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Asian/American Bodies in Extremis: Gendering Power, Pleasure, and Nation through "Spectacular" Excess

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Asian/American Bodies in Extremis: Gendering Power, Pleasure, and Nation through “Spectacular” Excess

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

by

Melissa Garcia Knoll

September 2012

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Asian/American Bodies in Extremis: Gendering Power, Pleasure, and Nation through “Spectacular” Excess

by

Melissa Garcia Knoll

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Dr. Traise Yamamoto, Chairperson

As a cross-genre study, this project centralizes performances of physical excess, putting genre theory in conversation with Asian/American critical race discourses to articulate the specific knowledges produced by film, stand-up comedy, theatre, and sports. Considering figures such as Annabel Chong, Margaret Cho, and Manny Pacquiao from within the discourses of gender and nation, I investigate how the Asian/American body in extremis speaks and is spoken, and how Asian/American subjects use both sexuality and violence to construct subjectivity in spite of and through their determined bodies. In chapter 1, I perform close readings of filmic representations of sexual excess to evaluate the possibilities and pitfalls of prioritizing sexuality as a strategy of hegemonic resistance. Chapter 2 furthers the discussion by illustrating how Margaret Cho masterfully stages her body, embracing its abjection to transform it into a source of
pride and making comedy a vehicle for productive coalition building. The final half of the dissertation marries the aforementioned discussion to postcolonial theory in order to focus on the Philippine body and the cultural labor it is made to perform within the American cultural imaginary. Chapter 3 provides close readings of Jessica Hagedorn’s play *Dogeaters* to show how the languages of romance and desire function to rationalize the logic of colonialism, while Chapter 4 illustrates how vestiges of colonial discourse continue to inflect the heroic mythos of international boxing superstar, Manny Pacquiao.
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Introduction

This dissertation project seeks to put genre theory in conversation with Asian American body politics in order to show how genre mediates the kinds of cultural meanings that are produced about body, gender, and nation. Genre theory is a useful critical tool because it articulates how meaning is produced. A tool of categorization, genre helps us structure ways of creating, interpreting and using the knowledge conveyed in a text. Since genre is central to knowledge production, it also implicitly codes value systems embedded through genre. Thus, looking at a text through the lens of genre is useful because doing so illustrates what kind of social labor a text performs and the ideological agendas that the text addresses.

If transmission of meaning is predicated on genre, then a nuanced understanding of how genre conventions function can help instructors create more effective learning modules. This project seeks to provide such a model. What is accomplished in theatre that is not possible in film? How is stand up comedy a particularly useful tool for political practice? What can a study of pornography offer to the conversation on Asian/American body politics? How does sports theory articulate the cultural labor that boxers perform for the body politic? Foregrounding genre will illustrate the kinds of cultural meanings that each genre is best able to convey. Additionally, my hope is that looking at texts that explore Asian American body politics through the lens of genre will offer new approaches, insights, and critical questions to Asian American literary studies. All of the texts reviewed centralize the theme of body politics as it speaks to
Asian/Americans. Furthermore, the genres under review will be predicated on the notion of embodiment as well. Film, stand-up comedy, theatre, and sports center on performances of living bodies, and these four genres will make up the basis of this study. The first two chapters consider the genres of film and stand-up comedy to interrogate the discourses of gender and nation, and the final two chapters utilize these theoretical lenses to focus on the Philippine body and its function within the genres of theatre and sport.

Chapter 1

Part of the cultural labor of film is to perpetuate the cultural myths of the dominant class, both in terms of the local and the international. Additionally, film works to police the boundaries of the nation-state’s imagined racial identity through its portrayal of raced bodies. Thus, it is noteworthy that in film, Asian/American bodies represent the inassimilable other—foreigners and immigrants. Representations of Asian/Americans as perpetual aliens speak to the role that Asian bodies play in the American imaginary. Therefore, it is clear that the film industry is entwined with the legacy of racist depictions of Asian/Americans in dominant culture as well as the cultural narratives that undergird colonialism (Feng 8).

Film has functioned as a political tool to rationalize imperialistic expansion abroad as well as to perpetuate notions of white superiority within the domestic space of the nation-state. For instance, the films that created public support for the Spanish-American War depicted Asians as racial inferiors that would benefit from US rule. In addition to undergirding narratives that rationalize US imperialist expansion, film also
depicts Asian bodies in order to perpetuate notions of Western cultural superiority. This is made most obvious in films depicting romances between Asian women and white men. In such films, Asian women embody one of two stereotypes—the passive Lotus Blossom who lives to serve white men, or the voracious, predatory Dragon Lady. In either case, the desire between the white male protagonist and the Asian woman serves to iterate the cultural superiority of the West over the East. As the Asian woman chooses the white man over his Asian rivals, she semiotically underscores her white lover’s privilege and entitlement. Possession of her Asian body filmically underscores another act of Western dominance over the East. The subjectivity of Asian/American women is determined through representations of female hypersexualization in film. As such, feminist film makers engage with this tradition to reclaim images of hypersexuality, manipulating them to signify in terms of empowerment rather than abjection. This chapter articulates the stakes of deploying images of hypersexuality in terms of its possibilities and pitfalls. While the strategy can serve to reclaim the sexuality of Asian/American women, using hypersexuality as a liberatory platform can also contribute to racist politics.

The pornographic documentary *World’s Biggest Gangbang* is fraught with tension between its explicit and implicit messages. Annabel Chong, the main performer and creator of the event, claims that she orchestrated the event in order to expose and explode the social conventions that restrict her freedom and determine her subjectivity, but the very text of *World’s Biggest Gangbang* punctures the possibility of feminist empowerment. Referencing the filmic history of hypersexual Asian women in representation, this section unpacks Chong’s methodology, revealing the factors that
undermine her feminist intent. However, close reading *Sex: The Annabel Chong Story*, the documentary chronicling the aftermath of *World’s Biggest Gangbang*, complicates this narrative by reading her project as a productive failure, illustrating how pornography and feminism can work together in surprising ways.

Films that provide counter-narratives through sexual discourses are also central to this project. Helen Lee’s *Sally’s Beauty Spot* uses images of hypersexuality to illustrate how racist filmic traditions continue to determine the subjectivity of Asian/American women. Using images and moments from *The World of Suzie Wong*, Lee manipulates filmic technique and technology to undermine the scopic pleasure of the audience, creating new knowledges and possibilities by using sex to signify in terms of liberatory feminist empowerment. Celine Shimizu’s films explore how cultural trauma is written on the body, using the language of sex to externalize the psychological traumas of loss of home, lack of place, and hunger for memory. *Mahal Means Love and Expensive* explores how female native subjects can negotiate the cultural trauma of colonial history through their sexual bodies. This text is useful because Shimizu very consciously deploys the structure of film to show how the bodies of women make colonial trauma visible. Both films find interconnections within multiple languages, those of artistic production, sexual performance, and filmic convention. All three languages are used to voice counternarratives that open up spaces of agency, not despite sexual objectification, but through it.
Chapter 2

In the genre of stand-up comedy, the barrier between performer and spectating audience is much more tenuous, intensifying the intimate sharing that happens in the performative space. Stand up comedy is also a physically produced art, but since the comedian is both writer and actor, the connection between the artist and audience is even more intense. Furthermore, the comedian is the sole focal point of the audience for a lengthy and sustained period of time. Additionally, sets are minimal to nonexistent, further focusing the audience’s gaze on the comedian. As such, audience reaction is even more important. The comedian directly addresses the audience, and the way the audience responds to the performer/writer directly affects the flow of the show. I will discuss how stand up comedian Margaret Cho uses this genre as a productive political platform from which to construct empowering subjectivities for queer and raced subjects.

In this chapter, I will extend my discussion to abjection and shame to illustrate how the genre of stand up comedy is uniquely suited for political activism. Margaret Cho deploys the intimacy between herself and the audience within the space of the comedy club for political purpose. Her performances of race are purposefully hyperbolic and aimed at provoking audience laughter. This laughter can be transformative and politically powerful. Through shared laughter, she creates an accord and very directly calls on the audience to recognize that race is a performance. Furthermore, her sexual discourse can be deemed as a signifier of “excess” and this very excess of information is
also political. Performances of excess through a racialized body underscore the stereotype’s inability to contain that body. The actor exceeds the limitations of the stereotype, thus dismantling it and revealing the social anxieties that produced it. The audience’s productive laughter in response to this “excessive” discourse elevates it from passive viewers to active participants in Cho’s political discourse.

Chapter 3

The conventions of theatre have much in common with those of stand-up comedy. Theatre is a dramatic art that relies on inducing an emotional impact. Additionally, both rely on the physical senses, as both are consumed in the shared space of the theatre or comedy club. Theatre can effectively bridge political activism and dramatic art through the way the spectating audience is mediated. Because drama is an immediate, physically produced art, the playwrights can connect with their audiences more intimately than other fiction writers, such as novelists and poets, who are more detached from their audience. Additionally, drama is a continuous art in that the audience consumes the play at the pace the playwright and acting company set. The audience cannot linger, halt the action, or re-experience past scenes. Lastly, drama is a spectator art, so audience reaction is critical and significantly affects the produced art. Unlike poets and novelists who rarely, if ever, alter their writing in response to audience reaction, playwrights often revise their work in rehearsal, after opening reviews, or even later if they find more effective ways to convey meaning or induce the desired response from the audience. These factors make the common space of the theatre a shared discursive space as well. Playwrights and theatre
companies create meaning in a way that includes the audience, and thus the audience becomes critical to the production of the art.

This chapter considers how Jessica Hagedorn melds the genres of soap opera and theatre in a postmodern pastiche to narrativize the terror during the Marcos era in her play *Dogeaters*. Hagedorn’s novel of the same name has garnered much well-deserved critical attention, and the conversations spurred by the novel will inform my study. However, considering the central themes of gender, nation, and the body in terms of theatre foregrounds notions of spectatorship, opening up questions regarding audience involvement and accountability. How does experiencing the text’s content in real time and from within the shared space of the theatre press on notions of audience accountability? The analysis privileges scenes unique to the play dealing with Asian women and the sexual body. The battered bodies of women in the play speak to notions of gender, nation, and the political relationship between the United States and the Philippines. How does Tiffany Lopez’s notion of critical witnessing impact the political effect of these scenes? Looking at the play through the lens of genre will help unpack these ideas further as well as open up new areas of investigation.

Chapter 4

The racial politics of sports is gaining more political attention. Decisions regarding who plays as well as how the sport is played are inflected by the notion of nation, as sports are used to police what is considered American and who deserves enfranchisement. Thus, sports are a tool for advocating American democracy by
focusing on fair play, democratic teamwork, and solid work ethic. Sports theorists such as Patrick Miller and Charles Ross have articulated how sports help create a sense of community among African Americans, thus inspiring spaces of empowerment and racial pride. The discourse on sports theory in race politics seems to center around African Americans and how the desegregation of sports is part and parcel of the civil rights movement and the growing empowerment of the African American class. This chapter extends this discussion by considering how Asian men in the sporting world signify both similarly and differently, investigating how Philippine masculinity is figured within the American cultural imaginary. By close reading discourses of heroism surrounding Philippines boxing superstar Manny Pacquiao, I will articulate the kind of cultural labor his body is called upon to perform, as well as how he masterfully manipulates his mediation to construct and protect subjectivity. The world of sports is a gendered one dominated by men. To put this in conversation with Asian/American studies, masculinity has long been a fraught topic to literary critics. The worlds of boxing and mixed martial art are hypermasculine spaces by virtue of the extreme violence inherent in these types of sporting performances. I am interested in considering the significance of Asian/American men participating in these violent, hypermasculine spaces, and how they mediate and are mediated by the cultural narratives surrounding their raced and gendered bodies.

Therefore, this chapter contributes to Asian/American studies by using sports theory to comment on Asian masculinity and the cultural labor it performs. Referencing television appearances, commercials, biographies, and autobiographies, I will illustrate
how the colonial history between the Philippines and the United States determines Pacquiao’s mythos of heroism. Additionally, I am interested in how Pacquiao’s transnational subjectivity and literal movement across national boundaries inflects how he speaks and is spoken by the media, the way he is scripted according to cultural narratives about race, and the significance of audience identification with his sporting body. While subjects like Manny Pacquiao get plenty of media attention, there is little scholarship on their cultural labor. This chapter illustrates how sports theory offers viable and valid entry points for the critical conversation about Asian masculinity, race, and nation.
Works Referenced


Chapter 1: Perverse Gazes: Constructing Subjectivity through Performances of Sexuality

“[I]f the spirit and sex have been linked in our oppression, then they must also be linked in the strategy toward our liberation”—Cherrie Moraga

1.0 Introduction: Ties that Bind: Race, Restraints, and Representation

In *Loving in the War Years*, Cherrie Moraga argues that the discourse of sex has long served as an instrument for rationalizing the oppression of women. From the institutionalization of rape during the slave era to modern day legislation prohibiting women’s right to terminate a pregnancy, the bodies of women have been policed to serve masculinist institutions. Since female power is controlled, contained, and restricted through sex, it is necessary to reclaim and valorize female sexuality because claiming sexuality as a terrain of one’s own is an act of political resistance. As the epigraph suggests, since sexuality has been a tool of oppression, than retooling sex is critical to liberation.

The languages of sexuality and race clearly inform the subjectivity of African American women. The place of black women within the national imaginary is predicated upon narratives that script them as lustful, amoral, and intrinsically sexually available. In *Ain’t I a Woman*, bell hooks locates the root of this discourse to the era of slavery. Arguing that black women have long been managed through their sexual bodies, hooks discusses rape as a technology of terrorism that facilitated slavery, since rape demoralized black women by making them more pliable and less disruptive and rebellious. Thus, rape was an institutionalized crime that served to enable slave owners...
to subjugate black women. This history of sexual violence has left a mark in the cultural imaginary. Hooks suggests that these discourses live on within media images that script the African American woman as the “fallen” woman—the whore, slut, and prostitute.

The hypersexualization of black women has dire material effects. Devaluing black women through sex rationalizes sexual assaults against them, since black women are supposed to have invited sexual abuse through their excessive sexual appetites and lack of morals. After slavery, black women continued to be coerced into sexual relationships with white employers, who would threaten to fire them if they refused sexual attention. Additionally, the legislation of the time reflected the racist nations that scripted black women as sexually promiscuous. There were different legal sanctions against rape, abuse of minors, and other sex crimes when committed against black women as opposed to white women. Such examples illustrate how the dominant orders have managed black women through both their physical bodies as well as the discourse about these bodies.

Like black women, Asian women are also hypersexualized within the national imaginary. However, unlike the sexualization of black female subjectivity, which fortifies internal institutions of racism, the hypersexualization of Asian women serves external American interests. Figuring Asian women as metonyms for Asian nations, narratives of hypersexual Asian women rationalize Western economic and/or colonial exploitation by coding Asian women as willing objects of white sexual interest. James Moy discusses how stereotypes of Asian women emphasize their sexual complicity by
asserting that Asian women are perceived as both sexually available and oversexed: “[T]he nineteenth-century construction of the sexually available Asian female has recently been transformed into the ‘super Jap’ or ‘sleazy Asian girl’ (SAG). In general, Asian women in America have come to be perceived as possessing special mastery of sexual practices” (136). Clearly, racist constructions of female sexuality determine the role Asian American women play within the cultural imaginary.

Asian women in film often appear to confirm such notions by performing this “special mastery” for the scopic pleasure of the white male audience, as exemplified by Stephan Elliot’s characterization of Cynthia in Priscilla: Queen of the Desert (1994). In Priscilla, the main character, Bernadette, a white drag queen transitioning from physically male to female, develops a love interest named Bob. However, Bob is already married to an Asian woman named Cynthia, who is amalgamation of racial stereotypes about Asians. Cynthia responds to her husband’s interest in Bernadette with jealous, competitive rage, staging a sex show in the desperate hope of regaining his attention, and the hypersexuality of her routine is clearly coded as excessive and perverse. During this routine, Cynthia shoots ping-pong balls out of her vagina, causing the white main characters, Mitzy, Felicia, and Bernadette to respond with horror and disgust. Clearly, director Stephen Elliot uses both Cynthia’s hypersexuality and race to abject her, thus coding her as an unfit partner for Bob, a white man. Thus, valorizing Bob and Bernadette’s queer relationship hinges upon coding Cynthia as perverse by virtue of her raced hypersexuality. Furthermore, Cynthia’s marriage to Bob tacitly rationalizes Western presence in her native country, neatly eliding any history of exploitation or
injustice. In Elliot’s filmic narrative, Cynthia is happy to leave behind the culture and customs of her country of origin in order to partner Bob, suggesting her willingness to accept and adopt his Western standards. Scripting Asian women as perverse and complicit with their sexual objectification filmically exculpates Western economic and colonial exploitation of Asian countries.

Asian women must negotiate hypersexuality because it is part of the narrative that determines their subjectivities. Filmic representations such as those in Priscilla are a form of bondage. Celine Shimizu asserts, “Asian/American women are tied to a tradition of excessive and perverse hypersexuality in representation [. . . . ] [T]he hypersexual Asian woman in representation haunts the experiences and perceptions of Asian women across different contexts” (16). Asian Americans live in a world where a representational tradition of hypersexuality informs and shapes social consciousness. From Grace Quek’s hard-core pornographic performances in World’s Biggest Gangbang, to Lucy Liu’s hyperbolic enactment of a sexually charged dragon lady in the mainstream dramedy Ally McBeal, contemporary media is rife with images of Asian American female hypersexuality. Furthermore, Asian American women must negotiate the material effects of filmic hypersexuality when these representations are collapsed onto their actual bodies. This filmic tradition is a tie that binds Asian female subjectivity to representations of hypersexuality.

Engaging the media tradition of Asian/American hypersexuality is a necessary strategy of feminist resistance. However, if hypersexuality is the lens by which
Asian/American women gain visibility, then how do feminist artists engage with this tradition without reentrenching the ideologies that abject them? To successfully accomplish this task, the very language of sex determining Asian/American female subjectivity requires contestation. Sexuality and race must be recognized as mutually constitutive and thus read alongside one another. While the images that undergird the machinery of patriarchy must be dismantled and exposed, it is also vital to appropriate these images to produce alternate viewing practices so that such images signify differently, from spaces of empowerment. Technologies of representation must address the audience and its gaze in ways that prioritize the feminine and female difference without reinscribing the male-female binary that restricts the parameters of discourse to a consideration of subject-object dialectics. Therefore, feminist film producers must negotiate the contradictory bind of portraying women as speaking subjects within discourses that objectify them in its representations.

Suggesting ways to avoid reinscribing the oppressive notions, Teresa de Lauretis calls for the production of new knowledges and understandings of aesthetics (321). She argues that it is necessary to affirm women as social subjects through consciousness-raising and the production of positive images of women. Also, she says that feminist film producers must interrogate the cinematic apparatus as a social technology in order to critique the patriarchal codes embedded in representation (de Lauretis 317). For example, de Lauretis argues that we must recognize and interrogate the invisibility of black women in white women’s films as well as the absence of lesbianism in mainstream film criticism (325). This acknowledgement of difference can provide the basis for coalition building
Furthermore, by articulating the multiplicity of female difference as divided and conflicting, feminist film criticism can resist the calcification of female identity as unitary and bound. De Lauretis says, “Radical change requires a delineation and a better understanding of the difference of women from Woman, and that is to say as well, the differences among women” (325). Thus, seeing diverse races, classes, and sexualities among women prevents the calcification of a singular or essentialist definition of Woman.

Representing women as desiring and agentive sexual subjects, filmmakers and performers such as Helen Lee, Grace Quek, and Celine Shimizu reinvent technologies of representation to produce new vocabularies for visuality, gender, sexuality, and race, which dissect the spaces of overlap with more precision. Interrogating the cinematic apparatus as a social technology, Lee, Quek, and Shimizu recognize, reclaim, and reappropriate representations of Asian American female hypersexuality, developing new vocabularies and producing sharper interpretive tools to contribute to a more precise literacy within critical race discourses.

1.1 Methodology and Media: Corrupting Communication in *World’s Biggest Gangbang*

Pornography producer and performer Grace Quek uses the language of sexuality to trouble the narratives scripting women as powerless, passive sex objects. Placing sexuality at the center of her discourse, Quek sets out to dismantle normative gender codes by enacting a performance of extremity and excess designed to shock the audience into recognizing a gender counternarrative, namely her assertion of female sexual agency.
To do so, Quek stages one of the largest orgies ever to be captured on film. However, Quek does not consider how her subject position as an Asian woman inflects the narratives produced about the event. Furthermore, she fails to interrogate pornography and its technologies of representation adequately. I argue that these flaws in her project compromise Quek’s feminist gesture and doom her project to failure. Thus, this section will dissect Quek’s methodology to investigate how her communication collapses under the weight of racial discourses about the hypersexual Asian woman.

In January of 1995, Grace Quek made history. Starring in the porn film *World’s Biggest Gangbang*, Quek set a world record for participating in the largest recorded orgy to date. At the time of this event, Quek was an ardent student who impressed her professors at USC with her eloquent writing and thoughtful commentary, while simultaneously supporting herself financially through her labor in the porn industry. Movie critic Carrie Rickey characterizes the duality of Quek’s identity: “By day Grace Quek is a gender-studies student at the University of Southern California, eloquently challenging feminist dogma and masculinist dogs. By night she is a perky porn princess” (W18). Passionately feminist and unashamedly sexual, Quek countered the anti-sex rhetoric dominating the feminism of the time by birthing Annabel Chong, her porn star alter ego, constructed to prove that women could be both feminist *and* sexual. While reporters such as Todd McCarthy dismiss her record-setting performance as a media stunt calculated to catapult her into stardom, basing her motives on her “apparently inexhaustible appetite for self-promotion” (64), Quek asserts that her motivations were feminist. In an interview with *The Japan Times*, Quek contends, “I wanted to challenge
that whole idea in feminist theory that porn victimizes women [. . .] I wanted to challenge [feminist theories] and their own stereotypes about women as victims, which I see as being really sexist” (Fazio par. 9). Appropriating the gangbang trope as a method of resistance, Quek attempts to trouble settled gendered notions within feminism that script women as passive objects of heterosexual male desire.

While the academic world accepts some sexuality-centered performance artists such as Annie Sprinkle, the same cannot be said for Grace Quek. Scholars such as Linda Williams and Chris Straayer have published scholarly articles investigating Sprinkle’s exploration of gender and sexuality in her performances and texts, but few scholars have commented on Annabel Chong’s record-setting gangbang or the motivations behind the “sextravaganza.” Kathy Smith uses a scene from Gough Lewis’ documentary, Sex: The Annabel Chong Story, which centralizes Quek’s response to the making of World’s Biggest Gangbang, to frame her own thoughts on pain, performance, and the material body, but Smith doesn’t discuss feminism or sex as a critical discourse. Darrell Hamamoto comments on the racial dynamics during Chong’s gangbang and its implications for Asian American male subjectivity, but curiously, he chooses to concentrate on the dearth of Asian men in the gangbang line to assert that this lack of representation is yet another example of Asian emasculation. On the other hand, Celine Shimizu does validate Quek’s authorial choices. In The Hypersexuality of Race, Shimizu argues that Quek’s purposeful embrace of hypersexuality suggests both an acknowledgment that such narratives script her subjectivity and an assertion of her right
to center sexuality as her own, even if this sexuality does not appear “normal” or socially acceptable.

While Shimizu’s rigorous critique is intriguing, based on the media responses to the event, I argue that Quek’s project was far from a critical success. Press from all over the globe covered the record-setting event, and there are countless narratives around both World’s Biggest Gangbang and Sex: The Annabel Chong Story, the documentary chronicling the event and its aftermath. While there are a variety of media responses, the most pervasive narrative is that Quek is a deluded and self-destructive victim of the patriarchal porn industry. Linda Williams contends, “The pathetic narrative [. . .] suggests [Quek] is just as much of a victim of male appetite (this time for the profits of Bowen’s film) as any other girl in the history of patriarchy” (61). Pointing to the fact that she was never paid for World’s Biggest Gangbang (Shimizu 179) and underscoring the health hazards of performing unprotected sexual labor, the popular media reinscribes the victim narratives that Quek intends to dismantle. Countering these media responses, Quek vocally disagrees with this diagnosis and continues to assert her subjectivity as an active agent of her sexuality. In an interview with The Korea Herald, Quek asserts, “I do not consider myself a victim. I’ve taken control of organizing the events, and now that I’ve got everybody’s attention, I’m ready to direct the discussion. I’m definitely in control” (Kim par. 17). However, Quek’s rebuttal goes largely unheard. Most popular responses voice a variation of the same theme, namely the porn industry’s exploitation of yet another disturbed woman. Any feminist message Quek attempts to transmit gets buried under the avalanche of victim narratives.
While Quek’s project did not gain the critical traction she desired, her theory is in line with many pro-sex feminists who consider female sexuality as an avenue for empowerment. Pro-sex feminists assert that female pleasure deserves recognition and critical attention. For theorists such as Linda Williams, Carol Vance, and Angela Carter, the genre of pornography in particular is a site of contention that requires feminist intervention in ways that differ from the approaches of theorists such as Andrea Dworkin and Catherine McKinnon. In *Hard Core*, Linda Williams argues that pornography is a bastion of masculine privilege, thus making it a necessary site for feminist intervention: “[P]ornography [has] long been a myth of sexual pleasure told from the point of view of men with the power to exploit and objectify the sexuality of women. Indeed, only recently has it become possible for pornography, as a genre, to introduce the alternative perspective of women’s power and pleasure” (22). Furthermore, considering representations of female sexuality from a space of pleasure and agency is critical for female empowerment. Carol Vance contends, “[T]o speak only of sexual violence and oppression ignores women’s experience with sexual agency and choice and unwittingly increases the sexual terror and despair in which women live” (quot. in Williams 26). Because reinscribing tropes of female victimization reaffirms masculinist notions of privilege and power, feminists must recognize sexual agency and female pleasure in order to avoid reentrenching the discourses they seek to dismantle. Finally, affirming female sexuality requires making room for disruptive, even deviant, sexualities, which broadens the scope of feminism in productive ways. Angela Carter finds redemptive value in Sade’s pornography because of his politicization of female sexuality as assertive,
agentive, and liberatory. Carter argues for Sade and his insistence that women have the right “to fuck’ as aggressively, tyrannically, and cruelly as men” (quoted in Williams 11). Such a stance puts male and female sexuality on more level ground. More importantly, it powerfully affirms deviant female subjectivities that are usually degraded, elided, or ignored.

