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Unhappy Asians: Decolonizing the Good Life in Lee Sung Jin's Beef / Leland Tabares

📅 December 18, 2023 (<https://asapjournal.com/unhappy-asians-decolonizing-the-good-life-in-lee-sung-jins-beef-leland-tabares/>) 👤 Leland Tabares (<https://asapjournal.com/author/ltabares/>)



“Burnmatter” by Joseph Lee.

If you quote search the term “Unhappy Asians” in Google, the top results that come up are stock marketing images of diasporic Asian models in staged situations. One of my favorites is titled “Portrait of man with toothache,” presumably a photo used in dentistry advertisements. Search “Unhappy Asian Americans” to focus the query on diasporic Asian experiences in the U.S., and Google responds with a mere eight search

results. Of the eight, over half link to personal blog posts or anonymous complaints on Reddit and Tripadvisor. With such a limited archive to indicate the contrary, one might conclude that Asian Americans seem quite contented as a minoritized community. Online evidence of their unhappiness appears miniscule, if not nonexistent. When searching for unhappiness in other racially minoritized communities in the U.S., however, the same phenomenon of abstraction, individuation, and absence does not occur. Their unhappiness is documented alongside real histories of political oppression and racial violence. Less an assertion that Asian Americans do not experience discrimination or the unhappiness associated with such traumas, this observation reveals that in a brief survey of information from the world's largest search provider Asian Americans are simply not associated with unhappiness at all.

Certainly, Asian Americans do experience unhappiness, but without a background in academic discourse or cultivating intentional reading practices that engage popular writings on the topic, like Cathy Park Hong's recent *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* (2020), it is easy to see how one could draw myopic conclusions from limited information. Historically racialized as high-achieving model minorities, Asian Americans are often viewed as emblems of the democratic possibilities of the American Dream, an exceptionalist fantasy that insists, with enough hard work and determination, anyone can obtain financial security, social acceptance, familial comfort, and happiness, regardless of subjecthood. For Asian Americans, their existence is one of the American Dream already realized. As such, they embody the supposed happiness that it purports to confer. Indeed, it is this very relationship between happiness and the American Dream that, on the one hand, authorizes their cultural belonging within the nation-state as "Americans" and, on the other hand, maintains their perpetual foreignness apart from the nation-state as "Asians." These contradictions surrounding happiness register in the embodied everyday lives of Asian Americans through the simple act of smiling. To the average American, Asian Americans would seem to smile a lot. They smile when they take your order; they smile when they serve you food; they smile when they get your laundry; they smile when they ring you up at the local convenience store; they smile when they read their college acceptance letters and upload their reaction videos to YouTube and TikTok to millions of viewers; they smile when they appear on marketing brochures as evidence of an institution's commitment to diversity; they smile in Hollywood films like *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) and *Always Be My Maybe* (2019) when they are jet-setting around the world and falling in love; and they smile when they walk on stage to accept their Academy Awards. If the American Dream can be said to manifest an aesthetic, it is not the big suburban house with a white-picket fence but instead the Asian American smile.

However, one recent narrative that explicitly frustrates these long-standing cultural narratives is Lee Sung Jin's new hit Netflix series *Beef* (2023). It does so by centering depictions of Asian Americans who are unhappy, despite appearing to obtain all the hallmarks of success that would otherwise signify self-fulfillment and happiness. Amy Lau (Ali Wong) and George Nakai (Joseph Lee) are a successful power couple well-known throughout the Los Angeles art world. George is the son of a Noguchi-esque furniture artist whose passing left George with the financial freedom to pursue his own art career. Amy owns a lucrative plant business valued at \$10 million. Together, they live in a mansion in Calabasas with their loving daughter June (Remy Holt). To anyone watching the series, Amy and George have actualized the promises of

the good life. Yet, as the series progresses, we learn that they are deeply unhappy. Amy harbors unresolved personal traumas that manifest in fits of anger, while George experiences suburban malaise, making him feel disaffected. Both dissatisfied with their lives, Amy and George have affairs. To add, the series establishes a narrative foil to the Lau family through the character Danny Cho (Steven Yeun). The son of former working-class motel owners, Danny meets Amy during a random road rage encounter. After getting to know Amy and her family, he aspires to live like them. He works tirelessly building his independent contractor business but finds that it brings more heartache than pleasure. Ultimately, *Beef* leads viewers into new discursive territory by reckoning with a cultural phenomenon previously unimaginable to the American psyche: successful yet unhappy Asian Americans.

