The Diasporic Lens:
Paracinematic Forms, Mediations, and Representations in the Asian/American Novel

By Julia Shin

Advised by Professor Sophie Gee
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"The photographer at the heart of the script is a woman, of course."
from *Insurrecto* by Gina Apostol

Introduction

Mirrored in text, the film director positions her camera lens, ready to capture and reproduce, to edit and kill. To her chagrin, the final product results not in a film, but a novel. An authorial power, at once unknown by and identical to the camerawoman, has been writing in synchronicity with the camera's framing. Onto the novel is refracted the image seen by the camera, but also the image of the camera itself: its angle, its mechanisms, its director, its edits. At once author, director, filmmaker, and translator, the Asian American woman acts as the diasporic lens through which cinematic forms are able to be represented within the novel's totalising form.

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha theorizes a postcolonial "third space" from which new forms of cultural expression, meaning, and identity emerge.[1] In this paper, I argue that, through the utilization of an auteurial diasporic lens, the novels *Insurrecto*, by Gina Apostol, and *My Year of Meats*, by Ruth Ozeki, mark the creation of a novelistic type akin to a "third form": the Asian/American paracinematic novel.[2]

Through its privileging of the postmodern fragments, ephemera, and transmedial constructions of globalization into form, the Asian/American paracinematic novel strives toward a formal realist totality in which the social realities and material histories of Asian Americans are

[1] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 55.
[2] There exists extensive debate over the use of the space, the hyphen, and the slash in Asian American, Asian-American, and Asian/American, respectively, as well as over the very existence of the terms used to designate "hyphenated-Americans" (African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Native-Americans, etc.) as opposed to an ideologically singular "American." See Theodore Roosevelt, *Americanism* (New York, 1915), JK1758 .R65, Library of Congress, https://lccn.loc.gov/22014020. Remaining faithful to the spirit of the novels *Insurrecto* and *My Year of Meats*, I have chosen to foreground the *slash* in Asian/American in order to reemphasize the "history of persistent reconfigurations and transgressions" that constitutes the basis of our ever-shifting identities. For the purposes of the creation of a "third form," the Asian/American paracinematic novel, I consider the term Asian/American as a "*sliding over*," an "and/or" configuration, and a "dynamic, unsettled, and inclusive movement" of identity and location. For more, see David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford University Press, 1999).

evoked through narration.[3] Despite this attempt at formal totality, however, the Asian/American paracinematic novel continues to embody what Yoon Sun Lee terms the formal "paradox of minor literature."[4] Although minor literature creates new forms of expression and representation through its very nature, it all the while desires to escape from formal confinement; a consistent longing *out of form* reflects minor literature's paradoxical and insoluble impulse to not only mediate the realities of its subjects but to represent them, in every sense of the word.[5] This antinomy, the formal wish for *out of form*, is best theorized by Caroline Levine in *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. Levine expands the definition of form to any "arrangement of elements—an ordering, patterning, or shaping… all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference," allowing for a synchronic grasp on the complicated interplay of structure, content, and historical context within a literary text.[6]

The Asian/American paracinematic novel, I argue, not only acknowledges minor literature's inherent formal paradox but incorporates it back into the form of the novel through its portrayal of the simulacra, mirroring, and mediations of non-novelistic forms, such as the documentary, the television show, the movie, and the script. Its engagement with forms mirrors the diasporic negotiation of multiple cultural frameworks, positioning the Asian American woman as both subject and shaper of mediated reality. Thus, the novel achieves a version of realist totality, evoking the essence of history, materiality, and the real from modernity's

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[3] I refer to the novel's formal realist totality in reference to both György Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel; a Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (M.I.T. Press, 1971) and György Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (Merlin Press, 1963).
[4] Yoon Sun Lee, "Type, Totality, and the Realism of Asian American Literature," *Modern Language Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (2012): 418, https://doi.org/10.1215/00267929-1631460.
[5] For more on the paradoxes inherent within the language and form of minor literature, see Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: toward a Minor Literature* (University of Minnesota Press, 1986).
[6] Caroline Levine, *Forms : Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton University Press, 2015).

irreconcilable world of projections, unreality, and East/West binaries, as a result of its engagement with forms— its own and others.[7]

The Diasporic Lens

"Halved as I am, I was born doubled."
From *My Year of Meats*, by Ruth Ozeki

Since the inception of diasporic studies in Stuart Hall's foundational essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," film has occupied a critical constitutive aspect within the discipline.[8] Through his argument that, rather than "being eternally fixed in some essentialised past," our identities are forever "a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being,'" Hall establishes identity as a *positioning*.[9] In a related essay published in *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* titled "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation," Hall claims the diasporic experience "is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity, diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference."[10] Like Bhabha, Hall is concerned with the hybrid "third" location of cultural studies, what he calls the "ground, place, territory," the "juncture-point… the 'empty' land" where cultures meet and interact.[11] In both essays, Hall's rhetorical moves depend upon his analysis of an emerging cinema of the Caribbean, a burgeoning addition to new world "'Third cinemas.'"[12] Perhaps due to the greater representational burden on film as a visual

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[7] Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*.
[8] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 222–237.
[9] Ibid, 225.
[10] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, no. 36 (1989): 68–81.
[11] Ibid, 78.
[12] Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 222. For more on Third Cinema, see Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino. "Toward a Third Cinema," *Cinéaste* 4, no. 3 (1970): 1–10.

medium or its effectiveness as an ideological form, film serves as Hall's emblem of hybridity—location, form, or otherwise.

