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Mirroring Financial Speculation and  
Late Capitalism through Speculative Fiction:  
Worker Gullibility and Guilt as Re-imagination  
of Human Value

A Thesis by

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Chapman University

Orange, CA

Wilkinson College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in English

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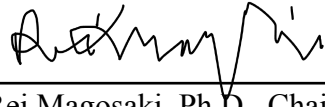
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The thesis of Ian Yi Heng Koh is approved.



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August 2023

Mirroring Financial Speculation and  
Late Capitalism through Speculative Fiction:  
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## ABSTRACT

# Mirroring Financial Speculation and Late Capitalism through Speculative Fiction: Worker Gullibility and Guilt as Re-imagination of Human Value

by Ian Yi Heng Koh

Charles Yu's short story "Standard Loneliness Package" from the speculative fiction collection *Sorry Please Thank You* features a worker who conforms to the cultural logic of Wall Street and late capitalism. However, the privilege of working in a tech company in an up-and-coming industry does not shield him from experiencing the oftentimes destructive logic of financial speculation and in-built structural inequalities. This paper makes a case that a tragedy could be read into this worker's seemingly stable situation in a way that can uncover the character's truly sorry state from his illusion of privilege and choice. But first, readers must read empathetically into the failures of this worker's colleagues, demonstrating that to be aware of others is to be aware of oneself. Ultimately, reading this way will reveal that workers have value beyond the dominant logic of late capitalism and Wall Street. Tragedy becomes an organic narrative device for self-realization for the readers, suggesting in the power of literature and reading responsibly to humanize characters counter to their own consent to the uncritical logic and acceptance of late capitalism that shapes their reality. Literature then becomes a way to imagine and "speculate" alternatively on human value against the status quo in which financial speculation has been a capitalistic tool for instrumentalizing the future.

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# **Mirroring Financial Speculation and Late Capitalism Through Speculative Fiction: Worker Gullibility and Guilt as Re-imagination of Human Value**

## **Introduction**

If modern human beings held a magic mirror to their imagination pertaining to the future, what might they see reflected? Several good answers would be a stable job, comfort, materialistic life, family, and a happily secured retirement. They are not a mystery. Neither is it a mystery to imagine people working, competing, and earning their way to materialize what they desire. In working to fulfill a natural human desire, such human behavior invariably intertwines with the influence of late capitalism—a period of capitalism today that is characterized by large corporations taken to their logical extremes, globalization, and structural inequalities. For example, trends, news, rankings, financial reports, observed behavior, and the real accounts of people in one's network all have a bearing on human desires and goals. Such reports facilitate people's decisions and choices out of an abstract or speculative notion of future attainment. However, individuals are not the only ones imagining or speculating about their own future. Their speculations might themselves be shaped by the realities and products of a late capitalist system as part of a broader system of financial speculations that try to account for and instrumentalize the future based on predictions. Through representations in literature revolving around the lives of exploited workers overseas, and more specifically in speculative fiction, it is possible to adopt a more critical, value-based orientation on the impact of capitalism powered by speculative finance.



According to Aimee Bahng in *Migrant Futures: Decolonizing Speculation in Financial Times* (2017), the speculative nature of fiction can be most incisively used to articulate coherent but alternate corporate realities of late-stage capitalism using its own cultural logic, this time not so much with a view for personal financial gain but towards liberating the human soul:

By excavating forgotten histories of science and empire, revising conceptualizations of technological subjectivities, and seeking out queer affinities that belie privatized futures, these works demonstrate how speculation can take the shape of radical unfurling, rather than protectionist anticipation. Instead of using predictive calculations that perpetually attempt to pull the future into the present, these alternative speculative fictions, films, and other media forms work to release speculation from capitalism's persistent instrumentalization of futurity. (Bahng 7)

Charles Yu's short story collection, *Sorry Please Thank You* (2012), includes stories about the impact of globalization, which fall into a category of literature one might call "speculative finance fiction," that helps free the human imagination from Wall Street speculations during the present stage of late capitalism. The opening short story, "Standard Loneliness Package," is set in a world where various forms of physical and emotional pain can be transferred as sensory data from clients to outsourced workers overseas to experience instead. Financial speculation in Wall Street is re-imagined from the exploited workers' point of view, as a form of corporate identification that causes the workers to take on risks and liabilities, creating antagonistic workplace relationships. Identification in this context causes workers to misguidedly adopt the beliefs of someone with more social privilege than themselves in compensation for one's own, caused by a sense of low self-esteem they themselves fail to recognize. So, in turn, this identification articulates the devaluing and dehumanizing cost of speculative finance. The story

can be read as a warning of the dangers of uncritical subservience to corporate and late capitalist rhetoric. Sci-fi-like elements of this story, in which an entire system of protocol develops around the transfer of pain, take an ironic jab at corporate rhetoric that only hard work can make the workers better off. The short story can only be read as a tragedy, but by enabling the readers to understand the dangers of wholesale identification with corporate and late capitalist rhetoric, it gestures towards freedom opened up by literature and critical engagement.