While Quek works from the tradition of pro-sex feminism, few scholars and media critics recognize her sexual performance as art, though she deems it is as such. *Sex: The Annabel Chong Story* depicts Quek appearing as Annabel Chong on the British television series *The Girlie Show*. Commenting on her subversion of gender stereotype, she explains the artistic impulse behind the gangbang, saying, “It’s a piss take on the whole notion of masculinity, [. . . .] the whole notion that a guy just goes around shagging all these women. The more the better, right? He’s a stud. So, I decided to take on the role of a stud and see how people react to it.” Thus, she proclaims an intention to expose double standards by interrogating the machinery that constructs masculinity. By demonstrating an aggressive female sexuality, she disrupts accepted norms for proper female sexual behavior. Furthermore, later in the documentary, Quek elaborates on her feminist agenda, rejecting the narrative of women as victims and actively scripting an alternative, more empowered subjectivity:

“We’re not wilting violets; we’re not victims for Chrissake [. . . .] If you really allow yourself to be a woman, you wouldn’t be sitting in the corner feeling really scared. You’d be out there doing what you really want to do, which may or may
not be banging 251 guys, but you’d know what you want and you’d go out there and get it.”

Thus, Quek makes a powerful call to action: women must actively take ownership of their sexuality in order to be truly empowered. This is, without a doubt, a vital feminist message. Quek asserts that reaffirming victim narratives compromises female agency. Thus, taking responsibility begins with rejecting narratives that script women as endlessly oppressed and powerless to overcome objectification. Quek argues that women should actively desire, articulate these desires, and find a way to achieve them.

Clearly, a feminist agenda motivates Quek’s performance, but considering the confused media responses to the event, it is clear that multiple forces undermined her message. This section suggests that Quek’s faulty methodology subverts her communication. Quek compromises her own project by appropriating misogynist tropes, thus perpetuating the patriarchal ideologies that motivate masculinist pornography. Quek stages and participates in a gangbang asserting that performing hypersexuality would explode narratives of passive female sexuality, but simply claiming to appropriate the gangbang trope is not enough. Within a masculinist paradigm, gangbans perpetuate patriarchy by scripting men as active sexual aggressors and the lone woman as the penetrated object of desire. Quek’s straight across application of this trope doesn’t reinvent the gender roles or problematize the power dynamics between sexes; men continue to exhibit agency, actively acting upon their desires, while women are the passive objects of male desire. Even though Quek stages the gangbang herself, doing so
only makes her complicit with existing masculinist norms; it doesn’t subvert them. 
Engaging in 251 consecutive sex acts fails to prove that she is just as sexually voracious as a man because her definition of sexual intercourse remains phallocentric. For instance, the character Annabel Chong brings scores of men to orgasm by allowing them to penetrate her, but her own pleasure is unaccounted for. Since the role of a woman during a gangbang is to function as a conduit for men to express and satisfy their shared sexual tension, female subjectivity is virtually nil during the act, and the woman’s pleasure is tangential. Without challenging the existing gangbang trope, Quek cannot successfully construct an active female subjectivity because her event reinscribes women’s object position.

Furthermore, Quek’s use of media problematically invokes racial narratives that undermine her political intent. During the call for willing male participants, Quek orientalizes and scripts herself as Annabel Chong, an object for male consumption. *Sex: The Annabel Chong Story* includes footage of this advertisement, and in this text, Chong is the stereotypical ‘China Doll.’ Her hair is cut in a short bob with a fringe, and her skimpy attire bares her thighs and chest. She knowingly displays herself as sexually voracious, willing, and available:

“I’m Annabel Chong, the porn industry’s newest fortune cookie and what a treat to nibble on. I really mean to fuck and suck, and that will happen at my next shoot, a record setting gangbang sextravaganza. Hey, I’m really looking forward to meeting you…and eating you.”
In this advertisement, Chong compares herself to a “fortune cookie” for men to “nibble on,” invoking racial narratives of sexually available Asian women and offering herself up as an object for consumption. Speaking from her raced body, Chong’s declaration that she wants to “fuck and suck” the presumably male viewer takes on troubling connotations. While Quek may have deployed this language to depict a strong, liberated, and unashamedly sexual woman, her construction still speaks from a raced Asian female body. In light of these pervasive racial narratives within pornography, it is easy to read Quek’s gangbang as just another example of an oversexed Asian woman complicit with her hypersexualization. Any feminist impetus for the event gets buried underneath the weight of racial stereotypes, and her record-breaking feat cannot be understood as the liberating move she intends. Rather, the gesture perpetuates stereotypes of Asian women as wanton sexual virtuosos. Ironically, in her attempt to explode sexist rhetoric, Quek reinscribes racist ones that ultimately undermine her project because she fails to recognize the mutuality between race and sex.

1.2 Annabel Chong and the Power of Failure

While Quek’s project failed to convey her feminist intent, reading it as an intentional failure reveals the parameters of both feminist and pornographic discourse. Counter-intuitively, Quek derives visibility by performing whoredom in *World’s Biggest Gangbang*. Locating agency from a space of abjection, she uses her objectification to reveal the misogynist desire motivating pornography, frustrating its masculinist gaze and asserting her subjectivity in the process.
In *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible,”* Linda Williams invokes Foucault to illustrate that pornography is a discourse entrenched in productions of power. Williams asserts that pornography is motivated by the desire to derive a “knowledge-pleasure” of sexuality (2). As a predominantly masculine genre, pornography produces meanings through gender difference, and as such, there is a fetishistic drive to capture the “truths” of women’s bodies and pleasures in particular. Thus, the goal of pornography is to make visible the involuntary confession of female bodily pleasure. Ironically, *World’s Biggest Gangbang* illustrates that the very conventions of pornography ultimately render such a quest an exercise in futility.

This emphasis on capturing the “truths” of women’s bodies and pleasures is made clear in *World’s Biggest Gangbang*. Close-ups of body parts are privileged over other kinds of shots, ensuring maximum visibility for the viewer. In addition to over-lighting easily obscured genitalia, the sexual positions most employed during the gangbang are ones that show the most of bodies and organs to ensure maximum visibility. For instance, one of the most common sexual positions in the film is of Chong on her hands and knees while a participant penetrates her from behind as she fellates another participant. This position enables the viewer to witness two kinds of penetration simultaneously with the utmost clarity. All of these filmic techniques are attempts to capture and document sexual “truth” about Chong’s body and its experience of sexual pleasure. Furthermore, *World’s Biggest Gangbang* also tries to capture the visible “truth” of sexual pleasure by privileging the presentation of documentary evidence over narrative elaboration, complex plots, and character development. Rather, all the filmic energy is
spent recording quantifiable signifiers of sexual experience, such as tallying the growing number of her partners. Therefore, *World’s Biggest Gangbang* attempts to articulate the “truth” of her experience by providing objective proof of her sexual behavior.

Through *World’s Biggest Gangbang*, Quek exposes the central contradiction of pornography, revealing that its genre conventions ultimately puncture its intent. Suggesting that pornography’s will to power is an exercise in futility, Quek foregrounds the masculine anxiety that pornography is designed to assuage. While pornography strives to articulate the “truth” of female pleasure, cinema fails because female pleasure cannot be quantifiably measured through visual mechanism. Williams explains, “The animating male fantasy of hard-core cinema might therefore be described as the (impossible) attempt to capture visually this frenzy of the visible in a female body whose orgasmic excitement can never be objectively measured” (50). Men give visible evidence of their arousal and pleasure via erections and “money shots,” but women can fake orgasms, thus frustrating the desire to objectively document female pleasure with any certainty. Therefore, the discourses that purport to articulate a “truth” about women fail. For instance, the enduring image in *World’s Biggest Gangbang* is that of Annabel Chong’s contorted face in the throes of sexual intercourse. Her face registers the intensity of feeling, but the literal sensation she experiences is unclear. Viewers do not know if they are watching Chong experiencing orgasmic pleasure or incredible pain. Furthermore, by narrativizing herself as an actress performing the character Annabel Chong, Quek disallows the audience from deriving any stable knowledge-pleasure about her body, as treating the event as a performance casts doubt on whether her physical
responses are real or feigned for the audience’s scopic pleasure. There is no discernible
truth to understand, thus interrogating the very need to quantify and capture the “truth” of
her pleasure via her sexual objectification. If the pornographic camera is a masculinist
tool intent on documenting the involuntary confession of female pleasure, then it is
noteworthy that regardless of Chong’s willingness to accommodate its penetrating gaze,
no matter what lengths she takes to expose her body’s most intimate places, the camera
only documents what she allows it to see. Furthermore, she affirms her agency through
her repeated insistence that she was a willing participant and producer of World’s Biggest
Gangbang. Thus, demanding the audience’s recognition of her sexual body is an
assertion of subjectivity.

If World’s Biggest Gangbang is a failed attempt to document Chong’s “truth”
through capturing an involuntary articulation of pleasure, then Sex: The Annabel Chong
Story attempts to determine Chong’s psychological motivations and chart her emotional
landscape. However, instead of striving to capture a bodily truth, Sex strives to penetrate
Quek’s psyche, visualizing Quek’s inner workings and exposing the psychological
impetus behind World’s Biggest Gangbang. The film makes several clumsy gestures to
locate the root of Quek’s desire to participate in the gangbang—Singapore’s conservative
national character, Quek’s austere upbringing, a gang rape she suffers in college.
However, none of these reasons fully satisfy. Again, Quek frustrates the audience’s gaze
by resisting narrative containment, thus foregrounding the audience’s desire to classify
her.
Purposefully deploying an unstable subjectivity, Quek disallows the audience from categorizing her, thus asserting agency over the narratives seeking to determine her subjectivity. For instance, in Sex, director Gough Lewis characterizes Quek/Chong in binary terms, thus framing her complexities as contradictions. Quek is a scholar, while Chong is a porn star; Quek is a serious artist, while Chong is a media whore; Quek wants to be a good, traditional Singaporean daughter, while Chong purposefully shames her mother by returning to the porn industry. While Gough uses this narrative technique to undermine her credibility as a subject, Quek/Chong embraces this unreliability, transforming it into advantage. While the documentary attempts to draw a line between Quek and Chong, the woman herself destabilizes such a reading, refuting any accurate or legible portrayal of her subjectivity. Thus, she frustrates the audience’s gaze by exploding the simplistic binaries seeking to contain her. Quek/Chong simultaneously enacts both personas, performing one, the other, or a combination of the two, seemingly at whim and according to her own discretion. As Annabel Chong, she appears on The Girlie Show to explain the critical impetus behind World’s Biggest Gangbang in clear, liberatory terms, as a strategy designed to trouble gender expectations: “It’s to shake people up from all these stereotypes about women being passive sex objects.” However, it is Grace Quek who gloats to her friends about performing the gangbang. At times, she says that Chong is just a character that she plays, while at other times she names herself Annabel Chong. Thus, Quek/Chong purposefully sidesteps drawing a line between the two personas, and by making herself illegible, she carves out a space where she can iterate herself on her own terms.
Furthermore, by enacting a decidedly unstable subjectivity, Quek/Chong asserts that the audience’s gaze cannot contain her full depth and complexity. Valorizing Quek’s refusal to perform a reliable and stable picture of “Chong’s” subjectivity, Shimizu says, “Through the force of unreliability, Chong rewrites racialized sexuality beyond victimization in favor of achieving an elusive and out-of-grasp subjectivity” (181). Thus, Shimizu argues that embracing this unstable and contradictory position gestures to the complexity and ambiguity of sex, race, and representation. By frustrating the audience’s entitlement, she asserts that she is more than the object of its gaze. Quek/Chong keeps a piece of her subjectivity to herself by placing it outside the realm of audience classification. Thus, performing unreliability enables Quek/Chong to locate spaces of agency and assert a measure of control over the narratives seeking to define her already-determined body.

Considering that Quek’s project purposefully sought to expose the limitations of feminism, it is safe to assume that she anticipated the backlash that World’s Biggest Gangbang engendered. Reading the event as an intentional failure designed to provoke discourse is useful, as the commentary mediating the event makes the boundaries of feminism and Asian American critical race discourses visible. Annabel Chong is undoubtedly a problematic figure. Performing racial/sexual stereotypes in order to gain visibility, she reifies the racist scripts that compound the abjection of Asian/American women. Performing whoredom seemingly confirms racial stereotypes of Asian female sexual monstrosity, and for that, her project appears inherently flawed, ill considered, dangerous, and perhaps best ignored.
However, her project is useful because it reveals the parameters of feminist discourse. Teresa de Lauretis argues that recognizing the differences among women is crucial for resisting an essentialist definition of Woman (325). Quek/Chong introduces a type of feminist subjectivity that centralizes sexual perversity as a feminist platform. Shimizu says, “The prioritization of sexuality and [Chong’s] voice within the film both argue for a new subject of feminism: the Asian female sexual pervert” (180). While this subjectivity may be considered another type of “difference among women,” Chong’s embrace of perversity and unreliability make this subject position difficult to accept and include. Shimizu says, “As monstrous and outside legibility, however, her meaning registers as primarily bad, undesirable, and powerless” (183). Quek confronts feminism with a troublesome, illegible subjectivity. Thus, Quek’s intentional failure is a productive one. If feminism seeks to validate diversity among women, then it is noteworthy that Quek’s illegible subject position and hypersexual platform provokes discomfort and displeasure. Her failure reveals the parameters of feminist and critical race discourses by showing the types of political gestures that are sanctioned and rendered acceptable and which are cast out.

At first glance, willingly courting backlash from the intellectual community appears to confirm Quek’s hypothesis—feminism continues to restrict female sexual agency by imposing limitations on what it deems acceptable feminist behavior, and the internalization of sexism is so deep that at times, feminism replicates the discourses it purports to explode. In an interview with *The Japan Times*, Quek articulates what she considers to be the blind spots of feminism: “There are a lot of assumptions about what
women want, what women like. And a lot of these myths are not just promulgated by “patriarchal culture,” but by feminists themselves [. . .] The argument is that it’s degrading for a woman to exploit herself [. . .] [b]ut that puts women in the prison of the pedestal” (Fazio pars. 10-11). According to Quek, feminists fail to recognize deviant subjectivities whose political platforms fail to conform to accepted models. However, while Quek decries the notion of the monolithic Woman, her response suggests that she herself essentializes feminism. Instead of recognizing the conflicting factions within the feminist movement, many of which validate her sexual identity, Quek fails to consider feminism as a shifting political platform and ignores its complexity and the potentially empowering slippages this complexity produces. Quek inscribes sexual difference as deviance, and while her gesture visualizes alternative subjectivities, deriving her power via positioning herself as marginal reinforces the priority of the normative. Furthermore, without recognizing the mutuality of sexuality and race, Quek’s project conflates racial otherness with hypersexuality, thus validating the racist discourses that render her abject. Therefore, considering Quek’s (intentional) failure is useful because doing so clarifies and sharpens the stakes of using hypersexuality as a strategy of resistance. Quek’s project illustrates how failure to negotiate the complexities of feminism and the fraught racial terrain of hypersexuality come at a high price. Her project underscores that presenting perversity as a feminist position poses productive challenges, and she was ill equipped to meet them. As a result, Quek reproduces abjecting discourses without redeeming them in ways that interrogate the histories that engendered them. Thus, her failure, whether intentional or not, provokes the discourse that illumines the stakes of
productive perversity. Quek’s project proves that deploying productive perversity as strategy of resistance requires the nuanced negotiation of the spaces of overlap within discourses of sexuality and race.

1.3 Racial Anxiety and the Sexualized Body

Like Grace Quek, filmmaker Helen Lee also deploys the image of the hypersexual Asian woman as a strategy for feminist cultural critique. However, unlike Quek, who never verbally acknowledges the mutuality of sexuality and race, Lee confronts racial stereotypes with more purpose and finesse, directly engaging with the scripts seeking to determine the sexuality of Asian/American women. Helen Lee’s film Sally’s Beauty Spot (1990) depicts an Asian woman struggling with the heritage of filmic hypersexualization. While the film visualizes Sally’s anxiety as she chooses between two lovers, the true heart of the film is Sally’s changing relationship with herself, emblematized by her pathological response to a mark on her physical body, namely a mole above her breast. Furthermore, by incorporating scenes from Richard Quine’s 1960’s film The World of Suzie Wong, Lee uses the language of sex to illustrate that Sally’s subjectivity is shaped by filmic representations of Asian female hypersexuality.

The imagery of Sally’s Beauty Spot underscores the central themes of the text—anxiety, racial fetishism, and sexual representations of Asian women. As the title indicates, the film revolves around the psychic significance of the mole over Sally’s breast and her relationship to it. The establishing shots at the beginning of the film suggest that Sally identifies the mark on her body with the film The World of Suzie Wong.
Helen Lee’s editing purposefully intercuts footage of Sally opening her bathrobe to expose the mole with a scene from Quine’s film. During this scene from *Suzie Wong*, the title character poses in a Western dress as the frame tilts to pan over her body, thus aligning the gaze of the audience to that of her white lover evaluating Wong as a spectacle. Wong stands quietly, eyes cast demurely down, as she willingly offers herself as the object of his gaze. While Wong’s beauty makes for a pretty picture, the manner in which Helen Lee deploys *Suzie Wong* refuses to allow Lee’s audience to identify with the white male gaze. In *Sally’s Beauty Spot*, the clip from *Suzie Wong* is difficult to watch; black bars flicker over the original images, disrupting the audience’s viewing pleasure and problematizing the narratives that produce such pleasure. Thus, the establishing shots of *Sally’s Beauty Spot* foreground the political impetus of the project. Interrogating the pleasures produced by traditional representations of Asian female sexuality, Lee addresses this history of objectification by reclaiming, reappropriating, and redeploying such images. In doing so, she creates a different set of knowledges that redress the epistemic violence such images induce.

Through both background sound and framing, Lee identifies the mole with Sally’s psychological tension regarding the significance of her sexual body. Far from considering the mole a neutral mark, Sally describes it as “black and ugly.” After Sally verbally denounces the mole, the film cuts to Sally nude in bed. The camera focuses on the mole occupying the center of the frame, and then it tilts, panning over Sally’s naked torso, as if following her lover’s point of view as he appraises her body. The camera work further underscores Sally’s disempowerment. The camera lingers over Sally’s
nudity, but Sally’s face never enters the frame, thus denying her subjectivity. Additionally, through high angle shots, the audience looks down on the inert Sally, its roving gaze suggesting that it is entitled to perform this visual mapping. Thus, Sally’s spatial positioning reinforces her limited status as a sexual object. Finally, the voice over suggests that Sally’s racial otherness is her primary appeal. Obsessed with Sally’s “exotic” Asian body, her white lover dwells on physical signifiers of race, commenting via voice over about the smoothness of Sally’s skin and her hair, which he describes as “so silky and black.” As he reduces Sally to a fetish object, it is not surprising that he also evinces an obsessive interest in Sally’s mole, the symbol of her sexualized status. “Were you born with it?” he asks avidly. “Can I see how it feels?” However, the film suggests that it is this very fetishization that is at the root of Sally’s neurosis. The film cuts to Sally in the shower, scrubbing the mole, almost abrading it with the violence of her rough strokes. As Sally scours the mole, the unmistakable sounds of sexual intercourse dominate the background. It is her object status that excites Sally’s white lover, and Sally’s anxiety from participating in this imbalanced sexual relationship is the psychic stain that she attempts to elide from her awareness.

Sally’s complicity with her own sexual objectification finds some basis in her identification with the 1960’s film The World of Suzie Wong. The film chronicles the budding romance between Robert Lomax, a white architect-cum-artist living in Hong Kong, and Suzie Wong, a beautiful young Chinese prostitute. Leaving behind his career to pursue his artistic aspirations, Lomax enlists Suzie’s services as a figure model. Thus, Lomax transforms Suzie into an art object by positioning, framing and recreating her
through his portraits. Clearly, the film is premised upon a white man’s literal
objectification of a willing Asian woman. The film uses the romance narrative to obscure
the imbalance of power between Suzie and Lomax. Scripting Suzie as a willing and
compliant object of Lomax’s sexual interest, the film uses representations of female
desire and its implications of sexual reciprocity to rationalize the disempowerment of
Asian women.

Helen Lee’s unconventional editing in Sally’s Beauty Spot suggests that Sally
wrestles with the filmic tradition of hypersexual Asian women exemplified by Suzie
Wong. Lee illustrates that such images inform both Sally’s subjectivity as well as her
romantic and sexual choices. Sally herself confirms that the film has informed her
growth by saying via voiceover that the film “has been there all [her] life.” Like an ever-
present specter shadowing her throughout her years, Suzie Wong informs how Sally
defines herself and her relationships with men. The composition of the scene in which
Sally scrutinizes her mirror image suggests that Suzie Wong is an intrinsic part of her
psyche. Helen Lee disrupts the continuity of this scene by intercutting clips of Suzie
 flaunting her desirability before American sailors with a shot of Sally gazing at herself in
the mirror. At the center of the frame, Suzie flirtatiously tosses her head, swinging her
long, lustrous black hair as she dances provocatively with sailor after sailor. Through
lighting and framing, Suzie Wong emphatically codes the Asian woman as an othered
body; her pronounced feminine beauty and Asian raced body are in marked contrast to
the blonde, white men that circle her on the dance floor. Lee’s sequence of cuts suggests
both Sally’s awareness of how Suzie’s hypersexuality signifies as well as her own
anxiety towards it. Sally’s gestures reveal an awareness that Suzie’s racial difference is the basis of her appeal. Looking into the mirror, Sally runs a comb through her own glossy black hair, the gesture clearly referencing Suzie Wong’s knowing deployment of her raced body for the purpose of garnering sexual attention. However, Sally considers her image and decides to cut her hair into an edgy, boyish pixie, thus stripping it of its fetishistic significance. Recognizing that The World of Suzie Wong conflates the title character’s beauty with her racial otherness, Sally alters her appearance, thus repudiating notions that pander to a male gaze that prizes her for the way her body codes his whiteness as superior and normative. Refusing the mantle of the beautiful, exotic other, Sally reclaims her body and defines beauty in her own terms.

Finally, the editing pace and the sequence of images in Sally’s Beauty Spot reveal that the discourses of sexuality and race inform one another. Sally’s psychic turmoil as she chooses between lovers indicates that her sexual choices signify more than an individual preference. Rather, her final decision reflects that her romantic relationships are inflected by the tradition of filmic racism, and the way Sally negotiates this tradition’s material effects is articulated through the discourse of sexuality. Sally’s Beauty Spot reaches a crescendo during the sequence in which Sally chooses her black lover over her white one. The pace of the editing picks up speed as Sally, appearing at first to choose her white lover, moves to kiss him. However, Lee disrupts the continuity of the kiss by interposing a scene from Suzie Wong. In this clip, Suzie presents herself in the traditional garb of a Chinese empress, much to Lomax’s delight. Lomax takes Suzie in his arms, his deep kiss suggesting that Suzie’s embrace of her racial otherness and acceptance of his
fetishization are requisite before he can consider her as a valid sexual partner. The background noise and pacing register Sally’s psychic turbulence at Suzie’s willing compromise of subjectivity. The rhythm of the images quickens to an uncomfortably frenetic pace. Clips of Sally abrading her mole or covering it with liquid make-up flicker in quick succession, while a jarring, discordant melody gives aural indication of Sally’s turmoil. The visual and aural elements of the scene build in intensity, until the tension breaks, and Sally chooses her black lover, metaphorized by the long, deep kiss between them. While Lee’s strategy of inscribing Sally’s sexual identity in terms of a race-based preference suggests that Sally is guilty of performing the same racial fetishization that she resents from her white lover, Sally’s final decision still signifies her purposeful break from the power dynamics that reduce her subjectivity to stereotype. The film closes with Sally attending a party wearing an elegant scoop-neck blouse that proudly displays the once-hated beauty mark above her breast. Finally at peace with herself, Sally is free to rewrite the dynamics of her new relationship in ways that assert her subjectivity on her own terms.