Film also serves a hybrid function in the novel *My Year of Meats*. First, it is important to note that Hall's conception of cinematic representation, diaspora, and hybridity is specific to his study of Third cinema. The term, coined in 1970 by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino in the article, "Toward a Third Cinema," designates an explicitly decolonial and revolutionary "cinema of subversion" rooted in the Third World.[13]

> *Third cinema* is, in our opinion, the cinema that *recognizes in that struggle the most gigantic cultural, scientific, and artistic manifestation of our time*, the great possibility of constructing a liberated personality with each people as the starting point -- in a word, the *decolonization of culture*.
>
> The culture, including the cinema, of a neocolonialized country is just the expression of an overall dependence that generates models and values born from the needs of imperial expansion.[14]

Third cinema exists in stark contrast to a First cinema; that is, a cinema of "ideological form" which exists to satisfy "the cultural and surplus value needs *of a specific ideology, of a specific world-view: that of US financial capital*."[15] First cinema entertains and distracts for the benefit of commercial interests. Its primary function is the "*absorption of forms of the bourgeois world-view* which are the continuation of 19th Century art, of bourgeois art: man is accepted only as a passive and consuming object; *rather than having his ability to make history recognized, he is only permitted to read history, contemplate it, listen to it, and undergo it*. The cinema as a spectacle aimed at a digesting object is the highest point that can be reached by bourgeois filmmaking."[16]

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[13] Solanas and Getino, "Third Cinema," 2.
[14] Ibid, 2.
[15] Ibid, 5.
[16] Ibid, 4.

My Year of Meats begins with the creation of a television show. The program, titled *My American Wife!*, is sponsored by the U.S. lobbyist group BEEF-EX with the explicit intent of promoting American meats to Japanese consumers. Many scholars have analyzed the novel's ecocritical framework, as well as its commentary on the ethics of meat consumption, the gendered violence of everyday life, and queer reproduction and fertility.[17] *My Year of Meats*, however, has received little critical attention for its diasporic approach to form, its importance as an Asian American novel, or its narrativization of film.[18] I therefore foreground the novel's protagonist, Jane Takagi-Little, in order to seriously consider the role of the mixed-race Japanese American film director as the novel's diasporic lens and metatextual author.

Takagi-Little is initially hired onto *My American Wife!* as a program coordinator. Her first task is to write its marketing pitch:

> *My American Wife!* Meat is the Message. Each weekly half-hour episode of *My American Wife!* must culminate in the celebration of a featured meat, climaxing in its glorious consumption. It's the meat (not the Mrs.) who's the star of our show! Of course, the "Wife of the Week" is important too. She must be attractive, appetizing, and all-American. She is the Meat Made Manifest: ample, robust, yet never tough or hard to digest. Through her, Japanese housewives will feel the hearty sense of warmth, of comfort, of heart and home— the traditional family values symbolized by red meat in rural America.[19]

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[17] For more on *My Year of Meats*' representations of eco-consciousness and problematized female reproduction, see the following literature. Leigh Johnson, "Conceiving the Body: Sandra Cisneros and Ruth L. Ozeki's Representations of Women's Reproduction in Transnational Space." *Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy* 19, no. 2 (Fall 2008–Winter 2009): 32–41; Andrew H. Wallis, "Toward a Global Eco-consciousness in Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats*." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 20, no. 4 (2013): 843–54; Emily Russell, "Conceiving the Freakish Body: Reimagining Reproduction in *Geek Love* and *My Year of Meats*." In *Reading Embodied Citizenship: Disability, Narrative, and the Body Politic*, 131–69. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011.

[18] The closest scholarship to this topic can be found in the article, Daniel McKay, "Camera Men: Techno-Orientalism in Two Acts," *Journal of American Studies* 51.3 (2017): 939-964. Linking historical anxieties around Japan's economic rise to techno-Orientalist tropes of Japanese cameramen, McKay argues that cultural production and expression within the works of Japanese American minority authors address the racialized trope of the "camera-toting Japan man" by incorporating the stereotype into their work and gradually dismantling them. The last section of the essay is dedicated to a reading of *My Year of Meats* as an example of this type of stereotype-dismantling novel. McKay, however, primarily focuses on the Japanese cameraman and soundman, Suzuki and Oh, and does not touch on Jane Takagi-Little's role as a mixed-race diasporic filmmaker.

[19] Ozeki, *My Year of Meats*, 12.

