel that bridges the gap between fiction and nonfiction?

---

43 For critiques on the historical novel and the realistic novel, see Mazurek, “Metafiction, the Historical Novel,” and Coover’s “The Public Burning,” especially 29-30.

44 For more on tensions between fiction and political content, see Mazurek 41.
I believe that we can read this tension between fiction and nonfiction as a symptom of the struggle between the traditional autobiographical narratives common in canonical Asian American literature and life writing and a self-conscious metatextual detention narrative. In the end, Gilvarry’s novel breaks away from autobiographical novel traditions and embraces the detention narrative. As a part of this process, Boy the narrator is succeeded by Boy, the third person character, but at the same time he also becomes symbolically linked with the other detainees of Guantanamo. Through this transformation, Boy no longer exists as a living character but rather as a symbol, representative less of an individual than as a category, as his name “Boy” suggests. Yet remarkably, in this new state, Boy is able to enact more progressive political change than he ever had before. We can see this transformation at work after the conclusion of Boy’s portion of the narrative, when his editor Gil Johannessen takes over to write about Boy’s dramatic influence on US legal policy. It is not Boy’s narrative or his trial that make an impact on the public. Rather, the release of a photo of Boy restrained and blindfolded, taken by Lieutenant Flowers, one the men who captured him, leads to public outcry. After the photo’s release, it is repurposed by the artist Sheriff Michaels, who “cartoonif[ies]” it by superimposing the American flag colors of red, white and blue and “stamping the word BEHAVE at the foot of the image” (281). The image immediately goes viral and appears across America graffitied on buildings in all of the major cities. Johannessen explains that the “BEHAVE” image turned Boy from a notorious terrorist to a “martyr for justice.” Most of important of all, Johannessen argues,

The image became a symbol for everything that had gone wrong in America since January 11, 2002, the day the prison at Guantanamo Bay opened its doors. Boy’s
portrait surpassed the images that had already haunted us, those of men in orange uniforms down on their knees in the gravel, masked with blackout goggles and noise-cancelling headphones. What Flowers did was put a face on the abused, the face of an up-and-coming designer of women’s clothing. (280)

More than any of the horrific images that had faced the public before, Boy’s humanizing image breaks through the fog of patriotism and fear that permeated post-9/11 America. Instead of degrading the detainee as Flowers had intended, his photo transforms Boy from a terrorist into an everyman, into the aspiring immigrant designer that Boy first imagined himself as, but one who had been deeply wronged and mistreated by the military-dominated end of the US legal system. In a stunning reversal, once Boy is forced to give up on his dreams, the American people who encounter his image return once again to their belief of the role of the immigrant as a hardworking aspirant to the “American dream” rather than a violent threat to American safety. In a strange way, Gilvarry's detention narrative reintroduces American readers to the role of the newly arrived immigrant as a positive contributor to American life, but for postmodern audiences it does so by rejecting that exact idea outright. The reverse-psychology of the detention narrative denies the possibility of integration, and by doing so, causes readers to yearn for the foreclosed possibility. Strangest of all is the fact that it is not Boy’s narrative but an artist’s repurposing of his photograph that causes public backlash against Guantanamo—not Boy’s account, but a fiction constructed from a fragment of his experience. Boy has no agency over his own image, just as he admits in the book's introduction that he has no influence over the reception of his narrative. The American public is not interested in his life, but rather, as Boy mentions earlier, the fiction created
from it. As Boy argues early in the novel, the public sees only what it wants to see, and
the BEHAVE image, appearing just at the right time of heightened American skepticism
of their intervention in Middle Eastern politics, takes hold of public consciousness.

If we extrapolate this phenomenon to the text as a whole, it becomes clear that the
detention narrative’s denial of the possibility of American immigrants’ acceptance of
assimilation into society, and its self consciousness toward the fickle nature of audience
reception provide it with additional tools compared to its literary predecessors. Gilvarry’s
satirical protests of American politics and culture and its mockery of the readers’ thirst
for truth, justice and a happy ending puts the onus on American readers to admit their
own shortcomings, rather than forcing the immigrants of the novel to adapt to suit
American values. It is true that both types of texts result in an audience yearning for
justice and positive narrative closure. But by refusing to end on a hopeful note, unlike the
end of Nguyen's novel, Gilvarry forces his readers to confront the fictions they create—
the mythology of happy assimilation and the dangerous, terroristic threat of unassimilated
brown bodies—and face the grim result of the policies these fictions create: the detention,
torture and deportation of non-violent, legal immigrants in the name of public safety.
Gilvarry's detention novel returns to the thematic anxieties that lay at the core of early
Asian American literature and, rather than acquiescing to them, turns them on their head.
By doing so he paves the way for the future of Asian American novels to critique not
only American politics and dominant cultural narratives but also the biases and blind
spots of its readership. Through humor and biting satire, Gilvarry's cultural critique
charms us while at the same time forces us to reflect and ultimately reject our dearly held
fictions in order to recruit us to fight for radical political and cultural change.
American Sit Com 2.0: Racial Visibility and the Future of Television

As sweeping changes have occurred in media consumption, traditional television broadcasting companies have struggled to keep up with rapidly changing viewer preferences. But what has been a struggle for broadcasting giants has become a boon for viewers, particularly Asian Americans. According to a presentation from the Pew Research Center, “87 percent of Asian Americans used the internet in 2010, more than any other major demographic group” and nearly 15 percent more than the average American adult (Rainie). Certainly these numbers may be influenced by Asian Americans’ higher than average level of education. However, internet content still holds a special appeal for Asian and Pacific Americans, who make up only 4.5% of the US population, or 5.1% when including mixed race individuals (Rainie). Despite the lack of racial diversity in television and Hollywood, the rise of the internet has given Asian Americans the chance to become content creators and to make their faces visible and voices legible to a global audience. Eleanor Ty in her 2017 critical work *Asianfail* extensively discusses the role of technology in Asian American communities, highlighting their embrace of “new media” and media creation tools such as message boards, blogs, social media and video and bookmark sharing websites among others (*Asianfail* 17). Ty concludes that “using new media allows Asian North Americans to circumvent the gatekeepers of traditional mass media outlets…in order to express their views, tell their own stories, criticize or mock aspects of dominant culture… [and] create a sense of the Asian diasporic community” (17).

---

45 For more educational demographics, see Camille Ryan’s U.S. Department of Commerce report.
Ty’s analysis captures the ways that Asian Americans build online communities to share and curate online content. However, the influence of Asian American communities has now extended well beyond selecting and sharing content to producing entertainment and delivering it online on sites like YouTube and Twitch. The results of these recent changes have been astounding. In 2011, out of the twenty YouTube channels with the most subscribers, three belong to Asian Americans (Considine). The same remains the case in 2018. These top entertainers hold between 20 and 24 million subscribers and profit not only from individual views but also from lucrative sponsorships. Additionally, the rise of eSports, competitive online gaming, has brought other talented Asian Americans and Canadians into the limelight. Asians consistently make up the majority of eSports teams worldwide (Groen). The lucrative nature of careers in eSports and online entertainment, which can reach two to three times the viewers of traditional broadcast sports events (Groen) and boast prize pools of up to 24.8 million dollars (Makuch) has led to a change in the perception of online entertainment from an unusual hobby to a legitimate career path. Younger generations, particularly those who have the support of open-minded parents, have begun to gravitate toward these new careers. With the rise of online entertainment, many young Asian Americans have bypassed traditional media gatekeepers and pioneered a tremendously successful new entertainment industry.

Unsurprisingly, traditional media companies have struggled to respond to the rapid changes in audience demand caused by the rise of internet entertainment. In order to gauge traditional media’s response to these trends, we will examine a traditional staple of

---

46 Considine notes that in 2011 Ryan Higa, a comedian; Michelle Phan, a beauty vlogger; and Hatsune Miku, a digital pop icon were in Youtube’s top twenty most popular channels. As of 2018, Ryan Higa remains in the top twenty, but Evan Fong (Vanoss Gaming), a gamer, and Mark Fischbach (Markiplier), a gamer and comedian, have risen to top twenty status (Mediakix).
American TV culture—the network sitcom—and how recent Asian American sitcoms have attempted to capture increasing audience demands for novelty and diversity in the media that they consume. It is undeniable that Asian American sitcoms face particular changes; the cancellation of Margaret Cho’s *All-American Girl* in 1995 and the recent negative critical reception of Mindy Kaling’s *The Mindy Project* (2012-2017) are two notable examples (Feng 125). However, other Asian American sitcoms have been embraced by viewers and critics, and it is important to note the ways that these shows have appealed to audiences and avoided the controversies of their predecessors, despite facing the burdens and strict scrutiny that comes with representing their communities.

Also, by analyzing two recent hits from two different types of services—ABC’s *Fresh off the Boat* (2015-) and Netflix’s *Master of None* (2015-)—we can compare the ways that broadcast TV and video on demand (VOD) differ in their presentation and delivery of Asian American stories. Although *Fresh* features a diverse cast and delivers jokes about the comedic absurdities of whitewashed suburbia, the show remains largely devoted to the tired structures and plots of the traditional family sitcom. And while the characters are often endearing, the show sometimes relies on stereotypes for laughs, reflecting American television and film’s long history of evoking Asian stereotypes as comic relief. For these reasons among others, Eddie Huang, producer and writer of the memoir that inspired the series, expressed his frustration at the show’s compromises and left the show after the first season. On the other hand, because of the flexibility of their partnership with Netflix, creators Aziz Ansari and Alan Yang were given broad editorial control over their production of *Master*. The show speaks frankly about issues of discrimination against Asians and showcases differences between first and second generation Asian
Americans in a way that unites rather than divides parents and their children. *Master* also includes several episodes that break the traditional sitcom format and address other minority issues, including the episode “Thanksgiving”, which won an Emmy for its depiction of Denise, one of the protagonist’s close friends, coming out of the closet and reconcileing with her family and the black community. Although *Master* has faced pushback for the protagonist Dev’s series of exclusively white girlfriends, it has been largely celebrated by critics and audiences.

Despite their differences, *Fresh* and *Master* address a major issue in entertainment for Asian Americans: narrative scarcity. In an opinion piece discussing the importance of the success of the film *Crazy Rich Asians*, Viet Thanh Nguyen describes narrative scarcity as the feeling when “[there were a] lack of characters who looked like us, and when they looked like us, were not really human” (“Asian Americans Need More Movies”). The result of narrative scarcity, Nguyen explains, is that “For Asian-Americans, if ‘Crazy Rich Asians’ succeeds, we all do; if it fails, we all do.” In the past Asian Americans have played generally positive roles such as martial artists like Bruce Lee or the comic relief like Jackie Chan, but never the romantic lead and never as part of a pan-Asian cast. *Fresh, Master* and *Crazy Rich Asians* have sought to change this, and their successes may be the beginning of a robust of generation of Asian American television and cinema. With shows like *Fresh* and *Master* bringing more Asian Americans to the “small screen” and raising critical issues including discrimination, representation and assimilation, television may yet meet the demands of contemporary audiences in the digital age.

47 The Twitter hashtag #StarringJohnCho brought attention to the lack of Asian American male romantic leads in Hollywood. Users shared famous posters from romantic films with actor John Cho’s face photoshopped over the original actor to bring attention to the issue.
All-American Girl and the History of the Asian American Sitcom

The New York Times Magazine notes that Fresh Off the Boat was the first network sitcom in twenty years featuring an Asian American family, and only the third to debut on any major network in the history of sitcoms (Yang 32). Two decades earlier, Margaret Cho was the first to embark on the challenge of bringing an Asian American sitcom to television with her show All-American Girl (1994-5). Originally Cho imagined that the show would be based on her standup routines, but it quickly became apparent that ABC wanted to stick to a “more formulaic sitcom structure” (Cassinelli 131-2). As a result, All-American Girl constructed its jokes around the adversarial relationship between Margaret and her mother in order to dramatize the old world/new world divide and harped upon the themes of cultural conflict and assimilation (132). But even as All-American Girl relied on depictions of the clash between generations, the show’s writers and producers insisted on maintaining an air of “ethnic authenticity” with their depiction of Korean-American family life (131), ostensibly to differentiate the show from other network sitcoms. Unfortunately, the result was that the show created a gulf between the portrayals of the characters, who were characterized by exoticism and racial stereotyping, and the idea of Americanness represented in the show’s title. The writers’ worries about authenticity and portraying the “right” kind of Asian went as far as policing the way that Cho “performed” her ethnicity. Cho talks about the absurdities of the show’s demands for authentic “ Asianness” in her standup routine I’m the One that I Want, where she imitates her producer’s demands: “She’s not Asian enough! She’s not testing ‘Asian’. So, for my benefit they hired an…Asian…consultant. Oh yes! Cause I was fucking it up so bad, they
had to hire someone to help me be more Asian”\textsuperscript{48} \textit{(I’m The One I Want)}. However, even when audiences, and in particular Asian American communities, balked at \textit{All-American Girl}, the producers only buckled down in response, insisting on further dramatizing the racial otherness of its cast.

The result was a show that “seemed to overemphasize the characters’ Asianness marking the Asian face, body, and family structure as decidedly uncanny” and anywhere from unapproachable to outright offensive for audiences (Cassinelli 131). When the show continued to receive harsh criticism for its stereotype-laden Asian American characters, the show eventually reversed course and added multiple Caucasian side-kicks in order to boost its appeal to white audiences (141). As Cho remarked herself on the network’s decision, “Eventually it was decided that America’s first Asian American family was too Asian. So they fired all the Asians, except for me and Amy Hill…She and I would stare at each other like, ‘One of us is going down’” \textit{(I’m The One That I Want}, Lee 119). With the Asian American actors eliminated, the show struggled with a loss of identity and was canceled after only one season in its debut in the 8 p.m. prime time TV slot.

Unfortunately, the cancellation of \textit{All-American Girl} was more than just about a single show’s fall from grace. Although Asian American actors would continue to appear in American TV programming, it would take another two decades for another Asian American sitcom to reach mainstream audiences.

Jeff Yang, Asian American cultural critic and father of Hudson Yang, the actor cast as Eddie, the protagonist in \textit{Fresh Off the Boat}, has spoken about the twenty-year gap between Margaret Cho’s “All-American Girl” and \textit{Fresh Off the Boat}. Yang believes

\textsuperscript{48} See Cassinelli 140-41.
that he may have contributed to the drought of Asian American sitcoms due to his scathing review of Cho’s show when he worked as a TV critic for *The Village Voice* (Caramanica). As one of the few Asian American TV critics at the time, Yang’s opinion was highly influential. After the review's publication, Cho personally called him up to criticize him, arguing that his article would be used to prove that not even Asian Americans viewers supported the show. But not even Yang could have predicted the long hiatus between Asian American sitcoms, which he described as “20 years of wandering in the desert” (Caramanica). The specter of the past two decades still haunts Asian American sitcoms today; Melvin Mar, one of *Fresh Off the Boat*’s executive producers, admits that “it freaks me out that if [the show] doesn’t work for some reason, it’ll be another 20-year drought” (Caramanica). Even though *Fresh Off the Boat*’s cast and crew faced the same pressures by network executives and high expectations from audiences as *All-American Girl*, their show has largely avoided the negative reception of Cho’s sitcom debut. Although critical reviews have been mixed, so far audiences have embraced *Fresh Off the Boat*; it has been renewed for a fifth season debuting October 2018 and ranks as the number seven most highly rated broadcast scripted show among Asian American households (Diversity Report 2018 65). But the question remains: how has *Fresh Off the Boat* avoided the pitfalls of *All-American Girl* and captured the hearts of American audiences? And conversely, in the face of the show's creator, Eddie Huang, abandoning the show after the first season, how can we better understand where *Fresh Off the Boat* falls short of expectations and teaches us lessons about how writers can better represent Asian American family life in the sitcom genre?

