

METAMODERN SATIRE IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LITERATURE AND  
TELEVISION

By

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For my husband, Zach,  
the answer to what comes next  
and how to like it.

“Who watches the watchers?”

— Juvenal

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## ABSTRACT

In 2002, Linda Hutcheon argued that the postmodern moment has passed, and what developed in its wake must be given a distinct term of its own. Answering this call, Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker posited metamodernism, a movement that, at its heart, is the negotiation between the conflicting objectives of postmodernism and resurgent modernism. Applying this process to the genre of satire, this project proposes a hybrid mode—metamodern satire—that mediates between the equally divergent objectives of its modern and postmodern predecessors. Modernist satire targeted human folly and vice with the objective of societal correction. As postmodernism emerged, the purpose of satire evolved, as its postmodern form replaced correction with destabilization of metanarratives. In this project, I argue that as elements of modernism have resurfaced in the metamodern era, a new theory of satire must be developed to account for satires existing in the liminal space between modernism and postmodernism. To exemplify this mode, this study includes literature from the 2000s, Percival Everett's *Erasure* and George Saunders's "Brad Carrigan, American," as well as television programs from the 2010s, Shalom Auslander's *Happyish* and Nick Kroll and Andrew Goldberg's *Big Mouth*. Collectively, the texts illustrate the way metamodern satire is uniquely suited to negotiate between overlapping calls for postmodern irony and modernist sincerity. I deconstruct the way these satires must first destabilize a social metanarrative, such as neoliberalism or white supremacy, often through the subversion of a symbolic metanarrative, such as advertising or puberty. While this process is often characterized by irony and

irreverence, each text eventually sheds these elements to provide a genuinely tendered solution—a return to modernist correction. I argue that the resulting form is one in which destabilization and correction take place in sequence, providing a fertile foundation for the emergence of a new, attendant mode of humor, simultaneously characterized by irreverent cynicism and sincere optimism.



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## CHAPTER 1: TOWARD A HYBRID MODE OF SATIRE

“Humor is what happens when we’re told the truth quicker and more directly than we’re used to.”

— George Saunders

“Against the assault of laughter nothing can stand.”

— Mark Twain

Satire, “a rationalist discourse launched against the exemplars of folly and vice, to rectify them according to norms of good behavior and right thinking” (Weisenburger, *Fables of Subversion* 1), has long held a space in the public forum, beginning with Horace and Juvenal, through Rabelais, through Voltaire, through Jonathan Swift, through Mark Twain, to present day when authors like Ishmael Reed provide targeted cultural commentary and Thomas Pynchon works to destabilize the very building blocks of that culture. In close quarters with satire is black humor, a mode of humor meant to highlight the absurdity and horror of everyday life. Scholarship about black humor hovers over works produced in the 1960s when the term “black humorist” was first applied. A 1965 *Time Magazine* article states that the Black Humorists,

deserve notice because their brand of comedy is so clearly not the saccharine hilarity packaged by commercial laff merchants, not the badboy snigger or contemporary bedroom farce ... the best of the black humorists hold some things too sacred to be bleared with hypocrisy or smeared with prurience. So they mock with a cleansing mirth every emotionally superseded [sic] subject from sex and death to religion, patriotism, family pieties, money, mom, war, the Bomb. They are well aware as any conventional moralizer that the times are out of joint, but

they choose to greet the dislocation with a jeer rather than a jeremiad. (“The Black Humorists” 3-4)

Entropy, a gradual decline into disorder, was at the heart of black humor in this era, probing society’s social, political, and economic systems, and resulting in a heightened consciousness of the absurd (Pratt xxi).

The use of the term “black humor” soon fell out of fashion as it began to be replaced with the term “postmodern” (Barth 19), which has often defied unified and explicit definition. Mike Featherstone writes of postmodernism that it is “more strongly based on a negation of the modern, a perceived abandonment, break with or shift away from the definitive features of the modern,” adding that the work of Jean Baudrillard and Jean-François Lyotard “assume[s] a movement toward a post-industrial age” when the distinction between the real and appearance is effaced (3). Underscoring the, at times, considerable overlap between two sequential movements, Jonathan Lethem pithily quips, “what exactly is postmodernism, except modernism without the anxiety?” In her work *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon gives a more detailed account of the movement, arguing, “In general terms [postmodernism] takes the form of self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement. It is rather like saying something whilst at the same time putting inverted commas around what is being said,” continuing, “Postmodernism’s distinctive character lies in this kind of wholesale ‘nudging’ commitment to doubleness, or duplicity ... postmodernism ultimately manages to install and reinforce as much as undermine and subvert the conventions and presuppositions it appears to challenge” (1-2). Hutcheon’s characterization points to the at times duplicitous effects of a movement that both subverts and reinforces the ideologies it deconstructs.

While these representations contribute to a heterogeneous conception of postmodernism, in my project, I offer two central definitions by Lyotard and Frederic Jameson to position the movement. Lyotard offers a terse explanation in his 1979 work *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, defining postmodern simply as “incredulity toward metanarratives,” with “metanarrative” defined as “a philosophy of history ... used to legitimate knowledge” (xxiv). Jameson posits a two-part definition of postmodernism, describing it first as “specific reactions against the established forms of high modernism, against this or that dominant high modernism which conquered the university, the museum, the art gallery network, and the foundations,” and elaborating that “there will be as many different forms of postmodernism as there were high modernisms in place” (“Postmodernism and Consumer Society” 1-2). The second part of his definition characterizes postmodernism as the elimination of “key boundaries or separations, most notably the erosion of the older distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture” (2).

Despite this change in terminology from “black humor” to “postmodernism,” black humor permeated many works of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, often emerging in satirical works that destabilized normative culture’s ability to serve as a mechanism for understanding the surrounding world. Coined by Douglas M. Davis as “Yankee Existentialism,” black humor, like postmodernism, disrupted the boundaries and metanarratives by which people had come to make sense of an increasingly chaotic world.

Black humor is alive and well today, though its expression in the contemporary moment is not always as amoral as its precursors, which relied heavily on jokes about

violence, incest, rape, excrement, and death to highlight the absurdity of modern existence. For example, Don DeLillo's work turns a comic eye to the intense existential dread spawned by a hyper-consumerist world. Sherman Alexie's oeuvre centers on the laughter found in the face of the intense poverty and despair of the Native American Reservation. And Goran Dukić creates a darkly comic narrative of suicide and redemption in his film *Wristcutters: A Love Story*.

To understand this shift away from the inherent cynicism of amoral approaches, it is helpful to examine the literary developments that have transpired in the wake of postmodernism. One reaction to the irony and cynicism that characterize the movement was the emergence of what has been termed the "New Sincerity," a new era founded on Lionel Trilling's definition of "sincerity" as a "congruence of avowal and actual feeling" (2). Trilling further argued that, as Adam Kelly succinctly describes, "truth to the self is conceived of as a means of ensuring truth to others" (132). In his 2002 essay, Jesse Thorn encourages readers to understand the development in the following way: "Think of it as irony and sincerity combined like Voltron,<sup>1</sup> to form a new movement of astonishing power. Or think of it as the absence of irony and sincerity, where less is (obviously) more." Christine Wampole reports on the impetus for the shift, writing, "The loosely defined New Sincerity movements in the arts that have sprouted since the 1980s positioned themselves as responses to postmodern cynicism, detachment and meta-referentiality." Further delineating between authors of postmodernism and the New Sincerity, David Foster Wallace argues,

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<sup>1</sup> "Voltron" is a reference to an animated television series franchise that follows a team of space explorers who combine their individual piloted machines into a super robot known as "Voltron."

The old postmodern insurgents risked the gasp and squeal: shock, disgust, outrage, censorship, accusations of socialism, anarchism, nihilism. Today's risks are different. The new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the "Oh how banal." To risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Of overcredulity. Of softness. ("E Unibus Pluram" 81)

The overarching pattern of the New Sincerity has been to break with the monolithic irony of postmodernism and instead present a variegated range of responses that embody congruency between sentiment and expression.

As is the case with many cultural epochs, postmodernism and the New Sincerity are not divided by a strict boundary. However, some have posited that September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 is, in fact, a discrete border. On September 17, 2001, Graydon Carter, then editor of *Vanity Fair*, asserted that in response to the terrorist attack perpetrated at the World Trade Center in New York City, "There's going to be a seismic change. I think it's the end of the age of irony" (Randall). On September 24<sup>th</sup> of the same year, Roger Rosenblatt reflected in *Time Magazine*, "One good thing could come from the horror: it could spell the end of the age of irony" ("The Age of Irony").

However, despite predictions for the demise of irony, the continued proliferation of media institutions like *The Daily Show*, *Saturday Night Live*, and *The Onion* show that irony is still threaded throughout popular discourse. Rather than irony and sincerity existing in discrete time periods, the two modes of discourse have a distinct pattern of crossover, and as such, it becomes necessary to investigate and define texts that exist in

the interstitial space between these two movements. As Linda Hutcheon succinctly argues,

The postmodern moment has passed, even if its discursive strategies and its ideological critique continue to live on—as do those of modernism—in our contemporary twenty-first-century world. Literary historical categories like modernism and postmodernism are, after all, only heuristic labels that we create in our attempts to chart cultural changes and continuities. Post-postmodernism needs a new label of its own, and I conclude, therefore, with this challenge to readers to find it—and name it for the twenty-first century. (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 181)

This pattern of negotiating between overlapping calls for postmodern irony and cynicism, and the New Sincerity's return to modernist enthusiasm are perhaps best defined by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, who answered Hutcheon's call in their theory of "metamodernism." They define the term as the "oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment" and make special note of the prefix "meta" and its reference to the concept of "with," "between," and "beyond" (2). Vermeulen and van den Akker explain metamodernism's interstitial role:

"Ontologically, metamodernism oscillates between the modern and the postmodern. It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naivete and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity" (5-6). Luke Turner builds on the work of Vermeulen and van den Akker to assert,

Rather than simply signaling a return to naïve modernist ideological positions, metamodernism considers that our era is characterized by an oscillation between aspects of *both* modernism and postmodernism. We see this manifest as a kind of informed naivety, a pragmatic idealism, a modern fanaticism, oscillating between sincerity and irony, deconstruction and construction, apathy and affect .... The metamodern generation understands that we can be both ironic and sincere in the same moment; that one does not diminish the other.

This negotiation between the modern and postmodern is relevant to the satires that have developed in Hutcheon's "post-postmodern" moment. Observing the succession of cultural movements, James Caron argues that "the distinction between *modern* and *postmodern* registers as ambiguously as anything claiming to supplant the postmodern, given the persistence of *modernism* in many of its would-be supplanters" (153).

In my project, I examine the cohabitation of modernism and postmodernism, investigating what results when the concepts of irony and sincerity are held simultaneously in the mind of the reader or viewer, and charting how the metamodern satirical mode manifests in liminal texts characterized by both hope and melancholy. Blending two types of satire identified by Steven Weisenburger as "generative" and "degenerative," I examine the way satirists express humor in metamodern satires that destabilize before suggesting a correction, resulting in a new mode that encapsulates both darkness and light. I argue that the structure and tone of metamodern satire are uniquely equipped to negotiate between the objectives of both modernist and postmodernist satire.



## Previous Scholarship

To understand the historical context of this project, it is necessary to chart the twentieth-century theories of both satire and black humor. To begin, in the past century, satire—a rhetorical form dating back millennia—has faced substantial criticism regarding its relevance and efficiency in contending with contemporary developments in literature. In “The Nature of Satire,” Northrop Frye claims that the satirist cannot “speak for the twentieth century” (77). He argues that “our sense of what constitutes absurdity has changed” (77), which leads to satire’s diminished function of speaking for a society in flux, with Frye submitting that satire based on “persistent moral sentiments has a better chance for immortality than satire base on fluctuating ones” (78). This assertion that satire cannot speak for the twentieth century has, in turn, demonstrated influence in every major study of satire published since (Weisenburger *Fables of Subversion* 1). In response to Frye’s critique, discussion and redefinition of satire’s fundamental parts have been necessary to account for developments in American literature, specifically the emergence of postmodernism. While modernist satires speak to the alienation and the break from tradition that characterize the movement, the development of postmodernism’s fragmented, depthless state led satire’s objective to shift from cultural criticism to destabilization.

To begin in the mid-twentieth century, Northrop Frye represented the old guard’s line of thinking, describing satire as “militant irony,” arguing that “its moral norms are relatively clear, and that it assumes standards against which the grotesque and absurd are measured” (*Anatomy of Criticism* 208). He argues that the satirist’s selection of absurdities is an inherently moral act, requiring both wit or humor and an explicit target

to communicate the message (*Anatomy of Criticism* 209). Frye writes, “Attack without humour, or pure denunciation, thus forms one of the boundaries of satire; humour without attack, the humour of pure gaiety or exuberance, is the other” (“The Nature of Satire” 76). In 1962, attempting to further define the genre of satire, Gilbert Highet posited his own boundaries, identifying two essential elements: the description of a painful or absurd situation as vividly as possible (18-19) and the intention to go beyond simply making a statement to “shock” readers (20).

Writing of the satirist’s larger method, Edward A. and Lillian D. Bloom argue, “As idealist—he believes virtue may be acquired. If overt or implied praise of the good points the way, he uses applause as a legitimate part of his armory. Otherwise and for the most part, he relies upon ridicule and castigation to prompt rejection of whatever may be inconsistent with reason and good nature” (18-19). They continue, “Whatever the depth of his feeling, he professes to expect that the reader will emerge from the satiric experience better equipped than before to fulfill his potential for social understanding and self-knowledge” (19). Commenting on the cloaked approach of the satirist, Alvin B. Kernan writes, “The satirist never seems to attack directly but always pretends not to be doing what in fact he is doing. He praises what he loathes, speaks with enthusiasm of utopias which he proves to be wastelands, creates pleasant little tales about the beasts and never seems to notice that his animals are reductions of human beings” (82). Observing the resulting social function of the genre, George A. Test claims that, “satire in its various guises seems to be one way in which aggression is domesticated, a potentially divisive and chaotic impulse turned into a useful and artistic expression” (4).

Observing the elements attributed to satire by literary critics throughout the mid-twentieth century, Steven Weisenburger succinctly defines traditional conceptions of satire as “a rationalist discourse launched against the exemplars of folly and vice, to rectify them according to norms of good behavior and right thinking” (*Fables of Subversion* 1), referring to this traditional model as “generative” satire. Expanding this definition, Weisenburger enumerates the four primary elements of the Formalist (“generative”) theory of satire:

- *Satire is rhetorical*—it puts forth a rational argument and is responsible for “demonstrably changing the world” (16).
- *Satire requires an object of attack*—the target must be external to and universal; unlike parody which makes the object of attack part of its structure, satire is “extramural” in its aim (16).
- *Satire is corrective*—this corrective nature ameliorates aggressiveness and is done to benefit the entire society; it is considered curative (19).
- *Satire is normative*—it is considered normative in a positivist or universalist sense, and these universals had to be “relatively clear” or “implicitly stated” (21).

Weisenburger complicates this definition of satire as he posits a new mode which he labels “degenerative,” meant to describe the satires emerging from postmodernism. Building on Lyotard’s definition of postmodernism as “incredulity toward metanarratives,” Weisenburger submits this new form, which departs from the corrective and normative elements of its generative precursor, aiming primarily to delegitimize,

“subvert[ing] hierarchies of value and ... reflect[ing] suspiciously on all ways of making meaning, including its own” (*Fables of Subversion* 3).

In addition to charting the development of the genre, identifying the mode of humor present in these contemporary satires is also necessary in understanding my project. Valentine Cunningham argues that satire “does not do happy endings. Its wastings and trashings go on irreversibly. Badness is unalleviated. The annihilations just continue” (419). This aspect of satire is one of the reasons it lends itself so easily to black humor. For thousands of years, “black humor” served as a direct allusion to black bile produced by the brain, which caused melancholy (Winston 269). However, the term took on new meaning when Andre Breton released his *Anthology of Black Humor* in 1939, declaring black humor “the mortal enemy of sentimentality” (xix). Two decades later, in his 1964 essay “Humor with a Mortal Sting,” Conrad Knickerbocker identified a new breed of American humorists who are “bitter, perverse, sadistic, and *sick*,” whose humor is “black in its pessimism” (299). Following the “humorless” Eisenhower era, black humor boomed in the 1960s (Kercher 4), often attributed to the rise in existentialism that occurred after World War II (Gehring 4). Overwhelmingly populated by male figures, the post-war satire boom was thought to be a reaction to the rise of mass culture, the spread of artifice, and feminine sentimentality. Jokes about murder, mutilation, incest, and cannibalism became popular among young men who desired to protest blandness and separate themselves from the “phonies” of society (Kercher 96).

Black humor has defied concrete definition, as it is referred to as a “genre,” “attitude,” “stance,” “perspective,” “mode,” “a technique, not a form,” “sensibility,” “tone” (Winston; Weisenburger *Fables of Subversion*). In the 1967 text *The Fabulators*,

Robert Scholes argues that black humor is an intellectual response to the limits of realism, writing of its practitioners, “They have some faith in art but they reject all ethical absolutes. Especially, they reject the traditional satirist’s faith in the efficacy of satire as a reforming instrument. They have a more subtle faith in the humanizing value of laughter” (41). While the terminology of “black humor” and “existential humor” are often folded in together, in 1973, Max Schulz claims that black humor differs from existentialism, highlighting that while both portray an absurd world bereft of values, existentialism preserves respect for the self (6). In his 1978 essay “Black Humor: To Weep with Laughing,” Mathew Winston returns to Breton, characterizing his perspective as a “Romantic irony which simultaneously perceives all of life as ridiculous and deadly serious” (271).

In studying black humor, scholars disagree about whether it is a mode of satire. Detractors argue that black humor is not satirical enough, citing its renunciation of the normative and corrective elements of generative satire (Weisenburger “Barth and Black Humor” 51). However, black humor lays the foundation for the degenerative mode of satire described above, in its amoral attempts to destabilize normative reality (Weisenburger “Barth and Black Humor” 51; Knickerbocker 302). The black humorist views societal institutions such as “the press, the movies, television, advertising, the universities, business, the government, the military, medicine” as contributing to the “national psychosis” (Knickerbocker 302). A precursor to postmodernism, black humor was also the first articulation of the collapse of textual boundaries (Weisenburger “Barth and Black Humor” 52).

Winston speaks further to the heterogeneous nature of generative satire and black humor, as he argues:

Black humor often reveals life's shabbiness and criticizes in the manner of satire. But unlike satire, it does not assume a set of norms, implicit or explicit, against which one may contrast the mad world depicted by the author. It relies neither on "common sense" as a guide to proportion and decorum, nor on social, religious, or moral convention. This is not to say that the reader of black humor is without norms. He has them, and the writer of black humor exploits them. The reader's sense of decency allows the writer to shock, the reader's humanity allows him to horrify, the reader's sense of verisimilitude enables him to outrage, and the reader's familiarity with dramatic and fictional conventions permits him to parody. But he does not rely on the reader's agreeing with him that a certain norm ought to exist and he does not attempt to convince the reader of what should be. Moreover, black humor challenges not only the standards of judgment on which the satirist relies, but also the very faculties of judgment. (*"Humour Noir"* 274-75)

While a defining quality of "New Comedy" was the victory of resolution and a "general atmosphere of reconciliation" between the individual and the society (Frye, "The Argument of Comedy" 451), Schulz argues that black humor results in lack of social reconciliation, stating that it "often moves toward, but ordinarily fails to reach, that goal ... condemn[ing] a man to a dying world" (8). This idea of a dying world dovetails easily with the fragmentation and dissolution that characterize the postmodern turn. One expression of this fragmentation manifested in humanity's integration with the media it consumes. As Jean Baudrillard argued, it wasn't that people couldn't tell the difference

between real life and television, but rather that that differentiation became less important. As simulacra, “substituting the signs of the real for the real” (Baudrillard 1), grew in prominence, the opportunity blossomed for destabilization in the form of degenerative satire. The rise of Jameson’s conception of the “eternal present” contributed to an erasure of the history that laid the foundation for Western civilization’s guiding metanarratives, such as science, humanism, Marxism, feminism, and religion.

In response to this dissolution of history, the New Sincerity offers an alternative to the destabilizing cynicism of postmodern texts, supplying instead an alternative that communicates a more optimistic outlook for humanity. As Rafael Alves Azevedo argues, “The New Sincerity’s rejection of postmodernism with its focus on moral relativism, self-referentiality, subjectivity, nihilism, deconstruction, and cynical irony amounts to a renewed embrace of historical materialism, i.e. a belief that there is a world beyond our individual senses, that humans have agency, and that, therefore, the world can be changed” (75). Alves Azevedo summarizes David Foster Wallace’s explanation of these concurrent cultural movements, writing “irony’s usefulness lies in its destructive nature which can be used to topple an oppressive status-quo; however, it must be followed by a new sincerity to construct something new in its place” (75).

As such, it becomes necessary to chart the evolution of the black humor that functioned as the artistic representation of postmodern philosophy, as it continues to serve the purposes of metamodernism that proposes a correction to the societal institutions subverted by the postmodern cause. In this project, I intervene in two conversations relevant to humor studies. First, I examine the delineation between generative and degenerative satire to propose a hybrid form to account for the interstitial

satires of metamodernism that take on characteristics of both postmodernism and the New Sincerity, resulting in a form equally capable of destabilization and correction. Secondly, I address the way that it has been necessary for black humor to evolve to account for the inherent optimism brought about by the return to modernist correction.

### **Toward a New Mode of Satire**

Since the release of *Fables of Subversion* in 1995, many humor scholars have relied on Weisenburger's theory of generative and degenerative (or postmodern) satire, and many literary works have been identified as breaking with the generative mode, such as Flannery O'Connor's *Wiseblood*, Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* and Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle*. While Weisenburger's definitions help scholars grapple with the influences from modernist and postmodernist periods, I challenge the presumed divide between the two modes, instead arguing that satire can simultaneously embody characteristics of both, a hybrid form that I refer to as "metamodern satire," which combines the targeted and corrective impulses of generative satire with the destabilization of degenerative satire. Undergirding the development of this term are four primary texts that embody this emerging form. I argue that these metamodern satires call into question our ways of reifying knowledge while simultaneously suggesting a correction and positing movement to a better space. The latter function draws on Erika Gottlieb's work on the cathartic function of modernist satire, a form that relies on the opportunity for reason to intervene before ultimate destruction can occur (273).

In submitting this new hybrid mode of satire, I stress the importance of speaking to both the distinctive structure and functionality of this form. To begin, I argue that metamodern satire uniquely functions to attack exemplars of folly and vice by



destabilizing the metanarratives used to legitimate knowledge. Generative satire has a specific target, and I argue that metamodern satire draws on this tradition of targeted attack, widening its sights from foolish and wicked human behaviors to the systemic problem of employing metanarratives to make meaning in the society.

Metamodern satire frequently draws on symbolism and allegory in order to examine the intended target, often manifests in the construction of a symbolic metanarrative to highlight absurdity and provide critique. These symbolic metanarratives are often nontraditional but function effectively to create a corollary for the text's underlying criticism. For example, in this project, I argue that Shalom Auslander's television show *HAPPYish* employs the symbolic metanarrative of advertising in order to critique the true metanarrative of the text: consumer capitalism. In relation to this satire, both advertising and consumer capitalism are mechanisms by which knowledge is legitimated in American society. However, it is through the creation and deployment of a symbolic metanarrative that Auslander is able to create an allegory that functions to destabilize more deeply entrenched ways of making meaning.

Generative satire may suggest corrective motion to a better space, but metamodern satire folds in tenets of postmodernism to suggest that correction lies in identifying and disposing of the metanarratives that fail to speak for the increasingly fragmented and heterogeneous society. Contemplating the objective of postmodern texts, Susan Strehle has argued that the work of postmodern satirists "indicts without consoling; it finds large scope for unchecked greed and virtually none for ethical values" (145-46). However, this sentiment is limited in its ability to account for the cultural evolution that has occurred with the introduction of the New Sincerity. This indictment, as Strehle puts

it, this identification and disposal of metanarratives, is only the first station on the trajectory of a metamodern satire, because unlike degenerative satire in which subversion is the terminal destination, metamodern satire moves beyond this chaos, rhetorically shifting from irony to sincere expression in order to propose a correction for the improvement of the society. (Though the success or effectiveness of the proposal is not guaranteed and often not productively implemented before the end of the narrative.)

I have observed that in metamodern works, the two necessary acts of destabilization and correction do not take place simultaneously, but rather, the former is necessary for the latter to occur. It is only after the monolithic nature of the metanarrative has been demonstrated to be insufficient that correction becomes inherently appealing. However, this chronological structure of destabilization and correction need not be a singular occurrence. Some metamodern satires, such as George Saunders's "Brad Carrigan, American," engage in a cyclical pattern in which the process of destabilization and correction is repeated throughout the narrative, often made necessary by the fact that attempted implementation of the correction has failed.

With a generic pattern of destabilization that often does not manifest in a successful or effective correction, one may be tempted to classify metamodern satires under the umbrella of "black humor." However, I argue that this mode of satire contains strains of optimism that endure even through these failed attempts at effecting change. The term "black humor" has been debated, often substituted for terms meant to more vividly pin down the movement. Terms such as "the existential novel," "novel of the absurd," "the anti-novel," "sick humor," "Yankee existentialism," "nightmare fiction," and "the comic apocalypse writers" have all been used to describe this humor

constellation (Janoff, Kercher, Davis). These terms reflect Cunningham's argument that satire does not culminate in happy endings, a claim that makes sense considering the postmodern movement, which black humor begot. Unlike the generative works that preceded them, degenerative works sought to expose societal chaos, without ultimately offering a life preserver to rescue it.

However, in proposing a hybrid mode of satire, it becomes necessary to contest Cunningham's assertion that satire offers no happy endings and submit that metamodern satire's corrective nature demonstrates inherent optimism for the society which it critiques, assuring the reader that there is still time to revise behaviors, attitudes, and institutions.

Additionally, with consideration to this new functionality of satire, one must also turn attention to conventional definitions of black humor, revising as necessary. Mathew Winston differentiates between two major forms of black humor, "absurd black humor emphasiz[ing] the humor in black humor" and "grotesque black humor stress[ing] the blackness." Winston positions "absurd black humor" as the "lighter side of black humor" (277), building on Martin Esslin's definition that absurd black humor "strives to express its sense of senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought" (6), stressing the dissolution of language and disintegration of plot.

However, my project builds on this idea of absurd black humor, taking into consideration the new role of metamodern satire. What results is my own contribution to the sea of terms surrounding black humor, which I term "daybreak humor," named for the moment when all is dark except for a glimmer of light on the horizon. Unlike black

humor, whose purpose is to destabilize and throw into suspicion all ways of making meaning, I argue that daybreak humor functions as the comic mode of metamodern satire, performing the same destabilization work, reveling in the absurdity of a situation, but eventually promoting the hope of social improvement. Daybreak humor is uniquely suited to destabilize and correct because it contains elements of both generative and degenerative satire, composed of the darkness of black humor, which highlights the inherent absurdity of life, and the lightness wrought by the inherent optimism of correction.

Additionally, I argue here that daybreak humor is a mode specifically tailored to metamodern satire, as it can adapt to and further facilitate both processes of destabilization and correction. As I have stated, metamodern satire follows the dictum of generative satire, offering a targeted and corrective impulse. However, the important shift here is that the target is the very metanarratives that fail in their attempts to universally legitimate knowledge. Daybreak humor can communicate both senseless absurdity and optimistic correction because the two features happen in sequence rather than simultaneously, allowing it to focus on both actions in a cyclical way. I argue that as an evolved form of black humor, both metamodern satire and its attendant humor signal the movement to a new literary space where destabilization and correction can coexist. Just as Vermeulen and van den Akker define metamodernism in terms of “with,” “between,” and “beyond,” I argue that metamodern satire and the daybreak humor that characterizes it exemplify a successful negotiation between the overlapping calls for ironic detachment and sincere expression, between the poles of postmodern subversion and modernist correction.

In order to make these interventions, it is important to examine and draw from the tradition of scholarly work already in place that applies theories of satire (generative, degenerative) and humor (black humor, superiority theory) to contemporary works of visual and written art. Wes D. Gehring's work *American Dark Comedy: Beyond Satire* examines the intersection of satire and humor as he turns a critical eye to darkly comic films that coincided with the emergence of postmodern satire from the 1960's onward, including such canonical hits as *Dr. Strangelove: Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), *Catch-22* (1970), and *A Clockwork Orange* (1971). Referring to black humor as a "comedy of terrors" (2), Gehring examines elements such as the role of Marxism in dark comedies as well as film noir's transition to become a part of this genre. While Gehring's text speaks to the functionality of dark humor in these mid-century films, my own project departs from this examination to move into a new period of analysis characterized by the development of the metamodernism and daybreak humor.

Following the trajectory set out by Weisenburger, Silas Kaine Ezell examines the role of televisual postmodern satire. Author of *Humor and Satire on Contemporary Television: Animation and the American Joke*, Ezell studies the use of irony in postmodern satire, asking whether its use is a symptom of the "postmodernity" of the mode, or instead comparable to the irony used by American humorists and satirists of previous eras. Ezell argues that "an overreliance on irony in the postmodern era has resulted in a rejection of any possible solution or real political action for the challenges we face in the post-industrial age" (143). Illustrating the effect of this overreliance, D.J. Dooley characterizes the satire of the late twentieth century as "a defensive humor of shock, a humor of lost norms or disorientation, or lost confidence" (7) and argues of

postmodern satire that “it [is] possible to say what it [is] against, but not what it [is] for” (14). While I believe the latter statement to be an apt way to describe degenerative satire, I do contend that the evolved mode of metamodern satire provides a space for the satirist to indicate what they are for, through the inclusion of correction. Each of the visual satires I examine follows a pattern in which the text is frontloaded with cultural critique but punctuated throughout with the suggested potential for societal improvement.

In *Satire and Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate*, Amber Day contends that satirical texts can be at once both parodic and entirely sincere, arguing, “Perhaps because irony is such a lingua franca, there has been a movement to use the language of irony, the self-referentiality, the wit, and the bite, as political tools in the hope for change” (32). She continues, “irony is not inseparably linked to cynicism; instead, oddly perhaps, it appears that, for many, irony is becoming a new marker of sincerity” (42). Examining the intersection of satire, activism, and postmodernity, James Caron makes a similar claim about the way irony and earnestness can be mixed to create “a hybrid structure of affect” (157), writing “The affect of being ironic yet earnest characterizes the hybrid model of satire, made visible by a turn to activism within the postmodern condition” (164). He cites Jessyka Finley’s concept “comic soapboxing,” which Finley characterizes as sincere moments “in which [comedians] can climb atop their comic soapbox and become audible agents of political expression” (242), positioning the hybridization of satirical and sincere expression as a means of enacting palpable change. I build on these voices to argue that metamodern satire exists at this nexus of irony and sincerity, that the corrections offered by these satirical works are clearly communicated through a departure from the postmodern irony on which they are

founded, and a return to the sincere expression of modernism. But these solutions are often complicated by the fact that the proposed corrections are not fully realized in the body of said text. Instead, they are posited as the beginnings of what must be a concerted and often protracted process of effecting change.

Theorizing an evolved form of satire to follow the original offerings of deeply ironic postmodernism, Layne Neeper suggests a class of second-generation postmodern satirists emerging from the New Sincerity movement, naming David Foster Wallace, Richard Powers, Michael Chabon, and Dave Eggers as the figureheads. Pointing to the confluence of postmodernism and satire, Neeper writes, “The postmodernist project would, of course, seem wholly at odds with satire. Satire depends upon stable shared values that find wide acceptance across a given culture’s social imaginary” (281). Neeper cites Walter Poznar, who argues that “the American novelist can only lash out at materialism, hypocrisy, the dreary artificiality of a commercialized society, but he has nothing to put in their place, no personal faith he can believe in in a time of ethical uncertainty and moral chaos” (281). Neeper turns a critical eye to George Saunders’s work, arguing that Saunders takes on the “postmodern satiric aesthetic” while his stories culminate in corrective impulse toward empathy. My own work follows this line of thinking, as it also argues for a correction in the wake of the destabilization of metanarratives. However, I depart from Neeper as I argue there are alternative final destinations for satire of the New Sincerity that inspire corrective action, such as disgust, anger, or compassion. Additionally, Neeper identifies Saunders as a practitioner of “sincere satire,” which draws a line between Saunders’s work and traditional conceptions of irony-laden counterparts. As I discuss Saunders’s work in a later chapter, I build on

this linguistic pairing to assess the way that Saunders does in fact employ irony as a mechanism to demonstrate the absurdity of his manufactured situations, while implementing sincerity when the text shifts from destabilization into a corrective mode.

With its emphasis on correction, at its heart, metamodern satire is concerned with the subversion and destabilization of existing power structures that legitimate cultural knowledge. As such, at the nexus of my analyses is the concept of privilege, and my examinations in this project deconstruct socioeconomic, gender, and racial subordination.

In my chapters examining Shalom Auslander's *Happyish* and George Saunders's "Brad Carrigan, American," questions of economic privilege drive the heart of satirical critique. The former addresses the role of consumer capitalism as the product of hyper-capitalism, and Justin Lewis's exploration of this development addresses the ascendancy of hyper-consumerism and an insatiable desire for "more." Amanda Hess's text "What Happens When People and Companies Are Both Just Brands?" and Sapna Maheshwari's "When Is a Burrito More Than Just a Burrito? When It's a Lifestyle" both provide an increasingly relevant and much needed discussion of the effacement of human identity, which is substituted instead with the concept of "personal brands," pointing to the augmentation of capitalism in the everyday lives of people.

My analysis of Saunders's "Brad Carrigan" relies heavily on the ascendancy of neoliberal economic theory in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Susan George's speech "A Short History of Neoliberalism" and David Harvey's *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* both provide an essential base for examining the proliferation of the social practices guided by a hyper-consumerist, hyper-individualist culture. One of these such practices is the development of reality television since the 1990s, and David



Grazian's "Neoliberalism and the Realities of Reality Television" serves as an excellent bridge between the economic values of neoliberalism and the social values of mass entertainment. Sue Collins's "Making the Most out of 15 Minutes: Reality TV's Dispensable Celebrity" further illuminates the neoliberal values of television that purport to elevate the most exceptional among us, only to dispose of them once society's passing and short-lived interest has waned. The concept of celebrity provides an apt metaphor for neoliberalism's culturally myopic practices, which focus solely on interests of the intensely privileged developed world, ignoring developing nations that badly need international aid and intervention.

Gender inequality is at the heart of my analysis of Nick Kroll and Jennifer Flackett's *Big Mouth*, a show that debuted in 2017 and has yet to receive much in the way of scholarly attention. However, despite this dearth of academic research, established arguments about gender expression and misogyny prove to be useful in examining privilege in this arena. Susan Bordo's "The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity" illuminate cultural practices of adornment that serve to restrict women's ability to actualize their desired identities. Rosemarie Tong's work on postmodern feminism also does the necessary work of navigating competing conceptions of feminism, when she posits the postmodern form as comprising multiple (often conflicting) iterations rather than one monolithic ideology.

While not explicitly tied to gender, J. Jerome Zolten's "Joking in the Face of Tragedy," further underscores the lived experiences of women, as his concept of "symbolic hostility"—a joke form in which the teller draws on pain of the hearer to illicit shock and laughter—helps to explain the humor style of the series, which to the untrained

eye appears to invoke misogyny to make women the target of the joke, rather than the purveyor. There has also been a robust critical response in popular media, such as National Public Radio, *The New York Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, and *The Atlantic*. This speaks to the subversive power of *Big Mouth*, with the show often cited as a feminist, progressive text.