While there has been no sustained scholarly attention on *Sorry Please Thank You* itself, existing scholarship on Charles Yu's more well-known work like *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* (2011) is useful in understanding how he has imagined the colonizing forces of financial speculation and late capitalism, which shapes personal beliefs. For example, scholars point out that time and language have a double function in Yu's fiction: one as a graspable set of metaphors for the linear and materialistic narrative of capitalism and the American Dream, and another as an immaterial reflection of self-belief and value. Time and language become sites for the reclamation and liberation of immigrant identities from dominant narratives. Liberation often hinges on self-belief and knowing one's own value to be distinct from capitalist systems. Even though the protagonist in "Standard Loneliness Package" seems to exhibit very little desire or agency to change or grasp his own hardships as an outsourced worker, the scholarship suggests that his uncritical embrace and persistence of beliefs is an important symptom of adopted devaluation and self-emptying delusion for readers to focus on.

In Charles Yu's *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* (2010), scholarly attention by Stephen Hock has been given to the fact that the time machine, a box, is being used in a postmodern and ironic way. The scholarship offers an analysis that lends itself to interpreting how the main character named Charles Yu, named similarly to the author, and his

journey within the time machine, which is a box, can be re-conceptualized, ironic, and meaning bending even. For example, the use of language in conjunction with the device of the Time Machine as a metaphor could illustrate an exigence for taking back ownership of his life from capitalism and the blind pursuit of the American Dream. Furthermore, the assumption that his agency must be reclaimed is reflected in an understanding that what belongs to Charles Yu must first be discovered in a step-by-step process of exploring the time machine, and ironically that results in the power of time returned back to him. The Time Machine that Charles Yu steps into represents a deviation from linear capitalist time that ultimately becomes his time only if he can want it to be such. Likewise, because time in the machine is constrained to a loop, the language Charles Yu comes to use while in the machine is a truer reflection of his own agency and meaning-making ability rather than his value within capitalism's linearity. But language can only become his when he can believe that grasping his agency is an opportunity that may never occur again: "Charles at first operates like a hack writer, going through the motions but no longer caring enough to make anything of his writing, until he begins to open himself to the possibility that the box he feels himself trapped in may also afford him a way out of the constraints that he feels govern his life in the science fictional universe" (Hock 68). The references to urgency and seizing opportunity can perhaps allude to a necessary rejection of capitalist demands of the time and agency exacted from its subjects. However, the exigence in relation to looping time and self-creating language is then used ironically: It does not create the opportunity to seize agency but suggests that self-belief and value has already manifested as agency. This leads Charles Yu to the "discovery" that he has already liberated himself. Perhaps Charles Yu's ironic journey is about the duality of beliefs that can feel like the binding of an individual to materialist and capitalist narratives or can seem like immateriality shaped by agency. It is not the time loop or self-created

language that ultimately liberates Charles Yu, but his ability to transcend the pain of confronting himself, which also held him back.

Since so much hinges on knowing self-belief and one's own value, the failures of the workers in "Standard Loneliness Package" to confront their own lack of agency comes to be a fault they both adopt and ignore—they simply adopt late capitalism in all its self-emptying rhetoric as a way of life—further suggesting the importance of literature, which nurtures critical engagement as a way to avoid going down such a path. This also presents the story as an opportunity for the reader for self-reflection, should the tragedy be read singularly into the narrative.