*Fresh Off the Boat: Summary and Reception*
*Fresh Off the Boat*, the ABC family sitcom, draws its material from writer and restaurateur Eddie Huang’s book *Fresh Off the Boat: A Memoir* (2013). The TV series follows the lives of the Huang family after their move from Washington, D.C. to Orlando, Florida where the family patriarch, Louis, has opened an American-style steakhouse restaurant. Since they are no longer surrounded by friends, family and their own racial community, the Huangs find different ways adapt to white suburbia, sometimes by adopting local practices and other times holding fast onto their own traditions and values. Although the memoir and the TV series share the same characters and some of the same themes, the two are characterized, and subsequently marketed, in vastly different ways. The *New York Times* describes the memoir as a “vital counterpoint to the many dignified and more self-consciously literary memoirs we have about immigration and assimilation. It’s a book about fitting in by not fitting in at all” (Garner). Garner goes further on to pick up on the parallels Huang draws between his struggles against the dominant forces of cultural whiteness and the kindred voice he found in black culture, writing, “It’s an angry book, as much James Baldwin and Jay-Z as Amy Tan.” However, ABC’s television adaptation excised the bitter tones from the memoir, including its depictions of domestic abuse, and Huang’s history with dealing drugs, peddling porn and getting into fist fights.49 Instead, the official ABC website’s description of the series summarizes the show as follows:

Set in the 90’s, hip-hop loving teenager Eddie Huang (Hudson Yang) and his family have lived in Orlando for a few years now and are assimilating nicely into the suburban American lifestyle. Cultural differences still present everyday

49 See *Fresh Off the Boat: A Memoir.*
challenges, but close friends, neighbors and business partners are there to help them navigate the complexities of raising a family of future millennials. ("About Fresh Off the Boat")

Rather than pushing back on assimilationist narratives, as Huang’s memoir has boldly done, the show’s description reemphasizes model minority stereotypes by blithely describing its characters as “assimilating nicely” so that they might fit better into the whitewashed suburban Florida landscape. The family’s “cultural differences,” rather than being valued for their distinctiveness, are instead viewed as “challenges” to overcome, not alone, but only with the help of white friends and neighbors who can gently guide the Huang family into happily assimilated bliss. Even this brief description suggests that Fresh Off the Boat is not intended to target Asian American viewers, many of whom resist assimilationist narratives. Rather, by including key phrases such as “90’s,” “hip hop,” and “millenials,” ABC clearly targets several markets, including nostalgic viewers who came of age in the nineties as well as consumers of other ABC sitcoms who are interested in a variation on the popular ABC sitcom “Modern Family.”

These marketing choices indicate that Asian American viewers are a secondary market for ABC, and it seems clear that the network expects them to be drawn to the show simply because of its Asian American cast. Nevertheless, even though ABC's marketing choices show that networks still frame Asian American stories for white audiences, simply increasing visibility for Asian Americans on TV is no small matter. Fresh Off the Boat’s inclusion of Asian American actors and actresses on the small screen pushes back against persistent racial discrimination in the industry, even as networks such as BET, as well as larger networks like Fox with their popular series
Empire (2015-), have successfully demonstrated the demand for stories featuring all-black casts. Disappointingly, only four percent of scripted roles were given to Asian actors in the 2012-13 TV season\(^5\) ("Diversity Report 2015” 20), a figure that increased by only one percentage point three years later ("Diversity Report 2018” 24). Even with the increasing visibility of Hollywood household names such as John Cho, progress in Asian American visibility has been slow. Stephen Gong, executive director for The Center for Asian American Media, speaks out about the importance of Asian American representation on TV, arguing that “the worst form of marginalization is to have no kind of voice and be invisible and be in completely stereotyped representations” (Ryan). A review of Fresh Off the Boat in the New Yorker seconds Gong’s claim by noting that “the show has a radical quality, simply because it arrives in a television landscape with few Asian characters, almost none of them protagonists” (Nussbaum 2). Even Eddie Huang, despite attacking Fresh Off the Boast on Twitter and in Vulture, was forced to admit that he was deeply moved to see an advertisement for the show play during the Super Bowl. Huang recalls his feelings as his friend Rocky excitedly told him, “‘I ain’t never seen anything like this. I don’t know what to say. I knew it was coming, but…son…YOU GOT ASIANS ON TV!’ But I still wasn’t convinced. Everything I knew rang in my head: ‘It’s not enough…You can’t just get on base. We got to come home’” (“Bamboo-Ceiling”). It may be that Huang’s reticence to embrace the show is not only a product of his disappointment in seeing his own life dissected and altered for mass consumption, but also may stem from his reluctance to view any positive Asian American representation on TV as progress enough. Huang’s demands that Asian Americans set the bar higher raises

\(^5\) See Patrick Ryan.
several important questions: is it enough to have an Asian American cast in a major network show if their portrayals still struggle to break from historically damaging stereotypical depictions? Should Asian Americans demand not only their faces onscreen, but more varied and honest portrayals of their lives and communities? As Andrew Fung, a Chinese-American YouTube comedian, explains, “I don’t like to overstate certain narratives. I know in Asian American literature or pop literature [we’re] quick to say… ‘Daniel Day Kim in Hawaii Five-Oh. We made it.’ It moves [us] in the right direction but there’s still so much room [for us] to go” (Uploaded). These questions have never been more relevant as the "golden age" of television continues to explore the minority stories to satisfy the demands for diversity and novelty from contemporary audiences.

The following analysis will examine Fresh Off the Boat and Master of None for their progressiveness in introducing more varied, realistic and positive portrayals of Asian American families while also noting their shortcomings, such as when they relying on stereotypes to generate conflict or jokes. These progressive changes, in comparison to earlier sitcoms like All-American Girl, are directly tied to the inclusion of more Asian American writers, directors and actors in the production of the series. The fact that the increase in positive portrayals of Asian Americans in sitcoms coincides with the rise in the genre's popularity supports the argument that shows with diverse writers, casts and crews are safe and lucrative investments for networks. Secondly, in order to better understand the differences between Fresh and Master, we must consider how the choices of the writers and directors have been influenced by the demands of their networks and the manner in which audiences consume their content. Fresh's traditional debut on

51 See “TV’s golden age is real.”
broadcast television on ABC allowed it to tap into the network's existing viewers, but also subjected the show to the demands of network executives. Fresh's broad appeal, simple plot structure and feel-good themes are undeniably shaped by ABC's vision as well as the show's distribution through its weekly broadcast time slot. In comparison, Netflix’s hands-off approach with Master gave Aziz Ansari and Alan Yang tremendous freedom that allowed them to address controversial topics that would make traditional networks balk. Combined with Netflix’s younger audience and the prevalence of "binge-watching" an entire series rapidly through the video-on-demand service, Ansari and Yang were able to vary the plot structure of their episodes and fill their series with reoccurring themes, undeniably resulting in more complex, flexible episodes that better encapsulate the creative visions of their writers and directors.

**Fresh Off the Boat Analysis**

After two decades without a series dedicated to Asian American life, viewers were suddenly confronted with a surplus of offerings in the decade of the 2010s. Peter Feng, a literature and film critic, writes that out of the recently debuted Asian American TV series, including *Fresh Off the Boat* (ABC 2015-present) *Dr. Ken* (ABC 2015-2017), *The Mindy Project* (Fox 2012-2015 and Hulu 2016-2017), and *Master of None* (Netflix 2015-present), the Asian American community was most excited about *Fresh Off the Boat* (Feng 126). Feng notes that the show brings up serious issues regarding racial discrimination; however, these radical comments on US race relations are “soften[ed]…by locating [the show] in a less enlightened but still familiar time”—the 1990s (126). ABC’s backwards-looking editorial choices are an unusual way for the network to eat their cake and have it too: Asian American viewers can see their struggles
with discrimination featured onscreen and white viewers can condemn the dated attitudes of their predecessors while remaining safely insulated from rebuke. Unlike *All-American Girl*, which portrayed its characters as foreign, *Fresh Off the Boat* walks a fine line by being “specific enough that racial minorities will find them authentic, but…relatable enough that they are universal…[it] must be racialized (and thus situated firmly within identity politics) without being formally illegible” (126). We can see this from the very beginning of *Fresh* through the clique of neighborhood mothers that Eddie’s mother Jessica strives to join. In the first episode, the posse sweep Jessica along with them—quite literally, via roller blades—and expect her to conform to the group's lifestyle and interests while demonstrating their own ignorance and cattiness. For example, Deirdre, the de-facto leader of the group of suburban stay-at-home mothers, claims authority over Jessica’s identity by explaining the root of immigrants' work ethic by citing a documentary she watched in college about China ("The Shunning"). The series continues to showcase Deirdre’s blatantly racist readings of Jessica’s ordinary behavior. She makes snide comments about Jessica’s cake cutting methods, suggesting that the evenness of her slices were due to the influence of communism. She later claims on a hot summer day that when Jessica tries to keep her kids cool with a garden hose she is instead cleansing them of evil spirits ("Fajita Man"). Ordinarily, characters with aggressive behavior like Deirdre might rob their victims of the chance to define their own identity. But Jessica does not allow Deirdre to use her queen bee status and erroneous education to supplant her authority. Every time Deirdre releases an ignorant quip, Jessica corrects her, insisting that her actions are normative and not exotic or dangerous.

---

52 Deirdre mistakes Jessica to be Chinese, when she in fact is Taiwanese-American.
Deirdre's continued ignorance forces Jessica to continually reject her racist assumptions, and so Jessica has to continually perform the emotional labor of correcting her throughout the course of the show. Even though Deirdre is never punished for her ignorant presumptions, viewers rally around Jessica, buoyed by her confidence as she rejects Deirdre’s attempts to fit her into a reductive narrative. Audiences recognize Deirdre's bigotry and by condemning her and her views allow Jessica to take up the position of a transnational cultural insider.

Although Jessica makes an effort to overturn her neighbors' harmful stereotyping, it is Eddie who gets the real opportunity to fight back against bigotry when one of his classmates uses a racial slur against him. When Eddie enters the cafeteria on his first day of school, he initially sits with Walter, the only black kid in the school. But when a group of white kids from a neighboring table notice that he is wearing a Notorious B.I.G. T-shirt, they immediately invite them to join them, much to Walter’s chagrin. Their new friendship does not last long, however, for when Eddie opens his lunch the entire table, revolted at the smell of home cooked Chinese food, forces Eddie to eat lunch outside with the janitor. After Eddie convinces Jessica to buy him Lunchables meal sets instead, Eddie enters the lunch room the next day with his trendy lunch expecting social re-acceptance. But instead Walter confronts Eddie in front of the microwaves and shoves him away, setting off an altercation that models the tensions of America’s race relations.

EDDIE: Yo, man! What’cha doin’?

WALTER: Get used to it. You’re the one at the bottom now.

EDDIE: No, I’m not!

WALTER: Yeah, you are! It’s my turn, chink!
All the children in the lunchroom stare at Eddie and Walter. The camera cuts to Eddie who furrows his brow in anger. It then cuts to Eddie sitting outside of Principal Hunter’s office and then to the principal with Jessica and Eddie’s father Louis sitting across from him.

PRINCIPAL: And according to the lunch monitor, he kicked him in the groin area, shoved a pudding in his face, and unleashed a string of obscenities I can’t repeat because God is listening. There were some words he used that I’ve never heard before. And I grew up in Boston! This is a very serious offense, Mr. and Mrs. Huang.

JESSICA: Yes, it is. We are very upset…that you didn’t do anything to defend Eddie!

LOUIS: That boy called our son a chink. You think that’s ok? Why didn’t you do anything about that?

…

JESSICA: If you try to suspend our son because of this, we will sue everyone in this school.

LOUIS: So fast that it will make your head spin. Hey, it’s the “American way,” right?

(“Pilot”)

Only three years after the 1992 Los Angeles Riots, Eddie and Walter jockey against each other in the cafeteria to try to escape becoming the one at the bottom of their school's social hierarchy. Walter’s demand “it’s my turn” is not only a reprimand for Eddie cutting in front of him, but also a desperate attempt to climb out of his marginalized
social position by any means necessary. Rather than placing blame on the social
dynamics that pit children of color against each other, Walter and Eddie are forced to
fight each other as their white classmates look on, unwilling to interfere. When the real
Eddie Huang watched the pilot for the first time, he recalls that “it was the most
formative moment of my childhood; the first time someone ever called me a chink, held
in a two-shot. Two kids of color forced to battle each other at the bottom of America’s
totem pole on ABC” (“Bamboo-Ceiling”). For just a moment, Fresh Off the Boat
diverges completely from its image as a sunny, Modern Family-style sitcom and draws
directly from a dark episode of Huang’s memoir. The experience of being labeled with a
racial slur may have resonated with many members the show’s Asian American audience
more than any other moment of the season. Walter’s expletive grinds the show to a halt
and for a moment viewers, both in the scene and on the couch, are unsure of how Eddie
will act. Will he turn the other cheek like society instructs children to do? Instead,
defying expectations, Eddie attacks Walter, breaking entrenched stereotypes of Asian
docility by physically and verbally assaulting his classmate. Similarly, when confronted
by the principal, Jessica and Louis mirror Eddie’s aggression, placing the blame on the
adults for letting Eddie get bullied and for refusing to also blame Walter for his part in
instigating the fight. Eddie’s surprise and delight at his parents siding with him mirrors
the audience’s delight at seeing Eddie's self-defense rewarded. The laughter that we
experience from Jessica siding with Eddie stems as much from its unexpectedness as our
own relief. For, as Louis notes, what is more American than fighting for what is right,
and suing for justice—and damages. The episode ends with Louis describing Orlando as
the "wild west" of America, a landscape full of opportunities but also a "lawless land for
only the bravest of families” (“Pilot”). White suburban Orlando may be lawless, but much like the colonists that Louis recalls, the Huang family is there to civilize the land. *Fresh Off the Boat* at its boldest flips the script by calling for the need to enlighten the sheltered locals to Chinese-American culture and customs and reject assimilation and sublimation of cultural identity by the whitewashed suburban landscape.