Lastly, racial inequality and privilege plays a part in my project, and while I briefly explore some issues of race in several chapters, I do so most acutely in my analysis of Percival Everett's novel *Erasure*. Published in 2001, *Erasure* is situated firmly within the boundaries of the post-soul aesthetic, and as such, scholars such as Touré and Bertram D. Ashe provide the criteria for analyzing texts of this period. Additionally, as a genre, African American satire has a long history of expression and evolution, and works from Darryl Dickson-Carr tracing this development are helpful in understanding Everett's approach to a racial critique of white supremacy. Lisa Guerrero's "Can I Live? Contemporary Black Satire and the State of the Postmodern Double Consciousness" is also uniquely suited to discuss the intersection of African American satire and postmodernism, providing a verdant point of departure for the exploration of black satire's metamodern incarnation. Lastly in 2014, Derek C. Maus and James J. Donahue created a seminal collection of scholarly work on contemporary African American satire called *Post-Soul Satire: Black Identity after Civil Rights*, which contains direct analyses of *Erasure*, such as Danielle Fuentes Morgan's essay on satirical blackness and Christian Schmidt's work on degenerative satire in Percival Everett's oeuvre.

## **Methodology**

The aim of my dissertation is to advance scholarship regarding the functions and limitations of contemporary satire by performing close readings of four texts that I have identified as metamodern satires. Each chapter establishes metamodern satire as a hybrid mode of Weisenburger's theories of generative and degenerative satires. Second, in select chapters, I distinguish the ways that each text participates in daybreak humor as a result of this mode, speaking to the ways the development of metamodern satire has caused a departure from the traditional definitions of black humor established in the 1960s. I examine the way the humor functions to highlight the inherent absurdity of the world and destabilize metanarratives in each of the texts, as well as posit a correction. To explain the new duality of humor, it is necessary to chart the ways that black humor must evolve as it has moved from participation in satirical texts that provide "no happy endings" to those satires that serve a corrective function.

Winston argues that absurd black humor presents characters of little depth, meant to represent the world of comedy, and that these characters lack development over the course of the work (278). In my research, I rebut this claim by demonstrating the multifaceted and layered condition of the major characters of my chosen texts, indicating the way that these metamodern narratives use pastiche not only to reflect the myriad of media influences felt by postmodern characters, but also to showcase the way that this approach creates characters of nuance who exist at the crux of overlapping and often competing metanarratives.

Each application chapter of the dissertation examines a different metanarrative destabilized by metamodern satire. These metanarratives, related to race, class, and

gender, all fall under the umbrella of privilege. Each text deploys a symbolic metanarrative that takes the place of the true target of the satire. The narratives include the exploration of television, advertising, puberty, and media representation as allegories for dismantling larger social forces used to legitimate knowledge. The texts in question range in terms of the level of privilege experienced by the protagonist, beginning with a protagonist who experiences race, class, and gender privilege (Thom Payne of *HAPPYish*), and eventually turning to examine texts in which characters of lesser privilege play vital roles (Thelonious “Monk” Ellison of *Erasure* and Jessi Glaser of *Big Mouth*). My project culminates in a chapter examining the destabilization that occurs when a character of high privilege attempts to use this advantage to go to the space of the “Other” (Brad Carrigan of “Brad Carrigan, American”).

## **Chapter Overviews**

### **Chapter 2: Shalom Auslander’s *Happyish***

In addition to the introductory chapter, in Chapter 2, I interrogate the way the Showtime series *Happyish* (2015) destabilizes the metanarrative of consumer capitalism through the establishment and subversion of the symbolic metanarrative of advertising. I argue that the protagonist Thom’s occupation as a creative director for an advertising firm uniquely positions him to legitimate knowledge through the lens of advertising. The crux of the show rests in the intersection between postmodern irony and modernist sincerity, with Thom serving as a metamodern character who must literally negotiate between the two modes when presenting advertising campaigns to clients. This

negotiation extends into Thom's personal life as he increasingly desires to push away the deeply ironic, social media obsessed world that he is complicit in creating.

Linda Hutcheon's observations on irony in discursive communities helps to elucidate the social and professional divisions Thom enforces as he seeks refuge from a hyper-consumerist world. Thom surrounds himself with like-minded people who employ irony to bond over their communal disappointment at what they perceive to be the demise of Western civilization. Hutcheon writes, "No theorist of irony would dispute the existence of a special relationship in ironic discourse between the ironist and the interpreter; but for most, it is the irony itself that is said to *create* that relationship" (*Irony's Edge* 85). The delineation between irony and sincerity is blurred here because, as I will argue, the members of Thom's discursive circle often use irony to communicate their genuine sentiments, transmissions made possible by an in-group/out-group mentality that fosters intimacy through the exclusion of others. Nick Marx and Matt Sienkiewicz explain irony's potential for galvanizing relationships, stating, "A regular joke offers a chance to be entertained in the presence of others. An ironic one provides an opportunity to bask in the self-satisfying knowledge that someone else is missing out on the fun" (102). I argue that it is through the frequent invocation of irony that Thom and his discursive circle irreverently reify their assurance that their worldview is correct.

I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the role of optimism in the humor of the show. I argue that Thom's repeated attempts to effect change are evidence of an ultimately optimistic outlook and belief that the world is capable of change. Over the course of the series, Thom fails time and again to see the societal transformation that he

desires, but like Sisyphus, continues to push the boulder up the mountain despite it rolling back down to the plain over and over again.

### **Chapter 3: Percival Everett's *Erasure***

In Chapter 3, I examine Percival Everett's novel *Erasure* (2001), which traces the story of an African American academic, Thelonious "Monk" Ellison, whose intellectual writings sell very few copies. Monk is criticized for the failure of his texts to speak to the black experience, but Monk himself adopts the attitude of post-blackness. Practitioners of this school of thought are described by David Gillota: "These artists do not ignore or sidestep the issue of race ... but they express little to no desire to speak directly to or for the so-called "black community" (18). Frustrated by the success of *We's Lives in Da Ghetto*, a novel depicting intense dereliction in the black community, written by a woman who "visited some relatives in Harlem for a couple of days," Monk pens his own satirically racial work meant to highlight the absurdity of this critically and commercially popular novel. His plan backfires as publishers welcome stereotypes that confirm their racial expectations and option the book, which is ultimately nominated for the Book Award.

This novel is especially interesting in terms of the study of satirical modes, because Everett has included a self-contained novella—*My Pafology*—inside of the larger narrative of *Erasure*. I argue that this is significant because the two texts invoke distinctly different modes of satire, with *My Pafology* operating as a self-contained degenerative satire and *Erasure* as a whole working as a metamodern satire. *My Pafology* presents the story of Van Go Jenkins, an uneducated, hyper-aggressive, hyper-sexual young man who lives in intense poverty. The narrative parodies Richard Wright's *Native*

*Son*, as Van Go takes a job working for a wealthy family and eventually rapes the family's semiconscious daughter. Because both satires endeavor to target and destabilize a white supremacist metanarrative, the literary effect is one in which the presence of the degenerative satire reifies white supremacy as a functioning metanarrative. This in turn augments the effectiveness of *Erasure* as a metamodern satire that works to further destabilize the metanarrative before offering a correction.

Both *Erasure* and *My Pafology* use a symbolic metanarrative of “popular blackness” to illuminate and critique the presence of a white supremacist mechanism for legitimating knowledge. The novel establishes this popular blackness metanarrative through the amalgamation of literary and media depictions of the black community as poor, uneducated, and aggressive. As Lisa Guerrero argues, “In contemporary America, black humanity is a hypothesis” (267), and Everett’s text takes this sentiment to heart. Everett draws on literary texts, such as the aforementioned *Native Son*, Sapphire’s *Push*, and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* as the basis for *My Pafology*. He then folds in media depictions such as sensationalist talk shows and breaking news footage to assert that popular depictions of blackness are monolithic and stereotypical. It is through the subversion of media depictions, made visible through Monk’s alternative personality of Stag—an aggressive ex-con who thinks he might “go off”—that the correction of the novel is made clear as a call for nuanced, diverse, human portrayals of blackness.

#### **Chapter 4: Nick Kroll and Andrew Goldberg’s *Big Mouth***

In Chapter 4, I explore the Netflix television series *Big Mouth* (2017—Present) and the use of dark humor to comment on the subjugation of women, specifically in terms of expression of sexuality. Examining two episodes of the show entitled “Girls Are

Horny Too” and “What Is It about Boobs?,” I argue that the show employs the symbolic metanarrative of puberty to critique and subvert the show’s true guiding metanarrative: patriarchy.

This chapter deconstructs the intersection of female sexual expression and Laura Mulvey’s concept of the “male gaze,” in which the recipient of the gaze becomes an object to be possessed. This problematic confluence provides space for a discussion of competing conceptions of feminism, specifically addressing the way that third wave and postmodern feminisms diverge in their approach to the female experience. A scene at a lingerie store most potently illustrates the divergent approaches of the two feminist theories, as third-wave’s conceit that participation in beauty practices should be considered empowering rather than oppressive contends with the postmodern notion that feminism is in fact plural in nature and that, as Rosemarie Putnam Tong asserts, postmodern feminism “view[s] with suspicion any mode of feminist thought that aims to provide *the* explanation for why a woman is oppressed or *the* ten steps *all* women must take to achieve liberation” (193).

Despite the fact that “Girls Are Horny Too” and “What Is It about Boobs?” are both primarily concerned with the pubescent experiences of girls as they learn to navigate an increasingly adult world, it is also necessary to unpack the experiences of the pubescent boys of the show who vacillate between serving as adversaries and advocates for these female characters. It is important to complicate the often problematic views of the male characters of the show in order to assuage any claims that the show participates in the complicitous critique of the patriarchy, meaning that the irony of the show can be misunderstood as reifying the very institution it seeks to dismantle. Michael Moore writes



that obversions, such as irony, parody, and sarcasm, are all intended to convey the very opposite of what they communicate on the surface. The misinterpretation of obversions can contribute to the audience's tendency to understand the satire as supporting the very ideas it seeks to critique. It is important to note that while the show may trade deeply in irony, often when the male characters are expressing problematic attitudes toward sexuality or gender relations, they are not expressing themselves in an ironic way, but rather with a sincerity underscored by genuine naiveté.

At the heart of this serious narrative is a streak of humor that contains an overarching darkness, punctuated with moments of optimism catalyzed by the possibility of movement to a better space. As such, it is productive to engage with the work of J. Jerome Zolten, who posited the idea that black humor jokes function as acts of “symbolic hostility” recalling past tragedy to shock the hearer of the joke. It is essential to contrast this idea with Erika Gottlieb's conception of cathartic satire, which she defines as “the sense of relief that comes from a revelation accomplished by the force of Reason; it consists of the recognition that we are still *before* the catastrophe, and hence in possession of the freedom to avert it” (273). These two concepts working in concert further define and explain the complex nature of metamodern satire and daybreak humor, providing a point of departure for the analysis of metanarrative disruption and correction housed within the text.

## **Chapter 5: George Saunders's “Brad Carrigan, American”**

In Chapter 5, I examine George Saunders's short story “Brad Carrigan, American,” published in 2007. In this chapter, I argue that “Brad Carrigan” employs the

symbolic metanarrative of television to dismantle the show's true target, neoliberalism, which David Harvey describes as,

the first instance of a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. (2)

I discuss the way that Saunders, perhaps more readily than any of his contemporaries, has come to be associated with the idea of empathy, which manifests in “Brad Carrigan” as the proposed correction to a myopic world in which characters are solely concerned with their own benefit. The story takes place on a fictional television show where characters (and the individuals who portray them) exist only so long as the show continues to stay on the air. As such, the television program is quickly established as the mechanism by which knowledge is legitimated for the characters, who come to understand everything in terms of mass appeal and sustained viewership, including the addition of meta-watching as part of the show.

In “Brad Carrigan,” characters frequently watch reality television shows predicated on the same desperation for viewership. Here, using the work of David Grazian, a connection can be made between television and neoliberal ideology, as Grazian argues that reality television was born out of the desire to deregulate television production. Further, he writes, “While the production of reality television employs neoliberalism’s economic principles, the genre’s narrative conventions reflect its morals” (69).

I argue that the subversion of the neoliberal metanarrative is undertaken by the titular character, Brad, who is greatly concerned by the inherently selfish nature of their television program, as the other characters of the show ignore the suffering of characters from the developing world. Faced with a near-constant stream of people who need his help, Brad attempts to effect change by harnessing the televisual metanarrative and repurposing it in order to expand the show's sphere of concern and alleviate suffering.

Lastly, I examine the story's cyclical mode of humor and argue that the metamodernist mode of satire comes through in the way that the story employs irony and sincerity. I assert that Saunders's text uses postmodern irony in order to call attention to the absurdity used to make a cultural critique and destabilize the metanarrative. However, as Brad tries repeatedly to insert himself in the emerging situation in the hopes of redirecting the efforts and focus of the show, the irony slips away, and Brad's solution is presented with congruency between avowal and actual feeling. What results is a darkly comic portrayal of American society that is punctuated by moments of optimism. I argue that though Brad ultimately fails in his mission to revise the aims of the show, the story is ultimately optimistic, offering a point of departure and an implied future opportunity for the correction to take hold.

## CHAPTER 2: ADVERTISING AND SINCERITY IN SHALOM AUSLANDER'S *HAPPYISH* (2015)

“Advertising is based on one thing. Happiness. And you know what happiness is? Happiness is the smell of a new car. It’s freedom from fear. It’s a billboard on the side of the road that screams with reassurance, whatever you’re doing is okay. You are okay.”

— Don Draper, *Mad Men*

“You have already grasped that Sisyphus is the absurd hero. ... As for this myth, one sees merely the whole effort of a body straining to raise the huge stone, to roll it and push it up a slope a hundred times over. ... At the very end of his long effort measured by skyless space and time without depth, the purpose is achieved. Then Sisyphus watches the stone rush down in a few moments toward that lower world whence he will have to push it up again toward the summit. He goes back down to the plain.”

— Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*

In April 2015, a *Wall Street Journal* review of the new Showtime series *Happyish* began, “As *Mad Men* exits, *Happyish* arrives” (James). For the preceding eight years, viewers of *Mad Men* had come to know the innerworkings of the American advertising industry. The show, set at the ad agency Sterling Cooper in the 1960s and 70s, made clear the problematic nature of discrimination at the time that limited opportunity based on race, gender, and sexuality. However, the show simultaneously depicted this time as a glamorous era, featuring elegant restaurants, impeccable fashion, and executives who drank their lunches. Among these glamorized elements was the advertising industry itself, and the men who created the content that would become synonymous with American consumerism.

Trafficking heavily in nostalgia, the show recreated an era when times were “simpler,” when advertising was a burgeoning science constantly evolving to meet the demands of an upwardly mobile post-war society. This is illustrated in the pilot episode

of the series that features the creative talents of the agency, led by handsome and confident Don Draper—a man whom all the women want, and all the men want to be—when they are asked to create an amended campaign for their long-time client Lucky Strike Cigarettes. Spurred by the “manipulation of the media” that has declared cigarettes to be bad for a person’s health, representatives from both Sterling Cooper and Lucky Strike convene in a smoke-filled room to discuss a new approach for selling their product. In what would become a defining characteristic of the show, the ad men pitch ideas that Lucky Strike hesitates to accept or simply outwardly rejects, until Don has an impromptu moment of inspiration and delivers, with his signature charm, an idea that will revolutionize the way the cigarette industry will advertise for decades to come. Side-stepping the medical warnings and drawing on the Lucky Strike’s manufacturing process of toasting its tobacco, Don pitches “Lucky Strike: It’s Toasted.” Don’s confident and measured delivery bolsters the glamorous and cool image of advertising propagated by the show, positioning the men of Sterling Cooper as the smartest guys in the room (“Smoke Gets in Your Eyes”).

“Fuck *Mad Men*.” These three words uttered in the first episode of Shalom Auslander’s short-lived Showtime series, *Happyish*, succinctly encapsulate both the attitude and purpose of the show, first to reject and then subvert the glossy, nostalgic view of advertising presented by its predecessor. The speaker of this blisteringly direct sentiment is Thomas Payne (Steve Coogan), the middle-aged protagonist of the darkly comic show, who works at an ad agency in New York City called MGT. Frustrated with his work that fuels a consumerist society, as evidenced by his assertion that he “work[s] for Satan,” Thom continues his diatribe to say, “There’s nothing cool about advertising.

There's nothing interesting. We do the same thing that everyone else in the world does these days. We kiss the zit-covered asses of arrogant, know-nothing teenagers" ("Starring Samuel Beckett" 00:10:09-00:10:30). The major conflict of the show arises when two Swedish millennials, Gottfrid (Nils Lawson) and Gustaf (Tobias Segal), take over as creative directors of the agency, and Thom must make a choice between adapting to an increasingly social media-centric advertising philosophy or being placed on the chopping block for being out of touch.

Showtime's dramedy focuses on the pursuit and failure to achieve happiness, and while the series revolves around Thom's work at MGT, the show deals holistically with the discontentment Thom feels living in a world that he perceives as increasingly superficial and depthless, one to which he does not think he belongs. Over the course of the ten-episode arc, we watch Thom move between several discursive circles (friends, family, coworkers, clients) to experience various degrees of recognition or frustration. While disgusted by the work he is asked to produce, Thom is also able to see his worldview confirmed and reflected in some of his long-time professional friends, such as his supervisor, Jonathan (Bradley Whitford), or his headhunter, Dani (Ellen Barkin), both cold-blooded sources for a brutally honest assessment of Western Civilization's slow but inevitable demise. Though incensed by his work, Thom also finds brief periods of genuine respite in the comfortable life he shares with his wife, Lee (Kathryn Hahn), who is a visual artist, and his young son, Julius (Sawyer Shipman), all of them living in a beautiful house in Woodstock, New York.

Lasting only one season, *Happyish* was almost universally panned by critics who decried the series to be too cynical, often citing the privileged position of Thom and his

family as the reason Thom's unhappiness fell flat. One review read, "from its repeated rants and middle fingers to almost everything, the supposedly satirical *Happyish* seems more an exercise in pursuing pretension than anything else" (Patten). The Guardian wrote, "Now there's this, a show that seems to wallow in the fact that everything sucks, is entirely pointless, and we're all sliding toward irrelevance until we die," and that the show was "far too smug and happy with its own superiority" (Moylan). Critic Brian Tallerico wrote, "Perhaps this is all broad satire designed to remind us that ignorance is bliss, and we can only find happiness when we embrace our social media overlords and the generation that will replace us. That could be true. You know what else would help on the road to happiness? Stop writing shows with characters who portray middle age as a wasteland of self-righteous judgement and false proclamations of 'what's real.'" One review that resolutely criticized the series ends by suggesting other shows for viewers to watch that better grapple with the "search for meaning in a fast-paced, superficial world." It closes with the sentence, "Misery loves company, but it also loves a light at the end of the tunnel" (Stevenson).

However, I argue that it is a sentiment like this, illustrated by the preponderance of reviews, that oversimplified the nuanced work being done by the series. *Happyish* is not exclusively the darkly cynical, self-righteous show that so many critics easily categorized it as, but rather a complex metamodern satire, negotiating between a depthless postmodern world and the desire to create congruency between feeling and sentiment propagated by the New Sincerity, and consequently taking on markers of both movements.

Drawing on the objective of postmodern satires, succinctly defined by Steven Weisenburger as “subvert[ing] hierarchies of value” (*Fables of Subversion* 3), this series works to destabilize the metanarratives used to legitimate the knowledge of the culture. In the case of *Happyish*, the target of subversion is consumer capitalism, which the series critiques through delegitimization of the symbolic metanarrative of advertising, a natural extension considering advertising’s pivotal role in the propagation of consumer capitalism. The connection between these two entities is emphasized by Nicholas Holm who argues, “We cannot really understand advertising without understanding capitalism. Not only is this because advertising would not exist without capitalism, but also because advertising is one of the major sites at which we, as a society, engage with, interpret and most often celebrate capitalism” (63). With biting cynicism and irony, *Happyish* critiques a world in which commodity culture has come to be a lens through which people define themselves, re-envisioning themselves as brands meant for public consumption.

However, because it exists in the overlapping eras of postmodernism and the New Sincerity, the show simultaneously embodies markers of the latter as well. While the underlying mechanism of the show is postmodern cynicism, *Happyish* is punctuated with moments in which characters demonstrate congruity between sentiment and expression. Speaking to the dualistic mode of this satire, one of the major conflicts of the show arises from the need for Thom to vacillate between irony and sincerity, though, as I argue here, these two modes of discourse are not mutually exclusive.

As a result of the contradictory characteristics of these two eras, a new mode of humor must be posited in order to adequately address the unique aims of metamodern satire. While postmodernism emerged out of the evolution of black humor’s



destabilization and irony, a return to sincerity reopens the possibility for satire to conduct its original, modernist objective: to reflect the society and offer a targeted correction. If generative satire is an inherently cathartic genre because it allows for the intervention of reason before the fall (Gottlieb 273), the humor of metamodern satire must contend simultaneously with the darkness of destabilization and the light that comes from the suggestion of correction. I argue that *Happyish* takes on this negotiation in the mode of humor expression that characterizes the program. Though it is often characterized by cynicism, the series also presents a glimmer of hope as it attempts to answer the question of how one may achieve happiness in an increasingly consumerist world.

### **The Advertising Grand Narrative**

As a metamodern satire, *Happyish* takes up the mantle of destabilization through its critique of advertising as the guiding metanarrative of the society, the mechanism by which knowledge is legitimated. On a practical level, the comfortable life Thom and his family know is predicated on his work in the advertising industry, and as Thom is regularly submerged in this world, advertising comes to filter reality, a development that functions as one of the major internal conflicts of the series. Advertising is by no means a new development of the contemporary moment, as corporate branding has played a crucial role in consumer behavior since the 1920s, when “the rise of American consumer culture produced a glut of products that couldn’t be differentiated from one another on sight” (Hess). With the proliferation and diversification of technology during the last century, the presence of advertising has both ballooned and advanced; It was projected that advertisers would spend nearly \$600 billion on paid media, digital, and mobile advertising in 2015 (“Advertisers Will Spend”), the year *Happyish* premiered. However,

as a member of a Generation X, defined by the Pew Research Center as those born between 1965 and 1980 (Dimock), Thom originates from an era when media saturation was much less concentrated, and his rejection of social media-centric advertising is rooted in his belief that it encourages hyper-consumerism and pseudo-connection.

Media surrounds Thom, and as an advertising executive, he is complicit in the creation of the increasingly pervasive mediascape. Despite his disavowal of its increasing presence, he is not immune to the advertising metanarrative, as it becomes the way that he, too, comes to understand the world around him. Thom's tendency toward this is demonstrated in the first episode of the series when he visits a health store shopping for male supplements in order to combat the erectile dysfunction he experiences as a side effect of his antidepressants. He comes across a product called "Forta-Dude," which encourages potential consumers to "Get amped and ripped as you max out those reps like never before" ("Starring Samuel Beckett" 00:15:50-00:15:55).

Here the metanarrative emerges, as Thom imagines himself looking beyond the bottles of supplements, through a window to a focus group for a new product: Thom himself. Leading the discussion, the facilitator asks the exclusively millennial group what they think about Thom:

FACILITATOR: Okay, Thom Payne. By a show of hands, how many of you find Thom likable? [group laughs] Does anybody here find Thom likable? [group laughs] Nobody? Interesting. How many of you would like to be like Thom someday?

MILLENIAL #1: Hell, no.

FACILITATOR: Hey, let me ask you this? How many of you think Thom should just kill himself?

MILLENIAL #2: That's a yes. [All participants raise hands] ("Starring Samuel Beckett" 00:15:32-00:16:10)

Here is an instance of Thom being discarded. While the group's critique is amorphous and not explicitly regarding his physical appearance, having his own impotence on the brain, Thom immediately breaks the "fourth wall" of the focus group to offer his biting critique of hegemonic masculinity:

THOM: Why [should I kill myself]? Because I don't look like this shithead?  
[points to a muscular man shopping behind him] I'm not supposed to look like that. I have a job, a wife, and a child. ... Do you know how much self-loathing it requires to have washboard abs? How much you've got to hate yourself to work that fucking hard? Abs don't tell the world you're healthy. They tell the world you're one Twinkie away from killing yourself.

MUSCULAR MAN: It's true. I hate myself. I pursue an impossible standard of physical perfection in the hope it will make me worthy of love. (00:16:18-00:16:50)

Thom feels vindicated because he believes this moment of unvarnished truth has made the case for the value of his own life; However, his point about the problematic link between masculinity, physicality, and value are quickly dismissed by the group, who pin Thom's sentiments on his own psychological projection:

MILLENIAL #3: Chill out, Thom. Camus said Sisyphus was happy in his absurd existence, a'ight?

THOM: Camus also said that the ridiculousness of life requires revolt, not suicide.

FACILITATOR: Okay, show of hands, how many of you think Thom is capable of revolt? [group snickers] (00:16:55-00:17:05)

Thom is discarded again.

This fantasy exchange with the focus group reifies the metanarrative, simultaneously denying Thom his humanity while reimagining the concept of masculinity entirely as a commodity that can be branded. With this scene Thom is reduced to a product whose virtues and shortcomings are meant to be evaluated by the millennial market. Finding that he does not embody the type of branding these consumers find attractive or valuable, Thom is pushed to the margins, unable to be profitably commodified.

This focus on the commodification of humanity is made clear again when he and Jonathan, Thom's boss and friend, talk about the new advertising strategy of the agency, a development that has been the catalyst for Thom's growing disgust with his industry. When discussing the necessity of the transition that MGT is undertaking, a movement toward social media plans and blurred boundaries between advertising and reality, Jonathan speaks to the ubiquity and saturation of marketing, stating, "The industry's in the shitter. We've reached peak America. We're sitting in a puddle of 'was.' In a couple of months, I expect to be replaced by a fucking app. Look, I love you, Thom, but if you want to survive this, you gotta play the game. So marketer, *rebrand thyself*" ("Starring Samuel Beckett" 00:13:30-13:52, emphasis added).

Here again we see evidence of an economic system that commodifies the self. Jonathan, while sympathetic to Thom's yearning for the way MGT used to conduct business, demonstrates his knowledge of the evolving world of media and its increasing ubiquity in the lives of consumers by encouraging Thom to "rebrand" himself. He pushes Thom to lean into the systemic changes taking place in order to preserve his spot in the industry and to continue to provide a comfortable life for his family. Jonathan's use of the phrase "peak America" commodifies the United States as well, drawing on critiques of the present and future condition of the state's economic positioning, and cultivating a brand bolstered by the inherent promise that every man, woman, and child has access to the American Dream. He leaves us to wonder what will come in the wake of the waning American brand, which has so valiantly promoted the tenets of Capitalism, and though the source of the declaration has been debated, it has been said that it is "easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of Capitalism" (Jameson, "Future City" 76).

I argue that the rhetorical effect of these two exchanges substantiates the shadow metanarrative of the society: consumer capitalism, a movement predicated on the idea that society is no longer governed by production, but instead dictated by consumption (Stiegler), and that people begin to define themselves through their purchases rather than by what they produce (MacKay). Justin Lewis succinctly defines consumer capitalism as "an economic and cultural system in which the appetite for goods becomes all-consuming and insatiable. The desire for free time would be eclipsed by the desire for more things" (53). Lewis's work on advertising's role in the proliferation of consumer capitalism is especially helpful in understanding the implicit connection between the advertising metanarrative and that which it represents—consumer capitalism. Lewis argues, "The

more we have, the harder the [advertising] industry needs to work to maintain demand” (53), and speaks to the decreasing value placed upon each commodity in the face of superabundance, stating that the value “becomes increasingly difficult to maintain, as the empirical impact of each new object on our quality of life lessens with every purchase” (5). Writing about the development of consumer capitalism over the past century, Lewis draws on Mike Budd et al. to assert,

As the twentieth century matured, it was supplanted by a new culture oozing with gratification yet underpinned by a permanent *discontent*. The desire for a better life became the desire for more things. Our dreams and norms “were cast more by capital than by church, community or country” (7). Acquisition went from being about the satisfaction of clearly understood needs to become an end in itself—commodities defined a lifestyle, a pastime, an ambition. Thus began the age of insatiability. (54)

In consumer capitalism, *wants* usurp the innate position of *needs*, which is economically useful to producers because while needs can be satisfied through a finite amount of purchasing, a want is much more elusive and abstract. Wants can be constructed in various ways to make a consumer’s thirst unquenchable. They can be predicated on a person’s ideal lifestyle, coveted social positioning, or greatest fantasy. This social shift from needs to wants began to occur in the 1920s as “ads began to create a new set of anxieties and insecurities about winning the approval (or avoiding the disapproval) of others—anxieties which could only be resolved in the marketplace” (Lewis 55).

As global advertising budgets have continued to balloon, producers have reflected this shift from fulfilling consumer needs to fulfilling consumer wants in the way that they

promote their products. As Amanda Hess writes, “Companies that used to manufacture wares or harvest foods—that used to sell *things*—became brands, which sell *ideas*. ... The brand’s real investment was to imbue the products with meaning.” Unlike *things* that satisfy needs which are often concrete, *ideas* are much more malleable and can draw on psychological factors that extend beyond the necessities for survival.

In recent decades, as companies have worked to further personify their brands, to connect through ideas rather than goods, people too have undergone to process of being branded and branding themselves. In his 1997 article for *Fast Company*, Tom Peters puts forward a prescient claim that essential decisions must be made by individuals to help cultivate personal brands: “To be in business today, our most important job is to be head marketer for the brand called You. It’s that simple—and that hard. And that inescapable.” Peters encourages his readers to follow a feature-benefit business model in which each offered feature yields “an identifiable and distinguishable benefit” and, following this logic, to ask themselves, “What do I do that adds remarkable, measurable, distinguished, distinctive value?”

In *Happyish*, Thom’s increasingly negative outlook on society is predicated on the fact that human beings are increasingly being commodified by a consumer capitalist society that views each of them as potential site of simultaneous consumption and advertising. The advertising campaigns he’s asked to undertake under the new management of MGT reflect the phenomenon of brands shifting from selling wares to selling ideas, a trend traceable even down to the branding and commodification of individuals. Thom bemoans a society that elevates brand-image, “the impression of a product in the minds of potential users or consumers” (“brand-image, n”), as the most

pressing concern for action and pushes back against this pattern in a short exchange with Jonathan:

JONATHAN: You got to hand it to bin Laden. What'd he spend on 9/11? Couple hundred grand? ... 9/10, no one ever heard of that brand. 9/12, not a person alive who hadn't. ... These homicidal motherfuckers are fantastic marketers.

THOM: Al-Qaeda is not a brand, Jonathan. It's a terrorist organization.

JONATHAN: Everything's a brand. I'm a brand. You're a brand. God's a brand. And a brand in trouble. ("Starring Samuel Beckett" 00:12:13-00:12:38)

Rather than further defend the delineation between people and brands, Thom changes the subject to the potential of he and Jonathan being fired under the new creative directors. But nevertheless, Thom's worldview is apparent in its incongruity with MGT's new creative vision.

Pamela Odih cites the work of Anthony Giddens when she claims that "Identity in modern times relies on 'the capacity to keep a particular narrative going,'" continuing that "every person is only as 'good' as his or her last 'claim' to a particular identity" (188). With the development of consumer capitalism, this sense of identity is increasingly tied to the economic participation of an individual. Odih continues, "Advertisers rummage through everyday culture in the relentless search for symbolic meanings to augment the utility value of commodities. The informal symbolic productions of social relations, in time and space, are a particularly attractive source of raw material for the creation of commodity values" (188-89).



Jonathan's declaration that "everything is a brand" speaks to the way contemporary advertisers have worked to conjoin the ideas of consumption and identity. Building on Lewis's assertion that the commodity has moved from the position of a *need* to one of a *desire*, it is this development that allows commodities to transcend the category of wares into the realm of social capital. By advertising the social capital of each product and its ability to contribute to the cultivation of an identity rather than simply accumulation, the consumption of *desired* goods transforms into the maintenance of an identity.

When the consumer is reimagined in the likeness of a brand, consumer capitalism assures the everyday person that their identity can be communicated through their chosen purchases. The clothes they use to adorn themselves, the products they take into their bodies, the material associations they hold all come to transmit information about the values of the consumer. Each item exists as a message for the outside world to notice and interpret. As a natural extension of this, consumer capitalism comes to be the way by which knowledge is communicated and legitimated, and advertising (the extraverted mouthpiece of consumer capitalism) comes to serve as the guiding metanarrative of the society.

If metanarratives are the apparatuses through which the society understands the world it inhabits, Auslander's series easily inserts advertising as that apparatus. The knowledge legitimated by advertising extends to assessments of who is valuable. Following the consumer capitalist metanarrative that advertising has so dutifully served, those who cannot be commodified are discarded by the society. Thom is uncomfortable

with this notion, as made evident through the focus group scene discussed earlier, but he also rejects the advertising metanarrative's process of commodifying thought.

Each episode of *Happyish* is titled in the same way: a list of three influential figures or institutions throughout history, including philosophers, scientists, religious and cultural figures, and media outlets. Over the course of the episode, these figures serve as the narrative's backbone, as Thom draws on their influence and ideas to help make sense of the increasingly media-drenched society that he inhabits. However, despite Thom's desire to root his worldview in the dictums of the world's most influential thinkers, through his role in the advertising industry and the evolving advertising tactics of MGT, he is made acutely aware that these figures no longer function as the mechanism by which society codifies knowledge. Instead, pop culture figures and institutions are placed on equal footing with philosophers, as evidenced by Episode 8: "Starring Rene Descartes, Adweek, and HRH The Princess of Arendelle." This juxtaposition of a philosopher, a media institution, and a character from Disney's *Frozen* illustrates the discursive integration Thom perceives from a society in which he believes that the creators of knowledge, the purveyors of "original" thought, are the very brands that consumers interact with every day.

One scene in the show's fourth episode, "Starring Sigmund Freud, Charles Bukowski, and Seven Billion A\*\*holes," is specifically telling, as Thom stands in line at a restaurant with his professional headhunter and friend, Dani. Waiting to place their orders, they discuss Thom's disgust for the new Swedish creative director, Gottfrid, and the following exchange occurs:

THOM: You know what really bugs me is that everyone loves this asshole.

DANI: Jonathan doesn't.

THOM: Yeah, but the accounts department, creatives, they're really impressed by this Swedish jackass. They think he's a fucking genius.

DANI: He is a genius.

THOM: Christ, not you, too.

DANI: "That which matters the most should not give way to that which matters the least."

THOM: Socrates.

DANI: [motioning to the bag of the woman in front of them] Lululemon. And that is where we get our wisdom from today. Not Socrates. Not Lao Tzu.

Lululemon. It's not hard to be a genius in a world that looks to shopping bags for insights. Christ, I am appalled I am even alive these days. I really am. You know, I imagine myself going up to heaven, where everybody's hanging around drinking martinis, and they look at me and they say "Hey, hi, what era are you from?" and I say, "America, turn of the twenty-first century." And then they all bash me over the head with their harps.

(00:15:22-00:16:20)

The culture that surrounds Thom, one he is complicit in constructing, is one that reveres the catchphrases constructed by "lifestyle brands," defined by Sapna Maheshwari as companies "trying the strategy of using emotion and 'shared values' to build relationships with customers—and to sell them more stuff." Christopher Brandt, the chief marketing officer for Chipotle, argues that when consumers use products to communicate information about their values, wielding each purchase as a "badge," a brand can

“[transcend] being a utility and [become] a more special, integral part of a consumer’s life” (qtd. in Maheshwari).

It is here that the idea of advertising as a metanarrative resurfaces. Thom and Dani are so repelled by the Lululemon shopping bag because the brand has included this pseudo-philosophical aphorism to attract consumers who wish to align with the projected values of the brand. What matters here is not the actual values, business practices, or social contributions of Lululemon, but rather the social credit its deceptively insightful catchphrases grant to those who sport them as value badges. In this consumer capitalist society, character is not determined by deeds, but rather through economic participation and trafficking in brands that function as shorthand for a legitimate value system.