1.4 The Productive Perversity of *Mahal Means Love and Expensive*

While Grace Quek fails to negotiate the imbrications of sexuality and race in *World’s Biggest Gangbang*, Celine Shimizu uses their mutuality to propel her film *Mahal Means Love and Expensive* (1993). As a result, Shimizu masterfully deploys the discourse of sex to illustrate how Filipino subjectivity is informed by a history of both Spanish and American colonialism. Furthermore, Shimizu uses the sexual body to speak
to the trauma of colonialism as an absence of cultural memory. Revealing the ideological construction of history, Shimizu foregrounds the native histories that have been lost and elided from official historical narratives told from the colonizer’s point of view. The sexual arena then becomes a space upon which to reconcile these absences. Thus, by recognizing and utilizing the mutuality of race and sexuality, Shimizu stages a filmic counter discourse that interrogates the colonial filmic gaze.

Since visual representations of sex have served as hegemonic tools for rationalizing colonialism, Shimizu’s reappropriation of the language of sexuality in her film *Mahal Means Love and Expensive* functions as a purposeful method to renarrativize history from the perspective of the colonized subject. In doing so, Shimizu inscribes the female colonial subject as central and speaking. It is noteworthy that although *Mahal* comments on the colonial history of the Philippines, there are no characters who represent the colonizer. Rather, all points of identification are native subjects, and in contrast to dominant filmic representations that portray the native female body as available for both colonial and sexual exploitation, the main character Korazon is not coded as a sexual object. By initiating her erotic experience on her own terms, Korazon figures herself as a sexual subject. Her very name speaks to her rearticulation of history. The traditional spelling of her name is “Corazon,” which is the Spanish word for heart. Thus, her name speaks to the history of Spanish colonialism in the Philippines. However, Shimizu’s purposeful usage of the letter K instead of C reflects the Tagalog language’s phonetic rendering of the name. In other words, in Tagalog, the letter K takes the sound place that the West would represent as C. The reinscription of her identity marker in
Filipino cultural terms iterates Korazon’s determination by colonial history as well as her agentive appropriation and renarrativization of this history. Therefore, in Shimizu’s text, the female native is not just a passive object of colonial discourse, available for sexual consumption. Rather, she is the consuming subject who actively writes her own history.

In *Mahal*, sexual imagery performs productive labor. In *The Hypersexuality of Race*, Celine Shimizu coins the term “productive perversity” to describe the embrace of hypersexuality with the purpose of interrogating the punishment and disciplining of Asian American women hypersexualized in representation. Shimizu argues “for how the bondage of hypersexuality and the bind of representation both must be put in service of making the pleasures and traumas of racialized sexuality relevant in our understanding of race, sex, and representation” (16). Thus, Shimizu asserts that by recasting sexuality and visuality in Asian American women’s terms, productive perversity interrogates the sexual discourses that regulate Asian American female subjectivity.

*Mahal* exemplifies productive perversity by deploying representations of deviant sex to agitate the dominant discourses of colonialism. Rather than elide the cultural trauma induced by colonialism, Shimizu foregrounds it and uses the language of sexuality to do so. The film superimposes a young Filipina woman’s negotiation of colonial trauma is superimposed upon her sexual awakening. Thus, Shimizu suggests that bodies function as store houses of cultural memory by showing how the sexual body speaks to the absences of memory induced by colonialism. Through Korazon, Shimizu underscores the hybrid sensibility of the Filipino condition, rendered through a reading of
American and Spanish colonialisms as a cultural trauma. In the beginning of the film, Korazon is a psychological wreck. Face contorted, Korazon obsessively runs her fingers through her hair and manically rifles through her paintings in a desperate search. However, what she seeks cannot be found in such a manner. Korazon speaks her experience of trauma via filmic voice over. While she obsessively searches, her voice over intones, “The flesh demands memory.” Korazon’s desperate search metaphorizes a lack that she strives to fill, one that the voice over identifies as memory. The following images suggest that this lack is written on the body, as it is through “the flesh” that Korazon makes visible the void stemming from the loss of histories elided by the forces of colonialism.

Shimizu’s depiction of productive perversity addresses the ways colonialism infiltrates the most intimate of spaces as well as redresses the West’s sexual objectification of Philippine women’s bodies. Linda Williams defines perversity in *Screening Sex*. Referencing Freud, Williams says, “Perverse in its adjectival form literally means turned about, deviated from, a more ‘proper’ direction. To engage in sex with an organ not destined for procreation is to Freud to engage in perverse behavior; it is a deviation from the ‘proper’ direction and aim of sex” (14). Thus, perversity includes any sexual behavior that does not serve the interests of procreation and/or conform to normative standards. Shimizu’s depiction of sexuality in *Mahal* exemplifies perversity because Shimizu deploys it as a political tool for hegemonic resistance. Not only is the sex in *Mahal* motivated by the desire for female pleasure, but it also serves a political purpose by speaking to the consequences of colonial history. As Korazon has sex with
her lover, the voice over says that in her dreams, Korazon sleeps in Manila and California, thus underscoring the double consciousness produced by colonial history. Furthermore, Korazon emphasizes that this doubling is written on her body, saying, “The music of my bracelets reveal the 400 year old convent in her thighs, of low-fat milk and diet coke.” Thus, Korazon identifies both Spanish colonialism and the internalization of American cuisine as histories that are inscribed on and in her body. Then, Korazon privatizes political history in sexual terms by equating American media colonialism to “one hundred years of Hollywood in the screen sheets of [her] bed, a movie of colonized sex.” Thus, Korazon illustrates how the arm of neocolonialism flexes its power through media. In response, Shimizu appropriates the medium of film to counter the skewed depictions of Asian American female subjectivity by presenting visual images that lay claim to both Filipino history and the Filipina American sexual body. Using sex effectively to do so, Shimizu’s methodology is both productive and perverse.

Visualizing sex as a form of female self-inscription, Shimizu’s usage of sexual imagery deviates from normative scripts that centralize male pleasure. This deviance marks Shimizu’s use of sexuality as perverse, as she uses sexuality in politically productive ways. In Mahal, sex functions as a language that assuages the trauma of memory’s absence. Korazon tries to fill this void through her art, as is evidenced by her paintings of anguished racialized subjects, mouths wide in silent screams, muscles straining against invisible constraints. Bringing her artist’s tool to bed suggests that her art and her sexual voice are different languages that counter and speak the same hunger. Korazon and her lover smear each other’s bodies with red paint during sex. For Korazon,
sex serves as another form inscription that fills the absence of memory. Indeed, their sexual experience is most often filmically narrativized by close up shots of hands running over bodies, in effect performing a mapping of bodies. As mentioned, the political relationship between the Philippines and the United States was figured as an intercultural romance to rationalize colonial exploitation, which necessitated the hypersexualization of native Philippine women. Clearly, Philippine bodies are marked by colonial discourses through the forces of both sexuality and race. When Korazon maps her lover’s body, smearing him with red paint, she symbolically superimposes her own narratives on top of a body already marked by colonial history. The act suggests a reclamation of her own sexuality, as one that acknowledges yet resists the imperatives of colonialism. Reclaiming the sexual body is a powerful assertion of subjectivity. In doing so, Korazon’s body becomes more than a canvas upon which narratives of power project themselves. Rather, Korazon inscribes it as the storehouse of memory, the seat of both pleasure and pain, and the vehicle by which she asserts subjecthood, in spite of and through hypersexualization.

1.5 Conclusion

This study of hypersexual Asian women in representation reveals that this terrain is one fraught with contestation. While movies such as *Priscilla: Queen of the Desert* and *The World of Suzie Wong* use hypersexuality to centralize the subjectivity of white men, films such as *Sally’s Beauty Spot* and *Mahal Means Love and Expensive* interrogate the masculinist gaze and illustrate that such representations undergird white patriarchy.
Lee’s and Shimizu’s texts suggest that the filmic tradition of Asian female hypersexuality represent the hidden wishes and fantasies of dominant culture as reflections of the real, rather than as fictions produced to rationalize colonial and/or economic exploitation.

However, revealing the sexism embedded in such narratives and raising up women through exposing the masculinist gaze is not enough. Doing so only reinscribes the subject-object dialectic that rests on sexual difference and assumes that the viewer is always male while the viewing object is female. Thus, removing men from the space of privilege and moving women into it does nothing to contest the logic that underwrites the machinery of filmic sexism. Grace Quek mismanages World’s Biggest Gangbang because the project contests assumed gender differences but fails to interrogate the mechanisms that construct the gaze as masculine. Seeking to reverse gender expectations, she engages in 251 consecutive sex acts in a 10-hour period. However, not only does she ultimately confirm gender stereotypes, she also perpetuates racist imaginings by embodying the hypersexual Asian woman of colonial fantasy. The sheer spectacle of the event underscores the extremity of her sexual feat. Thus, any sexual agency accorded to her appears monstrous and freakish. Coding female sexual power as monstrous underwrites the normativity of male sexual agency. Thus, by failing to interrogate the logics of gender difference, Quek’s project ultimately assimilates into a structure that iterates female objectification as natural.

On the other hand, by appropriating clips from The World of Suzie Wong, Helen Lee interrogates cinematic tradition and reveals how hypersexual representations of
Asian women undergird the privilege of white patriarchy. Lee illustrates that *The World of Suzie Wong* assumes a white male gaze that codes Asian women as the natural object of that gaze, thus undercutting the subjectivity of Asian women. *Sally’s Beauty Spot* scripts women as speaking subjects by giving the spectator a picture of female experience, perception, and events. There are no shot-reverse shots that narrativize Sally as complicit with her objectification. In fact, the only time the camera mimics the masculinist gaze is severely coded as the root of Sally’s psychological trauma. Thus, Lee’s rendering of sexuality and race creates new knowledges. Rather than coding Sally’s objectification as desirable, expected, or natural, Lee shows that such fetishism leaves a psychic wound.

In producing feminist film, redefining aesthetic and formal knowledge relies on articulating difference among women. To that end, de Lauretis argues that female differences of history, race, class, and sexuality require filmic representation (325-326). Celine Shimizu provides an example of female difference through *Mahal Means Love and Expensive*. The film exemplifies “Pinayism,” the branch of feminism that articulates the cultural concerns of “peminist” postcolonial and postmodern Filipinas and Filipina Americans. Using the language of sex, Shimizu represents the cultural trauma of two forms of Western aggression—Spanish imperialism and American cultural capitalism. Shimizu’s purposeful deployment of sex reclaims the sexual bodies once epistemically appropriated to serve colonial interests. In her article “Gender and Culture of Empire,” Ella Shohat explains how gender privileges within the filmic gaze speak to Eurocentric notions of power. Discussing gendered metaphors in film, Shohat illustrates how film
externalizes the colonialist imaginary by mapping the filmic East in sexual terms to reify and rationalize the masculine West’s imperial aggression. Such representations metaphorize the land as a female virgin that anticipates the seduction of the colonizer, who imparts only benefits through his “civilizing” touch. While the land is coded as a female awaiting seduction, the reverse is also true, as sexualized bodies of native women often symbolize the landscape (Shohat 670-71). Clearly, the discourse of sexuality has rhetorically rationalized colonialism. However, the sexual bodies in *Mahal* do not advance imperial interests or perform for the scopic pleasure of the Western gaze. Rather, they are desiring subjects taking pleasure on their own terms, outside of any colonial dialectic that compromises their sexual and/or racial subjectivities. Furthermore, for Shimizu, sex metaphorizes a form of inscription, a way to claim the missing histories that technologies of colonialism strive to elide. Thus, Shimizu filmically appropriates the sexuality of Asian American women to interrogate both Western exploitation as well as the systems of representation that use gender difference to facilitate colonialism.

Helen Lee and Celine Shimizu illustrate that engaging in the language of hypersexuality is vitally important. If women do not speak their own sexuality, then the dominant culture will speak it for them, and in terms that undergird its own privilege. Furthermore, since the discourses of sexuality and race inform one another, failure to interrogate sexism contributes to racist politics. Thus, Lee’s and Shimizu’s purposeful occupation of the hypersexual space serves three purposes. First, doing so inscribes female subjectivity by recognizing women as desiring subjects rather than simply objects of desire. Secondly, using sex to speak to race reveals how the histories of colonial
exploitation and Western militarism are written on the bodies of women. Finally, Lee’s and Shimizu’s deployment of hypersexuality also argue that since sex has been a tool of oppression, then reclaiming the sexual body is critical for liberation.
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Chapter 2: Performing Abjection and Shame: Stand-up Comedy and Margaret Cho’s Discourse of Identity

“Words should do the work of bombs.”—Margaret Cho

“To laugh is to be dominated.”—Jerry Seinfeld

2.0 Introduction

If to laugh is to be dominated, then stand-up comics who “kill” their audiences with punch lines are enacting a will to power. Margaret Cho asserts that she deploys her words to explode weapons of oppression, undermining racist, sexist, and heterosexist ideologies that seek to silence and degrade marginal subjects. For Jerry Seinfeld and Margaret Cho, stand-up comedy is more than mere entertainment; rather, the comedy stage is a space to attack hegemonic standards via discourse.

As Margaret Cho’s performances center upon redressing social abjection and championing the rights of disenfranchised communities, her work merits and requires critical investigation. Cho has often been recognized for her civil rights labor. According to her official biography, she received the First Amendment Award from the ACLU of Southern California as well as the Intrepid Award from the National Organization for Women. Organizations such as Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, Lambda Legal, the Asian American Legal Defense and Education fund, PFLAG, and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force have also honored Cho. Her
awards and honors suggest that her work is valued and recognized as having made a lasting impact on several communities.

Additionally, Cho does more than perform in comedy clubs. She also plays to audiences in concert halls, gay cruises, universities, and political rallies. Many of her performances circulate via CD and DVD, thus extending the event beyond the initial live performance. Not only has Cho authored two books of essays, I’m the One That I Want and I Have Chosen to Stay and Fight, she has also contributed to BITCHfest, a women’s studies reader. Furthermore, outside of the comedy club, Cho advocates for such causes such as free speech, immigrant rights, same-sex marriage, and a woman’s right to choose (Pearson 37). Clearly, Cho is an active agitator for political change outside of the comedy club as well as inside it.

Using Margaret Cho’s stand-up comedy shows and performances, this project strives to marry critical race discourses and genre theory to articulate the possibilities and the pitfalls of using physical performance to inscribe subjectivity. A study of stand-up comedy contributes to this discussion because redressing abjection is central to both stand-up comedy and critical race discourses. Simply put, comedians broker in injury. Stand-up comics make fools of themselves and make fun of the audience for profit, thus empowering themselves both rhetorically and financially. They transform their own injury into comedy, and by making other people the butt of their jokes, comedians give injury as well. Additionally, some comedians use their performances to lambast bigotry
and call attention to institutional injustice, thus making stand-up comedy a political tool for activism and change.

However, employing the rhetoric of victimage risks undermining Cho’s liberatory intent. Humor resides upon making fun of someone or some group. Joanne Gilbert notes, “Female comics deride patriarchal culture; Jewish comics deride WASP culture; African American comics deride white culture; gay and lesbian comics deride straight culture” (138). In Cho’s case, she uses her abjection to foreground the racism, sexism, and heterosexism of white patriarchy. This chapter investigates how Cho embodies the consequences of abjection and negotiates the burden of stereotype. Because she renders herself a victim patriarchal culture, her humor relies on deploying the power of powerlessness. While doing so enables her to use comedy to mount a social critique, it is also problematic because embracing the victim role concretizes the privilege of white patriarchy. In States of Injury, Wendy Brown discusses some of the pitfalls of affirming subjectivity through redressing disempowerment and disenfranchisement: “[O]stensibly emancipatory or democratic political projects [. . .] problematically mirror the mechanisms and configurations of power of which they are an affect and which they purport to oppose” (3). Therefore, Brown asserts that basing self-definition in response to social injury is counterproductive because responding to the dominant upholds the binary logic that keeps the subject disempowered.

Considering the disruptive power of stand-up comedy, this chapter articulates how Margaret Cho works from spaces of abjection to provide new strategies for
hegemonic resistance. Providing close readings from Margaret Cho’s stand-up comedy shows *Revolution*, *Notorious C.H.O.*, and *Beautiful*, I illustrate how Cho spectacularizes racial abjection, transforming shame into strength. Additionally, I will discuss how she produces alternative viewing practices that make racial injustice visible, while countering the flattening of Asian American subjectivity.

2.1 Stand-up Comedy as Genre

Stand-up comedy comes from a long tradition of social critique couched in humor. Comedians can be likened to fools and court jesters of old. The fool in *King Lear* exemplifies the power of humorous discourse in the royal court. As court jester, the fool makes light of Lear’s dysfunctional court, and in doing so foregrounds and publicizes the failings and imperfections that individuals keep hidden, satirizing these imperfections and offering them up for public consumption. Similarly, stand-up comics hold up a mirror to culture and show us our frailties and foibles. They are masters of satire that play the buffoon and deftly mock themselves to show us our own imperfections. Their weapon of choice is humor, and the laughter that stand-up comics elicit from the audience stems from self-recognition. The audience recognizes its own hypocrisies and imperfections as stand-up comics make light of them, and the tension produced by this pain of recognition is released through laughter. This laughter simultaneously empowers yet compromises the stand-up comic. Gilbert explains that humor is a rhetorical tool: “[Humor] arms speakers and disarms listeners, limiting options as it amuses, diverting while it deceives” (12). Because audiences pay stand-up comics to make them laugh, once the comedians
do so, the audience’s laughter absolves comedians of any offensive discourse required to get the laugh. Thus, this laughter grants stand-up comics the right to voice scathing social commentary with impunity. However, this laughter also compromises the weight of their critique. By their very nature, jokes are not meant to be taken seriously. A stand-up comic’s discourse, however incisive and incendiary, can always be written off since they are always “only joking.” Thus, stand-up comics work from within a contradictory and complicated tradition of couching social critique through the veils of humor and entertainment.

Stand-up comedy traffics in exploiting shifting power dynamics in society. Because comedians induce laughter via cultural critique, it stands to reason that humor is about power, namely who has it and who doesn’t. The terminology used to characterize the conventions of stand-up comedy is telling. The language of stand-up comedy is full of violence: comics “kill” the audience with their “punch lines” or “die” trying. Furthermore, humor does more than empower the comedian; humorous discourse in American comedy clubs also reflects the social hierarchy of the United States. In his article investigating the recuperative power of anger in Roseanne Barr’s work, Auslander notes, “Unsurprisingly, social scientists have uncovered evidence that people generally laugh along with those they perceive as more powerful than themselves and tend not to make jokes at their expense” (317). This phenomenon suggests that observing who laughs and who gets laughed at reveals which groups have social privilege and which do not. Thus, the unfettered, unrestricted discourse within a comedy club is a cultural barometer affording insight into power relations in contemporary American society.
Since stand-up comedy reveals who enjoys social privilege and power, then as masters of cultural discourse, comedians can either concretize existing power structures or labor to topple them. Margaret Cho employs the disruptive power of humor to contest racist, sexist, and heterosexist cultural ideologies.

Stand-up comics do more than comment on the ideologies and social groups in ascendancy; rather, the very act of comedic performance is a will to power. Comedians on stage deploy their humor to wield power over the audience, and eliciting laughter from the audience forces recognition of the stand-up comic’s discursive clout. Standing in the spotlight, the comedian is in the symbolic seat of power, which is metaphorized by the microphone—a surrogate phallus. Since the phallus is a symbol of hegemonic privilege, when marginal figures wield the symbolic phallus, it is a disruptive gesture that undermines the hierarchal norms that have been accepted as natural. Auslander asserts that when a female comic takes hold of the microphone, she styles herself as a self-constructed woman with a penis. Auslander explains, “By claiming to possess a metaphoric penis, each woman claims her right to the comic stage and challenges the cultural values that assert that women are not supposed to be aggressive and funny, are not supposed to have access to the power that humor represents” (330). Thus, by taking over the stage, female comics challenge the patriarchal institutions that script women as lesser citizens, and when they make the audience laugh, they beguile the audience into laughing at their own foibles as well as the institutions in which they participate.
Considering the genre of stand-up comedy in terms of how it redresses disempowerment is particularly noteworthy because marginality functions in unique and different ways on the comedic stage. While sociological marginality stigmatizes, the rhetorical marginality that forms the basis of many stand-up comedy routines is empowering. In fact, in the world of humor, marginality is a requirement. Just as ancient fools clad themselves in motley and painted their faces to mark their otherness, stand-up comics foreground their otherness because it enables them to criticize social mores with impunity. Gilbert explains, “Positioned as they are between at least two worlds, marginal individuals are afforded a unique perspective—a combination of the knowledge and insight of the insider with the critical attitude of the outsider” (4). Stand-up comics lampoon their weight, age, race, and desirability, thus marking themselves as deviant from the social norm and outside the realm of social privilege. Thus, on stage, marginality is not a disadvantage. Rather, the stigma usually associated with othered subjects can be rhetorically transformed into a critical lens. Stand-up comics who traffic in their marginality have the advantage of understanding the strengths and weaknesses of oppressive, dominant institutions. Made abject by virtue of their gender, race, or sexuality, outsiders develop techniques to observe and critique American life and culture with more nuanced sensitivity. Bell hooks explains the unique position of othered bodies: “It is essential . . . that black women recognize the special vantage point our marginality gives us and make use of this perspective to criticize the dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony as well as to envision and create a counter-hegemony” (quoted in Gilbert, 25). Hooks suggests that there are advantages to marginality. As marginal figures uniquely
situated to observe and critique culture with nuance and insight, stand-up comics make use of these (dis) advantages to empower themselves. Thus, the genre of stand-up comedy is uniquely situated in critical race discourse because within this genre, marginality operates in unique and sometimes counter-intuitive ways.

2.2 The Powers of Abjection

As mentioned, the rhetoric of a stand-up comedy show is often an attempt to redress injury. The sketch “The Ambitious Actress” in Cho’s show Revolution (2004) illustrates how she deploys humor and exploits the consequences of abjection to transform injury into advantage. To this end, I will first articulate how stand-up comedy is a theory of abjection often deployed by racialized bodies to counter marginalization. Then, I will consider how abjection of the Asian American body contributes to the concretization of the racial character of the United States and argue that Cho’s performance of abjection exploits the consequences and contradictions of this abjection.

Gaining mastery from within the space of abjection requires its recognition and performance. The genre of stand-up comedy enables marginal subjects to externalize their abjection, thus empowering them to transform injury to advantage. John Limon argues that stand-up comedy can be considered a theory of abjection. He says, “A theory of stand-up is a theory of what to do with your abjection at a moment of cultural history when abjection is startlingly pervasive” (8). Stand-up comedy is a direct response to abjection because it creates discursive spaces that enable marginalized subjects to redress their exclusion and make themselves visible. Furthermore, Limon says, “[T]o ‘stand up’
abjection is simultaneously to erect it and miss one’s date with it: comedy is a way of avowing and disavowing abjection” (4). Counter-intuitively, countering one’s abjection requires embracing it. Therefore, the genre of stand-up comedy is ideal for redressing abjection. On stage, comedians are rewarded for foregrounding their marginality and using it to ridicule the corrupt institutions that exclude them, thus exposing the machinery of racism. In this way, stand-up comedy becomes a weapon of empowerment for the marginal performer. Comics deploy humor to ridicule the notions that undergird racism, and in doing so, they contribute to the discourses aimed at dismantling such ideologies.

Margaret Cho counters her marginalization by making abjection visible and illustrating its psychological consequences. ‘Abjection’ is a psychoanalytic term often used in minority discourse theory to describe populations that are largely ignored and excluded from dominant culture, such as women, people of color, and the disabled. Although such subjects certainly make up a segment of society, they are liminal figures, relegated to the margins. In Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror*, she describes the abject in telling terms: “It lies there quite close, but it cannot be assimilated” (1). While the abject is necessary for the self as subject, it resides outside the normative realm and defies inclusion. Likewise, as a queer-identified, female, and raced body working from within the predominantly white media culture, Margaret Cho cannot be assimilated. As such, the substance of her comedy foregrounds her experiences as an abject body. Thus, in her sketch “An Ambitious Actress,” Margaret Cho performs abjection to illustrate the costs and psychological consequences of negotiating her marginality.
Comedians profit from their abjection by exposing who abjection benefits and how it does so. Specifically, Margaret Cho exploits the contradictions of Asian American abjection to fuel her humor. Understanding Asian American abjection is important because it illustrates how such bodies contribute to the formation of the national subject, and Cho’s stand-up comedy is useful in that it illustrates this process at work. Positioned as inassimilable aliens and marginalized for racial difference, Asian Americans are abjected from dominant culture and relegated to liminal spaces. Karen Shimakawa explains that this abjection is critical to constructing a coherent national identity. She says, “For U.S. Americanness to maintain its symbolic coherence, the national abject continually must be made present and jettisoned” (3). Thus, the marginality of Asian Americans is a product of U.S. Americanness; inscribing the United States as a white nation requires that the Asian American raced body be made present in order to render it as other and less American. Because Asian American subjectivity is one coin by which U.S. national and cultural identity is bought, Asian American abjection is inherently contradictory. A significant cultural constituency essential for shaping the national racial identity, Asian Americans are necessary to the dominant culture as marginal subjects because their otherness defines the hegemonic center. Relegating Asian Americans to liminal spaces helps define and regulate the normative. Therefore, concretizing the fiction of a white national identity requires the abjection of Asian American bodies.