Later, a production memo, sent from the Japanese television network to the show's American film crew, details the acceptable representation of an American wife. Such qualifications include "Attractiveness, wholesomeness, warm personality," "Attractive, docile husband," and "Attractive, obedient children," as well as the penultimate "Delicious meat recipe (NOTE: Pork and other meats is second class meats, so please remember this easy motto: 'Pork is possible, but Beef is Best!')."[20] Noted undesirables, on the other hand, include "Physical imperfections," "Obesity," "Squalor," and "Second class people," which the Japanese office later has to clarify with a "NOTE ON RACE AND CLASS— The reference to 'second class peoples' does not relate to race or class. Kato does not want you to think that Japanese people are racist. However, market studies do show that the average Japanese wife finds a middle-to-upper-middle-class white American woman with two or three children to be both sufficiently exotic and yet reassuringly familiar."[21]

Clearly, *My American Wife!* belongs to the model of First cinema. Its image of America is an ideological construction based on commodification and the "glorious consumption" of overproduced abundance.[22] Rather than acting as a reflection of real life, the show epitomizes what Solanas and Getino dub a "movie-life, reality as it is conceived by the ruling classes."[23] The ephemera of modern ideological production (memos, marketing material, emails) incorporated into the novel reveal the show's formally constructed nature. When referring to the program's focus, Takagi-Little's pitch insists "It's the meat (not the Mrs.) who's the star," revealing how the individual subject is subsumed by a commercial sponsor.[24] Meanwhile, the representative figure of a rural American homeland is an abstraction that gets swapped out week after week.

[20] Ibid, 18.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ozeki, *My Year of Meats,* 12.
[23] Solanas and Getino, "Third Cinema," 4.
[24] Ozeki, *My Year of Meats,* 12.

She is not a person; "She is the Meat Made Manifest."[25] The "traditional family values" of America only matter as a function of her quest to sell more red meat.[26]

While the ephemera of modern life reveal First cinema's constructed reality, postmodernism's simulacra questions the very existence of this reality. Throughout her attempts to procure suitable American wives and their "authentic" local cultures for *My American Wife!*, Takagi-Little learns "that there's precious little culture left, and what's managed to survive is mostly of the 'Ye Olde' variety."[27] Main Street, that symbol of small-town American culture, is long dead and replaced by Walmart.

> Don't get me wrong. I love Wal-Mart. There is nothing I like more than to consign a mindless afternoon to those aisles, suspending thought, judgment. It's like television. But to a documentarian of American culture, Wal-Mart is a nightmare. When it comes to towns, Hope, Alabama, becomes the same as Hope, Wyoming, or, for that matter, Hope, Alaska, and in the end, all that remains of our pioneering aspirations are the confused and self-conscious simulacra of relic culture: Ye Olde Curiosities 'n' Copie Shoppe, Deadeye Dick's Saloon and Karaoke Bar— ingenious hybrids and strange global grafts that are the local businessperson's only chance of survival in economies of scale.[28]

With the words, "It's like television," Takagi-Little explicit points to the vacuum of reality in American cultural production, filled by things like Walmart and television.[29] In his book *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard argues that postmodern images do not displace reality; instead, they conceal reality's nonexistence.[30] In *My Year of Meats*, the show *My American Wife!* operates as a case study in Baudrillardian simulation. The program doesn't reflect America; it replaces it with a consumable, exportable fiction. In doing so, the novel highlights a profound cultural realization that what we believe to be real, natural, and authentic is

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[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ozeki, *My Year of Meats*, 71.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.
[30] For more on simulacra and simulation, see Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (University of Michigan Press, 1994).

often nothing more than a carefully constructed, market-driven illusion. Any lingering truth is neglected in favor of exporting the cultural *idea* of America for consumption.

Despite beginning as it does with *My American Wife!*'s ideological production, *My Year of Meats* manages to move "Toward a Third cinema." How does the novel leave behind a First cinema of general unreality, including the above examples of ephemera and simulacra? Let us return to the "ingenious hybrids and strange global grafts that are the local businessperson's only chance of survival in economies of scale" and, in doing so, begin conceiving the diasporic lens.[31] The novel establishes early on that Jane Takagi-Little's diasporic position and her mixed-race hybridity serve a critical function in the creation of transnational media and exchange.

> Being racially "half"— neither here nor there— I was uniquely suited to the niche I was to occupy in the television industry. I was hired by Kato to be a coordinator for *My American Wife!*, the TV series that would bring the "heartland of America" into the homes of Japan." Although my heart was set on being a documentarian, it seems I was more useful as a cultural pimp, selling off the vast illusion of America to a cramped population on that small string of Pacific islands.[32]

By describing herself as a "cultural pimp, selling off the vast illusion of America," Jane acknowledges her own complicity in the commercial exploitation of bodies, aptly characterizing her role in converting American domestic spaces and female bodies into consumable images for Japanese audience.[33] Yet this metaphor also reveals her critical distance from the transaction; unlike her employers or the show's consumers, Takagi-Little is able to recognize the exploitative nature of this cultural commerce and the "illusion" at its center.[34]

This distance subsequently permits for the intervening diasporic lens when Takagi-Little becomes the director of the show. At once inside and outside the forces of power, Takagi-Little

[31] Ozeki, *My Year of Meats*, 71.
[32] Ibid, 14.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.