However, much like the superficial and aphoristic nature of the Lululemon sentiment, Thom believes that the critical thinking of the culture has also been flattened. And perhaps this flattening is to be expected, considering the palimpsest of the cultural divide between advertising and reality. In fact, at points in the series, there is no longer a divide between the two entities, and instead a confluence is created in which they fold into one another.

It would be short-sighted to say that the erasure of this barrier is a new development in American advertising. Throughout the twentieth century, even before the proliferation of electronic media, advertisers resorted to creative means for blurring the boundary between advertising and reality, such as paying women to pose as eager customers for the release of new products, a tactic that was even featured as a sub-plot for an episode of the aforementioned *Mad Men*. However, as technology has diversified, so too has the opportunity for advertisers to enter a person’s life, through television, print,

YouTube, and any number of social media applications. Faris Yakob cites a study that found that “8- to 18-year-olds are consuming more than seven hours of media a day” (6). When considering how all of this is mediated by those consuming it, it is helpful to invoke Jean Baudrillard’s observation regarding the dissolution of television into life. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, he argued that it is not that people cannot tell the difference between television and reality, but rather that the difference has come to be less important.

This confluence of media and reality aligns with the ideas put forth in David Foster Wallace’s famous 2005 commencement speech, “This Is Water,” which begins, “There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, ‘Morning, boys, how’s the water?’ And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, ‘What the hell is water?’” The larger point of Wallace’s speech is that the mechanisms by which we interpret the world eventually fade to invisibility so that our perception begins to feel natural or correct. In the consumer capitalist society, this manifests in a way that the insatiability for commodities comes to be felt as an ordinary impulse. Through the adeptness of advertising, the bombardment of messages urging consumers to buy comes to be so ubiquitous that, like the water surrounding the fish, it ceases to be visible.

In *Happyish*, the most salient example of this comes from the character Gottfrid’s repeated mantra that MGT should no longer be creating the advertising campaigns of the past, instead charging ahead to create “moments” or events that he believes to be markedly more effective and memorable. This idea capitalizes on the increasingly limited

time and attention people can devote to the plethora of ads that present themselves every day. While the amount of content has grown exponentially, human beings still possess only a finite amount of attention they are able to devote to consuming it. In her explanation of the resulting “attention economy,” Ester Dyson explains the obstacle companies must grapple with when faced with consumers’ limited capacity. She explains,

The attention economy is not the intention economy beloved by vendors, who grab consumers’ attention in order to sell them something. Rather, attention here as its own intrinsic, non-monetizable value. The attention economy is one in which people spend their personal time attracting others’ attention, whether by designing creative avatars, posting pithy comments, or accumulating “likes for their cat photos.”

However, when Gottfrid pitches “moments,” he works to commodify this “non-monetizable value” to suit the needs of an advertising sector populated with companies hungry for a larger slice of the available attention. The intention here is to commodify reality itself, turning instances of authentic experience into opportunities to sell more product by fully effacing the boundary between the real and the simulated.

In a pivotal meeting with Coca-Cola, Thom pitches a campaign called “Radical Happiness,” which appeals to millennials to acknowledge that life is not always a joyful experience, but that despite the pressures they feel, they should be rebelliously happy and, as an important part of that, drink Coca-Cola. Here MGT has put forward a strategy that positions Coca-Cola as more than a simple soft drink brand or makers of a quotidian product. Instead, the campaign draws on the very tenets of lifestyle brands, and it proposes an approach that equates the company with happiness, rebellion, defiance, and

bliss. Thom closes the pitch by saying, “That’s how you sell to millennials. Radical happiness. Punk joy” (“Starring Sigmund Freud” 00:21:11-00:21:20).

The Coke executives look pleased, having been introduced to an approach for connecting with the lucrative market of millennials. But Gottfrid has other plans, hellbent on implementing his theory of “moments”:

GOTTFRID: I’d like to jump in a moment. Talk about campaigns. ... We’re past the era of advertising campaigns. You don’t have to like it, but you can’t ignore it. Campaigns are last century. We don’t need campaigns anymore. We need—we need events. We need moments. Why are the insurgents winning in Iraq? Because America is playing an old game. An old game of campaigns. Coca-Cola needs to think like an insurgent. We need to become an insurgent brand. We need to fly a plane into Pepsi. We need to plant the roadside bombs, but on the information superhighways. Take the hilltop commercial. “I’d like to buy the world a Coke.” Yeah? That was an event. It was a moment. Not part of some campaign.

COKE EXECUTIVE #1: Yes, it was.

COKE EXECUTIVE #2: It was part of the “Real Thing” campaign. (00:21:24-00:22:15)

The moment is significant because it challenges the notion that the consumer must be unaware of the boundary between reality and advertising for the advertising to take hold. In an era of lifestyle brands, advertisers have already transcended the mental divide, as products come to represent more than the sum of their parts. Thorstein Veblen’s idea of “conspicuous consumption,” purchasing luxury goods in order to display economic

power or maintain social status (84), has been democratized, allowing all consumer goods to serve as symbols, undergirding Brandt's claim that purchases function as a badge.

This means the infiltration of branding is not surreptitious, nor the insurgent force that Gottfrid theorizes, creeping into our lives without our knowledge. Rather it is a commercial presence with which the current consumer is increasingly willing to interact. While advertising may be readily identifiable by consumers, it works to mask the underlying metanarrative of consumer capitalism that has created an "Age of Insatiability." Through its setting in a New York ad agency, *Happyish* explicitly reveals the motivations of advertisers, and as an extension, makes visible the profit-hungry motives of consumer capitalism so that they may be examined and ultimately destabilized. Thom's presence at the heart of the show serves as a satirical method of analysis as he serves as the straightforward mouthpiece of the show's societal critique and proposed correction.

### **Negotiating between Irony and Sincerity**

With advertising at the center of the narrative, *Happyish* depicts a culture in decay, one preoccupied by social media and consumption, starved for real meaning or significance. For Thom, advertising represents a depthless culture, drenched in irony and focused on the eternal present. Rooted in materialism, the capitalist society's insatiable urge for consumption has no memory for contentedness and demands more and more economic participation to satiate consumer desire.

Regarding the communicative mode of the 2010s, there has been much debate about whether the period is characterized by irony or sincerity. In her 2012 *New York*



*Times* op-ed, Christy Wampole argues that irony is the primary mode through which reality is dealt, arguing,

Advertising, politics, fashion, television: almost every category of contemporary reality exhibits this will to irony. Take, for example, an ad that calls itself an ad, makes fun of its own format, and attempts to lure its target market to laugh at and with it. It pre-emptively acknowledges its own failure to accomplish anything meaningful. No attack can be set against it, as it has already conquered itself. The ironic frame functions as a shield against criticism.

She continues to say that emergence of movements like the New Sincerity have failed to stick, as illustrated by the development of “the new age of Deep Irony.” However, Wampole was vocally criticized by those who perceived her declaration to be a generalization of a “sub-sub-sub-sub-culture,” with detractors citing the introduction of works by Wes Anderson and Arcade Fire, as well as the rise of “wholesome, though not traditional, family-centered television” to lend credence to the staying power of the New Sincerity (Fitzgerald).

However, more critics still attempt to illuminate the interconnectedness of postmodernism and the New Sincerity. Jeremy Green argues that writers who desire to inject their prose with sincerity must do so while contending with the continuing influence of postmodern culture (13). Jon Doyle clarifies this, arguing that “just as postmodernism is intrinsically linked to and informed by modernism, post-postmodernism must assess and utilize thematic and stylistic aspects of postmodernism and employ them against the strategies and beliefs of its predecessor to find a path forward” (260).

In order to better understand Thom's grievances with the culture he lives in, it is important to recognize the lasting impacts of postmodern irony that Thom both participates in and rejects. As an indication of the ironic cultural climate, Thom most often gets himself in trouble when he embodies congruity between what he thinks and what he says, a move that is interpreted by Gottfrid as evidence that Thom is old fashioned and disconnected from the cultural zeitgeist. The advertising world Thom inhabits has worked to discard his worldview, instead opting to cater to younger generations. Demonstrated in the focus group scene, Thom is not considered to be valuable, and therefore what Gottfrid desires from him is silence. When Gottfrid does ask for Thom's opinion, he is not genuinely interested in Thom's perspective on an issue. Instead, what he actually requests is Thom's tacit agreement in the approach of the agency and the trajectory of the advertising industry, perhaps best summed up by Gottfrid's repeated mantra "You don't have to like it, but you can't ignore it."

There are times in these exchanges between the two when Thom attempts to deflect the conversation away from voicing his dissenting opinion, an honest expression of the disapproval he feels. When Gottfrid continues to push Thom to contribute to his vision, Thom is unable to mask his contempt for Gottfrid and fatigue for a society that is interacting with advertising with increasing frequency. If Gottfried's world is all about simulation of reality through the creation of "moments," Thom's is about the real thing, a return to genuine expression without artifice.

One can see Thom's desire to return to a state of sincerity in the advertising campaigns he proposes throughout the series. Going back to the aforementioned Coca-Cola pitch, Thom prefaces his "Radical Happiness" campaign with a candid speech about

the human condition. He attempts to cut through the vision of the United States as the happiness machine and present a realistic account of everyday life. Thom invokes the “Life is Good” brand, using its profitability as an example of the desire people have to believe they are happy, to labor under the assertion that they are pleased with their lives. Thom explains to the Coke executives,

THOM: This is a \$100-million business in over thirty countries. You know why people wear ‘Life is Good’ shirts? Because it’s not. It’s hard. (“Starring Sigmund Freud” 00:20:40-00:20:54)

He continues,

THOM: Coca-Cola isn’t “Don’t worry. Be happy.” This campaign should be “Damn it, despite everything, despite war, despite ISIS, despite Ebola, despite the crumbling of Western civilization, despite your self-obsessed mother and your domineering father and your erectile dysfunction, despite all that, be happy. Be happy. (00:20:56-00:21:20)

Through his pitch of “Radical Happiness” and “Punk Joy,” Thom is pushing for congruity between lived experience and the acknowledgement of advertisers seeking to gain the favor of those to whom they sell. However, the overlapping nature of irony and sincerity is visible here as Thom simultaneously works to communicate the genuine sentiment of life being difficult through the use of ironic language to indicate the both global and local crises that one can overcome simply by drinking Coca-Cola and choosing to be rebelliously happy.

Another example of Thom’s desire to return to sincerity comes when MGT is tasked with pitching a new campaign to New York Life Insurance. The undertaking is

complicated by the company's request for a funny campaign in order to follow in suit with the rest of the insurance industry that has adopted comedic advertising to attract customers. Thom and his team pitch the idea of an oscillating, shit-blowing fan, which will eventually "point at you," the ad materials for which include rain ponchos with the fan and New York Life logo printed on the front. A piece of visual media for the campaign features a picture of an enormous fan photoshopped into a picture of a town completely decimated by a natural disaster. The campaign is irreverent in the wake of tragedy, and despite asking for funny, the New York Life execs are uncertain about MGT's plan:

NEW YORK LIFE EXECUTIVE: It's not our kind of funny. I don't know.

THOM: Well, you do, though. You do know, you know? That's what's special about New York Life. Look, you asked for comedy and we gave you comedy, and maybe we shouldn't have. Because you know what we all know—life is a tragedy; we die, all of us. It's an unhappy ending every time. A smart-ass gecko isn't gonna change that. Charlie Brown doing a commercial for Met Life isn't gonna change that. ... That's life. And you're right. It's not funny. And New York Life knows that. You're the adults in the room. Stay that way. Fuck GEICO and AFLAC and all that lame-ass comedy. Stop worrying what's going on at the kid's table. Sure, it's loud and it sounds like fun, but when tragedy strikes, when lightning flashes and thunder claps, the terrified kids—and we're all terrified kids—will come looking for the grownups. You. ("Starring Vladimir Nabakov" 00:23:00-00:24:25)

Thom sees that, despite New York Life's request, the low-brow humor and irony are misplaced here, and the campaign contributes to a culture of advertising whose bread and butter is the false promise of happiness. Here, again, Thom is a proponent of sincere expression, of an honest assessment of the human condition and an approach that reflects the reality of that condition.

In a sea of social media plans, Thom's repeated sincerity reflects a division in the society, which highlights the existence of different discursive communities. In *Happyish*, this division primarily takes place along generational lines. Looking back to these two pitches, one might argue that Thom feels comfortable suggesting this difference in approach because he is talking to fellow middle-aged adults who feel a similar resistance to an increasingly media-centric, ironic society. In his pitch to New York Life, he explicitly draws on this distinction between the "kids" and the "grownups." Looking back to the very first episode of the series, the importance of age in the determination of a person's identity is frontloaded when Thom imagines being evaluated by a millennial focus group.

In a conglomeration that spans both personal and professional arenas of his life, Thom has crafted a discursive community in which all members struggle with the same problem: how to achieve happiness in a world that considers their perspective less and less valuable by the day. Importantly, inside of this constructed discursive community, the lingua franca is sincere expression. There is a strong congruity between what these characters say and what they mean, as they honestly communicate about the discontentment they feel in their lives.

Take the following exchange between Thom and Jonathan that occurs as the two look in on a different millennial focus group in which the participants conclude that only “old” people, “people in their forties,” are too cynical to appreciate an optimistic commercial:

THOM: Millennials. Stupid fucking optimistic assholes.

JONATHAN: Oh, it’s not millennials, Thom, it’s nature. We’re all assholes.

Everyone who is or was is an asshole.

THOM: What, even Gandhi?

JONATHAN: Think about it. We all start out the same way—a single sperm

among fifty million other sperm, all desperate to get to one egg. To win.

You, me, everyone else on the planet ever in history, we all won that 100-meter in-utero, winner-take-all race to mama’s enchanted life-giving egg.

First prize?

THOM: Life?

JONATHAN: Second prize?

THOM: Death.

JONATHAN: Right. Now you think we weren’t throwing a few elbows? You

think you weren’t knocking a few other sperm over, stabbing ‘em in the back just to get ahead, just to win? Thom, you don’t win that kind of race without being an asshole. I mean, a huge asshole. Your problem is you think that assholes are some sort of anomaly, some sort of aberration.

Nature is an asshole factory, my friend. If you exist, you’re an asshole.

You think, therefore you are, but you are, therefore you're an asshole.

("Starring Sigmund Freud" 00:03:10-00:04:21)

In his typical, cold-blooded style, Jonathan offers an unvarnished assessment of humanity. While Jonathan's words may ring as cynical, it's clear that the exchange between he and Thom is an honest conversation about the agreed outlook of their discursive circle, communicated through a message of authentic expression.

At work, Thom finds his own internal struggle for happiness reflected in Jonathan, who himself is doubly-conflicted as he must keep one foot in both the "kid" and "adult" camps, working constantly to smooth over the growing rift between the two. Despite their commiseration and mutual grieving of a crumbling civilization, even when Thom and Jonathan angrily disagree, their meaning is sincere, as evidenced by a conversation between the two, hours after Thom takes a disruptive and cynical principled stand against the changing advertising tactics of MGT during a full-company meeting:

THOM: [sniffing Jonathan] Martini? A little dirty? Vodka. Vodka?

JONATHAN: Gin. Face-to-face with the Swedes down at the bar cleaning up  
your fucking mess.

THOM: You can't remember their names, can you?

JONATHAN: Fuck you, Thom.

THOM: Excuse me?

JONATHAN: 'Tis pity we're all whores, isn't it, Thom? Everyone but you. *I must say that was a stirring oratory you delivered earlier on the rights of animated elves.* You suck the same cocks we all do, Thom. Wincing at the taste doesn't make you a better man. It only makes you a worse whore. So

if you're going to show me the error of my ways do it from the cedar deck  
of your four-bedroom, two-and-a-half-bath American dream that you  
earned the same way I earned mine.

THOM: *You should drink more, Jon.*

JONATHAN: I couldn't possibly. ("Starring Samuel Beckett" 00:26:05-  
00:27:00; emphasis added)

Looking at this exchange, one can see the sincere expression of Jonathan, whose job it is to cater to the seemingly short-sighted perspective of the Swedes who represent a new approach to advertising, one full of campaigns that blur the lines between reality and advertising. Just as Thom is frustrated with his job, so is Jonathan, who differs in his willingness to explicitly acknowledge the advantage it has afforded him, made clear through his criticism of Thom.

However, discerning readers will notice that congruency between sentiment and expression does not adequately account for all the language exchanged in this brief conversation. Rather, irony is folded into this back and forth, which I have emphasized above. This emerges first in Jonathan's biting remark about the elves and is returned through Thom's ironic insistence that drinking suits Jonathan. This leads one to question whether the irony employed by both Jonathan and Thom undercuts the clarity of the sincere message? Is this ironic expression evidence of an attempt to distance one another from their typically beneficial and affirmational relationship?

To widen the lens for a moment: If postmodernism is characterized by irony and cynicism, and the New Sincerity by sincere expression, *Happyish* is a notable text because as a metamodern satire, it must contend with the overlapping qualities of these



movements. The show's ability to work at cross-purposes is illustrated by the intimate relationships inside of Thom's chosen discursive circle. Yes, as illustrated above, there is a pattern of sincere expression that winds its way through the show, as evidenced in Thom's approach in pitch meetings and the candor with which he speaks to Jonathan or Dani.

However, I argue that sincere speech is not the only tool with which one can build intimacy in a relationship. While often irony is thought of as a distancing mechanism, I argue instead that Thom's social circle also frequently uses irony to converse and communicate sincere sentiment, which solidifies relationships because it reinforces the cohesiveness of a discursive community. Linda Hutcheon argues,

From the point of view of the intending ironist, it is said that irony creates hierarchies: those who use it, then those who "get" it and, at the bottom, those who do not. But from the perspective of the interpreter, the power relations might look quite different. It is not so much that irony *creates* communities of in-groups; instead, I want to argue that irony happens because what could be called "discursive communities" already exist and provide the context for both the deployment and attribution of irony. (*Irony's Edge* 17)

Nick Marx and Matt Sienkiewicz write of irony that "there is always a possibility, perhaps even a guarantee, that a portion of the audience will simply take the ironist at her or his word" (103), which may be the case when the ironist and audience come from divergent discursive communities. However, Thom and his social circle do not experience this hindrance, and the ability to receive and correctly interpret an ironic transmission functions as proof of their mutually agreed-upon outlook. When Jonathan

and Thom exchange ironic barbs, it is with the understanding that their mutual membership to the discursive community will allow sincerity to come through, even when using a device as potentially obfuscating as irony.

The use of irony in Thom's discursive community is notable because, in practice, it functions as one of the mechanisms by which the characters communicate the truth of their worldview. Since characters like Thom, Jonathan, Dani, and Lee all participate and understand the mode of discourse, they can harness irony as a form of genuine expression, confident that their ironic transmissions will be understood as such by the recipient. While the literal content of their words is not congruous with their sentiments, the underlying meaning cloaked by the irony is. When Thom says to Jonathan, "You should drink more," his words express the opposite of his intended meaning, but because the two operate in the same discursive circle and have developed a resulting intimacy, Thom's critique of Jonathan is understood, strengthening the connection that could otherwise be established through congruous exchanges.

Unlike earlier sincere exchanges with Coca-Cola and New York Life, Thom's sincerity with Jonathan is not contingent upon the unvarnished expression of sincere sentiment. This is due largely to the scope of Thom's discursive circle. When speaking with advertising executives who operate in independent and divergent social environments, Thom is prone to communicating via uncloaked sentiment to ensure that his meaning is not misinterpreted. However, when considering the worldview of his most intimate social circle, Thom traffics in irony precisely because it creates and in-group/out-group dynamic that reinforces the connection he feels with the other members

and the boundary that separates Thom and his compatriots from the evolving marketplace.

Marx and Sienkiewicz speak further about irony's potential for bolstering relationships, arguing, "A regular joke offers a chance to be entertained in the presence of others. An ironic one provides an opportunity to bask in the self-satisfying knowledge that someone else is missing out on the fun" (102). The ironic sentiments exchanged between the members of Thom's discursive community help to solidify their communal but mistaken attitude that they alone understand the true nature of society, that they are among the chosen few who are aware of, but not immune to, the advertising metanarrative and the consumer capitalism it represents.

Existing in the liminal space between postmodernism and the New Sincerity, *Happyish* demonstrates that the path of sincere expression is not always one free of irony. For most of the series, Thom plays the role of the cynic, displeased with the world he observes around him even as he helps to create it. Dissecting contemporaries of *Happyish*, Layne Neeper examines the cross-pollination of postmodern satire and the New Sincerity, specifically arguing that the work of George Saunders departs from the realm of "some amorphous sense of correction" and instead "propose[s] the empathetic development of the audience" (280). Saunders's work asks the reader to sharpen their empathy, their "ability to understand and appreciate another person's feelings, experience," ("Empathy, n2b") to symbolically go to the space of the other.

*Happyish* does not require this mental travel, but I argue that it focuses instead on a more immediate compassion: Thom's determination to understand himself and his inability to find happiness. Though cynical in tone, the series encourages empathy for

Thom, who as the protagonist of the series, exists as the lens through which we navigate the world. The viewer comes to find him to be a reliable narrator because, while he may use irony to communicate intimacy with others, in his voiceovers that punctuate the series, he says exactly what he means without the rhetorical obfuscation of irony.

Much like a character who speaks softly to make you lean in and listen more intently, the genuine expression of these voiceovers is highlighted simply because it is free of irony and incongruity. Take the opening lines of the series—the first voiceover of many. Thom states,

This is Thomas Jefferson, founding father of my adopted home of America, which I love with all my heart. But then, fuck, he had to go and write that line, “Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Life, sure. Liberty, I understand the basic concept. But happiness? I mean, what the fuck is happiness? A BMW? A thousand Facebook friends? A million Twitter followers? I wish he’d been more honest. I wish he had just said, “Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, whatever the fuck that is.” Just don’t keep us guessing, Thom. Guessing and pursuing and failing. (“Starring Samuel Beckett” 00:00:20-00:00:58)

“Guessing and pursuing and failing” at achieving happiness. These introductory words essentially serve as the thesis of the series. This diatribe against Thomas Jefferson is cynical, yes, but above that, it is utterly sincere, dismantling any illusions of epideictic patriotism. It is the viewer’s first moment alone with Thom, as he succinctly demonstrates the cultural milieu in which he finds himself and the fundamental disappointment he feels attempting to live out the American Dream.

Thom's exceedingly honest assessment of his middle-aged life continues throughout the series, like in the excerpt that follows:

A strange thing happens when you hit your 40s. Things start falling apart. Suddenly everyone is splitting up. They're dropping dead. And so you start to think about death and how you're spending your life. And if you're spending it well or just spending it. There's a famous Buddhist, Thich Nhat Hanh, and he says you shouldn't worry about death. He says, "Clouds don't worry about becoming rain." But clouds don't have kids, Thich. Clouds don't have to worry about burying their cloud kids or their cloud kids burying them. You know who else doesn't have kids? Thich Nhat fucking Hanh. ("Starring Josey Wales" 0:03:10-00:04:00)

This monologue demonstrates another instance when Thom is simultaneously cynical and sincere. This piece illustrates Thom's displeasure with the trajectory of his life as his inevitable death inches closer and closer, and his words are a sincere acknowledgement about the fear he feels in the face of it.

The complexity of Thom's character demonstrates that the sloughing of cynicism and irony is not a requirement for the genuine expression. Some metamodern satires result in a greater sense of empathy, but I argue that they can just as easily result in a state of rage against the society they depict. *Happyish* achieves a sense of intimacy not through gentle guidance toward a correction but rather with a blunt honesty that makes the thesis of the series explicit. It is the guessing and pursuing and failing that serves as the mechanism by which the show communicates its messaging.

### **Enter Optimism**

In addition to sincere messaging, *Happyish* also combats an entirely cynical outlook by including moments of optimism throughout the series. Whether Thom finds solace in the time he spends with his family or through the sympathetic circle of friends who share his worldview, he finds respite despite living in a society he believes to be in decay. As a metamodern satire, the show is an ideal setting for the coexistence of darkness wrought by destabilization and light offered through the prospect of correction.

As television has evolved, viewers have come to expect the final episode of a series to provide answers to the questions that have undergirded the season, and the finale of *Happyish* is no exception to that structural pattern. How will Thom continue to contend with the Swedish Invasion? What is his breaking point? Will he be able to convince the hyper-consumerist society to come to its senses? Is there a viable alternative to a consumer capitalist world?

The closing episode centers around the day when Thom finally decides to quit his job at MGT and pursue more enriching work as an author. One of the first grievances he lists as a catalyst is his disgust that Gottfrid refers to the MGT employees as a “family.” Thom complains to Lee on the way out the door,

THOM: Got this agency meeting. These 25-year-old Swedish idiots love agency meetings. We’re a family. This corporation, this carnivorous machine that profits at the expense of everyone and everything around it, they say this is a family. The Manson family. Unless you have kids, I don’t care how much money you earn, what company you’re CEO of, don’t call your fucking company a family. (“Starring Christopher Hitchens” 00:01:42-00:02:00)

And from what viewers have come to know about Thom, this reaction makes sense. In his life, Thom's family has provided the much-needed support he seeks at the end of a day entrenched in the world of advertising. Gottfrid's bastardization of the term blurs the lines between the distinctly different value systems Thom applies at home and at work.

The show picks up with Thom arriving at the agency meeting where Gottfrid announces that Gustaf has pitched a new advertising campaign to J.P. Morgan called "Radical Capitalism," an obvious and unacknowledged rip-off of Thom's work for the "Radical Happiness" campaign pitched to Coke weeks earlier. Gottfrid screens the ad they have concocted for JP Morgan, with a voiceover narrating,

Money tends to get a bad rap. They never tire of telling us what money can't buy, while warning us in the same breath of all the ills it can cause. Well, at JP Morgan, we say "bull." At JP Morgan, we love money. We love the way money smells. We love the way it sounds. Let's get something straight. Money isn't the root of all evil. Evil is the root of all evil. Money can't buy happiness? We say bull. A Lamborghini will make you happy. A mansion with a pool? Happy. Caribbean vacation home? Happy, happy, happy. Money can buy health. [On-screen: "Annual spending on plastic surgery: \$12 Billion"] Money can buy families. [On-screen: "Cost of raising a child \$254,340"] It's time to stop apologizing. It's time not just for capitalism, but for radical capitalism. The next time you raise a fist in the air, make sure there's some cash in it. JP Morgan. Not just capitalism. Radical capitalism. (00:10:55-00:12:09)

Watching this pitch is the moment Thom decides for certain that he will be quitting MGT, as he can see the way that his work so clearly conflicts with his value system.

Looking back to the Coke meeting, Thom drew on sincerity that conflicted with the ironic world of advertising. I argue that the “Radical Capitalism” ad is so abhorrent to Thom because it invokes the idea of sincere expression for shamelessly selfish gains. When Gottfrid next announces that this campaign won JP Morgan’s business, it disgusts Thom because it is an obvious illustration of the society that he finds so shallow and vapid, so shamelessly consumerist. It illuminates the ugliness. As Maya Angelou said, “When someone shows you who they are, believe them,” and for Thom, watching this pitch is an unobscured look into a world in which he believes he does not belong. The “Radical Capitalism” ad highlights the consumer goods that are available to the wealthy and the insatiability of desire it inspires in all echelons of society, but Thom is not looking for a Lamborghini or a mansion with a pool or a Caribbean vacation home. He simply wants a good life for himself and his family.

So that’s the final straw. Thom takes Jonathan aside to tell him that he is quitting tomorrow, and he heads home excitedly to tell Lee the news. The entire season has grappled with Thom’s unhappiness concerning his job and as this sequence plays out one can see the weight lifted from Thom’s shoulders. He’s happy. He’s buoyant. He’s hopeful. He sees the light on the horizon. He arrives home and finds Lee, excited to tell her his decision:

THOM: I’ve got some news: I’m quitting. I’m quitting. It’s ... you know, do I wanna spend the rest of my days writing ads? I had a vision this morning of my tombstone. “Here lies Thom Payne. He wrote that Wonderbra ad.” You know, this is it. This is what we wanted. This is why we moved here, baby—so I can, you know, write and you can paint. ... Look, I figured it



out. I can earn extra money from freelancing, and we can show Jules that it's possible. *It's possible to—to find happiness.* So I'm quitting tomorrow ... I'm gonna spend my days here, writing and being happy. (00:21:34-00:22:20; emphasis added)

It's at this point that Lee hands Thom a positive pregnancy test, and the realization that he will have to go back to his job washes over him.

This moment has the capacity to be devastating, as it contrasts the feeling of lightness that accompanies Thom through the door. His aspirations of a writing career have disintegrated just as quickly as they coalesced. However, as Lee begins to tearfully apologize to Thom, he stops her and reminds her that they will be expecting a "new little Julius or Julia." Thom looks at Lee, and with deadpan delivery, says "I guess I just fucked myself out of my writing room," to which Lee responds, "Yay. Fuck" (00:22:57-00:23:20).

If the series was wholly postmodern, this scene between Thom and Lee would demonstrate failure to destabilize the guiding metanarrative, an assurance that Thom's suffering is inescapable and unceasing. However, *Happyish* also draws on the optimism of modernist correction, feeding on specific discursive circles that allow Thom to feel heard and validated. Family has provided the core of Thom's personal fulfillment, and it is this extended family of Lee and Julius and Jonathan and Dani that have created a sense of community for him. Because he is not alone, because he sees his worldview reflected in this discursive circle, he is able to hope for the intervention of reason, for a return to a saner time that may only exist in the cultural imaginary. While it means that Thom will

need to return to the job he hates, Lee's pregnancy also signals the growth of Thom's community, and by extension, his hope for a better tomorrow.

Flash forward to Thom's return to MGT later that day. The entire agency chants Thom's name as they wait expectantly for him to come down a newly-installed slide, similar to one found on a playground. Thom waits for a moment at the top where he imagines Lee and Julius watching him. Lee says, "We're with you, Thom. You don't have to go down if you don't want to. You don't have to do it for me, buddy. You don't have to do it for me" (00:26:03-00:26:15). He looks to Lee and Julius, contemplating his life for a moment, and flings himself down the slide. He arrives at the bottom where he smiles widely and puts two thumbs up as Gustaf snaps a polaroid of him. As the frame focuses on the picture, Thom's voiceover ruminates on modern society:

THOM: You gotta hand it to Stalin. He didn't fuck around. When he wanted to control you, he threw you in the Gulag or shot you in the head. Nowadays, they give you a 30-year mortgage. They give you an auto loan, credit card bills, and a Graco convertible crib with three-position mattress adjustment and a one-year limited warranty. Yay! Fuck. Yay! ... Fuck. (00:26:35-00:27:00)

These are the final words of the series, speaking to the complex and contradictory nature of modern society. The repeated mantra "Yay! Fuck" exemplifies the tenor of the show, the coexistence of darkness and light. As a punk rock version of "If You're Happy and You Know It Clap Your Hands" plays over the credits, the viewer is left to consider Thom's life and if he can ultimately achieve contentment.

Despite the necessity of Thom returning to MGT, I argue that the series is ultimately hopeful. At first glance, this final episode may appear to illustrate Thom's inability to escape his demoralizing circumstances and the triumph of the consumer capitalist metanarrative. But upon further inspection, the existence of a solution is still possible. Metamodern satires work to destabilize metanarratives while simultaneously undergirding themselves with a corrective impulse in order to effect social change, and it is through this proposed correction that hopefulness is able to shine through, intimating that the society is capable of better behavior than it has exhibited. However, it is important to note that while satire may offer a correction, it is under no obligation to posit a specific solution.

Throughout the series, *Happyish* is clear about the problems it perceives and necessity for a correction—the rejection of consumer capitalism—voiced through both sincere and ironic expression from Thom and his discursive community. As the series progresses, a solution seems to materialize, one implying that the road to happiness for Thom is his exit from advertising and the job he finds increasingly repugnant. The final episode of the series contains the breaking point where Thom decides to employ this solution, to pursue happiness at last.

But the series has other intentions. This act of leaving MGT held up as the silver bullet for Thom's discontentment is swept away just as swiftly as Thom's actions upon his final decision to leave. The final episode discards the solution it has been quietly positing for ten episodes, leaving the viewer with a cliffhanger. Will Thom be able to continue to navigate a job he hates knowing he is providing for the family he loves, a family that provides him relief from the world of which he is so critical? Will having

another child increase his sense of happiness or satisfaction? Will Thom be able to successfully negotiate with the purveyors of narcissistic, depthless, ironic culture?

The final words of the series, “Yay! Fuck. Yay! Fuck,” clearly exemplify the vacillating nature of the human experience. It is literally the juxtaposition of hope and tragedy, creating the interstitial space in which Thom functions. As a satire, *Happyish* does not offer an explicit solution to the societal problems identified throughout the series, and it would be too bold to claim that the show believes in any state of unadulterated happiness. However, the show does seem to offer the quiet suggestion that perhaps a life of discontentment can still be punctuated by moments of joy, of hope. For Thom, these moments come from his time with his family, and perhaps in the final episode, the series is suggesting that this is enough to sustain him. Perhaps the best statement of tempered expectations comes in the first episode, when Thom seeks out Dani to find a new position away from MGT and the Swedish invasion:

THOM: I’d be happier someplace else.

DANI: That’s a myth, Thom. You’re as happy right now as you can ever be. We each have our own joy ceiling. It doesn’t matter how much fucking money you have or how perfect your family is or how many Pulitzers you win. You hit your joy ceiling and you’re done. That’s why Jesus wept: low joy ceiling. Richard Simmons, high joy ceiling. And that fucking monk, what’s his name? Thich Nhat whatever-the-fuck, very high joy ceiling. Thom Payne, low joy ceiling. It’s not the pursuit of happiness that’s our problem. It’s our inability to accept when we have maxed out. You think

you're not happy? Trust me, Thom, you couldn't possibly be happier.

("Starring Samuel Beckett" (00:14:31-00:15:18))

The show may often feel cynical, but I argue that this is because it puts forward lower expectations of happiness than are generally conceptualized, a fact exacerbated by the show's location in the advertising industry whose bread and butter is the idea that consumption equates to happiness.

If the show begins with the thesis that people are "guessing and pursuing and failing" to achieve happiness, it ends with the idea that this failure is okay. It promotes the worldview that the complete avoidance of unhappiness is an unrealistic expectation, and that perhaps it is our ability to endure this unpleasantness that is a deeper marker of our character. Thom does not want to work in advertising, but as the final episode demonstrates, he understands that tolerating this weight to support his family allows him the brief moments of fulfillment that sustain him.

The final moments of the series complicate the critique of consumer capitalism that permeates the show. This monolith that Thom has raged against now becomes a necessary evil for his family's ability to thrive. The show by no means excuses the corporate greed and dishonesty of advertising, but it does disrupt the barrier between "good" and "evil" that has been one of the central conflicts of the series.

Shalom Auslander's show is not very optimistic, but it is hopeful at times. These moments may only be punctuation marks at the end of long stretches of unhappiness, yet they allow the viewer to envision a better society, even if they must wipe away the

ubiquitous muck and mire to see it clearly. The series positions happiness as a small, fleeting, exceedingly fragile force, markedly smaller than what has been promised by generations of consumer capitalism, the purveyor of the idea that the restlessness you feel in your heart can be bludgeoned through the simple acquisition of *more*. At its core, the series provides an insider's look at the way advertising is created and deployed, and as an extension to this, critiques and destabilizes the notions of consumer capitalism that have guided the economic activity of the past century.