Cho exposes the mechanism of abjection by relating her own experiences as an actress and argues that the lack of Asian American representation in Hollywood
emblematizes Asian American abjection. Both the form and content of her sketch “An Ambitious Actress” in Revolution illustrate not only the practice of abjection, but also the psychological costs for the Asian American subject. The narrative begins with Cho reminiscing about her childhood ambitions to become both a stand-up comic and an actress. She expresses a special fondness for period film, saying, “Whenever I see a petticoat and Helena Bonham Carter, tears come to my eyes. I love me some period film!” However, Cho points out that despite her desire, she has no place in this kind of film since her race precludes her from achieving her aspirations. It is then that her sketch takes a turn, and the audience catches a glimpse of the abject. Abjection is synonymous with abasement and groveling prostration, and Cho’s performance is exactly that. Repeatedly hunching down and straightening up, Cho writhes and flails on stage, refusing to meet the audience’s gaze. After bellowing her love for period film, Cho continues, “And I know that I will never be in them, no, no, I will never be, no, no, I will never, no, see, I will never be, no, no, I will never be--”. Her delivery is disjointed, frenetic, and delivered at a shotgun pace, while her vocal register is raspy and guttural. If abjection is the process of rejecting what is part of the self, then Cho’s flailing body appears to be attempting to violently cast out what is making her unfit for mainstream media—her raced body. Obviously, Cho cannot cast off the marked body that she inhabits, and her tortured convolutions externalize her psychic worry. Her inassimilable body makes it impossible for Cho to actuate her desire because the larger cultural body will not recognize her Asian body as part of its own.
The send up to the joke is a way for Cho to externalize her abjection, but it is the punch line that delivers her scathing denunciation of racist culture. According to Kristeva, the abject is a disruptive force. She asserts that it “disturbs identity, system, order” by its refusal to “respect borders, positions, [and] rules” (4). Watching Cho perform the abject is an uncomfortable, jarring, and disruptive experience. As Cho flails and shrieks, the audience responds to her performance of abjection with a tense, dead silence. Cho draws out the tension for an excruciating thirty seconds and then breaks it with a powerful gesture. Abruptly ceasing her manic flailing and guttural, raspy monologue of exclusion and alienation, Cho drops to the floor, rolls on to her side, assumes a posture of extreme passivity, and delivers the punch line, saying, “Unless I’m laying on my side smoking some opium.” With this, the audience explodes with laughter. The reasons behind the laughter are significant. Cho confronts the audience with a recognizable stereotype, and after the discomfort induced by her previous performance, this recognition is comforting, even welcome. Why does Cho’s performance of alienation evoke such hilarity? Rachel Lee’s discussion regarding Cho’s David Carradine sketch in *I’m the One that I Want* is useful here. Lee suggests, “Cho delivers what might be considered a non-joke: the punch line is only funny because it isn’t funny. Or rather, the audience laughs because Cho tells them something they already know but have actively tried to disremember” (117). Similarly, when Cho displays her Asian body in such a stereotypical pose, she confronts the audience with a familiar, recognizable trope that it has ignored or tried to forget. By invoking this laughter, Cho forces the audience to reflect on the social implications behind the lack of
Asian representation and interrogates the motivations around why the public ignores and disremembers that lack.

Margaret Cho masterfully exploits the contradictions of occupying the space of abjection. Cho illustrates that for her to be comprehensible and visible, she must adopt abject stereotypical personas that are comfortable for the dominant culture to witness. Bearing the weight of these racist expectations deforms Cho’s language. She erupts in nearly incomprehensible and repetitive speech that articulates her own revilement and self-loathing. Shimakawa’s close reading of Chin’s *The Year of the Dragon* explains the dynamic in play: “[C]ontfronted with their abject counterparts or representations, the ‘real’ Asian American characters register the distance between themselves and those representations either by their inability to communicate across that divide or by degenerating into vulgarity and (seeming) meaninglessness” (88). Shimakawa’s close reading revolves around the gap between “real” Asian American subjects and the stereotypes they are expected to fulfill. She also discusses the violent consequences that result from attempting to reconcile the two. Although Shimakawa focuses on the genre of theatre, her argument is still applicable to this discussion because Margaret Cho’s stand-up comedy is premised upon similar notions, namely Asian American bodies performing on stage and the barriers they must negotiate in order to be understood. Therefore, Cho’s language is very symptomatic of the phenomenon that Shimakawa describes. Cho’s shrieks are raspy and guttural, and her repetitions of “never” and failure to complete her sentence or finish her thought are reminiscent of a scratched broken record unable to escape its groove. Furthermore, her words cease to convey meaning.
Instead, her physical performance comes to the foreground to speak the psychological consequences of her abjection. Shimakawa notes, “[W]ithin that space of abjection [. . .] language is deformed, debased, or simply ineffective” (89). It is not Cho’s words that communicate; rather it is her use of debased language. Her inability or refusal to articulate herself through words and her violent performance communicate her rage and frustration at the racist limitations that she must endure as an Asian American performer. The sketch continues as Cho enumerates the roles available to her—manicurist, shopkeeper, model student, and Oriental Bond girl, and argues that outside these peripheral roles, Asian Americans are invisible in U.S. media culture and only serve to underwrite white privilege. However, to leave these contained spaces of abjection risks becoming even less visible, since refusing to enact stereotypes risks losing her already limited degree of visibility and comprehensibility.

Furthermore, through her experimental use of language, Cho demonstrates some alternative techniques to counter Asian American invisibility. Cho’s performance illustrates that as an Asian American, she is only recognizable when she performs the expected subordinate roles and embodies the character of the abject other. As she breaks out of Asian American abjection, Cho abjects her very Koreanness in favor of claiming a different form of otherness. Throughout Cho’s performance, she switches back and forth from uninflected speech patterns and ethnicized linguistic codes. Thus, her rejection of unmarked speech underscores her refusal to accept her abjection and follow a path of assimilation and subordination. This resistance to “talk right” suggests an awareness that acceptance of normative linguistic standards signifies an embrace of the sovereignty of
white linguistic agency. For instance, as soon as Cho begins to speak about her limited access to films roles because of her Asian body, she adopts black cadences in her speech. Her telling switch to emulate black vocal patterns illustrates the invisibility of Asian Americans in the cultural discourse about race in the United States. Speaking about this issue in Chin’s *The Year of the Dragon*, Shimakawa says, “That black and white are the only option from which he has to choose illustrates the way in which for Chin, Asian Americanness, as abject, simply does not directly figure in the subject / object relation of white / black race relations in U.S. American verbal discourse” (92). If race relations in the United States are defined in either black or white terms, then Asian Americans have no place in this equation. This invisibility limits options for linguistic and cultural expression. While there are definite markers of black speech, there are none that mark Asian American speech as specific signifiers of culture, discounting the alienating Asian-accented speech of stereotype. Thus, for Cho to have agency and power as other than an emulator of whiteness, she assumes a definite and powerful linguistic identity. However, because none exist to mark Asian American as separate and viable, the linguistic identity she assumes is not Asian American, but of another raced group. Thus, as the abject Asian American, Cho has no access to a culturally comprehensible language of resistance and thus chooses to adopt the speech patterns of African Americanness. Therefore, she performs a linguistic identity marker that is recognizable in the black / white paradigm of American race relations. In doing so, she attains some degree of visibility and makes her voice heard.
However, Cho’s appropriation of African American inflections is a faulty solution to the lack of Asian American visibility. While she makes herself recognizable through “talking black,” doing so doesn’t make her black. Ultimately, Cho’s strategy provides her with a voice, but it remains a voice that she cannot fully claim. Furthermore, since African Americans also occupy a space of abjection in the U.S. cultural imaginary (albeit a different one), Cho only succeeds in moving from one position of subordination to another. She negates Asian American invisibility by appropriating a recognizable marker of African Americanness, but in doing so, she makes herself subject to the limitations and restrictions of blackness as well.

2.3 The Agentive Possibilities of Shame

Critical race scholars are invested in the space of injury and possibilities for empowerment. Many discuss methods for redressing injury, while others problematize working from a position of abjection, arguing that doing so undergirds the power of the hegemonic center. In Writing Diaspora, Rey Chow says, “The “minor” cannot rid itself of its “minority” status because it is that status that gives it its legitimacy; support for the “minor” however sincere, always becomes support for the center” (167-168). Thus, since Margaret Cho’s humor often advocates for marginalized groups, her emphasis on otherness risks locking her inside spaces of disempowerment. In her discussion of class consciousness as an ideological weapon, Rey Chow posits that such oppositional discourse “offers a ‘critical edge’ only insofar as it permanently regenerates the reality of social injustice rather than its dissolution” (168). Thus, if Margaret Cho’s brand of
discourse counters marginalization by validating it, then the mechanics of her rhetoric may reentrench the very systems her humor strives to disrupt. Cho’s rhetoric does speak from a space of marginality, often publicizing her racial shame to fuel her comedy. However, the way Cho purposefully erects her shame also serves to parlay her abjection into coalition building and creating support for her political platform.

Ann Cvetkovich’s work sheds light on the possibilities of shame. In An Archive of Feelings, Cvetkovich interrogates traditional takes on shame and suggests that shame needs to be depathologized since preserving its very negativity can be productive. Additionally, shame can be a critical element in how politicized identities develop, so it needs to be theoretically depathologized before nuanced thinking about subjectivity can occur. Cvetkovich explains, “[I]f one adopts a queer and depathologizing approach to trauma and refuses the normal as an ideal or real state, the trauma of immigration need not be ‘healed’ by a return to the ‘natural’ nation of origin or assimilation into a new one” (121). In short, traditional shame narratives script shame as negative and assert that traumatized subjects must let go of their shame in order to heal. However, operating under models of loss and the desire for the return to normalcy perpetuates thinking in opposition, which is not useful as it pathologizes shame, a component of marginal subjectivities. Instead, Cvetkovich suggests that the normative should be removed from its space of privilege so that shame can be read differently. Many raced subjects feel ashamed because they have been rendered abject, so Cvetkovich urges the need to depathologize shame in order to complicate discourses of subjectivity.
Margaret Cho recounts incidents of shame, not only to fuel her stand-up comedy, but to model coalition building between marginalized groups. In her show Notorious C.H.O., she illustrates how her alliances with the queer population inspire her to embrace her abjection, rather than allow it to cripple her. She recounts that as a child, she aspired to become an actress, but because of the lack of Asian representation in American media, her dreams were drastically limited in scope. In high-pitched, earnest tones, she portrays herself as a youth, longing for a career in Hollywood, saying, “Maybe I could play a hooker in something!” Pretending that she gazes in a mirror, practicing for future acting jobs, Cho pipes, “Sucky fucky two dollar! Me love you long time!” Clearly, Cho references Hollywood traditions of hypersexual Asian/American women in representation, and her seeming willingness to collude with such provides shameful evidence of the intensity of her desire for acceptance within a racist system. Furthermore, her childish hopefulness is heartbreaking, as is the sadly small scope of her ambition. These factors magnify the shame of rejection that she shares with the audience in a moment. She continues to relate that once she is old enough to pursue a career in acting, her raced body narrows her options. Agent after agent urges her to give up her dream and accept the reality of Asian/American invisibility. However, Cho refuses to surrender, sharing her sources of inspiration and illustrating the power of coalitions and community.

Cho uses shame to bridge different types of abjection, thus agitating for coalition building between separate political camps. Though Cho is abjected by virtue of her raced body, she draws strength and inspiration from her two best friends, Alan and Jeremy,
who she describes as “teenaged drag queens.” As such, Alan and Jeremy embody multiple types of abjection, as they must contend with both homophobic and sexist oppression. Cho says, “Alan and Jeremy would get into fights at school everyday, and they would kick ass. It was like ‘Crouching Drag Queen Hidden Faggot.’” While Cho clearly references the Asian blockbuster of similar name in order to garner laughs, Cho’s purposeful hybridization of the queer and Asian/American population foregrounds how her own alliance with her queer colleagues provides her with an immense sense of support and strength. She relates Alan’s response to oppression and steps into his character. As Alan, Cho says, “They call me faggot. They call me sissy. I say, ‘Oh yeah? Well you forgot model and actress, so fuck you too!’” Clearly, his words shout his refusal to accept degradation via the oppressor’s terminology, declaring that the shaming epithets lack the scope to describe his subjectivity in all its depth and complexity. Interestingly, his response suggests that he doesn’t necessarily repudiate the epithets intended to shame him. Rather, he refuses to be contained by them, insisting that he is so much more. Thus, he asserts the right to complicate the discourse by contributing additional layers of meaning to the terms rendering his subjectivity.

Furthermore, Cho’s purposeful embodiment of queerness suggests that Alan’s words of empowerment resonate with her, despite the fact that his response was intended to counter a different form of abjection. Even though her shame stems from her racialization, Cho has clearly made his words part of her own discourse of strength and survival. In this way, Cho binds together the two forms of shame and transforms them into a shared discourse of survival. While Cho does not rewrite the shame as positive,
Cho suggests that the coalitions built on shared abjection certainly are, as they provide sources of support and empowerment for both marginalized groups. Additionally, Cho erects the shame to salvage the pride of narrative agency, which gives her some control over the pain of abjection. Retelling incidents of shame to fuel her comedy troubles her categorization as a passive victim of racism, since purposefully recreating them for the audience suggests that she has power over them. While this tactic does not neutralize the pain of abjection, it does give her some narrative agency over it, if only to herself and her audience.

2.4 Reclaiming Authority through the Body

As a determined subject, Cho negotiates the material effects of her raced body. This abjection and the shame it induces are central themes of her comedy. As she can escape neither her raced body nor the system that classifies her as alien and other, Cho finds subjectivity through alternate forms of self-inscription. Embracing art forms such as belly dance and tattooing, Cho produces additional layers of meaning that disrupt the hegemonic ideologies that seek to contain her. Therefore, while she cannot control the ideologies that marginalize her, Cho finds agency through taking ownership of her body and altering the way that it signifies, thus voicing her history on her own terms.

Cho’s abjection stems from more than race. To the youth and size-obsessed Hollywood media, Cho’s full-figured and aging body codes her as unattractive and undesirable. Her 2008 show *Beautiful* explores several incidents in which Cho works through the same of experiencing size and age discrimination. From the disc jockey who
queries, “What would you do if you woke up beautiful,” thus blatantly revealing his poor opinion of her appearance, to network executives who castigate her for baring her stomach in public and revealing her lack of tone and muscularity, Cho is constantly confronted with her failure to meet hegemonic standards of female beauty. However, Cho appropriates these incidents of shame, mobilizing them to mount an ideological critique of racism and sexism. In Beautiful, Cho recounts a radio interview in which a disc jockey asked her how she would feel if she “were beautiful,” and queries Cho, “What if you woke up and you were blonde, and you had blue eyes, and you were five foot eleven, and you weighed a hundred pounds, and you were beautiful?” His question clearly reveals his assumption of white privilege, as his judgment is based upon Anglocentric physical criteria. Cho reveals his racism and misogyny and responds, “Well, I probably wouldn’t get up because I’d be too weak to stand.” In an aside to the audience, Cho continues, “I felt very sorry for him because if that’s the only kind of person that you think is beautiful, you must not see very much beauty at all in the world.” Aside from his Eurocentric criteria privileging Anglo features, the disc jockey’s question reveals his underlying misogyny, and Cho reveals his limited and Eurocentric worldview. Furthermore, Cho’s response depathologizes shame by illustrating how it stems from a refusal to adhere to, and thus confirm, hegemonic criteria. Revealing that such standards are racist and misogynist transforms her refusal to conform into a political statement. If the shame is a product of cultural abjection, then the shame is a thing to celebrate, as it evidences a refusal to collude with oppressive systems that perpetuate the degradation of women by holding them to destructive, unhealthy, and racist standards.
While Cho erects her abjection through stand-up comedy, she also immerses herself in feminist spaces of empowerment such as burlesque and belly dance. Within these feminist spaces, Cho’s body is not reviled as fleshy and unattractive. Rather, it is the very fullness of her figure that renders it as both beautiful and desirable. Thus, Cho embraces burlesque and belly dance, asserting that such art forms are feminist for celebrating the diversity of the female body. In her weblog, Cho describes her initial response to the Cairo Carnivale, an annual belly dancing convention in Glendale, and her language emphasizes the event’s feminism. She says, “There were women of all ages, all shapes and sizes dancing for each other [. . . .] Here, what is considered excess flesh by mainstream Hollywood standards is beautiful.” Thus, Cho participation in burlesque and belly dance is a repudiation of mainstream Hollywood and the unhealthy and misogynist standards by which it measures femininity. Rather than judging women by virtue of their thinness and youth, such alternative art forms celebrate the female body in its infinite variety of shapes, sizes, and colors. Thus, it is noteworthy that Cho performs an amalgam of belly dance and burlesque on stage. If her past is riddled with shaming incidents in which she was castigated for showing her unviable body, her purposeful near-nude display of her body is meaningful. When she dances near topless, wearing only decorative arm bands and nipple jewelry above her waist, it is a flagrant visual declaration of self-affirmation in the face of an industry that judged her as ugly, alien, and other. When Cho dances, her purposeful movement speaks her refusal to accept such silencing, misogynist standards. Rather, she transforms the discourses of her body. As she proudly displays it on stage as a thing of beauty, she foregrounds not only the grace
of her movement, but also the pride, bravery, and self-worth that the gestures requires. Thus, for Cho, dance functions as a strategy of resistance, one that enables her to withstand shaming discourses.

While the celebration of the near-nudity in burlesque and belly dance make comparisons with pornography inevitable, Cho asserts that such art forms prioritize the female gaze. According to Teresa de Lauretis, feminist texts strive to address the audience as female, thus exploding the assumption that women are the natural objects of the male gaze. De Lauretis argues that recognizing the feminine redefines aesthetic and formal knowledges about women (321). De Lauretis says, “the effort and challenge now are how to effect another vision: to construct other objects and subjects of vision, and to formulate the conditions of representability of another social subject” (324). Thus, de Lauretis suggests that addressing the female spectator and prioritizing her scopic pleasure is central to the feminist project. Like de Lauretis, Cho centralizes the feminine. She argues that celebration of the female body in all its shapes and colors is feminist. Speaking on burlesque, Cho says, “Being able to celebrate the female form is feminism in its most genuine and heartfelt incarnation.” Some argue that the female nudity of burlesque is pornographic and hence antifeminist, but Cho points out the argument’s misogyny, as it assumes the priority of the male gaze. Cho says, “When some ‘feminists’ cry out against burlesque, claiming that it supports the ‘male gaze’ and call it ‘porn’ they are merely revealing their inherent misogyny. The ‘male gaze,’ although present at burlesque events is so far outnumbered by the ‘female gaze’ that someone might suspect that we are lesbian separatists” (“Burlesque,” Cho). Thus, by addressing the spectator as
female, art forms such as belly dance and burlesque trouble the male gaze and assert the priority of the female viewer, therefore prioritizing the scopic pleasure of women in women.

Additionally, Cho asserts her subjectivity through the practice of tattooing. Her public discussion on her online weblog reveals that for Cho, tattooing is much more than art designed to enhance the aesthetics of her body. Rather, tattoos are a form of inscription that enables her to author her own subjectivity, thus reclaiming her Asian/American female body from the racist narratives that strive to contain it. In most recent years, Cho has become a devotee of tattooing. Her stomach, back, thighs, ribs, arms, and legs display the work of prominent tattoo artists such as Craig Jackman, Eddy Deutsche, and Mike Davis. Speaking in the language of visual symbols, each tattoo writes her subjectivity in empowering terms. From the Medusa on her chest to her tribute to a lost loved one, Cho’s tattoos visualize her life’s triumphs and traumas, rendered in permanent ink on the landscape of her body. In her online weblog, Cho explains how tattoos double as a visual assertion of ownership and agency, saying, “I love tattooed women, maybe because they are uncontrollable, they are themselves to the point of drawing symbols of their power on their skin. Talk about owning your own body, being in your body, claiming yourself.” Thus, Cho consciously speaks her subjectivity through the language of visual signs. Because Cho’s tattoos emblematize her life story, her decision to externalize her experiences and mark her body with such permanence is a profound gesture of self-acceptance and self-claiming. Just as she chooses the symbols inscribed on her body, Cho scripts her life as a series of choices, writing herself as the
author and agent of her own subjectivity, despite her determined status as a race and
gendered body.

Thus, tattooing enables Cho to speak her body. As this project has argued, the
bodies of Asian/American women are often rendered as blank canvases that reflect the
racist fantasies of dominant culture. However, by using tattoos to reclaim the narratives
that determine her raced and gendered body, Cho’s purposeful self-inscriptions are
strategies for resistance. In her stand-up comedy show *Beautiful*, Cho jokes that her
tattoos enable her to divert attention from her physical signs of aging. She says, “I am
just going to get tattooed over my whole body. I’m not even going to get plastic surgery;
I’m just going to keep getting tattooed so that no one’s gonna even notice my wrinkles.
They’ll be like ‘Oh my God. Where is that turtle going?’” While the tattoos distract the
gaze from her aging body, her tattoos also complicate other codes that script her via the
visuality of gender and race. Cho still inhabits the body of an Asian/American woman,
but her tattoos impose another level of semiotics that disrupt normative discourses that
render her as marginal and alien. Thus, while Cho remains subject to the narratives that
determine the bodies of Asian/American women, Cho uses self-inscription to reclaim her
body as a landscape that does more than reflect the racist fantasies of the dominant.
Rather, her body speaks her story on her own terms.
2.5 Conclusion: The Power of Feminist Comedy

To be a stand-up comic is to generate laughter. When the audience laughs, the performer on stage enacts a will to power over the audience, forcing it to engage and respond to comedic discourse. At times, the comedian makes the audience itself the butt of the joke, and it laughs in rueful recognition of its own foibles and human imperfections. In Margaret Cho’s comedy, Cho erects her own experiences of shame, and finds agency through its appropriation and re-authorship. Thus, when Cho erects her abjection to make the audience laugh, the laughter affirms and validates her subjectivity, and Cho derives strength from her shame. In “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Helene Cixous intimates that laughter is transgressive, liberatory, and can function as disruptive acts of rebellion. She asserts, “Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wrench partitions, classes and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word ‘silence’” (256). As this chapter has illustrated, Cho speaks through her body to incite change. Whether she flails on stage to illustrate the price of abjection or dances in proud physical display as a flagrant repudiation of misogynist standards, Cho speaks her body to activate authority over her own subjectivity, disarming the discourses that seek to contain it. When the audience laughs, it is the ultimate affirmation of self-worth, one that transforms her shame into strength. Thus, Cho uses the disruptive power of laughter as a transgressive force for change.
Margaret Cho’s stand-up comedy contributes to coalition building, as sharing laughter produces a sense of community. In his investigation into comedy as a form of social mediation, Lawrence Mintz points out that a type of social unification takes place when people enjoy comedy together. Henri Bergson and Kenneth Burke call this phenomenon “the communion of laughter” (73). Thus, when the audience laughs as Cho visualizes her abjection, the laughter speaks the audience’s empathy and mutual recognition as it recognizes the mutuality of their experiences. Thus, Cho’s comedy creates communities of shared belief and mutual support. Cho’s audience is comprised of multiple populations, such as members of the queer community, people of color, particularly Asian/Americans, tattoo enthusiasts, and dancers of all shapes and sizes. However, when the audience laughs together, these individuals come together and become one community, sharing their shame with empathy and mutual recognition. When Margaret Cho’s audience listens to her recount shaming incidents, it dismantles and interrogates the discourses that render her as abject by virtue of her difference. They recognize that despite the various forms of abjection that they experience as individuals, there is a common thread to find—their laughter renders them as survivors of exclusion. Thus, it is their very difference that binds them together, forging them into a mosaic of diversity. Furthermore, this community contributes to depathologizing the shame of abjection. Since their shame signals their difference from the normative, the shame becomes a source of pride. As part of this collective, their difference becomes a source of pride and strength, as it distinguishes them from oppressive systems that render their difference as alien. Thus, the laughter that Cho induces creates a community of
empowerment, one that recognizes the diversity of shame, while simultaneously finding unity through it.