embodies Trinh Minh-ha's "SHE, THE INAPPROPRIATE/D OTHER."[35] Appearing in a 1986 special edition of *Discourse*, Minh-ha coins the term "the Inappropriate/d Other" to refer to "The Other of West, the Other of man," to a "she…who moves about with always at least two/four gestures: that of affirming 'I am like you' while pointing insistently to the difference; and that of reminding 'I am different' while unsettling every definition of otherness arrived at."[36] Minh-ha, a filmmaker of the Third cinema and a literary theorist on gender and ethnicity, later clarifies that the Inappropriate/d Other is "someone whom you can not appropriate, and as someone who is inappropriate. Not quite other, not quite the same."[37]

> Neither a claim for special treatment, nor a return to an authentic core (the "unspoiled" Real Other), it acknowledges in each of its moves, the coming together and drifting apart both within and between identity/ies. What is at stake is not only the hegemony of Western cultures, but also their identities as unified cultures; in other words, the realization that there is a Third World in every First World, and vice-versa. The master is made to recognize that His Culture is not as homogeneous, not as monolithic as He once believed it to be; He discovers, often with much reluctance, that He is just an other among others.[38]

Neither an essentialised, "'unspoiled' Real other" or a reflection of the same, the diasporic woman interrogates the hegemonic paradigm of the West through her own shifts and movements, her way of "coming together and drifting apart both within and between identity/ies."[39] Thus, when Takagi-Little has the unforeseen opportunity to direct an episode of *My American Wife!* for the first time, her vantage point not only allows for a new ideological construction of America, but eventually emerges altogether from the confines of a First cinema.

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[35] Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Introduction," *Discourse* 8 (1986): 3-10, http://www.jstor.org/stable/44000268.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Trinh Minh-ha, *The Digital Film Event* (Routledge, 2005). https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203036075
[38] Minh-ha, "Introduction," 4.
[39] Ibid.

Initially, however, Takagi-Little directorial mission statement, "to continue to introduce the quirky, rich diversity and the strong sense of individualism that make the people of this country unique" in order to "[widen] the audience's understanding of what it is to be American," only serves to reify the meatpacking industry's financial interests.[40] She continues to be responsible to the show's corporate meatpacking interests, pledging to "do [her] best to increase the Authenticity and General Interest of the program while maintaining the high standards of Helpfulness, Knowledge Enhancement, Wholesomeness, and of course Deliciousness of Meat."[41] This is immediately apparent in her directorial debut. Previously vetoed by Oda's directorial power ("Takagi, don't be stupid… The program is not called *My Mexican Wife!*, you know."), Takagi-Little jumps at the chance to tell the "real American success story" of the Martinezes, a Mexican-American family:[42]

> We filmed them stepping out on a Saturday night, and on Sunday afternoon after church, Cathy prepared Texas-style Beefy Burritos, made with lean, tender slices of Texas-bred sirloin tips. The burritos were the symbol of their hard-earned American lifestyle, something to remind them of their roots but also of their new fortune. Afterward, Bobby wanted to show us his 4-H project piglet. So there we were, in the chigger-filled field, filming little Bobby in a sea of golden grass that rippled in the wind. Bert and Cathy stood arm in arm, watching. The piglet, whose name was Supper, was so big and heavy that Bobby could barely hold it up in front of him. Bobby was wearing his Sunday suit, a hand-me-down from a neighbor, which was still a bit big for him and the trousers flapped against his bony shins. His head was dwarfed by an old felt hat of his father's. He had given the piglet a bath and the animal was still wet, sending glistening droplets into the sunlight as it squirmed in his arms. Bobby smiled at the camera, a little Mexican boy shyly offering his American Supper to the nation of Japan. Everything was in slow motion. It was a surreal and exquisite moment.[43]

Jane's camera captures an ideology, representing the Martinezes' "Texas-style Beefy Burritos," a "symbol of their hard-earned American lifestyle," as the material fulfillment of their American

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[40] Ozeki, *My Year of Meats*, 80.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid, 73.
[43] Ibid, 76-77.

dream.[44] While the burritos may be reminiscent of their past in Mexico, the meat is specified to be "Texas-bred."[45] Its status as a domestic American product serves as a tangible marker of its quality and a reminder of the Martinezes' newly fortunate circumstances. The camera switches from the burritos to Bobby and his piglet, marking a shift in representation from a tangible, consumable symbol of American success to a cinematic idealization of the American dream; yet, the piglet's name, "Supper," underscores the inescapable consumption embedded in this vision of prosperity. In this way, food serves as a means of narrating the racialized immigrant family's Americanness to a Japanese audience. Meanwhile, the cinematic imagery of the "sea of golden grass that rippled in the wind" and the sending of "glistening droplets into the sunlight" creates a dreamlike and picturesque scene for Takagi-Little to capture in "slow motion," one reminiscent of an agricultural American ideal.[46] In the glistening sunlight, the scene itself undergoes a transformation: what is real becomes stylized, heightened, and reimagined for the camera, turning a fleeting instance of lived experience into something to be consumed by its audience. Most pressingly, the inevitable fate of the child's piglet as literal "Supper" is not acknowledged. Therefore, despite challenging the dominant white American ideal, Jane's first directorial attempt remains ideologically suspect, providing only surface-level representation without acknowledging the real violence behind the scene.