But *Beef* is not an anomaly. There is a growing corpus of contemporary Asian American films, plays, novels, memoirs, and graphic novels that engage this phenomenon of unhappiness in complex ways that undermine the assumption that access to socioeconomic success and its associative opportunisms breeds happiness. These texts range in genre and, while not exhaustive, include Jon Lucas and Scott Moore's *21 & Over* (2013), Julia Cho's *Office Hour* (2017), Weike Wang's *Chemistry* (2017), Stefanie Foo's *What My Bones Know* (2022), Gina Chung's *Sea Change* (2023), and Deb JJ Lee's *In Limbo* (2023). Collectively, these narratives take us into the dark underbelly of middle- and upper-middle-class Asian America, where Asian Americans in otherwise successful positions as promising students, hardworking graduate researchers, inquisitive medical doctors and professors, ambitious journalists, and aspirational marine biologists nevertheless experience malaise, anxiety, trauma, loneliness, depression, and suicidal ideations. In doing so, they challenge the ideological foundations structuring the American Dream by demonstrating how the model minority's purported successes leave them unfulfilled. Their portrayals of unhappiness mark a dramatic shift in American popular culture where mainstream conceptions of Asian Americans' affective lives are expanding. It is through this representational expansion in affect, I contend, that narratives on Asian American unhappiness serve to decolonize the decidedly American embrace of the pursuit of happiness.



“Self (2021)” by Joseph Lee

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Happiness is baked into U.S. national identity, defining a principal feature of American citizenship. Since its foundation, the U.S. employed happiness as a collectivizing force to organize the self-interest and well-being of the nation-state. The Declaration of Independence cites the pursuit of happiness as an unalienable right on par with life and liberty. Happiness thus legislates the terms by which some people are made to belong and others are not. Yet, cultural conceptions of happiness have changed radically since these early years. By the twentieth century, the pursuit of happiness turned inward, reflecting the neoliberal socioeconomic policies governing the post-welfare state. Edgar Cabanas and Eva Illouz contend that happiness came to describe not so much an affective condition but rather a political ideation underwriting the “ideal image of the good citizen” who “rightfully achieves” happiness through individual character traits like resilience, self-motivation, and emotional intelligence.¹ By individuating happiness, the state was able to legitimize the disenfranchisement of underserved black and brown communities. In contrast, the perceived successes of diasporic Asians during this time coded them as model minorities who affirmed the self-made individualist ideologies buttressing neoliberalism in the post-welfare state. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965

was crucial to these state efforts because, by repealing the exclusionary immigration policies that had been in place since the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, it not only portrayed the U.S. as an inclusive geopolitical space where everyone was welcome but it also facilitated the migration of a large body of highly educated, high-skilled diasporic Asian knowledge workers, which effectively produced a new class of diasporic Asian professionals. The preservation of the American Dream therefore rested on the shoulders of a burgeoning Asian American professional class.