Perhaps existing scholarship can say with some certainty and optimism that agency is not something that can be borrowed but freely created. In "How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional America: Charles Yu's Immigrant Utopianism", Betsy Huang argues that the immigrant subject has the privilege of seeking out agency because of a tragedy. Tragedy represents the rejection of an initial inertia, to be seen as an organic counter-reaction to a misfortune. The changing of beliefs, just like time and language metaphors, can be indicative of this organic redemption, such as when it comes to reject the devaluation and reclaim agency outside previous beliefs: "Charles comes to understand why 'the world didn't want our invention,' for the father, the expendable immigrant, is the sacrificial figure for the preservation of the fantasy" (Huang 214-215). The character Charles Yu has the privilege of reflecting on his father's life. This is not always true. When the status quo that is the borrowing of capitalist language comes to represent the normalization of exploitation and devaluation, such scholarly work suggests literature plays an important role in returning agency back to those who are willing to engage it. In "Standard Loneliness Package," the main characters neither have a strong connection to their fathers nor

with each other, simply brought together as colleagues under a corporation. Whatever bad thing happens to a given character is not experienced as loss to be mourned by the protagonist, registered as no more than a work hazard. They also cannot (by merely speaking and responding to the language of the capitalist system) critically understand what is happening to them. This is why it is up to the reader to read a tragedy into the story that would challenge them to believe in a value outside what the corporations assign.

The short story collection seems to urge on a co-opting of the reader's own language and meaning making ability to bring closure. The prose style can feel like a deliberate attempt to render reality as constant cycle of laboriousness and heartbreak, adding to the tension in each short story that drives towards a revelation of the fact while falling short of a resolution. Despite feeling impenetrable, there are moments of respite from this matrix rendered by words. There seems to be a consensus in existing book reviews of the short story collection that the prose is like a container, which at first appears to be limited but may very well house another thing of greater value. This includes those found in *The New York Times Book Review*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Fiction Writers Review*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Washington Independent Review of Books*, and *Tor* among others. Reviewers seem to agree that the limitation hides some sort of self-realization and emotional depth that can be reached with some unpacking. In particular, the reviews in *The New York Times Book Review*, *Fiction Writers Review*, *Washington Independent Review of Books*, and *Wall Street Journal*, more profoundly come to identify unraveling of this limitation as being the central hazard to the reading experience. To confront what is so much a part of the human experience seems like a trial in itself: "how many of your own experiences and desires are actually a sham" (Wolk 8). Celeste Ng's review even goes so far as to make distinctions that suggest how meaning is imagined: "Being real and being meaningful...aren't

necessarily the same thing. A story can be made up and still matter” (Ng “Sorry Please Thank You, by Charles Yu”). The prose, like the search for what is meaningful, can feel like taking on an impenetrable task. It reaps “clever” and “precious” moments but not enough for a breakthrough because that belongs to the reader to discover (Kaiser C10).

This thesis fills in the gap from the project reviewers have identified and left off, to argue that the short story “Standard Loneliness Package” offers an example of the intentionality of Yu’s seemingly limited prose to carry the reader through towards a potentially liberating experience of speculative fiction as Bahng suggests, should they persist in meaning making and reading a tragedy simply contained within the story itself. Perhaps then there is hope that the impenetrable in the real world is not as impenetrable as it seems. The alienated and defamiliarizing quality of the prose, if it can reach the reader, can come to represent escape through meaning making rather than a dead end. First, the thesis contextualizes the short story by approaching speculative financial sector, as sketched out in the scholarly work of anthropologist Karen Ho in her field work on Wall Street, to tease out its dehumanizing cultural logic. While Yu’s short story centers the limitations of the narrator, which the thesis examines, it ultimately places an emphasis on the importance of the two side characters in the short story necessary to underscore this dynamic. In reading the narrator’s story alongside the stories of his colleagues, a cultivation of empathy occurs that helps in imagining the tragedy in the story. The short story then could be commenting on late capitalism’s blinding focus on the consumer and choices—how that generates self-centered and obsessive perspectives that lack meaning and depth. The short story also suggests by reading and giving meaning to the stories of others, the narrator’s own value or lack thereof could be better understood.

## **An Anthropological Perspective on Wall Street**

In *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street* (2009), Karen Ho provides an anthropological account of the practices, culture, values, and beliefs that come to define financial speculation on Wall Street. In this study, Ho provides an illustration of the particular way in which corporations and large institutions come to value workers. For one, workers value themselves as abstractions, often in alignment with how Wall Street and corporations regard their financial assets as speculative—a risk management instrument to turn the “untenable future into a futurescape—akin to the transformation of land into landscape” (Bahng 11). The result of being valued as an abstraction and speculative exacts a toll on workers. This passes down liabilities to workers and creates a toxic culture of prestige. In the case of Wall Street, this mostly draws from the investment bankers’ ties with huge networks of talent recruited from the Ivies. For one, Ho has, through interviews with veteran investment bankers of Wall Street, documented a culture of downsizing; their ability to lead change often relies on identifying and cutting out under-performers from corporations being evaluated (Ho 254, 256).

