Of Myths and Men: *Better Luck Tomorrow* and the Mainstreaming of Asian America Cinema

by Margaret Hillenbrand

Abstract: This article explores the problems of cinematic representation faced by Asian American men, arguing that Justin Lin's *Better Luck Tomorrow* offers a way out of the impasse. The essay contends that the strategies of parody and metacinema allow Asian American film to join the mainstream while retaining an oppositional edge.

Introduction: Invisible Men? Problems of representation cut to the core of Asian American cinema. First of all, there is the acute and fundamental need to get Asian Americans on screen: despite constituting 4.5% of the U.S. population (and thus numbering over 12.5 million people), Asian Americans are cast in less than 3% of film, television, and commercial parts, and—perhaps more tellingly—in only 1.7% of lead roles across the entertainment mainstream. Still more challenging than underrepresentation, however, is the intractable problem of misrepresentation, the habitual Hollywood reluctance to grant Asian Americans a subjectivity beyond stereotype. For women, the representational possibilities continue to be defined, and delimited, in erotic terms. Thus geisha girls, dragon ladies, China dolls, Miss Saigon/Madame Butterfly, and single Asian females seeking their white knights are still the major blueprint—all highly fevered but barely differentiated creations of the white male mind as it pursues fantasies of sexual otherness that are as old as empire itself. For the Asian American males who are displaced by this interracial erotic configuration, the constraints are stricter still. Seldom granted a cinematic space outside the laundry, the triad, the kung-fu club, or the academic decathlon, Asian American men are so far from landing roles where they might “get the girl” that access to fully fledged, three-dimensional masculinity (even if it is defined in heterosexist, homosocial terms) is denied them—and in the blithest, most unreflecting of ways—across the popular culture terrain. Lisa Lowe’s observation that “Chinese male immigrants could be said to occupy, before
This essay investigates the representational impasse within which Asian American masculinity is locked, and it takes Better Luck Tomorrow (Justin Lin, 2003) as the center point of analysis. I argue here that only a brash willingness to speak the language of Hollywood will get male identities out of the art house and past the multiplex gate; if mainstream and Asian America are to meet, it must—superficially at least—be on the former’s terms. Better Luck Tomorrow seems ready to make this compromise. In many ways, the film is more Hollywood than Hollywood itself: fluent in the lexicon of popular film, it displays its proficiency, like an apt pupil, through enthusiastic mimicry—of genre, stock character, and dramatic structure. Its reward has been a degree of crossover success, as critics have rushed to dub it the first example of a real “mainstream Asian American cinema.” But if crossover essentially means compromise, mimicry, and obedience, then the term “mainstream Asian American cinema” starts to sound like oxymoron. What, if anything, do the male identities it screens show us about the real lives of Asian American men? According to Sandra Liu, this stubborn circle can be squared so long as we accept that “Access to the full range of resources in the mainstream film industry and socially committed filmmaking [are] two complementary strategies that work together to challenge and subvert dominant ideologies and structures.” Liu’s point here is that going commercial while staying principled is the only way for Asian American cinema to win space in an industry that, at present, is disinclined to acknowledge it; but this balancing of interests becomes, inevitably, a tricky juggling act. In the pages that follow, I explore this tension between ethnic conscience and the mainstream, and ask whether Liu’s utopian dialectic can be translated into actual cinematic practice. More specifically, I use Better Luck Tomorrow to argue that the linked ploys of parody and metacinema may be one answer for an Asian American film industry that both aspires to the big time and is loath to surrender its oppositional edge.

Asian American Masculinities on Film and the Problem of “Filmmaking.” This essay can only begin, however, by noting the extreme scarcity of films that deploy Liu’s “complementary strategies.” For most Asian American cinema and its representation of men, “socially committed filmmaking” remains the language of engagement, either by default or by design. Daunted, or perhaps repelled, by the challenge of Hollywood, Asian American filmmakers are typically independent; and they devise their own means for bringing space, truth, and dignity back to Asian American masculinity. These representational strategies tend to subdivide into three major categories: close-focus empiricism (busy *mises-en-scène* crammed with ethnic detail); political grandstanding of one kind or another (documentaries, biopics, and epic historical narratives); and art house avant-gardism (suitably eclectic).

Wayne Wang’s *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1989), with its deep commitment to the visual reimagining of male immigrant lives in the aftermath of World War II, is a useful example of the first mode. Determined to banish the myth that the early
Chinatowns were nests of “opium-sodden yellow slaves,” Wang’s adaptation of Louis Chu’s classic novel presents a community suffering from punitive anti-immigration and anti-miscegenation laws that blocked family formation and left men loveless and alone. Mah-jongg parlors and barbershops form the backdrop for a cast of bachelor waiters who avail themselves of props ranging from the obvious (traditionally clad scribes who pen their lonely letters home) to the culturally coded (a bowl of fish as a symbol of the connubial bliss from which they are excluded). Indeed, Eat a Bowl of Tea tells its story through a very particularized mimesis. Carefully composed tableaux give the viewer visual instruction in the intimate secrets of immigrant history; the result, arguably, is “Chinatown-as-spectacle,” a movie that is a feast for curious tourists as much as an expression of righteous Asian American anger.

Unsurprisingly, other filmmakers balk at an Asian American cinema that offers itself up for voyeuristic consumption, and strive instead for a harder cinematic form. Stephen Okazaki’s American Sons (1994) is a case in point. Set in a stripped-down photography studio, with barely a mise-en-scène to speak of, the film is a contemporary docudrama in which four Asian American men tell of their lives and the racism they have suffered. The soliloquies they utter are drawn from real-life accounts of Asian Americans, whose autobiographies are diverse, yet at the same time alike in their disassociation from any photogenic, picturesque Chinatown. Masculinity is still the theme. But the movie no longer plays for sympathy and understanding in the manner of Eat a Bowl of Tea, and is instead so full of fury that, according to one critic, it is almost unmarketable outside its small, specific niche.

The right to be an angry young man—not a passive, obedient, invisible Asian American male—is intensely realized in Okazaki’s short film: his four “interviewees” (Japanese American, Filipino American, Chinese American, and Korean American) certainly voice their rage at the dominant racist culture, but just as key is the virility, the deliberate “manliness,” that several of the cast bring to their diction, body language, and physical personae.

Finally, there are the art house interventions, such as Chan Is Missing (Wayne Wang, 1982), a tale of two taxi drivers in search of a buddy who has absconded with their cash. Ostensibly a detective flick, this narrative pretense provides the pretext for an intimate insider’s tour of San Francisco’s Chinatown. Yet, as the film slips deliberately away from the dénouement we expect from the whodunit—laying instead a trail of false clues, dead ends, and red herrings—it becomes clear that the protagonists’ quest is not for the whereabouts of Chan, but rather for Asian America as an elusive and ever-changing ontology, whose contours are reflected in the movie’s studied and complex form. In particular, the two cabbies, their quarry, and Wang’s genre-twisting postmodern take on identity become a study in what it means to be an Asian American man.