Following the Martinez episode, Takagi-Little goes on to film a family with adopted Asian and Black children who also own a baby-back ribs restaurant, a family with a disabled daughter who miraculously woke up from her coma through the power of "Hallelujah Lamb Chops," and a family of vegetarian lesbians. Because the BEEF-EX corporate mandate states that "Pork is Possible, Beef is Best," even the choice to film a lamb dish is seen as a rebellious

[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.

act, as lamb in Japan tends to be an Australian import, not American; furthermore, the vegetarian lesbian couple provide the Japanese audience both a lifestyle and food alternative.[47] As Jane starts becoming more aware of the possible negative effects of the meat industry, once-superficial representation finally begins to challenge corporate interests. In her essay, "Gender, Race, and an Epistemology of the Abattoir in *My Year of Meats*, Laura Anh Williams defines "an epistemology of the abattoir" as the "not wanting to know," the willful ignorance most people choose to have about what goes on in the slaughterhouse or the food industry.[48] It is Jane's "doubling," her hybridity and angled position, that allows her to truly enter the abattoir.

In a chapter title called, "Editing Room," Jane begins to reflect on how "Truth lies in layers … In the edit, timing is everything."[49]

> Psychiatrists call this "doubling." Here's another example: I wanted to make programs with documentary integrity, and at first I believed in a truth that existed— singular, empirical, absolute. But slowly, as my skills improved and I learned about editing and camera angles and the effect that music can have on meaning, I realized that truth was like race and could be measured only in ever-diminishing approximations. Still, as a documentarian, you must strive for the truth and believe in it wholeheartedly.
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> Halved as I am, I was born doubled. By the time I wrote the pitch for *My American Wife!* my talent for speaking out of both sides of my mouth was already honed. On one hand I really did believe that you could use wives to sell meat in the service of a greater Truth. On the other hand, I was broke after my divorce and desperate for a job.[50]

This racial "doubling" of the "inappropriate/d other"— in other words, the diasporic lens— allows Takagi-Little to escape the "psychic numbing" of others. Thus doubled, Jane enters the abattoir and is hit by the raw materiality of meat. As they walk onto "the kill floor," another member of her crew, "screaming into [her] ear," informs Jane that the floor is also

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[47] Ibid, 16.
[48] Laura Ahn Williams, "Gender, Race, and an Epistemology of the Abattoir in *My Year of Meats*." *Feminist Studies* 40, no. 2 (2014): 244–72
[49] Ozeki, *My Year of Meats*, 210.
[50] Ibid.

"known as the 'hot floor'... *because blood is hot when it pours from a living body*!"[51] The "acrid humid stench," the screaming of cows and humans, and the heat of flowing blood all contribute to a feeling of sensory overload.[52] She is overwhelmed by "Massive swinging animals that had been hoisted into the air by a hind leg, suspended between the incremental stages of life and death and final dismemberment" and "the bodies… beneath which the blood flowed like a dark red river."[53] Finally, Jane observes a live killing and, in the chaos, is hit by "a thousand pounds of oncoming carcass."[54] Physically "knocked… out" by the raw materiality of the slaughterhouse, Takagi-Little is hit over the head with reality; this is the *out of form*, the interruption of "all ordering principles."[55] Forced to contend with reality, Takagi-Little changes forms, taking the edited footage of the commercialized television show and turning it into a documentary exposing the meat industry.

> Editing my meat video was hard. It was not a TV show, which was what I'd become accustomed to. It was a real documentary, the first I'd ever tried to make, about an incredibly disturbing subject. There were no recipes, no sociological surveys, no bright attempts at entertainment. So how to tell the story?[56]

Initially, Jane is lost on how to narrate a story without a set structure; however, the documentary proves transformative in exposing how television's commercial form conceals material truths about the meat industry, creating "a media controversy over reliability in television and the power of corporate sponsorship to determine content and truth."[57] By contending with reality and its relationship to form, Takagi-Little heeds Solanas and Getino's

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[51] Ibid, 331.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid, 333.
[55] Levine, *Forms*.
[56] Ozeki, *My Year of Meats*, 393.
[57] Ibid, 423.

directive to filmmakers: “Insert the work as an original fact in the process of liberation, place it first at the service of life itself, ahead of art; dissolve aesthetics in the life of society.”[58]

Jane reflects, “I wanted to tell the truth, to effect change, to make a difference. And up to a point, I had succeeded: I got a small but critical piece of information about the corruption of meats in America out to the world, and possibly even saved a little girl’s life in the process. And maybe that is the most important part of the story, but the truth is so much more complex.”[59] Despite this formal transformation from ideological television to revolutionary documentary, Jane still remains “haunted by all the things— big things and little things, Splendid Things and Squalid Things— that threaten to slip through the cracks, untold, out of history.”[60] Acknowledging her own hauntings reveals the limitations of any single representational form. It is precisely this awareness of formal inadequacy, I argue, that defines the Asian/American paracinematic novel, creating a “third form” that can encapsulate both the ephemera of unreality and the raw material truth of lived experience through its navigation of multiple cinematic modes and mediated realities.

Mediations

“*The Unintended*… pushes the envelope: within the spiral of war and loops of art is an unknown war wrapped in another, a ghost in its machine.”
From *Insurrecto*, by Gina Apostol.