These practices blind the Wall Street players to their own sense of self value, regarding peers with envy instead. This is a subtlety in the work culture and consequence of being part of a corporate risk management strategy. In effect, the analysts are being ungrounded by being controlled by Wall Street rather than being more in control:

... investment banking practices are represented and interpreted as abstract, cordoning “the market” off from social decisions. Socioeconomic dislocations are less cases of abstraction than instances of power being experienced and enacted. When conflicts between unequal values and interests are interpreted mainly in terms of abstraction,

which in turn is refracted back as a core characteristic of finance, such assumptions further obfuscate the task of grounding Wall Street actors. (Ho 37)

In Ho's analysis, the investment bankers become ungrounded, in a system which equates workers with work and encourages a concept of workers (including themselves) as an abstraction. When tasked with de-risking what is uncertain, they in fact believe workers' value and worth to be uncertain. Their perspectives have conformed to the way the corporations want to view them: not as individuals that grow with experience but pawns who are replaceable from a network of equally capable players. The analysts' own terms of employment are set up as a participation in a prestigious competition. Wall Street defines the culture and players that will be hired; Wall Street is in control, not the other way round. Perhaps this is because what sustains these players is an illusion, a rhetoric, a belief that sustains a kind of over-confidence that would otherwise defeat and wear out non-conformers.

Wall Street reaps the benefits of this ungrounding. The players prefer the suffering that can be imposed by corporate rhetoric than to address the realities of their own priorities. Identification is cult-like: players prefer the risk of replaceability for prestige. Ho describes being a part of the "Global Financial Management Training Program" (GFMTTP) orientation on Wall Street that then becomes a track of disparaging and unequal branding upon discovery of the elite and parallel "Global Corporate Finance Training Program" (GCFTP) (Ho 76-77). In the GCFTP every trainee was from first tier schools. The second tier group in the GFMTTP stopped working overtime because they did not see their worth as warranting anything more than regular hours. Rather than framing their roles as having lower risk and being less competitive, they are demoralized by the perception of being less than the most prestigious and envious of others. This says less about the orientation than the mindset on Wall Street: Players do not perceive the risks



of managing financial speculation as much as they perceive their competence and ability to deserve great prestige. They are more aligned with Wall Street's interests of profitability than their own long-term security, suggesting that they will heartily take on more risks and liabilities than they can manage over a low-risk setting. Therefore, wanting more prestige is not taken on in self-interest, but from a strong sense of identification with the products and goals of Wall Street. This identification is problematic on a personal and relational level. Ungrounded risk taking, therefore, becomes an indication of self-devaluation.

This devaluation can perhaps be further unpacked and imagined through the impact of identification and belief: Since it is not good for "Wall Street players" to ignore the notion of their own disposability, they have at some level unhealthily diluted the fear of risk. In one relatively secure scenario, the players enter on pedigree and can always fall back on prior networks or generational wealth for future stability should their term on Wall Street not work out. Identification and belief do not lead to a reality that is difficult to accept. In a less ideal scenario, prestige is construed as being in the domain of elitist and ableist rhetoric and communities and thus confused as necessary for social mobility. Yet this is an illusion because competition that often entails prestige does not mean the workers receive social mobility; it simply means workers are more easily replaced. The players in this scenario, who perhaps come from a less well-off background and due to the merits of personal qualities, would at a deeper level of intuition experience a greater and paralyzing sense of danger at possibly being retrenched into obscurity; the risk that would dissuade or quickly wear a person out may lead to confusion and reckless, risky decision making. This scenario suggests that the identification of some players with the culture of Wall Street or otherwise is unhealthily ungrounded and a personal liability that can hide behind corporate rhetoric. Such cultural logic extends beyond

Wall Street in “Standard Loneliness Package,” where similar identification also surfaces in the narrative, often as a symptom of detachment from reality.