At first sight, the three films just cited and the respective cinematic modes they exemplify seem generically at odds; yet at a baseline level, they remain oddly alike. All invite a content-based critique, and in none is cinematic form the major
vehicle for conveying message and meaning. This emphasis on content over form
is, of course, an understood phenomenon within Asian American cinema. As the
director Hyun Mi Oh puts it in a recent interview, “the discussion of Ang Lee’s The
Wedding Banquet focused purely upon the content of the work, whereas the way
Quentin Tarantino’s films have been analyzed always stresses his individuality and
his style, the way he uses generic conventions, his own specific signature.”11 In
many ways, as historiographers of Asian American film remind us, this situation
is as much about institutional power as it is about representational choice. Piv-
otal in this regard is the NATAA (National Asian American Telecommunications
Association)—now known as the Center for Asian American Media—a publicly
funded organization whose remit includes providing programming for PBS, pro-
ducing the San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival, and distrib-
uting Asian American film and video via its Web site. According to Jun Okada,
NATAA’s role as funder, producer, exhibitor, and distributor of Asian American
film has turned it into a de facto media “gatekeeper”;12 and the power it exercises
over what kind of films make their way onto the public screen, and into the pub-
lic eye, has shaped the ways in which national audiences come to a reckoning with
Asian Americanness. Most particularly, its provision of film and video for PBS (and
the latter’s documentary show P.O.V.) has required NATAA to accommodate the
tastes of mainstream broadcasting, which still prefers to see Asian America in
terms of an irreconcilable split between the two sides of the so-called “hyphen-
ated identity” rather than acknowledge the immeasurably—and uncomfortably—
more complex reality. The result, as Okada puts it, is that the films promoted by
NATAA are preoccupied with “the politics of ressentiment,” and “perpetuate the
ideology of injury that defines and limits Asian American film and video in nega-
tive terms, frequently in terms of political injustice or historical trauma.”13 And as
these institutional contexts dictate the “subject matter, mode, and ideology Asian
American films should espouse,”14 the rich diversity of film and digital productions
that do not toe this content-based line are forced to fend for themselves.

Yet salutary as this reminder is, it remains true that a good deal of Asian
American cinema is “about” itself by choice, and thus seals its own critical fate.
This is Peter Feng’s point when he writes: “Asian Americans are not filmmakers:
we produce guerrilla video, autoethnography, and autobiographical essay … Each
cinematic tradition implies a different politics: the guerrilla videomaker seeks to
change the world; the autoethnographer to explicate his or her world; and the
autobiographer shares his or her perspective of the world.”15 In other words, the
politics of perspective may be “different,” but the focus on the “world” (i.e., the
experience of Asian Americanness) is the same, as is the distinction this focus
creates between being a “filmmaker” and creating a quasi-activist “cinematic
tradition.” This sequence of cause and effect is not hard to plot. The agenda of
Asian American cinema is up-front as it tells the stories of immigration, segrega-
tion, and ongoing exclusion. This focus on the telling of truths and the righting of
stereotypical wrongs results in what we might call an “educative” representational
mode, and this mode in its turn leads to a critical reception that is more concerned with the politics of content than the aesthetics of style, generic convention, and specific signature. What is more, this phenomenon recurs across the Asian American spectrum and includes productions not funded by NATAA within its purview. From tales of interracial romance between South Asian and African Americans (Mississippi Masala [Mira Nair, 1991]) and avant-garde documentary about the exile experience of Vietnamese American women (Surname Viet Given Name Nam [Trinh T. Minh-ha, 1989]) to cinematic memories of Japanese American internment (Only the Brave [Lane Nishikawa, 2005]), recreations of the barbarous treatment suffered by the earliest Filipino Americans (Bontoc Eulogy [Marlon Fuentes, 1995]), and even Taiwanese American feel-good family melodrama (The Wedding Banquet [Ang Lee, 1993]), the preoccupation with Asian America—as a history to be recovered, an identity to be claimed, and a truth to be taught—remains remarkably constant. The result, as Justin Lin himself puts it, is that “When people hear … ‘Asian American film,’ they think it’ll be preachy or educational, or academic.” He takes this point further in a separate interview, when he argues that “People don’t want to sit there to have you explain why you need to exist. You just do, and people have to come along with it.”

The problem with ethnic “explaining,” and the failure to be a “filmmaker” that it entails, is that it keeps the Asian American battle for representational space and accuracy squarely in the trenches. This is because the crusading character shared by all these films, the trait that marks them out as Asian American, tends to work simultaneously to stigmatize them economically in Hollywood. Political consciousness, however variously couched, is what “ethnic” cinema does, and the “ethnic” tag, as everyone knows, does not do well at the box office; as Lin argues, “ethnic politics and ethnic cinema cause clutter for filmmakers.” In plain terms, then, this is Asian American cinema for largely Asian American audiences, and the people whom it most naturally reaches are those who are least in need of the education it provides. This dilemma is a familiar one and in the end is nothing more than the flipside of Sandra Liu’s observation that “as long as filmmaking occurs primarily within a corporate-capitalist entertainment system … filmmakers will be forced to make compromises in order to keep producing films.” Thus no compromise means, to borrow Peter Feng’s nuance on the term, no “filmmaking.” Restrictive as it is, this is a reality with which many independent directors are comfortable. At the very least, it is preferable to the excoriation that can follow when Asian Americans “sell out”—as Wayne Wang was seen to have done in 1993 with The Joy Luck Club, Better Luck Tomorrow’s most noted predecessor in the drive to go mainstream. But selling out may not even be much of an option for films that explore the lives of Asian American men. Indeed, some might argue that the very reason Joy Luck proved so insidiously marketable was because of its single-minded, crowd-pleasing focus on Asian American women—from dragon ladies to put-upon second-generation daughters and their white knights. It certainly did Asian American masculinity few favors.
Yet the “educative” representational mode and its implicit disavowal of what Feng calls “filmmaking” can prove every bit as punitive for these male identities by transforming the men in films such as *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, *American Sons*, and *Chan Is Missing* into subjects whose masculinity is much more about plea and supplication than any real surety of self. If the wider world would simply watch and learn, the subtext of these films suggests, then it would be easier to be an Asian American man, both on screen and in life. In this sense, the films exemplify the narcissism that often accompanies identity politics, in which the indignities of long-term marginalization force an almost obsessive focus on the self. Inevitable as this process is, the self thus produced can seem diminished by overarticulation, speaking in a voice that protests too much and so somehow rings hollow. Worse still, the cry of “this is who we are” is, of course, an implicit call for recognition, and as such sets up a power relation in which the intended interlocutor can “win” by simply refusing to reply. And, perversely almost, many Asian American filmmakers seem to speed this very outcome by continuing to make movies about masculinity for Asian Americans that play badly to the bigger audience. The result is a frustrating impasse, in which Asian American masculinity is overrepresented in some quarters, yet denied the most basic of representational rights in others.

By now it should be apparent that the travails suffered by Asian American masculinity are in many ways a straight metonym for the dilemmas of the Asian American cinematic tradition as it debates how—or indeed whether—to break out of the art house circuit. Just as Asian American men struggle to get the truth of who they are on screen, so too does Asian American film find itself endlessly conflicted about the mainstream and how it should position itself vis-à-vis the “center.” Indeed, perhaps the key point here is that the Asian American cinematic tradition has been as shunning of the mainstream as it itself has been shunned by it: the fear of selling out or of being subsumed has kept it highbrow and self-referential—and, to an extent, uptight. Thus, arguably, the best way for Asian American masculinity to gain the representational justice it deserves is for Asian American cinema to resolve its feelings of ambivalence about the Hollywood conglomerate. After all, where else, if not in the image factory of mainstream cinema, are other ethno-American masculinities produced and marketed? Whether African American, Italian American, Irish American, or Latino American, male identities are made in the movies, even when—and this might be the crux—those masculinities are the stuff of preposterous stereotype. This is because, in an extreme, Baudrillardian sense, Hollywood is the United States: grossly cartoonish, of course, but profoundly constitutive of American identities nonetheless. And a masculinity that has no real presence in the mainstream is one that, at some level, is still awaiting entry into Americanness too. In this sense, to duck the challenge of the mainstream means at base to be complicit with its dismissal of Asian American masculinity, however defined. Equally, and paradoxically, to enter the mainstream means to play by its rules, and to forgo aesthetic empiricism, political grandstanding, and art house avant-gardism for “filmmaking” and the cinematic language of
Hollywood. How to retain a singular voice, still more a voice that speaks with integrity about Asian America, under such aesthetic and commercial conditions becomes the pressing question.

