

## Flippin?: Contemporary Filipino-American Stand-up Comedy and Abjection as a Tactic of In/exclusion

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### Abstract

The rise of new, multicultural stand-up comics in the United States appears to have created new spaces for the presentation of long-peripheralised ethnic groups in the country. Deploying the observational humour, a signal contribution of American stand-up comedy, the stand-up comedy acts of contemporary Filipino-American comic artists provide a refocusing on Filipinos, on the Philippines, on Filipino migration to the United States, and on Filipino-American hybrid practices. Thus, they grant force and leverage to Filipino-Americans as a potent American ethnic group, especially as we consider the fact that they constitute the second-largest Asian-American group in the US. Based on this background, this paper aims to interrogate the re/de/constructions of the Philippines and Filipino-ness as transnational ideations that are sifted through the performance of these Filipino-American experiences in stand-up comedy across multimedia streams. It will focus on the contemporary stand-up comic act by Jo Koy, currently one of the most ubiquitous and famous of Filipino-American stand-up comics. Thus, to examine the Filipino/Philippines as transnational originary, and Filipino-American-ness as a nexus of these transnational traffics, the paper will use Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, supported by John Limon's adoption and critique of this concept in his reference to stand-up comedy and humour.

### Keywords

Stand-up comedy, observational humour, abjection, charged humour, interpretive tensions

### Introduction

Our entry into this study of Filipino-American stand-up comedy demands that we first look into the complex connection of humour to multiculturalism, examining how multiculturalism has become the target of ridicule, and, conversely, how we can understand the way humour can bring about understanding between and among diverse cultural groups (Espey 4). We are

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delving into ways by which the collective “American” has meaning that impinges on individuals whose identities are constructed within marginal groups (Gillota *Stand-up Nation* 103). Timothy Parrish avers the possibility of exploring American identity “in ways that account for our cultural diversity and its consequences without insisting that we are all the same or denying that we share crucial ties that unite us as Americans” (in Gillota *Stand-up Nation* 103-104).

While Parrish offers an optimistic view of multicultural American identity flourishing in a post-9/11 world, Michael Albrecht, in his review of Ted Gournelos and Viveca Green’s *A Decade of Dark Humor: How Comedy, Irony, and Satire Shaped Post-9/11 America*, maintains the fact that race concerns became particularly noticeable as racial profiling came to the forefront of public discourse post 9/11, and humour is a tactic used to analyze this (E2-E3). Comedy’s extensive appeal, its tendency towards overkill, to magnify, to amplify tropes concerning race that almost always go unnoticed, to use the vernacular, “... get us to the ‘doing’ of race, how it is shared, and its role in producing and reflecting the messiness that characterizes sociability...” (Laguna 106).

The link between American humour and the “fascination and fear of social minorities” is seen distinctly throughout American history in a country in which stereotypes about immigrants as unfamiliar cultural groups recur in jokes and satirical material to exhibit the social unease felt by dominant populations (Michael 130). Albert Sergio Laguna puts it well when he states that “race is a kind of ‘American style’ of comedy at its core” (105). Jonathan Rossing’s work on what he calls “critical race humor” looks at this as “a form of potentially transformative public discourse where racial truths and criticisms are ‘artistically angled’ through humor...” (in Fitts- Fulmer and Makepeace 41). For Rossing, critical race humour functions to inquire into and to dispute by way of humour and its strategies, “institutionalized power dynamics, systemic issues around devoicing and marginalization, and complicated cultural ideologies” (41).

Asian Americans are among these devoiced and marginalised groups, long seen in the United States as “perpetual foreigners,” (Jung 55), even while they have been inscribed within the “model minority myth” which perpetuates the misleading “triumphant tales of professional success and educational attainment, privileging individualism and ethnic assimilation as desirable alternatives to collective political activism” (Diffrient 41). Josephine D. Lee raises, too, the view of Asian Americans as “a potential traitor or an economic threat” whose intrinsic characteristics conflict with the American identity (292), and perceived inability of Asian immigrants and their progeny to achieve full assimilation (293).