### **Reality Detaching Corporate Rhetoric as a Dilemma**

The short story “Standard Loneliness Package” depicts an overarching corporate rhetoric which reduces workers to their work and to abstractions, while three different kinds of failings the workers experience at work tell a tragic tale through exploitation. The three accounts of failings revolving around the protagonist and his two co-workers, named Kirthi and Deepak who work at the fictional “emotional engineering” firm in India, are individually unfortunate. They are workers hired to take on physical and emotional pain for wealthy clients abroad, with all they have to look forward to being their eventual possibility of buying a virtual life down the road. Read together, they help readers imagine tragedy as an aggregate of failures on the part of workers themselves to recognize their own value, compounded by a collective inability to empathize or connect with others. Reading at this level goes beyond individual narrative arcs, as their stories collectively form a commentary as fateful preys of a predatory system and victims of their own gullibility. The tragedy is not even so much to be found in the way the worker is treated as lacking in agency, as much as the poignant way that the worker is convinced of one’s own lack of self-worth, enough to deny one’s own entitlement to agency.

The story thus sets out from a fairly well-recognized assumption: The prevailing corporate rhetoric disguises an opportunity that actually strips workers of their agency, consisting of an illusion of choice over the role they want to play as though a consumer would have over choosing goods on the shelves. In a pivotal scene, the protagonist is cast in the shoes of a potential client for the company he works for, watching its TV commercial. Capitalism’s

rhetoric, predicated on the consumer having options, extends to the employment ethos of the worker. For the moment, he is positioned to entertain the choices of the consumer, although he would never have a choice. In this scene, the narrator notably refers to the time at the beach/ ocean/ sea as an abstraction, “the water,” precisely at the moment that he perceives leisure to be an out-of-bounds symbol of privilege:

Next to me is a woman and her daughter. The girl, maybe four or five, is scooping rice and peas into her mouth a little at a time. She is watching the commercial in silence.

When she sees the water, she turns to her mother and asks her, softly, what the blue liquid is. I am thinking about how sad it is that she has never seen water that color in real life until I realize that I am thirty-nine years old and hey, you know what? Neither have I.

And then the commercial ends with one of our slogans.

*Don't feel like having a bad day?*

*Let someone else have it for you. (Yu 7)*

The sea appears as part of a TV commercial, which then equates the relaxation and enjoyment of being by the sea to be supported by the kind of pain transference service the narrator's corporation provides. The narrator's perception of the sea is influenced by how the corporation wants its customers to view their service. However, the narrator's pride is ultimately deluding because the narrator believes in his work and the mission of the company so wholeheartedly that he does not care to discover the sea for what it is. “Neither have I,” the narrator says in what can even be taken as a smugness, with some nonchalance, perhaps even with a shrug, as if in feeling the pain of the customers makes him so to speak a better, more synthesized, and transcendent

version of the sea. Despite the fact that the work of the narrator entails taking on physical pain for someone else's leisure as advertised, the narrator is not entirely wrong as his work does make him dream about one day playing the role equivalent to taking a trip to the sea as portrayed by the corporation's TV commercial when he can finally purchase and retire into virtual life. Yet by thinking so, the narrator is trapped within the limits of his beliefs available to him in Hyderabad. He has given up discovering the real value of experiencing the sea. So, he does ridiculous things like perceiving himself as an out-of-bounds symbol of privilege, and no one is there to tell him otherwise.

While the narrator feels like a superstar, his reality is not becoming any more special or valuable. His corporation exists because of, and as the creation of, speculative assets and financial instruments of varying degrees of abstraction. The corporation is an abstraction of advanced stages. So too is the narrator's role. Just as derivatives represent a more abstract concept of stocks, so too corporations can come to represent an abstraction of former early-stage companies and start-ups after mergers and acquisitions. While greater abstractions tend to correlate to greater public interest and adoption, such as through IPOs and greater distribution of an ever-larger profit, such abstract instrumentation does not create more worker security. More jobs can be created, but also the likelihood of retrenchment increases. It would seem too that worker interest corresponds with roles that are more abstract, perhaps suggesting that workers play into the rhetoric more than they think for themselves; more join at advanced stages of abstraction when demand for the product is high and the corporation is large rather than during early stages. Essentially, workers meet a demand or otherwise do not have a job. In the story, the narrator meets the demand for clients who do not want to feel pain by being on the receiving end:

The company started off in run-of-the-mill corporate services, basic stuff: ethical qualm transference, plausible deniability. The sort of things that generated good cash flow, cash flow that was fed right back into R&D, year after year, turning the little shop into a bit player, and then a not-so-bit player, and then, eventually, into a leader in a specialized market. In those early days, this place was known as Conscience Incorporated. The company had cornered the early market in guilt.