In many ways, *Better Luck Tomorrow* sets out to find an answer. Lin’s ultimate quarry here is a mainstream Asian American cinema, a mode of screening the “GenerAsian X” age group, in particular, that is no longer—almost as a point of ethical principle—“about” Asian Americanness in fiercely definitional ways. Deborah Wong has written in a recent essay about the gulf that is beginning to open up between “Asian American” as an angry immigrant subjectivity and the newer, younger notion of being an “American of Asian descent,” with all the outgrowing of identity politics that this implies. In the process, Wong argues, this new youth culture “upsets established understandings of … mainstream vs. oppositional cultures.” In an article on Asian American music, Oliver Wang elaborates this point and argues that these generational cohorts are “the unlikely, unknowing, and sometimes unwilling heirs to the legacy of the [Asian American] movement … In contrast to the previous generation, who made music ‘for, by, and about’ Asian Americans, many of the new artists seek to make music for an audience beyond their constituency.” This is by no means to claim that identity politics have had their day: on the contrary, much of *Better Luck Tomorrow*’s opening buzz was generated by a grassroots e-mail blitz among Asian American college students, bolstered by rallies to raise awareness of the movie and buyouts of entire cinema screenings by Asian American business leaders. But this kind of community-led activism has begun to coexist alongside the creative desire to speak to bigger, broader audiences. *Better Luck Tomorrow* partakes fully of this shift in impetus, so much so that it starts to look almost “post-identity.” To be more precise, the film articulates Asian American masculinity via the long-established codes, cues, and conventions of Hollywood, moving away from the self-referentiality of the Asian American cinematic tradition toward the open waters of the mainstream. Unlike its movie predecessors—which often express their protest through the content-based devices of plot and character—*Better Luck Tomorrow* articulates itself through narratology, borrowing magpie-like from the mainstream and using allusion to create a metacinematic parody.

Up to a point, this makes the film derivative, an exercise in mimicry in which the language of Hollywood comes first and “authentic” Asian Americanness is swapped for a shot at the big time. Yet a closer look at the film reveals that *Better Luck Tomorrow* is as much about the misappropriating potential of parody as it is a study in plagiarism and ethnic forgetting. The meanings of parody in cultural theory and practice have been closely contested in recent years, with heavyweights such as Fredric Jameson and Linda Hutcheon battling it out over the terrain of the postmodern. For Jameson, decent parody died out with modernism and has been succeeded by its poor relative pastiche, which is, “… like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a
dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter.”26 Hutcheon, however, sees more than simply a “satiric impulse” in parody, and finds that its etymological origin in the Greek para—meaning both against and beside—allows for a postmodern parody, which can lampoon the cultural past at the same time as freely looting its traditions.27 In other words, parody both legitimates and undermines the object of its attentions: insofar as it is imitative, the parodic impulse flatters its original in the sincerest of ways. Yet its citations are also ironic and as such operate subversively. This tension demands from us a close attention to the processes of representation and, more importantly, to the ideological forces that shape them. As Hutcheon puts it, “through a double process of installing and ironizing, parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference.”28 I argue in the remainder of this essay that Better Luck Tomorrow both exemplifies Hutcheon’s argument and takes it a stage further.

Gook or Geek: The Conundrum of Stereotype. Better Luck Tomorrow’s parody begins innocently enough, with a tranche-de-vie portrait of well-to-do Asian America and its model youth. The movie is set in suburban southern California, shot through pans that draw out its long grid-like lines, through close-ups of barred gates, and through tracking shots that move down deadly uniform streets. This is a world of dull perfection, in which sunshine, affluence, and blandness make up the habitat of the model minority as we think we know it. At the heart of the film is Ben, and the trouble that ensues as he tires of good behavior and seeks out other ways of expressing himself. A series of establishing shots introduce Ben as a slave to Ivy League box-ticking: he spends his days perfecting his GPA, cramming his head with trivia for the quiz team, laboring at his basketball in order to look more rounded on application forms, working part-time at a fast-food outlet in an attempt to play the “poor and ethnic” card, and helping out as an interpreter at the local hospital to display his credentials as a worthy citizen. So far, so model minority. Ben’s life takes a different turn, however, when he encounters the Mephistophelian Daric, class valedictorian, editor of the school newspaper, and ostensibly an even more accomplished all-rounder than Ben. But Daric’s true interests lie in crime: low grade at first (supplying cheat sheets to classmates), but quickly graduating to graver misdemeanors (drugs, guns, and violence). Together with Virgil and Han—two mismatched cousins—Ben and his new friend begin a double life of vice and virtue that culminates in the killing of Steve, Ben’s rival for Stephanie, another superstudent whose bouncy cheerleading, matched by good grades and high ambitions, finds its sinister other life in occasional work as a porn actress and shoplifter. After the violence, the film ends ambiguously, with a return to the linear streets and neatly spaced residences of the suburb, but with Ben now in the company of Stephanie, his reward for a season of bad behavior (Figure 1).
It is tempting to read this tale of masks and morality as a satirical restaging of the model minority as myth. In many ways, the film works at this level, and a brief survey of the evolution of model minority discourse certainly points toward such an interpretation. As Robert G. Lee has observed, this most insidious of racial myths traces its genealogy back to the Cold War period, when the creation in official discourse of an Asian America that was “self-contained, safe, and politically acquiescent” acted as proof positive that immigration worked and that the United States was not racist. This Asian America was nurtured in the matrix of the quasi-Confucian family, a place where parental pressure and a Calvinist work ethic combined to almost alchemical effect. Indeed, the scholastic and professional achievements of Asian America continue to be so striking that for many ideologues this “community” points the way both for a directionless white middle class, and—more grandiloquently—for a U.S. global hegemony that is equally unsure of its bearings. Yet Lee is surely correct in noting that the “model minority can operate as the paragon of conservative virtues that all Americans should emulate only if Asian Americans remain like ‘us’ but utterly are not us.” And this mantle of ethnoracial otherness in which the Asian American wunderkind is cloaked (excluded from full membership in the national family) can all too easily be turned inside out and made the costume of the enemy. In this process of inversion, the very qualities that commend Asian America to the dominant culture—its tractability, unobtrusiveness, and diligence—become signifiers of the sinister in a narrative of racial fear and loathing. For Lee, this means the “model minority as gook”: the honor student who turns triad in Chinatown, and thus embodies “the popular Vietnam War trope of the female Viet Cong fighter emerging from a crowd of friendly

Figure 1. Ben gives his all at the basketball tryouts. He makes the team, only to spend the season on the bench as the token Asian (Paramount, 2003).
villagers to kill ... the American savior.” Through such expedient voltes-face, Asian America is made to carry the can for the trauma of Vietnam, the fallibility of the United States as superpower, and the post-Fordist hollowing-out of the American economic heartlands as capital has turned global and, more pertinently, Asian. Played straight, Ben and his friends present themselves as a flesh-and-blood, up-to-the-minute embodiment of this Janus-faced stereotype. Alternating metrically between “geek” and “gook,” their split subjectivity reaffirms hoary white fears about the inscrutability of the “Oriental,” the basic ontological sameness between Charlie Chan and Fu Manchu (typified by the fact that the white actor Warner Oland played both characters on film), and the danger of trusting in the yellow hope when the yellow peril is always lurking in offscreen space (Figure 2).32