While *My Year of Meats* demonstrates how the diasporic lens serves to modify formal ideologies and structures, the novel *Insurrecto*, by Gina Apostol, harbors a recursive formal dilemma only made possible through the double vision of its female protagonists. Magsalin, a Filipino-American translator and writer, commences the narrative by writing a mystery novel

[58] Solanas and Getino, “Third Cinema.”
[59] Ozeki, *My Year of Meats*, 424.
[60] Ibid.

about an international filmmaker. The novel's central character is also one of *Insurrecto*'s protagonists: Chiara Brasi, the daughter of a famous, Francis Coppola-like auteur most famous for his movie *The Unintended*, a Vietnam War movie filmed in the Philippines. One can already begin to see *Insurrecto*'s characteristic structural confusion in Magsalin's description of the university class in which she watched *The Unintended*:

> Locations/Dislocations, about the phantasmal voids in Vietnam War movies shot in equally blighted areas that are not Vietnam. The disturbing web of contorted allusions, hidden historiographical anxiety, political ironies, and astounding art direction resident in a single frame, for instance, of a fissured bridge in the Philippines, in real life dynamited by the Japanese in 1943 and still unrepaired in 1976, and rebuilt specifically and reexploded spectacularly in the film's faux-napalm scene against a mystic pristine river actually already polluted by local dynamic fishers.[61]

What is most troubling about this cinematic palimpsest, Magsalin notes, is that "on one level, the professor's point was true, our identities are irremediably mediated."[62] Her recognition of mediation's inescapability becomes crucial to the novel's approach to representation.

Inspired by the history of her late father's film, Chiara writes a screenplay about the 1901 Balangiga Massacre. The massacre is an overlooked episode of violence in the oft-forgotten Philippine-American War, in which Filipino revolutionaries attacked American troops, leading to brutal American retaliation. Although Magsalin is initially hired only as a translator and "local" guide, she takes it upon herself to rewrite Chiara's screenplay, thus creating a parallel narrative that both supplements and challenges the original. Explaining her rewriting of Chiara's screenplay, Magsalin articulates a struggle with historical representation: "I wanted to write about this unfinished thing—this revolution. A story of war and loss so repressed and so untold. But all I did was dwell on trauma that only causes recurrence of pain."[63] Her confession reveals

[61] Gina Apostol, *Insurrecto* (Soho Press, 2018), 15.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid, 291.

the paradox at the heart of *Insurrecto*'s formal project, the way the novel attempts to capture what has been systematically erased while simultaneously accepting the impossibility of its ask. Through its layered narrative structure of competing film scripts, embedded mystery novel, and fragmented memories, *Insurrecto* suggests that "History, revolution, bloodshed" require "a different lens" to be glimpsed, even partially.[64] *Insurrecto*'s lens, like Jane's documentary in *My Year of Meats*, necessarily remains "haunted" by what escapes representation, by what stubbornly remains "untold, out of history."[65]

Encapsulating the novel's central formal tension, Magsalin and Chiara clash over authorship. Their exchange dramatizes the diasporic perspective's challenge of dominant modes of storytelling. When confronted about her unauthorized revision, Magsalin subtly reframes her intervention, presenting it not as revision but as "the possibilities of a translation. A version," evoking the transformative potential of translation rather than mere reproduction.[66] Chiara immediately rejects this, finding the very notion of "co-authorship" of her script "unacceptable."[67] As Magsalin insists her "perspective offers an advantage," Chiara establishes a rigid boundary: "A translator is not a writer."[68] The exchange escalates into a battle over representational territory when Magsalin challenges the filmmaker's infallibility and Chiara accuses her of not merely creating "a version" but committing "an invasion." Most tellingly, when Magsalin gently suggests her work functions as "a mirror," Chiara hurls her most charged accusation, that Magsalin's script is "a double-crossing agent! An occupation!"[69] By characterizing Magsalin's textual intervention as an occupation, Chiara unconsciously inverts the

[64] Ibid.
[65] Ozeki, *My Year of Meats*, 424.
[66] Apostol, *Insurrecto*, 96.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid.

colonial history between the Philippines and America, echoing the imperial relationship her screenplay attempts to represent. Magsalin's rewriting functions, then, as a textual counter-insurgency. The mirror Magsalin offers is precisely what Chiara cannot accept—a reflection that would reveal the limits of her own perspective and the historical blind spots in her representation of Philippine history.

Like the psychological doubling in *My Year of Meats*, this doubled script creates what Apostol calls the "vexing sense of vertigo in stories within stories within stories that begin abruptly, in medias res."[70] As the novel's "Chapter numbers double up" and "points of view…" multiply, *Insurrecto* creates a formal representation of the diasporic experience itself: multiple, layered, and perpetually in translation.[71] Through this structural complexity, Apostol embodies Bhabha's "third space" as form itself. *Insurrecto* does not simply narrate the diasporic experience; it performs it through its very structure. Christian Benitez proposes this has something to do with the Filipino novelistic tradition:

> Considering the common Filipino perception of the novel to be made up of a 'connected series of events' ("konketadong serye ng mga pangyayari") (translation mine) ("Nobela"), *Insurrecto*'s disorderted design— or designed disorder—effectively disrupts then the purported metonymic unfolding of the form. This way, the novel as an embodiment of history is rendered to be contiguously aphasiac: similarities become more crucial, not only between fragments of the same narrative threads, but also among the fragments of all narrative threads, as to let a semblance of wholeness emerge, however impressionistic. In other words, what Apostol generates is a fiction that is most metaphoric in its strategy of performance.[72]

The parallels between filmic representation and novelistic form become explicit when Chiara reflects on the nature of cinema and narrative:

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[70] Ibid, 91.
[71] Ibid, 107.
[72] Christian Benitez, "Gina Apostol, *Insurrecto*: A Novel and Dominic Sy, *A Natural History of Empire: Stories*." *Southeast Asian Review of English*, vol. 57, no. 2 (2020): 110–14, https://doi.org/10.22452/sare.vol57no2.13.