The temporary alliances forged through laughter contribute to coalition building, and this spirit of community opens up new vistas of social possibility. In her discussion of theatre, Tiffany Ana Lopez argues that plays make “critical witnesses” of the audience, encouraging individual members to thoughtfully engage with dramatic spectacle, thus forging pathways for productive political change. Lopez says, “By slowing down and intensifying a story, theater compels audiences to listen to people they might easily pass by and to look at things normally left unquestioned. Finally, theater fundamentally challenges audiences to think about themselves as part of a larger community the moment seats are taken in an auditorium” (68). For Lopez, the temporary community forged within the theatre foregrounds the audience’s stakes in the larger communities outside. As critical witnesses, the audience recognizes and considers its own collusion with the injustices that the plays purposefully interrogate through spectacle. Stand-up comedy makes critical witnesses of the audiences as well. On one hand, comedians provoke laughter from the audience, often by making their own foibles the butt of the joke, and the audience laughs at itself in rueful recognition of their imperfection. Thus, stand-up comedy enables audiences to be both witnesses and active participants in the comedian’s discourse. Furthermore, while Cho shares her shame to get laughs, the laughter she provokes comes from a variety of complex places. For some, it is the rueful laughter of self-recognition; a few others laugh in derision. However, for much of her population, Cho visualizes the shame of abjection that many share in some form. Cixous argues that
laughter is transgressive, and as such, the laughter that Cho provokes for them is a powerful declaration of validation and presence. The laughter proves that while shame wounds, it does not always destroy. Thus, the laughter becomes a powerful affirmation of survival, a joyful shout that the audience can be shamed, but it cannot be silenced.

Perhaps most importantly, the genre of stand-up comedy facilitates direct calls to political action with force lacking from other genre forms. As mentioned, the discourse in the comedy club unifies the audience into one cohesive community, depathologizing their shame and voicing their empathy with one another and the comedian on stage via laughter. The success of stand-up comedians depends on inducing audience identification. By the end of the night, good stand-up comics have the audience hanging on their every word and laughing to their cues, proving that comedy is a will to power. However, what can comedians accomplish with this power? Stand-up comics like Margaret Cho use this power to agitate for political change. At the end of her show Revolution, Cho says, “I think that if racial minorities, sexual minorities, feminists, [...] hell, all liberals—If we all got together and had this big ‘too much information,’ ‘go there’ voice [...] that would equal power, and that power would equal change, and that change would equal a revolution.” Clearly, Cho purposefully recognizes the coalitions formed within the comedy club, and she urges the audience to unify and revolutionize the systems that keep them marginal. Thus, Cho strives to transform her loyal fan base into political operatives through her humor. Not only does she enable her audience to see itself with new critical insight, but Cho induces a visceral response from her fans that generates a buzz of excitement; people carry her words with them outside of the comedy
club, spreading her counter-normative discourse masked as humor. Audience members retell their favorite witticisms, and when they share their favorite moments of humor with others, they extend the community forged in the comedy club to the communities outside of it. Thus, stand-up comedy is an important genre for consideration within critical race discourses and genre studies because it directly contributes to the coalition building that leads to productive social change.
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Chapter 3: Romancing the State: Spectacularizing the Female Body in Jessica Hagedorn’s play *Dogeaters*

3.0 Introduction: Spectacle and the Philippines

One of the ways that a nation locates its cultural identity is through narratives of colonial history. One of the most common sayings in the Philippines illustrates the degree to which imperialist spectacle informs the national character: “The Philippines spent 400 years in a Spanish convent and 50 years in Hollywood.” This pithy expression succinctly summarizes the colonial history of the Philippines and the ideological apparatus that made it possible. While Spain used Catholicism and the spectacle inherent in religious ceremonial service (i.e. Catholic Mass) to make subjects of Philippine natives, the United States used spectacle and popular media to rationalize American presence and its cultural “superiority” of the United States, thus paving the way for imperialism.

In both the play and novel forms of *Dogeaters*, Jessica Hagedorn interrogates the function of spectacle within the political economy of the Philippines. How are public figures such as movie stars spectacularized to serve a political function? How does the spectacle undergird institutional agendas, and what does this mean for the consumers of media? Many scholars consider these themes in their critical investigations of Hagedorn’s novel *Dogeaters*. In *Race and Resistance*, Viet Nguyen interrogates gender and commodity to illustrate how colonial discourse relies on heterosexist spectacles of melodrama. Myra Mendible also discusses melodrama and spectacle in her article
“Desiring Images,” doing so in ways that foreground Hagedorn’s postmodern appropriation of filmic convention. While Hagedorn’s novel attracts much critical attention, fewer scholars consider the theatrical version of Dogeaters. Lisa Lowe performs a close reading of the scene “Sex Show Montage” in her article “Memories of Colonial Modernity.” However, her article is based on the 1998 La Jolla Playhouse production, which varies significantly from the 2001 Public Theater production. The latter forms the basis of my own interrogation, as it is, in Hagedorn’s words a “leaner and meaner” text that dispenses with the 1959 scenes and focuses on the Manila of 1982 (viii). Nguyen’s, Mendible’s, and Lowe’s careful scholarship certainly inform this chapter. This chapter contributes to the present scholarship by foregrounding the notion of spectatorship and the gaze in the play Dogeaters, a text often undeservedly overlooked in favor of the novel. Thus, the chapter consists of three close readings of scenes from the play, two of which do not appear in the novel form of Dogeaters.

Illustrating the horrific consequences of becoming part of a society of the spectacle, Hagedorn, perhaps counter-intuitively, uses theatre, another form of spectacle, to mount her critique of public complacency. The space of the theatre facilitates an address of audience in ways that foreground spectatorial complicity. Theatre produces participants out of spectators, making the viewer part of the play and inducing a deep investment in the world of the text. Robert Leach explains that unlike a novel or film, a play is not a finished product; it is alive and moving in front of the spectator. As such, the boundaries between the play and the consumer dissolve in the theatrical space. Arguing that while the spectator is a member of the audience, he is simultaneously part of
the performance, Leach says, “[B]ecause the performance is being made in the presence of the spectator, the spectator must be contributing to the making and the meaning” (172). As a maker of meaning, the spectator becomes part of the text, thus developing a close investment in the world of the play and the playwright’s message. The intimacy of this response makes theatre a very useful space for staging counter narratives that produce political awareness. Since theatre induces a more direct link between the text and the audience, theatre creates a sense of personal responsibility; thus it moves critical thinking to a more visceral level—one in which the individual members of the audience are more likely to take political action, transforming them from spectators to actors.

Therefore, the play is more capable of arousing the audience’s sympathies through its dramatic impact. In effect, theatre creates a space for critical witnessing, a mechanism that serves the function of social change. In her work on Latina/o and African American prison narratives, Tiffany Ana Lopez defines the term “critical witnessing” as one that induces an engaged critical reading of any art form that so moves the consumer to forge a path toward social change. Lopez argues that plays are especially powerful tools for positioning the audience as critical witnesses. Arguing that audiences literally inhabit the positions of witnesses, Lopez explains, “By slowing down and intensifying a story, theater compels audiences to listen to people they might easily pass by and to look at things normally left unquestioned. Finally, theater fundamentally challenges audiences to think about themselves as part of a larger community the moment seats are taken in an auditorium” (68). Therefore, Lopez argues that the dramatic space is one that not only articulates the unspeakable, but also gives it life through its physical
representation. In doing so, the audience must consider and interrogate their own complicity with what they witness on the stage. Regardless of whether the people in the room are actors on the stage or spectators in their seat, all become aware of their place in a larger world community, one in which atrocities are committed on a routine, every-day basis. Thus, by presenting spectacle in the dramatic space, Hagedorn foregrounds political atrocities and asserts that they cannot be ignored.

Since a play positions the audience as critical witnesses, theatre is more capable of making direct calls to action. Spectators of art dealing with violence and trauma receive these stories and bear witness to the characters’ traumas. Furthermore, Lopez explains how critical witnesses to violence are characterized by a sense of collective violation: “Critical witnesses understand themselves to be distinctly implicated in the fate of the person or persons they are watching” (76). Recognizing that the performers on stage are representative of real, live bodies that endure literal and institutionally-sanctioned acts of violence, the audience is reminded that they are members of a larger world community that ignores these traumas, and this refusal of awareness makes them complicit in these atrocities. Art teaches its audience to see themselves in a different light with critical insight. However, because the dramatic space lends itself to both community building and induces a visceral, personal reaction to art, audience members are also compelled more forcefully to forge a path towards social progress.

Hagedorn’s play *Dogeaters* can be narrativized as a warning against the stupefying effects of media immersion. In *Dogeaters*, characters mediate their
relationship to the surrounding world through spectacle. A spectacle is a display offered up for public consumption meant to elicit a particular audience response, such as horror, arousal, amusement, or guilt. Therefore, products of mass media such as films, television, and commercials exemplify spectacle, and *Dogeaters* chronicles how such circulate, informing the viewers’ articulation of self. From Rio’s fixation with Jane Wyman and Romeo Rosales’ self-conscious mimicry of James Dean, characters internalize spectacle to mediate their own subjectivities. However, the spectacle also generates ways of looking that produces certain types of audience. Thus, this chapter investigates how Hagedorn constructs the spectator through her presentation of reality, identity, and history. Thus, while illustrating how spectacle affirms the agenda of the ruling class through its manipulation of the gaze, the chapter also interrogates how Hagedorn’s manipulation of spectacle produces new ways of looking that resist social domination. Furthermore, the histories of Spanish colonialism and American imperialism are incorporated on the bodies of Philippine women in *Dogeaters*. If the Philippine body functions as a canvas upon which ideologies of power are projected, then this discussion locates ways of reclaiming the body through spectacle. Foregrounding Hagedorn’s spectacularization of female sexuality and desire, this chapter interrogates how she reappropriates such images to resist containment.

3.1 Spectacle in the Philippines

The American conquest of the Philippines relied on discourses of gender, race, and sex to rationalize US imperialism. Many of these discourses employed spectacle to
affirm the heterosexist and patriarchal ideologies that upheld the logic of Western expansion. In the late nineteenth century, the United States used acts of imperial aggression to define itself in terms of masculinity and virility. In Colonizing Filipinas, Mary Elizabeth Holt argues that the Philippines became a space to demonstrate American virility and aggression. Additionally, casting the Philippine natives as “savage” in counterpoint to “civilized” Americans confirmed the notion of American superiority through casting Philippine difference as savage and alien. Holt argues that the Philippines was the perfect ground for articulating and constructing American masculinity: “These ideologies sailed with white Americans across the ocean to that new international frontier in whose environment collective male virility could be renewed—the Philippine Islands” (50-51). Therefore, the logic of colonialism relies on discourses of gender, inscribing the American character through tropes of aggressive masculinity.

As the US was figured as masculine, the Philippines and its inhabitants were coded as feminine, thus rationalizing US domination of the Philippines through patriarchal and heterosexist discourse. Representations of Filipinos from that time period are gendered feminine. Holt quotes Mary H. Fee’s letters back to the United States that describe Filipinos. These documents provided one of the few available lenses by which to understand the Filipino people, and thus these representations created a “truth” that rationalized Western exploitation. Holt summarizes Fee’s observations thusly: “[Filipinos] pride is feminine; they are ‘intuitive’ as are women; sexually jealous and sensitive about rank and worldly possessions, supposedly only womanly attributes” (20-21). Fee continues to characterize Filipinos in gendered terms. She calls Filipinos
mentally inferior and passive, suggesting that they do not know what is best and require guidance. Figured as feminine, the discourse positioned the Philippines as requiring guidance and protection from the masculine United States. As the category of Woman was appropriated to feminize the Philippine nation and ideologically rationalize its subordinate position to the masculine United States, the literal bodies of Filipinas were sexualized to further fix the Philippines as object to the Western gaze. Therefore, considering spectacles of female sexuality in *Dogeaters* reveals how Hagedorn uses spectacle to explode the very narratives that rationalize and undergird Western exploitation in the Philippines.

While the imperial West deploys gender and spectacle to rationalize acts of colonialism, the Filipino ruling class also uses it to keep the citizenry under governmental control. To illustrate, Mendible explains how the Marcoses used spectacle to pacify the people. Mendible asserts, “[I]deological production is inextricably linked to image production, and spectacle remains a primary mechanism through which state powers project the appearance of consensual rule” (302). The Marcos regime cleverly crafted images meant to keep the populace as passive observers, uninterested in the politics of the day. Vicente Rafael explains the mechanism of spectacle, asserting that the Marcoses invoked themselves as the Father and Mother of the Filipino people. Ferdinand deftly projected an image of strength via a spectacular display of wealth. He also made a point of invoking the support of the United States to undergird his power. For her part, Imelda Marcos used her charm and beauty to position herself as a spectacle of ideal femininity. By willingly casting herself the object of the public’s gaze, Imelda deflected attention
away from her husband’s political corruption. Rafael notes that it was Imelda who was positioned as the center of Filipino political gatherings, not Ferdinand, despite his presidential status. While these events were ostensibly for the purpose of discussing the political state of the Philippines, Imelda displayed herself in such a way that her spectacularization of feminine beauty and charm were of more public interest than the politics of the day. Rafael asserts, “[The Philippine audience] looked at her while he spoke to them” (290). Imelda and Ferdinand deployed spectacle to distract and pacify the Filipino people from recognizing, discussing, and interrogating the crimes of the Marcos regime. Since spectacle is a tool of both Western imperialists as well as the corrupt Filipino institution, spectacle is a ripe subject for critical interrogation. While Hagedorn’s play illustrates how spectacles affirm institutional power through spectacle, the play also uses spectacle to construct the audience, guiding the spectator’s gaze to centralize disenfranchised subjects, thus visualizing histories once elided by the forces of imperialism.

3.2 The Colonial Spectacle

Act 1 Scene 2 introduces the critical themes of Dogeaters—spectacle and its ideological function. The first two speaking characters are Nestor Noralez and Barbara Villanueva, who are, according to the stage notes, “eternal stars of radio, stage and screen” (16). The duo’s notoriety in these major areas of popular media signals that they symbolize the mass media and its function to the public. Throughout the play, the duo comment on stage action and offer background information, in effect mediating the
play’s content to the audience. As such, Nestor and Barbara serve as a type of Greek chorus. Just as a Greek chorus shapes how the audience understands the play’s content, popular media likewise determines how the public interprets and understands the world around them. However, contrary to a traditional Greek chorus that deepens and broadens the audience’s understanding of important themes, as talk show hosts, Nestor Noralez and Barbara Villanueva simplify and reduce ideas to entertaining sound bites, thus stripping them of any significance or depth. Thus, they proceed to introduce the characters of *Dogeaters* by reducing them to archetypes—Joey Sands as “The Survivor,” Daisy Avila as “The Tormented Beauty Queen,” and Rio Gonzaga as “The Anguished Exile.” Thus, the talk show hosts position Joey, Daisy, and Rio as characters in the show *Dat’s Entertainment*, and in doing so, the tragedy and trauma that they experience is trivialized and sanitized, as their pain is reduced to its entertainment value.

Barbara Villanueva and Nestor Noralez, the talk show hosts of *Dat’s Entertainment*, interview Jean Mallat, 19th century Jesuit priest and author of the text *The Philippines*. The presence of Nestor and Barbara suggest the political function and power of spectacle in the Philippines. By including Jean Mallat, Hagedorn critiques the concept of objective history and exposes the political agendas that such narratives serve. Furthermore, Hagedorn illustrates how the seemingly innocuous language of romance functions to rationalize imperial projects through heterosexist gender codes.

Hagedorn breaks the audience’s suspension of disbelief by positioning the 19th century priest Father Jean Mallat as a guest on a 20th century talk show. This tactic does
more than underscore the constructed quality of the play’s spectacles, thus undermining the “truths” that spectacles suggest. Linda Hutcheon’s article “Historiographic Metafiction: The Pastime of Past Time” discusses postmodern texts that reference historical events. She argues that such texts employ narrative techniques that illumine how history is a constructed narrative, not an objective one. Rather, they problematize the possibility of historical knowledge, as all knowledge must be understood as serving an ideological agenda. To put this in conversation with Hagedorn’s play, *Dogeaters* can be understood as a piece of historiographic metafiction because it recreates the culture of terror during the Marcos era. Furthermore, Hagedorn’s purposeful appropriation of filmographic techniques, as well as its intertextual references to “historical” works such as Mallat’s *The Philippines* and tabloid journalism marks *Dogeaters* as postmodern.

True to Hutcheon’s definition, *Dogeaters* not only recreates the past, but also rewrites it in a new context, one that privileges the subjectivities of those that had been silenced—*kanto* boys like Joey or victims of government corruption such as Romeo Rosales and Daisy Avila. Hagedorn deploys spectacle to present counter narratives that give voice to traumas that the dominant class attempts to silence.

In Act 1 Scene 2, Hagedorn interrogates the objectivity of the historical text *The Philippines* by Jean Mallat. As a text intended to document the culture of 19th century culture of the Philippines, it is a “textualized remain,” to use Hutcheon’s term. Hutcheon argues that despite the fact that the past did exist, readers can only know the past through its textualized remains—through texts meant to depict the past. However, these texts cannot represent the past in a transparent way. Rather, the attempt to represent the past is
laden with ideological agendas that serve to change the past. Defining historiographic metafiction, Hutcheon argues that it “problematizes the activity of reference by refusing either to bracket the referent (as surfiction might) or to revel in it (as non-fictional novels might)” (119). The audience of *Dogeaters* witnesses this refusal to bracket the historical referent in the play. In Hagedorn’s play, the constraints of time do not hold, and Mallat’s nineteenth-century persona mingles with twentieth-century talk show hosts. By refusing to treat Mallat as an untouchable, historical figure, Hagedorn depicts him as a man with specific and personal motivations for writing *The Philippines*. Hutcheon says, “Postmodern fiction suggests that to re-write or to re-present the past in fiction and in history, is, in both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological” (110). The way Hagedorn uses Mallat troubles the notion of an objective past, instead positioning his work as a textual remain that speaks ideologies of power. This tactic suggests that it is impossible to know the past or read any of the texts that represent it with any conclusiveness or certainty.

Hagedorn’s embrace of postmodern theatre techniques disallows the audience from suspending its disbelief and becoming passive observers of spectacle. Inserting a 19th century figure into a 20th century entertainment talk show forces the audience to question the logic behind his presence. Thus, guiding the audience’s gaze, Hagedorn shows the spectator that the past continues to inform the present, mediating the spectator’s relationship with itself and the surrounding world. Furthermore, the audience becomes aware that its knowledge of the past is semiotically transmitted, meaning the audience can only know the past through its textualized remains, and these remains are by
no means transparent. The ideological agenda of Mallat’s *The Philippines* then comes to the forefront. It is not an innocent text, meant to represent the Philippines objectively. Rather, it functions as a tool serving the interests of colonialism come to the foreground. By representing the native Filipinos as bestial and devoid of “civilization,” Mallat’s text rationalizes the colonial enterprise. Furthermore, the text provides knowledge of the people as well as the geographic terrain that expedited Western expansion into the Philippines. Hence, Hagedorn’s treatment of Mallat illustrates that history is not transparent; rather it is a narrative told to further a specific political interest. Thus, *Dogeaters* serves, not to “tell the truth,” as much as to question whose truth gets told.

The truth that *The Philippines* wishes to create is one that rationalizes Western colonial interests, and *Dogeaters* demonstrates how the ideological agendas work. During the interview, Nestor and Barbara immediately identify Mallat’s interest in the Philippines as imperial. Nestor asks, “Are you one of those conquistador types obsessed with finding paradise?” While Mallat denies participating in the first acts of colonialism, he still admits to enjoying his task of cataloguing Filipinos as if they were livestock. He had “the most fun [he] ever had” measuring the skulls, buttocks, and teeth of Filipinos and publishing his ‘findings’ (Hagedorn 19). Mallat’s assumption of authority and his treatment of Filipinos as objects of study further rationalize Western colonial enterprises, since the very act of creating knowledge assumes the right to do so.

Furthermore, this scene illustrates one colonial discourse commonly deployed to justify imperialism—the romance narrative. Figuring the object of colonialism as
feminine and the West as masculine, the romance narrative “naturalizes” the West’s dominance and subjection over the colonized territory. Therefore, Mallat’s purposeful gendering of the Philippines and the sexualized nature of his commentary illustrate this discourse in play. When asked what it was like seeing the Philippines for the first time, Mallat reveals: “Like falling in love [. . . .] The Spaniards never fully appreciated this melancholy paradise, but I did. Such mystifying hallucinogenic beauty” (19). Describing the Philippines as a mysterious, melancholy beauty, Mallat clearly genders the nation as female, and thus, his lust metaphorizes a colonial desire to culturally penetrate the Philippines and tame its unruly, “hallucinogenic” beauty. The terms “mystifying” and “hallucinogenic” suggest that the Philippines is unknowable, illogical, and in need of civilization. Metaphorizing the Philippines as female frames it as a woman anticipating the seduction of the masculine West who only imparts benefits through his civilizing touch. Thus, positioning the political relationship between the West and the Philippines as a heterosexual romance serves to mask the Philippines’ dispossession and exploitation.

3.3 Spectacle and the Discourse of Sexuality

In Act 1 Scene 15 entitled “Sex Show Montage,” Hagedorn manipulates spectacle to challenge the assumption of spectatorial privilege and stages counternarratives to articulate the voices of the marginalized and disempowered. Furthermore, by purposefully obfuscating the line between performer and spectator, Hagedorn reveals the stakes behind the display of the sexual spectacle. “Sex Show Montage” depicts a “date
night” of four different couples. Two couples engage in sexual intercourse while the
other two couples are spectators at a sex show. Rio and Boomboom watch child
performers stage a live porn show, and the hustler Joey Sands escorts his client Rainer
Fassbinder to the same show for his viewing pleasure. Meanwhile, Trinidad Gamboa
loses her virginity to Romeo Rosales, while bomba star Lolita Luna fellates General
Nicasio Ledesma. The staging of the scene purposefully evokes filmic spectacle by
weaving together and intercutting fragments of each couple’s evening. Each pair
interacts in a different part of the stage, and the house lights move from one to the other
in a very quick, jump cut, cinematic fashion. For instance, the audience hears the Lolita
cry out in pain after the General pulls her hair, then the house lights immediately move to
a brief moment of pillow talk between Trinidad and Romeo. After three lines of
dialogue, the house lights switch to focus on Joey enumerating the different types of sex
shows available for their viewing pleasure. This section will illustrate how both the form
and content of this scene illustrate the various ways that spectacle constructs the
spectator, foregrounding the alienation induced by spectacle.

Hagedorn’s manipulation of the form and presentation of spectacle expose how it
pacifies the spectator, encouraging passive and docile responses and discouraging
engaged and active ones. As mentioned, fragments of events are intercut and woven
together in a cinematic fashion. Couples interact on various parts of the stage, but the
lighting only makes one couple visible at a time. Thus, the spectator’s eye constantly
moves from one part of the stage to another. The staging prevents the spectator’s gaze
from lingering on any one couple, thus disallowing any true arousal or empathy. The
audience does not witness a tender love scene between Trinidad and Romeo. Rather, the audience hears a snippet of their awkward, uncomfortable post-coital dialogue. Thus, the staging prevents the spectator from sympathizing or identifying intimately with the characters. The audience does not experience any specular, voyeuristic pleasure from watching the young people have sex either. Because the scene is presented through a series of fragmented images, the overall effect is one of discomfort rather than titillation.

Although the spectator witnesses snippets of sexual images and situations, the images are not sustained long enough to induce any feelings of arousal or identification. Rather, this tactic positions the audience into an uncomfortable awareness of its own voyeurism.

Furthermore, Rio’s response to the sex show suggests that this recognition of voyeurism and the attendant discomfort is what Hagedorn intends the audience to experience. Like the theatre audience, Rio watches a sex show unfold. Thus, Rio’s spectator status suggests that she is a placeholder for the audience, so her feelings and behavior reveal the intended audience response. The stage notes describe the sex show that Rio, Boomboom, Joey, and Fassbinder watch thusly: “The sex show performers undress. They never look at the audience and enact a variety of sexual positions in a brisk, business-like manner” (59). Clearly, the sex that the two performers enact is devoid of any true passion, intimacy, or eroticism, and their brisk, business-like attitude underscores that the two perform solely for the audience’s scopic pleasure. Furthermore, recognizing the performers’ youth sickens Rio. As the performers undress, Rio objects, “That girl’s a child” and proceeds to antagonize her escort, perhaps in an attempt to displace the guilt for her voyeurism (59). However, Boomboom’s rejoinder inscribes
Rio’s status as a willing spectator and participant as he responds, “But here you are, Rio. Having fun” (59). Boomboom suggests that Rio’s very presence makes her complicit, as Rio is “having fun” by actively consuming the sexual spectacle before her. Recognizing the stakes in her viewership, Rio says, “I feel [. . . .] [s]ick. Let’s get out of here” (59-60). Rio’s discomfort with the performers’ objectification induces a physical response, suggesting that Rio is aware of how her status as spectator implicates her in the performers’ exploitation, and this realization compels Rio to leave.