But the stereotype is not played straight, of course, and the gook/geek gang seems instead to point to an Asian American masculinity that defies such absolutes. Thus, Ben, Daric, and Virgil do indeed excel academically, but Han is much more brawn than brains; the pushy parents who supposedly foster Asian American excellence are tactically wiped from the picture; and the desire to succeed is less Calvinist than brazenly self-seeking (“at least it’ll look good on my college app” is Ben’s favorite mantra). Certainly, the gang is criminal, but they have no links to organized tong violence, their sphere of operation is an Orange County high school rather than the occult underworld of Chinatown, and they could scarcely care less about America’s geopolitical angst. Even more persuasive is the way in which the gang fuses the two disjoined halves of the model minority stereotype into a single subject position. Needless to say, any such fusion makes most sense as satire: the boys cannot be geeks because they are gooks, nor gooks because they are geeks, and the Jekyll and Hyde leitmotif is exposed as racist melodrama. Through this anti-syllogism, which enables Ben and his friends to be both “good” and “bad” Asians, often in a single scene, the absurdity of the stereotype is revealed at the same time as its “truth” is parodically affirmed. Thus, Ben’s first foray into crime is the suitably geeky provision of “cheat sheets.” At the end of the film, he is no career criminal, but still as college-bound as ever, and, although the gang may recast their aspirations (directing them at drugs, guns, and violence), they remain “Asian American” in the work ethic—even geekiness—that they bring to their criminality. Ultimately, the joke is on audiences who fail to see that Asian American masculinity is neither gook nor geek, but something else altogether (Figure 3).

Mimicry, Metacinema, and the Possibilities of Parody. Yet meaningful as it may be to read Better Luck Tomorrow as a content-based assault on the model minority myth, to do so is essentially to place it on a representational continuum with such films as Eat a Bowl of Tea, American Sons, and Chan is Missing. Seen as a tale of gooks and geeks, Better Luck Tomorrow becomes “ethnic,” a quirky example of the “educative representational mode,” a contribution to the Asian American “cinematic tradition.” It is minority as opposed to mainstream, content rather
than genre, and it is emphatically not “filmmaking.” As Jachinson Chan has noted, and his observations can be extrapolated to Asian America more generally, “the construction of a Chinese American male is inevitably bound by refuting, denying, or rejecting … stereotypes.” But the battle against stereotyping will always be a self-defeating one, for the simple reason that to resist a stereotype is to acknowledge, at a basic epistemological level, its representational power, even when the traits it describes are inverted or strategically misassigned. As Ron Eglash describes Asian American hip-hop and its attempt to negate “nerditude”: “The problem with this line of resistance is that, in the words of Donna Haraway, it is never enough to ‘simply reverse the semiotic values.’ Despite their identity violations, these figures of … cultural hybridity often reproduce the very boundaries they attempt to overcome: not surprising since they are focused on attaching the ‘wrong’ race to the ‘right’ identity.” Lin himself is quite clear on this point, corroborating it emphatically when he says that “This film is not a counter-comment on … stereotypes.” Nevertheless, this notion that Better Luck Tomorrow bashes stereotypical representation in order to “tell the truth” about the model minority is a prevalent one among reviewers, bloggers, and Web-based Asian American activists. And although these constituencies may also be intrigued by the film’s heavy-duty referencing of Hollywood cinema, they tend to see Lin’s borrowings as a matter of influence and inspiration rather than in terms of political protest. This brings us full circle back to mimicry and misappropriation, plagiarism and parody, and the ways in which Better Luck Tomorrow’s metacinematic character treads this fine line. Indeed, this balancing act is the key to the film, and to its success (or otherwise) at opening up the mainstream for Asian Americans while also staying critically clear-eyed about why access was foreclosed in the first place.
Even a casual observer would struggle to miss the point that *Better Luck Tomorrow* is promiscuous in its cinematic quotations, and from here the journey to parody is a short one. Multiple intertextuality is well understood as a marker of the parodic in metatexts, whether they are fictional, cinematic, or artistic: Patricia Waugh refers to this as “intertextual overkill,” while Stephen Mamber argues that Waugh’s “overkill could more properly be labeled massive annihilation by multiple warheads.” Either way, *Better Luck Tomorrow* exemplifies the trend. First and foremost, perhaps, the film plunders the norms and forms of the American teen movie, particularly in its 1980s and 1990s incarnations. Its ensemble of stock characters—the cheerleader (Stephanie), the comedic misfit (Virgil), the *capo mafioso* in the making (Daric), the suave but soulless rich boy (Steve), the secretly sensitive muscleman (Han), and the everyman hero who gets the girl (Ben)—immediately recalls the teen trilogy of director John Hughes’s 1980s heyday: both *The Breakfast Club* (1985) and *Pretty in Pink* (1986) are freely referenced here, and Virgil, Ben’s oversexed and goofy pal, looks like a sharply drawn spoof of Long Duk Dong, the butt of Hughes’s Orientalist racism in *Sixteen Candles* (1984). Just as seminal an influence is the nemesis of feel-good teen fare: Michael Lehman’s rebarbative and violent *Heathers* (1989). This satire on high-school life, with its mordant commentary on the sociology of cliques, privilege, and teenage criminality, provides a rich vein of inspiration for *Better Luck Tomorrow* and its musings on adolescent sociopathy. Some of the masculinized subgenres that fan out from the teen movie’s high-school hub also make their way into Lin’s film. The “party when the parents are away,” immortalized in Paul Brickman’s *Risky Business* (1983), finds new life in Daric’s quiz team prep night, a drunken free-for-all in which incorrect answers are punished by the compulsory downing
of several shots of liquor. Parental influence, as in Brickman’s original, is brushed
to the edges of the frame, except, perhaps, in the shallow focus shot that comes at
the end of the debauchery. Here, Ben vomits into the lavatory in a blurred back-
ground while the camera homes in on a cherished portrait of Daric as an angelic
child, brushed-up in his school uniform and wearing a beguilingly eager smile.
Rounding out the male teen repertoire is the coming-of-age road trip flick, in this
instance—predictably enough—to Las Vegas. In this extended sequence, the
four boys run amok in the casinos, share a run-down hotel room, and split the serv-
ices of a prostitute, their antics a copycat rerun of boys on tour elsewhere in the
Hollywood teen canon.  

The other major reference point for Lin’s parody is, of course, the “ethnic”
gangster movie in its various guises. Most obvious is the debt to Martin Scorsese’s
Goodfellas (1990). Freeze-framing, kinetic editing, and flashback structure flag
this debt stylistically, while the familiar conceit of the corpse who opens proceed-
ings reinforces this point through plot. Characterization makes the Scorsese con-
nection unmissable: Virgil is Tommy Devito, Daric plays Jimmy Conway—or even
crime lord Paulie—while Ben is Henry Hill himself, complete with laconic voice-
over narration. Scorsese’s influence is also faintly visible in the relationship be-
tween Ben and Virgil, whose mismatched but quixotic attachment recalls the
morally conflicted Charlie and the dangerous duty of friendship he shoulders for
the unbalanced Johnny Boy in Mean Streets (1973). On a different theme, the tra-
jectory of cocaine abuse, from easy confidence to strung-out hubris, recalls such
core gangster moments as Henry Hill’s last blast drug deal and Tony Montana in
Brian de Palma’s Scarface (1983), burying his face Nero-like in a mound of cocaine
while a gang of Bolivian assassins go on the rampage in his mansion. Less visually
obvious, but just as relevant, are John Singleton’s Boyz n the Hood (1991) and
Menace II Society (Albert Hughes and Allen Hughes, 1993). Certainly, the two
landmark films are referenced less reverentially, with crime becoming a lifestyle
choice for the protagonists of Better Luck Tomorrow—a respite from the rigors of
scholastic endeavor rather than a fate from which education provides the only
means of escape. Indeed, Lin himself has referred to the “urban gangsta mental-
ity” glibly assumed by “upper middle class kids” in search of recreation. But the
linkages between Los Angeles, ethnicity, and disaffected male youth are in many
ways the same, and all three films are alike in their attempt to obtain, on low budg-
ets, a high impact for “minority” groups.