Unfortunately, not all of *Fresh Off the Boat* holds up to the ideals set up in the series' pilot. The show never resolves the conflict between Eddie and Walter and the racial tension built up in the pilot falls by the wayside for the rest of the series. Besides a passing mention of O.J. Simpson’s trial, the series neglects black American issues in the 1990s in favor of a deeper exploration of white suburban life. These choices are in line with the show’s trivialization of Eddie’s devotion to hip hop, which Huang describes in his *Memoir* as the way that he channeled his frustrations over discrimination and domestic abuse. In fact, by the last episode of the first season, the Huang family has assimilated in many ways, and Jessica fears that her family is losing their cultural values, to the detriment of her sons. From Jessica's perspective, her transformation from a cultural outsider into the soap opera-savvy, “Chipwich-eating American couch lady” loyally follows the traditional structure of Asian American narratives of assimilation, and these changes cause her a great deal of angst. Early on in the series, Jessica struggles to fit in with the locals. She is unfamiliar with white suburban staples like the soap opera *Melrose Place*, which she at first mistakenly calls “The Melrose Street” and judges the show's convoluted plot twists by stating, “all those white people sound like they are making mistake” (“So Chineez,” “Pilot”). Her early potluck dishes of stinky tofu are left untouched and her homemade lunches cause Eddie to be ostracized by his new friends.
("Pilot"). Early on, she is forced to make the decision to abandon her close friend Honey, who happily eats her tofu and shares her love of Steven King, in order to fit in with Deirdre's posse and avoid ostracization that could affect the reputation of their restaurant ("The Shunning"). Yet by the end of the first season, Jessica has found a balance between cultivating her friendship with Honey through horror movies and spending time with Deirdre and the other neighborhood women by watching Melrose Place together. Nevertheless, at other times her efforts to exude "Americanness," wealth and success end up becoming destructive to her family relationships. When Jessica's grandmother, sister and brother in law—Louis's former boss—visit the family, Jessica and Louis are desperate to make it appear that they are wealthy and successful even though the restaurant is still struggling to get off of the ground ("Success Perm"). The entire episode’s A-plot, the primary storyline, revolves around the two couples competing to impress each other and the grandmother. Louis and his brother in law try to one up each other by showing off their new tech gadgets: an answering machine and a computer with dial-up internet. Jessica and her sister battle by trying to find clothing with the biggest discounts, modeling increasingly ridiculous outfits for their mother during dinner. Jessica even quietly shoves two of her sons into the pantry to sleep and offers their bedrooms to the visitors, so that their house will appear bigger than it actually is. The result is that both couples look shallow and foolish in their mimicry of American conspicuous consumption. Although some may argue that the episode is a critique of American materialism, the effect of the episode is only to make the Huang family look ridiculous, and the lessons that the family learns does little to alter the family’s pursuit of material wealth in the future.
Episodes like this give fuel to Huang’s accusations that *Fresh Off the Boat* performs a “kind of ‘reverse yellowface’”\(^5\) — telling white American stories with Chinese faces” (Yang 32). Huang recalls similar cultural betrayals by Melvin Mar, one of the show’s executive producers, whom he quotes as saying, “‘Listen, white people keep you on the air. They have to feel included. If people understand our perspective, they won’t be offended… We gotta hold the viewer’s hand through this because they’ve never been inside an Asian-American home before” (“Bamboo Ceiling”). Mar reinforces Huang’s view in the *New York Times*, explaining that “we’re not making a show just for Asian-Americans, we’re making a show through the Asian-American point of view for everybody” (Caramanica). Mar insists on holding the audience’s hand, an attitude that is both privileging and condescending towards white audience members. This worrying perspective, also present in *All-American Girl*, can alienate Asian American and white viewers alike, and even steal the spontaneity of humor by bogging the show down with cumbersome cultural explanations. But more troubling, perhaps, is the insinuation that the Huang family home should be representative of Asian American homes in general. The boiling down of Chinese American family life into stereotypical representations threatens to turn it in what orange chicken represents for Chinese takeout in America: easily digestible, culturally unrecognizable food produced for white Americans. Although *Fresh Off the Boat* never veers fully into orange chicken territory, it remains reluctant to engage with the culturally unique but sometimes problematic elements of Huang’s memoir and instead remains devoted to reproducing harmless sitcom tropes.

\(^5\) See Feeney.
Fresh Off the Boat’s choice to play it safe ignores the opportunity to complicate its characters by demonstrating their involvement in aspects of American culture outside of white suburbia. In the previously discussed episode “Success Perm”, the Huang family’s slapstick competition acts as a foil to a brief B-plot that follows the two grandmothers’ reactions to the end of the O.J. Simpson trial. As their children flail around madly to show off their vast financial success, the two older women discuss the trial and defend O.J.’s innocence. Even though they speak no English and rarely interact directly with the white community around them, their knowledge and interest in a defining moment in American history shows that they are more in touch with their moment in time than their children. The cultural savvy that the grandmothers demonstrate is a surprise and a delight, and it could represent a jumping off point for the show’s characters to engage with the contested heated politics and race relations of the 1990s. Unfortunately, very little of the episode is devoted to the grandmothers’ discussion of OJ, which fits the larger trend of Fresh Off the Boat’s neglect of the cultural issues of its setting. Most of the time, 90’s cultural references are played for laughs, especially Eddie’s devotion to hip hop. In Huang’s memoir, hip hop represents Eddie’s way to deal with physical and verbal abuse he experiences at home, where he was called “a fan tong (rice bucket, fat-ass or waste of space)” (“Bamboo-Ceiling” 33). To Huang, it is an essential part of his identity, an identity that opposes the demands of the model-minority myth and embraces the idea of being a “rotten banana” (37). The show, on the other

---

54 The O.J. Simpson criminal trial took place from January to October of 1995 and involved Simpson, a former college football star, who was charged with the murder of his ex-wife Nicole Simpson and her friend Ronald Goldman. Simpson was acquitted after the jury reached a verdict in less than four hours. Public opinion was sharply divided down racial lines. It remains one of the most famous trials in US history. See “O.J. Simpson Trial.”
hand, uses Eddie’s fascination with hip hop as a setup for jokes. In the third episode of the first season, Eddie dreams of being in a rap video where he squirts Capri Sun onto scantily-clad Honey, Jessica's friend from next door (“The Shunning”). Although test audiences found the scene funny, Huang found it highly offensive because it reduced hip hop to nothing but a shallow display of sexist attitudes ("Bamboo-Ceiling" 37). Instead of using hip hop to make a statement about potential cultural alliances between blacks and Asian Americans, the scene manages to poke fun at both groups by trivializing the hip hop genre. For a show that frequently earns its laughs at the expense of white suburbia, treating Eddie’s love of hip hop seriously would be a gesture of racial solidarity in American television.

But *Fresh Off the Boat* largely steers clear of political and cultural complications. In fact, without the jokes about Lunchables, 90s fashion and other subtle references, *Fresh Off the Boat* could exist in white suburbia of any time period. And perhaps that's what the show’s producers have envisioned for the show all along: just another timeless family sitcom but with an Asian American main cast, who are neither fresh off the boat nor liable to rock the boat. Emily Nussbaum of the *New Yorker* sums up this viewpoint by asserting that “‘Fresh Off the Boat’ [sic] is unlikely to dismantle the master’s house. But it opens a door” (“Home Cooking”). At its lowest, *Fresh Off the Boat* dredges up stereotypes and shows that the Huang family can be just as shallow and materialistic as their white suburban neighbors. But at its best, it forces audiences to fight violent racial conflicts and combat racism and bigotry, and shows that the Huangs can balance both the demands and delights of American and Chinese cultures.

---

55 See Bianco.
56 See Nussbaum.
Whereas ABC’s *Fresh Off the Boat* steers away from political and cultural flash points, Netflix’s *Master of None* challenges its audience by focusing on racial and cultural tensions in America. The sitcom rejects the stereotypical transgenerational conflicts featured in *All-American Girl* in favor of developing closer relationships and better understanding between the first-generation parents and their second-generation children. They also frankly address the discriminatory hiring practices surrounding Asian Americans in television, film, and advertising. If *Fresh Off the Boat* only opens the door to discussion of racial discrimination, *Master of None* steps through the doorway and uses its platform to raise awareness of crucial political and cultural issues faced by Asian Americans.

**Master of None: Summary and Reception**

Netflix advertises *Master of None* as a quirky comedy about urban millennials. The series follows Dev (Aziz Ansari), an Indian American, who tries to “jump-start his acting career and elevate his dating game with the help from his eclectic group of friends” (*Netflix*). At first glance, *Master* appears to fall in line with other shows featuring life as a millennial in New York City, such as Lena Dunham’s hit series *Girls* (2012-2017). But while *Master* certainly does focus on the eating and dating rituals that characterize its predecessors, the way that it addresses race’s intersections with dating, acting, family and community push it beyond the familiar dramatization of millennial woes. Throughout the series, Dev pursues acting despite many setbacks, including being cut from ads, television shows and films and being forced to abandon a starring role in major Food Network show due to a costar’s sexual misconduct. In several episodes that feature Dev’s parents, Ansari cast his own parents in the role. By bringing his preexisting
familial relationships onto the screen, Ansari incorporated authenticity into *Master* in a way that previous shows like *All-American Girl* struggled to emulate. Literary and film critic Shilpa Davé writes that Ansari “goes even further by writing stories for his show that contemplate how his cultural heritage and ethnic background inform his everyday life, from his consumer choices to his relationship with his profession” (Davé 144). At the same time, they reject the “brown voice or accent racialization” that comedies today still use for laughs. Ansari’s gamble to directly confront complex race relations and reject race-based comic stereotypes has paid dividends: since its debut in 2015, the show has won three Emmy Awards and a Golden Globe (IMDB). Unfortunately, despite the series’s popularity, controversies surrounding Ansari’s personal life has put *Master* on hold and it is unclear whether it will be renewed for a third season.57

One of the ways that *Master* differentiates itself from its predecessors is that it is not afraid to break away from the neatly tied up endings that traditionally characterize sitcoms. Despite the genre’s popularity, the sitcom has often attracted criticism for its “formulaic narrative structure…and lack of innovation”58 (Bore 87). The root of the easily predictable, neatly resolved “happy ending” stems from the serialized nature of the broadcast TV sitcom. TV viewers cannot be expected to tune in for every episode, and so it is important to tie up any loose ends so that unresolved issues would not affect the following episode, which might confuse viewers who are just tuning in. To maintain narrative continuity, writers must reset their stories to their original state by the end of the forty-minute episode, which rarely gives writers enough time to fully develop a complex storyline.

57 See Fernandez.
58 See Becker.
On the other hand, Netflix grants shows like *Master* unique opportunities to break from the recursive nature of the traditional sitcom. In fact, Mareike Jenner in an article on Netflix and streaming TV, argues that “Netflix is simply not TV” but something else entirely (Jenner 261). Rather, Netflix is an example of “matrix media,” a term the describes the fluid and complex nature of the platform’s production, use, and interactivity (260). Although Jenner does not delve into the specifics of what defines “matrix media,” she is clear about the fact that matrix platforms like Netflix are completely different from broadcast TV in the way that entertainment is created, advertised, consumed, and shared—most of which occurs away from the TV set (260). One of the practices that differs radically from traditional TV program consumption is the prevalence of “binge-watching” on Netflix. According to Jenner, “binge-watching is…disconnected from scheduled television” and “such viewing practices serve to remove any ‘pollution’ of the text through advertising breaks” (265). Netflix will continue to play three episodes without interruption before prompting the viewer with a message asking if he wants to continue. This method of consumption eliminates the interruptions of frequent television advertising breaks, which disconnect the viewer from the programming and stretch the viewing of a single forty-minute episode to an hour or more. Likewise, since the service is on demand, the viewer can select the programming he desires at any time, eliminating the time-consuming act of channel surfing or settling for programming in which he is less interested just because it is currently being broadcast. Because of its broad choices, convenience and lack of distractions, Netflix makes it far easier for a viewer to become absorbed in a show than broadcast TV does. And since TV series are added to the Netflix

---

60 See Jacobs.
platform one season rather than one episode at a time, it encourages fans to consume the series in a short period of time, or for some, in one sitting.

The effect of on-demand content and binge watching means that “Netflix exclusives”—shows funded and designed for streaming on Netflix—are built without the need for recursive storytelling and convenient breaks in the action for commercials. In many cases, they are intended to be watched more like a film: with full attention, and for long stretches. Shows like Master of None allow the viewer to disengage if he must, but are best when viewed in several long sessions. Jenner explores the different nature of shows on Netflix and broadcast television by analyzing sitcom Arrested Development,61 which ran on broadcast television for three seasons before transitioning to Netflix for a fourth. The fourth season, released in 2013, was characterized by a dramatic change in the show’s structure, including non-linear, diverse, intertwined storylines, which would have confused viewers if released on broadcast TV (266). Instead, by viewing the season in long, devoted sessions, Netflix viewers are better able to appreciate complex plots and recurring themes, both of which build toward a satisfying season finale.

Master of None: "Indians on TV"

Master of None takes advantage of the binge-watching nature of the Netflix platform to explore complex and sometimes controversial racial issues. One such issue is discrimination against Asian Americans in entertainment. Master explores TV networks’ practice of explicitly writing only one token role for an Asian American actor, which is often characterized by the use of “brown voice”: a performance including a highly accented voice and mannerisms that recall negative stereotypes about the racial group

---

61 Arrested Development was broadcast on Fox from 2003-2006. Netflix purchased it and released a fourth season in 2013 and a fifth in 2018.
(Davé 143). In the episode “Indians On TV” before the opening credits even roll, viewers are barraged with a montage of clips from films, TV and video games that feature stereotypical representations of Indians. A brief cut shows Dev as a child smiling and watching with us as the clips quickly begin to feature more exotic and less human characterizations: Indians serving chilled monkey brains at a banquet, playing a sitar to attract scantily clad beautiful women, haplessly trying to argue with the white patrons of their convenience store, and finally a white actor donning brownface and doing a Bollywood dance to advertise potato chips. Other clips feature white actors putting on fake Indian accents to directly mock others. Dev and the viewers are forced to absorb these damaging characterizations and participate in the cultural education that Indian Americans and other Asian American groups receive from a young age.

Compared to these overtly racist characterizations, the episode’s opening clip seems innocent in comparison, but the references to it that reoccur throughout the rest of the episode make it representative of the show’s criticism of racist hiring practices in the entertainment industry. The clip is drawn from the comic sci-fi movie Short Circuit 2 (1987) about an experimental robot from the US military that, through the power of a freak lightning strike, gains sentience and escapes its captors. The character Ben Japituda, the robot creator’s assistant, appears to be Indian American, but is in fact played by the white actor Fischer Stevens, who hams up his character as a socially awkward computer genius with a stereotypical heavy accent. Ansari explains in an editorial for The New York Times that he had loved Short Circuit 2 as a child and believed for a long time that Ben’s actor was Indian and that the movie was ahead of its time. Only during college did Ansari discover that Ben’s actor was white, and would get “painted an ‘Indian color’
before going on set and doing his ‘Indian voice’” (“Acting, Race and Hollywood”).

Ansari describes how he reached out to Stevens and learned that he was originally hired to play a white grad student, but that the director and writers changed the character to Indian and asked him, “‘Can you play Indian?’” Desperate for the job, Stevens agreed to play the part and studied with a dialect coach, started doing yoga, and lived in India for a month before shooting the sequel to the film. In the editorial, Ansari explains coming to terms with Steven, and instead places blame on the director for the decision not to hire an Indian actor instead. But what struck Ansari so deeply was that he had been convinced for years that the character of Ben was played by an Indian American actor. The sense of betrayal was not the stereotypical characterization of Ben, but the fact that he was tricked into reading Indian features on a white body. Hollywood has a long history of misleading and damaging representations of Asian Americans. However, Ansari's frustration, not with the negative representations but with his failure to recognize the difference between real and fake racial characterizations, demonstrates the effects of America's racial education in entertainment. Because they have been inundated with racialized characterizations from a young age, viewers like Ansari who try to resist these characterizations find it increasingly difficult to determine what is real. Inevitably, this further frustrates their efforts to find and support positive racial representations in entertainment.