Even the term “Asian American” is problematic because it was coined as a way to oppose earlier epithets such as “Oriental” or “Mongoloid” to refer to members of this minority group, and is meant to engender unity among Asian American ethnic groups, but Filipino Americans, South Asian Americans, and

Southeast Asian Americans have consistently verbalised that they are excluded from this pan-ethnic community (Nadal 2-3). Filipino Americans are discriminated against even within the Asian American movement as they are seen to be “‘not Asian enough’... stereotyped as inferior or uncivilized, or being completely overlooked or excluded altogether...” (3).

This paper, therefore, seeks to examine how contemporary Filipino-Americans are made visible, and are granted force and leverage as a potent American ethnic group in 21<sup>st</sup> century America, through one of the most popular cultural performance forms that currently encourage new, multicultural voices in America, stand-up comedy. We are looking at this new mode of comic performance in which the deployment of observational humour allows us insight to how Filipino practices and cultural stances are seen in the context of contemporary Americanness as part of a specific multicultural group. This examination of the linkage between humour and race in America, and this inscription of the comic within the operations of American multiculturalism, is germane to Asians and to Asian cultures because “twenty million Asian Americans can trace their ancestral origins to over twenty countries in East, Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent” (Tran).

That “Asia and the Pacific region is home to more than 260 million indigenous people, making up 70 percent of the global indigenous population in the world...” (Tran) means that the political and discursive constructions that develop in this American domestic space reaffirm, themselves in the transnational public sphere (Jin 24). Asia, as a transnational domain is the nexus and the originary point of this migration into the United States, and Asian Americans who are seen as part of “U.S. ... minorities,” and who are deemed to be “part of the Third World” are the “racialized manifestation [of] the U.S. nation state” (24). This study of Filipino American stand-up comedy and its multicultural ramifications within the United States, and the way this also redounds to a Filipino, or an Asian, viewing public, not less a global audience, is a very specific instance of “the many intersections of U.S. expansion into Asia and its management of racialized Asian bodies” (25), thus proving how American history, and the place of Asian Americans in it, is not confined to a “one single national space...”, but have “multiple beginnings in Asia-U.S. interactions” (25).

### **On stand-up comedy**

To comprehend the potency of this comic performance and the place that comic artists of colour, with particular focus on Filipino American standup artists, have wrested in this current popular art form, we need to delineate the development, and the characteristics of, standup comedy. Stephanie Kozinski Olson cites Lawrence Mintz, who defines standup comedy as “an encounter between a single, standing performer who behaves comically and says humorous things to an audience without much use of costume, props, or setting” (110).

The term “stand-up” entered general usage in the 1950s when stand-up comedy began as a performance structure in the United States (Daube 1, 3). With its roots in early comic performance forms such as vaudeville and burlesque, even the performance of comic monologues in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century consists of “solo joke-telling appeared on-stage alongside songs, skits, dancing, juggling, magic, animal acts, and more” (3).

The turn of stand-up comedy to the “realm of the topical” did not come until the Civil Rights era with the “stand-up’s style and subject matter... inextricably linked to issues of race, ethnicity and the production of identity” (1). The remaking of this comic performance in contemporary America engenders laughter by way of the presentation of the stand-up comic’s personal life, thus becoming a “performance of personhood” (2).

This discussion of personhood lies within the greater American valuing of individualism, the belief in one’s natural rights, and in the potency to conquer hardship, primarily by way of a strong work ethic (Gillota *Stand-up Nation* 103). However, one controversial view of this much-vaunted individualism is that, these American individuals also identify themselves as members of particular groups within the nation, groups for which rights and opportunities may be withheld and denied, issues that surfaced prominently during the Civil Rights period (103). Tim Parrish states that earlier conceptions of cultural uniqueness attributed to individuals have now shifted to distinct ethnic and cultural groups (qtd. in Gillota *Stand-up Nation* 103). Stand-up performance becomes an illustration of this national inquiry into identity politics and into the issues of individualism and collectivity, as the stand-up comics “may position themselves as spokespersons for “everybody” or for the entire nation (even as they claim individuality)”, while others “represent the point-of-view of a particular demographic defined by race, gender, class, or sexual orientation,” and therefore, stand-up comics are “in a constant negotiation between individual expression and group interest” (103).