The film’s use of allusion is doubtless more extensive than the above sketch
allows. Such is the “overkill,” in fact, that some observers of Better Luck Tomor-
row have accused it of being an overly obedient imitation that lacks any signature
of its own.  

Certainly, it is true that the film embodies Hutcheon’s claim that the
parodic impulse works in part to legitimize its representational prototype; yet as
Mamber reminds us, the crux of parody lies in its “simultaneous qualities of faith-
ful appropriation and vengeful revisionism.” Lin’s movie is less about the recital
of an encyclopedic list of influences than the bricolage effect that these influences

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collectively conjure, and it is in this notion of cinematic composite, of the filmic texture as an ironic collage of borrowings, that the messages of *Better Luck Tomorrow* are couched. Firstly, and most conspicuously, this is because each of the familiar cinematic paradigms discussed above has been more or less foreclosed to Asian Americans in the past. This point holds true most incontrovertibly for the teen movie and its various hybrids. As observed earlier, John Hughes drew fire for his brazenly racist depiction of the Chinese exchange student Long Duk Dong in *Sixteen Candles*, but more striking still, ironically enough, was his inclusion of an Asian character in the first place. By and large, the mainstream teen movie is a white, and usually middle-class, affair. From time to time, African Americans make a token appearance, usually to deepen the palette in cosmetic ways, or, much more rarely, to allude to more complex social issues. Asian Americans, on the other hand, have proved almost entirely surplus to the themes of sex, sport, delinquency, and social acceptance that drive this genre. Indeed, barring the occasional role as nerdy science student, kung-fu fanatic, or delivery boy, Asian Americans remain anonymous to the point of invisibility in the profitable teen market. Even a recent exception to this rule—*Mean Girls* (Mark Waters, 2004)—is merely grudging in its nod to the very real presence of Asian Americans in U.S. high schools. Near the beginning of the film, the heroine is pithily introduced to the politics of clique that rule her new school. This sequence, a montage of different cafeteria tables and their socially variegated occupants, picks out two species of Asian cliques: the Cool Asians and the Asian Nerds. Needless to say, neither makes a proper reappearance in the rest of the action.

To a lesser extent, this limited visibility of Asian Americans affects the crime movie too, although here the problems are rather more complex. If the teen flick is predominantly white and middle-class, then the “ethnic” gangster movie runs along equally fixed racial rails. From cinema’s earliest days, organized crime has been the screen métier of immigrant Americans, and a succession of ethnic gangsters—Irish, Jewish, Italian, Latino, and Black—have muscled their way onto the screen and into our understanding of what it takes to make the “American dream” a reality. Indeed, just as celluloid criminality has been tied in binding and emotive ways to certain ethnic groups—from *The Public Enemy* (William A. Wellman, 1931) through the Blaxploitation cycle to *The Sopranos*—so too has it tended to describe a fixed ideological arc. Throughout movie history, the gangster genre has been about migrants and minorities, the meaning of “whiteness,” and the proper—or improper—paths to consumer and class belonging. Thus, although James Craig Holte is surely right to observe that the “stereotype is that our gangsters are urban ethnics with stronger ties to an ethnic subculture than to the mainstream,” the truth which this stereotype conceals is that ethnic gangsterdom has always been about the nature of identity in an immigrant society. This is Martha P. Nochimson’s point when she notes that “At varying levels of consciousness, the gangster film draws the audience into a radical alliance with an inversion of the usual definitions of ‘like’ and ‘other,’ making American audiences adhere to the foreign.”
precisely through this process of inversion and adherence that a fuller, more intuitive—as opposed to taught—understanding of America as a melting pot is achieved. And it is this selfsame process of inversion and adherence that it is lacking in cinematic representations of Asian American criminality.

This is by no means to dispute that Asian Americans frequently play the gangster. On the contrary, shifting angst about the “Yellow Peril” has guaranteed Asian baddies regular screen time. As Ming the Merciless and Fu Manchu have given way to Banzai war criminals and the gooks of Indochina, who in their turn yield the stage to the tong guerrillas of Chinatown and the corporate warriors of Rising Sun (Philip Kaufman, 1993), the association between Asian Americans, crime, and fear has persisted in tenacious ways, even if the distinction between Asian and Asian American is typically elided. Jun Xing notes how the three wars America has fought on Asian soil keep the appetite to demonize whetted, and the Asian American gangster still functions as a key valve for this hostility. Indeed, the critical difference between these gangsters and their counterparts in other ethnicities hinges very neatly on emotional point of view. The Asian American gangster generally lies beyond the pale of sympathy, let alone identification; and the kind of modulated, slow-burn exposition of character and crime, nature and nurture, right and wrong, that is elaborated as Michael Corleone makes the decision to kill Solozzo in Francis Ford Coppola’s The Godfather (1972) finds scant equivalent among his Asian American counterparts.

Better Luck Tomorrow’s most obvious parodic move is to co-opt both these genres—the teen flick and the gangster movie—and to rescript, recast and reedit them for Asian America. This overhaul means transforming Asian American high-school students from extras into headliners, to the extent that there are no Caucasians in leading roles whatsoever. It also involves a representation of Asian American criminality that, from the voice-over to the details of the diegesis, breathes real subjectivity into Ben and his gang. The result is an aggressive grab on genre that transforms what Mamber terms “faithful appropriation” into “vengeful revisionism.” By slotting Asian American men into these well-worn cinematic models of masculinity, the film gestures powerfully to the absence of any established paradigms that they can call their own. Asian American men have to beg, borrow, and steal a presence on screen because the cultural hegemony continues to deny them more legitimate access. In this sense, Better Luck Tomorrow offers clear corroboration of Hutcheon’s point, cited earlier, about parody and the politics of representation. Continuity here is the familiar terrain of Hollywood genre, while difference stands for the Asian American “aliens” who have annexed this ground for their own purposes. By this rationale, the parodic energy of Better Luck Tomorrow lies in the friction generated between the two.

“Bad” Parody and Awkward Assimilations. This, at any rate, is the way things look from the outside in. From the inside out, however, parody of this sort can still seem a long way from sufficiently subversive. The stumbling block here,
unsurprisingly, is the question of ethnic authenticity. Over the past few decades, policy makers have regularly rolled out case studies of Asian American academic, entrepreneurial, and behavioral achievement as hard evidence that assimilation is indeed possible in the egalitarian, multiculturalist family of peoples that is the contemporary United States. Yet, this very rolling out is premised on racial difference that is rigidly invoked—and at the very moment that it is ostensibly denied. “Yellowness” is granted admission into America through the imitation of what the white hegemony sets down as good behavior, and is rewarded for this with the tag of model minority, a terminology that is, needless to say, all about racial difference. In this context, mimicry, even the most misappropriating kind, is a coping strategy that remains freighted with uncomfortable memories and connotations: however ironic its citations, however murderous its intertextuality, the stereotype of Asian American males as obedient, tractable, and good in the classroom can make parody something of a dangerous game. The risk of being misread, of audiences seeing only the faithful appropriation and none of the revenge, is so real as to jeopardize the entire project of a “mainstream Asian American cinema.” Instead of squaring the circle, the film arguably becomes just another instance of imitative model minority behavior, in which violent heteromasculinity and bourgeois materialism are reaffirmed, and dominant culture norms are allowed to stick fast in their rut. This time, the model minoritarian role is performed via Hollywood cinema, where party going, drug taking, and even gun toting are as “American” as picket fences and living a better life than one’s parents. But the same sense of ethnorracial otherness, of Asian Americans being, to quote Lee again, “like ‘us’ but utterly … not us,” remains intact. Seen in this light, Better Luck Tomorrow might appear to have entered the mainstream—applauded by Ebert and Roeper, screened at Sundance, distributed by MTV—but it remains a traditional Asian American movie: cooler than The Joy Luck Club, but “ethnic” nonetheless.