More than a domestic ideology, then, happiness justified the expansion of U.S. economic power in the global marketplace. The next logical step in the inward turn of happiness, following the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, emerged in the late 1990s with the Positive Psychology Movement. During this time, happiness became conceived as a measurable scientific metric. William Davies explains that this shift toward scientific quantification meant that everyday people now bore the responsibility of being happy, since happiness could be assured with the proper treatment. This quantification of affect paved the way for a future where “the pains, politics and contradictions of the past can be overcome.”² Rather than signaling a new cultural phenomenon, the impetus to quantify, personalize, and moralize happiness is a symptom of the post-industrial capitalist economy where the global restructuring of labor inaugurated 24/7 workplace practices that caused people to become overworked and unhappy.³ In this way, neoliberalism created both the problems and solutions to happiness, producing an industry built on the cultivation of happiness. Eventually, this happiness industry shifted from a more centralized model organized around trained mindfulness practitioners and self-help gurus to a decentralized digital network where anyone could garner happiness with the right smart phone application. More than determining citizenship and belonging domestically, the pursuit of happiness has become “one of the most distinctive exports and chief political horizons of North American culture.”⁴ Happiness secures the U.S.’s hold over global capitalism by minimizing the sadness, stressors, and illnesses that would lend to unproduction.

Not simply a contemporary phenomenon associated with model minority success, the management of diasporic Asian affect has been co-constitutive of American identity formation since the nineteenth century. With the arrival of Chinese immigrants, who came to work in the California gold mines and on the transcontinental railroad, the diasporic Asian body became a site of intense scrutiny onto which the political and cultural ideologies legislating citizenship were projected. Xine Yao explains that “the optical logics of American race science” at the time coded the Chinese face as inscrutable, racializing the diasporic Asian physique through affective means that positioned Chineseness in direct opposition to the liberal humanist values organizing the economic and cultural stability of the West.⁵ This early history informed later conceptions of other diasporic Asian ethnic communities. During World War II, Japanese faces mapped the surveillance technologies of the wartime state. As Japanese Americans were being incarcerated at inland detention centers, the U.S. Army distributed illustrative pamphlets to American soldiers that diagrammed how the expressive contours of diasporic Asian faces could be read to distinguish Japanese Americans from Chinese Americans.⁶ In the Korean War, David Ralph Millard, a white American surgeon serving in South Korea for the U.S. Marine Corps, infamously performed the first documented double eyelid surgery on a Korean translator because, to his Western sensibilities, the Asian monolid was seen to communicate

occlusion and suspicion. Double eyelid surgery was therefore conceived as a cure to inscrutability by facilitating affective transparency. The U.S. military continued to regulate the terms of affective transparency to manage public perceptions of its imperial efforts during the Vietnam War. Film and media coverage on Vietnamese refugees arriving in the U.S. portrayed the abject refugee body as a site of pure affective grief to endow the state, Timothy K. August writes, “with a sense of benevolence that forces the refugee into a position of endless debt and/or gratitude.”⁷ Gratitude perpetuates the project of American imperial power today through representational narratives that thematize Asian American appreciativeness, deference, and happiness.

Beef works against these affective imperatives by situating unhappiness as the means through which to motivate, rather than foreclose, social relations. The history of happiness is always a history of American empire, where racially minoritized subjects play central roles in legitimizing its colonial logic. Sara Ahmed argues that empire operates on the assumption that “liberation from abjection” is fundamental to the cultivation of personhood.⁸ Being liberated from abjection means being liberated from misery. To become legible as a citizen-subject then is to become a colonial subject who, through a “moral education,” learns the “certain manners, habits, and inclinations” that enable access to the inalienable right to the pursuit of happiness.⁹ This ideology not only justified the colonization of indigenous peoples but also conscripts migrants into the demand for assimilation. Assimilation for the inscrutable Chinese laborer, the incarcerated Japanese internee, the untrustworthy Korean combatant, and the grief-stricken Vietnamese refugee depends on the capacity to acquire happiness in the U.S. Since the pursuit of happiness organizes the American collective as a social body, any failure to obtain happiness results in alienation and, for those in racially minoritized subject positions, marginalization. Unhappiness manifests not as a failure with empire, but rather as a failure with the individual. *Beef* confronts these colonial assumptions and demonstrates how generative forms of social belonging can cohere through unhappiness. To do this, it brings into visibility unique forms of unhappiness that result from second-generation socioeconomic success, rather than failure, making it decidedly different from the more traditional narratives of unhappiness that have come to inform popular conceptions of Asian Americanness in the American mainstream. Such narratives often revolve either around first-generation immigrant struggles or second-generation assimilation, where unhappiness emerges from the experiences of migratory dislocation, overt racial violence, incommensurable cultural difference, and an unattainable American Dream. These stories perpetuate the associations between unhappiness and alienation. Instead, *Beef* reveals how unhappiness motivates social relations amid turmoil and results not from a failure to access success or belonging, but rather having accessed it. It does so by invoking Asian Americans’ status as model minorities, if only to undermine the sense of security that it purports to provide. *Beef*’s distinctive orientation to what can otherwise be called the Asian American post-success unhappiness narrative exposes the false promises of the pursuit of happiness.