Then the technology improved. Some genius in Delhi had figured out a transfer protocol to standardize and packetize all different kinds of experiences. Overnight, everything changed. An industry was born. The business of bad feeling. For the right price, almost any part of life could be avoided. (Yu 6)

The narrator's role, referenced in the last sentence, is to expand the distribution of the service—not to feed value back into R&D, not needing investment in professional development. Like the preference of consumers, it is temporary. Like a wild swing in the stock market, abstraction draws interest and action the most when it is least real. So, the worker's role was never really designed to give them real value. Just as the stock market never goes up always, and like the sharp plunge that follows a rapid spike, these workers were made to bear euphoria and psychological despair.

Interestingly enough, the narrator does not think of the company they work for in name but in relation to an older and acquired company called "Conscience Incorporated" and a rival company called "Precision Living Solutions" in Hyderabad (Yu 6). The narrator's own company is in Bangalore. The narrator suggests that the mention of the company's name is unnecessary, reinforcing that they understand their jobs more as industry abstractions rather than something

identifiable. After all, only when the “genius in Delhi figured out a transfer protocol” that puts the technology in touch with the mass consumer does the industry take off (Yu 6). Corporations and workers are opportunistically created, while innovation remains a specter that mysteriously haunts the inner workings of late capitalism. The transfer protocol seems to have first appeared in Delhi. The rest of the technology is history that can be speculated upon. The innovation when globalized is no longer innovation but product. It is hard to identify with innovation in the way most human beings form identification with traditional forms of belonging, such as with nationalities, citizenship, family, friends, etc. A contemporary case in point might be the rise of Tik Tok, that corresponds with adoption by the masses. Yet previously, Musical.ly, the innovating company was headquartered in Santa Monica, California with roots to Shanghai. These companies move and merge, leaving behind only traces on the globe and shedding the shells of their former selves until they come to be acquired by large corporations configured to monetize the middleman business of distribution. Bangalore and Hyderabad are cities that attract innovation and form seats for larger corporations to operate. Like Silicon Valley, these places offer a way of life that may sound very attractive and exciting, but only because such a life is speculative and abstract. It makes the workers feel invincible rather than vulnerable, running on unrealistic optimism.

“Standard Loneliness Package” can be viewed as an exploration of what underlies the unrealistic optimism of workers. It is ugly, entailing selfishness, competitiveness, and a lack of empathy directed towards other workers. However, in most cases, the systems enabling this is neither obvious nor viewed this way. Rather, what is reflected is the insecurity workers project as a false sense of confidence; devaluation seeps into aspects of these workers’ relationship as bitterness which is hidden or unnoticed. In the short story, the narrator plays a gullible wage

slave who seemingly performs his role better than his other colleagues. Believing he has cause for optimism, the narrator entrenches himself in corporate jargon and the devaluation. His estrangement is subtle but ultimately pertinent. His colleague, Deepak, is a sensitive and inquisitive man who feels limited by the role he is given. Deepak experiences a personal side tragedy when he tests the limits of the technology and cracks up, a term that could mean the loss of sanity or a metaphorical death. Deepak's act of nonconformity serves as a foil and warning to center the narrator's life as the main tragedy in the story. In the story, questions surrounding Deepak's crack up falls on deaf ears, coming to represent the tone deafness of corporations towards their workers. The narrator's ultimately doomed pursuit of a romantic relationship with another colleague, Kirthi, the "heartbreak specialist," might be seen as exposing the narrator's imposing side, founded as it is on his blindness to her mental exhaustion from exploited affective labor. He cannot see that Kirthi is weary, detached, and jaded after experiencing generational devaluation passed on through her father working for similar global corporations. She acutely feels the antagonistic relationship between the corporation and worker and so chooses to find a way out. Her story interrogates late capitalism for what it is—an illusion of value that distracts from real value. Together, the three characters' stories represent a nuancing of the various fates that befall the subject of late capitalism and the abstraction of speculative finance to offer a reading that defines the devaluation and dignifies the human value of the workers.