Fortunately, the film is more self-aware than this and incorporates these problems of misreading into the very structure of its parody. For a start, the story line, as both teen flick and gangster movie, is consciously formulaic, with set pieces from both genres that elicit an instant sense of déjà vu. From prom night to cocaine nights, these scenes are hackneyed by design and are so precisely as a means of exploiting this sense of ethnorracial fissure between the familiarity of the scene and the Asian Americanness of those who act it out. As the movie steers its protagonists through such rites of passage as the road trip to Las Vegas, the nerves of prom night, and the gangster standoff, it reveals that they are young American guys in a wholly generic sense. Yet, at the same time, the very triteness of their impersonation makes them look like crude, counterintuitive stand-ins for the real thing. Here, in other words, is a calculated invitation to misreading, an exemplary rendering of parody as gamble. Rather than pinching generic turf with panache, the maneuver is clunky and courts audience disapproval: as Mamber puts it, by “Risking comparison to the originals, [such] films can easily be thought of as ‘bad’ by the unparody-minded, a risk openly engaged.”48 Through the very staginess of
the way it takes Asian American rights to mall-and-MTV masculinity for granted—and without any quarter being given, even vestigially, to the traditional markers of ethnicity—Better Luck Tomorrow ironically reenacts the reluctance of the watching public to let actors and directors shrug off the ethnic tag.

In this, the film achieves some success, as my personal experience of teaching Better Luck Tomorrow in a course on Asian American film bears out. On one memorable occasion, a normally shy and quiet white student who had grown up in Orange County became furiously animated as she told the class that the Asians in her high school “just weren’t like that.” The student’s reaction, which seemed puzzling even to her in its vehemence, stemmed perhaps from an instinctive discomfort at the particular way in which her prejudices were being played. A notorious example of this selfsame tendency is the reaction of a viewer at the film’s screening at Sundance, who leapt up indignantly during a Q&A session to demand of Lin why he had portrayed his “community” in such a damaging light. In a significant step for the film’s later success, the well-known mainstream critic Roger Ebert, who was also in attendance, jumped to Lin’s defense by quipping to the accuser that the latter would never have made such a comment to a “white filmmaker.” Nevertheless, reactions of this kind crop up right across industry reviews of the film. Critic Brian Mackay is just as vexed as my student, and without quite knowing why, when he storms that, “You could have replaced everyone in this movie with the cast of some lily-white show like Dawson’s Creek and nobody would notice the difference.” Yet Mackay’s insistence that the cast should act more “yellow” is, of course, precisely why the movie has something to tell him. Indeed, the awkwardness with which Ben and his gang act “white” is a joke not on them but on those audiences that prefer ethnicity to be served up straight and stereotyped. A closer look at an extended two-part sequence midway through the film clarifies this point.

The sequence begins with Ben, Daric, Virgil, and Han crashing a house party hosted by a classmate. The gang slip invisibly and without acknowledgement through the throng, the camera in pursuit as Lin stages an ironic retake of the celebrated scene in Goodfellas when Henry Hill arrives with great pomp at a local Italian restaurant and the assembled diners smile their deferential welcome. Looking jumpy in this teenage setting, the gang take up their post in the corner while a drunken Virgil throws up in the bushes. Before long, a group of white jocks begin to taunt them: “Bible study’s next door,” quips one, while another refers mockingly to Ben as the “Chinese Jordan.” Already at this point in the sequence, it is the gang’s liminal status—the sense in which they flit uneasily between identities—that strikes the dominant note. This liminality finds its special visual signal in the selfsame green letterman jackets worn by both Daric (for tennis) and his jock tormentor. Each aspires to social recognition through sportsmanship, yet as the jock points out with something close to real indignation, “you got to play a real sport to wear that jacket.” This anger at Daric’s perceived trespass of turf reenacts, at the microcosmic level of plot, reactions to the more wholesale raid
on the teen genre that Lin is attempting with *Better Luck Tomorrow* in the macro-cosm. The jock, like the genre, furiously resists the Asian American attempt to claim squatters’ rights. Denied entry into the teen world of beer and house parties, Daric is forced to slip roles, metaphorically shrugging off the letterman jacket in favor of something harder. Pushing roughly past the jocks, he provokes a physical confrontation, and when the fight does not go his way, he pulls his gun. At this point, Lin abandons the teen movie for gangsterdom, the generic mode that will hold sway throughout the latter part of the sequence. Thrown by this sudden switch of genres, the jock, who was more than happy to bully while his screen reality was the teen movie, crumples in terror as Daric and Virgil rain down blows. His assailants meanwhile revel in their new identity, that of angry ethnic outsider whose violence, unlike that of the clean-cut white boy, is for real. Jerky camera movement and unexpected angles convey both the tentative, unpracticed nature of the violence and, just as importantly, a sense of transition, as the genre shifts bumpily from teen movie to gangster flick (Figure 4).

Yet as the sequence progresses, Lin’s Asian American cast quickly finds that gangsterhood is just as tricky as the equally scripted scenes of pubescent hedonism that came before. Escaping to Han’s ultimately American red Mustang after the fight, the gang speed off into the night to test-drive their new identity. Carried out to the accompaniment of rap music and Virgil’s hyperkinetic reliving of the violence just past, this sloughing of skins begins well enough. Before long, however, the camera starts to hint at failure, as the passing streetlights play in chiaroscuro patterns on their faces, mirroring their awkward hold on the roles they play. Suddenly, the rap playing on the radio is drowned out by a harder hip-hop as another car draws level: inside are the “real thing,” four gangbangers of uncertain ethnicity who square up to Ben and his friends in a frightening standoff. A series of close-up match cuts of the eight faces follows, as the camera darts between the unease of Ben, Han, and Daric and the menace of the four men in the other car. The realization that they are outclassed by real gang members with real attitude is driven home by the huge semianemonic that one of their counterparts brandishes; Daric’s revolver looks like a child’s toy beside it. Only Virgil remains oblivious, his babbling falsetto distracting him from the bass that booms out from the other car. Yet eventually he, too, realizes that the game is up, as his adrenalin ebbs away and he is seized by panic about what his father will do if he discovers the incident at the party. As the other car pulls away in disgust at the gang’s failure to act tough, the boys find themselves back where they started: outsiders with no party to go to, no role to play, and no mainstream cinematic genre in which they are allowed to appear except under sufferance (Figs. 5 and 6).

Indeed, the gist of this sequence lies in the multilayered nature of its parody. Both the jocks and the gangbangers are at once creatures of the diegesis on the one hand and code words within the grander language of metacinema on the other: just as they close ranks against Ben’s gang in the narrative, so too, in the metatext, do they work as ciphers for the difficulty of getting Asian Americans into the
“Get out of our movie,” say the well-to-do white teens and the downbeat ethnic hoodlums to the Asian American cinematic wannabes. Disappointingly, perhaps, the gang duly doff their caps and leave. Yet, their failure to crash both the party and the genre constitutes, in fact, the core of this film’s parodic protest. As the film’s protagonists act out the struggles of Asian American cinema to shrug off the ethnic label and wear the neutral, branded garb of their peers instead, *Better Luck Tomorrow*—its director, its cast, and much of its crew—make a series of interlocking statements, at different levels of the diegetic and extradiegetic worlds, about the rules of racial engagement that continue to operate in Hollywood cinema. As such, the film becomes a textured, reflexive critique that articulates the indignation of the Asian American filmmaking community as much as that of “Asian America” itself (wherever, whatever it may be), and that speaks to Hollywood as directly as it does to society at large. And if, as suggested earlier, Hollywood is America, then that critique is cleverly directed.