De Pasquale and Lewis noted the evolution of American comedy from “a slapstick, rehearsed style to an underground counterculture movement, to the improvised, subversive, spontaneous style we see today” (60). Improvisation in comic performance seeped into contemporary stand-up routines---the series of personal anecdotes a stand-up comic narrates as part of his or her act appear unrelated and invented on the spot.

These one-time scenarios in improvisational comedy correspond to the stand-up material marked by **observational humour**, in which “there are few formal jokes; the audience is instead expected to laugh in recognition as the comedian points out minor absurdities or annoyances of daily life: lost car keys, rude airline attendants, traffic, etc.” (Gillota *Beyond Liveness* 56). Iain Macrury expands this by saying that “stand-ups represent losses and deprivations, including the real and imagined traumatic frustrations of life... social rejection

or a bad-hair day... in which the existential psychic clutter of everyday struggle is at once grasped tightly, then overcome, let go and shared” (189). And it does this by centering on everyday humour, what is also called lay humour (Stebbins 1). Stebbins’ use of the term “lay” assumes a general population or a public who are able to tune in and to ally themselves to the groups and classes for whom the stand-up comic acts as a spokesperson, who identifies with the “intimate understanding of the everyday world of ‘their people’ and what it is like to be treated maliciously by outsiders” (2).

The assumption of common experiences of incongruity and disruption engenders a sense of “social solidarity” (Hall in De Pasquale and Lewis 69), and allows humour to function as an intervention for survival, a way to deal with the severities of life (69).

### **On abjection**

The concept of abjection is another integral concept in our examination of Filipino-American stand-up comedy. Maggie Hennefeld and Nicholas Hammond, in their introduction to the book *Abjection Incorporated: Mediating the Politics of Pleasure and Violence*, rightly note the current emphasis on “one’s own social persecution and economic dehumanization,” conditions that we have underscored as being integral to the self-mockery and self-deprecation that standup comics draw upon to signal their “status as outcast” (1). This marginalisation is due to “race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, [and] nationality” and characterises “a wounded identity”, and “abjection is its lingua franca” (1-2).

Bernard Alan Miller speaks of the abject to mean “literally to cast aside or eliminate,” and then relates this to Julia Kristeva’s definition of the abject, who speaks of it as “what is intrusive and disruptive, ‘what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules’... the ‘eruption of the real’ enter[ing] into our lives” (323). The term “abject” as a concept came into critical use with Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. One significant way to reckon with abjection is to see this from a biological perspective (Jay 237). The body is the principal locus of the abject (Foster 112), and therefore refers to bodily effluvia such as “excrement, pus, menstrual blood, mucus, vomit” that look forward to ultimate corporeal decay as a corpse (Jay 237). These images “tend toward a representation of the body turned inside out, the subject literally abjected, thrown out” (Foster 112).

Another important substantiation of the abject is in cultural manifestations such as in “tabooed food, incestuous sexuality, violent crime, and religious notions of abomination and sacrilege, in anything, in fact, that threatens rigid boundaries and evokes powerful fears of filth, pollution, contamination and defilement” (Jay 237). Kristeva explains, however, that it is not the absence of wellness or hygiene that creates the abject, but the agitation of “an identity, a

system, an order; that which does not respect limits, places or rules” (Kristeva and Lechte 127). The abject, then, occupies a state of the self being expelled.