### **Conformity as Pain Denying Identification with the False Escape of Abstraction**

In many ways, the narrator's story does not seem so tragic to begin with because it is about tragedy as it is disguised and unrealized—the tragedy of selfishness stemming from insecurity. The narrator seems almost happy to lose sense of his own value and wholeheartedly adopts what late capitalism's rhetoric of prestige and social mobility defines. "We're in a growth

industry” (Yu 4), the narrator tells us, reflecting the hopes and aspirations of financial speculators, hoping it will pay off and bring stability, while claiming that the risk is minimal or factored in. The narrator adopts the rhetoric and language of capitalism, which considers the priorities of the workers second to the potential to earn profits. The narrator makes justifications for this: “It was okay for me. It’s a good job. I didn’t do that well in school, after all. It was tougher for Deep...He was always saying he deserved better” (Yu 8). Even though the narrator acknowledges that there are differences between Deepak and himself, not just in qualification but in aspiration, there is something artificial and cold underlying this sentiment; no, the narrator does not truly think Deep is deserving of better now that they are performing the same role. There is a certain spiteful pride with which the narrator notices this, as if he knows he is doing “better” than Deep. The narrator is walling himself in from his colleagues but justifies the act by passing it off as conformity to the real mission of the corporation. He slowly allows work to subsume social relationships and other non-work priorities. Putting work high on the shelf of priorities comes because the worker feels more deeply obliged to what the role offers and represents than to their own abilities and skills. The prestige is after all a privilege that can go away, so the worker feels entitled to feeling some hubris and savoring the moment. Work may not even feel like a part of their history, but something that lifts them out of a lackluster past. The worker voluntarily prolongs this dependence to feel irreplaceable. However, this is based on an inaccurate notion of their worth to the corporation. The real consequence of this hubris is upon the worker’s personal life. The machinations of late capitalism work devaluation upon all workers and instead of self-reflection; so, the narrator is unable to see that he copes by subconsciously taking relief that the downfall of his colleagues could be a sign that he is employable. The narrator’s communication is mainly through jokes and teasing because the



narrator's optimism is ultimately untethered to his own value. The narrator does not know if he is truly wanted by the corporation.

What the narrator thinks will bring him value, equivalent to the Wall Street player's notion of prestige, is actually a misguided validation seeking. It certainly represents the type of workers' relationship to reality, which corporations thrive on. Workers who are insecure enough in their selves to put their lives second, who coddle up to this culture of prestige, are easy to handle. This is perhaps best represented by the fact that the narrator is the only one left in the company when the story ends. In the story, the narrator does not really do much to be disliked other than the fact that he is not so bright and does not have much in the way of ambition. His jokes are not that bad, and he still tries to relate to colleagues. Amicably, he was not the greatest at school, but he sure can outlast his colleagues because he is "nice," a self-referential term for the fact that he knows how to keep his head down in tough times because he is unable to stand out or grasp greater agency (Yu 16). However, the conformity the narrator becomes a poster child for is a sinister disguise and justification for being masochistic in accepting the harm caused by devaluation. The narrator's misfortune is in being a sucker, the last guy with the short end. His colleagues move away due to the repulsiveness of his passivity, Kirithi romantically and Deepak in spirit.

The metaphor of workers receiving pain in exchange for wages is not a subtle one. In a twisted way, the pain the narrator takes through his work thrills and excites him rather than defeats him. Bring it on, the narrator seems to say as he works on a pain ticket attending a stranger's funeral: "The foot, the foot. So heavy. Here we go, yes, this is familiar, the foot, yes, the foot. It doesn't hurt, exactly. It's not what I would call comfortable, but it's not pain, either. More like pressure" (Yu 5). When Deepak, the narrator's colleague, tries to rationalize it as the

Christian God, the narrator replies, ““Are you sure it is the Christian God?... I always thought God was Jewish”” (Yu 5). The narrator teases Deepak for feeling the pain another way, for feeling in a sensitive spiritual way, for wanting to make sense of it. The narrator would rather have the experience be felt as inherently senseless because he has accepted that his position cannot make sense to him. The narrator is a defeated broken man who is deluded that his radical acceptance of corporate rhetoric is his salvation. So, the narrator carries on his life, trying hard to believe he is not being exploited, expressing this sentiment through jokes, all while being devoid of understanding his own value.