The series begins by situating the viewer in the daily tedium of suburban America to undermine the assumption that minority access to the good life equates to happiness. In the opening sequence, Danny bickers with a cashier at a retail home goods store who refuses to accept Danny’s request to return a set of hibachi grills without a receipt. While spotlighting the everyday frustrations and mundanity of middle-class

life, this seemingly minor exchange turns grim as the viewer soon realizes that Danny has been using the hibachi grills to try to kill himself through carbon monoxide poisoning. Despite being an independent business owner, a role that attests to his entrepreneurial American spirit, Danny exposes how assimilation into middle-class American life not only fails to generate happiness but, in fact, directly produces his unwellness and desire for self-harm. Although representative of Asian America's cultured elite, Amy and George are not so different from Danny. Their lives in their Calabasas mansion are typified by the banal, stultifying routines of domestic drudgery. They bicker over how to raise their daughter, how to manage Amy's expressive outbursts, and how to deal with George's overinvolved mother. In a promotional interview with Netflix, Ali Wong describes how the interior design of the house communicates both the feeling of "zen" through its sleek modern aesthetic and the feeling of being trapped in "a cage."¹⁰ The house is less a site of marital bliss and more a space of confinement. Amy's unhappiness is made salient when juxtaposed with George's unrelenting positive thinking. George speaks in self-help aphorisms that he learns from his therapy sessions. He reminds Amy about the importance of creating "new neural pathways" to promote happiness for the whole family.¹¹ "We owe it to ourselves," George says, "to stay positive."¹² Their daughter is even enrolled in "mindfulness classes."¹³ *Beef* caricatures the legacies of the Positive Psychology Movement that continue to inform contemporary American life. Indeed, Amy and George's mansion is located on Bon Homme Road, a real road in Calabasas that loosely translates to "Good-natured Fellow" Road. As the series' primary setting, the American suburb provides a critical entryway into examining unhappiness because, Hillary Chute explains, representational narratives set in the suburb unveil the "dark secrets" and "horror" hidden behind the orderly façade of middle- and upper-middle-class American existence.¹⁴ Such narratives serve "to critique the homogeneity, and the social dichotomies, to which suburban life gives rise."¹⁵

More than a setting, the suburban home identifies a representational expression of the false promises structuring the American Dream. In *Beef*, homes symbolize the hopes and unfulfilled expectations of its main characters. But, rather than signifying social and financial security, the show depicts homes as fragile, porous, and prone to destruction. Over the course of the series, Danny works to build a new home for his Korean parents to live in. The home emblemizes Danny's desire to provide an American Dream experience for his parents, who were unable to obtain it on their own. Years earlier, after losing their motel business, they were forced to return to Korea. After obtaining the land and building the property, he flies his parents in from Korea to start a new life with the happiness of knowing that their futures are finally secure. Homeownership is a testament to Danny's filial piety as the eldest son. However, right when they pull up to the property, they see that it is engulfed in a massive fire, and it burns down in front of them. The tragic scene becomes more disheartening as Danny learns that he unintentionally caused the fire by using the wrong electric wiring when building the property. The devastating irony is that Danny's own professional labors as a contractor and his devotion to the American Dream betrayed him. While the narrative around Danny's house reveals the fragility of the American Dream, Amy and George's mansion is constantly broken into, indicating how security is illusory. In one episode, thieves enter at night to steal George's art. In another, after a road rage incident with Amy, Danny finds their home address and enters it through deceptive means. In an act of revenge for the incident, he urinates on their bathroom floor. Later, while George is

cleaning up the mess, Amy remarks, “He came into our home, and he violated our sacred space.”¹⁶