Judith Butler speaks of the “abject realm” as functioning “as a ‘threat and disruption’; it is not only the pathologised outside, ‘perpetual failure,’ but also a ‘critical resource’ in the struggle to renegotiate cultural norms” (in Jarenski 89) and the abject constitutes the “‘unlivable’ and ‘uninhabitable’ zones of social life,” with this “zone of uninhabitability” comprising the definitive boundary of the subject’s sphere (Larson 551). It pays to note John Limon’s reiteration of the term “abjection” here: “By abjection [...] I mean [first...] what everybody means: abasement, groveling prostration” and “standup [sic]” concurrently erects abjection and misses the opportunity to meet with it, and therefore comedy becomes “a way of avowing and disavowing abjection” (qtd. in Lee, R. 112). Limon posits, in pursuing Kristeva’s definition of abjection, that “the person who is ‘beset by abjection’... puts on daily infradramas, actor before audience and vice versa. [One is] after all, literally beside [one]self, watching [one’s] faculties: desire, for example, “... play unaccustomed roles.... [The] abjected subject is caught in a vortex,” which Limon notes as the “flux... of will and victimage” (72). It is in this performativity of abjection that we find an intimate linkage between stand-up comedy and the presentation of selves so intrinsically knit.

These “infradramas” in which Limon notes the exhibition of the abject, and which we emplace within the observational humor that marks standup comedy, instantiate the intersections of marginality in which the body is actually reckoned as non-normative. The identification of the body’s, or the self’s, ruptures, or experiences with rupture and brokenness, highlight the state of absurdity and abjection and is made evident in the standup comic artist’s performance of the narratives of her or his life. These narratives are “...constructions with purposes... they aren’t simply anecdotes...”, but are now seen as constitutive of an “...autobiography [that] is an “...*imaginative*, rather than transparent, mimesis of the life as lived” (Olney in Lucian). This deliberation in creating a world that both mirrors and abstracts the hybridised self of the standup comic of color consciously shapes this autobiographical self’s tactics of inclusion in the American mainstream, while at the same time elucidating how these same tactics demonstrate the self’s peripheralisation and disengagement from both the dominant social structure, and even more surprisingly, from the Asian/Filipino originary communities.

### **Filipino-American stand-up comedy: The case of Jo Koy**

The stand-up comedy routine by Jo Koy is a prime example of the comic narrativisation of this imagined abject self. Jo Koy is perhaps, at the moment, the only Filipino-American stand-up comic who has shot to prominence in Hollywood, a feat very few Asian-Americans achieve. He currently has a planned single-camera sitcom based on the life of a hardworking Filipino American nurse

whose mother moves in with him, under development at ABC, provisionally titled “Josep” (Zorilla), after Jo Koy’s real name, Joseph Glenn Herbert. The elements of this new show borrow heavily from the focus of Jo Koy’s own stand-up comedy specials. In addition to this planned television show, a film entitled “Easter Sunday,” inspired by his life, and produced by Amblin, Steven Spielberg’s production company, is now in post-production (Pastor). Prior to this, his Comedy Central shows, *Don’t Make Him Angry* (2009) and *Lights Out* (2012) ([www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)) and Netflix-produced shows *Live From Seattle* (2017), *Comin’ In Hot* (2019), and in 2020, *Jo Koy: In His Elements* (Ramos) were all very well-received.

That Jo Koy has arrived at this level of fame is belied by his “[being] in the comedy game for over three decades” (Ramos), before his show *Live from Seattle* was bought by Netflix in 2017. In an article on Jo Koy, Dino Ray Ramos notes that despite the many years of experience as a stand-up artist, he was refused by Netflix, and what was particularly galling was that “he would see comedians who opened for him land specials.” Jo Koy adds:

‘Imagine being in my shoes,’ he points out. ‘I was doing standup before these motherf\*\*\*\*\* were born and I’m not even being looked at?! It was just killing me inside... but we all face obstacles. We all have to. You have a choice: you can go around the obstacle or you can let that obstacle stop you... watch *Live From Seattle* and you see me laughing and having a good time.... I was also broke.’  
(Ramos)

Jo Koy’s persistence in the stand-up circuit despite these difficulties and apparent lack of recognition illustrate the precarious circumstances that hone the presentation of the stand-up comic’s persona as one labelled as “damaged” in Rikki Tremblay’s phenomenological study of stand-up comedy, in which “damage” owing to “dark childhoods and family relationships” is one of the identifiable themes in the stand-up comedian’s self-perception (26). Tremblay notes that the comedians who formed part of his survey used “their childhood, adolescences and relationships with their families. None felt their childhoods or families were cruel or abusive, but each expressed dark moments in their pasts that lead or added to their comedy” (35). In his book *Mixed Plate: Chronicles of an All-American Combo* (2021), Jo Koy writes about moving from the Philippines to the United States and growing up poor with a single mom raising him and his siblings after his parents split up and his dad left them. He writes about living with a brother who has schizophrenia. He writes about his marriage and why it was a mistake. He writes about what he calls “real emotion, real conflict, real darkness” – things that you see little hints of in his stand-up (Pastor).