Beyond the controversial brownface in *Short Circuit 2*, the specific clip that Ansari chose to open the episode draws an important metaphorical parallel to issues of racial casting. The brief segment of dialogue between Ben and the robot Johnny 5
cleverly comments on racial performance and cultural assimilation. In the clip, Ben and Johnny 5 discuss the robot's recent self-modifications:

BEN JAPITUYA: I am proud of you. You have removed your laser weapon, huh?

JOHNNY 5: Weapon is to kill, disassemble, make dead. Unacceptable.

BEN: You have made many modifications upon your person, huh? You have come a long way from the Defense Department prototype.

JOHNNY: You betcha. It’s the all-new Johnny Five. Just look at these items.

Ironically, Ben’s heavily inflected accent and the repetitive form of his lines make his performance far more robotic than that his synthetic companion. In comparison, Johnny’s voice, although buzzy, is full of cheer and human-like delight. Through Steven’s imitation of Indian stereotypes, Ben appears wooden, which only enhances Johnny’s humanity. By reading this clip metaphorically, we can view Ben and Johnny as two examples of racial casting. Ben represents the pitfalls of “brown-face” casting, where actors’ attempts to appear as a different race enhance stereotypes and diminish the characters’ humanity. On the other hand, Johnny stands in for the position of real Indian American actors, who, although they act far more human than their counterparts, are forced to alter parts of their identity performance in order to be deemed acceptable by audiences. Johnny’s deweaponizing stands for the compromises that assimilation demands from their minority subjects, compromises that emphasize passivity and acquiescence and diminish opportunities to fight against stereotypes to gain societal acceptance. Indian Americans in the entertainment industry are also often forced to “deweaponize”: to put aside their own identities in order to “play Indian,” by adopting humble, subservient roles.
The dichotomy of representation in *Short Circuit 2*, which Dev asserts “got a real robot and a fake Indian” continues to haunt the rest of the episode as the characters struggle against balancing between fighting problematic racial representation and meeting the demands of their own careers. For example, Dev and his friend Ravi both try out for the role of “Unnamed Cabdriver,” a bit part with two lines, and Dev is denied the role when he refuses to put on a fake Indian accent for the part. Dev explains to Ravi why his willingness to embrace stereotypes to get acting jobs only feeds into the system that represents Indian Americans in damaging ways, which he emphasizes by telling Ravi about the brownface casting in *Short Circuit 2*. After Dev and Ravi both try out for an open-ethnicity comedy call, Dev finds himself accidentally included in an email chain where the executives debate whether to hire Dev or Ravi, because they believe they can’t both be on the show. One of the respondents cracks a joke that they should meet both of them and “see who can curry our favor,” and Dev debates leaking the emails to the press to get the racist staff fired. But when Dev meets with the show's producer Danvers, Danvers takes him to a Knicks game where he meets the rapper Busta Rhymes, who suggests that Dev should not “play the race card” but “charge it to the race card.” After a series of events where Dev is replaced with another Indian actor and Danvers dies from a heart attack, Dev is invited in by the new director who wants to hire both Dev and Ravi, but for a film where he would have to play a stereotypical unassimilated Indian immigrant because Ravi has decided to no longer take brown voice roles. After an argument between Dev and Ravi, the issue of whether to take or abandon the new offer remains unresolved.
Along with the problems inherent in brown voice casting, the issue of tokenism in entertainment is a major driver of the episode. Although the racist joke “curry our favor” is a major driver of the plot, after the Knicks game Dev brings up his other source of frustration: the studio’s assertion that they can only hire one Indian actor. Director Danvers responds that if they have two Indian actors, white viewers will think that it is an “Indian show” and believe that they are not its intended audience. He reassures Dev that they would love to see two Indian people, but that “we’re just not at that point.” In the next scene, Dev and Ravi argue over the issue, with Dev adopting Danver’s position, that Indians are still “set decoration” and “just aren’t at that level yet,” while “black people just got to ‘there can be two’ status…though, there can’t be three, ‘cause then it’s, like, a black show or a black movie.” Dev’s racial mathematics expose the truth behind the hiring practices in the entertainment industry, where the anticipated demands of white audiences determine who can be hired and what can be produced. Although progress has been made, the industry is still stymied by fears that they will lose viewers by featuring more than one Asian American actor or actress in a show’s cast. The only exception to the one Indian actor rule seem to be shows like the new director’s reboot of “Perfect Strangers,” where the assimilated Indian American teaches his immigrant relative how to become an American. Just like Short Circuit 2’s Ben and Johnny, these narratives ironically teach newcomers how to fit into the society they seek to join—at the expense of their original identity. The assimilated Asian and the brownface computer engineer

---

62 Perfect Strangers follows the life of Larry Appleton, whose distant cousin Balki Bartokomous, a Greek shepherd, comes to live with him in Chicago. Larry tries to teach Balki about American life, while Balki’s cultural mistakes serve as comic relief. Notably, Bronson Pinchot, who plays Balki, was once cast as Ben Japituda in the first Short Circuit film, but was subsequently fired. See Rabin.
stand in for the demands for model minorities, citizens who can imitate and aspire to whiteness but can never attain it.

The episode also explores Dev contemplating taking a stand against brown voice casting practices at the expense of damaging his career. Busta Rhymes and Dev’s agent both advise him to take advantage of his knowledge of the racist emails to force Danver to cast him, and thereby trade a moral victory for a financial one. At first Dev resists, sticking with his position that the producers should be punished for their racist behavior. But when Dev learns from Danvers that, with one hundred episodes and a syndication deal he could earn 50 to 75 million dollars, he immediately begins parroting Danvers’ talking points to Ravi, who calls him an "Uncle Taj"—an Indian Uncle Tom—for cutting a deal with the studio. On one hand, viewers are initially repulsed at seeing Dev turn on a dime and abandon his convictions, but at the same time they are familiar with the struggles that Dev has experienced in show business from previous episodes. As much as the audience may yearn for justice, they realize that firing a few producers will not overturn racist casting practices. And by hiring Dev, the studio also has a chance to introduce positive representations of Indian Americans to general audiences that would stand against the industry’s long history of damaging stereotypes. On the other hand, Dev's acquiescence to Danvers' generous financial offer is intentionally juxtaposed with the struggles and financial difficulties of the episode’s activists in their efforts to make issues of representation matter to the general public. When Dev and Ravi visit an advocacy group to leak the email, they find that their point of contact in charge of Indian American advocacy, Prashanth, has been let go because there wasn't enough work to justify his position. Dev remarks, "Good for Indians in general, bad for that specific
Indian," suggesting that the advocacy group's lack of issues for Indian Americans signals greater national sensitivity toward their issues. However, the rest of the episode makes it clear that Indian American representation remains just as fraught as it always has. Rather, the lack of work at the advocacy group suggests that stereotypical depictions of Indian Americans have become the norm even in the Indian American community, diminishing the work of advocates for racial equality. The long history of stereotypical characters combined with the high hurdles faced by advocates for cultural change in general—the scene notes the Redskins as on the to-do list of the advocacy group since 1994—has de-incentivized Indian Americans to push for change.

In addition to its exploration of the racial stereotypes and tokenism in entertainment, "Indians on TV" returns repeatedly to the struggles that its characters experience when they try to discern real from fake Indian American actors onscreen. After the episode addresses racist portrayals of minorities in entertainment and the daunting effort required to replace them with positive representations, viewers expect some sort of speculation about the future of Indian Americans on TV. Instead, the episode ends with Dev’s bodybuilder friend Anush learning about the brownface actor in Short Circuit 2. Anush’s astonished and anguished response to the discovery—“Is Mindy Kaling real?”—is a line delivered for laughs, but it also shows that brownface and stereotype-laden representation has altered the American cultural consciousness so dramatically that even real Indian American actors playing non-stereotypical roles have become suspect. The inability to discern the real from the fake, the brown from the white, the human from the inhuman causes viewers like Anush to experience an identity crisis. Anush’s confusion, like that of young Dev in the opening scene, suggests that in real life,
Indian American viewers' exposure to brownface and accented voices from a young age encourages them not only to accept stereotypical representations about their race, but also to second-guess the genuineness of real Indian American actors. Hollywood magic blurs our ability to read bodies to discern which resemble our own and which are merely imitations.

Homi Bhabha's concept of colonial mimicry gives us an important tool to develop our complex discussion of racial performance: of white actors performing Indianness, of robots performing humanity, and of Indian American actors playing themselves, all of which are subject to the skepticism of their audience. Bhabha defines mimicry as "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite...the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference" (Bhabha 126). In other words, in order to incorporate the minority colonial subject into the rest of the population, nations shape the identities of such subjects to better suit the social and cultural demands of their nation. But mimicry is by nature inexact, and the distance that remains between the minority subject and the native citizen forever brands the subject as other. Bhabha continues to explain that the desire for minority subjects to “emerge as ‘authentic’ through mimicry—through a process of writing and repetition—is the final irony of partial representation” (126). The desire of the minority subject to appear as an authentic national citizen fuels the mimicry process and further inscribes the necessity of mimicry in the mind of minority subjects. Bhabha concludes that these destructive desires result in the “splitting of colonial discourse so that two attitudes toward external reality persist; one takes reality into consideration
while the other disavows it and replaces it by a product of desire that repeats, rearticulates ‘reality’ as mimicry” (130). In Bhabha’s view, minorities are split between the reality of their lived experiences and conflicting cultural discourses that have been shaped by mimicry. The latter of these is the root of “racist stereotypes, statements, jokes and myths” that negatively characterize the racialized subject, generating confusion and anguish. As mimicry integrates itself deeply into national discourse, it becomes difficult if not impossible to distinguish between what is real and what is a product of mimicry.

These issues of mimicry, authenticity and reality play out in “Indians on TV” repeatedly through the ways Indian Americans are portrayed in popular media. Short Circuit 2's Johnny 5 demonstrates the destructive potential of mimicry. Viewers find the robot’s mimicry charming as he attempts to become human because it demonstrates his desire to assimilate. We can see this trope throughout science fiction, famously from Spock and Data in Star Trek and Star Trek: The Next Generation and the Doctor in Doctor Who. At the same time, his failure to become human reassures us that he will remain a subservient minority subject, constantly striving but always remaining inorganic and less than human. The role offered to Dev, Srikumar, the immigrant character in the new director's proposed reboot of Perfect Strangers, represents a similar case. The original Perfect Strangers featured a Greek immigrant who struggled to acclimate to American life and entertained the audience with his comedic customs and traditions. Similarly, the reboot of the series of the movie is poised to force Srikumar, with the help of his "totally assimilated" cousin Darren, to learn how to perform the role of a proper minority subject by mimicking American cultural norms. In both of these cases, minority

---

63 See also Gene Roddenberry’s The Questor Tapes.
subjects are applauded for their imperfect mimicry. The comedic shortcomings of their performance continue to feed narratives that support the colonial subject's goal of flawless imitation, while at the same time reinforcing the superiority of the white native subject.

The tension between the mimicry performed by racialized subjects and what the subjects perceive as reality accounts for the conflicted feelings that the characters of the episode face when they confront moments of covert brownface casting in movies like *Short Circuit 2* and *The Social Network*. Ravi’s discovery of brownface in *Short Circuit 2* evokes feelings of astonishment and frustration that he struggles to come to terms with. He admits that he is “experiencing a lot of emotions right now” and that man who played Ben Japituya “was one of [his] favorite Indian actors.” His later insistence that the actor Max Minghella in *The Social Network* was not browned up but was in fact 1/16th Indian is yet another example of resistance against the fact that Indian bodies that he reads as genuine are in fact cleverly disguised imitations. Ravi’s brownface actors not only perform mimicry, recalling stereotypes through their accented voices and mannerisms, but they also impersonate brown bodies so persuasively that Ravi is unable to distinguish the difference between real brown skin and Hollywood makeup. Mimicry is such an essential part of the way that Ravi interprets his ethnic identity that he can no longer recognize reality through the distorting lens of colonial desire. Because Ravi’s models are so influential in their performance of Indian American identity, finding out that they are fake represents a fundamental betrayal that causes him to experience deep feelings of betrayal.

---

64 In *The Social Network* the Indian American character of Divya Narendra is played by Max Minghella, who has Italian, Scottish and Chinese heritage. Sony Pictures allegedly declined to comment about the casting decision. See Agrawal.
loss. The fact that the episode ends with Anush’s same discovery and questioning of the authenticity of Indian actors cements the characters’ anxieties about their ability to discern reality from fakery and their problematic ideas about Indian American representation shaped by colonial mimicry.

With American media’s fixity on racial stereotypes and the audience suspicion that results, it remains unclear what the episode suggests might address these issues. Dev’s initial plan to leak the racist emails is derailed by Danver’s heart attack. Furthermore, the episode notes that past attempts to change Indian American representation on TV have made little headway, such as the outrage against the 2012 Popchips commercial where Ashton Kutcher appeared in brownface playing the part of an amorous Bollywood producer named Raj, leading to public outrage. In the episode itself, Dev and Ravi disagree about the right course of action when they learn about Danvers’s heart attack. Ravi’s initially celebrates, responding, “but that’s how we roll, dog. Those racist motherfuckers die, and we take over!” Unlike Johnny 5, who disarms himself voluntarily, Ravi’s plan is to re-weaponize to arm for a takeover of the media industry by any means. Dev refuses to celebrate Danvers’s death, but he never settles on another solution to racist hiring practices in the industry, leaving the audience without closure. Later in the season he takes a stand against the ad agency that hires attractive female actresses but refuses to give them speaking parts in a Garden Depot hardware store ad (“Ladies & Gentlemen”). In response to his criticism that the women are simply there to serve antiquated domestic roles, the ad agency takes his suggestion and rewrites the script, making the ad women-only but cutting Dev’s role in the process. Dev’s efforts

---

65 See Eng and Han.
66 See Marikar.
to fight for fairer representation, whether for Indian Americans or for women, are continually met with frustration and pushback. Throughout the course of the series, *Master* supports the assertion that when it comes to visibility in media, minorities are constantly fighting to divide up the same small slice of pie.

Dev’s struggles with both his career and ethical questions create a long-lasting plot arc that continues to focus on issues of discrimination and problematic representation in entertainment. Even though Dev never discovers a satisfactory resolution to these issues, his ongoing struggles bring the ongoing politics of discriminatory hiring to the fore. *Master’s* continuous attention to racial politics also represents an innovative step for the sitcom, which traditionally ties up its ethical and moral issues by the end of the episode. The steps that *Master* takes to feature issues of representation and casting bias throughout the series contrast with *Fresh’s* subtler approach to issues of discrimination, which are always neatly resolved within the span of a single episode. *Fresh* also persuades viewers that the Huang family successfully assimilates into white suburbia and gains acceptance, while *Master* argues that assimilation is impossible: minority subjects may mimic whiteness but can never achieve full acceptance. It is true that both shows promote visibility and generally showcase positive representations of Asian Americans. But *Fresh* remains limited by the traditional sitcom format and supports notions of achieving the “American dream” of assimilation and prosperity. The series showcases examples of racism and discrimination, and even though the characters directly face off against their attackers, the narrative that the Huangs can eventually change the minds of their bigoted neighbors, classmates and guests puts the onus on the family to change society, rather than demanding that society overcomes its biases. Conversely, *Master’s*
interrogation of brownface and discriminatory casting refuses to neatly resolve the issue, and its continuous disruption of the lives of Dev and his friends proves the intractability of racism in media and undermines the narrative that minority subjects can unilaterally overcome their circumstances.