> I think we are stuck in someone's movie... and the director is still laying out his scraps of script, trying to figure out his ending. He does not have an ending. Everything around him has the possibility of becoming part of his movie... That is what we are: hundreds of thousands of feet of unedited film, doing things over and over, in a recursive spool, and we are waiting for the cut. But who is the director? What is our wait for? I would like to make a movie in which the spectator understands that she is in a work of someone else's construction, and yet as she watches, she is devising her own translations for the movie in which she in fact exists…[73]

Recall Jane Takagi-Little's fixation on editing's relationship to truth in *My Year of Meats*. Similarly, *Insurrecto* positions both its characters and readers in a recursive relationship to media and representation. As "hundreds of thousands of feet of unedited film" mirror the novel's own formal excess, layers of nested narratives resist linear progression.[74] Thus, the novel becomes a kind of cinematic experience that nonetheless remains acutely aware of its own textuality: "as she watches, she is devising her own translations for the movie in which she in fact exists."[75] This self-reflexive awareness characterizes the diasporic lens, which always maintains a critical distance from the forms it inhabits and transforms.

Thus, *Insurrecto* brings us closer to understanding the paracinematic Asian/American novel. The "irremediabl[e] mediation" that Magsalin identifies—the impossibility of accessing an unmediated "real"—marks *Insurrecto*'s departure from the documentary realism of *My Year of Meats*.[76] Instead, *Insurrecto* suggests that the diasporic lens can only apprehend history through its multiple, contradictory mediations. As Benitez argues, *Insurrecto*'s "disordered design—or designed disorder—effectively disrupts then the purported metonymic unfolding of the form," generating "a fiction that is most metaphoric in its strategy of performance."[77] The novel thus embodies what I have termed the "third form" of the Asian/American paracinematic novel.

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[73] Apostol, *Insurrecto*, 50-51.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid, 15.
[77] Benitez, "Gina Apostol, *Insurrecto*: A Novel and Dominic Sy, *A Natural History of Empire: Stories*."

Neither purely cinematic nor purely novelistic, it is a hybrid space where both forms interrogate and transform each other.

This formal innovation is evident in the novel's treatment of historical memory.[78] The recurring trauma of colonial violence is formalized in the novel's structure. The recursive formal structure of *Insurrecto* thus performs the paradox that Yoon Sun Lee identifies in minor literature: the simultaneous desire for representation and the recognition of form's inherent limitations. Rather than resolving this paradox, *Insurrecto* incorporates it as a constitutive element of the "third form." Thus, the Asian/American paracinematic novel does not overcome the limitations of representation but makes them visible as the very condition of diasporic subjectivity.

The Third Form: Rewriting Differánce and Diaspora

In summary, the Asian/American paracinematic novel, as exemplified by *My Year of Meats* and *Insurrecto*, creates what I have termed a "third form," a hybrid literary mode that emerges through the novels' formal engagement with cinematic techniques, narrative recursion, and diasporic subjectivity. This concluding articulation asserts this essay's conceptual groundwork, with the introduction of a crucial insight: within the Asian/American novel, writing itself—layered, recursive, and collaborative—is the privileged medium through which the Asian American female protagonists interrogate diasporic mediation.

Rather than functioning solely as a theme, the diasporic lens in both novels shapes their formal composition, transforming narrative structure through cinematic fragmentation and

[78] The novel takes seriously Walter Benjamin's historical materialism, allowing for a nonlinear conception of history. See Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968).

textual simultaneity. Apostol's observation in *Insurrecto* that "simultaneous acts of writing are the illusions that sustain a story" captures the metafictional heart of the third form.[79] Here, the illusion is not a failure of representation but its animating condition; multiple stories unfold at once, overlapping, contradicting, and sustaining the narrative through their mutual deferral.

Consider *My Year of Meats*, where the third form materializes through Jane Takagi-Little's shift from complicity in ideological media to the pursuit of documentary truth. The novel's structure mirrors this journey. While narration remains central, it is constantly interrupted by memos, emails, faxes, scripts, poems, and excerpts from Sei Shōnagon's *The Pillow Book*. These disruptions create a fragmented, polyvocal structure that resists narrative authority. In "Hybrid Vigor: The Pillow Book and Collaborative Authorship in Ruth Ozeki's My Year of Meats," Leah Milne describes these interruptions as fostering collaborative authorship, requiring readers to navigate competing voices and textual layers.[80] Drawing from Barthes' "Death of the Author," Milne suggests that this narrative form diffuses authorship, turning it into an ongoing dialogue between character, author, and reader.