Jo Koy looks into this familial dysfunction as he opens his comic routine with an introduction of himself as “half white and half Filipino, that’s what I am” (Jo Koy “Rice is Rice” 00:06-00:11), foregrounding his own hybridity. Indeed, Jo

Koy pokes fun at being the product of the union between his white father and Filipina mother in two ways: first, he deliberately skews the logic of his biracial identity with a not-so-subtle mockery of the stereotypical penchant of American military personnel to have relations with women in the places where they are posted, and Jo Koy states: “Which means my dad was in the military. That’s not even a joke.... That’s real shit. A lot of soldiers were fighting for this country.... My dad was dating.... I’m his Purple Heart” (00:12-00:32). This apparent diminution of the value of his white father’s service is a comic stance he takes as part of the savage self-deprecation that he uses “to critique and sometimes subvert the status quo” (Gilbert in Gillota *Reckless Talk* 5). Another way to construe this comic line may also be that while the “Purple Heart” is a military decoration that rewards the valor of those wounded or killed in action, in referring to himself as his father’s “Purple Heart,” Jo Koy’s comic persona becomes the unintended result not of heroics, but of trivial romantic dallying. This ridicule of his father continues on when he labels his father an outright racist:

My dad would say borderline racist shit to me when I was a kid....  
Borderline racist shit.... But I knew he was joking.... It’s my dad just sitting at the dinner table like....

‘You know why I married your mom, right?’

‘Why...?’

‘Cuz I love Chinese food...’

‘She’s Filipino, dad...’

‘Whatever...rice is rice.’

‘What the fuck?! Rice is rice! That’s so racist!’ (00:40- 01:13)

This anecdote is hilarious, but it also illustrates, in a very personal way, the sameness and indistinctness of those who are deemed different, which impinges on the intrinsic debates about Asian-American-ness in the United States. We laugh at the incongruity of Jo Koy’s father treating his wife, who is supposed to be an intimate partner, as lumped among all other Asians, and discrete identities robbed not only from her who is Filipino, but from all other Asians in America. “Rice is rice” is such a succinct metonym for faceless Asian-ness as seen by Jo Koy’s father. In setting this reality within his biracial roots, Jo Koy “[hides] in plain sight” the discussion of “color-blind racism” (Perez 479) in his comedy, and uses “comedy [as] the lens with which political issues become more... discussable” (De Pasquale and Lewis 71). Jo Koy as stand-up comic exhibits an abject position that allows the “transgress[ion of the] lines between what should be said or done” to “[provide] room for viewers to play with politics... and take a jab at authority” (71), thus illustrating what Rebecca Krefting terms “charged humor” that “relies on identification with struggles and issues associated with being a second-class citizen” (Gillota *Reckless* 5).

An integral aspect of Jo Koy’s comedy routine is his constant mention of his Filipina mother. As part of this same comic narrative from his 2017 “Live



from Seattle” stand-up show, he appears to foreground the backwardness of his mother as a Filipina who migrates to the United States by way of her marriage to Jo Koy’s white father, interpreting this as an almost degenerate scheme to come to the United States, a “hustle”, in his own words:

I’m not knocking what my mom had to do to get to America she... Fuck it, that’s her hustle... That was her hustle... God bless you mom! ... You hooked up with a soldier, had a kid in America... God bless you mom! She did what she had to do...  
(Jo Koy “Rice is Rice” 01:17 01:31)

Jo Koy teeters between an almost accusatory tone that is funny because it is so far from the stereotypical reverence with which mothers are spoken about in Asian or other cultures, and while, on the one hand, he underscores an almost abrasive dismissal of his mother’s originary circumstances, he also takes on the persona of the “ugly American” who relegates any place outside of the United States as backward, and therefore, abject.