The dialogue and plot of “Indians on TV” and other episodes themselves do not suggest a solution to the problem of brownface, racial stereotypes or the absence of brown faces on TV, but when viewed as a whole, the Master series gives viewers a glimpse of the solution. As Dev and Ravi debate the “rule of two”—that two brown actors in a TV show cause the show to be labeled as an ethnic series and alienate potential white viewers—viewers may not notice that placing Dev, Ravi, and Anush onscreen at the same time violates this very rule. Master’s popularity suggests that its mostly minority cast does not appear to take away its appeal for white audiences. Rather than simply remaining disheartened by Hollywood’s neglect of Asian American representation, Master demonstrates that influential writers and directors can use their position to feature more Asian American actors in their shows and films. Master’s popularity disproves the rule of two through demonstration rather than argument and paves the way for other studios to feature more minority faces and issues in their entertainment offerings.

The Future of the Asian American Sitcom

With the popularity of both broadcast sitcoms like Fresh and streaming sitcoms like Master among others, it appears that Asian American TV has entered a new renaissance. But will this new age of diverse media continue? What might the future of Asian American television look like? Although Nielsen ratings give us an approximation
of the popularity of broadcast TV shows, streaming services like Netflix are secretive about their metrics, and so the popularity of their series can only be estimated by imperfect measures, such as examining their popularity on social media like Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook. One way to find the answer is to look to theorists in the field of audience studies who address new media’s effects on viewership. By taking a look at Philip Napoli’s book *Audience Evolution* on new media’s effects on audience reception, and his theories, drawn from Chris Anderson’s long tail hypothesis, we can speculate how current trends of streaming media may enhance the popularity of Asian American sitcoms and other emerging genres and bring them into the mainstream.

First, it is important to distinguish how streaming media differs from its traditional avenues of entertainment dissemination. In contrast to “broadcast” media, audience studies theorists have coined the terms “narrowcasting” and even "slivercasting" to denote the narrow focus that streaming media offers to niche audiences. In other words, rather than focusing on shows that have broad appeal, slivercasting focuses on content that appeals to a very specific set of viewers in order to tap into a small but untouched and potentially lucrative market. This strategy was not viable before the rise of streaming television, as TV networks could only broadcast one show or film on a channel at a time. Because networks were forced to put all of their eggs in one basket, executives would rarely take risks and instead relied on guaranteed hits, including genre staples like family sitcoms or reruns of formerly successful shows. But due to the popularization of streaming and video-on-demand services, both online-only content providers like Netflix, Hulu and Amazon, as well as an increasing number of traditional TV networks, now feature content available to viewers anytime through websites and apps. Anderson notes
that because media content can be stored and distributed digitally, it reduces the costs of providing a broad range of content to consumers (Napoli 58). In addition, for very little cost, providers can also access the growing number of cord cutters who have abandoned traditional TV services altogether. This dramatic cost-to-benefit ratio may explain HBO’s, Netflix’s, Hulu’s and Amazon’s rush to buy the rights to promising new content and fund the revivals of TV staples, like the 90’s reboot Fuller House. It only takes one viral hit like Game of Thrones or Breaking Bad to generate record profits; due to viewers increasing tendency to consume online content at their leisure, traditional TV networks can afford to gamble on new shows while still playing it safe by broadcasting their core lineup. This flexibility and willingness by networks to experiment certainly has contributed to what many have been calling the current “golden age” of TV (“TV’s Golden Age Is Real”).

These bold choices by TV networks have dramatically changed the media landscape and have caused a riot of speculation about what the future of entertainment may hold. For many years, Chris Anderson’s theories about the future of entertainment had critics convinced that video-on-demand services would revolutionize the scope of network and studio entertainment. Anderson coined his visualization of the supply-to-profit model—and consequently the supply-to-viewership model—as the “long tail hypothesis” (Napoli 58).
Fig. 1: Chris Anderson’s adaptation of the power law distribution for his “long tail hypothesis” (“The Long Tail”).

The long tail hypothesis follows the power law distribution, a traditional model for the sales curve (qtd. in Napoli 59). Like the power law distribution, Anderson’s model has a tall head, representing the small number of blockbuster hits, but it differs in that it has a dramatically long and skinny “tail” along the x-axis. This “long tail” represents the large number of niche shows and films that, individually, garner little support and attention. However, when taken as a whole, the tail itself is highly profitable, perhaps even rivaling the small but lucrative head that represents the top hits. Anderson defends his hypothesis, explaining,

Our culture and economy are increasingly shifting away from a focus on a relatively small number of hits (mainstream products and markets) at the head of the demand curve, and moving toward a huge number of niches in the tail. In this
era without the constraints of physical shelf space and other bottlenecks of distribution, narrowly targeted goods and services can be as economically attractive as mainstream fare. (qtd. in Napoli 52)

Anderson’s hypothesis challenges older economic models that put pressure on network executives to search for hits and guaranteed successes in order to generate profits. Napoli adds that the low cost and wide availability of digital storage, and the convenience and reliability of search tools that help users discover new content, online streaming has upended the entertainment profit curve (Napoli 61). Expounding upon Anderson’s claims, he notes that digital providers can be confident that the content that they create will generate some revenue, though the bulk of their revenue will still come from the most popular twenty percent of their entertainment offerings. As long as they can rely both on their top performers and on cost-efficient and reliable digital storage and search tools, providers face very little risk when investing in niche content. It also relieves the pressure for networks to gauge their audiences’ tastes accurately (61), allowing them to test the waters with innovative shows and then capitalize on their successes.

Anderson’s theories have far-reaching implications for entertainment that features minority casts and addresses minority-specific issues. If networks feel comfortable taking risks by investing in shows like *Master of None*, then they may eventually make more daring choices, such adapting Asian American literary staples for TV. Netflix’s popular adaptation of Jenny Han’s 2014 novel *To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before* shows that featuring widely popular genres, such as teen romance, with an Asian American protagonist can be just as popular as the same story featuring a white actress. If networks expand their offerings to more niche or experimental genres or controversial social
issues, they have little to lose and much to gain. If the show is panned, then they only lose their initial investment, rather than losing ad revenue from an unpopular series’ time slot for an entire season. But if their show is successful, or perhaps even goes viral, then they have the chance to tap into an enormous market of viewers, possibly even attracting additional subscribers to their online viewing platforms. And just as networks are poised to profit from broadening the scope of their productions, the success of Asian American narratives in mainstream entertainment will attract attention to Asian American writers whose books have been adapted. And more broadly, the increase in positive representations of Asian Americans on television will combat the stereotypes that Master’s “Indians on TV” demonstrated are still deeply embedded in mainstream entertainment.

Anderson’s ultimate belief is that video-on-demand will ultimately “fatten” the tail and shorten the head of entertainment offerings (61). Unfortunately, recent critics have argued that, in the decade since the publication of Anderson’s theory, his ideas have not panned out. Critics who have analyzed music and movie consumption have discovered that the tail is “becoming longer and flatter, rather than thickening”—indicating that niche content continues to be produced, but has not led to an increase in overall profitability through views or downloads (64). In fact, Anita Elberse, a professor at Harvard’s business school, concludes from her research that since Anderson published his research, “a diminishing number of different content options are accounting for the top 10 percent of sales…[which shows that] the importance of individual best sellers is not diminishing our time. It is growing”67 (Elberse 64). One of the major causes for the

---

67 See Elberse 92.
increasing profitability of a shrinking pool of hits has to do with the way viewers
discover content. Some researchers suggest that online recommendation systems like
Netflix’s, Google’s and Amazon’s complex proprietary search tools strongly factor
popularity into their results, contributing to the “bandwagon effect” which steers viewers
toward hits over niche content that might more accurately suit their interests (65-6).
Social media may also act as an additional recommendation system, as shows that reach a
critical tipping point for visibility, by trending on Twitter, for example, are rewarded with
a dramatic increase in viewers.

It is not a surprise that these ranking tools, both engineered and incidental, use
popularity as a key factor in their rankings. Their approach mirrors the pre-digital ways
that we socially interact; we share our personal preferences with others by word of
mouth, and when we receive repeated verbal recommendations, they strongly influence
our ultimate choices. However, by using popularity ranking in searches and steering users
toward hits, providers lessen the impact of the breadth of their digital collections. Not
only do they get less from their niche investments, they also contribute to the continued
narrative scarcity that digital tools have the potential to ameliorate. And in the worst
cases, it encourages content providers to invest less in their niche offerings and rely
instead on “recycling and repurposing” existing content, which we can see already in
other industries, such as “in media organizations’ increasing reliance on user-generated
content” over investigative journalism (69). In the area of entertainment, this tendency
may herald the return of reruns and less investment in innovative content. Shows that
push the envelope like Master or shows that threaten to attract online controversy may be
refused in favor of safer options, and failed shows like Margaret Cho’s *All-American Girl* may lead to the abandonment of entire genres of entertainment. Contrary to Anderson’s model, the use of automated curation systems may threatens TV’s golden age of innovative entertainment.

How, then, can viewers, particularly those in the Asian American community, fight for diversity in entertainment and encourage networks not only to host but also to actively advertise and feature content that reflects the lives and experiences of their communities? Critics like Ien Ang suggest that taking control of the way that audiences are defined and constructed is the only way to affect which shows are included and excluded from mainstream entertainment. Ang discusses the “disparity between the ‘real audience’—that is, actual individuals watching television, and their needs and interests—and ‘the audience’ as a creation of the industry that served or justified its needs and interests” (Ang ix). The television networks’ artificial division of its viewership into categories—such as the coveted 18-49 age demographic—is more of a convenient measure for advertisers than an accurate measure of the interests of a specific age group. Nevertheless, even though demographics like Nielsen are impractical for gauging viewer interest in a product or show, they are only widely used tool available to TV content producers and therefore exert strong influence on what shows are picked up by broadcasters. In response to the influence of metrics of audience interest, Ang cites Foucault to argue that “knowledge was one of the defining components of power, and that defining ‘the audience’ was actually about controlling it. A fundamental task in

---

68 See Patrick Ryan.
69 See Chapter Four.
70 See Sundet 12.
71 See Napoli 76.
television became, therefore, to ‘make an audience’” (Sundet 12). The same theory holds true for television in the digital age. Film and TV researcher Vilde Sundet adds,

In an age of media convergence, when television drama is increasingly produced for both a national and an international audience for consumption according to both “flow” and on-demand user modes, the simple act of “making an audience” is more than ever about exercising power. As such, the act of defining an audience—who to include and who to exclude—transcends the act of counting eyeballs. It is a question of politics, culture and economics. (24)

Throughout the history of television, broadcast companies have largely shaped their offerings to suit the needs of their advertisers first and their audiences second. These controversies continue today, even on internet-only spaces, such as when YouTube removes or demonetizes users’ videos because advertisers did not want their products paired with controversial content. YouTube content creators, who frequently rely on their own funding to produce videos, may lose out on the chance to make any money on a video if advertisers decide that they don’t want their products to appear alongside it. These restrictions may cause creators to opt for producing safe content rather than risk alienating advertisers.

These threats to creators, both in mainstream entertainment and online, only emphasize Ang’s argument about the importance of making an audience. Ang calls our attention to the power dynamics inherent in “making” an audience and the way that these power dynamics shape the politics, culture, and economics of our society. In order to shape what entertainment our society produces to fit how we see ourselves represented,

---

72 Traditional scheduled broadcasts.
73 See York.
we must wrest control of content away from advertisers and give it to viewers. Digital tools that allow viewers to directly respond to creators, like Twitter and other social media, can be used by viewers to shape more directly how shows are produced. But in addition to digital tools and likeminded writers and producers, content providers must be willing to give creators more creative leeway in terms of what they produce. By proving that viewers enjoy stories that address controversial social topics, successful pioneers like Master pave the way for broadcast networks and video-on-demand services to venture beyond traditional genres and safe, advertiser-friendly content. Master’s daring choices are one example of how the recent decade of television, in which networkers reaped benefits by taking greater risks than their peers in the film industry, have revolutionized contemporary entertainment.

The future of the Asian American sitcom, and minority representation on television in general, is still very much up in the air. Anderson’s long tail hypothesis underscored conditions that could enable the industry to embrace niche content, including shows that catered to minority issues. Unfortunately, over the past decade Anderson’s hypothesis has become less accurate as the industry has come to rely on a decreasing number of even bigger hits to sustain itself. The only alternative appears to be Ang’s suggestion that viewers wrest control of the industry’s concept of audience from the hands of advertisers. Through digital tools like social media, audiences can become more visible and vocal and make their demands heard by network producers. But only by witnessing the successes of mainstream minority narratives like Fresh off the Boat and experimental shows focused on cutting-edge social issues like Master of None are
networks likely to invest in promoting narrative diversity, respectful representations, and crucial social issues.
Breaking the Fourth Wall of Comic Reception:  
Affective Connections and the Writer-Reader Relationship

Before taking the stage for a standup performance in San Francisco in 2002, Margaret Cho reflected on her feelings about her performances. Cho specifically addresses the special type of connection that she made with her audience members through her comedy, confessing,

   It’s very moving to see so many people in my audience. It means a lot to me because I feel like I really identify with them, too, and we get a lot of comfort from each other. So I don’t think what I’m doing for some people is just entertainment. I think it’s a kind of way of feeling like we belong in the world. It’s a kind of inclusion and a way to feel validated. It’s really exciting. So I don’t take their support of me lightly. (Notorious)

For many viewers, standup comedy is a genre that by nature is meant to be taken lightly. Audience members offer an hour of their time to the comedian and allow him to poke fun at themselves and their society with the expectation that they will be repaid with laughter. Yet Cho suggests that her routines are not only simple entertainment, but also rather a medium for emotional exchange between herself and her viewers. Cho describes the act of performing standup comedy as creating feelings of inclusion and validation that stem from a sense of mutual identification. Somehow, through her act, she cultivates feelings of belonging that connect her to her viewers, and her viewers to each other. This nurturing act of comedy generates a temporary space of mutual positive feeling where individuals can reaffirm their social bonds to one another. Both Cho and her audience experience a sense of comfort along with the compulsion to laugh, and these sensations,
along with feelings of inclusion and affirmation, remain long after the duration of the performance.