*Happyish* is a series that bridges the gap between postmodernism and the New Sincerity, taking elements of both to create a sincere portrait of feelings of alienation in the wake of chaos. Auslander creates a world of tempered expectations, a realm in which optimism and cynicism can coexist and illustrates that intimacy and genuine expression can come from typically distancing mechanism of ironic discourse.

What results is a series that encapsulates both the darkness that accompanies a transparently consumerist society and the light that comes from the idea that humans are capable of better things. *Happyish* raises many questions, supported by the desire for correction, but it is short on answers. However, if one considers for a moment the function of a metamodern satire—to hold up a mirror to society so that it can see itself more clearly than it is used to—it is under no obligation to provide those concrete answers. As viewers, we are left with the same objective given to the characters of the show: the guessing and pursuing and (often) failing to formulate an answer for how to build a better life and world.

### CHAPTER 3: METAMODERN AND DEGENERATIVE SATIRE IN PERCIVAL EVERETT'S *ERASURE*

“When the central character is black, the abuses are authentic. No black American author has ever felt the need to invent a nightmare to make his point.”

— Roger Rosenblatt

“Is green a color or an emotive state?  
are the boys running behind the black boy  
laughing or just baring their teeth? Is it any  
different whether they spit on him or soak  
him in gasoline? Say wither. Say the bathwater  
went out with the baby. Say the baby.  
Say the Germans had to have had something right  
wing. Say we’re all just billboards anyway.”

—Roger Bonair-Agard

“Whites, who made up the majority of sales in the literary category, felt their own writers could handle the other issues in the universe just fine, they just wanted the black guys to clarify the Negro stuff.”

— Mat Johnson, *Hunting in Harlem*

“I’m trying to write an individual story about an individual person, about an individual life”

— Percival Everett (as qtd. in Stewart 294)

Charles H. Nichols writes, “Afro-Americans have had (historically speaking) too little to do with society’s image of them. The comic Negro was defined in black-face acts, minstrel shows, and caste etiquette,” continuing, “White men boasted that the Negro was what they made him, and indeed, the creature presented in minstrelsy was a projection of the grotesques in the white mind” (106). Depictions of blackness in the works of authors such as James Fenimore Cooper, Joel Chandler Harris, and Harriet Beecher Stowe often dehumanize black subjects, relegating them to an animalistic state. However, this tradition has continued to the current moment, as genres such as “ghetto fiction” and “urban realism” continue to illustrate a brutal conception of black life. As

Lisa Guerrero argues, “in contemporary America, black humanity is a hypothesis.” She expands, “Within the system of US capitalism, African Americans’ role has been as human commodity, cultural commodity, and exploited social class, all of which are crucial components of the capitalist system, just not socially equal ones” (267).

Percival Everett’s *Erasure* takes on the mantle of black representation and presents a unique site for the study of satire, as it contains both the generative and degenerative forms presented as self-contained texts. At the broadest level of analysis, one finds the larger text of the novel to bridge the chasm between the two satirical modes to present a metamodern satire, as it critiques racism through the symbolic metanarrative of popular blackness, an amalgamation of black representation in literature and the media.

The popular blackness metanarrative communicates the homogenization of black narratives presented in the larger culture. In its role as a monolithic “authentic” narrative of black life, the metanarrative draws on stereotypes of black people that characterize them as uneducated, overly-deferent, criminal, hyper-aggressive, and hyper-sexual in order to justify extensive inequality between races and the pervasive neglect of black communities, placing the blame for this institutional disparity solely at the foot of those oppressed by the narrative. This mechanism for legitimating social knowledge is demonstrated in the publishing industry, whose selection and promotion of black texts often reifies the stereotypes about the black population that have developed and propagated through slavery and Jim Crow to the present day. As I will discuss in this chapter, because he is an author of color, the protagonist is hindered by this phenomenon as he composes texts that do not engage with race, leaving him open to critique from



publishers that black authors must communicate and elucidate a specific conceptualization of the black experience, one that ideally confirms the audience's expectations for what that "authentic" narrative will be.

Popular blackness is also bolstered as a metanarrative by media portrayals of the race, representations often problematic and meant to dehumanize and subjugate people of color. From news broadcasts that disproportionately feature black individuals as the source of crime, to sensationalized talk shows meant to underscore and reinforce conceptions of black people as lazy, irresponsible, and aggressive, the larger media plays a vital role in the propagation of the metanarrative meant to strengthen the societal hierarchy that keeps people of color voiceless and prevents them from attaining the power with which they might affect social change.

Through the invocation of exaggeration and the grotesque, Everett's text critiques the notion that "authentically black" experience is a homogeneous entity in order to highlight the stereotypes on which the popular blackness metanarrative subsists. As *Erasure* destabilizes the perpetuation of racism even among those who consider themselves to be progressive or enlightened, it also puts forward a suggested correction, facilitated through the presentation of black characters who do not conform to the insufficient depiction of blackness promoted by both the publishing industry and larger media.

As protagonist, Thelonious "Monk" Ellison functions as the primary subversive actor, with his position as an academic and writer of incredibly intricate novels counterbalancing the expectation and pressure to act "black enough" that has been placed on him since childhood. However, Monk is not the only character meant to provide a

corrective template. The novel includes nuanced and capable black characters meant to further undermine the oversimplification inherent in the popular blackness metanarrative. Monk's grandfather, father, and brother are all physicians. Monk's sister, Lisa, is a women's health physician working at an abortion clinic. Even a woman with blue fingernails and a young child whom Monk meets in Lisa's waiting room subverts his own expectations of her when she surprises him by talking about the work of Zora Neale Hurston and Jean Toomer.

As a larger text, *Erasure* suggests a correction to promote stories that more accurately reflect the heterogeneity of the black experience in America. Notably, the inclusion of these characters alone functions as act of inherent correction, as Everett's texts provides a model for the proposed change the novel suggests. In fact, the whole of *Erasure* operates as an exemplar of blackness that includes nuance and complexity. The text participates in what David Gillota refers to as a "new trend in African American Humor," which he describes as creators,

directly discuss[ing] race but do[ing] so in ways that reject the traditional signifiers of black popular culture and eschew the conventions of mainstream African American humor that have become commonplace since the early 1970s.

These artists do not ignore or sidestep the issue of race ... but they express little to no desire to speak directly to or for the so-called "black community." (18)

*Erasure* is part of a larger conversation comprising complaints that portrayals of educated, middle-class points of view are missing from the media's depiction of black life (Gillota 18).

The novel works within the framework of post-blackness, which “suggests a simultaneous break from and extension of the traditional tropes of black culture” (Gillota 18). Touré expands upon the objectives of the movement, arguing that post-blackness “does not mean that we are leaving Blackness behind, it means we’re leaving behind the vision of Blackness as something narrowly definable as we’re embracing every conception of blackness as legitimate” (12). Speaking to the deployment of the term, Thelma Golden says of “post-blackness” that “it was a clarifying term that had ideological and chronological dimensions and repercussions. It was characterized by artists who were adamant about not being labeled as ‘black’ artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness” (14).

In fact, some scholars, such as Bertram D. Ashe have jettisoned the term “post-black” for the alternative moniker “post-soul,” defined as “generally refer[ing] to art produced by African Americans who were either born or came of age after the Civil Rights movement” (611). Ashe goes further to theorize a “triangular post-soul matrix” which identifies three essential concerns of post-soul texts: “the cultural mulatto archetype; the execution of an exploration of blackness; and lastly, the signal allusion-disruption gestures that many of these texts perform” (613), but goes on to add, “There is no organized or even loosely organized ‘movement’ that collects these post-Civil Rights movement artists and places them under any sort of overtly political banner” (618).

*Erasure* takes on these three elements of the post-soul matrix as it adds another text to the storied tradition of African American satire. In *The Sacredly Profane Novel*, Darryl Dickson-Carr creates a succinct history of this tradition, where he notes that “humor infused with slapstick, double entendre, and a healthy dose of irony has played a

central role in African American culture” (3). He adds, “African Americans were forced to create various complex coded languages and expressions that allowed for the indirect expression of their frustration. Bitingly satiric humor was as much a part of these codes as any other rhetorical element, written into a language of indirection that often satisfied those who held power even as it stymied them” (3). Speaking to the larger objectives of black satire, Guerrero writes, “Satire by black artists and performers has an investment in comic critique that is characteristically different than other possible examples because of how the structures of racialization play out within black satire, as well as how black satire serves to both critique society and legitimate black rage in a society that systematically invalidates black rage” (268). While the metanarrative of popular blackness may often feature hyper-aggressive black characters, this rage is often depicted as unnecessary or a threat to society rather than a critique of the very society that has inspired this fury.

However, *Erasure* complicates traditional analysis of African American satire because nested within this metamodern satire is a self-contained degenerative satire, defined by Steven Weisenburger as a delegitimizing form that functions to “subvert hierarchies of value and to reflect suspiciously on all ways of making meaning, including its own” (*Fables of Subversion* 3). Frustrated by the success of Juanita Mae Jenkins’s *We’s Lives in Da Ghetto*, Monk’s scathing parody, *My Pafology* (presented as the work of alias Stagg R. Leigh) is meant to chastise potential publishers and illuminate the absurdity of subscribing exclusively to an urban realist or ghetto fiction depiction of blackness. The resulting work is an incredibly exaggerated, comically distorted novella about the life of Van Go Jenkins, a degenerate father of four children by four different mothers who unrepentantly refuses to pay child support. The text draws on Richard

Wright's *Native Son* (1940) as inspiration for its parody-driven plot, which involves Van Go raping the semi-conscious daughter of his wealthy employer, resulting in a police chase across the city. Linguistically, Monk's novella draws on the work of Sapphire's novel *Push* (1996), which is characterized by the strong use of dialect and misspelling to communicate the dire circumstances and lack of education of the protagonist, Precious Jones.

As a degenerative satire, *My Pafology* is meant to subvert the metanarrative of popular blackness that presents a limited scope of representation for black characters. Additionally, due to its degenerative status, it lacks the modernist feature of correction, instead attempting to leave the mechanism simply destabilized. The fact that *My Pafology* is mistaken as serious rather than parody does not change the nature of the text, but does, however, contribute to the corrective function of the larger novel of *Erasure*, as the inability of characters to recognize the ironic destabilization demonstrates the presence and pervasiveness of the larger metanarrative.

Because of its hybrid nature that contains both the metamodern and degenerative modes, *Erasure* provides a fertile site for analysis. The inclusion of *My Pafology* within greater *Erasure* creates a textual environment wherein the metanarrative of popular blackness is both subverted and reified by *My Pafology*'s critical reception. The result is a text that moves beyond Linda Hutcheon's conception of complicitous critique, wherein the destabilization of a metanarrative inadvertently reinforces its position as knowledge-producing (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 15), to a position in which the reification of the metanarrative is necessary for the greater metamodern satire to function effectively.

### ***Erasure* as a Metamodern Satire**

In her *New York Times* review of the novel, Jenifer Berman, succinctly describes *Erasure*'s approach and target: "With equal measures of sympathy and satire, it craftily addresses the highly charged issue of being 'black enough' in America." Dickson-Carr provides a more expansive description, writing, "[Everett's] best known work, *Erasure* (2000), satirizes the publishing industry, academia, the general public, and African American writers for circumscribing African American literature into such limited categories as 'urban' realist or 'ghetto' fiction, southern pastoral narratives, and others, all for the sake of a crippling and false authenticity" ("Afterword" 271).

Taken as a whole, *Erasure* addresses the problem of black authenticity by presenting a metamodern satire that marries the dual objectives of postmodern destabilization and modernist correction. For a metamodern satire to function, at its heart, it must contain a metanarrative to be subverted throughout the satire. In the case of *Erasure*, the novel subverts the metanarrative of popular blackness presented by book publishing and the larger media. As a way to critique one of the most significant purveyors of this image, the novel begins with a scathing critique of the publishing industry and the way that it promotes a homogenized depiction of blackness, citing Monk's most recent novel being rejected by a publisher whose reviewer writes, "*The novel is finely crafted, with fully developed characters, rich language and subtle play with the plot, but one is lost to understand what this reworking of Aeschylus's The Persians has to do with the African American experience*" (2). Monk attributes this occurrence to the larger pattern of his life in which he has been repeatedly told that he is not "black enough," and this latest review is simply an institutionalized version of the critique.

The moment brings up an important consideration of which types of black narratives have been considered acceptable or worthy of being admitted into the canon.

As Dickson-Carr argues,

the Western literary canon tends to deem African and African American literature and culture as primarily social protest literature, a restrictive designation not normally given to traditional, European literatures and cultures. Judged by the standards established by Western scholars, they have been declared patently inferior, decried as hopelessly derivative, deracinated from their cultural contexts, or unduly romanticized. (*Sacredly Profane* 2)

In his 1937 essay, “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” Richard Wright speaks to the long history of limited treatment of black texts, writing,

Generally speaking, Negro writing in the past has been confined to humble novels, poems, and plays, prim and decorous ambassadors who went a-begging to white America. They entered the Court of American Public Opinion dressed in the knee-pants of servility, curtsying to show that the Negro was not inferior, that he was human, and that he had a life comparable to that of other people. For the most part these artistic ambassadors were received as though they were French poodles who do clever tricks.

White America never offered these Negro writers any serious criticism. (45)

The racial critique offered by the Monk’s reviewer engages with this history of homogenized narratives and the expectation that black authors must center their work on revelations about the black experience. In response to the reviewer’s critique, Monk recounts his experience at a party in New York at which he was advised by a book agent

that Monk “could sell many books if I’d forget about writing retellings of Euripides and parodies of French poststructuralists and settle down to write the true, gritty real stories of black life” (2), further exemplifying the problematic nature of book publishing and the way that it perpetuates the metanarrative of popular blackness.

However, as the novel advances and Monk grows increasingly incensed by the critical and commercial success of Juanita Mae Jenkins’s ghetto fiction, *We’s Lives in Da Ghetto*, a novel written after Jenkins visited some relatives in Harlem, he pens his biting satirical novella, *My Pafology*, as a way to reprimand the industry for propagating such a problematic conception of blackness. Written under the pen name Stagg R. Leigh, Monk sends the manuscript to his agent, Yul, for him to distribute to publishers:

I picked up the heavy black telephone and called my agent, who recognized my voice and said, without much pause, “Are you crazy?”

“No, not quite,” I said. “Why do you ask?”

“This thing you sent me. Are you serious?”

“Yeah, why not? You’ll notice that I didn’t put my name on it.”

“I did notice that. But I’m the one who has to try to sell it, with my name.

I have to work in this town.”

“Look at the shit that’s published. I’m sick of it. This is an expression of my being sick of it.”

[...]

“So, what do you want me to do?”

“Send it out.”



“Straight or with some kind of qualification? Do you want me to tell them it’s a parody?”

“Send it straight,” I said. “If they can’t see it’s a parody, fuck them.” (132)

In this conversation, Monk’s intentions are clear: *My Pafology* is meant to be read and recognized by publishers as a venomous send up of the industry and its complicity through its narrow presentation of black narratives. However, the novella is mistaken as a serious narrative and is enthusiastically optioned by Random House for a \$600,000 advance. This inability to recognize *My Pafology* as a highly exaggerated grotesque only reinforces the prevalence of the popular blackness metanarrative that *Erasure* destabilizes.

However, I argue that part of the reason Monk’s novel is taken as serious is his submission of it under the pen name Stagg R. Leigh, an act that is meant to be a relatively obvious indication of his satirical intent through his invocation of the folk figure Stagolee. Conversely, the move backfires by removing Monk the from the discursive circle of the literary world. As “Thelonious Ellison,” Monk has traversed this terrain and become an established member of the discourse, having published several unprofitable books. But despite Monk’s lacking sales, the simple act of having his work released by major publishers cements his position in the literary circle. When he submits *My Pafology*, he believes that he has written a work so over the top and littered with racial stereotypes that it will be immediately recognized as a scathing satire, but by changing his identity through the adoption of a pen name, Monk presents his work through the unknown conduit of Stagg R. Leigh, a new figure who lacks any literary or personal

history that would indicate satirical intention and whose ghetto fiction novel fits easily within the expectations of readers.

Everett's novel takes an important turn in the way that Monk reacts to the positive response he receives for *My Pafology*. Instead of revealing his satiric intentions and the way the publishers have completely misinterpreted the work as confirming their problematic expectations of blackness, Monk decides to extend the satirical text by taking on the identity of Stagg and embodying him as a character, presenting him, both in person and over the phone, as aggressive and tight-lipped ex-convict who has recently been released from prison. By performing Stagg, Monk engages in an act of "participatory satire," defined by Marcus Paroske as a form of satire in which the text or performance critiques through imitating the texts or behavior it attempts to subvert (209). By taking on the role of Stagg, Monk develops and implements a character who is an example of the stereotypic depictions of black people that he aims to destabilize. However, such a move is particularly risky, because, as Paroske argues, when the irony of participatory satire is misinterpreted, the satire runs the risk of being taken as serious and reinforcing the ideas it seeks to subvert (225), which is exactly the fate of *My Pafology*.

Conflicted about the purpose and effect of his penning *My Pafology*, Monk more fully develops the persona of Stagg, stating, "I would have to wear the mask of the person I was expected to be" (212). As Danielle Fuentes Morgan points out, without having revealed his appearance, Stagg is presumed to be black because his "convincing use of violence and heated language is tantamount to purportedly black rhetoric" (163). When Random House insists on talking with Stagg as part of the publishing deal, Monk

instructs his agent Yul to tell Paula Baderman—the representative from Random House—that “Stagg R. Leigh lives alone in the nation’s capital. Tell her he’s just two years out of prison, say he said ‘joint,’ and that he still hasn’t adjusted to the outside. Tell her he’s afraid he might *go off*. Tell her that he will only talk about the book, that if she asks any personal questions, he’ll hang up” (153). Drawing on racial stereotypes, Monk develops a character who matches the expectations of the publisher, setting the parameters with minimal details for Baderman, who takes the narrative hook, line, and sinker because the details only confirm her impression of Stagg formulated from reading the text.

After a phone conversation between Baderman and Stagg, Yul calls Monk to let him know that Random House is more enthusiastic than ever and willing to take steps to ensure the success of the novel:

*Yul: What did you say to her?*

*Me: What do you mean?*

*Yul: She’s more gung-ho than ever.*

*Me: I don’t know why that would be.*

*Yul: They’re going to take out a full page ad in the New York Times and the*

*Washington Post.*

*Me: You’re kidding me.*

*Yul: She wanted me to ask if Stagg will do a couple of talk shows. Morning network stuff.*

Monk's performance is one of an alternative identity, one that is a strict departure from the persona he has cultivated for himself throughout his life. As Monk reflects in the novel, he was often critiqued as a teenager for not being able to "talk the talk" of his peers, explaining, "I'd try, but it never sounded comfortable, never sounded real. In fact, to my ear, it never sounded real coming from anyone, but I could tell that other people talked the talk much better than I ever could" (167). As a result of this inability to convincingly code-switch, Monk is criticized, with his peers calling him awkward, identifying him through his perceived deficiencies: "*Talks like he's stuck up? Sounds white? Can't even play basketball*" (167).

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However, as *Erasure* progresses and Monk's satire continues to go unnoticed, the audience for the satire shrinks so that Monk and Yul are the only ones meant to recognize its effects. Yul is hesitant, calling the exercise "weird" (153), but Monk is enthusiastic about creating and maintaining this expression of character, despite the nervousness he feels before each meeting. It is not that his intended audience for the satirical performance of Stagg is not larger, but rather just as the satirical intention of *My Pafology* is misinterpreted, Monk's character of Stagg reifies the metanarrative because his is assumed to be authentic—despite the inclusion of clues that Stagg is meant to be subversive—simply because his personal details and behavior align with stereotypical conceptions of blackness. Speaking to his performance of Stagg as entertainment, prior to meeting with movie executive Wiley Morgenstein, Monk states, "I had already talked on the phone with my editor as the infamous Stagg Leigh and now I would meet with Wiley Morgenstein. I could do it. *The game was becoming fun.* And it was nice to get a check" (212; emphasis added).

It is when Monk meets with Morgenstein that the target of the satire expands beyond the publishing industry to also include the larger media and the way that it contributes the societal conceptions of blackness. When the two discuss the film rights for *My Pafology*, Morgenstein is surprised by the way Stagg presents himself, how he orders a Gibson martini and the carrot ginger soup, served cold. He voices his wonder:

Morgenstein offered a puzzled look to his young friend. "You know, you're not at all like I pictured you."

"No? How did you picture me?"

"I don't know, tougher or something. You know, more street. More..."

“Black?”

“Yeah, that’s it. I’m glad you said it. I’ve seen the people you write about, the real people, the earthy, gutsy people. They can’t teach you to write about that in no college.” (217)

Morgenstein’s fascination with Stagg and the opportunity he sees to commodify the hyper-aggressive blackness of his novella fit within a larger pattern of media exploitation. Speaking to the ability to parlay the “authentically black” identity of Stagg into a profitable venture, Richard Schur writes that “corporate marketing campaigns have transformed identity from membership in a particular community into more of a consumer transaction or a performance that can be chosen, modified, or discarded” (238). The media commodifies and exploits blackness in order to maintain hegemonic control of the white population, and as Nicole Rodgers argues, it has “worked to pathologize black families in the American imagination to justify slavery, Jim Crow, mass incarceration, widespread economic inequity and urban disinvestment—as well as to gain and maintain political and social power” (as qtd. in Jan). Speaking to the way Everett’s work interacts with this narrative, Dickson-Carr argues that his writing “reveal[s] that ‘race’ and/or ‘blackness’ stand as a [sic] markers for an elusive authenticity that writers and publishers are quite willing to exploit at every opportunity, primarily for profit, but also with the secondary effect of reifying ‘race’ as eternally exploitable” (“Afterword” 272).

For Monk, the exercise of personifying Stagg is more entertaining each time he is misunderstood, and it becomes a game to him to see how he can play Stagg so that he simultaneously reinforces notions of a hyper-aggressive blackness while subverting expectations with smaller details. Stagg operates as an alternative identity for Monk, as

his presence is an act of embodied satire, and in a way, Stagg is real because through Monk's performance he is a functional representation of popular blackness in the white racial imagination. This phenomenon is reflected in a conversation between Monk and Yul following Stagg's lunch with Morgenstein:

"And what did you say to Morgenstein?"

"Nothing really."

"Well, the guy's in love with you. He's scared to death of you, but he said,

*'That fuckin' guy's da real thing.'*"

"He's right." (222)

Monk presents Stagg as a combative participant in every conversation or interview. He behaves with hostility toward those who are eager to give him money and exposure in return for his story, a phenomenon complicated by the fact that despite his truculence, he still participates in his own commodification.

Although Stagg has taken the advance from Random House, Monk still employs behaviors meant to push the boundaries in terms of what the publisher will accept. After he has received strong praise for his novel and its true-to-life depiction of the ghetto, Monk calls the publisher to inform them that he wants to change the name of the novel from *My Pafology* to *Fuck*, which understandably unnerves the editor, who is concerned with the book's profitability and who cites the word as obscene to many. When the editor cautions Stagg that the title change could hurt sales of the novel, Stagg replies, "*I don't think so. If you like I can give you back the money and take the book elsewhere*" (210). When the publisher comes back with a compromise to spell the new title "*Phuck*," Monk doubles down and tells Yul, "*Fuck with an F or they can p-huck off*" (222).

Stagg can be so aggressive in his demands because Monk knows Stagg has something that the publishers and movie executive and television producers want: a salacious story that reinforces the profitable popular blackness metanarrative. However, I argue that part of Monk's decision to make Stagg so contrarian is to assuage his own feelings of conflict about his status as a sellout, which he has considered at length in the wake of *My Pafology*'s success:

I considered everything that was not good about the novel I was about to publish, that I submitted for the very reason it was not good, but now that fact was killing me. It was a parody, certainly, but so easy had it been to construct that I found it difficult to take it seriously even as that. The work bored and had as its only virtue brevity. There was no playing with compositional or even paginal space. In fact, the work inhabited no space artistically that I could find intelligible. For all the surface concern with the spatial and otherwise dislocation of Van Go, there was nothing in the writing that self-consciously threw it back at me. Then I caught the way I was thinking and realized the saddest thing of all, that I was thinking myself into a funk about idiotic and pretentious bullshit to avoid the real accusation staring me in the face. I was a sell-out. (160)

Even as Monk continues his embodied performance of Stagg, he begins to wonder about the larger effects of unleashing a character who both reinforces and subverts the narrative of popular blackness:

Had I by annihilating my own presence actually asserted the individuality of Stagg Leigh? Or was it the book itself that had given him life? There he was for public scrutiny and the public was loving him. What would happen if I tired of



holding my breath, if I had to come up for air? Would I have to kill Stagg to silence him? And what did it mean that I was even thinking of Stagg as having agency? What did it mean that I could put those questions to myself? Of course, it meant nothing and so, it meant everything. (248)

It is when Monk realizes that his subversive character of Stagg is actually complicit in the reification of the metanarrative that he begins to worry about the effect his performance is having, reaching fever pitch when he must simultaneously perform the dueling subjectivities of Monk and Stagg in order to prevent *My Pafology* from becoming the Book Award winner.

However, while the satirical performance of Stagg is an effective means for subverting the guiding metanarrative of the text, it is only one type of destabilization that takes place over the course of the novel. The pastiche nature of Monk's diary helps to create a variegated canvas on which the reader can dissect the larger media's role in the propagation of popular blackness. The discrete diary entries are composed of realistic reflections on Monk's own experiences, as well as an array of imagined scenarios and conversations meant to reveal larger truths about the role of race in society. One such example of the latter is a succinct, two-line conversation between D.W. Griffith, director of *Birth of a Nation* and Richard Wright, author of *Native Son*:

*D.W. Griffith: I like your book very much.*

*Richard Wright: Thank you. (193)*

The brief exchange easily communicates what Monk thinks of Wright's novel and the way he believes that his "ghetto fiction" depiction of black life only feeds and reinforces negative stereotypes about black people propagated by the larger media.

As a further critique of media, Monk pens a detailed self-contained entry that further illustrates the role the media plays in the proliferation of stereotypes through a behind-the-scenes depiction of television production. The entry describes a fictional game show, *Virtute et Armis*, the premise of which is to pit white contestants against black, as the knowledge of each is tested. In order to even appear on the show, black contestants must undergo a rigorous qualifying test that includes advanced questions about entomology, history, and mathematics. Passing the test, the black protagonist, Tom, is sent to makeup and wardrobe where the beautician applies a brown cream to his skin because Tom “ain’t quite dark enough” (173). When Tom asks if he must wear the makeup because it makes him feel like a clown, the makeup artist responds, “I’m afraid so. Rules are rules. You wouldn’t want to confuse the folks viewing at home, now would you?” (174). He is also outfitted with a brand new, starched white shirt to wear, a garment meant to further highlight the blackness of his skin.

Once on set, Tom notes that all the audience members are white with blond hair, and all are staring at him with their blue eyes. As the game show is about to begin, Jack Spades, the show’s host, comes over to reassure Tom and to wish him luck, adding, “Just relax. I’m sure you’ll do fine and be a credit to your race” (175), a statement that underscores the explicitly racial context of the show. As the show gets underway, the white contestant is asked extremely rudimentary questions (e.g. Name a primary color. Who slew Goliath? Who is the first president of the United States?), while Tom is asked exceedingly advanced ones (e.g. What is anaphase? What is a serial distribution field? With what lines does Ralph Waldo Emerson open his essay “Self Reliance”?).

The construction of the show critiques the unequal expectations for the races, reminiscent of the idea that black individuals must be twice as good to make the same gains as their white counterparts. As the white contestant continues to miss questions and Tom succeeds, the stress of the host and producer becomes more apparent, as the show is not meant to award a black champion. Because the operation of the gameshow is made transparent through the black contestant's perspective, it strips back the veneer of the show, allowing a glimpse into the commercial breaks typically hidden from view in television, in which the host becomes increasingly upset with the white contestant and the audience grows hostile toward Tom. When Tom wins the game, the audience is completely silent, and Monk indicates that they are "dead" (178). The glimpse into the innerworkings of the show demonstrates the way that the media is constructing a specific view of race, bolstered by the presence of distress in light of Tom subverting expectations of what a black contestant can be.

This is not the only time that we are privy to the hidden mechanics of a television show. When Monk appears as Stagg on the Kenya Dunston show, the readers can see the way the media metanarrative is disrupted in order to comment on racial stereotyping. Throughout Stagg's appearance, the host attempts to reinforce a certain account of Stagg, highlighting the way his "brilliant" book is meant to portray the real experiences of black Americans, saying that "it doesn't get any more real than this" (251). When Stagg doesn't play along, or rather, refuses to offer any information or opinion that would actualize this depiction of him, Dunston becomes frustrated, which we see vented during the commercial breaks. "What the hell is going on?" she asks. "That son of a bitch won't say a goddamn thing. What the hell kind of interview is that?" (249). When, despite the

host's anger, Stagg still refuses to reveal anything, Dunston is left with no choice but to read an extended passage from the book as her only source of evidence from which to draw. She offers the passage to provide a direct line into the narrative that she wishes to propagate for Stagg. Just as earlier, when Wiley Morgenstein only wanted a version of Stagg he could successfully commodify, Dunston, too, expects Stagg to perform the identity of a hardened, aggressive man in order to attract viewers. When he refuses, he is no longer considered valuable.

Because *Erasure* contains postmodern elements, scenes like these are concerned with establishing popular blackness as the mechanism by which knowledge is legitimated and reinforcing its position as such before it is destabilized. However, as a metamodern satire, the text must perform an additional rhetorical function by offering a proposed correction in the wake of the metanarrative's subversion. The correction seemingly put forward by *Erasure* is to construct an iteration of popular blackness that contains a more diverse and variegated cadre of black voices. As W. Lawrence Hogue argues,

Everett in *Erasure* wants to liberate the African American novel from a normalized and predictable literature and from a publishing industry that supports it. He also wants to reframe the representation of the African American outside of certain otherized but acceptable stereotypes that continually *erase* complex, varied, and diverse African American subjectivities and experiences. (103)

The novel asks the reader to move beyond the stereotypical narratives being lambasted by Monk—the ghetto fiction, the urban realism—and instead conceive of an idea of blackness that accounts for the disparate, at times conflicting, experiences of black individuals.

I argue that the way this novel presents an exemplar of this version of blackness is through the very implementation of the novel itself. With its academic protagonist and situation in the upper middle-class, *Erasure* defies the expectations of ghetto fiction or urban realist genres that Monk protests. As Hogue argues,

Everett flips the binary and gives us an African American who defies the negative stereotype by being the same as the American upper-middle-class educated elite norm: an African American who graduates summa cum laude from Harvard, has doctors in his family, is a Western renaissance man, and writes experimental novels that have nothing to do with the African American experience. (102)

In *Erasure*, Monk deals with the ensuing circus that surrounds his authoring of *My Pafology*, but there are notably other plot points of the book that do not address race, like Monk's scholarly presentation at the *Nouveau Roman Society*, or his treatment of his mother as she quickly declines from the swift progression of dementia, or his struggle to find work on the East coast when he realizes he must relocate to Washington, D.C. to take care of her. The scenes are not meant to speak to the black experience—telling in the wake of Monk's declaration that he does not believe in race—but rather to the human experiences of someone who happens to be black.

Essentially, what *Erasure* creates is a model for black narratives that positions them as simply human narratives. This is expressed through the invocation of Monk, who is only spurred to question or doubt himself when—to adapt Zora Neale Hurston's phrase—he is thrown against a sharp black background.<sup>2</sup> The character of Monk communicates the critique because he exists in the liminal space between “whiteness”

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<sup>2</sup> Hurston wrote, “I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background,” in her essay “How it Feels to Be Colored Me.”

and “blackness.” He has the markers of a privilege, considering his family’s servant and his attendance at an Ivy League school, though he purports to hate every minute of it. He engages with heavily theoretical texts like Roland Barthes’s *S/Z* and he desires to write retellings of Greek plays. These are all things unrelated to his race. However, Monk cannot escape it, and as such, he is repeatedly reminded of his blackness through the dismissive comments of book reviewers who chastise him for the failure of his adaptations to reflect on the black experience. Monk may not believe in race, but he still inhabits a black body, and therefore, he is subject to the racial expectations put upon him from without. *Erasure* illustrates the seeming inescapability of race, but also presents a model that both destabilizes notions of what a black narrative can be and repeatedly presents its black protagonist in situations where race is not the overarching concern.

Monk exists in the space of what Ashe termed the “cultural mulatto” as he simultaneously enacts a duplicity of identities reminiscent of W.E.B. DuBois’s “double consciousness.” Ashe, who claims cultural mulatto-hood as one of the defining elements of post-soul texts, submits Trey Ellis’s extrapolation to clarify the term:

Just as a generic mulatto is a black person of mixed parents who can often get along fine with his white grandparents, a cultural mulatto, educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures, can also navigate easily in the white world. ... We no longer need to deny or suppress any part of our complicated and sometimes contradictory cultural baggage to please either white people or black. The culturally mulatto Cosby girls are equally as black as a black teenage welfare mother. Neither side of the tracks should forget that. (613)

Ashe goes further, complicating Ellis's definition by expanding the realm of consideration to contemplate the role that these uniquely positioned individuals have in the larger scheme of racial identity:

The question becomes, then, what do these cultural mulattos do? What is their cultural work? These artists and texts trouble blackness, they worry blackness; they stir it up, touch it, feel it out, and hold it up for examination in ways that depart significantly from previous—and necessary—preoccupations with struggling for political freedom, or with an attempt to establish and sustain a coherent black identity. Still, from my vantage point, this “troubling” of blackness by post-soul writers is ultimately done in service to black people. (614)

But despite this objective of sustaining a coherent black identity, even as Monk inhabits a black body, his role as a cultural and psychological mulatto relegates him to accusations that he is not genuinely or authentically black. As noted, Monk tells of his own inability to speak in the vernacular of his young black friends as a child, commenting that even when he got the words right, he was unable to make them sound convincing. And yet this highlights the very critique at the heart of the novel. As Hogue writes, “Unlike mainstream white males whose representation of themselves (as white) remain racially *unmarked* because of the pervasive nature of white privilege and domination, Monk's representation of himself as a racially *unmarked* individual is not reinforced by the social” (113). Despite the fact that Monk notes repeated instances of failing to be seen as authentically black, the larger world sees his black body and immediately ascribes him diminished status under the popular blackness metanarrative. *My Pafology* functions as a rebellion against this burden, written in black vernacular and invoking the many racial

stereotypes placed on Monk from without. *Erasure*'s proposed correction is to throw off the binds of racial expectations that dictate which narratives are perceived as authentic and instead move to a better space in which black characters are allowed the freedom to express themselves without being expected to speak for their race.

### ***My Pafology*: A Degenerative Satire**

Monk's satirical novella, *My Pafology*, is the primary anchor for the action of *Erasure*, as it is the novella's mistaken objective that spurs on the action of the larger text. The misinterpretation of *My Pafology* is critical to the larger metamodern satire that is *Erasure* because it is meant to underscore the popular blackness metanarrative and the limited range of black narratives considered acceptable by the publishing industry and larger media that explicitly propagate this narrative.