Yet despite its ingenuity, *Better Luck Tomorrow* is perhaps only partially successful in its attempt to join the mainstream while remaining ethnically, and ethically, uncompromised. This is because, when viewed as a piece, the film comes altogether too close to reenacting what is perhaps the central contradiction of the model minority discourse as it has evolved over the past few decades. As Robert G. Lee puts it, the gaping hole at the core of this discourse is “the contradiction between the continuing reproduction of racial difference and the process of ethnic assimilation.” At first sight, of course, *Better Luck Tomorrow* sets itself against this enduring contradiction: its strategic use of “bad” parody—the Asian Americans who can never fit in however hard they try—is all about this pernicious inconsistency. Yet perhaps it is Lin’s very anger at this double bind that leads him
unconsciously to replicate it. Indeed, although the movie sets itself up—and in many ways delivers—as a critique of a nation and an entertainment industry that forces Asian Americans to “remain like ‘us’ but utterly … not us,” Better Luck Tomorrow can seem just as reluctant to grant access to flesh-and-blood, three-dimensional identity to its racial “others.”

For a start, crude ethnic stereotypes recur across the film. The jocks and gangbangers familiar to us from the sequence just described are White and non-White in an axiomatic, *a priori* way, with the White jock as dumb as the non-White gangbangers are thuggish. And the blonde girl with whom Steve two-times Stephanie is referred to unblinkingly in the credits as “Steve’s Barbie.” Then there is the casting and delineation of the protagonists themselves, which suggest a definition of what constitutes Asian America, and Asian Americans, that is disappointingly circumscribed. By and large, “Asian American” means “Chinese American” or “Korean American” in Better Luck Tomorrow, and even the film’s major nod to a broader ethnic base in the shape of Ben, who is possibly of Filipino descent, is oddly compromised by the casting of a Chinese American actor (Parry Shen) in the role.53 Moreover, Ben, Daric, Virgil, Han, and Stephanie (despite her White adoptive family) all interact, through choice, with other Asian Americans, and while high school life might force them to weave a broader net of sociability (Stephanie with her fellow cheerleaders, Ben with his baseball team, Daric with his protégés in the academic decathlon), business, love, sex, death, and the rituals of male bonding are all conducted within a tight ethnic nexus. This is why, of course, Steve’s other girl can only be his “Barbie”—plastic, disposable, and identikit when contrasted with Stephanie and her racially authentic charms. As part of the same process, subjectivity, point of view, and sympathetic camera angle are an exclusively Asian American preserve in Better Luck Tomorrow, from Ben’s first-person voice-over downwards. If not quite othered in racial terms, everyone else in the film is wallpaper, a truth that is elegantly revealed in the montage near the end of the film when Ben sits in solemn solitary confinement at his cafeteria table while his peers, filmed in either fast or slow motion, pass in a depersonalized flow of human traffic before him. If it seems counterintuitive for a movie that, at base, is about the language of prejudice to make its bimbos blonde, its sportsmen White (except, of course, for the basketball team), its gangsters from somewhere south of the border, and its Asian Americans ethnically East Asian, then perhaps we can look to the film’s transitional status for an explanation.

**Conclusion: Whither Parody?** Certainly, developments since the release of Better Luck Tomorrow seem to point to a maturing momentum in the use of metacinematic parody as a strategy for Asian Americans in the movie industry. Better Luck Tomorrow’s most obvious heir apparent in this regard must surely be Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle, Danny Leiner’s gross-out comedy of 2004. In it, Harold (a Korean American investment banker) and his friend Kumar (an Indian American trying to dodge medical school) share an apartment, a marijuana
hobby, and a flippant attitude to the entire business of being Asian American. The action of the movie follows them on a grail-like Friday night trek across New Jersey as they hunt down the perfect munchies: the burgers at White Castle fast food restaurant. Silly and scatological, the film is an entertaining amalgam of the stoner/buddy/road trip movie, in which Harold and Kumar (like their predecessors in *Better Luck Tomorrow*) assume the stock genre roles more usually inhabited by Caucasian actors, and in a manner that is just as artfully blasé. In similar fashion to Lin’s earlier film, in fact, *Harold and Kumar* is cinema about cinema. The movie references the norms and forms of mainstream entertainment in quick-fire, compulsive fashion only to undercut its homage by giving representationally disenfranchised Asian Americans center stage.

Yet unlike *Better Luck Tomorrow*, *Harold and Kumar* no longer needs to “fail” in its grab on mainstream cinematic genre, nor, for that matter, to tread carefully around the minefield of race relations for fear of looking too ethnic. Instead, the film portrays two protagonists so at home as young American guys, and so confident about starring in mainstream Hollywood cinema, that Leiner’s intertextual overkill has a different role to play. For a start, and in contrast to the surface side-stepping of race-as-issue that we see throughout *Better Luck Tomorrow*, allusive reappropriations of the racist gesture abound. This process begins with the promotional material for the movie, which refers to John Cho and Kal Penn, the actors who play Harold and Kumar respectively, as “that Asian guy from *American Pie* and that Indian guy from *Van Wilder.*” The drive to reappropriate continues with Harold’s post-identity, merrily un-PC obsession with John Hughes’s *Sixteen
Candles, before it hits a high note when a gang of neighborhood racists calls Kumar “Apu” (the Indian convenience store owner in The Simpsons), only for him to chant Apu’s catchphrase, “Thank you, come again,” right back at them.

All in all, in fact, racial representation in Harold and Kumar is a far less labored affair. Color is much closer to being truly incidental—as opposed to secretly all-defining—to the point, in fact, that the film does not shirk from showing that prejudice can be the sin of Asian Americans as much as it is the cross they have to bear. Thus, Kumar may think he is taking a swipe at self-ghettoization when he dubs a group of nerdy Korean American students at Princeton the “Joy Luck Club”—yet he and Harold find themselves on the butt end of the joke when the geeks turn out to be far naughtier hedonists than they are themselves. Putting a Korean American together with an Indian American as the buddy pairing also suggests a progression from the ethnic cliqueishness of Better Luck Tomorrow. What is more, when Harold “gets the girl,” she is not an Asian American at all but rather his Latina next-door neighbor, who shares his enthusiasm for John Hughes. As anger yields to levity, and a willingness to send up racism instead of railing against it, the film begins to embody the parodic impulse, with its light but killer touch, far more comfortably than Better Luck Tomorrow. The strong residue of resentment that tinges Lin’s film and seeps through into his depiction of race is absent here. Instead, the movie displays a throwaway attitude to prejudice that is ultimately far more disarming. Perhaps most crucial of all in this regard is the intertextual impertinence to which the Asian American cinematic tradition is subjected in Leiner’s film, particularly in the choice moment when Leiner gently lampoons Better Luck Tomorrow for being a touch too earnest in its desire to claim a space.