Beyond the immediate surface level feel-good sensations of laughter there lies a deeper purpose behind our drive to joke and laugh with one another. In *Punchlines*, the psychologist Leon Rappoport discusses the history of stereotype humor in the United States and the way that jokes can exacerbate divisions along racial, cultural, gender and political lines. Cho’s idea of the mutual identification of comic performance disrupts traditional beliefs about comic performances as divisive and replaces them with the idea of humor as cultivating feelings of belonging. It also suggests that comedy has the potential to disrupt the normally strict boundaries that we draw between ourselves and others by temporarily turning outsiders into insiders through the process of telling jokes. When a comedian treats audience members as insiders and coaxes them through the joke to its punch line, this coaxing not only rewards them with laughter but also, through sharing positive feelings with others, encourages them to identify with the comedian and the audience members around them, at least temporarily. In Cho’s case, she shares her minority experiences through her routine; the empathetic feelings that she creates bridges the gaps of ethnicity and nationalism to unite her audience members. Through the exchange of mutual positive feelings, including belonging, understanding and acceptance, comedy can build social bonds rather than further divide society. These connections are not built through every comic routine, however, and social unification can only occur through development of a trusting and intimate comic-audience relationship.

Although Ozeki does not discuss issues of ethnicity and nationalism as explicitly as Cho, her 2013 novel *A Tale for the Time Being* approaches race from a transnational
and transgenerational perspective. *Tale* builds an unlikely relationship between its characters through the darkly humorous diary of Nao, a Japanese teenager, which mysteriously washes up on the shore a thousand miles away to be discovered by Ruth, a Japanese-Canadian writer. Like Cho, who shares her troubled experiences with her audience, Nao exposes her vulnerabilities to Ruth, who develops a deep attachment for her. This empathetic connection puts Ruth back in touch with her Japanese heritage and eventually allows her to literally transcend time and space in order to change the course of Nao’s life. Ruth and Nao’s special connection makes a case for the power of bonds forged through humor, which in the case of *Tale*, are quite literally supernatural in scope.

In this chapter, we will use the lenses of humor studies and affect theory to explore the ways that standup comedians and authors create intimate connections between their audience members and readers, respectively. When artists and audiences experience shared affective states, it disables the binary between performer and spectator and creates a lasting sense of sympathetic identification between everyone involved. The cultivation of feelings of identification and belonging are especially important for minority performers and authors and their audiences. Through standup performances like Margaret Cho’s, Asian American and queer audience members experience Cho replaying familiar experiences from their lives, including ones that have created negative feelings such as frustration or shame, in order to turn them on their heads to create positive feelings through exaggeration, ridicule or tongue-in-cheek observation. Audience members outside of groups can also experience pleasure by witnessing the comic’s transformation of unfamiliar experiences into familiar ones, when the comic either draws

74 For more on Asian American performance theory, see Karen Shimakawa’s *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage.*
relatable parallels between their experiences and hers, or when she familiarizes the audience with her experience through the joke’s narrative setup. Through these comic methods, minority experiences are affirmed and normalized, and negative experiences can be brought to light and processed in a socially supportive environment.

Like Margaret Cho’s comedy, Ruth Ozeki’s novel *The Tale for the Time Being* also illustrates deep emotional exchanges between artists and audiences. The bonds that Ozeki’s characters forge are so strong that they ultimately transcend space and time. Through an intersection of events magical, philosophical and supernatural, the novel obscures the divide between the production and consumption of the text. This allows the readers within the novel to also act as authors who can reshape the events and lives of others, even though they are separated by a decade of time and the space of the entire Pacific Ocean. The ability that the characters of Ozeki’s novel have to traverse the bounds of time and space can only be possible because of the strong affective bonds created between characters through the art of storytelling. In both of Cho and Ozeki’s cases, storytelling—whether through standup or through the written word—becomes a medium through which very different individuals can create deep emotional connections and achieve feats that they could not do as individuals.

**Humor Studies and Affect Theory**

Before jumping into exploring the texts themselves, it’s important to first discuss the fields of humor studies and affect theory, with a special focus on where these theories intersect. Combining these two fields lets us better understand the mechanics of

---

75 The field of humor studies focuses largely on debating the essence of comedy, and can be broken down into three lines of theory: the incongruity theory, superiority theory, and relief theory (See Medhurst and Mills). These theories include scholars such as Bakhtin, whose concept of the carnivalesque characterizes laughter as a liberating force (*see Rabelais*).
laughter and how comedy uses affective exchanges to generate emotional bonds between individuals. However, since humor studies theorists have devoted much work to the subject of how and why laughter is produced, this chapter will focus on how humor affects its audience and therefore will address humor largely from the perspective of its reception rather than its production. A key way to approach comic reception is to discuss the way that a joke is contextualized by the comedian and how the audience then unpacks the context of a joke in order to react with laughter when it arrives at its punchline. Media critic Inger-Lise Bore addresses the importance of context in the production of humor by discussing Brett Mills’s concept of cue theory, which explains how audiences distinguish a text as one marked by a “comedic modality.” Bore argues that cue theory indicates that texts are intended to be funny, but they are not “inherently funny.” When we recognize the comedic modality of a text, our impetus to laugh depends on a number of factors, including “our relationships with characters, our understanding of the narrative so far, our comprehension of cultural references…our tastes, our attitude toward the themes that are represented, our previous experiences with comedy, our moods, who we are watching it with, and so on” (Bore 5). Humor, on other words, is “embodied and performative” rather than innate and static. It depends both on the performance by the artist and the receptiveness of the audience.

These ideas account for the great variance in comic reception that Cho describes in an interview with Fashion Magazine. When asked what advice she would give to other aspiring women comedians, Cho explains that they must “be prepared for every type of experience…you can go from being applauded and getting standing ovations to almost

---

76 See Mills, *The Sitcom.*
being burned at the stake in the same night…the variance of audience reactions are so vast that there’s no way to judge if you’re good or not” ("All Hail"). Bore’s argument supports Cho’s opinion that her witch-burning experiences are not tied to flaws in her own comedy. Instead, when an audience recognizes the comedic modality of the performance, they expect to be rewarded with laughter, but if the performance fails to fulfill one of the many factors outlined in Bore’s list, it will fail to elicit laughter and cause the viewer to react with disappointment or perhaps even hostility. On the other hand, when Bore’s conditions are met, viewers feel amusement and therefore perceive the comic act as being inherently funny—an effect that Sara Ahmed observes in her theory of emotions (Cultural Politics 194). Ahmed reinforces Bore’s argument that a viewer’s perception of comedy is inexorably tied to the social and cultural background of the spectator. As a result, an “individual’s experiences of comedy are situated within an ‘affective economy’…of wider cultural discourses around what is funny and what isn’t, and within this environment our repetitive performances of amusement reinforce cultural norms by reproducing ‘past associations’” (Bore 5). In other words, individual preferences for comedy are inexorably tied to the individual’s preexisting cultural knowledge and identification. If we apply these claims to minority comedians, the initial comedians that debut from any group are likely to face pushback from audiences who are unfamiliar with their content and comic style. They may even resist associating members of that group with comedy altogether.77 Over time, however, successful repetitive exposure of audiences to minority comedians may create new norms that encourage them to accept minority performers in comic roles. Therefore, despite initial resistance, once

77 See Rappoport’s discussion of sympathetic and antagonistic humor and their representation or contradiction of stereotypes, Rappoport xi.
comediants from a minority group reach a critical mass of exposure over time, they are likely to become “naturalized” into the comic genre. We can see these theories in action when we trace the Asian American and Latinx comedians from the past two decades following in the steps of earlier black and Jewish comedians who have long since cemented their place in American comic history.  

Over time audiences largely become more comfortable with comedians from different racial groups and accept comic routines that expand what they perceive of as funny. But what is actually happening in these comic performances that dramatically alters what causes individuals to loosen up and laugh? These questions are key to understanding what comedians need to do to pave the way for cultural acceptance and the difficult work of altering cultural norms. One answer lies in the field of affect theory, an area of study pioneered by the work of critics including Sara Ahmed, Benjamin Anderson, Lauren Berlant, Lone Bertelsen, Anna Gibbs, Eve Sedgwick and Silvan Tomkins. Bertelsen summarizes the work of these theorists by denoting three different aspects of affect: affect as a “pre-personal” force, as emotion or feeling, and as the Spinozan “power to affect and be affected”—a “transitive” force where objects and people in the world affect the subject and the subject in turn affects the world and others around him (Bertelsen 140). This chapter takes advantage of the last two definitions of affect in Bertelsen’s summary in order to analyze how comedians and audiences transitively share in feeling through humor and laughter. Sara Ahmed and Silvan Tompkins support the idea of transitive affect and suggest that, for social creatures like us, affect can be particularly contagious. Therefore, comedians who are able to tap into

---

78 See Rappoport xiv.
79 See Genosko 158.
the positive affects experienced by members of their audiences can be confident that those good feelings will spread to their fellow viewers and, if they last long enough, may even carry from one performance to the next. Anna Gibbs describes affect and the feelings that it generates by using the metaphor of a disease: “bodies can catch feelings as easily as catch fire: affect leaps from one body to another, evoking tenderness, inciting shame, igniting rage, exciting fear…communicable affect can inflame nerves and muscles in a conflagration of every conceivable kind of passion” ("Happy Objects" 36). Humor, in particular, has been shown to be particularly contagious, and simply the act of witnessing someone else laughing can act as a strong impetus for laughter in others.\(^{80}\) For example, during his routine a comedian will sometimes single out a member of the audience to be the subject of a joke. Even though the rest of the audience is not the subject of the joke, the naturally occurring social bonds that exist between members of the audience may cause us to laugh as if we were the one under the comedian’s lens. The subject’s embarrassment may trigger feelings of discomfort, but when the comedian coaxes him into laughter, we laugh with relief and a feeling of shared joy. Not only is laughter easily shared between individuals; the experience of shared laughter is often greater than that of laughing alone because of the affective bonds that we create.\(^{81}\)

On the other hand, laughing alone, without the reassurance of others laughing around us, can paradoxically create feelings of self consciousness and isolation. These feelings have certainly contributed to the development of substitute laughter, such as the canned laughter common in sitcoms\(^{82}\) and the practice in Asia of including reaction shots

\(^{80}\) For more on the neuroscience of laughter, see Bergland.
\(^{81}\) See Bergland and Manninen.
\(^{82}\) See Michel for more scientific literature on laughter and human relationships.
of celebrities laughing during comedy shows in order to reassure the viewer that it is acceptable to laugh and to give him the cue that it is time to laugh. People crave the communal connection of shared affect through laughter; however, when we laugh alone, particularly when watching comedy through television or film when the comedian is not physically present, we may experience pleasure, but not as much as if we shared the humor with others and affirmed our social connections with one another.

The notion that affect is transitive and builds social bonds gives critical support to our reading of affect’s effects on audience reception. It also adds to our understanding of the importance of social context for the success of comedy. Through Margaret Cho’s standup comedy and storytelling, we will put these ideas into practice to discover how humor affirms and normalizes Asian American experiences through affective exchange. The structure of Cho’s routine, from its early jokes about lighthearted common experiences to its later discussion of moments of rejection and humiliation, demonstrates how comedy allows comedians and audiences to commiserate over painful emotional experiences. Ultimately, the raw emotional journey of Cho’s comedy creates the conditions for audiences to become vulnerable and forge sympathetic connections through shared feeling in a way that cannot ordinarily occur in other environments.

**Sharing Support and Solidarity in Margaret Cho’s *I’m the One That I Want***

Margaret Cho’s first officially recorded and distributed performance, *I’m the One That I Want* (2000), features Cho at the height of her standup career. Critics praised her performance and likened her to comedians like Richard Pryor, whom Cho deeply admired (Chan). As much as her standup elicits laughter, Cho’s routine also chronicles her failures, in particular her struggles with weight loss and the criticism and cancellation
of her sitcom *All American Girl* after one season in 1995. In addition to the comic mastery of her performance, Cho’s frank recounting of her struggles, failures and attempts to cope through alcohol and drugs humanizes her in the eyes of the audience through the course of her routine. The structure of Cho’s routine, her frank delivery, and her sympathetic audience combine to create the perfect conditions for affective exchange that allows viewers to partake in both shared laughter and communal mourning.

In the DVD extras, Cho discusses her experiences with audiences while touring across America performing *I’m the One That I Want*. Cho remarks that, no matter what city she visited, their reactions were the same, because “wherever I go the same people come to see me. It’s always the freaks…the trash…the gays…the Asians…the people of color…the alternative sex communities…the people who don’t hear their voice out there in the media. It feels like family to me, it always feels like hope to me” (*I’m the One That I Want*). Cho’s popularity grew from her position as a voice for marginalized communities, stemming from intersections between her race and her connections to the queer community through her bisexuality, her family’s bookstore at the center of San Francisco’s LGBT scene, her friendships with drag queens, and her participation in the city’s pride movement in the 1970s. Her unabashed embrace of marginalized communities and the solidarity she creates between them sets her apart from other comedians who use their comedy to push more overt political messages. Cho recalls the standing ovation she received when first performing *I’m the One That I Want* at a college campus and remarks, “I knew that I had hit upon a really good thing. It was like this perfect combination of what I was used to doing in standup and my new persona as this

---

kind of emotional shaman.” The DVD includes a series of clips of Cho’s audiences rising to their feet at the conclusion of her performance, visually reinforcing her claim. Cho’s self-stylization as an “emotional shaman” accurately summarizes the goal of her performance: to bring her audience along an emotional journey where they will laugh and rejoice, but also sympathize and mourn along with her. Cho, much like a Greek tragedy, intends her audience to receive a catharsis and emerge from the performance profoundly changed by the emotional journey.

*I’m the One That I Want* is structured by including comic imitations, slapstick, physical humor and other easy laughs at the beginning of the routine. But approximately a third of the way through the performance, Cho changes tactics to adopt longer, more serious narrative punctuated by comedic or tragicomic anecdotes. The beginning of the performance also gives a nod to the queer contingent in the audience. In one joke, Cho imitates her mother leaving a voicemail on her phone, simultaneously drawing on and undermining the trope of the nosy mother:

Are you gay? (Silence) Are you gay? (Silence) Pick up the phone. If you don’t pick up the phone, that mean you gay. Only gay screen call. You are gay. Why don’t you talk to mommy about it? You can talk to mommy about everything. You have cool mommy. Mommy is so cool. And mommy know all about the gay. I know all about the gay. They have so many gay—waah. So many gay in the all over. They have all over the world, so many gay all over the world. But not Korea, not Korea! But everywhere else, so many gay. You know I think you gay? When you born. Yeah, you born I was holding you, I was saying oh, she’s so
beautiful…what a dyke, what a big dyke. Yes, you are, you are so dykey, ah!

Maybe one day you will grow up to be PE teacher. (Margaret Cho)

Like many comedians, Cho adopts an accent when imitating her mother, but rather than using that to ridicule her or make her look foolish, her performance characterizes her mother as sweet and open-minded, though somewhat laughably traditional. For some of the audience, Cho's mother may bring back memories of their own mothers who struggled both to understand their queer identity and to get them to answer their phone calls. Cho's mother's insistence that her daughter can talk to her about anything is also a frequent refrain that queer members of the audience may have heard from their own parents, but the gesture often obscures the threat of judgment. However, Cho’s joke about her mother praising her newborn daughter as a lesbian takes away threats of judgment and rejection by caretakers. By subverting the trope of parents acting open-minded but ultimately insisting on their children’s gender conformity, Cho elicits laughter, even as her performance shows the limits of her mother’s understanding through her stereotypical association of lesbians and PE teachers. Cho portrays her mother as kind but realistic, open-minded but still old-fashioned, offering sort of relationship that the queer members of the audience may have wished to have with their own parents.