Unlike the larger novel, *My Pafology* differs in that it is a degenerative satire, a mode intended to stand in "crucial opposition" to the corrective generative satires that preceded it (Weisenburger, *Fables of Subversion* 3). Weisenburger asserts, "Loosely in concord with deconstructionist thought, [degenerative satire] functions to subvert hierarchies of value and to reflect suspiciously on all ways of making meaning, including its own" (*Fables of Subversion* 3). Darryl Dickson-Carr writes specifically of the African American tradition of satire and its connection to the degenerative mode, arguing,

African American satire tends to follow the degenerative model in its iconoclasm, with the icons subverted ranging from oppressive individuals or systems to the very culture that allows for systematic racism to obtain. African American political discourse has frequently focused upon the following facts: (1) that African Americans have experienced oppression due to their "race" and class



distinctions on both the individual and systematic levels and must, therefore, struggle against this victimization; (2) that past and present victimization of African Americans cannot be looked at exclusive of the injuries African Americans have inflicted upon themselves. (*Sacredly Profane* 17)

Christian Schmidt argues that *Erasure* as a whole is a degenerative satire, writing “Degeneratively satirizing the notion of a black text, the novel targets the ways in which a text’s meaning comes to be (mis)aligned with the black face of its author” (153). While I agree with the assessment of the subversive work undertaken by the novel, I argue that the degenerative label does not adequately characterize the novel as a whole, as Everett’s larger work does contain the corrective impulse absent from the degenerative mode.

The self-contained novella represents an aberration in mode from the larger metamodern satire, and it is because of the shift to degenerative satire that the irony of *My Pafology* is completely missed. As Danielle Fuentes Morgan writes, “*My Pafology* has all the signifiers of a work to be taken seriously, at least when presented to an audience already largely inured to a complex signification regarding black masculinity. Monk’s narrative is bolstered only by grotesque, caricatured blackness, and he smugly places the burdensome onus of discerning it as satire on the audience” (166). I agree with Fuentes Morgan that *My Pafology* lacks elements characteristic of modernist satire—namely the suggestion of a correction—but argue that the text does contain elements that identify it as a degenerative satire.

The degenerative mode skews toward chaos, as its ultimate objective is to destabilize the metanarratives through which the society legitimates knowledge. In the case of *My Pafology*, the metanarrative to be destabilized is the same one as the larger

target of *Erasure*: white supremacy. Monk accomplishes his critique by taking on both internal and external targets, through the implementation of literary parody and critique of the larger mediascape of television, respectively.

To begin with Monk's use of parody is to identify the texts which he attempts to emulate as a tool of destabilization. Monk explicitly names some of the texts from which he draws inspiration directly before he begins composing *My Pafology*:

I went to what had been my father's study, and perhaps still was his study, but now it was where I worked. I sat and stared at Juanita Mae Jenkins' face on *Time* magazine. The pain started in my feet and coursed through my legs, up my spine and into my brain and I remembered passages of *Native Son* and *The Color Purple* and *Amos and Andy* and my hands began to shake, the world opening around me, tree roots trembling on the ground outside, people in the street shouting *dint, ax, fo, screet and fahvre!* and I was screaming inside, complaining that I didn't sound like that, that my mother didn't sound like that, that my father didn't sound like that. (61-62)

Here both Monk's influences and his reason for composing the novel are laid bare. He protests and seeks to correct black narratives that pigeonhole a race into history characterized by poverty and lack of education, and importantly, narratives that relegate the black individuals to the unyielding position as the "other."

Returning to Monk's influences, one can perceive the way that *My Pafology* is meant to create meaning through parody of both the content and style of these texts. As Linda Hutcheon writes in *A Theory of Parody*,

Like irony, parody is a form of indirect as well as double-voiced discourse, but it is not parasitic in any way. In transmuting or remodeling previous texts, it points to the differential but mutual dependence of parody and parodied texts. Its two voices neither merge nor cancel each other out; they work together, while remaining distinct in their defining difference. (xiv)

A significant portion of the novella is a direct pull from the plot of Richard Wright's *Native Son*, as the protagonist of *My Pafology*, Van Go, goes to work as a houseboy for a wealthy man in the suburbs. Monk's text parallels the novel, but also importantly differentiates itself by subverting several key details. One example is the fact that the Dalton family's race has changed from white to black, which is complicated as the story continues to diverge from Wright's text. For example, instead of Wright's Mr. Dalton being a philanthropist who donates money to the slums of Chicago, Monk's Penelope says her father contributes by "mak[ing] loans and giv[ing] some cheap legal help," which her boyfriend Roger quickly clarifies, saying, "You mean he's a loan shark and an ambulance chaser" (102).

While differences between the two texts communicate critique, there is also destabilization happening in the details that directly mirror one another in both texts. For example, Monk draws directly from the iconic scene of *Native Son* when he includes wealthy Penelope and Roger asking Van Go to take them to someplace "colorful" (103). Despite Van Go's visible discomfort, the two of them push him to take them to his neighborhood, with Roger commanding, "Take us to the hood and we can shoot some hoops and then maybe score some weed and eat some chicken" (102). The moment is notable because it illustrates the way that two privileged black people are just as unable

to see the problematic nature of stereotypes of poor black people as their white counterparts in Wright's novel. Just as Jan and Mary are tourists in Bigger Thomas's neighborhood, so too are Penelope and Roger in Van Go's. They are amused by the culture of poverty of which Van Go is a part, and they are surprised when the houses in his neighborhood have lawns, as they admit they expected slums. Monk's parody targets people of both races who see novels like Juanita Mae Jenkins's *We's Lives in Da Ghetto* as the authentically black narrative. Taking an elevated view of the text, Fritz Gysin observes,

in terms of plot, *My Pafology* imitates only the first book of *Native Son* ("Fear") and fragments of the second one ("Flight"), whereas the last one ("Fate"), covering Bigger's trial, its socio-political ramifications, and the political and philosophical arguments between the state attorney and defense lawyer, are left out. What might refer to a court scene is presented as a shallow television show, (par. 10)

pointing to television as a society's chosen mechanism for justice. While the parody in content operates as an internal target, Monk folds in television portrayals of black life as a way to critique his external target, the media at large, engaging with a long and problematic history of representation. Tracy Jan argues that "major media outlets routinely present a distorted picture of black families—portraying them as dependent and dysfunctional," a move that Travis L. Dixon argues, "leaves people with the opinion that black people are plagued with self-imposed dysfunction that creates instability and therefore, all their problems" (as qtd. in Jan). Jan cites a study by the racial justice group Color of Change, which reports that "black families represent 59 percent of the poor

portrayed in the media, according to the analysis, but account for just 27 percent of the American poor.” Further, a literature review by The Opportunity Agenda found that “African Americans are disproportionately represented in news stories about poverty, and these stories tend to paint a picture that is particularly likely to reinforce stereotypes and make it hard to identify with black males,” continuing, “The idle black male on the street corner is not the ‘true face’ of poverty in America, but he is the dominant one in media portrayal” (*Media Portrayals* 24).

This consistent depiction perpetuates a vicious cycle in which a greater frequency of negative images in the media increases the likelihood that viewers internalize these stereotypes (Dong and Murrillo). Narissra M. Punyanunt-Carter further develops this idea, as her research reveals that television viewers perceive portrayals of African Americans’ negative personality characteristics as “real or true to life,” while at the same time rejecting positive stereotypes of African American as unrealistic or inaccurate (241). A study by Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis confirms this phenomenon, as they reported that viewers of the *Cosby* show felt that it portrayed an atypical depiction of blackness (74). Jhally and Lewis speak to the consequences of the rejection of positive, middle-class depictions of African Americans as unrealistic, citing Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who argues, “As long as *all* blacks were represented in demeaning or peripheral roles, it was possible to believe that American racism was, as it were, indiscriminate. The social vision of ‘*Cosby*’ however, reflecting the minuscule integration of blacks into the upper middle class, reassuringly throws the blame for black poverty back on the impoverished.” Gates continues, “There is very little connection between the social status of black Americans and the fabricated images of black people that Americans consume each day.”

Punyanunt-Carter provides a succinct history of television's frequently negative portrayals of African American stereotypical personality traits:

In one of the earliest examinations of African American portrayals, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (1977) found that African American television portrayals typically depicted the following stereotypic personality characteristics: inferior, stupid, comical, immoral, and dishonest. Dates (1990) later noted that the other stereotypes of African Americans existed, including disrespectful, violent, greedy, ignorant, and power-driven. After determining that Blacks in the media tended to be portrayed as menacing, untidy, rebellious, disrespectful, buffoonish, sexual, immoral, hopeless, untrained, uneducated, and noisy, Cosby (1994) concluded that most roles Blacks portrayed were negative and stereotypical. (242-43)

And it is this substantial history of negative, devalued representation with which Monk intends to engage, though importantly, Monk acknowledges this tradition as stretching back even further than television's history.

As a way of disrupting this problematic, deeply entrenched history of the media's portrayal of black life, Monk draws on fictionalized television junctures as a way of making the biased and problematic nature of this portrayal visible. For example, by creating exaggerated portraits of Van Go on the Snookie Cane show, a daytime talk show in the vein of Jerry Springer or Rikki Lake, and on the news broadcast of Van Go's attempted escape from arrest for raping an unconscious woman, Monk makes the apparatus of media portrayals of race visible to the reader.

Van Go's appearance on Snookie Cane is an occasion for the four different mothers of his four children to confront him about his failure to pay child support. Monk describes the scene Van Go discovers upon his entrance to the stage:

I be struttin cool as shit along that red line, round the corner, through the door and down the stairs to the stage and there they be. My fo' babies sittin on they fo' mamas' laps. Aspireene be sittin on Sharinda's lap. Tylenola be sittin on Reynisha's lap. Dexatrina be sittin on Robertarina's lap. And Rexall sittin there on Cleona's lap. The empty chair be next to Cleona and that big waterhead retard be grabbin at my shirt when I sits down. The audience be booin me and I look up and I can kinda see they ugly ass faces, but the lights in my eyes and I gives them the finger. Booin me? Shit, I kick all they asses. (113)

This moment reflects Van Go's problematic conceptions of family relationships and responsibilities, foreshadowed at the beginning of the novella when Van Go awakes from a dream in which he stabs his mother, "Cause I love her. Cause I hate her. Cause I ain't got no daddy" (65). Rachel Farebrother writes of this occurrence, "With its invocation of crime, an absent father, and material influence, Van Go's fantasy might be read as a parody of the notorious Moynihan Report of 1965, which characterized black families as 'pathological,'" continuing, "Read in this context, Van Go's dreams pander to a white readership who, in Stagg's words, 'will get a big kick out' of exaggerated stereotypes about black violence and sexual promiscuity" (126).

Van Go's entrapment in appearing on Snookie Cane illustrates both the simple and oblivious nature of Van Go, who is easily tricked, as well as his hyper-aggressive nature as he presents an obscene gesture to the audience. Further, the scenario reinforces

the social narrative of the black man as an absent and neglectful father when the show aims to confront Van Go for his failure to support his children. Aamna Mohdin speaks to the root of this stereotypical misconceptions: “The misrepresentation of Black fathers as ‘absentee’ stems, in part, from the common but incorrect use of non-marital birthrates as a proxy for parental involvement, falsely leading to the assumption that Black fathers who are not married to the mothers of their children must not be involved parents.” Van Go’s position as a neglectful father to his four children by four different women is meant to simultaneously invoke stereotypes about childbirth outside of wedlock and the absent and irresponsible black father.

However, Monk’s attempt to subvert the trope of the absent black father through its reduction to absurdity is taken as a pitch-perfect, true-to-life depiction of blackness due to popular beliefs about blackness carved into American consciousness over the course of centuries. Monk’s alternative identity as Stagg only serves to convince the audience further about the veracity of *My Pafology*. As Fuentes Morgan argues, “The novella is taken at face value as audiences either ignore or fail to recognize its satirical elements and project the stereotypical black masculine on the pseudonymic author, an author ironically received simultaneously as mysterious and (to paraphrase [Zora Neale] Hurston) as someone audiences already know all about” (164-65). The media creates and propagates images of animalistic, immoral black poverty, and because this has come to operate as the metanarrative by which reality is perceived and understood, a text that confirms these stereotypes can only be interpreted as supporting evidence.

Both the Snookie Cane episode taping and the news broadcast that ends *My Pafology* are meant to destabilize media’s role in the propagation of popular blackness by



providing an inside glimpse into the production of these media moments. With Snookie Cane, the reader is exposed to the way that Van Go is entrapped and baited into performing the hyper-aggressive model of blackness. The fact that the show tricks him by luring him to the set with the promise of meeting an admirer along with the music played through headphones to obfuscate Van Go's knowledge of the show's content makes transparent the manipulation undertaken to produce the iteration of blackness desirable for ratings, one that further reinforces stereotypes of black men as uneducated, violent, and hyper-sexual.

This control is further illuminated through Monk's description of each commercial break in which the producer confronts Van Go about his use of explicit language on the program and threatens to remove him if he fails to cooperate, saying "One more fuck and you're off the show ... Got it?" (115). The moment makes clear the constraints under which Van Go is placed. He is there as a pawn, meant to embody the stereotypical black man constructed by the media. The television show wants him to act out and be aggressive, as this is good for ratings. However, they simultaneously work to constrict him by policing his language to ensure that the footage they record is able to be broadcast and therefore profitable. Van Go is encouraged to act in ways that reinforce the metanarrative of popular blackness but only under restrictions that allow it to be packaged and commodified.

The destabilization of media surfaces again when Van Go flees from Snookie Cane's show as he is pursued by the police for raping Penelope. The crime of rape further reinforces narratives of black men as hyper-sexual and a threat to womanhood, and Van Go's flight reifies popular conceptions of black men as criminals. When Van Go is

cornered at a gas station and is finally captured by police, he sees that he is being broadcast on television by a news camera. Van Go describes his delight at this event: “I looks up and see the cameras. I get kicked again while I’m bein pulled to my feet. But I dont care. The cameras is pointin at me. I be on the TV. The cameras be full of me. I on TV. I say, ‘Hey, Mama.’ I say, ‘Hey, Baby Girl. Look at me. I on TV’” (131).

The moment illustrates Van Go’s simplicity and lack of awareness, as his attention is pulled away from the larger situation of being taken by the police and instead focused on his opportunity to be on television, seemingly taken by the acknowledgement of his life, despite the fact that it is an ultimately negative portrayal—a moment of notoriety in an otherwise ignored life. *My Pafology*’s objective is to destabilize the societal conception of blackness propagated by the media, and it is through the invocation of media that Monk makes visible the metanarrative that controls perception. However, because it does not participate in the corrective function of generative satire, its satirical intention is missed, as it inadvertently supports the very narrative it seeks to disrupt.

### **A Satire within a Satire**

While the metamodern mode of satire accounts for the overlapping demands of the postmodern and metamodern periods, *Erasure* provides a unique site of study because folded inside of it is a self-contained degenerative satire, a mode that typified the satires of the postmodern era. The presence of a degenerative satire within a metamodern text functions in a way that doubles down on subversion while simultaneously underscoring the corrective function of the larger metamodern satire.

Everett’s text is notable because it embodies or presents essentially two iterations of the same narrative. The first of these narratives is *My Pafology*, conceived of by Monk

as a way to destabilize a literary and media culture that, with few exceptions, propagates the idea of popular blackness characterized by poverty and ignorance, while glossing over systemic problems to attribute failure or struggle to black individuals. The characters created in *My Pafology* are one-dimensional parodies, with its protagonist preoccupied by a burning anger at the world around him, an anger parallel to Van Go's predecessor, Bigger Thomas. The text is meant to draw on the most salient and deeply entrenched stereotypes of black life, exaggerating them greatly to demonstrate absurdity, but because of its status as a degenerative satire, *My Pafology* lacks the corrective markers of modernist satire, and therefore the ironic nature of the text is misinterpreted as a blisteringly honest account worthy of cultural exaltation. Because the intended effect is chaos and not correction, this degenerative satire backfires in a way that engages complicitous critique, a subversion that has the unintended consequence of reifying the very metanarrative it seeks to destabilize (Hutcheon, *Politics of Postmodernism* 1-2).

The larger text of *Erasure* represents the second of these narratives, and as a metamodern satire, it contains the corrective impulse that is withheld from *My Pafology*. Everett's novel uses several mechanisms to destabilize the popular blackness metanarrative that runs throughout the text. *Erasure* draws on a variety of methods to critique the pigeonholed perception of what the true black experience should be, ranging from Monk's own account of his experiences with racial expectations, imagined conversations between historical figures, or a fictional game show that all highlight racial disparity.

However, the most salient of these subversive mechanisms is the inclusion of *My Pafology* as a whole. It is the composition and distribution of this degenerative satire that

spurs the action of the novel and catalyzes Monk's association with powerful people in publishing, film, and television. It is the failure of *My Pafology* to be recognized as satire the undergirds the larger critique of *Erasure*, and the fact that the novel is taken and celebrated as a serious work of fiction only reifies the metanarrative that the larger novel subverts. However, I argue that the failure of *My Pafology* is a necessary element of the novel for the larger satire of *Erasure* to work.

For *Erasure* to function in a corrective way that seeks to diversify and complicate depictions of blackness, first the metanarrative it subverts must be demonstrated to be a real mechanism by which the society legitimates knowledge. Monk's experiences with being told he is not black enough are only anecdotal, and therefore the large-scale acceptance and exaltation of *My Pafology* goes further to illustrate a systemic problem. As such, when Monk unsuccessfully attempts to destabilize the metanarrative by submitting the novel, he only reveals its pervasiveness.

The larger novel of *Erasure* is an exercise in creating an alternate reality, one in which variegated and individualized portrayals of blackness are the standard. Where *My Pafology* illustrates the limited range of narratives considered acceptable from black writers, the very composition of *Erasure* demonstrates the correction suggested by the narrative, which is that there should be a larger range of stories accepted from black authors, including those who do not consider race at all. Monk expresses that he does not believe in race and his intricate novels are criticized for the fact that they are not relevant to the black experience.

The proposed correction in the novel is most apparent when Monk feels the intense obligation to stop *My Pafology* (now *Fuck*) from winning the Book Award,

despite the fact that he's entertained himself by furthering the alter-ego of Stagg and the perception of the narrative as genuine. While Monk—one of the reviewers on the award's committee—has hoped that his fellow critics will recognize the poor quality and stereotypical depiction in the novel for what it is, as the novel advances from round to round, Monk must finally make his objection explicit:

“It's not that it's a bad novel,” I said, sipping wine, then placing down my glass. “It's no novel at all. It is a failed conception, an uninformed fetus, seed cast into the sand, a hand without fingers, a word with no vowels. *It is offensive, poorly written, racist and mindless.*”

Wilson Harnet, Ailene Hoover, Thomas Tomad and Jon Paul Sigmarsen just looked at me, none of them speaking.

“It's not art,” I said.

Ailene Hoover said, “I should think as an African American you'd be happy to see one of your own people get an award like this.”

I didn't know what to say, so I said, “Are you nuts?”

“I don't think we have to resort to name calling,” Wilson Harnet said.

“I would think you'd be happy to have the story of your people so vividly portrayed,” Hoover said.

“*These are no more my people than Abbott and Costello are your people,*” I said, considering that I had perhaps offered a flawed analogy.

“I learned a lot reading that book,” Jon Paul Sigmarsen said. “I haven't had a lot of experience with color—black people—and so *Fuck* was a great thing for me.”

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about,” I said. “*People will read this shit and believe that there is truth to it.*”

Thomas Tomad laughed. “This is the truest novel I’ve ever read. It could only have been written by someone who had done hard time. It’s the real thing.”

(260-61, emphasis added)

In the above selection, Monk makes three clear statements about his objections to acknowledging the novel with an award. He starts with the most basic objection, that it is “offensive, poorly written, racist and mindless.” The necessity of Monk pointing out that the work is racist helps to underscore the pervasiveness of the metanarrative that guides the text. When this proves to be ineffective in persuading his fellow judges, he objects to the suggestion that he be proud of this representation of his people. When he responds that these are not “his people,” it emphasizes the homogenization of black narratives.

Fuentes Morgan confirms this idea, arguing,

The experiences of people of color are systematically simplified and consciously homogenized, as though the experiences of one cannot be distinguished from another, particularly if that experience is negative. Difference of class, education, and background are all dismissed in favor of a limiting, monolithic organization of nonwhiteness wedged into categorical subculture. (162)

Monk’s last objection—that people will read *Fuck* and believe that there is truth to it—is his most vociferous critique as it directly addresses the way that the popular blackness metanarrative works to legitimate knowledge. Monk’s invocation of the word “truth” points to the way that the media is capable of manipulating perceptions of blackness that are perceived as honest depictions by consumers of that media. Monk

knows that the novel is a farce, but this fact is lost on the other judges who only see it as a text that meets their expectations of what a black narrative should be. Everett's larger narrative of *Erasure* confirms Ted Cohen's work on race humor in which Cohen argues, "The fact that [a racial] joke works is a fact only because of some genuine truths—not truths about black men, but truths about how black men are thought of" (80). The most prominent plotline of *Erasure* revolves around the fact that there is a disconnect between this binary. Monk pens *My Pafology* to demonstrate the dismissive way black men are thought of by creating a hyper-sexual, hyper-aggressive, uneducated, simple black male character. Van Go is meant to exemplify all at once a varied cadre of stereotypes. However, the larger society misses the joke because the nuance is lost between "truths about how black men are thought of" and "genuine truths." When thinking about the way that *My Pafology* is misinterpreted, Mel Watkin's work is illuminating. He writes, "Laughter and the comical ultimately depend on the expectations and assumptions that an individual brings to a situation" (26). The larger society lacks the ability to identify *My Pafology* as satire because its divergent expectations and assumptions cause them to perceive the work as a confirmation of stereotypes, rather than the subversion it is meant to be.

In *I Don't Hate the South*, Houston A. Baker, Jr., writes,

African Americans—especially African American writers—do not take well to being reduced to a single, authentic, "racially truthful" voice. We are a manifold and complex population, and we want to be represented as such. The question "Who speaks for the Negro?" does just the opposite. It assumes there is a single,

authoritative, expressive voice of the Negro. The consequence of this assumption (which is actually a boldly insulting presumption) is that every black man, woman, or child who sets out to write or to be a writer in the United States must devote themselves and their work to speaking for and being that “negro” voice.

(126)

This assertion reflects clearly the conflict that anchors Everett’s *Erasure*. From the beginning of the narrative, Monk has resented his imposed responsibility to speak for the black man. However, the subversion in *Erasure* comes when Monk decides to silence his critics and do just that. He pens a scathing satire meant to make visible the problematic nature of the dynamic Baker describes, but because *My Pafology* is misread as a confirmation of the very stereotypes Monk attempts to disrupt, he is drawn further into a farcical performance of Stagg with the intention of furthering his critique by baiting his audience into calling him on his façade.

The novel destabilizes the metanarrative of popular blackness developed by the publishing industry and greater media, and the novel itself operates as an exemplar of the correction the novel suggests. As a metamodern satire, the novel works cyclically to first destabilize the meaning of blackness assigned by the society, one that presumes poverty, ignorance, and violence, then to offer a correction and the suggestion of movement to a better space. *Erasure* suggests an alternative identity for black people through its construction of Monk, a man who proclaims to not believe in race, who desires only to write a story without the necessity of undergirding his prose with his blackness. Everett’s novel delivers a cultural mulatto for a protagonist, rejected by both sides for not adhering with enough fidelity to either identity. While the text ends with Monk revealed to be the



author of *My Pafology*, the reader is granted no further glimpse into the reaction and fallout of the audience. Everett resists promoting a specific solution, or as Joe Weixlmann writes,

[He] most definitely does not set out to proselytize in his writing. Rather he seeks to engage readers sufficiently in his stories that they will spend time thinking about what they've read when they finish one of his texts. ... Everett's very different literary formulation—at least with respect to those he terms “serious readers”—might be expressed this way: writing + reading = thinking. (xix)

More than other satirists, Everett seems cognizant of the fact that he is offering *a* solution, rather than *the* solution, and he has explicitly refused to explain his work to readers, stating, “I never speak to what my work might mean. If I could, I would write pamphlets instead of novels. And if I offered what the work means, I would be wrong. The work is smarter than I am. Art is smarter than us” (Goyal). His writing cultivates debate and disagreement, and Everett has shunned sympathetic readings of his novel to say, “There’s been a lot of people getting onboard and agreeing with me, and there’s nothing more boring than that” (Ehrenreich). The novel’s clipped ending works to imply the necessity for correction without having to explicitly state what that correction will be. The result is a novel that subverts the popular conception of blackness in America, substituting instead a nuanced portrait of a single man, or as Everett ventured to attempt, “an individual story about an individual person, about an individual life.”

#### CHAPTER 4: PUBERTY AS A SITE OF FEMINIST CRITIQUE IN NETFLIX'S *BIG MOUTH* (2017—PRESENT)

“We've been turned away from our bodies, shamefully taught to ignore them, to strike them with that stupid sexual modesty; we've been made victims of the old fool's game: each one will love the other sex. I'll give you your body and you'll give me mine. But who are the men who give women the body that women blindly yield to them? Why so few texts? Because so few women have as yet won back their body. Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck 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,’ the one that, aiming for the impossible, stops short before the world ‘impossible’ and writes it as ‘the end.’”

— Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa”

“Patriarchy has no gender.”

— bell hooks

“A sex symbol becomes a thing. I hate being a thing.”

— Marilyn Monroe

To examine the television history of the United States is to find a strong tradition of satirical animated television. From *The Simpsons* (1989—) to *South Park* (1997—) to *Family Guy* (1999—), animated television has provided a verdant medium for cultural critique. Speaking to the larger social impact of television, Steve Anderson contends that “American television, virtually since its inception, sustained an extremely active and nuanced engagement with the construction of history ... [which] plays a significant role in the cultural negotiation of the past” (15). Silas Kaine Ezell argues that animated television is particularly suited to this aim: “Animated programs destabilize memory and

history, often playfully exposing the errors of popular history and sentiment while offering alternative readings of historical events” (42).

Following in this tradition of the destabilization and reconstruction of cultural memory is Netflix’s animated series *Big Mouth*. Released in the fall of 2017, *Big Mouth* follows the misadventures of a group of seventh graders as they enter puberty and make the rough transition into adolescence. Taking a nuanced and satirical approach to the difficulties of this developmental period, the show consistently employs dark humor to navigate discussions of sex, masturbation, and gender politics, routinely meeting taboo subject matter with irony and irreverence.

The critical commentary surrounding the show has centered on two facets: first, that the humor deployed by the show is exceptionally vulgar, and second, that the show’s blisteringly honest approach to puberty communicates its progressive approach to sex education and human sexuality. Hannah Giorgis of *The Atlantic* calls *Big Mouth* a “raucous, delightfully vulgar exploration of puberty,” adding, “*Big Mouth* offers its audience, which includes a good number of young teens, more nuanced sex ed than some schools do.” *Chicago Tribune* writer KT Hawbaker argues, “The show is a lot like hiding a dog’s medication in a handful of treats: Underneath the delightful filth, its discussion of sex, love and politics are straight-up nourishing.” Princess Weekes highlights the widespread critical surprise at the progressiveness of the show, asking, “Who would have expected a show with so many dicks would have so much heart?” In a *New York Times* interview with co-creator Nick Kroll, critic Kathryn Shattuck characterizes the show as “shockingly dirty,” but Kroll counters, “Beneath that is a show that’s trying to talk about really important lessons. ... Something that adults would enjoy but also that kids could

watch and feel like they're not traversing this incredibly tricky time alone" (as qtd. in Shattuck).

*Big Mouth* broaches standard puberty topics, such as changing bodies, wet dreams, and menstruation, but it also tackles larger cultural considerations, such as the objectification of women, toxic masculinity, and consent. With its first season released on September 29, 2017, two weeks before Alyssa Milano's tweet about sexual assault reignited the "MeToo" Movement,<sup>3</sup> *Big Mouth* addresses a culture in which hegemonic masculinity creates opportunity for the subjugation and objectification of women. Responding to the momentum of "MeToo," *Big Mouth*'s second season, released on October 5, 2018, more prominently incorporates a storyline about sexual exploitation that dovetails with the concerns of the feminist movement.

*Big Mouth* addresses the pervasiveness of patriarchal attitudes about sex by presenting a world in which knowledge is created and legitimated through the experience of puberty, which serves as the symbolic metanarrative of the program. On *Big Mouth*, the phenomenon of puberty serves as the mechanism by which the adolescent characters come to understand the world around them, with specific attention paid to sexual and social interaction. Jaya Saxena's observation illustrates the narrative functionality of puberty: "More than anything ... the show gets to the question at the heart of puberty, which is *WHAT THE FUCK IS HAPPENING?*" This question extends beyond simple considerations of physiological development to speak to larger issues of adult socialization and the, at times, problematic state of gender relations.

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<sup>3</sup> On October 15, 2017, actress Alyssa Milano tweeted "If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet" ("#MeToo: A Timeline of Events").

Positioning puberty as the lens through which the human experience is viewed works efficiently as a mechanism to examine the society because the show's adolescent characters are making the transition from childhood to adulthood, and as such, there are many opportunities for the social and sexual politics of the society to be identified, explored, and challenged as the characters work to navigate their initiation into this new world. What might otherwise come across as clumsy exposition is folded easily into the natural dialogue that emerges from adolescents questioning new terrain.

While traditionally puberty narratives have been limited to male perspectives, due in part to its gender-balanced writing room, *Big Mouth* provides an even-handed account of both male and female experiences of this part of human development. As Lorraine Berry observes:

Far too often, very ordinary phenomena like female sexual desire or the onset of puberty are elevated by male writers to something remarkable, frightening. Young women are either animalistic bearers of the erotic urge, or bodily reminders of how sin enters the world. And other elements of female adolescence not associated with sex—like the intensity of friendships or familial bonds at that stage of life—are left off the page, or reduced to dramatic displays of hormonal cattiness.

The simple inclusion of female narratives is progressive, but the show goes further to communicate messages about female sexuality that challenge patriarchal notions of femininity, a pattern arguably attributable to the strong presence of women writers. According to Jourdain Searles, “[This] puberty comedy is one of the few successful adult cartoons with a female co-creator—writer/director Jennifer Flackett—and six of the first

10 episodes were written or co-written by women.” From the very beginning of the series, *Big Mouth* charts the challenging trajectory of a diverse body of female students who come to the table with their individual attitudes, experiences, and hang-ups, as well as explores the perceptions held about these women by the male characters of the show

While the trajectories of both the 2017 and 2018 seasons of *Big Mouth* are characterized by a progressive attitude toward sex, I argue that two episodes, “Girls Are Horny Too” and “What Is It About Boobs?,” acutely illustrate the inherent obstacles of female sexual development, with special consideration given to the way that patriarchal notions of female sexuality complicate this transformation. The show employs the puberty metanarrative to demonstrate the ubiquitous nature of body-image issues that plague even the most self-assured girls on the show.

The first episode, written by Emily Altman, entitled “Girls Are Horny Too,” focuses on the complex nature of third-wave feminism, which debates whether prescribed beauty practices and body adornment are oppressive or empowering. This notion is challenged when the young female character Jessi desires a new bra that will amplify her figure and, as she anticipates, allow her to feel sexually empowered. However, this narrative is complicated when Jessi becomes highly aware of what Laura Mulvey terms “the male gaze,” a patriarchal phenomenon that contributes to the objectification of women (62). In this chapter, I explore the way that this dehumanization draws on the lived pain of female viewers to create an ultimately cathartic experience.

The second episode, written by Kelly Galuska and entitled “What Is It About Boobs?,” picks up in season two, illustrating the cyclical nature of self-confidence and doubt, as the show depicts the reaction of several female characters to the recent physical

development of one of their peers, Gina (Gina Rodriguez). A range of responses is depicted from these characters, who must contend with the jealousy and envy they feel as a result of the male characters' thinly veiled obsession with Gina's breasts. In this chapter, I deconstruct the way that patriarchal society influences their reactions, as well as the way the series balances male- and female-centric humor as a way to contend with what Linda Hutcheon has termed the problem of "complicitous critique," a phenomenon that occurs when a postmodern text inadvertently reinforces the metanarrative it seeks to subvert, which in this case is a patriarchal view of female sexual development (10).

I argue that these two episodes adeptly illustrate the larger objective of this metamodern satire, which is first to destabilize the congruous metanarratives of puberty and patriarchy by disrupting typically male perspectives and employing a gender-balanced depiction of adolescence. The show simultaneously destabilizes puberty and patriarchy by taking a non-traditional approach that creates sex-positive messaging about many issues of female sexual development and expression, in addition to engaging male characters in explicit conversations about the problem of patriarchy's role as the mechanism for understanding human sexuality.

The second objective of this metamodern satire occurs when the show transitions from subversion to correction. These episodes suggest corrective solutions that suppose optimistic improvement. Both "Girls Are Horny Too" and "What Is It About Boobs?" put forward a message that rejects the perspective of the male gaze in order to depict layered, nuanced narratives about female sexuality and its expression. They also suggest a female-centric, sex-positive message about girls taking back autonomy over their own bodies and their perceptions of them.

The humor of *Big Mouth* is incredibly dark, drawing consistently on the idea of a societal id to illuminate issues related to gender and sexuality, as well as the socially deviant thoughts that accompany them. While the show is consistently characterized by this darkness, moments of light also populate the series as the adolescent characters of the show push back against the patriarchal conceptions of human sexuality that are so engrained as to be considered natural. The show disrupts the puberty metanarrative, and in the wake of this disruption is an occasion for the inherent optimism of the show to shine through. As a result of the show's subversive nature, both male and female characters are gifted with a sense of freedom and an opportunity to revise the narrative surrounding sexual development and expression.

Strikingly, *Big Mouth* engages in a cyclical form of humor in which optimism is repeatedly presented through the process of correction. However, the characters proposing these corrections often fail to effect the change they desire to see. This ineffectiveness highlights the pervasiveness of the patriarchal metanarrative, illustrating the deeply-entrenched nature of this human construction and its influence in the way knowledge is legitimated. It is perhaps the very presence of this failure that draws into sharp focus the optimism of the show, as it communicates a message that corrective action must be undertaken repeatedly in order to counteract the negative effects of the metanarrative.

### **“Girls Are Horny Too”**

Female sexual desire has long been a taboo subject, exacerbated by the societal double standard that rewards boys for sexual activity while valuing girls for their sexual “purity.” Women and girls are often subject to the madonna/whore dichotomy, which



“denotes polarized perceptions of women as either ‘good,’ chaste, and pure ‘madonnas’ or as ‘bad,’ promiscuous, and seductive ‘whores’” (Kahalon et al. 348). This phenomenon relegates girls to a denigrated position in the society, and the false dichotomy leads to problematic gender relations where sexuality is concerned. As Leah M. Wyman and George N. Dionisopoulos report, “Research has noted that such defining of women [as virgins or whores] is perpetrated by a societal notion which combines female sexuality with submission and objectification and male sexuality with aggression and hostility. Viewing sex as a form of conquest instead of an act of mutual validation and intimacy results in demeaning and dehumanizing images of women” (213).

*Big Mouth* breaks with this tradition of demonizing female sexuality by honestly and directly depicting the presence and nuance of female desire. Made clear even from the title, “Girls Are Horny Too” begins at the most basic level of subversion with the simple assertion that girls feel sexual desire in equal measure to their male counterparts. This idea is made explicit when one of the show’s male protagonists, Nick (Nick Kroll), and his older sister, Lia (Kat Dennings), discuss the popularity of a romantic historical fiction novel making the rounds at school, called *The Rock of Gibraltar*. When Nick comes home to find Lia reading the novel, he asks for an explanation of its appeal:

LIA: You have no idea why girls read this book, do you?

NICK: Yeah, I do.

LIA: Because it turns them on.

NICK: [stammers] What was that now?

LIA: Newsflash: Girls get horny too.

[Nick’s head explodes]

LIA: Don't tell me you didn't know that.

NICK: Of course I did.

LIA: Girls are just as horny as boys. We just don't talk about it constantly. ("Girls Are Horny Too" 00:08:15-00:08:35)

The moment is a direct acknowledgement of both the existence of female desire and the ignorance of male-centric views surrounding sex that paint women as gatekeepers tasked with preventing sexual activity. Nick's reaction effectively demonstrates the patriarchal underpinning of the society because, as a pubescent boy frequently in conversation with other pubescent boys, he exemplifies an ignorance toward female perspectives on sexuality. However, the show does not depict this ignorance as malicious. Instead Nick represents the limitations of the patriarchy through his incomplete knowledge and experience, which, as the protagonist of his own story, he understands through a male perspective.