Jo Koy says of his mother, “She could have hooked up with a Filipino and had a kid in the Philippines...” (Jo Koy “Rice is Rice” 01:33), and then proceeds to malign the Philippines: “You know how much a... a comedian makes in the Philippines? A chicken and flip flops! Fuck that... Fuck that, I don’t even like flip flops...” (01:36-01:40) by depicting it as uncivilised (in which natives wear flip flops instead of shoes) and poverty-stricken (in which the mode of exchange is in the barter of goods, and in this case, livestock), sustaining an archaic American colonial view of “the natural inferiority of non-whites” (Silva).

In this spiel that dubiously characterises his own mother, Jo Koy exhibits how the abject both seeks and destroys the self as subject, who is made aware of this state of being outside itself, and in its attempts to apprehend itself outside itself is left debilitated, as “the subject finds the impossible in himself: *when he finds that the impossible is his very being, discovering that he is nothing other than abject*”, and this abjection of the self attests to the fact that “all abjection is in fact a recognition of the fundamental lack of all being, meaning, language and desire” (Kristeva and Lechte 128; my emphasis). This distinction between the abject and the subject is deemed by Kristeva as a “violence of mourning for an ‘object’ that has always been already lost” (Jay 237), which makes the comic presentation of this otherwise tragic realisation of outsideness truly ironic. Because the “abject shatters the wall of repression and its judgments,” the conflict arises between the ego made to go back to these “abominable limits” and the ego that wishes to remove itself from this, and the ego vests itself “a source in the non-ego, drive and death,” thus rousing antithetical feelings of “horror and fascination” (238).

What John Limon notes as comedy’s avowal and disavowal of abjection is seen in Jo Koy’s juxtaposition of the earlier denigration of his mother and her roots, to a rough compliment of her strength and hardiness. This oscillation between celebration and disrespect makes for the comic in this narrative, and his

use of vulgar cusswords and expletives move this discourse away from the stereotypical expectation of reverence for mothers in Asian, and certainly in all, cultures. As he says, “My mom was the shit... My mom and dad divorced when... When I was like 10... 11 years old. My mom had to raise us on her own... She did that shit on her own... Tough as shit...” (Jo Koy “Rice is Rice” 01:49-01:59). “Shit” here connotes both the state of toughness that his mother maintained in order to raise her children in America, and is used as well as praise for being exceptional in facing this responsibility. The term “shit”, though not deployed literally here, illustrates Kristeva’s view of abjection as “a psychic worrying of those aspects of oneself that one cannot be rid of, that seem, but are not quite, alienable – for example, blood, urine, feces, nails, and the corpse” (Limon in Lee, R.112). This relegation of the mother as both abject and not is achieved by way of the use of “dirty words,” functioning to “express the intensity of the speaker’s own experience of awe, fear, or any other such wonderment...,” to “express heightened speaker-affect,” the non-denotational use of taboo language “open[ing] up the many poetic pleasures of word-play” (Seizer 210-211). The “comics’ idiomatic and non-denotational use of swear words,” therefore, helps create a mutually enjoyable, intimate experience for both lay audiences and the road comedy community—that inner circle of bookers, club owners, other standup comics and their friends” (211), and the fluidity of meaning that these erstwhile unacceptable words have taken on engenders a shared pleasure between the stand-up comic and his audience, “even a sense of delight or ecstasy,” which allows the abject, that which is unknown and undesired, to unite with a “sense of redemption or deliverance,” what Kristeva calls *jouissance* (Miller 324).

Jo Koy’s stand-up narrative “Munggo Anyone?” (Mung Bean Soup, Anyone?), from his “Comin’ In Hot” comedy special, continues to illustrate this state of abjection in depicting the Filipino-American by way of stand-up comedy. This comic anecdote begins with Jo Koy recounting a painful childhood experience of not wanting to go to school and being seen as different because of the strange lunchbox he is made to bring by his mother. The lunchbox is indicative of civilisation and assimilation into American culture, and “Tupperware” as the metonym for acceptable middle-class-ness is proof of this. Jo Koy narrates:

Jo Koy: ... I don’t want to go to school ...