Rio’s manner of her exit reveals the mechanism of spectacle. Although Rio feels disgusted and upset, her gesture towards departure is rather half-hearted until the spectacle draws to a close. It is not until the spectacle is over and the performers are cleaning themselves that Rio finally summons herself to leave (61). Rio feels tied to her seat, and despite her discomfort and disgust, she waits to see how the show will end, thus revealing the passivity that is central to the spectator’s condition. By presenting images of active subjects engaged in purposeful activity, spectacle masks the spectator’s inertia by giving the illusion that the spectator is active as well. As the spectator identifies with the subjects of the spectacle, the spectator is made to feel part of the action, despite his actual passivity. Thus, in order to experience a sense of resolution, the spectator must wait for the spectacle to come to a close. Rio is caught in the same bind. Although she wants to distance herself from the performers’ exploitation, she waits for the spectacle to resolve itself first. Thus, spectacle implicates the spectator by inducing inactivity and discouraging purposeful choices and behavior.
The audience’s inertia also stems from the alienation induced by spectacle. Guy Debord says, “The spectacle’s function in society is the concrete manufacture of alienation” (23). As spectators lose themselves in the fantasy of the spectacle, they withdraw from the objective world, preferring the internal reveries conjured up through the world of the image. In effect, spectators grow estranged and isolated from their fellows, and this sense of isolation deadens their senses of human affection and sympathy. Strong, active communities derive from fellow feeling and shared common interests. However, spectators immersed within the spectacle have no need of such communities; their gestures and choices have been appropriated and replaced by those of the spectacle. Explaining that the spectacle works to keep the citizenry sedate and the institution in power, Debord says,

“[T]he more [the spectator] contemplates, the less he lives; the more readily he recognizes his needs in the images of need proposed by the dominant system, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires. The spectacle’s externality with respect to the acting subject is demonstrated by the fact that the individual’s own gestures are no longer his own, but rather those of someone else who represents them to him” (23).

Not only is the spectator alienated from his fellows, but he is also alienated from the object upon which he contemplates. Despite his intense contemplation of the object, it forever remains in the realm of the spectacle and thus outside of the spectator’s objective
reality. Ironically, the more the spectator immerses himself in the spectacle, the more subject he becomes to it.

The sexual discourse of General Nicasio Ledesma during “Sex Show Montage” illustrates how spectacle alienates individuals from one another. Although General Ledesma is having sex with one of the most desirable women in Philippine cinema, he does not derive pleasure from erotic intimacy with a beautiful woman. Lolita Luna’s status as a filmic sex object clearly fuels Ledesma’s desire, and the way that he narrativizes the sexual moment illustrates that imagining himself as central to a spectacle of his own heightens his pleasure. While Lolita’s popularity as film star suggests that Ledesma could have scripted himself as Lolita’s romantic leading man, Ledesma spectacularizes himself as a different sort of hero. In fact, while Lolita fellates Ledesma, he imagines that he is the general of the United States Army, Douglas MacArthur, leading his troops during the Philippines campaign. During the sex act, Ledesma’s cries of “Back to Bataan!” (58) and “I shall return!” (60) reveal his internal reverie. In this case, the contemplated spectacle, General Douglas MacArthur, has gained mastery over him. Ledesma’s gestures are no longer his own; he articulates his needs through the vocabulary of the dominant system, namely through the words of the highest ranked General in the Philippines. In doing so, Ledesma reveals that he has internalized the codes of the dominant Western system. Like Jean Mallat, Ledesma articulates his lust through the discourses of colonialism. However, while Mallat positioned the Philippines as a nubile woman anticipating the seductive hand of the Western male colonizer, Ledesma shores up his masculinity and facilitates sexual congress with a Philippine
woman by aligning himself with the Western colonial power that is subjugating the Philippines. However, while doing so brings temporary satisfaction, psychologically colluding with the United States is ultimately an empty gesture. No matter how he figures himself as Douglas MacArthur, Ledesma’s raced body feminizes him.

Furthermore, as discourses of gender determine the cultural identity of the Philippines, Lolita Luna epitomizes the feminized, sexualized Philippine national body. If discourses of power are projected upon her body, then it is noteworthy that Ledesma speaks the language of US Empire while he makes sexual use of her. His internalization of the West reminds the American audience of the political and cultural linkages between the United States and the Philippines that continue to have material effects on the literal bodies of Philippine people emblematized by Lolita Luna. Furthermore, in the scene “Dirty Movies,” Lolita begs the third leg of their love triangle, billionaire corporate mogul and symbol of American capitalism, Severo Alacran to facilitate her escape from the Philippines and its fate under the oppressive Marcos regime. Lolita asks for his help and protection, but just as MacArthur failed to live up to his promise of protecting the Philippines from Japanese occupation, withdrawing from Bataan instead, Severo Alacran, the capitalist face of American imperialism also fails to find refuge for Lolita. Ultimately, she has little recourse but to continue serving as both Ledesma’s and Alacran’s mistress as well as the Philippines’ leading film sex idol in a country suffering under a brutal dictator. Thus, Hagedorn foregrounds US complicity in the Marcos regime, reminding the primarily American audience of its tacit participation in the corruption and terrorism of that era.
Additionally, a close reading of the characters’ subject positions reveal whose interests spectacles serve and in what manner. The scene consists of five couples. Two watch as one puts on a live sex show for their entertainment. The other two couples are only visible to the theatrical audience. It is noteworthy that the diegetic audience of the scene consists of the elite of Filipino society. Boomboom is the only son of Severo Alacran, the billionaire corporate mogul who owns the Philippines’ largest and most lucrative store, Sportex. His companion Rio Gonzaga is a rich Filipina mestizo who is on holiday in the Philippines. A tourist, Rio has both the currency and agency to enter and exit the Philippines at will—a luxury that subjects such as Lolita and Joey can only dream about. Finally, Joey’s client, the German photographer Rainer Fassbinder, represents the cultural privilege and wealth of the white colonial West. In effect, Rainer is a modern day Jean Mallat. Like Mallat, Rainer’s purpose in the Philippines is to document Filipino subjects and their culture through images. While Mallat wrote a historical text complete with illustrations, Fassbinder seeks to objectify the Philippines through photography. The club caters to the interests of these subjects and the groups of people that they represent. Boomboom’s, Rio’s, and Rainer’s place in the audience underscores their class privilege. As spectators, they watch the sexual spectacle, visually consuming the performers’ laboring bodies.

On the other hand, the scene’s dialogue emphasizes the sex performers’ lack of agency during the spectacle. The four members of the audience comment on the performance, some even exhibiting the agency to reject it, but the performers on stage are nameless automatons that mechanically enact sexual intercourse for the audience’s
specular pleasure. In fact, Joey illustrates their object status when he lists the “flavors” of show available for their viewing consumption, asking, “You want boy-boy, girl-girl, threesome, children, or combo?” Joey itemizes the available shows as if he is reading food choices in a restaurant menu, because clearly, there is a show available for every taste, no matter how sordid. His objectivity further underscores that this state of affairs is “normal” in the Philippines. There is no reticence about the availability of child sex, nor is there any judgment or shame in watching people exploit their bodies for the audience’s gratification. The performers are positioned as nameless objects stripped of all subjectivity, and Joey’s insensitivity suggests that this is common, expected, and normative. Thus, this scene reveals the chilling gap between the classes and the role that spectacle plays in naturalizing that gap. Hagedorn mounts a social critique by illustrating that the divide between the elite and the working class is so vast that the most intimate physical acts are spectacularized and consumed by those with power and wealth.

As Hagedorn makes the audience aware of the mechanism of spectacle, she avoids the pitfalls of using the medium and uses spectacle in new, productive ways. By revealing how the play’s diegetic audience is complicit with the performers’ degradation by virtue of their spectator status, Hagedorn implicates the theatrical audience as well. Just as Rio watches the performers have sex, the audience watches Lolita, the General, Romeo, and Trinidad do the same. Thus, positioning Rio as a placeholder for the audience makes those watching the play aware of their privilege as well as their voyeurism. Josephine Lee explains, “[P]lays challenge the notion of the audience as invisible and privileged viewers. Instead, we are confronted by our own expectations of
ourselves as an audience, and experience the severe dislocation of being reminded of our limited status as spectators” (56). The theatrical production of Dogeaters is intended for a Western audience. However, as the Western audience visually consumes the spectacle of Asian bodies engaged in sexual acts, the audience becomes aware of the misplaced assumption that the West is entitled to consume the labor of these bodies. Thus, Hagedorn uses sexualized bodies to explode the notion of Western privilege. Through her spectacle, it is the audience’s voyeurism that comes to the forefront during this scene, not the performers’ sexuality.

3.4 The Commercial Spectacle

As a postmodern text, Dogeaters troubles the boundaries between public and private. In her treatise on postmodernism, Linda Hutcheon argues that rather than remain in two distinct spheres, the separation between private and public history must be rethought because “the personal is political” (160). This section provides a close reading of Daisy’s interrogation and brutalization at the hands of Ledesma and his men to illustrate how the public and private are inseparable in Dogeaters. Furthermore, the scene is a theatrical postmodern pastiche, one that melds theatre with the television genre of soap opera. By appropriating the soap opera form, Hagedorn exposes the complicity of the spectating public in a way that implicates the theatrical audience as well. If Daisy’s personal trauma is read as a political act, then the representation of her character cannot be separated from the representation of the nation. In fact, as the reigning Miss Philippines in the text, Daisy Avila is clearly a metonym for the Philippine nation. Thus,
the military’s abuse of Daisy metaphorizes the government’s exploitation of its own people during the Marcos regime. Therefore, as Hagedorn politicizes the personal, Daisy’s individual trauma takes on political dimensions; her institutionally sanctioned rape is a representation of fictionalized, yet historical events. Thus, Daisy’s story becomes the microcosmic history of the Philippines, and the text’s visualization of her exploitation articulates the suffering of the Filipino people during this time period.

As the text elides the boundary between public and private, Hagedorn appropriates the genre of soap opera to expose its spectatorial effects. Arguing that immersion into spectacle inures the public to its civic responsibilities, Hagedorn’s use of soap opera functions as an indictment of the public’s political complacency. In her discussion of the soap opera and television genre, Laura Mumford addresses gender, consumption, and public vs. private in soap opera genre. Traditionally consumed by women, soap operas trouble the boundaries between public and private by opening up public discussion of emotional and domestic issues, which are normally deemed private (17). Domestic tensions, love triangles, and emotional/psychological instability provide much of the intrigue within soap operas—topics that are usually kept out of public discussion. Additionally, the genre’s typical manner of consumption troubles the public/private divide as well. Unlike films, which are traditionally viewed in a public place, soap operas are television programs, and as such, are consumed in a domestic setting. However, both the subject matter of soap operas as well as the manner in which they are consumed have ideological implications. Mumford explains, “[T]he 

externalization of internal conflicts, the perpetuation of the myth of total legibility of
meaning, an intense concern with gender, and the way that framing a story in exclusively personal terms allows the framer to avoid its ideological implications” (23). As viewers are entertained by the extremely personal subject matter of soap operas in the privacy of their own homes, it becomes easy to divorce these images of private life from the politics that engender them. For instance, as viewers sympathize with a female character’s conflict with her male partner, they are more likely to “feel for her” rather than interrogate the sexist or ageist assumptions that initially birthed the conflict between them. However, the manner in which Hagedorn uses soap opera genre to frame the ‘melodrama’ of the scene accomplishes the opposite, by functioning as a political indictment of the public’s collective passivity. The following close reading illustrates how Daisy’s brutalization at the hands of the military is reduced to mindless melodrama, revealing the grotesque state of affairs during this time period. By presenting Daisy’s rape as a soap opera, complete with commercial interruptions, Hagedorn suggests that the only way such atrocities could garner public attention is through dramatizing them for the audience’s viewing pleasure. Not only does Hagedorn expose how the public is party to its own exploitation, but by melding genres in this scene of postmodern pastiche, Hagedorn illustrates how the public’s willing immersion into spectacle makes it complicit in the atrocities committed during the Marcos’ reign of terror.

The spectacle creates a culture of consumption, which serves to sedate the populace. Discussing the relationship between spectacle and commerce in The Society of Spectacle, Guy Debord says, “The spectacle corresponds to the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life. It is not just that the
relationship to commodities is now plain to see—commodities are now *all* there is to see; the world we see is the world of commodity” (29). Thus, spectacles enact a type of social colonialism by urging viewers to covet “pseudo-goods,” or unnecessary products (37). Just as physical consumption of food can numb a body to its psychological or emotional pain, consumption of goods also has the power to induce a false sense of well being. If spectacle serves the interest of the ruling classes by keeping the public sedate and inert, and if consumption of products and goods elicits a false sense of security, stability, and comfort, then it makes sense that the spectacle often encourages and induces spending and consumption of goods.

Tying this to soap opera genre, there is no other space in which the collusion of spectacle and capitalism is more apparent. It is fitting then that Hagedorn appropriates the genre form of soap opera, since her indictment of the public’s collective passivity is rooted in the obsession with viewing spectacles and buying products. These two drives keep the Philippine people passive and desensitized to their own exploitation.

Hagedorn’s use of commercials disrupts and mediates the content of the scene “The VIP Lounge” to assert the media’s complicity. Before Daisy’s interrogation begins, Nestor and Barbara introduce the scene as one from a soap opera, complete with corporate sponsorship, listing the advertisers—Eye Mo Eyedrops, Tru Cola, Manila Rum, and Elephant Brand “Katol” Mosquito Coils (Hagedorn 85). All of the products either figure directly into the diagesis of the play or underscore the public’s misguided passivity. For instance, while the mosquito coils ensure the public’s uninterrupted
“sleep” in the face of their own exploitation, Eye Mo Eyedrops affirm the public’s reliance on artificiality and spectacle. Furthermore, the other products underscore Daisy’s victimization and heighten the horror and brutality of her treatment. After General Ledesma forces Daisy to ingest water against her will, Barbara and Nestor perform a chipper TruCola commercial as Daisy chokes and gags (86). Barbara and Nestor’s final sigh of contentment is more than a foil to Daisy’s lack of agency. The stark dualism of the scene’s staging inscribes that the media moguls and Daisy occupy extremely opposing positions. Daisy is violently forced to swallow liquid against her will, while Barbara and Nestor drink with pleasure. Daisy is tortured and gang raped, as Barbara and Nestor avidly watch her degradation, feasting on her terror and pain. Barbara and Nestor obviously do not identify with Daisy. To them, Daisy is an object for consumption, a thing to be enjoyed along with their TruColas. Rather, their subject positions as voyeurs make them part of Daisy’s brutalization. Since Barbara and Nestor are representatives of the media elite, their light-hearted responses to Daisy’s rape remind the audience of the media’s complicity in Daisy’s victimization.

Hagedorn’s purposeful use of commercials heightens the horror of the tableau and further asserts that the public’s immersion into spectacle has terrible ramifications. Daisy’s brutalization is framed as a television melodrama, complete with commercial breaks, and the brutality of the scene is at odds with the kitschy commercials interwoven throughout. Thus, the audience is disallowed from experiencing the soporific effects of melodrama. Instead, Hagedorn’s appropriation of soap opera foregrounds the ideological implications of Daisy’s torture and rape.
The scene continues in such a way that confirms the public’s complicity in its own exploitation. As the lights go down and Lieutenant Carreon prepares to rape Daisy, the spectacle fades to black as Nestor and Barbara bookmark the final visual—an advertisement for Manila Rum. The lights go up to focus on Nestor and Barbara who sing, “A Party’s not a party without dark Manila rum... Mabuhay! Fiery and sweet, such a treat... Manila rum... Ahh!” (88) Nestor and Barbara’s upbeat tone sharpens the horror of the spectacle as it frames Daisy’s gang rape as a party that the audience is invited to join. Furthermore, the gendered, sexualized terms used to describe the rum underscore Daisy’s objectification and subsequent consumption. As Nestor and Barbara urge the audience to partake of the rum, exhorting that it is “fiery and sweet, such a treat,” Carreon readies to sexually consume Daisy. Nestor and Barbara’s final exhalation of contentment and pleasure after swallowing the rum parodies post-coital contentment, a response wholly at odds with the horror of the moment. Just as Daisy’s beauty queen status as Miss Philippines suggests that her physical body represents the Philippine nation, Nestor and Barbara metaphorize mass media. Their horrifically insensitive mediation of this gruesome event foregrounds how the public’s investment in media spectacle deadens it to the realities of corruption.

3.5 Conclusion: Theatre and Political Calls to Action

Visualizing Daisy’s brutalization implicates the audience and makes it aware of the impossibility of remaining neutral. However, Hagedorn does more than place the burden of guilt on the audience’s shoulders. Positioning the audience as critical
witnesses, Hagedorn deploys the scene to articulate the unspeakable—the atrocities committed during this period derive partly from the public’s blithe refusal to recognize such horrors, choosing instead to immerse itself in spectacle and consumption. Enacting these atrocities in the space of the theatre is a powerful political practice because it transforms the audience into both witnesses and participants. Spectacle implicates the spectator as the act of viewing validates it. Thus, viewing Hagedorn’s alternative spectacle changes the spectators into bearers of the very narratives that the corrupt institution attempts to disavow. Using spectacle, Hagedorn gives voice to oppressed and disempowered subjects, and the genre of theatre provides a way for these narratives to move beyond the space of the theatre. As the audience leaves the playhouse, it bears these narratives with them and gives witness to realities usually kept outside the public’s realm of awareness. Thus, Hagedorn’s play enables these alternate narratives to cross the boundaries of fiction and art, breaching the divide between spectacle and reality.

While theatre makes powerful calls to action possible, critical witnessing may be limited in that the dramatic presentation and its political platform may appear contained upon the theatrical stage. Once the spectacle is over, temporary alliances forged within the collective conscious of the theatre may dissolve along with any resolution that the spectator may have made. The novel form of *Dogeaters* is also an indictment of spectacle, and the play’s conclusion suggests that Hagedorn recognizes that both texts’ political force is somewhat limited in effect. In the final scene, Hagedorn suggests that despite her political indictment, little in the Philippines has changed, and the ruling classes continue to use spectacle to affirm and support its agenda. The scene “Final
Pageant” illustrates that the Philippines continues to be a society of the spectacle. Rio articulates this notion upon her return to the Philippines “where everything has changed and nothing is different” (108). She comes back several times after the People Power Revolution ousts Ferdinand Marcos from office, but rather than signaling an end to Filipino exploitation and political corruption, the revolution effects no real change. In fact, the public’s obsession with media spectacle continues to be the root of the problem. While the leaders of the country are different, both parties used the same problematic manipulations of spectacle to gain power. Rio notes that former action star, Tito Alvarez, wins the presidency, obviously invoking Joseph “Erap” Estrada, the film star who did the same in 1999. While Imelda Marcos spectacularizes her femininity to keep her political party in power, Estrada deploys his celebrity status and takes advantage of the public’s obsession with spectacle to win the popular vote. Not surprisingly, both institutions exploit the Philippines. According to Hagedorn’s notes on the play, Estrada spent his two years in office “looting the country,” until he was jailed for misusing government monies (122). Hagedorn’s indictment of spectacle through Dogeaters has yet to initiate any discernible type of reform.

However, the play Dogeaters does create new possibilities with every new production of spectacle. Robert Leach argues that the spectators’ viewership make them part of the production because they make meaning from spectacle. Because the audience is a fluid and shifting population, the possibility for producing new meanings grows, as each spectacle has the potential to signify differently. Thus, with each performance, the theatre production provides a fresh opportunity for creating new knowledge and building
coalitions, thus affirming anew the possibility of social transformation. Theatre is uniquely situated to incite political change. While Hagedorn’s *Dogeaters* does not visibly alter the existing power structures in an immediate way, challenges to hegemonic culture must be voiced before any change occurs. Clearly, the theatrical version of *Dogeaters* is an integral component of the tapestry comprising methodologies of hegemonic resistance. Therefore, engaging the potential of theatre through Hagedorn’s transformation of spectacle may be one more productive place to begin agitating for change.


4.0 Introduction

Masculinity has long been a fraught discourse in Asian/American studies. The editors of *Aiiieeeee*! thought that the cultural emasculation of Asian American men was one of the most damaging repercussions of racial exclusion, since in the American cultural imaginary, the Asian male body is emasculated, feminized, or homosexualized. Furthermore, Lisa Lowe explains how the juridical history of the United States racializes Asian American men in gendered ways. Up until 1870, American citizenship was granted exclusively to white males, so the masculinity of the citizen was inseparable from his whiteness. As the state extended citizenship to nonwhite males, it symbolically designated these subjects as male as well. Since Asian male immigrants were barred from national inclusion, it excluded them from social definitions of maleness as well as normative conceptions of masculinity legally defined as white (Lowe 11).

As this project has argued, performances of excess not only illustrate how gender and race are mutually constitutive, but they also disrupt the hegemonic gaze. For feminist artists such as Jessica Hagedorn, Celine Shimizu, and Helen Lee, these performances of gender provide strategies for reading such images differently. This chapter will consider the challenges of redeeming Asian/American masculinity, particularly the possibilities and pitfalls of creating viable masculinities. How can
subjects reclaim masculinity without reproducing the logics of domination that excluded Asian/American men in the first place?

To address these issues, this particular chapter focuses on Manny Pacquiao and his construction of masculinity. As a Philippine national, Pacquiao fits into this study because the ways in which Asian American men and Filipino men have been rendered as subjects in the United States are structurally similar. Both groups are highly visible as racially marked objects that are on the “other” side of the East-West divide. As Traise Yamamoto says, “[T]he racial history of the United States, as it pertains to Asian Americans, has continually failed to differentiate between Asian ethnic groups, as it has failed to distinguish between Asian Americans and Asian nationals” (64-65). While not Asian American, Manny Pacquiao is subject to the same race and gender discourse that mark him as Asian and thus alien in the United States. Therefore, the discourses that determine perceptions of Asian American masculinity inform both Pacquiao’s subjectivity and his status as celebrity.

Furthermore, the fact that he is a symbol of pride for Asian Americans suggests that for many, Manny Pacquiao is one of “us.” In her article investigating the cultural stakes of the Pacquiao vs. Hatton fight, Thea Lim suggests that Pacquiao’s reversal of racial stereotypes makes him a symbol of pride for Asian/Americans as well as Filipino/Americans. She says, “If Pacquiao could beat Hatton, it would undo—for at least a moment—the prevalent stereotype that Asian masculinity has dogged Asians in American pop culture for decades, and continues still today” (par. 16). Thus, Pacquiao’s
cultural resonance with Asian/Americans suggests that his marked Asian body bridges the distances between Asian nationals and Asian Americans, despite his political status as a Philippine national. However, this discussion is sensitive to the perils of eliding the differences between Philippine men and Asian American men. In order to avoid theoretically replicating the absence of ethnic differentiation, I will look for the particularities that enable me to both draw connections as well as differentiate between Asian American men and Philippine male nationals.

Since Asian/American men must negotiate a history of emasculation, it makes sense that one strategy to counter disempowerment is co-opting hypermasculine spaces. The sport of boxing exemplifies such a space. A celebration of force, domination, and competition, boxing is strongly associated with traditional hegemonic masculinity. In On Boxing, Joyce Carol Oates puts it even more bluntly: “Boxing is for men and is about men, and is men” (72). Clearly, boxing masculinities are forged through extreme corporeal contact, danger, and violence. Courageously facing the real threat of physical harm, prizefighters become heroes of the people by fighting, not only for their own glory, but for the honor of the communities that they represent. Furthermore, the world of boxing shores up masculinities in crisis, and for disenfranchised men of color, boxing has long been an avenue to social advancement. Oftentimes, boxers negotiate histories of financial hardship and racial exclusion. Sharpened by poverty and embittered by racial inequality, prize fighters often channel their rage into the world of boxing, at times earning the wealth and celebrity that others can only dream of. It is no wonder that boxing narratives of heroic triumph over adversity and economic disadvantage often
dovetail with actuating desires for respect and self esteem. Additionally, some boxers parlay their celebrity status into more direct cultural labor. Muhammad Ali used his public popularity to agitate for political change. If men of color suture themselves into the mythology of the American dream via the sport of boxing, what does this mean for the Asian/American subject who is rendered an inassimilable alien within the cultural imaginary? This chapter considers the possibilities and penalties of gaining enfranchisement via forging boxing masculinities for the Asian/American subject.

In the world of boxing, Manny Pacquiao is one of the most beloved of these heroes. However, while he proves his entitlement to hegemonic enfranchisement through his decisive and forceful mastery of violence in the ring. He disavows this type of enfranchisement by enacting a trickster persona. As a trickster, his clowning is most often thought to target the scopic pleasure of his Western audience. However, the manner in which he addresses the audience can also be narrativized as strategies of resistance intended to puncture notions of Western privilege.