This exchange also provides a fruitful opportunity to establish puberty as the guiding metanarrative of the text. This transition from childhood to adulthood is the apparatus through which the show communicates critique, and it performs this function efficiently because of the puberty's fundamental process of initiation. With this shift into adulthood, characters receive information from a diverse array of sources: parents, peers, imaginary sidekicks called "hormone monsters." Because the protagonists of the show are seventh graders, just now entering puberty, they seek counsel on issues such as what to expect in terms of physical development, but also, importantly, questions about sexual interaction and gender politics, inherently complex topics that must be explained to them in clear terms.

One of the comic apparatuses by which the show depicts conflicting and, at times, problematic advice is through the deployment of male and female hormone monsters, Maury (Nick Kroll) and Connie (Maya Rudolph), respectively. Appearing at the commencement of puberty and visible only to the person they are guiding, as Naomi Fry points out, the hormone monsters represent both the kids' physiological and psychological urges (Fry). This means that they not only bring forward the base sexual impulses that emerge in adolescence, but also convey the psychological baggage created by the adult society, especially gender relations. Connie materializes for the first time in the second episode when Jessi (Jessi Klein) is alone in her bedroom after a harrowing day during which she experiences menarche on a school field trip to the Statue of Liberty:

CONNIE: Hello, my precious little ravioli. ... Shh! Quiet, baby.

JESSI: Who ... what are you?

CONNIE: I am the Hormone Monstress.

JESSI: If you're here to tell me how terrible being a woman is, the Statue of Liberty and my mom already covered that.

CONNIE: The French are full of shit, and your mother's a woman in decline. You're on the rise, girl.

JESSI: I am?

CONNIE: But you'll have to make some changes, dumpling. For instance, what the fuck is this?

JESSI: It's my baseball mitt.

CONNIE: Get rid!

JESSI: Hey!

CONNIE: Listen to me! You want to shoplift lipstick. You want to listen to Lana Del Rey on repeat while you cut up all your T-shirts. You want to scream at your mother and then laugh at her tears!

JESSI: But I don't want to scream at my mom.

CONNIE: She's not your mom anymore. From now on, you call her Shannon.

JESSI: You're very beautiful.

CONNIE: [purrs] I know.

JESSI: Why do you smell so good?

CONNIE: Because I don't use deodorant and I only take bubble baths.

(“Everybody Bleeds” 00:22:35-00:23:30)

The hormone monstress accompanies Jessi everywhere, sending mixed messages about sexual desire as well as commentary about Jessi's body that causes self-consciousness and shame. This is apparent even from their first interaction when Connie simultaneously flatters Jessi and discourages her from participating in the “male” activity of baseball by telling her to throw away her baseball mitt.

Because the hormone monsters operate as guides to both physiological and psychological urges, they often provide conflicting information about human sexuality. However, as the absurd “experts” in the room, Maury and Connie are allotted heavy influence on the kids, who are often learning information about their development for the first time. The hormone monsters serve as human sexuality sherpas for the young characters of the show, which provides an effective narrative vehicle to navigate the confusion that accompanies puberty while simultaneously highlighting the complexity of socially imposed attitudes and behaviors regarding sex. In their mixture of id-driven

instincts and superego-informed progressivism, Maury and Connie in equal measure both clarify the mysteries of sex and provide problematic advice that at times plays into the patriarchal views of sexuality the show subverts.

An extended example of this emerges through Jessi and her relationship to her own feelings of desire. Just as the rest of the female student body is taken by *The Rock of Gibraltar*, Jessi too finds herself wrapped up in the love story that depicts erotic desire and a strong emotional connection between the protagonists, Fatima and Gustavo, whose love is forbidden but who risk it all to be together. Reading the physical descriptions of Fatima, whose ample bosom is often creatively described, Jessi begins to find her own body lacking. While reading the book in the library, Jessi comes across the sentiment “Fatima looked down at her intricately laced bodice, her sensual ripe breasts bursting,” which causes her to glance down her shirt at her own plain, nude-colored bra and refer to it as “dog shit” (“Girls Are Horny Too” 00:07:58).

At this formative point in her life, Jessi desires to leave behind her adolescent conception of love and be initiated into the space of adulthood that would foster a passionate relationship such as the one between Fatima and Gustavo. She perceives her bra, an item of clothing that only she can see, as an obstacle to actualizing her desire to emulate Fatima. As a result of her newfound dissatisfaction, Jessi convinces her mother, Shannon, to make a trip to the mall to purchase her a new bra, with Connie in tow. When they reach the store, Veronica’s Closet, the following exchange occurs:

SHANNON: I still don’t see what the rush is, honey. You’ve already got a perfectly nice bra.

CONNIE: You tell Shannon you do not want nice. You want two scoops of  
Haagen-Däzs French vanilla boobies.

JESSI: Mom, I want something ... voluptuous. A woman's bosom should  
resemble the wild, sweet oranges of Valencia which yearn to be plucked.

SHANNON: Oh, honey, buying a fancy bra won't make you look like these  
models. You know they all have their ribs removed and their buttoholes  
bleached.

JESSI: I get it. I just want a grownup bra, okay?

CONNIE: [holding up a red volumizing bra] This one! This is the one. Tell  
Shannon you'll kill yourself if you don't get it.

JESSI: How about this one?

SHANNON: I don't know, Jessi. Is this bra really ... you?

CONNIE: Yes, of course it's you! It's always been you!

JESSI: Shh, shh. I got this. Was it not you, Mom, who insisted from an early age  
that I quote, "embrace my power," end quote, as a female?

SHANNON: Yes, but this red bra. [laughs] I mean, this is a power that you can't  
handle yet.

JESSI: Are you trying to make me afraid of my own sexuality?

SHANNON: [gasps] No, Jessi—

JESSI: Are you slut-shaming me?

SHANNON: I would never slut-shame you.

JESSI: Are you the patriarchy?

SHANNON: [with tears in her eyes] Oh, my God, of course not.

CONNIE: Go in for the kill.

JESSI: Eleanor Roosevelt once said, quote, “Do one thing every day that scares you,” closed quote, and I think this red bra scares both of us. (“Girls Are Horny Too” 00:08:44-00:10:15)

As we can see from this exchange, Jessi works to pit her mother’s feminist parenting style against her as Shannon cautions her about purchasing the bra. Shannon’s warnings that the red bra represents a “power” Jessi cannot handle yet demonstrates her contradictory ideas. While Shannon aspires to be a third-wave feminist who believes in sexual empowerment, her suggestion that Jessi is not ready signals her belief that Jessi’s expression of sexuality will open her up to a potentially threatening world of sexual attention that Shannon believes she is not ready for.

This conversation between Jessi and her mother illustrates a conflict between competing conceptions of feminism, foreshadowing the complex nature of sexual empowerment explored in the episode. Sheila Jeffreys reports that by the 1990s, conflicting ideas about women’s participation in beauty practices emerged, as some scholars like Sandra Bartky claimed that women were coerced into undertaking these practices, while others contended that participation in beauty practices should no longer be considered oppressive but rather, empowering (5). Shannon telling Jessi that buying a fancy bra will not make her look like the models featured in the store illustrates these dueling ideologies, with Shannon’s statement nodding to the oppressive societal conditions that may be catalyzing her daughter’s desire for sexy undergarments. While Jessi is attracted to the bra for the self-confidence and adoration she thinks it will inspire,

her mother understands that the act of female adornment in a patriarchal setting is more complicated than Jessi is anticipating.

Couching the scene in a third-wave setting illuminates the way that feminism can be expressed in diverse ways that uniquely aspire to improve conditions on a larger scale. As Elissa Marder writes, “The term ‘feminism’ always speaks in the plural; not only is feminism itself plural (there are many different ‘feminisms’ under the name of ‘feminism’) but when one speaks ‘as a feminist,’ in the name of the feminist project one must say ‘we’” (163). By putting two feminist characters in conflict, the exchange also exemplifies postmodern tenets of third-wave feminism, which maintain that there is “no single formula for being a ‘good feminist’” (Putnam Tong 193). Jeffreys attributes the increased emphasis on women’s autonomy rather than the coercion of beauty practices to the rise of postmodernism and Frederic Jameson’s “cultural turn,” adding, “Postmodern thinking rejects the notion that there is such a thing as a ruling class that can create dominant ideas” (14). As Rosemarie Putnam Tong argues, “[Postmodern feminists] view with suspicion any mode of feminist thought that aims to provide *the* explanation for why a woman is oppressed or *the* ten steps *all* women must take to achieve liberation” (193). The Veronica’s Closet scene illustrates the way that women may hold different opinions and enact divergent plans to feel autonomy over their own sexuality, which has heretofore been exploited by a patriarchal culture, a pattern that continues throughout the show as an array of female characters embark on various paths to explore their sexual autonomy.

Later in the episode, Jessie makes her debut at school featuring her new bra, which does not go quite like she had envisioned it. Her new appearance garners much



attention, which Jessi initially enjoys, as she flips her hair from side to side. Walking down the hallway with her augmented bustline and the straps of her new bra visible outside of her tank top, she engages in an act of gender performativity, unwittingly reinforcing a gender reality in which women are highly valued for sex appeal. As her walk continues and she finds uninvited eyes on her new silhouette, such as Andrew, who mistakenly greets her, “Hello, Red Bra,” or a teacher, who looks her up and down before saying, “Well, *bonjour*, to the lovely Ms. Glaser,” she becomes increasingly uncomfortable with the sexual attention she has attracted by wearing the bra.

The scene depicts a conflict between Jessi’s internalized feminist ideals and the patriarchal culture she inhabits. As Judith Butler argues, “Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed” (527). However, what Jessi finds in this moment is that the conception of gender she is performing by foregrounding her sexuality is not congruent with the gender relations she desires to emulate from *The Rock of Gibraltar*, which depicts a story of sexual desire and characters who value each other as whole people. When Jessi wears the bra, she is attempting to foster the sexual energy she’s found inside the text, but this decision ends up backfiring as it reifies the patriarchal culture that Jessi wishes to destabilize by expressing her own sexuality. Susan Bordo writes, “It is difficult to avoid the recognition that the contemporary preoccupation with appearance, which still affects women far more powerfully than men, even in our narcissistic and visually oriented culture, may function as a backlash phenomenon, reasserting existing gender configurations against any attempts to shift or transform power relations” (91-2). While first enthusiastic to walk down the halls as a newly developed sexual presence, accompanied by Connie’s

energetic singing and guitar playing, Jessi quickly learns that while she may want to project her sexuality, she cannot control who receives the message and gazes back at her. Laura Mulvey's male gaze theory helps to inform this scene, as Jessi finds herself stripped of autonomy and transformed into a sexual object. Mulvey argues,

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed ... so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness* ... she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire. (62)

In this instance, Jessi finds her subjectivity removed as she becomes the recipient of the gaze. Initially the looks please her and boost her confidence, but as she is visually consumed by more and more eyes, she loses her sense of sexual autonomy and instead is transformed into a symbol of male desire. Essentially, Jessi does not control the ways she is perceived and cannot prevent the objectification and sexual stereotyping from both male and female onlookers. When Andrew, mistakenly greets her "Hi, red bra" it reinforces lyrics in Connie's song claiming that Jessi is "transformed into an *object* of envy and awe" ("Girls Are Horny Too" 00:14:25).

The hallway scene is meant to be satirical in its exaggerated reactions to female sexuality, but it also points to the double-edged nature of sexual expression for women. As she makes her debut, Jessi is initially greeted with stares that actualize her desire to be noticed, but as the tenor of the attention changes from admiration to consumption, patriarchal patterns of objectification emerge, facilitating interactions Jessi does not

welcome. As the final lines of Connie's song state, the "[sexy red bra] will lift up your life, my dear / But beware of the fall" (00:14:45).

As a result of her walk, Jessi's self-concept takes a beating, and she and Connie both end up crying in the bathroom:

JESSI: What the hell? Why are you crying?

CONNIE: Because it's all so overwhelming.

JESSI: My mom was right.

CONNIE: [slaps Jessi] Don't you ever say that again.

JESSI: What? She said I wasn't ready, and I wasn't ready for all those eyes on me.

CONNIE: But you liked some of them.

JESSI: I know! But what about Mr. Lizer and Jay and ... Lola. [taking off bra] I want to throw this thing away.

CONNIE: Yes, drown the bra. Kill it!

JESSI: Or maybe I could just put it in my backpack.

CONNIE: Yeah, keep it. I still love it, too. (00:15:04-00:15:28)

The complex nature of female sexual expression is visible here, as Jessi and Connie discuss the conflicted feelings Jessi has about what has just transpired. On one hand, Jessi enjoyed some of the attention she received, as she initially perceives the comments from her classmates as an acknowledgement that she has crossed the threshold into womanhood. However, on the other, she's come to realize that women expressing their sexuality comes with an array of psychological consequences, which can include having to deal with the phenomenon of being objectified. Jessi desires the admiration she has

read about in *The Rock of Gibraltar*, but what's available to her in a middle school hallway is the objectification of her body that leads her to feel like a subjugated thing.

### **Subversion**

With a patriarchal metanarrative now in place, *Big Mouth* can begin the destabilizing work that characterizes metamodern satire. One of the mechanisms employed by the show is the use of dark humor, which when effectively deployed highlights the moments of attempted subversion through acts of “symbolic hostility,” explained by J. Jerome Zolten:

Tragedy causes pain, and a joke about a past tragedy recalls that pain forcing us to relive the hurt. Part of the tragedy-joke technique is the teller's use of the hearer's pain. That is why the joke may be thought of as hostile. The teller, though primarily seeking to amuse, knowingly brings into play the pain of tragedy. Part of the hearer's response is shock at the teller's willingness to make light of pain for the sake of laughter. (309)

When Nick, Andrew, and Jay (Jason Mantzoukas) discuss what it means for Jessi to wear the red bra, Jay's comments that position Jessi as inviting sexual attention call upon the lived pain of women for male and female viewers. Ostensibly, women watching the show will identify with this moment because they have experienced objectification themselves, and Jay's belief that Jessi wants to be seen as a sexual object, as well as his explicit rejection of any narrative that does not fortify this position, brings forward memories of trauma.

Male viewers may find the dark humor to function in a way that encourages empathy. Speaking to the power of popular culture, Ezell succinctly describes Alison

Landsberg's estimation that "not only can popular culture present an alternative view of history, but it can give those who did not specifically live experiences access, allowing them to change behavior" (44). While some viewers may never have been on the receiving end of objectifying actions, Jay's position as a "mock intolerant" helps to illuminate the problematic nature of the male gaze. The mock intolerant is described by Ethan Thompson as "the figure [who] does not hide his or her intolerance but espouses it without hesitation, unaware of—or, more likely, indifferent to—social mores that such opinions be kept to oneself" (41). Thompson points out that the intolerance is not real but performed, adding, "There is no room for nuance in the beliefs of the 'mock intolerant' character, no room for audience reflection over whether their beliefs deserve ridicule" (41).

When Jay claims that Jessi will be grateful to them for touching her breasts, he justifies it by saying, "I know if I was walking around with a red bra on my dick, I'd want somebody to touch my dick, right?" ("Girls Are Horny Too" 00:15:50). The ludicrous and hedonistic nature of this comparison is underscored by hormone monster Maury's response, "You're a little fuckin' freak, I like hanging out with you" (00:16:04). While all of the adolescent characters at times say things that are problematic, it is through the exaggerated character of Jay that the audience is most able to see the destabilization, as his expression of exaggerated, patriarchal attitudes are easily apparent through his flawed logic.

Jay's role as the mock intolerant is made even more clear when he approaches Jessi about the "signal" she's sent by wearing the red bra, and the patriarchal metanarrative is highlighted as Andrew speaks to its potential viability, saying, "if [Jay's]

right, it changes everything” (“Girls Are Horny Too” 00:17:25). When Jay tells Jessi in the school hallway that he would be happy to help her relieve her horniness, Jessi grabs him by the throat and shoves him up against a locker, yelling, “You have no idea what I want” (00:17:55). By physically overpowering him, Jessi subverts traditional narratives about female submissiveness and weakness, and the moment depicts what perhaps many female viewers have wanted to say to those who harass them. A cathartic scene, indeed.

However, one concern regarding satire is that the presence of catharsis in a narrative satisfies the audience and breeds inaction toward correcting the problem at hand. Bassem Youssef, “the Jon Stewart of Egypt,” has expressed his concern that satire leads to complacency in its viewers who feel satisfied with the text’s message, stating “Satire doesn’t change things. People change things.” However, “Girls Are Horny Too” demonstrates an awareness of the fact that one fictional confrontation will not undo centuries of subjugation. Jessi’s moment of catharsis is short-lived, as Jay stumbles over to Nick and Andrew and says “Did you guys see Jessi choking me out over there? Yeah. She gets pretty angry when she’s horny” (00:18:33). The moment illustrates the pervasiveness of the patriarchal metanarrative and its rejection of women’s autonomy, which could ostensibly inspire viewers to take further action, as Jessi’s actions have not yielded substantial change in her immediate environment.

While Jay’s demonstration of a resilient patriarchy can be read as a moment of cynicism, a more durable catharsis comes later in the episode in Jessi’s bedroom when she and Connie discuss the encounter. Sensing Jessi’s confusion about the way her recent sexual attention has affected her, Connie gives Jessi a hand mirror, stating, “Who cares about everyone else? Maybe it’s time to get to know yourself.” When Jessi hesitates, she

says, “It’s yours isn’t it?” (00:20:35), reestablishing Jessi’s autonomy in exploring her emerging sexuality. Instead of the audience of people in the hallway, here Jessi is transformed into the one doing looking. She is no longer at the whim of the scopophilic gaze that works to possess her, but instead able to look upon herself with a sense of subjectivity.

When greeted by her anthropomorphized, smiling genitals (Kristen Wiig), the humor shifts, and Jessi has a giggling, positive conversation with her newfound friend. The irony and cynicism dissipate temporarily because the encounter is not meant to call forth pain from the viewer, but instead provide a moment that revels in a sex-positive portrayal of female desire. Jessie, surprised, remarks, “You’re not scary,” to which her genitals respond, “Of course I’m not scary. I’m you, and I’m very fun” (00:22:15). After giving her “the grand tour,” identifying each piece of anatomy, her genitals encourage her to explore her own body, ending with the declaration “I’m telling you to masturbate” (00:22:25), to which Jessi agrees.

The conclusion of this episode is sex positive, as it depicts Jessi feeling comfortable in her own body. However, one of the ways that *Big Mouth* has been able to create such an honest characterization of puberty is through its employment of cyclical patterns of self-confidence and doubt. Jessi’s positive experience of exploring her own body sends a strong message about empowering female sexuality, but the confidence she feels in the private confines of her own bedroom do not necessarily extend to the outside world, which continues to promote the sexualization of women and girls. In subsequent episodes, Jessi demonstrates both self-confidence in her continued attempts to disrupt the patriarchal metanarrative, replacing it with a worldview that values women and girls as

autonomous and intelligent actors as they participate in sexual expression, and self-doubt as she is disheartened by the difficulty of that task.

### **“What Is It about Boobs?”**

The juxtaposition of the private and the public is further illustrated in an episode from Season 2 of the show called “What Is It about Boobs?,” which centers on the physical development of a previously unIntroduced character named Gina, whose growing breasts garner new, widespread attention. Gina’s physical maturity is the topic of conversation of both male and female students in the school, though the types of conversation they have are distinctly different. Nick, Andrew, and Jay are predictably entranced by Gina’s breasts, and Jessi, observing this new obsession, calls the behavior out as objectification.

The narrative of men sexualizing women is certainly nothing new for the show, as it has already been explored in “Girls Are Horny Too.” However, the show performs a notable shift in “What Is It about Boobs?” because it also depicts the problematic ways in which the female characters of the show respond to Gina’s sexualization. Following the soccer game when Gina’s breasts are first noticed, Jessi, Connie, Missy (Jenny Slate), Devin (June Diane Raphael), and Lola (Nick Kroll), converse in the locker room in a way that highlights the pervasiveness of patriarchal narratives toward women’s bodies, which cause women to act as adversaries toward one another:

JESSI: My boobs don’t even bounce when I run.

CONNIE: And your taters are growing in uneven. One’s a Yukon Gold. One’s a little fingerling.

DEVIN: Oh, my God! You guys! Devon broke up with me.



MISSY: Oh, holy heck! Another broken heart. That really stinks.

DEVIN: I bet he dumped me for Gina and her slutty boobs.

JESSI: Uh ...

DEVIN: Big boobs aren't even that great. Right, Lola?

LOLA: Yeah. You know my mom wrote me a check to get a breast reduction, but  
I spent it on a *Pretty Little Liars* meet and greet.

JESSI: That sounds like a good investment. Look, you should all calm down. We  
already live in a society that fixates on the female form in a  
psychologically—

LOLA: Ugh.

JESSI: Listen! ... decimating way to many young women.

LOLA: Boo, feminism! I am not with her.

JESSI: Okay, well, anyway—

LOLA: MAGA! MAGA! MAGA! (“What Is It About Boobs?” 00:03:15-  
00:04:00)

In this scene, Jessi attempts to unite the girls by acknowledging the detrimental effects of a patriarchal society, but the episode counters this with Lola's invocation of Trump rhetoric “I'm not with her” and “MAGA (Make America Great Again),” a move that brings to mind the presidential campaign of Hillary Clinton, who presented a threat to the patriarchal society with her nomination by the Democratic National Party.

The scene develops further, as Missy, an intelligent and self-possessed character, finds herself falling victim to insecurities foisted upon her by Devin, the most popular girl in school, who backhandedly assures Missy, whose breasts have not developed

enough to require a bra, that she is “very lucky to be totally, completely flat,” because “boys will never bother [her] ‘cause, you know, there’s nothing there, right?” (00:04:15-00:04:25). Devon’s tongue-in-cheek assurance to Missy highlights the way in which patriarchal notions of desirability and value have infiltrated the self-concepts of these twelve-year-old girls, emphasized most visibly by the critical language used by Devon and Lola, who work to pit the girls against each other over their implicit desires to conform to idealized beauty standards. Devon comments on both the smallness of Missy’s breasts and the largeness of Lola’s to instill self-doubt in each girl, regardless of their divergent body types.

Later in Missy’s bedroom, she, Jessi, and Connie, scroll through Instagram comparing themselves to the girls they see who all appear to be effortlessly beautiful and privileged. With the three of them feeling acutely envious, Jessi tries once again to combat negative thinking, saying, “Missy, the important thing is we are smart, and we know who we are” (00:16:10), which Missy rejects. Overhearing their conversation, Missy’s mom, Monica (Chelsea Peretti), enters to tell the girls that she’d like to take them on a field trip to the spa.

Arriving at a Korean spa where women relax in the nude, Missy feels self-doubt about the attractiveness of her body and is hesitant to remove her robe. Monica attempts to persuade her, saying, “Being comfortable in your body is beautiful” (00:19:28), before Connie chimes in with a song about women loving their bodies. As all the women of the spa join in for the musical number, Connie sings about body parts typically considered inferior or defective:

I love my body, I love it all

Every wrinkle, pimple, dimple, big or small

My booty is a beauty, my boobs a work of art

My love handles, my bat wings, I love every single part (00:19:50-00:20:10)

As Connie performs her song, women of all shapes, sizes, ages, and races dance around proudly, freed of the expectation of the male gaze and able to shed patriarchal standards of feminine beauty. Unlike the previous conversation in which the girls are critical of one another's bodies, the Korean spa represents a space for women to regain their sense of subjectivity and support one another.<sup>4</sup>

Jessi and Missy stand side-by-side as different women's body parts (torsos and legs) are rotated through to create new combinations. As this happens, Connie's song lyrics call out the terms "Cellulite and knobby knees / Ittie-bitties and double D's / Skinny legs and thunder thighs / Areolas of every shape and size" (00:20:10-00:20:20). Naming terms like "ittie-bitties" and "thunder thighs" subverts typically negative connotations, and instead positions them in a celebratory light. The women of the spa dance around happily in unison as they continue to name "inferior" features such as "frizzy hair" and "crooked toe[s]" (00:20:45). Missy and Jessi feel empowered, having thrown off their robes and joined the dance party.

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<sup>4</sup> Despite the fact that the space of the Korean spa was free of the male gaze, on a meta-level, voyeurism still presented an issue to contend with, as the writers for the series extensively debated the way to depict the two young girls so that they were not sexualized. Kayla Cobb reports, "Whereas Nick Kroll and co-creator Andrew Goldberg were quick to advocate for covering Jessi and Missy up, [Jennifer] Flackett originally pushed for them to be fully nude in the song," which Flackett justified by submitting that the boys on the show had been depicted nude. Nick Kroll adds, "We've shown the boys topless, we've shown the boys naked. We should be able to show the girls naked and not have it be a sexual—like those girls being naked is not inherently a sexual thing. We put that sexuality on them" ("Nick Kroll and Jennifer Flackett Break Down"). The writers eventually decided on some strategically placed steam that left Jessi and Missy's nipples exposed but their vulvas covered.

While “Girls Are Horny Too” may begin the conversation about the patriarchy’s staying power, “What Is It about Boobs?” picks up the discussion in an episode that is easily one of the strongest depictions of feminist destabilization. The longevity of the patriarchal metanarrative also contributes to this metamodern satire’s use of humor, which brings to the forefront the dire necessity of societal change, despite the satire’s ultimately optimistic mode.

One moment where the show’s humor represents the durability of the patriarchy happens when Jessi and Missy find themselves in the locker room again after they have had the transformative experience of the Korean spa. Missy, completely shirtless in a pair of briefs, dances across the room in front of Devin and Lola, which comes under criticism in a few ways:

DEVIN: Um, Missy, what are you doing?

MISSY: What? It’s just a body, you guys, and I am owning it.

JESSI: Yeah, being comfortable in your body makes you beautiful, they say.

MISSY: Sing it!

DEVIN: Oh, my God! Did your moms tell you that?

LOLA: I bet they’re on that website, *Ugly Girls Are Pretty Too*.

DEVIN: But they aren’t, are they, Lola?

LOLA: No, they’re not. (00:23:20-00:23:40)

Following the condescension from Devin and Lola, Jessi reminds Missy that not every girl present went to the Korean spa and suggests that Missy should put her shirt back on, to which Missy complies.

The trip to the Korean spa exemplifies the optimism that follows destabilization of the puberty metanarrative. Looking back to the scene, women of all shapes and sizes communicate a message of reverence that rejects misogynist conceptions of the ideal female form. However, despite this positivity and optimism, *Big Mouth* illustrates the deeply entrenched nature of the metanarrative through this quick exchange in the locker room. While Jessi and Missy have experienced a sea change following their visit, Devin and Lola represent the persistence and ubiquity of patriarchal narratives of beauty that prescribe often unattainable standards. The criticism of the *Ugly Girls Are Pretty Too* group is a direct satirical illustration that alternative perspectives on beauty will not be tolerated, and how patriarchal influence will continue to be felt even among girls who have otherwise witnessed the freedom that accompanies destabilization. This is evidenced by the disparate reactions of Missy, who strips to near nudity, and Jessi, who is still at least mildly uncomfortable with this exposure.

While Jessi and Missy have undergone a transformative experience, they still inhabit a society where patriarchal thinking thrives among both boys and girls. *Big Mouth* presents feminist narratives that draw on the lived experiences of female viewers in order to counteract the prominence of societal attitudes that reward boys for sexual behavior while denigrating girls for the same things. The oppressiveness of the patriarchal metanarrative is felt throughout the series, especially so in “Girls Are Horny Too” and “What Is It about Boobs?,” but despite the fact that the show acknowledges the presence of the patriarchy, it also provides moments of optimism where female characters are able to escape the ubiquitous male gaze and feel a renewed sense of subjectivity in their own bodies.

## Complicitous Critique of the Patriarchy

With satire, there is the risk of the audience misunderstanding the message of the text, since one of the most prominent tools of the genre is irony, which *Big Mouth* uses generously to communicate the progressive, sex-positive messaging of the show.

Speaking to this phenomenon of misinterpretation, Michael Moore claims that irony and its companions, such as parody, sarcasm, satire, spoof, and burlesque, can be collectively termed “obversions,” which are “intended by their source to convey its very opposite” (E3). However, if one cannot discern which elements are meant to be satirical and which are genuine, the audience runs the risk of misinterpreting the satire or understanding it as supporting ideas that it seeks to critique. Citing modernist explanations of this phenomenon that proclaim a universal truth of the text, Jonathan P. Rossing writes, “The ridicule is misunderstood; the winks are too subtle; the satirists and comic performers are taken as sincere on their face and accused of reinforcing oppressive structures and ideologies” (14). However, the misinterpretation of satire is not limited only to satires with a static meaning. Postmodern texts, which contain within them a multiplicity of meanings, can still be accused of reifying the very things they subvert. While the objective of postmodern satire is to destabilize the metanarrative it critiques, when the audience misperceives the satirical irony as a genuine expression of sentiment, the opposite effect can occur. Helene Shugart writes that “although postmodern irony [and satire] functions subversively for select audiences, it may well function hegemonically for others” (434), the consequences of which can be long-lasting. Providing an example of the longitudinal effects of such misunderstanding, Paul Lewis cites a study by Thomas Ford and Mark Ferguson, which “supports the conclusion that being exposed to

disparaging jokes about disadvantaged subgroups can move listeners already prejudiced against these groups toward a greater tolerance of discrimination” (15). Essentially, the subversive function of the satire backfires, as erroneous readings reinforce the cultural institutions the satire aims to destabilize.

Linda Hutcheon’s theory of “complicitous critique” succinctly describes this phenomenon’s presence in the postmodern texts. She suggests that postmodern works “[involve] a paradoxical installing as well as subverting of conventions—including representation of the subject” (13), adding, “Postmodernism paradoxically manages to legitimize culture (high and mass) even as it subverts it. ... It is the function of irony in postmodern discourse to posit that critical distance and then undo it” (15).

Importantly, the likelihood of misinterpretation can be mitigated if the creator and audience have a specific rapport that allows for the clear identification of ironic transmission. Speaking to this necessary connection, Hutcheon writes, “No theorist of irony would dispute the existence of a special relationship in ironic discourse between the ironist and the interpreter; but for most it is irony itself that is said to *create* that relationship. I would like to turn that around here, and argue instead that it is the community that comes first and that, in fact, *enables* the irony to happen” (*Irony’s Edge* 85). Hutcheon calls this relationship a “discursive community,” which she defines broadly as a “complex configuration of shared knowledge, beliefs, values, and communicative strategies” (87).

As Graham Dunstan Martin writes, “different people live in ‘different worlds of discourse.’ The whole communicative process is altered and distorted by these different worlds” (432). Further parsing out the oppositional experiences of the audience, Michael

Moore cites Philip Wheelwright when distinguishing between the idea of “fit” and “unfit” readers, writing that “the former see beyond the manifest content, while the latter are trapped by it. . . . Unfit receivers of an obversion are thus receiving the opposite of what the source intended to send” (E2). However, when the author and reader populate the same discursive circle and have a communal understanding of the communicative strategies of the group, irony can create an “amiable communit[y]” (Booth 28). While irony can be interpreted as an exclusionary tool in the way that it creates and in-group/out-group mentality, Wayne C. Booth writes that irony “inevitably builds a community even as it excludes” (28).

However, this “community” may be increasingly smaller and smaller. Since the late seventies, as television moved away from a three-network model toward more diverse offerings, the concept of narrowcasting has proliferated, which has caused a notable shift in the way postmodern satire functions. William Howell argues, “As television moved from broadcast to narrowcast cable and to internet narrowcasting, people gained access to more specialized programming. This wider selection had a drawback: individuals could choose to watch *only* specialized programming. This change results in audiences who are highly engaged with programming but also ideologically homogenous” (71).

One result of this ability to choose “*only* specialized programming” is viewers choosing programming that already aligns with their beliefs, with the glut of narrowcast satire choices leading to a phenomenon that excludes “both apathetic viewers and viewers who deny that the subject is flawed or problematic” (Howell 71). One illustration of this occurred with *Big Mouth*’s Season 2 episode “The Planned Parenthood Show,” the



objective of which was to clarify the organization's important contributions to the health of men and women, including, but not exclusively limited to, providing abortion. While conservative news sites reported on the episode with articles such as "Netflix Show 'Big Mouth' Thinks Abortion is Funny, Promotes Planned Parenthood With Comedy" and Monica Cline's claim that the show misrepresented the organization that "normalize[s] high risk behaviors that lead to disease, depression, and ending the lives of preborn children," many articles praised the episodes objective of relaying factual information about the organization with the intent of dispelling misinformation.<sup>5</sup> Much like Howell argues, the show appealed to those already supportive of Planned Parenthood, while galvanizing the opposition to dig their heels in, but the response also suggests that an audience tuned into this narrowcast satire, despite the fact that they did not agree or were not apathetic viewers. *Big Mouth* writers demonstrated their awareness of this predicted situation as Coach Steve (Nick Kroll), ends the episode by acknowledging the encouragement from liberals to create the show, despite the fact that it was going to make many people furious ("The Planned Parenthood Show" 00:25:00). The result is a satire that operates subversively for those already attuned to the show's message, but whose irony reifies the opposition who read the satire's use of irony and irreverence as reasoning to further support conservative perspectives on sexual health and activity.

Returning to Hutcheon's idea of complicitous critique, as a television series on Netflix, one of the largest streaming sites in the world, *Big Mouth* must contend with being a narrowcast satire for a generalist audience, and as such there is ample opportunity for this metamodern satire to be read as legitimizing the very system it critiques. As a

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<sup>5</sup> See Rought, "*Big Mouth* delivers its best episode yet with season 2's 'The Planned Parenthood Show,'" and Cobb, "*Big Mouth*'s Planned Parenthood Episode is a Rule-Breaking Must-Watch."

series, *Big Mouth* ironizes the idea of patriarchal attitudes on sex through its positioning of puberty as the metanarrative of the show, illustrating the problematic nature of this mechanism through its depiction of pubescent males' limited sexual and social knowledge.

Ironic messaging is often expressed through the ill-informed ideas of young male characters like Nick and Andrew, who may have good intentions, but must also navigate problematic attitudes about sex and girls. Often the ironic message of the text is not communicated through characters who are conscious of this mode. Rather it is the relative naïveté and genuine expression of the characters that communicates the ironic meaning of the text, such as a conversation between boys about how best to kiss a girl, which neither of them have done:

NICK: Jay hasn't even kissed a girl. None of us have. Not, you know, with tongue anyway.

ANDREW: Of course, 'cause when you do kiss a girl, to make it official ...

NICK: There's gotta be tongue.

ANDREW: Major tongue.

NICK: You want to flick your tongue around.

ANDREW: Ideally.

NICK: And you really want to get your tongue underneath hers, too.

ANDREW: Yeah, you want to get in there like a Claritin to just dissolve.

NICK: Yeah.

ANDREW: Yeah.

NICK: We know what we're talking about.

ANDREW: It's nice to talk like men. ("Ejaculation" 00:03:50-00:04:15)

The comic moment is meant to express the sexual ineptitude of these two boys, but the declarations about official kissing are not communicated in an ironic way. Rather, the irony is made visible through the relationship between writer and audience who recognize through shared knowledge that the device is being employed. But because the transmission of the message relies on recognition on the part of the viewer, uninitiated audience members may misinterpret the satire's irony as reifying opposing messaging.

While some criticisms of puberty are easy to spot, such as the conversation presented above, other elements of the text present the potential for problematic readings of the show as legitimizing the very metanarrative it is set out to subvert. One of the most potent ways this happens is through the inclusion of male desire embodied both by the male characters of the series, as well as the presence of Maury, the male hormone monster.