Jo Koy’s mother: ‘Why not?’

Jo Koy: Because I don’t want to go to school with my lunch in one of your Tupperwares...

Jo Koy (continuing his monologue): ‘... so that shit’s embarrassing...if I send my son to school with a Tupperware container, he goes to school with a clear bowl and it’s got a blue lid and it says Tupperware on the lid ... my son will be proud to go to school with that shit...’ (Jo Koy “Munggo Anyone? 00:01-00:20)

He contrasts his son's Tupperware with what his mother's version of "Tupperware," which is "usually an empty Cool Whip container, Country Crock, an empty Neapolitan ice cream container had the red handle she put my homework and my lunch it looked like a fuckin' briefcase" (00:22-00:45). This condition of unwelcome ridiculousness is aggravated by his mother's insistence on embarrassing him further by marking his Cool Whip lunchbox with his name, which Jo Koy counters ironically, "like someone else has a Cool Whip container lunch box ... I'm pretty sure I'm the only one with a Cool Whip container lunch box" (01:04-01:19). His mother's serious rejoinder – "you never know Josep [sic]" – is taken as funny because it obviously exhibits a lack of awareness of how schoolchildren deride and laugh at those who do not follow the norm.

These plastic containers used as lunchboxes do not only buck the norm, they become correlatives of the state of abjection because these are detritus, throwaway remainders of American commodities, now resurrected for reuse. This would not have been deemed ecologically conscious, and instead would have been construed by Jo Koy's young schoolmates as laughable and embarrassing because this would have been equated with poverty, not keeping with the purchase culture signifying mobility in American social life. It is worth noting, however, that Jo Koy's "problematization" of this lunchbox debacle is met with overwhelming laughter by his audience, who presumably are aware of this practice, or who themselves have experienced this same custom, indicating that they form part of the marginal culture/s to which Jo Koy addresses himself, American audiences whose roots are, apparently, from similar developing countries (if not the Philippines itself). Ian Brodie underscores the dialogic nature of a stand-up performance, whereby the comic "perform[s] not to, but with an audience," thus forming a collaborative alliance (qtd. in Gillota *Beyond Liveness* 45). That this comic spiel is so well-received proves the success of the stand-up comic "as unofficial spokespersons for a particular group affiliation or demographic" (50), ethnic identity being defined by what Werner Sollors deems "by consent as well as by descent" (in Lowe 441), whereby "communities of laughter" are created by way of these shared humour at outre customs, laughter at the dominant group who are now treated as outsiders, but who are as easily reintegrated into the community (Lowe 441) when the stand-up comic's joke-telling continues on to other topics.

The second half of this comic narrative involves the practice of lunch swapping, which peripheralises Jo Koy's comic persona even more. Acceptable American school lunches of "turkey and cheddar cheese sandwich," "peanut butter and jelly [sandwich]," "chocolate chip cookies," "chocolate milk," "Pringles," and "Gatorade" (Jo Koy "Munggo Anyone?) are again metonyms for normalcy, and Jo Koy's proffer of his Filipino lunch of munggo, sauteed mung bean soup, for lunch trade, is an incongruous counter. This trade becomes more

and more ridiculous as Jo Koy narrates this: first, his munggo as lunch fare, “little round green beans and it sits on top of a bed of rice... if you dig deep enough you might find a shrimp or two” (02:55-03:02) is as far from the convenience of easy to eat and brand-familiar foods, and even while he pathetically throws in the Cool Whip container in which the munggo is contained as a freebie. This food marks him even more as abject because it is accompanied by “patis,” Filipino fish sauce, which, while “really accent[ing] the flavor of the munggo,” makes one “smell like pussy all day” when it is accidentally spilled on one’s shirt (03:21-03:25).