Violations to the home become synonymous with personal violations. For the characters, no amount of white-picket fencing will ensure their safety and security. *Beef* reveals the American Dream to be a site of trespass and devastation.

Yet, amid the destruction, Amy and Danny connect through their unhappiness. As the series develops, the characters appear more similar than different. Both struggle, for instance, to process their traumatic upbringings. As children, they witnessed the daily struggles that their immigrant parents faced in their own pursuits of happiness and in turn learned the need to develop hyper-independence as a coping mechanism. The model minority success that they appear to embody as adults then is a direct byproduct of early childhood trauma. After urinating on her bathroom floor, Danny indicates as much when he leaves a vengeful voicemail on Amy’s phone:

You’re just a bored, suburban housewife with no purpose...I bet you’re mad at yourself for letting your whole life pass you by. I bet you had big dreams. Anything was possible. Then, you blinked, and now you’re stuck in a life you never wanted. You have it all, but you’re empty inside.¹⁷

Although Amy does harbor all the feelings that Danny insinuates, the message does not so much have anything to do with Amy; instead, it reveals how Danny’s understanding of himself gets projected onto Amy. If misery likes company, then the voicemail suggests that they must recognize their respective unhappiness in each other. Amy confirms as much when, during a moment of candor, she admits, “I hate pretending like I don’t hate things.”¹⁸ Her perceived model minority successes bely her unhappiness, and it is Danny who can see it. Later, during a private party at her house, they share another moment of self-recognition after Danny sneaks into the party to confide in her for assurance:

Amy: What do you need?

Danny: I just want to know if you’re, like, I don’t know, happy and shit.

Amy [surprised]: What?

Danny: All your hard work paid off, right? You’re fulfilled?

Amy: Why do you care?

Danny: I just want to know if I’ve got to get to where you are.

Amy: Everything fades. Nothing lasts. We’re just a snake eating its own tail.¹⁹

Rather than providing the false assurance he desires, Amy offers an honest refutation. She helps to unmoor him from his misguided and even self-destructive attachment to the American Dream, a form of attachment that Lauren Berlant elsewhere describes as “cruel optimism.”²⁰ *Beef*’s director Lee Sung Jin suggests that, for two characters whose individual pursuits of happiness produce isolation and loneliness, there is something “very freeing” in their unhappiness that allows them to bond by seeing themselves in each other while “at their very, very worst.”²¹ Sitting by Danny’s hospital bed in the series’ closing sequence, after surviving days lost in the wilderness together following a crash from another road rage incident, Amy props

herself up onto his bed and nestles herself in his chest. Right before the scene cuts to black, we see Danny's arm rising behind her back to wrap her in his comfort. The show leaves us with hope. These interactions signal a shared connection that emerges through vulnerability, a vulnerability that Amy and Danny have both avoided yet desperately need from and immediately recognize in one another.

Beef finds possibility in the unhappy, and it does so by confronting Asian American success rather than failure. Contesting the presumed happiness that structures cultural narratives of model minority success, it challenges the aspirational promises organizing the American Dream, a dream that has not simply been built on the systematic disenfranchisement of racial minorities but has been legitimized and perpetuated through narratives of their purported happiness. More than simply mobilizing critique, though, *Beef* takes time to wade in unhappiness as well as the alternative and sometimes alienating modes of sociality that result from it. In doing so, *Beef* insists that there is something to be valued, something life-giving and validating in our unhappiness.

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