Patriarchal ideology is most easily recognizable in the character of Jay, whose actions and expressions are meant to illustrate the pervasiveness of patriarchal views on sex. A latch-key kid and an enthusiastic serial masturbator, Jay represents unfettered sexual desire, which the show nods to through Maury's observation that Jay is his own hormone monster. Jay's deviance is one of his defining characteristics, illustrated succinctly when he finds out *The Rock of Gibraltar* is so popular among the girls at school because it "turns them on":

JAY: This book makes them horny? It's just porn, then, right? They're walking around school reading porn!

NICK: Actually, no.

JAY: Jesus, this is no fair! Girls walking around school reading porn, and I make one drawing of twenty-three teachers having consensual sex, and I'm the creep. ("Girls Are Horny Too" 00:13:00-00:13:09)

Jay's objection speaks to the perceived double-standard he sees in terms of sexual expression, but other thoughts he's offered also speak to the pervasiveness of patriarchal culture and the hyper-virility assigned to men.

For viewers who come from outside the discursive circle in which *Big Mouth* operates, Jay's presence can be read as a counterbalance to the feminist messaging that runs throughout the series. However, much like the conversation about kissing between Nick and Andrew included earlier, Jay's statements are meant to be read as the satirist's deployment of irony rather than straightforward ideas. Using puberty as the symbolic metanarrative of the show complicates this metamodern satire because unlike other iterations of this mode, *Big Mouth* operates in a way in which the characters are most often engaging in sincere expression. Instead of the characters using irony and cynicism to converse, as children making the harrowing transition into adulthood, they are simply communicating honestly by using their best guesses as to what is appropriate. For these characters, there is not a veil of adulthood to complicate their expression, but rather, as an uninitiated group they are most often vehicles for highlighting adult sexual politics, depicting what is essentially trickle-down sexuality.

However, this is not to say that the series operates free of irony. As I have already argued, the irony of the show is communicated in the atmosphere above the characters, where the satirist and audience can connect directly. Even though the show's main

characters are all children, *Big Mouth* is created and executed by writers who can draw on adult experiences to depict the retroactively apparent absurdity and confusion of puberty.

Despite this dual mode of operation, with sincerity on the surface and irony in the subtext, there is a point in every episode where the underlying irony dissipates, resulting in congruity between the messaging of the satirist and the expression of the characters. If the period of destabilization is characterized by irony and cynicism, the shift to sincerity comes when the proposed correction is put forward—an alternative to patriarchal conceptions of femininity. But to say that *Big Mouth* does not further legitimate patriarchy as the guiding metanarrative would be untrue. In fact, the show makes a pattern of demonstrating the way that patriarchy continues to thrive despite the destabilizing efforts of feminist characters.

*Big Mouth* repeatedly presents an environment in which young male characters objectify girls whose bodies they admire. For example, in a scene in their own locker room, four male characters have a conversation about Gina's body that is a comedic exaggeration, but also indicative of a larger societal problem:

DEVON: Gina? Ooh! She got such a bangin' body, bro.

LARS: You love her. You want to marry those boobs.

ANDREW: I would 100% marry her boobs. It would be a tasteful ceremony.

Catered, open bar, but wine and beer only. I'm not made of money.

MAURY: I now pronounce you man and boobs. You may motorboat the bride.

RICK (ANOTHER HORMONE MONSTER): Mazel tov!

ANDREW: [to Gina's disembodied breasts] I love you so much. ("What Is It about Boobs? 00:04:30-00:04:50)

Andrew's fantasy about his marriage to Gina's breasts can be read as a glorification of objectification, as the group excitedly talks about the prospect. However, it is the absurdity of this scene that is meant to undercut the viability of the objectification. Instead of simply singling out the body part that they admire, their reduction of Gina to her feminine parts is exaggerated to the point of absurdity as Andrew carries out the fantasy to a detailed end in which he imagines marrying Gina's enormous, disembodied breasts. The cartoon highlights the way in which this objectification is silly and juvenile as the scenario is proposed and narrated by a thirteen-year-old boy who has never even so much as touched a girl's breast.

In addition to demonstrating the ways in which patriarchal thinking manifests in women, the show also explores the challenging experience of a male character trying to navigate the dueling impulses of hedonism and morality. In "What Is It about Boobs?," Andrew is presented as a thoughtful character, who despite his best efforts to respect women, often falls prey to Maury's bad influence. However, Andrew is aware of this flaw, and the show presents him as grappling with the overlapping impulses of desiring women's bodies and wanting to respect their autonomy.

While Andrew only represents one boy's exploration of masculinity, his demographic information positions as a representation of hegemonic masculinity. Bob Pease writes that "middle-class, white, heterosexual masculinity is used as the marker against which other masculinities are measured" (32). While he may be portrayed as questioning problematic behavior from Jay, by benefitting from what R.W. Connell calls the "patriarchal dividend" (79), he gains an advantage from the overall subjugation of women. Subjected to Maury's constant suggestion of objectifying women, Andrew must

navigate between hedonism and morality when he becomes obsessed with Gina's developing body. He lets his imagination run wild and fantasizes about a world populated by thousands of pairs of disembodied breasts for him to explore. When his attention returns to the real world, the following interaction occurs, as Andrew finds himself face down in a pile of backpacks:

JESSI: Andrew, what are you doing?

[Andrew moans]

JAY: Yeah, what *are* you doing, you weirdo?

ANDREW: What? No, I wasn't at home in the field of boobs.

JESSI: Ew, you guys *are* obsessed with boobs. This is exactly why Missy feels shitty for not having them.

ANDREW: She does?

JESSI: Yeah, we all do. (00:14:50-00:15:00)

Later, finding himself in the nurse's office after he is beaten up by a student who is upset that Andrew has taken his backpack, Andrew and Maury discuss the politics of sexual desire and the male gaze:

MAURY: Kid beat the shit out of you.

ANDREW: Jessi's right. I'm out of control. What is it about these boobs?

MAURY: Behold, the peaks and valleys—

ANDREW: No, stop painting pictures. I feel like a pervert.

MAURY: So what? You like boobs. That's natural.

[Andrew waves to Missy through a window. Missy pulls her hood farther down on her head and scurries away.]

ANDREW: [sighs] Ah. You see that? I don't want to make girls feel weird about their bodies, especially Missy.

MAURY: I honestly don't think we can continue working together.

ANDREW: I can't be horny and still be a decent guy?

MAURY: Look, as His Holiness the Dalai Lama once told me, "You have enough blood to fill your heart or your *shvantz*. Not both." (00:15:20-00:15:50)

The last line here points to a false dichotomy in societal conceptions of masculinity that states that men can either be virile by engaging their sexuality or feminized through connection with their emotions. Andrew identifies his own behavior as problematic and oppressive. However, Pease draws on the work of P. Middleton to argue,

One of the difficulties with the statement: "Men oppress women" is that it makes oppression definitional of men. It implies that men oppress women by virtue of being men. If, instead, we say things like "men oppress women because they control the institutions of the state," or "because they exploit their labor in the home," or "because they use power and control tactics with them," it seems to imply a possibility for change. If we define men solely as oppressors, all that men can do is to will their own demise as men. (29)

Andrew's question about the ability to concurrently be "horny" and "still be a decent guy" indicates the presence of a society mitigated by a metanarrative that refutes this capability. Arielle Bernstein speaks to the conflicting messaging Andrew receives throughout the series, arguing that "the show insists on demonstrating how the way boys are socialized to be men is often incredibly destructive," adding, "Andrew could very much benefit from some type of positive initiation into manhood, and, even though



society very much caters to his experiences, the playbook he is being given is filled with mixed messages about what it means to be a man.” However, Michael A. Messner argues that in contemporary society, there is a “shift in personal styles and lifestyles of privileged men that eliminate or at least mitigate many of the aspects of ‘traditional masculinity’ that men have found unhealthful or emotionally constraining,” adding, “these shifts in styles of masculinity do little, if anything to address issues of power and inequality raised by feminist women” (728). I argue that Andrew’s acknowledgement and conflicted feelings about the way he affects women represents an awareness of the constraining nature of “traditional masculinity” while simultaneously expressing his desire to be an ally to women. When Andrew says that he does not want to make girls “feel weird about their body,” he operates as correction to the ideal of hegemonic masculinity which prizes sexual competition and the subjugation of the female sex. The comment reintroduces the idea of nuance that attributes oppression to specific action rather than an essential trait.

*Big Mouth*’s inclusion of a conflicted male characters such as Andrew demonstrates the pervasiveness of the patriarchal metanarrative, but it also ensures that destabilization is still being enacted. While much of the subversive work has come through the inclusion of female voices who push back against patriarchal conceptions of sexuality, the storyline of Andrew conceiving of a reality where he can be “horny” and a “decent guy” provides an internal fissure in the patriarchal metanarrative, as Andrew, whose particular experience of masculinity is the version that all others are measured against, desires to interrupt the expression of hegemonic masculinity. Andrew’s criticism in the nurse’s office reifies the patriarchal metanarrative because it demonstrates that

even as a person set to benefit from its deployment, Andrew finds the perspective problematic and as he tries to navigate puberty, he continues to fall victim to its objective of possessing women.

Through its evenhanded depiction of sexual desire, *Big Mouth* subverts the conventional narrative surrounding sex that positions boys and girls as adversaries rather than allies. While the show does not depict sexual acts on the part of these middle school students, *Big Mouth* does construct a narrative about sexuality that not only includes women but elevates their voices and sense of autonomy. Instead of operating as the singular perspective through which to view puberty, the male characters often demonstrate problematic attitudes toward sex, not simply because they have sexual urges, but rather because of the way their limited social experience reifies the patriarchal metanarrative. This satire critiques patriarchy through the exaggerated way in which what the characters say speaks to larger systemic issues.

As Naomi Fry of *The New Yorker* writes,

‘Big Mouth’ isn’t just a fun show but a significant one. Its focus on the embarrassments of sex—the mechanics of jerking off, the terrors of overhearing the goings-on in your parents’ bedroom, the surprisingly stinky body odors, the sudden boners—doesn’t only work in the service of gross-out laughs (though it certainly does that) but also seeks to chip away at shame.

It would be easy to say that the filthy nature of *Big Mouth* is excusable simply because the cartoon is meant for adults. However, this isn’t the case. Co-creator Jennifer Flackett

speaks to the intended and actual audience of the show, saying, “It was conceived with a slightly older audience in mind. We really felt like, you know, this is for college kids. But I have discovered for myself, as I talk about it with people, that if you are going through puberty, this is a show for you.” Nick Kroll has claimed that he is trying to create the show that he wishes he had when he was younger, and that one of the aims of the show is that teenage viewers will watch and feel less alone as they navigate puberty (Shattuck). *Big Mouth* is so successful in this ambition because it establishes puberty as the metanarrative of the show, and as such, both children going through puberty and adults who have the memory of such, can relate to a time in which this period of physical and psychological development is the overriding mechanism through which knowledge is legitimated and the world is understood. With a critique of the patriarchy at the heart of the show, *Big Mouth* is able to have two conversations simultaneously, the first being the sincere initiation of younger viewers, and the second, an ironic meta-commentary that draws on the lived experiences of adults to subvert the patriarchal metanarrative.

Speaking to the specific brand of humor deployed on *Big Mouth*, Glen Weldon of National Public Radio’s *Pop Culture Happy Hour* writes,

The jokes are many, and filthy, and utterly cringeworthy for all the right (read: deeply earned) reasons. Compare to *South Park*, an animated series that similarly delights in humiliating its characters. There, the jokes are paramount, the humiliations punchlines in and of themselves, and stimulating our cringe response is the end goal.

*Big Mouth* is arguably a filthier show, with even cruder jokes and an obsession with sex that’s more relentless. Crucially, however, it’s also a much

more sincere, more sweet, more intensely empathetic series that—even as it’s visiting horrors and humiliations on its characters—never fails to side with them. We care about these poor schmucks, so the jokes land harder, the cringes go deeper.

Like its animated precursors, *Big Mouth* often employs a dark strain of humor, but unlike the inherent cynicism of its counterparts, the show folds in ribbons of optimism (like Jessi’s self-exploration or Andrew’s conflicted epiphany) meant to signal the positive effects of destabilizing patriarchal views about sex. The series draws on this unique mixture to honestly communicate the complexities of adolescence, including the accompanying confusion and shame.

Due at least in part to the strong presence of women writers, the destabilization of the patriarchy is perhaps most effectively rendered through the simple and sincere inclusion of women’s voices and experiences, which concurrently speak to the detrimental effects of hegemonic masculinity and restore a sense of subjectivity to a gender so routinely objectified and silenced. As Jourdain Searles observes, “That’s ultimately what makes *Big Mouth* so refreshing—it uses its humor to make subtle yet powerful statements about life. ... The episodes written by its female writers are shining examples of how *Big Mouth* uses its satire to punch up, and that is what sets it apart from its more nihilistic predecessors” (emphasis added).

On its surface *Big Mouth* may appear to be a bawdy cartoon that traffics heavily in blue and amoral humor, but a deeper look reveals that the show is performing the serious work of popular culture texts, which George Lispitz describes: “At their worst, they perform the dirty work of the economy and the state. At their best, they retain

memories of the past and certain hopes for the future that rebuke the injustices and inequities of the present” (20). *Big Mouth* does contain ironic humor that, when taken as sincere, reifies the patriarchal metanarrative. However, it counterbalances this by diligently including moments of genuineness that allow for the correction to be communicated. Ultimately, it is a show that acknowledges the struggles inherent in both puberty and patriarchy, charting a harrowing but worthwhile course toward a more egalitarian society.

## CHAPTER 5: NEOLIBERALISM AND TELEVISION SENSIBILITY IN GEORGE SAUNDERS'S "BRAD CARRIGAN, AMERICAN"

"Who has a right to live and who does not?"

— Susan George, "A Short History of Neoliberalism"

"I don't know that I'm all that interested in the moral ins and outs of it ...  
I guess I'm just saying I enjoyed it."

— George Saunders, "Brad Carrigan, American"

Perhaps more potently than any of his contemporaries, as an author, George Saunders has come to be synonymous with the idea of empathy and kindness. In a 2013 commencement speech at Syracuse University, Saunders's message to graduates was that the moments he regretted most in his life were "failures of kindness" (*Congratulations* par. 15), and his desire to correct this behavior is evidenced in his work through darkly comic depictions of deeply flawed and relatable characters. Vince Passaro argues that Saunders's use of humor has the unfortunate side effect of encouraging readers to "pigeonhole [him], to think of him largely as a wit and an absurdist extraordinaire," adding, "This would be to miss his point. Saunders's laughs are a cover, a diversion, beneath which reside some profoundly serious intentions regarding the morality of how we live and the power of love and immanent death to transform us into vastly better creatures than we could otherwise hope to be." In an interview with *The New Yorker*, Saunders speaks to the dismissive attitude that accompanies general critiques of comic writing and the sentiment that the presence of the humor represents an author "not living up to [their] full literary potential":

What I've come to realize is that, for me, the serious and the comic are one and the same. I don't see humor as some sort of shrunken or deficient cousin of "real" writing. Being funny is about as deep and truthful as I can be. When I am really feeling life and being truthful, the resulting prose is comic. The world is comic. It's not always funny but it is always comic. Comic, for me, means that there is always a shortfall between what we think of ourselves and what we are... Maybe the most clearly we ever see reality is when it boots us in the ass. ("George Saunders's Humor")

Saunders's brand of comic work departs from typical conceptions of satire that portray the form as a biting and at times venomous, with Saunders crafting instead narratives built on a compassionate foundation. The author argues, "If two of us can agree that we're looking at one damn ugly dog, suddenly that dog becomes a little lovable. ... At least to the two of us looking at it, anyway" (as qtd. in Buchholz). Even in the wake of absurdity and exaggeration, Saunders's work is supported by an underlying ribbon of gentleness and sincerity, a quality he attempts to more aptly describe as "fairness" ("George Saunders's Humor").

George Saunders's short story "Brad Carrigan, American" depicts a fantastical sitcom unlike one we've ever seen before. Or perhaps, rather, it is the exact reverse that is true. The story depicts an unvarnished and unflinchingly honest televisual mediascape that we as consumers are all too familiar with. Though it employs exaggeration in the service of satire, "Brad Carrigan" draws on the tropes and tenets of television programming that reflect the increasingly neoliberal world that is producing it, one guided by an economic theory which prizes hyper-capitalism and competition over the

well-being of the worldwide population. The outlandish scenarios contained within draw on the rote storylines and stock characters that populate the sitcom genre, and it is through the inclusion of graphic sex, prank show gimmicks, and extreme plastic surgery that the story critiques the development and influence of reality television and the neoliberal values the genre embodies.

In this chapter, I explore the ways that “Brad Carrigan” operates as a metamodern satire, as it positions television as a symbolic metanarrative meant to critique an increasingly neoliberal world, a domain that espouses a “survival of the fittest” mentality that stokes a myopic focus on the developed world. In addition to economic privilege, the televisual metanarrative also illustrates the way neoliberal values inform gender expression, positioning the hyper-competitive narrative of hegemonic masculinity as the dominant mechanism for legitimating social knowledge. Presenting this stunted perspective, the story arc contains and destroys any empathetic impulse demonstrated by characters who look beyond themselves to consider others. “Brad Carrigan” is a satire that first destabilizes before, in its final moments, offering a correction to intervene before society’s ultimate destruction. As a metamodern satire, it strikes a balance between irreverent darkness and the inherent optimism of correction.

### **The Reign of Television**

While the early days of television programming were predicated on an aspect of public service—a certain amount of time was required to be dedicated to educational or informative programming—as the economic climate has evolved, so too has the televisual model. When regulation was relaxed, the medium began to work in the service of the capitalist society in which it was embedded, and programming began to serve most



importantly as a vehicle for advertising and the propagation of consumerist values through direct sponsorship and product placement that both permeated the creative content.

Despite a program's role as the canvas for advertising, production was an expensive undertaking, a fact magnified by the presence of unions that ensured fair compensation for many industry workers. As the twentieth century advanced, the emergence and propagation of neoliberalism affected the way that television was produced, as executives looked for ways to cut cost and shift programming to a hyper-competitive mentality that focused on profitability over quality.

As Ien Ang argues, "Television itself has undergone massive postmodernization—manifested in a complex range of developments such as pluralization, diversification, commercialization, commodification, internationalization, decentralizations—throwing established paradigms of understanding how it operates in culture and society into disarray" (3). In the early years of the medium, programming was characterized by shows that prized clarity over complexity; however, more contemporary offerings reflect the postmodern state of the world, echoing the influence of intertextuality, hyperreality, and importantly, irony. As David Foster Wallace claims:

Television both fears irony's capacity to expose, and needs it. It needs irony because television was practically *made* for irony. For TV is a bisensuous medium .... Since the tension between what's said and what's seen is irony's whole sales territory, classic televisual irony works not via the juxtaposition of conflicting pictures or conflicting sounds, but with sights that undercut what's said. ("E Unibus Pluram" 35)

With the increasing presence of television in the postmodern era, Jean Baudrillard argues that there is a “dissolution of TV in life” and “the dissolution of life in TV” (30). In the postmodern era it is not that people cannot tell the difference between the real and the simulated, but that the difference between the two has come to be considered unimportant.

One of the primary sites of television’s destabilization is the contemporary sitcom. In contrast to the stalwart wholesomeness of the earliest content, many sitcoms of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century reimagine the genre in a way that mirrors the qualities of a postmodern society. Few texts take this sentiment to heart as dearly as Saunders’s in which the continued existence of reality is predicated on the sustained broadcast of a television sitcom. Following the internal logic of the short story, the space of the television show and the characters who populate it exist as a representation of the hyperreal, a simulation without a referent (Baudrillard 1). The environment of the show is a simulacra, “substituting the signs of the real for the real” (Baudrillard 2), and the inhabitants, Brad, Doris, Chief Wayne, and Buddy are all simulated amalgamations of the archetypal sitcom characters they each represent: the husband, the wife, the neighbor, the pet. Unlike real sitcoms that present *actors* performing naturalness, in the world of the Carrigans, there is no divide between *character* and reality. Their literal survival is determined by their ability to increase the appeal of the show, garnering as many viewers as possible, and guaranteeing the show’s continued slot in the line-up. Instead of death, the characters fear the space of being “Written Out,” a garbage disposal for characters who are no longer considered viable. Those relegated to this domain cease to exist, dissolving into the ether.

Essentially, the situation presented in “Brad Carrigan” is an environment of *characters* without *actors*, differentiated still from reality television by the quality of magical realism that runs throughout the story and the show. Brad and the gang are aware of the viewing audience and of the unrelenting necessity of sustaining viewership, and the show undergoes both gradual changes (e.g., the folding in of more bathroom humor) and more immediate ones (e.g., entire reconfigurations of family structures) in order to attain this goal. The show is the apparatus by which characters decipher who they are and what their larger purpose is, as well as how they come to understand and mitigate reality, and as such, television, by natural extension, takes the position of the guiding metanarrative of the story.

Because of television’s exalted position, features of the medium determine the way knowledge is legitimated, with one of the most potent illustrations of this phenomenon being the use of language on the show, specifically the invocation of aphorism. The story opens with a conversation between Brad and neighbor Chief Wayne, who has discovered that the stick of butter he has borrowed is not actually a stick of butter at all, but rather Buddy, the Carrigan family dog, wearing a butter costume. The following exchange occurs between three of the four major characters:

“Oh Buddy,” says Doris. “Don’t you know that, if you want someone to like you, tricking them is the last thing you should do?”

“I guess I know that now,” says Buddy sadly.

“Brad? Doris?” says Chief Wayne. “I guess I also learned something today. *If a dog likes you, or even a person, you should try your best to like them in*

*return*. Buddy wouldn't have to hide in this butter costume if I'd simply accept his friendship."

"That's a good lesson, Wayne," says Doris. "One I guess we could all stand to learn." (119-120; emphasis added)

Note the use of platitude here, a trivial statement offered by Chief Wayne as something profound. The moment rings of the formulaic lesson-dispensing nature of an after-school special in which a problem arises through miscommunication or subterfuge but is resolved just in time for a reflective communal scene before the end credits. This format is satirized here in its brevity, as the problem doesn't take the requisite thirty minutes to solve, but rather the lesson is meted out in the opening scene, with characters using superficial language to perform understanding of their reality.

The formative power of pithy advice continues directly after when the group chases down an embarrassed Buddy, only to find him in the backyard hanging motionless from the clothesline, his severed genitals on the ground below him, having committed auto-castration and suicide. The preferred tool of Doris and Chief Wayne is again aphoristic speech:

"Well, I guess I learned something today," says Chief Wayne.

"What I learned?" says Doris. "Is that you never know when someone precious may be snatched away."

"And therefore," says Chief Wayne, "we must show our love every day, in every way."

"That is so true," says Doris.

"Don't you think that's true, Brad?" says Chief Wayne.

“I guess so,” says Brad, whose hands are shaking.

“You *guess* so?” says Chief Wayne? “Oh that’s rich! You *guess* we must show our love every day, in every way?” (120-21)

The juxtaposition of Buddy’s lifeless corpse and the aphoristic response by Chief Wayne and Doris is further thrown into contrast by Brad’s reaction of horror. The interaction contains the first attempt to destabilize the televisual metanarrative, as the aphoristic response proves to be an inappropriate and ineffective means for Brad to process the macabre situation inside their televisual reality.

However, aphoristic speech is only the first of several measures enacted to retain their audience and ratings. As the story progresses and the vague but looming threat of cancellation continues, the group integrates television-watching into the format of their own show, resulting in a meta-televisual experience for the viewer. The Carrigan house is outfitted with televisions in every room constantly playing reality television programs, such as *FinalTwist*, *TotallyFukked*, and *Kill the Ho*, as well as brief but urgent news updates, cementing television as the mechanism by which they understand the larger world.

As the story progresses, the viability of the televisual metanarrative is destabilized both by the presence of Brad, who operates as the moral center of the show, and the show’s increasingly tenuous claim to “watchability.” Having evolved with economic policy, television operates as a symbol for a larger critique of a neoliberal society, and it is through the satiric treatment of both the sitcom and reality television that neoliberalism is destabilized as a contemporary metanarrative.

The emergence of neoliberalism is often associated with the economic policies of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, but some scholars identify its nascent presence as far back as the years following World War II (George). David Harvey describes neoliberalism as,

the first instance of a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. (2)

Wendy Brown highlights the role of deregulations in this economic system, enumerating neoliberalism's objectives as,

radical reduction in welfare state provisions and protections for the vulnerable, privatized and outsourced public goods, ranging from education, parks, postal services, roads, and social welfare to prisons and militaries; replacement of progressive with regressive tax and tariff schemes; the end of wealth redistribution as an economic or social political policy; the conversion of every human need or desire into a profitable enterprise. (28)

Despite its increasing presence in the world economic system, neoliberalism has come under intense criticism for its focus on privatization of wealth and its aim of weakening publicly funded social safety nets. Henry Giroux offers a succinct critique of several facets of the system:

With its debased belief that profit-making is the essence of democracy and its definition of citizenship as an energized plunge into consumerism, neoliberalism

eliminates government regulation of market forces, celebrates a ruthless competitive individualism, and places the commanding political, cultural, and economic institutions of society in the hands of powerful corporate interests, the privileged, and unrepentant religious bigots. (8)

Brown criticizes the movement for “converting the distinctly *political* character, meaning, and operation of democracy’s constituent elements into *economic* ones” (17). The consequence of such a transition is a society in which a strong emphasis on competition results in radical inequality and repurposes individuals most importantly as economic actors (Brown 31).

This emphasis on competition and determination of human value through economic participation is made evident through Brad and the gang’s concerns regarding the cutthroat nature of television scheduling in which viewership and profitability become intimately linked. Research has demonstrated that aesthetic merit alone is not enough to sustain the continuation of an unprofitable show (Bielby and Bielby 1290). The show’s reality television offerings provide a verdant site for analysis, as they participate in an “unabashedly commercial genre united less by aesthetic rules or certainties than by the fusion of popular entertainment with a self-conscious claim to the discourse of the real” (Ouellette and Murray 2).

According to David Grazian, neoliberalism and reality television are intractably linked, as they are born of the same idea: to weaken unions and allow the free market to propagate unfettered by regulation (69). Television studios enacted extensive cost-cutting measures as a response to the labor strikes that proliferated in the 1980s and 90s. Chad Raphael reports that during this time, “the [National Association of Broadcast Employees

and Technicians], Directors Guild, American Federation of Musicians, Screen Extras Guild (SEG), and the American Federation of Radio and Television Artists all struck, while the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) struck twice, and the Writers Guild three times” (123). Television studios released their first reality television offerings (COPS and America’s Most Wanted) as a direct response to the 1988 Writers Guild of America strike (a twenty-two week endeavor that delayed the premiere of the fall season) (Raphael 125). As Bill Carter writes, the emergence of reality television catalyzed a “radical restructuring of the network business.” Seeking broadcast opportunities that freed them of their obligation to hire and pay union wages to writers and actors, studios developed a format immune to industry labor movements and regulation, opting for unscripted television starring amateur participants (Grazian 69).

When discussing the reality programming of the early 2000s, Grazian continues, “While the production of reality television employs neoliberalism’s economic principles, the genre’s narrative conventions reflect its morals” (69). The practices promote the idea of free-market, highly competitive scenarios where individualism and self-interest are celebrated (Grazian 69). Reality television has purported to democratize celebrity in a way that re-envision the concept as a merit-based system. However, as Sue Collins argues, what truly results is “dispensable celebrity” in which participants “give up their day job believing they are destined for show business. Most of these reality TV vets find that in the sixteenth minute, they are not absorbed into the celebrity system; rather, their celebrity currency runs out and they are channeled back into obscurity” (89).

As an example of neoliberal morals, take *Kill the Ho*, a reality TV show that the characters of “Brad Carrigan” watch, on which America votes to execute one of six



“loose, poor, and irresponsible” women, followed with a computer simulation of the “winner” being murdered (138). The description of the women as “loose, poor, and irresponsible,” places each of these qualities on even footing. While a more expanded discussion of gender and sexual behavior would further illuminate the issue, it is clear from the tone and explicitly proclaimed objective of the show that these women are considered worthless, disposable members of the society. As “loose” women, they lack the value bestowed upon women for being sexually “pure.” The women are “poor” and therefore unable to participate economically, to take their place in the society as *homo economicus*, defined by John McMahon as “an atomistic individual who has stable, coherent and well-defined preferences rooted in self-interest and utility maximization that are revealed through their choices” (141). Building on this, they are “irresponsible,” a trait neoliberal thinking would attribute as the reason for their poverty. The “hos” have no inherent value, socially or economically, and therefore the natural conclusion is that they should be obliterated for the entertainment of consumers who, by contrast, are considered intrinsically valuable. In the case of *Kill the Ho*, society does not wait for the sixteenth minute of fame to consign these women back into obscurity, but rather actively attends to their destruction during their brief period of celebrity.

Continuing this pattern of diminishing human value, the second type of meta-televsual offerings—UrgentUpdateNewsMinutes—are miniature news broadcasts that punctuate the reality television programs and also reveal the priorities of the society. The first of these updates announces,

In California, a fad has broken out of regular people having facial surgery to look like their favorite celebrities. Sometimes they end up looking like hideous

monsters. Celebrities have taken to paying surprise compassionate visits to the hideous monsters. One hideous monster, whose face looks like the face of a lion roasted in a fire, says the surprise celebrity visit made the whole ordeal worthwhile. In the Philippines, a garbage dump has exploded due to buildup of natural gas emitted by rotting garbage, killing dozens of children digging in the dump for food. (130)

The content of the UrgentUpdate, as well as the order in which it is presented, illustrates the neoliberalism that undergirds the televisual metanarrative of this story. It begins with material about celebrity and plastic surgery, speaking to the commodification of fame and the economic decisions ordinary people can make in order to manufacture an ersatz version for themselves. Following in the vein of reality television, this plastic surgery allows for the “celebrification of ‘average’ folk” (Ouellette and Murray 8), which promises transcendence from ordinary to extraordinary.

The last fifth of the news segment is devoted to the issue of poverty and starvation in the developing world. Through the neoliberal lens, these children digging in the dump for food lack value in that they cannot participate economically, the fault for which is placed on their own shoulders. Susan George describes the neoliberal attitude that disregards the effects of competitive struggle and leaves people behind: “People are unequal by nature, but this is good because the contributions of the well-born, the best-educated, the toughest, will eventually benefit everyone. Nothing in particular is owed to the weak, the poorly educated, what happens to them is their own fault, never the fault of the society.” The Filipino children are worthless to the Western world, conceived of as a

drain on resources better to be ignored, as their story is tacked onto the end of the update, positioned as a societal afterthought.

However, while the Carrigan sitcom celebrates the neoliberal tendencies of the meta-televisual offerings, Brad's presence in the story represents a disruption of the televisual metanarrative because he operates as a site of empathy in an otherwise self-interested world. The significance of Brad's aberration is illustrated by the disgust and anger Doris feels toward Brad whenever he breaches the operating procedure of what he deems "basically a selfish show" (142) so that he can try to help those who need it most.

Brad exists in stark contrast to the characters surrounding him, who even in moments of supposed compassion still communicate the neoliberal agenda. Upon discovering Buddy's corpse, Doris tells Brad that "the people we know and love are all that matter in this crazy world" (121). However, as the narrative progresses, it becomes apparent that this statement is not the comforting, empathetic platitude it appears to be, but rather a literal statement of Doris's priorities, which limit her concerns to her own family and the impending threat of cancellation. As the narrative progresses, the Carrigans are introduced one-by-one to external characters who desperately need help in some way or another—animate charred corpses who are victims of civil unrest, starving Filipino children who come to collect food, and an HIV-positive baby who appears spontaneously by falling through the roof. With each occurrence, Doris resolutely rejects their need for help, embodying the self-interest that the text critiques.

This self-centered attitude is illustrated when Doris's family comes over to have dinner. Saunders lists each of the many dishes and desserts they have available to them

for a single meal, a feast indicating intense privilege, and the family even goes as far as to remark about this abundance:

“This meal we just ate?” says Aunt Lydia. “In many countries, this sort of meal would only be eaten by royalty.”

“There are countries where people could live one year on what we throw out in one week,” says Grandpa Kirk.

“I thought it was they could live one year on what we throw out in one day,” says Grandma Sally.

“I thought it was they could live ten years on what we throw out in one minute,” says Uncle Gus.

“Well anyway,” says Doris. “We are very lucky.” (136)

This dinnertime conversation simultaneously reveals the family’s myopia and illustrates the opinion this first-world family has about the developing world, with their proclamations exposing their conception of its inhabitants subsisting on impossibly small quantities of discarded food.

The scene depicts the neoliberal stripping back of the social safety net, as the characters readily acknowledge the inequality between the developed and developing world. However, despite this awareness, they propose no action to alleviate this, with their conversation ending on Doris’s redirection. Peter Bloom’s work on the ethics of neoliberalism illuminates the critique taking place in the scene, because, as Bloom notes, “Just as markets are seen to be the best source for their own management, so too are individuals. External interference by governments is not only ineffective but also socially

harmful” (6). The conversation over an opulent dinner dehumanizes those in developing nations, but it also absolves the family of any responsibility to help.

### **Depictions of Masculinity**

Because it is the guiding metanarrative of the story, television operates as the mechanism through which the world is formed and knowledge is legitimated. Following this function, another televisual feature is employed in the service of critique: the use of stock characters who are meant to communicate information about the society’s views on gender. It is fruitful to examine the way that male characters are portrayed to both reinforce and subvert hegemonic masculinity, as well as how the intersection of television and masculinity further destabilizes the tenets of neoliberalism.

The concurrent use of television and masculinity as symbolic metanarratives operates so that one amplifies the other, as the masculinities projected in this story are done so according to the different stock roles they are meant to fill. This televisual depiction of masculinity is significant because of the substantial impact television viewership has on one’s perception of the larger world. According to Patrice A. Oppliger, as children’s exposure to gender stereotypes increase, so too do “sex-typed behavior and sex-role stereotyped attitudes” (208-210). Erica Scharrer and Greg Blackburn succinctly describe cultivation theory to suggest that “television content provides consistent message patterns that construct a specific perspective on social reality,” drawing on the work of Michael Morgan to state that “those who spend more time with television are more likely to reflect those perspectives in their own views compared to those who spend less time” (150). As such, “Television cultivates a common world view and common

stereotypes through a relatively restrictive set of programs, images, and messages” (Signorelli 335), reinforcing television’s role as the guiding metanarrative of the story.

As Diana Miller argues, “No form of culture is a mirror. Sitcoms, like any cultural object, are shaped by the societies in which they emerge, but also by the specific people, processes, and industries that produce them” (142). Though seemingly superficial terrain, sitcoms are culturally valuable because the characters they feature serve as templates that influence the behavior of viewers. Stock characters provide a cultural shorthand for possible variation of gender performance. Drawing on the work of Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, Miller argues that “media portrayals of men provide models that individual men can emulate or reject, and that shape culturally available standards to which men may be held accountable” (142).

In Saunders’s story, television reality and social reality are combined into one, and as such, the portrayal of men on the show is indicative of social attitudes about men, specifically in reference to hegemonic masculinity. Citing Antonio Gramsci’s concept of “hegemony”—“the cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life”—R.W. Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer of the legitimacy of the patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken as a guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (77). Ronald Levant et al. identify common features of traditional masculinity (an entity closely related to hegemonic masculinity) as embodied through “Avoidance of Femininity, Fear and Hatred of Homosexuals, Self-Reliance, Aggression, Achievement/Status, Non-relational Attitudes toward Sexuality, and Restrictive Emotionality” (84).