This framework of layered authorship finds even sharper expression in *Insurrecto*, where narrative authority is not only fractured but actively contested. Apostol builds a formal palimpsest of competing screenplays, recursive chapters, and metafictional commentary that resists history's linear progression. Magsalin's rewriting of Chiara's script functions not only as translation but as political reclamation, literalizing the postcolonial struggle over who controls narrative.

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[79] Apostol, *Insurrecto*, 102.
[80] Leah Milne, "Hybrid Vigor: 'The Pillow Book' and Collaborative Authorship in Ruth Ozeki's 'MY YEAR OF MEATS.'" *College Literature* 42, no. 3 (2015): 464–87.

More significantly, the formal multiplicity in both novels enacts what Derrida terms *différance*. Using Derrida's concept for his essay on diaspora, Hall defines *différance* as "the idea that meaning is always deferred… by the play of signification."[81] *Insurrecto*, referencing both Derrida and Hall, makes this deferral explicit, framing it as a structural and thematic principle. When describing Magsalin's changed identity after moving to America, Apostol notes, "These realizations of differance comprise her surrender to her new world of signs," signalling a diasporic subjectivity constituted through layers of mediation.[82] Meaning emerges not through resolution but through the friction between fragments. Likewise, *My Year of Meats* acknowledges its own representational limits through Jane's closing words: "I am haunted by all the things... that threaten to slip through the cracks, untold, out of history."[83]

This formal vision aligns with Trinh Minh-ha's theorization of the postcolonial woman as both "writing and written subject."[84] She writes, "identity is this multiple layer whose process never leads to the True Self... but only to other layers, other selves, other women."[85] Jane's dual identity as narrator and mixed-race subject exemplifies this recursive construction of identity. Her hybrid position becomes a strategy of narrative multiplication, enabling formal shifts across styles and perspectives. In *Insurrecto*, Minh-ha's framework is built into the novel's recursive architecture; its nested texts and spiraling timelines mirror the dislocation and reframing intrinsic to diasporic life.

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[81] Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora."
[82] Apostol, *Insurrecto*, 102.
[83] Ozeki, *My Year of Meats*,
[84] Trinh, T. Minh-Ha. *Woman, Native, Other : Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).
[85] Ibid.

Importantly, Caroline Levine reminds us that "there is no politics without form."[86] Form is not neutral; it shapes and structures power. Both novels enact this principle by disrupting conventional narrative modes. Benitez's description of Apostol's method as "designed disorder" notes how *Insurrecto* privileges doubling, co-authorship, and the elliptical logic of trauma over linear coherence. Similarly, Ozeki's pastiche structure rejects singular representation in favor of fragmented, multiperspectival storytelling. These formal choices are not merely experimental but political, challenging dominant representational systems by rethinking what form can do.

The Asian/American paracinematic novel is not distinguished simply by its engagement with cinematic forms.[87] Instead, its self-reflexive engagement with the politics of writing creates the novelistic "third form" from an interaction with non textual forms. Exposing the mechanics of storytelling, *Insurrecto* and *My Year of Meats* transform literary form into a site of critique. Thus, Homi Bhabha's "third space" becomes more than a metaphor for hybridity; it becomes a narrative strategy. The Asian American woman is not simply a character shaped by diaspora but a formal innovator, refracting cultural experience into new literary shapes: editor, author, and critic of the text she inhabits.

In this context, the third form that emerges from *My Year of Meats* and *Insurrecto* acts as a response to the formal paradox Yoon Sun Lee identifies in minor literature. These novels do not reconcile the tension between representational desire and formal limitation. Instead, they structure that tension into the very fabric of their narratives. Through layered authorship, historical recursion, and refusal of closure, they present writing itself as a medium of diasporic becoming.

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[86] Levine, *Forms*.
[87] Marco Bellardi, "The Cinematic Mode in Fiction," *Frontiers of Narrative Studies* 4, no. s1 (2018): s24–s47, https://doi.org/10.1515/fns-2018-0031.

Looking forward, as the Asian/American novel continues to evolve, the paracinematic mode offers a rigorous way to engage with contemporary forms of mediation. In an era of algorithmic fragmentation, digital circulation, and cultural erasure, these novels foreground writing as both method and metaphor for diasporic negotiation. By placing textual form at the center of their aesthetic and political commitments, they offer more than critique; the Asian/American paracinematic novel offers a generative vision of what narrative can do.

Ultimately, the third form functions as a literary apparatus for refracting experience through language, constructing authorship not as singular vision but as a practice of fragmentation, layering, and revision. Jane's editing room and Magsalin's manuscript become sites where authority is unsettled and narrative is made through interruption and juxtaposition. Their work redefines authorship as an act of critical curation rather than creation. These novels, then, do not simply reflect diasporic instability but invite the reader to inhabit it. In doing so, they assert that literary form can confront the failures of representation not by resolving them, but by rendering them legible. The form of the Asian/American paracinematic novel culminates in this gesture: the insistence that storytelling, like diaspora itself, is never finished, but always becoming.

This paper represents my own work in accordance with University regulations.
Julia Shin, April 21, 2025.

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