Figure 6. The night takes a further turn for the worse when Ben and his friends find themselves face-to-face with more “authentic” gangsters (Paramount, 2003).
for Asian America. This sly nod occurs in the opening scene of the movie as Harold drives despondently home after being dumped on by his lazy White boss. He finally arrives home, only to have his parking space (here, a metaphor for his beleaguered representational rights) pinched by a trio of White thugs in an SUV, who inform him that “This is America, dude, learn how to drive,” before mockingly wishing him “Better luck tomorrow” and flashing him their middle digits.

The most obvious point here is that John Cho also played the role of Steve in Lin's film, but far more important is the cheerful effrontery with which Harold and Kumar incorporates Better Luck Tomorrow into its satirical project. After all, if Asian American cinema can be parodied alongside Sixteen Candles and The Simpsons, then surely—at last—it is on its way to arriving.

Notes
1. Long-standing reservations about the appropriateness of the term “Asian American” have only gathered pace in recent decades as the diversity of this broad-based constituency has grown, and this semantic quagmire becomes even murkier when we come to define “Asian American cinema.” Peter X. Feng has written in illuminating ways on this subject, observing first of all that consensus on what the term means is lacking, and will remain so until “a significant and vocal number of film critics, festival programmers, filmmakers, and audience members agree that there are some movies which are Asian American—and some movies which are not.” Feng then proceeds to the more targeted debate over Asian American filmmakers versus Asian American films, a point of contention that has only sharpened as ethnically Asian American directors have begun to move away from culturally Asian American material to make films as varied, and as well-received, as Wayne Wang's Smoke (1995), and Ang Lee's Brokeback Mountain (2005). Yet at the same time, few dispute that a preoccupation with Asian American lives continues to operate as the core definitional criterion. As Lane Ryo Hirabayashi puts it, Asian American films capture “the historical and the contemporary, the ostensibly traditional and the hybrid, and the local and the transnational dimensions of Asian America from the points of view of those who have actually lived the experiences” (emphasis in the original). This definition is, of course, still far from fail-safe. Feng summarizes the problems succinctly when he asks: “given the ethnic diversity of Asian Americans; given the divide between content-based and authorship-based definitions of Asian American Cinema; and given the shifts in modes of production from the Sixties to the Nineties, is it at all possible to speak of a coherent Asian American Cinema?” These reservations notwithstanding, some working definition of Asian American cinema is essential for the discussion that follows; and here I borrow Judi Nihei's pithy précis — quoted by Feng — that Asian American cinema is “Asian American stories through the eyes of Asian American filmmakers,” with the additional proviso that it should feature a significant Asian American cast. See Feng, “In Search of Asian American Film,” Cineaste 21/1-2 (1995): 32–6; and Hirabayashi, “Preface,” in Jun Xing, Asian America Through the Lens. History, Representations and Identity (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 1998), 10.


3. Gina Marchetti provides an illuminating study of these stereotypes in her book Romance and the “Yellow Peril”: Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). According to Marchetti,
cinematic examples of geisha girls include *My Geisha* (Jack Cardiff, 1962) and *An American Geisha* (Lee Phillips, 1986), while *Year of the Dragon* (Michael Cimino, 1985) depicts both dragon ladies and China dolls; versions of Madame Butterfly can be found in *China Gate* (Samuel Fuller, 1957) and *The Lady from Yesterday* (Robert Day, 1985); and white knights make their Asian conquests in *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing* (Henry King, 1955) and *The World of Suzie Wong* (Richard Quine, 1960).

4. The situation on TV is more complex, with arguably a wider range of roles available, although convenience store owners, doctors, and computer geeks have traditionally tended to predominate. A further problem relates to the prevalence of TV series set in cities with significant Asian American populations, such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York, which feature lamentably few Asian faces. Recently, however, there has been a distinct shift in this tendency as mainstream series such as *Grey's Anatomy*, *Gilmore Girls*, *Lost*, *The Office*, *E.R.*, *Crossing Jordan*, *Numbers*, and *Battlestar Galactica* have begun to cast Asian Americans in key roles.


6. Critics such as Daniel Y. Kim go a step further and argue that this feminizing racism expresses itself through metaphors of homosexuality. See his *Writing Manhood in Black and Yellow: Ralph Ellison, Frank Chin, and the Literary Politics of Identity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

7. Born in Taipei and raised in Buena Park, California, Lin made his solo debut as director and writer with *Better Luck Tomorrow*. Most of the work on the movie was completed while he was a graduate student at UCLA: Kodak donated the film, and ten maxed-out credit cards met the other expenses. Lin's toil was rewarded when the film was screened at Sundance, won a distribution deal with MTV films, and garnered both audience and critical plaudits. More recent films by the director include *Annapolis* (2006) and *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift* (2006).


11. Quoted in Feng, “In Search of Asian American Film,” 33.


16. Cynthia Fuchs, “‘It’s Three-Dimensional’: Interview with Justin Lin,” *PopMatters*, April 2003, http://www.popmatters.com/film/interviews/lin-justin-030411.shtml (accessed on September 8, 2006). Despite Lin's vehemence on this point, it is worth remembering that the same institution of “Asian American film” that he critiques for being “preachy or educational” also functions as an enabler of cultural production in the form of festivals and grants that specifically assist this niche industry, Lin's work included.


18. Fuchs, “It’s Three-Dimensional.”
20. Recent examples of filmmaking about Asian American masculinity that are arguably aimed at an Asian American audience include: The Slanted Screen (dir. Jeff Adachi, 2006), Sentenced Home (dir. David Grabias and Nicole Newnham, 2005), and Only the Brave (dir. Lane Nishikawa, 2005).
21. The term “GenerAsian X” refers to members of Generation X raised in the United States and Canada who are of Asian ethnicity. Justin Lin and Quentin Lee’s co-directed feature, Shopping for Fangs (1997), is often seen as the poster movie of this emerging identity.
30. Ibid., 183. Anne Anlin Cheng, meanwhile, examines the internal toll that this kind of fake assimilation, or “inauthentic performance,” takes on minority subjects themselves. Her work on race and fantasy explores “how the internalization of the other holds profound subjective effects … (since) to racially assimilate … implies an act of private and subjective dissimulation.” See Cheng, “Race and Fantasy in Modern America: Subjective Dissimulation/Racial Assimilation,” in Multiculturalism and Representation, ed. John Bieder and Larry E. Smith (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1996), 188.
32. David L. Eng makes a similar point when he observes that the yellow peril and the model minority “are not opposite phenomena; indeed, they exist on the same material and psychic continuum.” See Eng, Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001), 203.
35. Fuchs, “It’s Three-Dimensional.”
36. This tends to be the view propounded on key Web sites and e-zines such as Angry Asian Man and AsianZine.
38. Lin, discussing what has influenced him cinematically, goes so far as to describe himself as a “film school geek” who “wanted to make an ‘MTV film.’” See Fuchs, “It’s Three-Dimensional.”

39. This point is reinforced by the DVD cover, which refers to the protagonists in generic terms as “the boyfriend” (Steve), “the beauty” (Stephanie), “the overachiever” (Ben), “the mastermind” (Daric), “the clown” (Virgil), and “the muscle” (Han).

40. Up to a point, of course, the trip to Vegas can be seen as a straightforward instance of gender performativity, à la Judith Butler, in which the boys are enacting their masculinity by imitating the movies as much as they are artfully parodying the conventions of teen cinema.


43. Mamber, “In Search of Radical Metacinema,” 86.


46. Jun Xing, Asian America Through the Lens, 57.


50. For some audiences, the gangbangers are Filipino-American, while for others they are Latino. For examples of each, see Philip W. Chung, “Fifty Memorable Moments,” AsianWeek, November 7, 2003; and Manohla Dargis, “Death of the ‘Model Minority,’” Los Angeles Times, April 11, 2003.


52. Lee, Orientals, 183.

53. Steve is a Korean American.