Considering these factors, one can see that Brad emerges as the site of hegemonic masculinity's subversion, and through his position as the empathetic center of the show, he rejects many of its characteristics. However, as someone whose actions run counter to the dominant cultural pattern, he is the target of heavy criticism, with Brad's emotionality at the center of each attack from Doris and Chief Wayne. Brad repeatedly displays of empathy—an expression of emotion more central to women's identities than men's (Davis 60), a result of more intimate social groups and, by extension, more practice in “detecting and responding to others' emotions” which precipitates gender stereotypes (Strauss 452). Because of this he breaks with the gender hierarchy wrought by hegemonic masculinity and becomes a problem to be eliminated from the show.

Just as neoliberalism is predicated on competition and dominance, so too is the concept of masculinity in a patriarchal society. Depictions of traditional masculinity have often been featured on television, manipulating the way viewers perceive the surrounding world. Beginning at the birth of television sitcoms, the patriarchal figure was often presented outside of the humorous narrative, never the butt of the joke and always a wellspring for sage advice to solve the problem of the week, as evidenced in depictions of fatherhood on *Leave It to Beaver* and *The Andy Griffith Show*. However, as the decades passed and the privilege of white heterosexual men was eroded by advancements in the civil rights of the subjugated, the patriarchal figure began to be folded into the larger milieu of the show, and the traditionally exalted role of “breadwinner” became secondary to concerns about the family and fending off critique from family members (Scharrer 23).

In the story, Brad represents a loss of hegemonic power. He is repeatedly chastised by both male and female characters for the persistence of his empathetic drive

that flags as incongruous to the metanarrative of competition and dominance. There are several instances when Brad's virility is called into question by Doris and Chief Wayne in response to each display of sensitivity from Brad.

In one such instance of empathy, Brad suggests sending corn to the aforementioned starving Filipino children, much to Doris's protest. In the moments that follow, Brad is cuckolded by Doris and Chief Wayne who are filming an episode of a little-explained prank show, *TotallyFukked*:

Brad returns to the living room. Doris, on the love seat, wearing the black lace bustier Brad bought her last Christmas, is straddling Chief Wayne, who, pants around his ankles, is kissing Doris's neck. ... A TotallyFukked cameraman steps out from behind a potted plant, with a release form, which Doris signs on Brad's behalf.

"Gosh, honey, the look on your face!" Doris says.

"He sure takes things serious," says Chief Wayne.

"Too serious," says Doris.

"Is he crying?" says Chief Wayne.

"Brad, honestly, lighten up!" says Doris. "Things are finally starting to get fun around here."

"Brad, please don't go all earnest on us," says Chief Wayne.

"Yes, don't go all earnest on us, Brad," says Doris. "Or next time we TotallyFukk you, we'll remove that thin sheet of protective cellophane."

"And wouldn't that be a relief," says Chief Wayne.

"Well yes and no," says Doris. "I love Brad."



“You love Brad but you’re hot for me,” says Chief Wayne.

“*Well, I’m hot for Brad too,*” says Doris. “*If only he wasn’t so earnest all the time.*” (133-134; emphasis added)

The moment operates as an affront to Brad’s masculinity and position as patriarch of the family, but also as an explicit threat that his continued empathetic behavior will result in further punishment from Doris.

The environment of the show is one that is deeply ironic and cynical, and those who desire to retain privilege in this setting must operate within these parameters. Brad’s earnestness, his pattern of “showing sincere and intense feeling or conviction” (“Earnest, n3”) for his beliefs, runs counter to a narrative. The internal logic of the show dictates that a dismissive attitude toward those suffering outside the family communicates a masculinity that embodies the neoliberal tendencies of competition and dominance. When confronted with the *TotallyFukked* taping, Brad responds by crying rather than reacting with anger or violence toward Chief Wayne, further illustrating his emasculation, reinforced by Doris’s threat to repeat the act if Brad does not toughen up. Brad does not protest or attempt to defend himself, but rather is affected by the event in a way that causes him to question his masculinity as well. Brad thinks,

What right does he have to be worrying about the problems of the world when he can’t even make his own wife happy? How arrogant is that? Maybe a man’s first responsibility is to make a viable home. If everybody made a viable home, the world would be a connected network of viable homes. Maybe he’s been mistaken, worrying about the Belstonians and the Filipinos, when he should have been worrying about his own wife. (134-35)

Following his new line of reasoning, Brad apologizes to the Filipino children, sending them away empty-handed, and then asks Chief Wayne to leave as well. As a response to Brad's attention being refocused on their own home, Doris, feeling tended at last, readily accepts Brad as a sexual partner, throwing off her bustier and initiating intercourse.

While Doris and Chief Wayne may chastise Brad for his empathy, another character represents an alternative form of virility: Brad's grandfather, Old Rex. Appearing exclusively in one of Brad's eight Childhood Flashbacks, Old Rex is remembered by Brad as a "grizzled" yet caring individual. Brad ruminates on the time to two of them visited the zoo on the Fourth of July:

Near the bear cage they found a sparrow with its foot stuck in a melted marshmallow. When Old Rex stopped to pull the sparrow out, Brad felt embarrassed. Everyone was watching. Hitching up his belt, Old Rex said: *Come on, pardner, we're free, we're healthy, we've got the time—who's gonna save this little dude, if not us?*

Then Old Rex used his pocketknife to gently scrape away the residual marshmallow. Then Old Rex took the sparrow to a fountain and rinsed off its foot, and put it safely on a high branch. Then Old Rex lifted little Brad onto his shoulders and some fireworks went off and they went to watch the dolphins.

Now that was a man, Brad thinks. (142)

The memory is brief but illustrates for Brad the viability of a masculinity that incorporates the idea of empathy and concern for others, directly contradicting the neoliberal nature of his television show. In an interview with *Publishers Weekly*, George Saunders states, "Capitalism implicitly states that if you have more, you're better. And

then there is this really frightening leap, which is to say, that success equals virtue ... the core hypocrisy of America to me is that we always assign blame to misfortune” (Bahr 323). The bird incident represents an occasion when another’s struggle is not dismissed or attributed to their own fault, but rather it is viewed as a problem that can be alleviated. There is no monetary reward to be gained from taking the time to clean the bird who cannot clean itself. But rather, the qualifications cited by Old Rex are that he and Brad are “free,” “healthy,” and “have the time.” When he ends his explanation with “who’s gonna save this little dude, if not us?,” he brings forward the concept of personal responsibility in correcting wrongs even if one is not directly responsible for them, a sentiment that flies in direct contradiction to Doris’s claim that her family is absolved of any duty to help, arguing, “We didn’t do it” (148).

This recollection of his grandfather accelerates Brad’s further consideration of the show and its “smallhearted” nature, with Brad ultimately deciding that the show is selfish. It occurs to Brad that he can counteract this narrative by taking the initiative to help the Belstonians, the animate charred corpses in his backyard. When Doris protests Brad’s actions, he hypothesizes a solution that works within the televisual grand narrative, imagining himself taking Doris aside and making the following impassioned speech:

Look Doris, he’ll say. What’s happened to you, where has your generosity gone? Our house is huge, honey, our refrigerator is continually full. However much money we need, we automatically have that much money in the bank, and neither of us even works outside of the home. There doesn’t seem to be any physical limit to what we can have or get. Why not spread some of that luck

around? What if that was the *point* of our show, sweetie, the radical spreading around of our good fortune? What if we had, say, a special helicopter? And special black jumpsuits? And code names? And huge stores of food and medicine, and a team of expert consultants, and wherever there was need, there they would be, working to bring to bear on the problem whatever resources would be exactly most helpful?

Talk about positive. Talk about entertaining?

Who wouldn't want to watch that? (143)

The bow on the end of Brad's intended speech points to the necessity of watchability, the consideration that has catalyzed the changes on the show. Brad claims that they can disrupt the system from within by attracting a large audience with a program that uses its resources to help people. Unlike the postmodernisms of Jameson and Lyotard, predicated on the destabilization of metanarratives, Brad here reimagines a world in which the metanarrative of television can be harnessed in order to initiate the change he wishes to see. He is invoking television's role as mechanism for creating knowledge and working to shift the focus of that knowledge to reflect a more empathetic drive. Unlike the reality television shows that populate the story—shows that attempt to appeal to viewers by depicting the harm or destruction of an individual—Brad attempts to flip the script in order to re-envision the genre as something that can contribute to the general well-being of the world.

However, this revolutionary scheme is never communicated. When Brad attempts to enter the house to tell Doris his idea, he finds that she's locked him out, a gesture meant to emasculate Brad by illustrating that he is not in control of his own home. This

emasculatation continues when Brad goes around the front of the house to ring the doorbell, only to find that the show's cast has been reconfigured, and he has been replaced as patriarch by Chief Wayne, now referred to as Chaz Wayne, "an epileptic pornographer with a taste for the high life and nightmarish memories of Vietnam" (145). Chaz Wayne's position in the sex industry is of note, because in addition to his control of the way sexuality is packaged and sold, he traffics in the commodification of sexuality and of the self.

Chaz Wayne's profession is also important because it positions him as the breadwinner for the family, a role that Brad has not experienced because, as Brad has stated earlier, neither he nor Doris must work outside of the home. Brad is doubly hindered because in addition to his aberration from a narrative of hegemonic masculinity and hyper-competitiveness, he is also limited by his lack of a career, which would serve as an explicit demonstration of his contribution to the family's success. Instead, Brad's lack of traditionally masculine features—including role as "breadwinner"—is perceived as a drain on the viability of sustained viewership.

The story uses overlapping metanarratives of television and hegemonic masculinity in concert to destabilize the neoliberalism that undergirds the story. Destabilization is an essential component of metamodern satire, and Saunders's work engages in this destabilization through the inclusion of Brad, who subverts both the internal logic of television and the expectations of hegemonic masculinity. Through this cultural disruption, Brad embodies an alternative to the presiding ideologies, as well as the freedom that comes with choice. He is able to shed the trappings of these

metanarratives, and instead adopt a sincerity of expression that consequently allows the short story to progress into the second necessary phase of metamodern satire: correction.

### **A Proposed Correction**

George Saunders himself has acknowledged the abundant absurdity of “Brad Carrigan” (Symonds). Ludicrous storylines, exaggerated characters, extreme and deeply questionable plastic surgery—all of these elements work together to create a deeply ironic and wildly absurd postmodern landscape. However, while the text employs irony throughout, Brad’s subversion of the metanarrative positions him as a character of sincerity in an otherwise ironic environment.

The story’s sitcom setting establishes an environment ripe for irony and populated by actions chosen solely for their potential to attract viewers. One can see the increasingly desperate attempts to garner viewership, which is evidenced through Brad’s recollections of more wholesome past and trivial storylines from which the show has departed:

He and Doris used to talk about real issues, about them, their relationship, their future hopes and plans. Once she lost her engagement ring and bought a fake so he wouldn’t notice. Once he became jealous when the butcher started giving her excellent cuts of meat. (122)

Or,

Brad remembers when old Mrs. Giannelli got Lou Gehrig’s disease and began losing the use of her muscles, and Doris organized over three hundred people from the community to provide round-the-clock care. He remembers when the

little neighborhood retarded boy, Roger, was being excluded from ball games, and Doris herself volunteered to be captain and picked Roger first. (141)

Reflecting on its current format and tone, Brad, at various intervals, describes the show as “dumber. Plus meaner” (122), “too small-hearted” (142), and “basically selfish”(142). The increasingly exaggerated and absurd nature of the show, along with a secret note from Doris to Brad, points to the singular objective of remaining on the air. As such, when faced with macabre situations or people in need, the characters on the show are not able to respond with sincerity, but instead in a manner allowed by the televisual metanarrative, such as the use of aphorism and stock character behaviors. As the aberration from the narrative, Brad’s responses to disturbing situations on the show are treated as inappropriate.

Saunders’s work first engages in the disruption of a metanarrative—neoliberalism—but it also, in turn, suggests a correction, and as this correction is introduced, one can see that the moment it emerges and subsequently returns to the idea are characterized by a lack of the absurdity inherently present in its televisual setting. As the symbolic representation of correction, Brad is not the target of the joke when he is trying to initiate an empathetic shift in the show. Take the following occurrence, when Doris discovers that Brad has brought the animated charred corpses in from the backyard because they are in physical pain:

“The rain hurts them,” Brad says.

“Having my entry full of dead corpses hurts me, Brad,” Doris says. “Did you ever think of that?”

“No, I mean it physically hurts them,” says Brad.

“After all we shared last night, you pull this stunt?” Doris says. “Oh, you break my heart. Why does everything have to be so sad to you? Why do you have so many negative opinions about things you don’t know about, like foreign countries and diseases and everything? Why can’t you be more like Chief Wayne? He has zero opinions. He’s just upbeat.” (140)

Within the context of the sitcom, Brad is being targeted for his departure from the televisual metanarrative. However, the reader, who has a wide-angle perspective of the show can easily identify that it is in fact Doris who is being critiqued. Her string of accusatory questions toward Brad do not take away from our estimation of Brad’s character, but rather serve as evidence of Doris’ adherence to a neoliberal metanarrative that promotes unwavering happiness and a short-sighted perspective toward world events and attendant human suffering.

Taking into account the corrective impulse contained within metamodern satire, as well as the fact that a satirist does not want the proposed solution to be part of the material satirized, one observes that generally the satirical devices in play for much of the narrative are often pared down as the story advances toward its end. Such is the case with “Brad Carrigan.” The message woven throughout the satire is one that promotes empathy and the humanization of those in the developing world, and while the audience is exposed to this through short bursts of action on Brad’s part, it is the final scene of the story where the corrective message is most clearly visible and sincerely expressed.

In the closing moments, Brad is apprehended by the police and thrown into the back of van that houses the infamous space of being “Written Out.” In stark contrast to the previous setting of the story, the Carrigan house (a location characterized by chaos



and distraction), the interior of the police van operates as a sensory-deprivation tank. Unlike Brad's inability to control the sprawling situations with starving Filipino children, animate corpses, and an HIV-positive infant, here existence is compressed into a contained environment that prohibits him from any further action. It is in this situation that Brad begins to disintegrate, unable to communicate with anyone else as he begins to feel himself "going" (154). As he dematerializes, Brad focuses on his identity in the hopes that he will one day be reconstituted as himself:

"Brad brad brad," says Brad.

Then his mind drifts. He can't help it. He thinks of the Belstonians [the animate corpses], how frightened they must be, sealed in large plastic bags at the police station. He thinks of poor little Doug [the HIV-positive baby], probably even now starving to death sunburned on the familiar Carrigan roof.

The *poor things*, he thinks. The *poor, poor things*. I should have done more. I should have started earlier. I could have seen it all as part of me.

Brad looks down. His feet are now two mini-blobs attached to two rod-shaped blobs that seconds ago were his legs, in his khakis.

He is going, he realizes.

He is going, and will not be coming back as Brad.

He must try at least to *retain this feeling of pity*. If he can, whoever he becomes will inherit this feeling, and be driven to act on it, and will not, as Brad now sees he has done, waste his life on accumulation, trivia, self-protection, and vanity.

He tries to say his name, but has, apparently forgotten his name.

*“Poor things,”* he says, because these are now the only words he knows.

(153-54; emphasis added)

The van serves as a meditative space and Brad’s thinking exemplifies the proposed correction of the satire. The repeated phrase “poor things” functions as a final expression of empathy, because Brad is determined to “retain this feeling of pity.” The “pity,” defined as “tenderness and concern aroused by the suffering, distress, or misfortune of another, and prompting a desire for its relief; compassion, sympathy,” (“Pity, n1) referred to in the preceding selection is not meant to serve as the ultimate destination for the characters, but rather the first impulse, the catalyst that sets into motion a course of action to help those experiencing that suffering.

It is in this distraction-free environment that Brad can finally think clearly, with intention, about the kind of person he wishes to be. Returning to Erika Gottlieb’s claim that satire is a cathartic genre, one that communicates the idea that reason may still intervene before the fall (273), one can see that the story’s ending communicates the opportunity for that intervention. As he dissipates into a shapeless blob, Brad’s final act is to concentrate on an improved version of himself that he hopes will guide his actions when he re-emerges in his next life. The space of the van provides a contained environment where Brad can internalize the behavioral correction he wishes to employ. Much like the scene where Brad imagines pitching a new type of show to Doris, it is Brad’s internal monologue that has provided him the space to embody a new attitude about empathy, one that departs from the standards set by the neoliberal metanarrative. Finally, he is allowed an opportunity to achieve congruity between feeling and

expression. With the repetition of his own name, he legitimizes and reinforces his own empathetic identity.

### **A Cyclical Mode of Humor**

The final moments of Saunders's story reflect a persistent optimism that punctuates a narrative built on cynicism and destabilization. This cyclical pattern of hope and despair also characterizes the overarching humor of the text. "Brad Carrigan" presents an added challenge for deconstructing the humor it employs because it necessitates an analysis of two concurrent modes of humor: first, the humor expressed as a part of the sitcom in which the story is set, and second, the satirical humor offered by the author to critique the society that it represents. These modes embody tenets of two distinct theories of humor: superiority theory and incongruity theory.

The sitcom humor is best addressed by superiority theory, which takes as its target a "laughable person ... one who thinks of himself as wealthier, better looking, more virtuous, or wiser than he really is" (Morreall 4). E. M. Dadlez writes that "superiority theories ally humor principally with ridicule and the enjoyment on one's own superiority in pinpointing the foibles or weaknesses of another" (2). John Morreall characterizes this mode as "self-congratulatory" because it is based on the principle of finding oneself better off than another in the protracted struggle of life. The laughter elicited performs a corrective function, due simply to the fact that people do not like to be laughed at (5).

One can see evidence of this theory of humor in the way that Doris and Chief Wayne interact with Brad, whose earnestness marks him as the "laughable person." Returning to the first emergence of empathy in the wake of Buddy's auto-castration/suicide, the jokes made by Doris and Chief Wayne are meant to perform a

socially corrective function and knock Brad back in line with the values of the televisual metanarrative. As Brad contemplates the changing nature of their show, Doris interrupts, asking,

“Brad, hello? ... Have you had a stroke? Is that why you’re staring off into space as if taking a dump?”

“Did you take such a difficult dump it gave you a stroke?” says Chief Wayne.

Both Doris and Chief Wayne put on their faces the expression of someone taking a difficult dump, then having a stroke. Then we see from the way they start laughing warmly, smiling affectionately at Brad, and from the happy swell of music, that they haven’t really had strokes while taking dumps, they’re just trying to keep things light, and also, that it’s time for a commercial. (122)

The scatological humor employed by Doris and Chief Wayne reifies the dominance of the sitcom sensibility that guides the action of the story. Morreall speaks to the preponderance of this type of humor on “pitifully childish” sitcoms, stating that many of these shows “have almost no plot but consist simply of a group of family members or friends trading obvious and stupid insults” (10).

While the aforementioned moment details Doris and Chief Wayne “smiling affectionately” at Brad, as the story progresses and Brad resists the televisual metanarrative, the need to assert superiority over him becomes increasingly important. The appearance of the *TotallyFukked* taping is another way Doris and Chief Wayne attempt to correct Brad’s behavior. The prank show is meant to be entertaining and prompt laughter at the cuckolding of Brad, and Doris even threatens that if Brad

continues to be earnest, the next time she and Chief Wayne appear on *TotallyFukked*, they will go further and participate in unprotected sex.

The sitcom setting of the show exemplifies the superiority theory of humor, but if one widens the lens and looks at the short story as a whole, another theory is suited to describe the rhetorical moves of the satire. Saunders's satire participates in the incongruity theory of humor in which amusement comes from "an intellectual reaction to something that is unexpected, illogical, or inappropriate" (Morreall 15). Arthur Schopenhauer makes a sweeping claim that all laughter is the result of incongruity, stating, "The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity" (76). Morreall elaborates on the idea supporting this theory, stating, "We live in an orderly world, where we have come to expect certain patterns among things, their properties, events, etc. We laugh when we experience something that doesn't fit into these patterns" (15).

Saunders's story is ripe with instances of incongruity, specifically in terms of the way the characters react to the events of the show. When Buddy commits suicide, the characters use stock aphorisms to create the illusion of processing the event. When Doug, the HIV-positive baby, falls through the roof, the characters suggest their best solution, which is to climb up on the roof and duct tape him to the place from which he came. It is the incongruity between the events of the story that are at times horrific and the sitcom-style reactions that create the story's most dominant mode of humor.

However, the short story also uses this incongruity theory to critique the sense of superiority that guides the actions of the characters on the show. This incongruity comes

from the fact that Brad, the empathetic center of the sitcom, is treated as the “laughable person,” the character who overestimates himself and needs to be taken down a notch or two. Inside the sitcom sensibility, this person believes themselves to be “more virtuous, or wiser than he really is,” and it is because of Brad’s instinct toward virtue that he is targeted by Doris and Chief Wayne. The incongruity theory comes into play when one considers the treatment Brad receives as he attempts to enact change on the show. Despite his proposed actions that exemplify empathy and kindness, Doris and Chief Wayne are presented as the superior characters because they better represent the value of “watchability.” Any empathetic action or sentiment expressed by Brad is treated as evidence of his inferiority and inability to conform to the televisual metanarrative.

Saunders uses many implements of the satirist’s tool chest to create a story mired in absurdity. Irony, exaggeration, bathos, and the grotesque are all employed to create a darkly comic reality where ridiculousness is made apparent. The mode of humor—one of dark irreverence paired with small moments of optimism—emerges in the narrative through an amalgamation of exaggerated scenes, which augment the absurdity of reality, with specific attention paid to the televisual lens of the show. When asked whether it has become harder to write speculative fiction in light of the increasing absurdity of television, Saunders responded, “I think [entertainment] is getting more absurd; but then, theoretically, if a person wanted to riff on that, you can always go further. ... Maybe with [*In Persuasion Nation*], the ‘Brad Carrigan’ story, I’d gone about as far as I could” (Symonds).

Much of the dark humor in “Brad Carrigan” is in direct response to the overblown nature of the fictional sitcom it presents. The story uses over-the-top storylines to

highlight the exaggeration that is happening in the Carrigan universe. The following takes place directly after the group finds out that Buddy has committed his auto-castration and suicide:

“Uh-oh, guys!” [Chief Wayne] says. “Looks like, in addition to a persnickety dog, you’ve got yourself *another* little problem. Your darn backyard has morphed again!”

Then we hear the familiar music that indicates the backyard has morphed again, and see that the familiar Carrigan backyard is now a vast field of charred human remains.

“Carrigan, I’ve about had it with this nonsense!” shouts their neighbor, Mr. Winston. “Last week my grumpy boss, Mr. Taylor came for dinner, and right in the middle of dessert your yard morphed into ancient Egypt, and a crocodile came over and ate Mr. Taylor’s toupee!”

“And when my elderly parents came to visit?” says Mrs. Winston. “Your yard morphed into some sort of nineteenth-century brothel, and a prostitute insulted my mother over the fence!” (125-26)

One can see here the use of the grotesque, a situation “ludicrous from incongruity; fantastically absurd” (“Grotesque, n1”), with the pairing of the exaggerated sitcom storylines and the new landscape of a field of charred corpses. Part of the absurdity comes from the quotidian nature with which these events are treated. For the characters on the show, the field of charred corpses is just another plucky storyline to fill broadcast time.

When the group takes up their original objective to find Buddy, Doris treats the new landscape with irreverence, telling Brad and Chief Wayne to “Look for the one thing not smoldering in this vast expanse of carnage” (126). It is only Brad who takes the time to consider the suffering inherent in the scene that surrounds him, pausing to say, “My god ... Who were these people?” (126). This simple act exemplifies the difference between Brad and the rest of the gang. Where Doris and Chief Wayne see the mild inconvenience of a field of corpses, Brad desires to know who these people were, an impulse that ascribes them humanity in an otherwise dehumanized state.

Brad’s serious contemplation of the scene exemplifies the way daybreak humor manifests in terms of the story. While much of the text is a dark exaggeration of television offerings and genuinely selfish and reprehensible behavior, the hope in the narrative is present but not played for laughs. While there is no shortage of scenes in which Brad struggles to act on the empathetic impulse he feels, it is not Brad’s impulse to help that is satirized, but rather the self-interested attitude that runs counter-flow to his own, exemplified by the obstacles he faces in the behavior of the other characters.

When Brad acts on his empathy, such as when he attempts to bring in the animate, charred corpses from the rain once he finds out that being rained on causes them intense pain, the audience is not meant to laugh at Brad’s execution of these tasks, as they are perpetrated with genuine concern, rejecting the “dumber,” “meaner” nature of the show. Instead, the humor comes from the tone-deaf responses of the other characters on the show and the inherent selfishness these responses exemplify.

The dark humor is threaded through each of Brad’s attempts to act on his empathy, beginning with Buddy’s funeral in light of his suicide/castration, through his



efforts to help the starving Filipino children, the Belstonians, and finally “Doug,” the HIV-positive infant. Brad’s actions in each of these scenarios is best described as chaotic because he simultaneously tries to help while contending with the criticism and impediment of the other characters.

Brad operates as the source of light in the darkness of the narrative, as his empathy represents an aberration from the neoliberal values of the show. When the story hits its crescendo, with Brad running around in an attempt to simultaneously solve all of the crises occurring at the same time, he conceives of a solution that uses the apparatus of the show to make the changes he wishes to see, while still including him as part of the program:

What he’ll do is drive down Eiderdown Path, across Leaping Fawn Way, Bullfrog Terrace, and Waddling Gosling Place, and drop Doug off at the EmergiClinic, which is located in the Western Slope Mini-Mall, between PetGalaxy and House of Perms. Then he’ll go live in Chief Wayne’s former apartment. He’ll clean out the garage for the corpses. He’ll convert Chief Wayne’s guest room into a nursery for Doug. He’ll care for Doug and the corpses, and come over here once a day to borrow his butter, trying to catch Doris’s eye, trying to persuade her to leave Chaz Wayne and join him in his important work.

(150)

The absurdity in this selection comes not from Brad’s desire to help, but rather the juxtaposition between supernatural occurrences and the quotidian nature of Brad’s solutions. His thought process is harried as he formulates this plan as quickly as he can, but the absurdity comes from the televisual framework it employs. By adhering to the

conventions of the televisual metanarrative, Brad believes he can remain a relevant component of the show, despite the fact that this empathetic action conflicts with its selfish nature. However, it is these very conventions that relegate him to the space of being “Written Out,” resulting in his ultimate destruction.

The final moments of “Brad Carrigan” are serious in nature, as Brad finds himself locked in the back of a police van. The darkness of this moment is palpable, and Brad is able to assess his own behavior in an uninterrupted way that has yet to occur in the narrative. However, I argue that this moment is not entirely tragic. In his work, “The Frames of Comic Freedom,” Umberto Eco lays out the criteria for classifying a work as a tragedy or comedy, presented here in a truncated form.

First, tragedy,

The tragic effect is realized when: (i) there is a violation of a rule (call it a Code, a social frame, a law, a set of social premises) which (ii) is *committed by somebody we can sympathize with*, since he is a character of noble condition, not so bad as to be repulsive, not so good as to escape identification, and (iii) we recognize that the rule has been broken since *we feel it to be either still valid* (*‘do not kill your father’*) *or at least sufficiently justified by the context* (1; emphasis added)

Then, comedy,

comic effect is realized when: (i) there is the violation of a rule (preferably, but not necessarily, a minor one, like an etiquette rule); (ii) the violation is committed by someone with whom we do not sympathize because he is an ignoble, inferior, and repulsive (animal-like) character; (iii) therefore we feel superior to his

misbehavior and to his sorrow for having broken the rule; (iv) *however in recognizing that the rule has been broken, we do not feel concerned; on the contrary we in some way welcome the violation; we are, so to speak, revenged by the comic character who has challenged the repressive power of the rule* (2; emphasis added)

Looking to Saunders's text, one observes that the story does not fit squarely into either effect, but rather is a hybrid form of both. Brad, the transgressor and empathetic center of the story, is a character with whom the audience can sympathize, a criterion of tragedy. However, the story partially adheres to a comic effect as well, as the audience is not meant to be concerned with the rules being broken, and in fact is meant to identify with Brad's impulse to transgress the rules. Brad represents the force that has "challenged the repressive power of the rule" through his rejection and attempted reconfiguration of the televisual metanarrative.

The final three paragraphs of the story contain the glimmer of hope that characterizes the ultimate boundary of daybreak humor. Faced with the impending threat of death, the only thing left for Brad to do is consider what he will do differently in the future. He focuses on his hopes for the subsequent generations, determined to keep compassion as the final thought of his life, in hope that the next incarnation will "be driven to act" (154). The correction will not take place in the duration of this story because Brad has failed to effect change. However, as a metamodern satire, the story presents optimism as its final note. Brad believes that if he concentrates hard enough, "whoever he becomes will inherit this feeling [of empathy]" (154). All is not lost.

There is still time for the correction to occur, not in Brad's lifetime, but in the next.

In his essay "George Saunders and the Working Class," David P. Rando argues that "George Saunders peoples his stories with the losers of American history—the dispossessed, the oppressed, or merely those whom history's winners have walked all over on their paths to glory, fame, or terrific wealth." "Brad Carrigan" complicates this notion, as its titular protagonist occupies the space of both the privileged and the oppressed. Brad and Doris are distinctly advantaged in their class positioning as well as their geographic location in the United States, and as such, they are able to focus on trivial matters rather than the systemic economic problems of the developing world.

However, Brad is oppressed in the way that he is trampled by those who more faithfully adhere to the neoliberal metanarrative that serves as the foundation of the text. It is his intolerance of cultural myopia and the ignorance toward suffering that causes Brad to take on the role of the "laughable person," which unfortunately positions him as the target of ridicule within the framework of the television show.

"Brad Carrigan, American" participates in metamodern satire as it works to first destabilize and then offer a correction. In her speech, "A Short History of Neoliberalism," Susan George asks us to remember that "neo-liberalism may be insatiable but it is not invulnerable." Saunders's text presents a narrative that admirably contends with the economic movement, employing the satirist's most potent tools to present it with exaggerated absurdity. However, the text does not leave the reader simply with chaos, but

rather proposes a correction embodied by Brad. This juxtaposition of darkness and light allows for the presence of daybreak humor, which promises hope on the horizon, even when the rest of the sky is black. This work allows readers to conceive of the possibility of movement to a better space and provides the roadmap for how to find it.

## CHAPTER 6: SOME PARTING THOUGHTS ON UTOPIA

Utopia is on the horizon. I move two steps closer; it moves two steps further away. I walk another ten steps and the horizon runs ten steps further away. As much as I may walk, I'll never reach it. So what's the point of utopia? The point is this: to keep walking."

— Eduardo Galeano

Discerning readers will notice that this project is populated with failures. Thom Payne fails to convince his ad agency to abandon the increasing thirst for social media plans. Monk Ellison finds himself at the podium accepting the Book Award for a text meant as invective but read as a wholly authentic portrayal of blackness. The pubescent girls of *Big Mouth* play a game of inches in which, despite their attempts at progress, they are constantly barraged by the presence and prevalence of the patriarchy as a metanarrative. And lastly, Brad Carrigan uses his final moments on earth to focus intently on how to remake himself in the next life so that he might convince his family and friends to develop empathy and concern about the developing world. They are Sisyphi, all of them, pushing the boulder up the mountain each day, only to watch it roll back down to the plain.

So what accounts for this pattern? For this overarching failure to effect change? Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker speak to the way failure is baked into the metamodern form:

Metamodernism moves for the sake of moving, attempts in spite of its inevitable failure: it seeks forever for a truth that it never expects to find. If you will forgive us for the banality of the metaphor for a moment, the metamodern thus willfully

adopts a kind of donkey-and-carrot double-bind. Like a donkey it chases a carrot that it never manages to eat because the carrot is always just beyond its reach. But precisely because it never manages to eat the carrot, it never ends its chase, setting foot in moral realms the modern donkey (having eaten its carrot elsewhere) will never encounter, entering political domains the postmodern donkey (having abandoned the chase) will never come across.

This endless pursuit of truth demonstrates the optimistic nature of metamodern satire, a form rooted in the pursuit of societal improvement. As Luke Turner writes, “Metamodernism does not ... propose any kind of utopian vision, although it does describe the climate in which a *yearning* for utopias, despite their futile nature, has come to the fore.” Commenting on the integral relationship between satire and utopia, Darryl Dickson-Carr observes, “To put it bluntly satire can seem rather old-fashioned and conservative. Many satires seem either to want a prelapsarian world in which humans behaved rationally and society was balanced and just or to believe that in the absence of utopia, humanity is disgusting and unworthy” (*Sacredly Profane* 4).

I agree that satire does, at times, contain an idealistic notion of what the society can be. Modernist satire suggests a correction, defined by Weisenburger as “a rationalist discourse,” the phrasing of which implies an inherent logic and method to the corrections suggested by these texts. Postmodern satire goes further. Without the obligation of explicit correction, these satires function in a way that highlights folly and vice, both in the form of human behavior and in the adherence to metanarratives that serve as the mechanism for legitimating knowledge in a society. What is left in the wake of Jamesonian or Lyotardian postmodern satire is a chaos, meant to demonstrate, perhaps,

not Dickson-Carr's "disgust and unworthiness," but certainly the necessity for social revision.

Here, I argue that metamodern satire revises this binary between prelapsarian utopia and humanity-fueled dystopia. In order to better understand the desired terminal destination of this mode of satire, it is helpful to examine the definition of the "utopia" with which metamodernism and specifically metamodern satire engage. Utopia has multiple definitions, but among them one can observe two diametric poles: the idealist and the impossible. First, the term can be defined as "an imagined or hypothetical place, system, or state of existence in which everything is perfect, especially in respect of social structure laws and politics" ("utopia, n2a"). But, importantly, it can also be explained as "a plan for or vision of an ideal society, place, or state of existence, *especially one that is impossible to realize*; a fantasy, a dream" ("utopia" n4; emphasis added).

So what fuels this metamodern yearning for utopia? As I've argued throughout this project, satire is an inherently optimistic genre, as it communicates the possibility for reason to intervene before the fall. However, there is not a single satire examined here in which this intervention is successfully implemented. Bassem Yousef warns that satire makes people complacent, content to see their own perspectives and desires for change reflected in the text. But it is perhaps through this metamodern failure that the complacency is circumvented, that the audience comes to understand that there is still real work yet to be done.

I have written here about the strain of humor that characterizes these texts—an overwhelming darkness run through with a ribbon of light—and I argue that this small but present optimism reflects the yearning for utopia that Turner identifies. Through the



dramatization of this humor, the texts I have examined here communicate their awareness of the overwhelming social opposition sprung from a desire to conserve the very metanarratives that guide the society and keep existing hierarchies of power in place. The darkness and irreverence communicated by each text reflects the prevalence of each metanarrative, as each protagonist attempts to subvert a deeply entrenched narrative. One could argue that these actors take on the role of the cynic, but I argue that this pessimistic setting is only presented in service of underscoring the presence of the metanarrative, that each character presents this worldview as a weapon against what would otherwise destroy them. As Amy Tan has said, “What makes people resilient is the ability to find humor and irony in situations that would otherwise overpower you” (Mulkerrins). Their adopted worldviews and approaches are reminiscent of Freud’s gallows humor, described by Kurt Vonnegut as “humor about weak, intelligent people in hopeless situations” (257).

But metamodern satire is not without hope. In fact, its emphasis on black humor only serves to make its ribbon of optimism more visible. The metamodern satirist seems to say, despite the prevalence of the guiding metanarrative, despite an antagonistic culture deaf to the satirist’s logical appeals, that there is still merit in attempting to argue for change. The opposition may be formidable, socially reinforced, and even celebrated, but that does not free the satirist from their duty to subvert the power structures that elevate an oligarchic minority while subjugating the rest. In contrast, the metamodern satirist considers it his or her duty to ceaselessly march toward the horizon where utopia resides—despite its continual retreat—convinced that the inherently optimistic act of marching forward is in itself enough.

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