Cho’s opening segment is crucial to the success of her routine because it develops a strong affective connection between her and her audience. Her initial jokes loosen up her audience and put them in a frame of mind that makes them more receptive to laughter. And since her jokes directly resonate with the experiences of her audience, Cho establishes herself as an insider and builds feelings of trust and connection that lay the groundwork for her own emotional unburdening in the subsequent portion of her
performance. Since Cho has demonstrated that she understands her audience’s experiences, the audience is therefore willing to sympathize with Cho’s personal experiences.

A half an hour into the performance, Cho changes the routine, moving from jokes aimed at the queer community to a long narrative about her struggles during and after her sitcom *All-American Girl*, a storyline that continues to the end of the performance. While Cho’s initial routine focused on empathizing with the audience, now Cho expects the audience to empathize with her. As a result, her jokes change tone from the comic to tragicomic, with a comedic setup that precedes a heart-wrenching punchline. Cho recounts her interaction with the writer hired to transform Cho’s comedic act into sitcom material:

Gary was a nice guy. Gary took five minutes of my standup comedy and stretched it out to a half hour pilot about a rebellious daughter growing up in a conservative Korean household—when the real story was that I had moved back home after a brief stab at independence and I couldn’t even live in the house. I had to live in the basement because my father didn’t want to watch me come down off crystal meth. *Audience laughs and cheers.* Now that would’ve been a great sitcom. *More audience laughter, cheers, claps.*

Here, Cho does not let the gallows humor linger long. Her description of the quaint nature of *All-American Girl* jarringly contrasts to the reality of her situation where her father exiles her to the basement in order to hide the shame of her substance abuse. At first, the audience’s laughter to Cho’s situation is hesitant, though its presence suggests that some members of the audience sympathize with her plight or are familiar with her
desperation or drug habit. Cho backs off quickly and resolves her joke by reframing her disintegrating life as a sitcom, an idea that is absurd but also pokes fun at the artificiality of the genre to the satisfaction of the audience. Much of Cho’s audience is familiar with her comedic style and prepared for her frank performance, where no issue is taboo, and reacts positively to her confession and the gritty joke that encapsulates it.

Ten minutes later, Cho begins a humorous anecdote of the dramatic and dangerous weight loss journey that the network demanded she undertakes for *All-American Girl*. Cho recounts her boyfriend bringing over sugarless frozen yogurt, which she was forced to turn down due to her strict diet. When her boyfriend suggested they make out instead, Cho agreed, but recalls,

> So we’d make out, but the whole time I would just be eyeballing the yogurt. *Cho mimics holding her boyfriend while eyeing the yogurt with her tongue sticking out. The audience laughs.* And I lost weight through diet, through exercise, but mostly through fear. I was so scared and I lost a lot of weight really quickly and I got sick because I lost thirty pounds in two weeks. *Audience goes “oh.”*

The quick turn from humor to tragedy in Cho’s joke mimics her earlier juxtaposition of the quaint sitcom and the dark reality of her family life. Cho establishes the comedic image of her slavering over the yogurt and then undermines it with the cruel reality of her condition, the depth of her fears and the life-threatening consequences of her weight loss. This time, however, the audience does not laugh but lets out a deep, sympathetic sigh.

What has changed in the audience between these two jokes to account for the dramatic difference in their audible emotional reaction? One possibility is that more members of the audience have experienced the destructiveness of weight loss in comparison with drug...
addiction. However, if that were the case we might expect the audience’s reaction to Cho’s previous joke to be much more mixed than it sounded in the recording. Rather, it is more likely that, through the course of Cho’s storytelling, she has created a stronger emotional connection with her audience that has allowed them to identify with her plight. A similar reaction occurs later when Cho describes her reaction to a photographer at a photo shoot who demanded that she twist her waist and stick out her face to diminish the fullness of her figure and her double chin. Cho recalls, “Tears filled up in my eyes and rolled down my face and the makeup artist came and powdered over it.” A few in the audience laugh and quietly groan. The audience reacts to Cho’s humiliation with a sympathetic groan that validates Cho’s emotional pain, even as the photo shoot staff attempt to erase it by painting over it. Over the course of the performance, Cho’s jokes delve more and more deeply into dark humor, and the audience continues to react with compassion. Cho's sharing of jokes in the introduction of her routine enables the shared humanity that characterizes the rest of her show. By beginning with easy jokes customized for the tastes of the audience, Cho primes viewers for the affective exchange of dark, less easily received jokes drawn from the struggles and failures of her personal life.

Cho's emotional standup routine ends on a high note when she finally reveals to her audience the ways that she has come to resist the demands of the toxic entertainment industry. As if an anticipation of the Me Too movement, Cho shares how she was sexually assaulted by a director who offered to make her movies. When she reports that she immediately fired him the audience cheers in response. These cheers return at the very end of the routine when Cho discusses how she has given up on losing weight and
instead has decided to focus on herself. The audience immediately erupts into loud cheers that carry through through her exit offstage. It is an undeniably cathartic moment that accounts for the clips of the standing ovations that Cho received during her tour. Through Cho's routine we can see the seeds of future feminist social movements, including the backlash against unhealthy beauty standards in media and Me Too movement's wave of victims coming public with sexual assault allegations against celebrity actors, directors, CEOs, politicians and other highly influential men across America.

But long before these issues were publicly discussed, Cho's routine explores them in the shelter of standup comedy. Standup comedy like Cho's represents a safe space to explore contentious social issues because of its ability to facilitate sympathetic affective exchange between the performer and her audience. Philosopher and social theorist Brian Massumi addresses the importance of this exchange when he describes the affective excesses present in everyday experiences and the sense of possibility that affective connections bring to an individual's experience of his own life. Massumi argues that "this ever-present excess of potential relatedness can be seen as a dynamic core of living," or in other words "this means we can 'feel' beyond our capacities to adequately experience" (Massumi 36, Brown and Tucker 239).

Massumi’s, Brown’s and Tucker’s discussions of the affect of everyday experiences apply even more aptly to Cho's standup comedy. Life is characterized by a search for relatedness with others, and empathic affective exchange offers a way to connect with others and feel beyond our own personal experiences. This is one way to

---

84 In a recent 2018 performance in Taiwan, Cho directly addresses Me Too and the Trump era. See Windham.
85 For more on humor and sympathetic identification, see Wood 127.
understand the audience's quick sympathetic identification with Cho and their willingness to share feelings and mourn with her even though they may have never experienced struggles like hers. It is no surprise that the audience cheers loudly when Cho shares common experiences like the self-consciousness women feel about their weight and way they are forced to hide their feelings of inadequacy. But even when Cho shares her feelings about the pressure of celebrity and her neglectful upbringing, the audience still eagerly responds, validating her feelings. Because Cho has taken the time to affirm the experiences of her audience and create a personal connection with them, the audience rewards her with sympathetic responses to her struggles and cheers when she overcomes them. The supportive environment of Cho’s comedy contrasts with the ever-present atmosphere of critique present in our lives, from traditional media outlets like the newsroom to the hostile climate of online spaces, Cho's standup comedy cultivates an atmosphere of support and solidarity that enables an uncritical sharing of feeling across lines of race, gender, and class. This supportive atmosphere is something that we desperately need to build the social connections that seem ever more tenuous in modern society.

**Reading Feeling Across Time in Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being***

We've explored how Margaret Cho uses standup comedy to forge connections between herself and her audience, but it is important to note that these effects are not exclusive to the standup comedy genre. Ruth Ozeki's 2013 novel *A Tale for the Time Being* accomplishes the same task by creating connections between writers and readers both inside and outside of the text itself. Ozeki grounds her novel in theories about time, human connection, and the power of reading drawn from Marcel Proust's novel *In Search*
of Lost Time and the 13th century Soto Zen founder Dogen's series of texts, Shobogenzo.

These eastern and western philosophies destabilize the reader's expectations and set them up to accept events that challenge their ideas about the power of authorship, which allows Nao, a Japanese girl writing from the past, to forge an unlikely but powerful connection with her reader, Ruth, a novelist living on an island off of the coast of British Columbia in the future. Both characters struggle with the idea that connecting to another person across vast expanses of time and space is crazy or absurd, but Nao's dire circumstances force the two women to connect in order to change Nao's past and save her life. Tale's philosophy sets the stage for Nao and Ruth's intimate connection, and through it an exploration of the intimacy innate in the writer-reader relationship and the strong emotional connections that are built through storytelling.

Upon its publication, Tale won a number of awards, including the 2013 Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Fiction, and was largely met with praise, including The New York Times Book Review, which called it "a delightful yet sometimes harrowing novel" perhaps due to its focus on bullying and suicide (Lee). Pulitzer Prize-winning author Junot Díaz called the novel "bewitching, intelligent, hilarious, and heartbreaking, often on the same page" (qtd. in Ozeki). Fantasy writer Deborah Harkness noted that Ozeki's novel "proves that great stories—like this one—can both deepen our understanding of self and remind us of our shared humanity." In an interview with The New York Times, Ozeki admitted that it took five years to write the book, partly because of the grief she experienced after her mother's death from cancer (Lee). Soon after Ozeki handed the book to her editor in 2011, the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami hit Japan and she decided to throw out half the novel and rewrite it to reflect the tragedies experienced
Tale is also profoundly influenced by her experiences as a Zen Buddhist priest, which have lent the novel attributes that many readers describe as a Zen koan-like quality (*The Washington Post*). Her practice of Zen also has informed the way she structured the relationship between the novel's writers and readers. Ozeki has said that "the relationship between reader and writer is reciprocal in a way...We co-create each other. We are constantly emerging out of the relationship we have with others" (Lee). With this in mind, Ozeki's novel explores the relationship between writers and readers, specifically how their relationship changes the ways that the characters conceive of themselves and the ways that it dramatically alters the world around them.

*Tale* is a poignant novel whose tone shifts from silly to tragic, buoyed along by the ups and downs of the life of its teenage protagonist. The novel’s narration is split between two characters. The first is Nao, a sixteen-year-old Japanese American transplant who struggles to adjust to the dramatic changes in her life after her family moves from California to Tokyo. The second is Ruth, a novelist off the coast of British Columbia who lives on a rustic island with her husband Oliver and their cat Pesto. Ruth, a fictional stand-in for Ozeki, gains access to Nao's narrative when she finds the girl’s diary washed up on the shore of her hometown due to the force of the tsunami and the ocean’s gyres. But instead of opening the novel with Ruth’s discovery, Ozeki begins the book with Nao, who begins with a plucky “Hi!” to introduce herself to the reader. Nao’s initial introduction quickly diverges into dark territory as she speculates about what would happen if she deigned to talk to the greasy, nerdy salaryman sitting in the cafe near her, a dark fantasy that ends with her rape and murder in a local “love hotel.” In the

---

86 See Lee.
book’s introduction and throughout the rest of the novel, Nao fights mightily against being consumed by the tragedies in her life as she faces bullying by her friends, classmates, and strangers on the internet along with the death of her grandmother and suicide attempts by her father. Readers watch Nao’s life unfold as Ruth makes her way through the diary and slowly untangles what has happened to the girl. Later, on the same beach where she found Nao’s diary, Ruth miraculously finds the diary of Nao’s great uncle Haruki, a kamikaze pilot in World War II. Ruth finds a translator for the diary, mysteriously written in French, and discovers that Haruki was a pacifist forced into the war, who decided to crash his plane into the ocean rather than take American lives. When Ruth fears that Nao may have taken her own life, she reaches back through time in her dreams to convince Nao’s father to not commit suicide and instead rescue his daughter from ending her own life. She also delivers the diary back to Nao’s family, where Nao later discovers it and finds inspiration and a will to live due to her uncle’s bravery and determination. The novel ends with Ruth writing back to Nao, mirroring the language of the book’s opening and closing the loop of the novel’s journey through time and back again.

The alternating humor and tragedy of Nao’s story create an urge of anticipation for Ruth and the novel’s readers. Nao admits obliquely that she does not expect to live long from the very beginning of her narrative; yet, as we become more invested in her life, the idea of her inevitable death becomes increasingly distressing and her recurring dark jokes about her sexual exploitation and suicide plans become ever more emotionally affecting. As in Cho’s comedy, the personal relationship that we develop with Nao while learning about her life and sharing in her jokes primes us for a full emotional appreciation
of her feelings of sorrow, loss and hopelessness throughout the course of her diary. Because Nao’s humor tempers us, we are able to relate with deeper emotional intimacy than if Ozeki had plunged us into Nao’s tragic life without including bittersweet jokes. Humor paves the way for readers to join Nao on her emotional journey to the brink of suicide and then from there to a place of peace and reconciliation with her family and life purpose.

To give support to its intense emotional journey, Ozeki connects her novel to the philosophies of 20th century novelist Marcel Proust and the 13th century Zen Buddhist priest Dogen. Ozeki avoids justifying her choice to read the philosophies of writers seven hundred years apart by eliciting Dogen's argument about the interconnectedness of humanity throughout time. Ozeki first introduces us to Dogen through Ruth's research, where she summarizes his notions of the nature of time: "time itself is a being, he wrote, and all being is time...In essence, everything in the entire universe is intimately linked with each other as moments in time, continuous and separate" (Ozeki 30). Dogen's theory of time establishes the idea of mutual connections between individuals, or even objects, throughout space and time. Ruth at first finds Dogen's ideas frustratingly opaque, but her grasp of his philosophy begins to develop as Ruth discovers connections between her world and Nao's. Some of these connections are physical and obvious, such as the meaningful objects shared between the women. For example, Nao and Haruki #1's diaries miraculously wash up onto Ruth's island, and Ruth's house is haunted by a Japanese "jungle crow" while her cat mysteriously disappears without a trace. At the end of the book, while in a dream Ruth crosses into Nao's past and returns Haruki's diary to her, changing Nao's future in the process. These objects demonstrate Dogen's ideas of
interconnectedness of the universe. But rather than the physical and overtly magical elements of the novel, the story's development of the emotional connection between the two women is what really drives the plot and propels Ruth into her dream journey to save Nao's life. Ultimately, we can read these acts as demonstrations of the power of storytelling, fueled by emotional connection, resulting in the development of solidarity between disparate individuals over space and time.

Later in the novel, Ozeki’s novel uses Proust to apply Dogen's theories of time and interconnectivity to the connections between readers and writers made through the medium of the text. At the beginning of part two of the novel, Ozeki quotes Proust:

*In reality, every reader, while he is reading, is the reader of his own self. The writer's work is merely a kind of optical instrument, which he offers to the reader to permit him to discern what, without the book, he would perhaps have never seen in himself. The reader's recognition in his own self of what the book says is the proof of its truth.*

(109)

On the surface, Proust's quotation seems to work against the idea that texts connect readers and writers. He suggests that the aim of reading a text is not to discern the nature of its writer, but to turn the lens of introspection on oneself, using the text to discern aspects of the self that would not otherwise appear. But if we extend Proust’s ideas and the contents of the book happen to mirror the thoughts and feelings of the reader, it suggests that both writer and reader share common experiences and a kinship of feeling. Even though the reader cannot be expected to "read" the writer through the text, the writer is able to connect with the reader by recreating his or her feelings or experiences and hoping that the reader can relate to those experiences. Nao echoes this desire at the
opening of the book, which is also the beginning of her diary, when she explicitly says that she wonders about the reader, and assumes that the reader wonders about her, too. Her guesses, that the reader is in a New York subway car, a hot tub in Sunnyvale, California, a beach in Phuket or a spa in Abu Dhabi are attempts to fish around for a point of connection with her invisible future reader (1). If Nao succeeds in connecting with her reader on a deeper level, Proust claims that her book will represent a sort of fundamental truth, albeit a subjective rather than an objective truth—a claim comparable to Dogen's belief in the fundamental interconnectedness of people in the universe. When a reader is able to use a text to self-reflect and discover something about himself, the sort of truth that it embodies is the realization of a deep human connection, one that the novel depicts as strong enough to negate the barriers of space and time.