Food becomes a marker of abjection here as it “establishes who is inside and outside and outside specific groups” (Latimer), and Jo Koy is certainly identified as a hybrid “other” through this Filipino fare. “Patis” as condiment exoticises munggo as lunch trade food even more because it is another product unknown to a supposedly dominant white group of which Jo Koy wishes to be part. That he describes “patis” as smelling like vaginal fluids pushes this to the limit, as bodily fluids mark the abject, and is considered defiled, meaning “jettisoned from the ‘symbolic system’” (Mickalites 502). In allying Filipino food to female genital smells, “eating, like other bodily functions” becomes “an act that attracts and repulses because it highlights our attempts to keep our bodies clean and autonomous,” and highlights eating as an abject act that points to the instability of our identities (Latimer).

### **Filipino-American stand-up comedy and its tactics of in/exclusion**

Jo Koy’s stand-up comic routine has successfully put Filipino-American life and culture into mainstream America, arguably the most visible and most widely received of Filipino-American stand-up comics from the late 2010s to the 2020s. This visibility means that his focus on his Filipino-American life from the vantage point of a biracial individual – half-white and half-Filipino – redounds too to the greater acknowledgment of Filipino-American experiences in contemporary America. The audience of this standup act is composed not only of fellow Filipino-Americans or Filipino immigrants to the United States, but also of other Americans of various ethnicities. The participation of this diverse spectatorship is made possible not only by way of the live performances of the comedy specials, but the dissemination of these performances in other digital platforms that are freely available, such as YouTube, or that are accessible for a fee, such as by way of cable channel subscriptions or by way of the newer pay-for-access platforms such as Netflix. Simon Ozer et. al. note how cultural participation by way of “global channels of cultural content (e.g., Internet, media, and intermittent intercultural contact)” (684) allow individuals to internalise cultural interconnections with which they can later identify (681). These global media avenues that encourage interconnections with varied ethnic groups accustom people to “a world of interacting cultural traditions” (684), affiliated with local

cultural streams, present a wider audience with ways to incorporate new identities into their own.

Aside from the very real contribution of this extensive dissemination of Filipino-American-ness through Jo Koy's comic specials, the samples from his stand-up comic routine that we have examined in this paper are proof of how ethnic writers frequently begin with the stereotype imposed on the group from without, a distortion or falsification of reality. Beginning their narratives with realistic "slice of life" vignettes, these artists both counter the stereotypes and temper the reader's reaction to the comic invention that follows. (Fitts- Fulmer and Makepeace 42)

While the lines are blurred and hard to distinguish, Jo Koy the stand-up comic explores and performs the experiences of a Jo Koy who becomes another persona, illustrating "actual ethnic life and fictional ethnic life, respectively" (Lowe 453).

The act of story-telling and performing comedy and the narration of truly bizarre experiences by Jo Koy illustrates what Fitts –Fulmer and Makepeace call "interpretive tensions" (42). These represent Filipino-American life as an immersion in, and acceptance of, instability, a circumscription in repulsion (Shimakawa in Nittrouer 183) as he narrates experiences too bizarre to be accepted by a dominant, white American culture. In this sense, he appears to play into the expectations of a dominant population that looks at minority ethnicities as different and strange. Likewise, he appears to present a Philippines from which his mother comes and from which he derives part of his personal and cultural identity as a backward originary place, again perpetuating, on the surface, Third World/Global South stereotypes of lack and retardation. These evince "insider humor" that opens up queries about who has permission to initiate racial jokes and who is allowed to laugh at them" (42).

This is precisely what John Limon means when he speaks of how stand-up "comedifies" (Mackin 212): humour allows for multiculturalism to break down the idealisation of the body and the abstraction of materiality (212). Jo Koy relates comic anecdotes that are accessible only by way of knowing specific Filipino cultural practices, lived objects, "textured 'surfaces' of the everyday" (Macrury 201). In Jo Koy, this texturisation is achieved by way of exploring the strangenesses of these Filipino practices, the incongruity of which vis-à-vis white, middle class American life practices always marginalises the Filipino-American and makes of him a citizen fighting against the limits of this dominant containment.

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