It is not an exaggeration to call Pacquiao a cultural sensation. A Filipino boxing champion, Manny Pacquiao is a household name in most Asian/American homes, and in his native country of the Philippines, he is a symbol of national pride. As a boxer, he is unparalleled. Currently the World Boxing Organization’s welterweight champion, Pacquiao is the only boxer in the world to have ever held eight world titles from eight different weight divisions. Considered the best pound for pound fighter in the world, Pacquiao has been named the Fighter of the Decade by the Boxing Writer’s Association
of America. His record is undeniably impressive. As of 2012, Pacquiao has won 54 out of 59 fights, and 38 by technical knockout. Furthermore, Manny Pacquiao’s boxing prowess has garnered other forms of media attention. A darling of the American media, Pacquiao is the subject of documentaries such as HBO’s 24/7 and Showtime’s Fight Camp 360°. He has made appearances on late night comedy shows such as Jimmy Kimmel Live! and Tosh.0. Pacquiao’s likeness even appears in video games such as Fight Night Champion.

If Manny Pacquiao is famous in the United States, it is nothing compared to his acclaim in the Philippines. Known as “The Fist of the Philippines,” Pacquiao is beloved of the people. He is greeted like a conquering emperor after each boxing match, complete with a victory parade and invitations to the presidential mansion. The citizens of the Philippines demonstrate an obsession with all things Pacquiao. Dominating sports, film, music, and television genres, Pacquiao has starred in several films and television shows and is a popular recording artist. His 2006 album Laban Nating Lahat Ito (This is Our Fight, my translation), has sold millions of records (Poole xvii). Furthermore, Pacquiao has parlayed his boxing earnings and acclaim into his political career. In 2010, Pacquiao was elected to represent the Sarangani province in the Philippines’ House of Representatives. Considering the vastness of Pacquiao’s celebrity, it is no wonder that the question reporters ask most often is whether he aspires to be the next president of the Philippines.
Pacquiao’s degree of worldwide popularity underscores the vital importance of his cultural labor. As David Eng argues, the tropes surrounding the Asian male body serve to render the national body as racially and culturally unified. In Racial Castration, Eng says, “[A]rticulations of national subjectivity depend intimately on racializing, gendering, and sexualizing strategies” (3). In particular, Eng considers how constructions of Asian American masculinity enable the production of images characterizing “the abstract national subject of a unified and coherent national body” (3). As a Filipino national figure circulating within the international media, Manny Pacquiao’s narrative and its subsequent cultural traction are also inflected by discourses of nation. This chapter considers the stakes of the cultural labor that his body performs and the set of knowledges produced by this body in the United States. Pacquiao’s management of his media image enables him to bear the weight of these discourses, while simultaneously retaining his subjectivity despite negotiating multiple terrains. Putting sports theory in conversation with critical race discourses, the following close readings reference commercials, television show appearances, documentaries, news articles and biographies that inform the mythology of Manny Pacquiao as international celebrity up to the year 2011, illustrating how Pacquiao negotiates his many cultural assignments while protecting and constructing a masculine subjectivity from within the public eye.

4.1 Sport, Colonialism, and Commerce

In order to fully articulate how Pacquiao’s Filipino body functions discursively in the American cultural imaginary, it is vital to recognize the significance of sport to the
American imperial project. The previous chapter discussed how American colonialism was discursively rendered as an international, intercultural romance between the masculinized United States and the feminized Philippines. However, sporting games and the discourse around sport functioned as a primary tool for spreading American values and beliefs. The bodies of native Filipinos were surveilled and evaluated via sporting games, and discourses of the body in colonial missives reveal how the language of sport constructs national identity, articulating which bodies “deserve” national enfranchisement. Thus, the next section will consider how the discourses of sports and colonialism intertwine in the shared national history between the Philippines and the United States. After tracing the history of these discourses, this discussion references current examples of contemporary American advertising featuring Pacquiao to illustrate how such language continues to circulate today, underwriting the logics of American egalitarianism.

Administrative missives documenting America’s imperial interest in the Philippines reveal that the discourses of the native’s sporting bodies and their supposed savagery were inextricably linked. Sports functioned as a barometer of civilization, and the lack of recognizable sporting games suggested the Philippine natives’ cultural inferiority to Western eyes. In 1887, Dean Worcester, a zoology professor cum physical anthropologist established himself as an authority of Filipino tribes. A self-proclaimed cultural anthropologist, Worcester argued that the Philippine natives’ lack of Western sports spoke to their savagery. In his 1914 book, Worcester write, “[B]efore the American occupation of the Philippines the Filipinos had not learned to play. There were
no athletics worthy of the name” (cited by Gems 48). Worcester goes on to recommend baseball as a way to “strengthen muscles and wits” (Gems 48), underscoring how sports “civilized” native Filipinos by transforming their bodies to meet Western standards of size, strength, and muscularity.

Introduced as soon as the American military set foot on Philippine soil, sports such as baseball and boxing transmitted American ideology and culture, often working alongside structures of governance, administration, and education. Gerald Gems explains, “Baseball, the American national game, linked participants and spectators to particular cultural values that they intended to transmit to the Filipinos” (49). In fact, baseball was a way to keep order even before government officials arrived in the country. Shortly after Americans arrived in the Philippines in 1898, soldiers were conscripted into introducing the Philippine natives to baseball. Confirming the role of baseball to the colonial project, General Franklin Bell, commander of U.S. forces in Manila says, “[B]aseball has done more to ‘civilize’ Filipinos than anything else” (quoted by Gems 49).

As sports and education became the primary methods of transmitting American culture, the bodies of Philippine natives were surveilled to evaluate how well they internalized colonial culture. For American administrators, culture and the body were considered mutually constitutive, as sporting prowess gave physical proof of cultural assimilation. As children received public education and participated in sports and physical education programs, physical prowess became linked to intellectual and cultural
development. Students who failed physical education classes or performed poorly in sporting games did not advance to the next grade level, suggesting that their bodies failed to prove their cultural adherence to the West. Thus, sporting excellence on the field supposedly evidenced the relinquishment of native ideals and the embrace of Western ones. Furthermore, the discourses of bodies in sport underwrote the logics of beneficial assimilation. Gems says, “The Bureau of Education maintained that exercise was necessary to make Filipinos taller and bigger and ‘that the stock of the race can be improved considerably’” (62). Therefore, sports were intended to produce muscular, fitter, taller Philippine bodies more analogous to Western standards of size. Denigrated for their physical difference, native Philippine bodies functioned as the canvas upon which U.S. imperialism projected its racist ideals.

Despite nearly eighty years of independence from the United States, traces of colonial discourse emerge in the language used to inscribe Pacquiao’s body and mythos. Often praised for his gentleness and amiability, Pacquiao is a favorite of the American public. Much of the American viewing public has been conditioned to expect meekness and servility from Asian men through decades of witnessing Asian male labor in laundries and restaurants. For such audiences, Pacquiao embodies a fascinating paradox—a hypermasculine fighting body within the ring and a sweet, self-effacing Asian man outside of it. It is not surprising that American companies such as Hewlett-Packard seek to parlay Pacquiao’s popularity into company capital. Interestingly, Hewlett-Packard commercials featuring him deploy language rationalizing Western imperial interests in the Philippines. As one of HP’s spokespersons, Manny Pacquiao
appears in commercials advertising the HP Touchpad and the HP Veer, the industry’s smallest cell phone. The manner in which such advertisements appropriate his image and conflate his body with the product speak to a lingering sense of U.S. entitlement to Philippine native bodies. In the HP Touchpad advertisement, the framing, editing, and use of voice over suggest that while the company celebrates Pacquiao’s achievements, it also seeks to co-opt them by hinging his identity with the product. The framing and use of voice over during the opening sequence immediately underwrites this conflation. The Touchpad’s screen dominates the frame, obscuring Pacquiao’s face and head, while Pacquiao’s bare torso appears below the Touchpad and his fingers manipulate its screen. As Pacquiao relates his accomplishments via voice over, the Touchpad responds to his roving fingers and communicates his journey via a narrative visualized through the Touchpad’s applications. The sequence of images is revealing. As Pacquiao voiceovers, “They said I couldn’t win a fight, but I did,” the images upon the Touchpad’s screen portray one of Pacquiao’s trademark knockouts. However, the framing and perspective of the images reveal that the Touchpad reflects Manny Pacquiao’s point of view during a fight, as the screen depicts his opponent buckling under an onslaught of Pacquiao’s blows. The commercial’s filming technique produces a doubling, which insinuates that the Touchpad and Pacquiao are a singular entity, thus co-opting Pacquiao’s skillful fighting body, while reducing him to object and commodity.

As Pacquiao lists the many obstacles he has overcome, the advertisement writes the Touchpad into this narrative of triumph by stitching together the languages of colonialism and commerce. As mentioned, American administrators displayed a
preoccupation with the physical size and fitness of native Philippine bodies, believing that such bodies gave proof of acculturation through sporting prowess. The advertisement reiterates this discourse through its obsession with Pacquiao’s body size. Pacquiao continues, “They said I couldn’t fight above my weight class, but I did,” while the Touchpad’s screen depicts a promotional poster depicting Pacquiao facing off with an opponent that stands nearly a half head taller than he. The dramatic difference in size between the two men is further emphasized by the poster’s logo: “A Fight Against All Odds. You Won’t Believe Your Eyes.” The phrasing underscores that size often dictates success in the ring, while emphasizing Pacquiao’s small stature and the seeming impossibility of success. However, Pacquiao’s fighting history proves his “unlikely” fighting prowess, and Hewlett Packard capitalizes on this history by inserting itself into his mythos.

Manny Pacquiao also promotes the HP Veer, the Hewlett Packard smart phone, and the discourse of this advertisement also demonstrates a preoccupation with Pacquiao’s body, specifically his small stature. In fact, the advertisement uses size to make a direct analogue between Pacquiao’s body and the product. The cinematic techniques and use of framing are very similar to the commercial for the Touchpad—the phone obscures Pacquiao’s head while his fingers play over the phone, demonstrating its applications during the voiceover. While this strategy certainly conflates his persona with the HP product, it is his closing comment that cements the doubling that underwrites his commodification. When his face is finally visible within the borders of the phone’s touch screen, Pacquiao explains why he chooses a “small phone,” saying, “Well, if
there’s one thing I know—little guys can pack a punch.” Clearly, Pacquiao’s “little guy” joke references both himself and the phone, equating his fighting skills to the product’s capabilities. Pacquiao then moves the phone aside to reveal his own face. With his static image emblazoned on the phone in one hand, Pacquiao uses his other hand to underscore his joke with a feigned punch at the audience, pulling back at the last moment with his signature smile. This doubling of images emphasizes both the conflation and his commodification as the advertisement suggests that consumers can own a piece of Pacquiao by purchasing the HP Veer, the “little guy” that will enable them to “pack a punch” of their own.

However, what is noteworthy about the HP Veer ad is how it uses Pacquiao’s body differently. While the advertisement operates according to the logics of colonialism, what is particularly striking is how the advertisement folds Pacquiao’s mythos into the narrative of the American Dream, despite his status as a citizen of the Philippines. Like the bodies of Asian Americans, Pacquiao’s body underwrites notions of American egalitarianism and its subsequent narratives of meritocracy and exceptionalism. Depicting Pacquiao as a “little guy” codes him as the prototypical underdog, neatly suturing him to the logics of the American dream and its attendant mythos of class mobility via hard work. Pacquiao proves his heroism through the management of his physical body. As Pacquiao laboriously shapes his body via disciplined training and physical deprivation, he molds himself into an enfranchised social subject, one who deserves recognition for his disciplined work ethic and hard labor.
The advertisement clearly hinges Pacquiao’s status as champion to his strong work ethic. Pacquiao enumerates his daily labors via voice over, saying, “I run ten miles every morning. Do two thousand sit-ups every day. Eat seven thousand calories and train for eight weeks straight.” Interestingly, the language remains firmly entrenched in discourses of the body, foregrounding his physical labor in terms of numerical quantities, and choosing to deprioritize the intellectual and emotional components of Pacquiao’s labor, such as studying his opponents and formulating strategies for his bouts. This preoccupation with quantifiable labor clearly hearkens back to the colonial obsession with the size, weight, and height of native bodies.

After providing objective evidence of Pacquiao’s strong work ethic, via the HP Veer’s many applications, the phone’s touch screen switches to depict a montage of live action sequences portraying Pacquiao fighting in the ring with various opponents. Interestingly, all of Pacquiao’s opponents are larger, light-skinned men, such as Antonio Margarito and Ricky Hatton. The decision to use these fighters underwrites the exceptionalism and egalitarianism of the United States, as HP suggests that the United States is a country where hard work trumps race and class. Even the commercial’s closing slogan carries echoes of the American work ethic—“Works like nothing else.” While the phrasing’s immediate application references the HP Veer, it also suggests that while Manny Pacquiao is exceptional, so is the larger American social machine that simultaneously embraces and commodifies him. As the advertisement clearly relies on narratives that script the United States as a color blind land of opportunity, it is not surprising that it elides the fact that while Pacquiao is celebrated for defeating light-
skinned men, thus providing evidence of American egalitarianism, Pacquiao has never faced a white American in the ring during his boxing career.

While the notion that Pacquiao’s mythos serves hegemonic American interests may appear to compromise his agency, it bears witnessing that despite how he is used to signify, Pacquiao enjoys a life of extreme privilege, and he earns this privilege by courting media attention and purposefully commodifying himself. In his biography Pacman, Gary Poole inscribes Pacquiao as a man surrounded by both adoring fans and an entourage that meets his every need, however minute it might be. In his prologue, Poole describes a typical evening as Pacquiao readies himself for a night out: “[Pacquiao] holds out his hand, and a member of his entourage slaps a comb in it [. . . .] Someone slips on his watch—a gold Rolex Yacht Master—and then gives him his diamond stud earring [. . . .] The champ is ready [. . . .] [A] horde of fans lie in wait with cell phones and cameras. ‘Manny, just one picture, pleeceeeaaase!’” (ix). Flashing his Rolex and diamonds, Pacquiao gives visual evidence of his success and wealth, while the fawning from his entourage and fans illustrate the degree of cultural capital that such fame brings.

Pacquiao’s prowess in the boxing ring is what makes him famous, but it is his purposeful deployment of this fame that garners him wealth. He is open about his purposeful self-objectification. To this end, he treats his image and mythos as commodities. In his autobiography Pacman, Pacquiao writes, “Boxing is a professional business—with deals and side deals. The gym is my office, the ring is my negotiation table, and I am the product—a product I sell to the world” (16). Interestingly, Pacquiao’s
metaphor inscribes him as both agent and object. While he asserts his agency by underscoring his power to control his body and mythos, negotiating for his own best interests through his labor in the ring and at the boxing gym, he also codes himself as an object, a product that must continue to appeal to transnational markets. In order to garner worldwide appeal, he purposefully makes “deals and side deals” with companies such as HP and Nike to boost his level of fame.

Furthermore, Pacquiao reinforces his authority over his body and mythos by narrativizing his bouts as carefully crafted performances over which he has total control. Pacquiao describes his bouts in terms of performance, and by treating his fights as constructions, Pacquiao undermines audience privilege and foregrounds his own. While much of the audience’s scopic pleasure relies on the delusion that it witnesses real antagonism between two boxing opponents, Pacquiao compromises this pleasure by insisting on the fights as performance. The language he uses to describe them iterates how his movements and gestures in the ring have symbolic purpose, almost as if Pacquiao is an actor on the theatre stage, and his every nuanced gesture carries meaning.

In his autobiography, Pacquiao discusses his strategy for the fight with Miguel Cotto, and his language echoes the logics of performance. He says, “I really wanted to give the fans a good back-and-forth battle [. . . .] So I allowed Cotto to hit me [. . . .] Then I raised my arms and tapped my gloves together as if to say, “Come on. Is that all you have?” (134). Pacquiao describes his bout as if it was a carefully plotted performance, and his primary purpose is to craft an exciting spectacle for the audience. Rather than privileging his victory, Pacquiao’s narrative suggests that he chooses to emphasize the performance
itself. According to Pacquiao, he purposefully places himself in a compromised position in order to heighten the dramatic tension of the moment, keeping the audience at the edge of their seats. Then, he demonstrates a nuanced understanding of symbology and gesture, using physical cues in the ring to communicate his confidence and mastery to the audience. By narrativizing his bouts as performances, Pacquiao interrupts the illusion of the narrative of spontaneous action that springs from instinct, rather than intellect, directly interrogating spectatorial privilege and the voyeurism such privilege relies upon. In doing so, he codes himself as author of his dramatic, physical performances.

4.2 Manny Pacquiao: Disruptive Philippine Trickster

The previous section articulates the type of cultural labor that Pacquiao’s body performs within the American imaginary. Determined by discourses of colonialism and race, Pacquiao’s semiotic body signifies to uphold dominant power structures. However, considering his power resides in his appeal as a celebrity, how does Pacquiao protect his subjectivity despite the factors determining his body? This section explores how Pacquiao purposefully deploys a trickster persona to profit from the ideologies his body is expected to uphold. Pacquiao crafts unreliable and shifting images; at times he plays to American expectations, and at other times he destabilizes stereotype. In doing so, Pacquiao profits from the American public’s embrace, enriching himself by exploiting its racist assumptions. Pacquiao acts in his own best interests as he garners media attention, intending to parlay such acclaim into wealth. However, intentional or not, the strategy
also produces the effect of undermining the hegemonic gaze by appearing to mock the presumed dominance of the white audience.

Manny Pacquiao has always portrayed himself as a trickster. It is no secret that Pacquiao loves clowning and practical jokes, and his love for light-hearted trickery is often a central motif in his media characterization. On the show *60 Minutes*, Pacquiao relates one of the best-loved tales of trickery in his heroic mythos. According to Pacquiao, he launched his career with trickery, using deceit to fool the boxing authorities in order to gain access to the ring. At age sixteen, Pacquiao began at the lightest weight class, light flyweight. However, boxing regulations stipulated a minimum weight of 108 pounds to fight. Regardless, Pacquiao was determined to be a champion. Weighing only 98 pounds, but determined to fight, Pacquiao tricked the administration into allowing him to fight. Filling his pockets with change and other heavy objects during the weigh-in, Pacquiao appeared to make weight, fooling the administrators who would have denied him entrance. Sure enough, in his first professional bout, Pacquiao fought someone larger and heavier than he, and Pacquiao brought him down via knockout, thus discounting and devaluing discourses of the body that had rendered him invalid as a fighter.

In addition to these straightforward examples of fooling, Manny Pacquiao is a trickster in that he performs transformative cultural labor. The primary characteristic of the trickster is to invert order and disrupt the rules. A border crosser, the trickster uses clowning, humor, and deceit to raise awareness of institutional injustice, thus
deconstructing hierarchies of subjugation. In *Trickster Makes This World*, Lewis Hyde explains, “We constantly distinguish—right and wrong, sacred and profane, clean and dirty, male and female, young and old, living and dead—and in every case trickster will cross the line and confuse the distinction [. . . .] Trickster is the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox” (7). Thus, the trickster performs the important labor of transformation by creating new landscapes, remaking boundaries, and finding new possibilities of being. In this way, Manny Pacquiao’s performances, both in and out of the ring disrupt the discourse regulating Asian masculinity. In effect, this disruption exposes the inequalities elided in the name of American egalitarianism.

Like the proverbial trickster, at first glance, Manny Pacquiao seems to perform for the scopic pleasure of the dominant class, namely the white audience, appearing to confirm stereotypes about Asian men. Pacquiao’s stilted English calls to mind the accented pidgin of the inassimilable Asian. Furthermore, Pacquiao’s beaming smile and often-articulated desire to please his fans reinforce the stereotypically deferential attitudes of Asian men laboring in service industries. Even Pacquiao’s status as a Philippine Congressman is a source of amusement for much of the Western audience, as it appears faintly ridiculous for an athlete of his caliber to pursue two such seemingly contradictory occupations. Furthermore, according to the logics of imperialism, Pacquiao’s mastery of the sport of boxing gives physical evidence of his internalization of American values, thus making him an ideal candidate for remaking the Philippines in the image of the United States. If this is an example of colonial rule advancing through postcolonial
replication, then it is no wonder that Pacquiao’s political ambitions induce a pleased, patronizing chuckle from Jimmy Kimmel’s audience when he discusses his Congressional responsibilities (“Episode 10.33”).

While the American media’s eager acceptance of Pacquiao suggests the drive to assimilate his subjectivity, thus negating the threat of his otherness, the manner in which Pacquiao manages his masculinity is transgressive. His performances within and outside of the ring provokes anxiety, and this anxiety calls attention to the gaps that colonial necessity labors to elide. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the United States deployed the language of romance to rationalize its imperial interests in the Philippines. This rhetoric had a two-fold purpose. First, by framing the Philippines as a sexually receptive woman, the language inscribes the Philippines as complicit with American colonial interests, as the Philippines appears to willingly accept the benefits imparted by the United States’ “civilizing” touch. Secondly, the rhetorical tactic affirms the masculine character of the United States, as it is coded as a desiring aggressor, who is naturally entitled to take what it wants via force. Clearly, this logic operates upon patriarchal and heterosexist hegemonic standards, as this rhetoric feminizes the Philippine nation in order to rationalize imperial interests. However, in doing so, heterosexual Filipino masculinity was necessarily elided in order to make room for Western male entitlement. The Philippines had to be narrativized as female in order to construct Western masculinity as a heterosexual, patriarchal force. Recognizing male heterosexualuality of the Philippines would have queered the impetus of imperialism and destabilized the logic of Western interest as normative and natural, thus revealing the
venture for what it was, namely an act of cultural aggression premised upon economic and military greed. While the language of colonialism continues to infiltrate Pacquiao’s heroism mythos, determining the cultural labor his body performs, Pacquiao, like a trickster, disrupts and inverts the logics of this discourse. On one level, Pacquiao’s aggressive performance within the boxing ring reinscribes the Philippine masculinity that colonialism discourse attempts to elide. However, while Pacquiao proves that he can operate within the logics of Western patriarchy, his performance outside the ring can be read as a refusal of this kind of enfranchisement. Pacquiao’s shifting, unstable masculinity lends itself to strategies of resistance, as this version of masculinity appears to reject Western patriarchal enfranchisement, thus revealing the unjust discourses that uphold it.

Asian/American masculinity has long been devalued via logics that degrade women and homosexual men. Media representations reveal the ways Asian men are emasculated and feminized in the cultural imaginary. For instance, Long Duk Dong from 80’s film *Sixteen Candles* epitomizes the nerdy, sexually awkward alien, while in *The Hangover*, Mr. Chow inspires homosexual panic by leaping out of a vehicle trunk and throttling another man between his thighs (Lim par. 17). In “Looking for My Penis,” Richard Fung puts it even more bluntly, saying, “Asian and anus are conflated.” The message is disturbing and clear—Asian men are never “macho” and are thus incapable of being tough, dangerous, and sexy. In other words, according to racist logics, Asian men cannot meet heterosexist, patriarchal definitions of masculinity.
Whether or not this ideal is worthy of aspiration, it is transformative and revolutionary that Pacquiao’s prowess in the ring proves him capable of forging masculinity in hegemonic terms that privilege force and violence. As a boxer, his prowess is indisputable, and his performance troubles racist narratives that emasculate Asian men. His disruptive performances seemingly provoke emasculating discourses that move the Pacquiao mythos into the more recognizable terrain of racial stereotype, as such discourses mitigate the racial threat that Pacquiao poses. This section references a few of Pacquiao’s television appearances to illustrate the cultural anxiety and the attendant containment strategies that his performance of Asian masculinity provoke. The Showtime reality series Fight Camp 360° features the lives of Manny Pacquiao and Sugar “Shane” Mosley weeks before their 2011 fight. By comparing and contrasting their lifestyles, training methods, and approaches to boxing, the show generated interest in their bout by allowing the audience a glimpse into the boxers’ personal lives. However, more importantly, the way the series dichotomizes the two fighters reveals how racial anxieties continue to determine the portrayals of black and Asian men.

Fight Camp 360° reiterates the myth of the hypersexual black man to characterize Mosley. The show’s narrative centralizes his relationship with his girlfriend Bella Gonzalez, using her feminine beauty and sexual appeal to code Mosley as an enviable sex “stud,” thus forging his masculinity via heterosexuality. Fight Camp 360° treats the romantic relationship between Gonzalez and Mosley as a key focal point, as Gonzalez is a constant presence in the narrative from the beginning. In one of her first appearances on the show, almost two minutes are devoted to a photo shoot featuring Gonzalez
modeling lingerie in a variety of seductive poses. Clearly, her feminine beauty shores up Mosley’s sexuality, as he is inscribed as the man who has sexual access to her desirable female body. Thus, the show hails men as desiring subjects, while women are the “natural” objects of their desire. Clearly, both racist and heterosexist narratives of black hypersexuality continue to inflect Mosley’s portrayal on Fight Camp 360°.