Nevertheless, readers may resist these unusual philosophies about interconnectedness, and even the characters themselves are hesitant to accept the idea that texts can facilitate connections that defy the conventions of reality. At first, Ruth labels Nao's diary an "improbable text" and considers her claim to have "written it just for her" to be "absurd" (38). However, Ruth decides to "go along with the conceit" because, as a reader, "it was the least she could do." The tone of Ruth's reflection reflects her emotional distance from Nao, the writer, and her decision to play along with Nao's gesture suggests a feeling of obligation as a reader rather than a willing embrace of the writer's perspective. But by the time Ruth nears the end of the diary, her relationship with Nao has completely changed. When she reads about Nao and her father's intentions to commit suicide and receives information from Nao's father's former colleague about the tragic history of the family, she passionately writes back to try to set the record straight and
plans to take immediate steps to prevent their suicides. When her husband Oliver steps in and reminds her that the events of the diary took place over a decade ago, Ruth's sense of reality is shattered and she teeters as if her world itself is tipping. Ruth reflects,

It wasn't that she'd forgotten, exactly. The problem was more a kind of slippage. When she was writing a novel, living deeply inside a fictional world, the days got jumbled together, and entire weeks or months or even years would yield to the ebb and flow of the dream…Fiction had its own time and logic. That was its power. But the email she'd written to the professor was not fiction. It was real, as real as the diary. (313-4)

Ruth feels the same sense of distortion—of the shrinking of time and the disappearance of the boundaries between fiction and reality—that occurs when she acts as a writer, but this time she experiences these distortions from a reading perspective. What disturbs her is that her email correspondence with the professor, ordinarily nonfiction, has now been tainted by her exposure to the reality-altering events of the diary. Her determination to save Nao from committing suicide is temporarily quelled when she has to face the harsh reality that the events of Nao's life have already been long resolved, since the events of Nao's life in her diary are long past. Because of the relationship that has developed between Nao and Ruth through the diary, Ruth struggles to accept her reader's role as simply a recipient of the text, as Proust suggests. Instead, Ruth desires to react rather than just receive and to take on Nao's role as an author, and thus to alter the grim conclusion to Nao's life. Because of Ruth's history as an author and her past experiences of exiting reality through her writing, Ruth is able to reach back through time and alter events that allow Nao to be reunified with her father, preventing both of their suicides. Ruth's
openmindedness about the blending of reality and fiction is what allows her to flip roles from reader to writer and make authorial changes to the text of Nao's life.

Ruth's ability to change from reader to author coincides with Nao's crisis of faith at the end of her diary. Earlier, Ruth has reacted with skepticism to Nao's initial claim that she was writing for her; later, Nao rejects her own decision to write to her reader along, renouncing her hope of connecting with another person. At the very end of her diary, Nao writes,

I know this is stupid. I know you don't exist and no one is ever going to read this…The fact is, you're a lie. You're just another stupid story I made up out of thin air because I was lonely and needed someone to spill my guts to. I wasn't ready to die yet and I needed a raison d'etre. I shouldn't be mad at you, but I am! Because you're letting me down, too…I should have known better. I knew when I started my diary that I couldn't keep it up, because in my heart of hearts, I never believed in your existence. How could I? Everyone I believed in is dying…and now I don't even believe in myself anymore. I don't believe I exist, and soon I won't. I am a time being about to expire. (340)

Nao's loss of faith in her reader stems from her anticipation of the loss of her loved ones, and it ultimately causes her to lose her own sense of life purpose. But Nao's loss of faith is important because it entails not only a failure to create emotional connections with others, but also a complete erasure of others from the world. It is not coincidental that Nao admitting that she doesn't believe in the existence of her reader is directly paired with her refusal to believe in her own existence, which fuels her anticipated self-erasure through suicide. Ruth never meets Nao directly, not even through her dream, and so if
Nao gives up writing her diary, for all intents and purposes, she ceases to exist for Ruth and for the novel's readers. Additionally, the reason Nao has survived to write her diary is because writing is her raison d'être. At the beginning of the diary she intends to use the book to write down her grandmother Jiko's life story, but ultimately she writes down her own tragic life story instead. Nao mourns that she has failed in both respects, which undermines the last reason she found to live. Because of Nao's loss of faith in her role as a writer and the anticipated loss of her loved ones, she decides that her life must end in suicide. When Ruth arrives at this point in Nao's story, she subsequently discovers that the diary abruptly ends with a surplus of blank pages when she had been sure that before this point the book had writing right up to the final page. Nao's decision to end her life alters reality by literally erasing her from the final pages of her diary. By admitting failing as a writer, Nao gives up her authorial role and leaves her readers with nothing but silence.

But when Nao retreats as a writer, Ruth steps in and takes her place, assuming the role of author and writing herself into Nao's past. Through her dreams, Ruth finds Nao's father on a park bench, waiting to for his suicide partner, and tells him about Nao's location and her plans to commit suicide. She also returns Haruki #1's lost diary to his altar before the conclusion of the dream. Due to these events, Nao's father decides against taking his own life and rushes to find Nao before she commits suicide. Later, because Ruth has returned Haruki's diary, Nao eventually discovers her great uncle's brave decision to steer his plane into the sea rather than an enemy ship when forced to become suicide pilot. By reading Haruki's diary, Nao adopts the reader's role, which Ruth once had taken, and develops a similarly deep emotional connection with her uncle through the
medium of the text. As a result, Nao discovers a new purpose in living and new ways to achieve agency as a reader rather than just a writer. Upon waking, Ruth miraculously finds the blank pages of Nao's diary have been filled with writing; because of her supernatural intercession, Nao's future has been restored. Ruth's surprise at the discovery brings back the residual resistance created when readers struggle against the novel's view of the expansive power and agential act of reading. Ruth muses,

Surely a reader was not capable of this bizarre kind of conjuration, pulling words from the void? But apparently she had done just that, or else she was crazy. Or else…

Together we'll make magic…

Who had conjured whom?…

Was she the dream? Was Nao the one writing her into being? Agency is a tricky business…Maybe she was as absent as her name indicated, a homeless and ghostly composite of words that the girl had assembled. (392)

Ruth echoes the words that Nao wrote at the beginning of her diary describing the connection she desired to create between herself and her imagined reader. Ruth's reality-changing dream certainly appears magical, especially in its ability to conjure words on the pages of the diary like a magic trick. However, Ozeki's novel does not focus primarily on theatrical magical happenings, but instead on the magic that occurs when writers and readers connect through a textual medium. Ruth and Nao only exist for one another because of the interconnecting text of the diary, which itself is unstable because both women engage in the roles of writers and readers, erasing and rewriting words on its pages. Ruth's perception of the slippage of agency brings up a hint of the same existential fears that Nao faced when she felt that her purpose and existence was under threat. The
novel never resolves these hints of the dangers of being a writer or reader, but these threats are unsurprising threat if we consider the vast power wielded by its writers and readers. As readers ourselves, we must struggle with the same questions regarding our relationship to Ozeki's novel and the role of reading and writing more generally. How do texts shape our perceptions of ourselves and connect us to others? Can we, in turn, become textual producers to connect and affect our own readers? And how can we use these emotional and agential powers to improve our own lives and the lives of others?

To address how to do so as a reader, we must refer to the scene where Nao and her grandmother Jiko first talk about the remains of her uncle Haruki that are enshrined in Jiko's temple. Nao anticipates something special inside the box of remains, but she finds it empty, and when she shakes it upside-down, she only finds a small slip of paper with the word "遺骨" or "ikotsu—remains" written on it (247-8). Jiko explains that when the Japanese Naval Authority could not retrieve a soldier's body, they sent a box with a piece of paper in order to avoid sending an empty box to his family. Jiko recounts,

"I opened it just like you did," she said. "And just like that, the paper fell out. I was so surprised! I read it and then I laughed and laughed. Ema and Suga were in the room with me. They thought I had gone crazy with grief, but they didn't understand…To a writer, this is so funny. To send a word, instead of a body! Haruki was a writer. He would have understood. If he had been there, he would have laughed, too, and for a moment that's what it felt like, like he was there with me and we were laughing together." (248)

Although Jiko recounts a scene that begins with a tragedy, the loss of her son, the moment is unintentionally transformed into an act of bonding through the appearance of
an unanticipated text. Jiko's laughter, which her daughters mistakenly interpret as an expression of shock and mourning, is instead a reaction to the absurdity of the situation. Rather than a moment of grief, Jiko experiences a communion of shared feeling with her dead son about the ridiculousness of the paper and its remoteness from what it attempts to signify. For Jiko the text, even though it is just a simple word, brings up such strong feelings and memories that for a moment it feels as if her son is there with her, laughing. The one-word text implies an absence—of a body, and of Haruki’s diary, which we as readers know exists. Jiko and Haruki, both writers themselves, recognize this absence and in its place fill the void with their own authorial response of laughter to make up for what the emotionless slip of paper lacks. The slip of paper reshapes Jiko's reception of Haruki's death, helping her move from mourning to laughter and acceptance. It also gives her the chance to experience a moment of emotion that reconnects her to her son one last time.

Although we never get to see Jiko as a writer—the power in Ruth's house inconveniently fails before Ruth is able to retrieve an article about her—we know that her life as a monk and feminist writer\(^7\) has undoubtedly shaped the lives of others.

We can address these same questions as writers by stepping back and examining Ozeki’s and Cho's texts and performances as a whole. Ozeki and Cho both address the affective exchange and eventual emotional connections that develop between writers and readers, performers and audience members. The stories that they share are meant to create at least a temporary bond between the producers and receivers, and these shared emotional experiences help both sides contend with powerful negative emotions including fear, humiliation, abandonment and loss. However, their experiences of

---

\(^7\) For more on Jiko and the Japanese feminist “I-novel” see Ozeki 149-150.
negative affect are balanced with positive, supportive feelings associated with the relationship, including the sense of inclusion and validation of mutual feeling. These shared feelings of pain and acceptance ultimately lead to a relationship characterized by trust, acceptance and belonging, even if this relationship only lasts for the length of the text or the duration of the performance. Cho's earlier term "emotional shaman" provides an excellent metaphor for the role of the producer: she represents an individual who can channel and mediate negative but necessary affective experiences for her audience. Ozeki and Cho address social isolation through the lenses of bullying and fat-shaming, respectively. By sharing troubled stories about themselves or their characters, they connect with audience members who have experienced similar hardships. Both producers then create a remedy for isolation through storytelling by building an empathetic social connection with their audience. By communing over common emotional experience through storytelling, both producers and receivers can explore denied or repressed parts of themselves in a safe and supportive space.

It may be hard to believe that such deeply resonant emotions can occur in the brief, makeshift relationship between comic and audience. But Cho and Ozeki go beyond temporary entertainment, and to create a deep and enduring imaginary community. Compared to traditional communities that are shaped by ethnicity, culture or geography, imagined communities, as historian Benjamin Anderson calls them, are socially constructed groups created by people who perceive themselves as part of the group (Anderson). Anderson applies the term to his reading of national identity, but we can also use it ourselves to describe the audience that Cho and Ozeki create through humor. Cho’s standup creates a community that transcends race and sexual preference. Cho's devoted
attendees ecstatically praise her and sometimes even memorize and recite her punch lines, reiterating the inclusionary spirit of her jokes. Some of Cho’s audience are even compelled to return to Cho's performances to refresh and renew their relationship with her community. In comparison, Ozeki’s novel creates a community for her characters that transcends nation and generation. Ruth and Nao’s emotional connection is so radical that they breach barriers of language, culture, time and space. Their affiliation creates an environment where the characters can safely explore troubling issues such as Japan’s relationship to its violent imperial past, the relationship between Japanese-Americans and their heritage,\(^88\) and the breakdown of traditional Japanese communities and their replacement with toxic digital equivalents. Nao's relationship with Jiko and her adoption of Zen Buddhist practices shows the power of traditional Japanese communities and gives Nao an escape from internet bullying. But Jiko's death suggests that these communities are dying out and must be replaced with something else. Nao and Ruth’s connection shows that imagined communities, in their case through writing and reading, can be a substitute for Japan’s lost community bonds. Although they work in different genres, both Ozeki and Cho’s works underscore the power of the affective connections within imagined communities to intimately connect disparate lives through storytelling and performance.

These relationship-building acts have the potential to create a stronger sense of community and solidarity between different groups. Psychologist and humor theorist Leon Rappoport discusses how humor lets us address and amend our unmentionable differences, writing, "humor allows us to suspend or rise above reality. This is no small

\(^{88}\) Ruth’s reconnection with contemporary Japan through Nao’s diary suggests that we can read Tale as a return narrative. See Chu’s Where I Have Never Been.
thing, since social and emotional group differences are largely unmentionable, locked out of polite society. Humor opens them up" (Rappoport xii-xiii). Humor helps us recognize our differences instead of minimizing them or denying our assumptions and prejudices. In the supportive environment of comedy, we can put our beliefs out in the open and allow ourselves to be corrected, we can learn about the differences and similarities between each other, and we can use our new understandings about our commonalities to build relationships with one another and work toward achieving our common goals. These achievements are possible in the unique environment of comedy because it enables us to be vulnerable without fear of attack or rejection and soothes our reexploration of negative experiences with the balm of positive feelings and mutual laughter.
Bibliography


Cassinelli, Sarah M. “‘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* 3.17 (2008): 131-144. JSTOR. Web. 15 August 2018.


*Empire*. Fox. WTTG-TV, Washington, DC, 2015-. Television.


Fresh Off the Boat. ABC. WJLA-TV, Washington, DC, 2015-. Television.


—. “Pilot.” 4 February 2015.


—. “So Chineez.” 21 April 2015.

—. “Success Perm.” 10 February 2015.


“Master of None.” IMDB. Web. 9 August 2018.


—. “Finale.” 6 November 2015.


—. “Indians on TV.” 6 November 2016.

—. “Ladies and Gentlemen.” 6 November 2015.

—. “Parents.” 6 November 2015.


Ryan, Patrick. “Now is prime time for dialogue about Asians on TV.” *USA Today* 17 November 2015: 02D. Print.


Willmore, Alison. “The ‘90s Asian Sitcom That Shows How Far We Haven’t Come.”


Windham, Te’Quin. “Margaret Cho’s exclusive interview with Taiwan News, part two.”


Wolff, Carlo. “Meanwhile, Back in the Philippines… ‘Fashion Terrorism’ with Filipino Flair Alex Gilvarry’s Sparkling Debut: Deadly Serious, Laugh-out-loud Funny.”

*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* 19 February 2012: B5. Print.