Similarly, Pacquiao’s narrative is also determined by histories of racist discourses hinging upon sexuality. However, for Pacquiao, the show’s narrative compromises his masculinity by attacking his heterosexuality. While Fight Camp 360° treats Mosley as a sex stud with access to one of the most sexually desirable women imaginable, the show foregrounds Pacquiao’s relationship with his ever-present, all-male entourage. Described as “the most ridiculous in sports history,” Pacquiao’s constant cadre of companions generates extreme media interest (Poole 67). Sports writer Gary Poole describes Pacquiao’s extensive entourage: “He is surrounded by dozens upon dozens of lackeys who exist to satisfy his every whim—from fluffing his rice to testing the temperature of his drinking water” (8-9). Fight Camp 360° plays up this constant male presence in its camera work as it pans over Pacquiao’s crowded living space, capturing men as they play cards, cook, or drink beer. The show takes pains to capture the extremity of their constant presence, illustrating how Pacquiao’s male companions even infiltrate his bedroom. Thus, unlike Mosley who sleeps next to a paragon of feminine beauty, Pacquiao’s bedroom is coded as a queer space, complete with various men residing in his sleep space.
Furthermore, Manny Pacquiao regularly appears on the show *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* to promote his bouts, and the discourse during his appearance prior to the Juan Marquez fight (November 12, 2011) operates along similar lines. Just as the writers of *Fight Camp 360°* undermine his masculinity by compromising his heterosexuality, Jimmy Kimmel plays on Pacquiao’s seemingly contradictory masculinity to fuel the comedy of his show. From the moment Pacquiao walks on stage, Jimmy Kimmel introduces Pacquiao as a walking gender contradiction, saying, “Our next guest is unquestionably the best Congressman slash prizefighter of all time. He’s got rockets for fists and a song in his heart” (“Episode 10.33”). The humor of Kimmel’s phrasing relies on pairing seemingly incongruous and illogical elements of Pacquiao’s public character. By foregrounding his reputation for sensitivity and kindness, Kimmel rhetorically contains the threat of Pacquiao’s disruptive masculinity, as it is one that proves itself capable of speaking in hegemonic terms, but from within a culturally emasculated and raced body.

Kimmel appears to undermine Pacquiao manhood by subtly suggesting that Pacquiao fails to live up to masculine expectations. Kimmel begins innocuously enough, by displaying video footage of Pacquiao’s recent appearance on Spanish television. In this video, Pacquiao and his challenger for the WBO title of Welterweight champion, Juan Manuel Marquez, sing a pop culture standard to a crowd of screaming fans. The two companionably perform a duet, taking turns with the lyrics of “La Bamba,” smiling and moving to the music, clearly appearing to have the time of their lives (“Episode 10.33”). The video footage provokes laughter from Kimmel’s audience, and regardless
of Kimmel’s intention, foregrounding such a performance prior to Pacquiao’s boxing match punctures his claim to hegemonic masculinity by undermining his credibility as a tough guy. Prior to a fight, narratives emphasizing the combatants mutual disdain and even hatred for one another are much more common. Such narratives exploit the public’s voyeurism and delusional desire to witness “real” combat between two antagonists, rather than a sporting match between professional colleagues. However, showing the two boxers playing to the crowd and performing karaoke makes such delusions impossible. Thus, to the viewing public hoping to witness two raced bodies facing off solely for their scopic pleasure, the spectacle of these two competitors singing “La Bamba” together mere weeks before they are scheduled to beat one another to a bloody pulp appears ludicrous and laughable. Thus, portraying Pacquiao in this manner compromises the hegemonic currency Pacquiao earns via sporting prowess. Furthermore, Kimmel’s humorous commentary codes Pacquiao’s masculinity as performative rather than intrinsic. Thus, by highlighting his camaraderie with Marquez, the discourse of *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* also foregrounds Pacquiao’s homosocial appeal to other men.

Shows such as *Fight Camp 360°* and *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* appear to mitigate the hegemonic currency Pacquiao accrues in the boxing ring. However, such enfranchisement is problematic, as constructing subjectivity by adhering to standards of hegemonic masculinity validates systems that keep marginalized subjects disempowered. David Eng argues that hegemonic masculinity should be interrogated because it inscribes Asian American masculinity in ways that enable the national body to appear coherent and unified. Hence, Asian American masculinity is a tool deployed by hegemony, not only to
keep Asian Americans in line, but also to comment about what the national body should look like, in terms of racial and gender power dynamics. Eng asserts, “[T]he production of whiteness as a universal norm [...] attempts to project the burden of racial difference onto the Asian American male body. Moreover, it reveals how this production of an unmarked and invisible whiteness is achieved only through its complicit intersection with a system of compulsory heterosexuality” (31-32). By showing how masculinity is a trope deployed to undermine Asian American power, Eng questions the very desire to become vested in the masculinity. Thus, hegemonic masculinity is not desirable if it requires Asian/American men to collude with the very power systems that exclude them in the first place. To that end, racial and sexual difference must be interrogated together since they are mutually constitutive. Considering them as distinct categories of analysis serves the political power, economic interests, and cultural hegemony of the mainstream. Isolating gender from race reproduces the logic of domination that configured the two categories as opposed. For example, the editors of Aiiieeeee! used the trope of Asian American emasculation to decry their racial exclusion. However, the proposed method of constructing a viable masculinity was premised upon cultural nationalism, with its emphasis on compulsory heterosexuality and cultural authenticity. Ironically, this mirrors the very hegemonic mechanisms that excluded Asian American men in the first place. Pacquiao’s response to such containment produces the effect of illustrating how gaining enfranchisement through adhering to masculinist standards degrades other minoritized subjects. Like the proverbial trickster, Pacquiao profits from the very media seeking to emasculate him, and in the process, such injustices become visible.
Pacquiao deploys trickster strategies to protect his subjectivity. More specifically, he resists containment through enacting a process resembling colonial mimicry. Disidentification is the process of appropriating images, objects, and gestures of the dominant culture and transforming them into sources of empowerment. Jose Munoz further explains, “Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (4). Despite his celebrity status, Pacquiao remains a minoritarian and determined subject, and the media’s characterization of Pacquiao reflects the cultural anxiety around his disruptive masculinity. Pacquiao’s clowning can be narrativized as a type of colonial mimicry, and thus a strategy of disidentificatory resistance. As a type of disidentification, colonial mimicry enables colonized subjects to take what is not intended for them to make them signify differently, thus foregrounding the slippages that destabilize authority. Homi Bhabha says, “Mimicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the other as it visualizes power” (123). This type of appropriation does not set itself in direct opposition to the dominant, thus it doesn’t reaffirm it through repudiation. However, neither does colonial mimicry dissolve into the dominant structure without a trace. Rather, it works on and against the dominant, from within and outside the structure. Far from being an homage to the dominant, colonial mimicry relies on the double articulation springing from its difference. Bhabha explains, “[T]he discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence [. . .] [M]imicry must
continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference [. . . .] [M]imicry emerges as
the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal” (122-23).
Pacquiao embodies this difference in his trickster performances of mimicry, and as such,
his gestures produce a double articulation that destabilizes dominant privilege and its
expectations for cultural signifiers.

Intentionally or not, Kimmel’s discourse effects the compromise of Pacquiao’s
claim to hegemonic masculinity by emasculating and queering his public image.
However, as a form of colonial mimicry, Pacquiao’s clowning protects his subjectivity
via the gesture’s double articulation. Kimmel’s queering of Pacquiao is the subtle basis
of this episode’s comedy. The clip of Pacquiao and Marquez singing “La Bamba” with
one another is laughable, considering the two prize fighters would shortly square off in
the ring. Thus, their camaraderie seems odd and counter intuitive. However, Kimmel’s
jokes are subtle digs in comparison to his next sketch, which blatantly homosexualizes
Pacquiao. Like Pacquiao and Marquez, Jimmy Kimmel performs a duet with Pacquiao.
However, the two sing the Bee Gees’ classic ballad “How Deep is Your Love,” a song
exploring the plight of a pair of lovers condemned by social convention. As Kimmel and
Pacquiao croon the lyrics together, querying whether the other is willing to defy societal
norms and endure social stigma in order to be together, the queer overtones are much
more obvious and pronounced.

While the performance appears to be the logical next step in Kimmel’s teleology,
I contend that Pacquiao’s seeming complicity is strategic. His show is a form of colonial
mimicry, thus a tactic for resistance. Pacquiao performs a song that emblematizes the American disco era. As a Philippine national, he appropriates a cultural signifier that is clearly not intended for him, thus gesturing towards the prevalence of the American cultural hegemony in the Philippines. The comedy of the performance relies on the disconnection between an iconic signifier of US pop culture, and the raced body performing it. However, his hyperbolic performance of American pop culture suggests that he too is entitled to such American signifiers because as a Philippine national, he is marked by American culture. The shared political history between the United States and the Philippines is inscribed upon his body, and this very body speaks this history. Thus, his performance reveals the ambivalence that colonialism provokes and exposes the gender prescriptions that this system requires.

Furthermore, the way Pacquiao addresses audience is transformative. In “Rethinking Women’s Cinema,” de Lauretis writes about creating new knowledges and constructing subjectivities for determined subjects. While her work centralizes women, her logic applies to other subjects also negotiating legacies of racism and sexism. For de Lauretis, addressing the spectator as female is critical for redefining aesthetic and formal knowledges about women (321). De Lauretis says, “the effort and challenge now are how to effect another vision: to construct other objects and subjects of vision, and to formulate the conditions of representability of another social subject” (324). Thus, de Lauretis’ emphasis on constructing new visions suggests that addressing the spectator differently has the power to effect alternate representations and thus reorder the way that we see the world. Such addresses validate the experiences of othered populations,
recognizing them as subjects and shapers of culture, rather than passive objects shaped by it. These techniques validate the perceptions and experiences of the disenfranchised and othered, rather than reentrench the privilege of the dominant.

Applying de Lauretis’, it becomes clear that there is a vital double articulation in play. While Pacquiao’s antics seemingly make him appear complicit in his emasculation, this reading privileges Western discourses of racism and gender. Rather, his performance voices a doubled articulation, speaking differently to raced bodies, particularly Asian/American subjects as it opens up new ways of envisioning privilege. According to de Lauretis, one way a feminist film addresses the spectator as female is by centralizing the nuanced particularities of female experiences, gestures, and perceptions. Praising Chantal Akerman’s filmic text for its feminist vision, de Lauretis explains, “[I]t is so because it is a woman’s actions, gestures, body, and look that define the space of our vision, the temporality and rhythms of perception, the horizon of meaning available to the spectator” (321). Thus, the spectator’s point of entry into the text is a woman’s point of view, thus privileging her vision of the world around her. Manny Pacquiao’s performance speaks to raced subjects in a similar fashion. Thea Lim, online contributor to Salon, describes her response to the first time she saw Pacquiao perform a song on Jimmy Kimmel Live!: “I was transfixed by his warbling; he employed the exact same karaoke style as my Singaporean uncles. I had never seen such a comforting, familiar and unabashed presentation of Asianness on American TV” (par. 14). Interestingly Lim’s comment doesn’t reiterate the tired ground decrying the lack of Asian faces in the American media. Rather, Lim is moved by Pacquiao’s visualization of “Asianness.”
Through Pacquiao’s affect and gestures, she recognizes herself. For Lim, Pacquiao’s performance privileges her spectatorship, inscribing her and other raced bodies like hers as his intended audience.

While Pacquiao may not intend to confer agency, his autobiography does suggest that he strives to induce audience identification. In fact, Pacquiao explains the reasons behind his prevalence in the media: “Visibility is very important to a sport. It’s all about how well your fans can see you. The more they see you, the more they can become a part of you and a part of the sport” (120). Pacquiao argues that asserting a visual presence is necessary for audience identification. By making himself visually available through endorsements and appearances on shows such as *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* and *Fight Camp 360°*, Pacquiao provides a bridge for the audience into the world of boxing, enabling audiences to transfer their frustrations and aggressions onto his own fighting body. As audiences identify with Pacquiao, they watch him fight their own battles, and their pride in Pacquiao’s success transforms into a culture pride as Pacqiao’s victories become their own. By enabling identification through his address of spectator, Pacquiao jars hegemonic rhythms of perception and the assumption of the monolithic white male spectator. Thus, like a trickster, Pacquiao makes new horizons of meaning available, ones that validate and centralize Asian experience. In this moment, Pacquiao’s performance addresses othered populations as the primary spectators and privileges determined bodies like his own, rather than relegating them to the margins.
4.3 Conclusion

Much of the current discourse on the Philippine body treats it as a canvas upon which ideologies of power are projected. This chapter fits into these studies by exploring how Pacquiao’s sporting body circulates within colonial and critical race discourses about Asian/American masculinity. However, what this chapter also strives to articulate is how determined bodies resist containment and construct subjectivity instead. In the case of Manny Pacquiao, he enriches himself by co-opting the very narratives that seek to diminish him, reinventing them to engender productive double articulations.

To do this, Pacquiao embraces the unstable, changing subjectivity of the trickster. Lewis Hyde defines the shifting subjectivity of the trickster, saying, “With some polytropic characters, it is possible that there is no real self behind the shifting masks, or that the real self lies exactly there, in the moving surfaces and not beneath” (54). When Manny Pacquiao keeps his public image in flux, he disallows the calcification of any “knowledge” about him, thus keeping a piece of himself outside the discourses that seek to determine him. Manny Pacquiao constructs his public persona via performance, constantly shifting to accommodate the needs of the moment. His image shuttles between seemingly oppositional poles, landing nowhere for long. He is a gentle, smiling family man, but he is also a ruthless and violently decisive prizefighter. He loves to clown, sometimes even playing up his own infantilization, but he is also a working Congressman, devoted to his community and active in Philippine outreach programs. He aggressively courts American media, appearing on several late night TV shows, but when
reporters travel to the Philippines to profile him, they get nothing but footage of him napping with his family and playing basketball for hours (Poole 180-181). This purposeful instability is a form of masking that allows him to protect a subjectivity outside the public view. In *Masking Selves, Making Subjects*, Traise Yamamoto writes about how masking can preserve subjectivity. In her discussion regarding the exoticization of Nikkei women, Yamamoto describes how they resist their rendering as perpetual foreigners, saying, “[T]hey have deployed the very surface whose opacity has denied them particularity and humanity in order to claim and preserve both” (3). Applying this to Pacquiao, like Nikkei women, he strategically uses his hypervisibility, transforming it into a mask that enables him to carve out a space for himself. In this way, he constructs himself as a subject from a space that renders him as a commodity.

While this hypervisibility protects Pacquiao, it also enables audience identification. This chapter argues that Manny Pacquiao encourages Asian American identification through his purposeful hypervisibility in the US media. However, for Philippine Americans, this identification enables them to bridge the temporal and cultural gap between the US and the Philippines. Oscar Campomanes asserts that an exilic sensibility informs the politics and cultural production of Philippine Americans. To apply Campomanes’ logic to this discussion, identifying with Manny Pacquiao may enable Philippine Americans to assuage the alienation and pain of their exilic sensibilities.
Campomanes argues that motifs such as departure, nostalgia, incompletion, rootlessness, leave taking, and dispossession are all emblematic to Philippine American texts. While the current paradigms of Asian American literature are concerned with nation building, acculturation, and settlement, according to Campomanes, Philippine American literature represents a reverse telos, an opposite moment. Rather than claim America as home, Philippine American identity centralizes exile and emergence, not immigration and settlement. For Philippine Americans, life in the United States is a site of displacement and suspension. Exile is a necessary, inescapable state for Philippine Americans in the United States, primarily because of the (neo)colonial relationship between the United States and the Philippines. Campomanes argues that, as a result, the exilic subject is hampered by a sense of sorrow stemming from the loss of what has been left behind forever. As an exile, the Philippine American’s stay in the United States is fraught by indeterminacy, signified via a sense of suspension in cultural time and alien place.

In his biography *Pacman*, Gary Poole describes an incident that emblematizes this exilic sensibility as well as how Pacquiao fans seek recognition from Pacquiao to assuage their sense of disconnection from the Philippines. On a Valentine’s Day in Glendale, California, a hotel hosted the event “Manny Pacquiao Shows His Love” in its ballroom. Poole genders the event, focusing on the several hundred Philippine women arriving with their husbands and children in tow, but the audience is comprised of entire families waiting patiently for a moment with Pacquiao, suggesting that this adoration from fans is a family affair. Poole narrates, “Each of the five hundred people paid twenty dollars to
get a glimpse of their idol, and they wait placidly, some slowly getting drunk and enduring a string of Pinoy rock bands [. . . .] That Manny is routinely late, even by three or four hours doesn’t seem to raise an eyebrow. Waiting, it seems is a regular part of life. His fans are used to it” (113). Poole’s phrasing suggests a sense of suspended time, as the fans wait patiently for a glimpse of their hero. Pacquiao is three hours late, but when he finally arrives, the crowd’s fanaticism rises to fever pitch. Poole observes, “[T]he crazed crowd of Manny fans scrambles to their feet. At least a quarter of the crowd were older ladies, and they look the most visibly excited, some shaking” (114).

This devotion and hysteria suggests a longing for identification with Pacquiao and the Philippine nation that he represents. As Philippine Americans, many members of his audience may contend with a sense of estrangement from the Philippines, as they are disconnected and outside of the Philippines’ flow of cultural time. This disconnection can fuel the psychological need to identify with Pacquiao, whose prowess and success represent the best of the Philippines. Individuals may feel that if Pacquiao recognizes them and acknowledges a shared sense of culture, they will be connected to him and by extension, the Philippines. Thea Lim agrees, “For Asians and Filipinos who were born and live in the West, Pacquiao offers a space where a diasporic people can feel closer to somewhere hardly ever seen [. . . .] Pacquiao closes a distance of thousands of miles so that they are at home” (par. 5). Thus, many Philippine Americans may seek to bridge the cultural gap between the US and the Philippines via their identification with Pacquiao. Through his embrace of hypervisibility, Manny Pacquiao performs the vital cultural labor of making such identifications possible.
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Conclusion

This project contributes to the field of Asian/American literary studies in a variety of ways. On a pedagogical level, it provides a model of a cross-genre study articulating how particular mediums offer specific contributions to Asian/American body politics. While I organized the dissertation’s methodological approach to separate genre readings of the body, gender and nation, the central theme of the dissertation explores the construction of Asian/American subjectivity in spite of and through the discourses that determine individual subjects. How does Manny Pacquiao protect his subjectivity despite the cultural labor his sporting body performs? How does Margaret Cho reclaim abjection to create narratives of self-empowerment? As with any study, the content of this dissertation was determined by both the resources available at the time of production as well as my current interests as a writer and thinker. As such, this section articulates how I hope to develop, broaden, and deepen my study in the next few years.

In Chapter 1, I consider how feminist film producers engage with the hypersexual discourses that render Asian/American women abject by exploring the ways they reclaim and redeem sexuality. If I pursue this subject further, I will continue to press on notions of gender, race, and nation, but in the genre of pornography in particular. While doing so further legitimizes the value of these inquiries to cultural studies, it also deepens the discourse in porn studies by introducing issues of race and nation to the conversations about gender and sexuality. Porn studies is a vital and emerging field of study. According to Linda Williams, pornography is one of the largest industries in the United
States, citing that pornography revenues amount to between 10 and 14 billion dollars annually. She explains, “This figure, as New York Times critic Frank Rich has noted, is not only bigger than movie revenues; it is bigger than professional football, basketball, and baseball put together” (2). As pornography generates revenue in such high numbers, it is clear that pornography is a pervasive part of American culture, and as such, it is a subject requiring critical attention.

Feminist pornography in particular is a growing field that deserves academic interrogation. Events such as the annual Feminist Porn Awards in Toronto, Canada and the documentary Hot and Bothered (2003) suggest that feminist pornography is gaining momentum. While pornographers such as Erika Lust and Candida Royalle may provide a starting point for my study, I am more interested in locating feminist pornographers of color to see how they explore issues of race and nation in their work. While Asian/American pornographers Annabel Chong and Asia Carrera gestured towards their racialization at times, neither artist continues to work within the porn industry. I would like to search for contemporary feminist pornographers that address race and nation in more direct ways, perhaps creating new sets of knowledges and vocabularies by which to construct subjectivity.

In the second chapter, I develop the notions of shame, comedy, abjection, and scopic pleasure in relation to the body. Much of Margaret Cho’s career revolves around her marginality and subsequent strategies for redressing alienation. However, Cho’s growing popularity may compromise her central claim to abjection. In addition to her
regular appearances on the program *Drop Dead Diva*, Cho has been the star of two television shows—the sitcom *All-American Girl* and the reality program *The Cho Show*, featuring Cho’s antics with her entourage. Clearly, Margaret Cho is carving out a niche for herself in the mainstream media, in effect becoming part of the hegemonic center, despite her early efforts to define herself in opposition to it. It may be productive to track the trajectory of her career to witness how she negotiates her growing privilege and how it impacts her comedy. Additionally, Cho continues to advocate for the queer population, so it may be useful to see how her raced yet privileged body figures into her political labor as she agitates for change.

Jessica Hagedorn’s play *Dogeaters* explores how women’s bodies bear witness to histories of institutionalized violence. Pairing *Dogeaters* with Evelina Galang’s forthcoming book *Lolas’ House: Women Living With War* may extend my discussion in productive ways. Galang’s text chronicles the experiences of comfort women from the Philippines. Oftentimes, the narratives considering comfort women limit the discourse to histories of Korean women enslaved by the Japanese Imperial Army. However, Japan perpetrated war crimes upon women from the Philippines, China, Australia, New Zealand, and even Japan as well. Failing to recognize this fact elides the histories of these women, denying their injury while ignoring Japan’s obligations to them. I am interested in how Galang portrays the struggles of these women. As female bodies serve as the screen upon which discourses of power are projected, how do women with histories of institutionalized victimization reclaim their bodies and inscribe histories in
their own terms? Considering their stories illustrates how discourses of gender, race, and nation play out on the bodies of women, while serving the machinery of the state.

I am most excited about extending my discussion of Asian/American masculinity and the sporting body. In Chapter 4, I consider the type of cultural labor that Manny Pacquiao performs in the American cultural imaginary. I argue that while his masculinity is determined in ways that define the cultural character of the United States in both racial and gendered terms, Pacquiao resists cooptation by performing a trickster subjectivity. However, if the history of American colonialism in the Philippines bridges the two countries and inflects how Pacquiao’s Philippine body functions in the United States, then the reverse is true as well. This study considers Pacquiao’s role as a sports figure in the U.S., but in the Philippines, he is much more than a boxer. He is a powerful up and coming politician as well. My next study may investigate how Pacquiao’s acclaim in the United States impacts the trajectory of his political career in the Philippines. Chapter 4 argues that Pacquiao’s sporting success can be rendered as proof of Western assimilation. However, how does it function in the Philippines? Furthermore, every project is determined by the discourses that surround it during the time of its production. I wrote the chapter prior to Pacquiao’s controversial loss to Timothy Bradley in June of 2012, the bout that foregrounded Pacquiao’s growing religious zeal, conservatism, and political prejudices. Only time will tell whether such leanings are a passing proclivity or central characteristics determining Pacquiao’s worldview. Considering his political impact on the Philippines will have definite material effects, it will be important to note the way he
deploy his transnational fame to gain political power and the effect this will have on the Philippines and abroad.

As Manny Pacquiao works from within a tradition of hegemonic masculinity to undergird his patriarchal privilege, it may also be useful to pair this study with an investigation including Nong Tum, a champion Thai cross-dressing transgender kick boxer. She has won 22 professional fights, 18 by knockout. As of the current date, Tum is retired from the world of professional boxing. Having met her financial goals, it has nothing left to offer her. In 2006, Tum underwent sex-reassignment surgery, funded by the proceeds from her boxing career. What is of particular interest is how Tum opens up alternate and often conflicting narratives about race, gender, and masculinity. As both a Ladyboy and a kick boxer, Tum spectacularizes her body through hyperperformances of gender. Oftentimes, she does both simultaneously. For instance, Tum is famous for applying lip gloss and kissing her boxing opponents on the cheek before proceeding to beat them to a bloody pulp in the ring. Interestingly, Tum constructs subjectivity through consciously appropriating the conventions of hypermasculinity, ascending the social ladder and making her personal dreams a reality. Ironically, her success at performing masculinity enables her to reject her biologically male body and the status it confers in favor of taking her performances of gender to the next level. Clearly, Tum very consciously uses the genre of sports for empowerment and self-realization. The critically acclaimed film *Beautiful Boxer* chronicles Tum’s experience, and it will form the basis for my study. Clearly, putting sports theory in conversation with discourses of race, gender, and nation offer great potential to contribute to the scholarship investigating
masculinity in Asian/American studies, and I hope to contribute to this discourse in the following years.
Work Referenced


Drop Dead Diva. Lifetime. 2009-present. Television.