The narrator not knowing the water then is an apt metaphor for identifying uncritically with the corporate rhetoric of late capitalism. The lack of desire to examine the workings of late capitalism comes from an extreme dependence on innovation. This is a fear and awe of innovation, which metaphorically could be like sailing on an early exploratory ship and surviving treacherous seas, unpredictable weather, harsh conditions, disease, pirates, etc. The innovator/explorer has automatic aura and status because nobody wants to be on that ship but yet desires that such a ship sails into their port. Colonizers and capitalists remain undisputed heroes, so others lap out of their hands. Similarly, the narrator does not know the water, did not take risks, does not have the genius to create the protocol: The narrator is by process and status made to default the decisions about his life to the corporations. The narrator seems to want to reject the notion of his own value, almost as if remembering is out of the picture because if the narrator survives by forgetting, to remember or to know what went on to make this journey would cause him to lose the ability to conform and thus to work. However, this is a personal choice, just as it is the choice of the second-tier players of Wall Street not to work overtime. The tragedy is that the narrator, in making choices that benefit the corporation exclusively, is ultimately a sucker

who forgets his own agency and lacks critical thinking. He does not see that the game is predicated on paradox: wanting more only because he believes he does not deserve better.

### **The Narrator Ignoring Human Value in Others**

The other characters, Deepak and Kirithi, experience misfortunes; they may be tragic but that will not be the focus of Yu's story because of the dignity these characters retain. The main tragedy is that the devaluation has made some of the workers callous to their own human value. To begin, the way the narrator views his colleague Deepak is not very flattering. The narrator teases Deepak constantly because of personal qualities that negatively impact Deepak's job performance. Deepak is sensitive, and this is seen as a misalignment and self-sabotage when he is unable to view his role from a point of detachment. At one point, Deepak is overcome with emotion and the narrator well-meaningly tries to comfort him with some words, "hey man, you have to let go a little. Just a little. Don't let it get to you so much" (Yu 12). The narrator has given himself and the corporation concession not to validate his own human emotions, since he is just doing it as a job. The narrator does not see how his own humanity has been twisted out of nature even as he encourages Deepak to be the same way. Deepak, on the other hand, struggles to retain his personhood. The contrast between Deepak and the narrator helps to imagine the corporate culture of late capitalism as a concession of the worker's personhood rather than simply a few hours a day of labor. Deepak's emotional inability to perform his role efficiently is perhaps an indication that work cannot be detached from being, despite how the corporate rhetoric tries to make it seem as such. The narrator may think Deepak is inexperienced, slow, overly-sensitive, or resisting even, but this sentiment is a reflection more on the corporate

influence upon the narrator than Deepak. The corporate rhetoric isolates the narrator from the value of themselves and others, taking away their agency to preserve their own self-interest.

It is interesting to note how Deepak and the narrator adopt language as an unserious, dysfunctional, and imaginative tool. There is something speculative and skeptical about the way language comes to be regarded by these workers. In fact, the use of language by these workers suggest division rather than connection. The narrator observes Deepak's attachment to the verbal mannerism of the engineers:

He liked to start sentences with okay, so. It was a habit he had picked up from the engineers. He thought it made him sound smarter, thought it made him sound like them, those code jockeys, standing by the coffee machine, talking faster than he could think, talking not so much in sentences as in data structures, dense clumps of logic with the occasional inside joke. He liked to stand near them, pretending to stir sugar into his coffee, listening in on them as if they were speaking a different language. A language of knowing something, a language of being an expert at something. A language of being something more than an hourly unit. (Yu 8-9)

Seeing Deepak talk like he was from the engineering department strikes the narrator as entertaining an illusion and wishful thinking. While seemingly thinking this is cute, the narrator believes it is futile for Deepak to try to communicate his talents and potential. Whether worker or engineer, the narrator implies their value is tied to the speculative fates of boom-and-bust cycles: "In the end, we're all brains for hire. Mental space for rent, moments as a commodity" (Yu 9). Perhaps the narrator's subconscious is judging the narrator's own predilection for using a corporate language that is just as spurious in value to the way Deepak imagines himself as an

engineer. When corporate language shapes the way the workers regard each other, it is not a source of deep relationships but a borrowed, pre-fabricated one, packaged by managers as professionalism to serve the objectives of the corporation. The narrator looks upon Deepak's ambitions and language use with skepticism because he knows he too does not have the power to better his situation.

While the narrator thinks it is tragic that Deepak "cracked up," he misses that it could be considered an honor-suicide (Yu 24). The narrator instead interprets it through perhaps a learned corporate jargon, cracked up, which perhaps can be interpreted as a spiritual and metaphorical death, resulting in an inability to be there for the kind of work performed. For one, Deepak seems to defy his temperament for emotionality by taking on an almost impossible to handle job: "Too much what? There is no upper bound on cruelty, he said" to the narrator who reacted skeptically when told about Deepak's plans (Yu 25). Deepak's emotionality is not so much an inability to handle pain; Deepak is unable to handle that all the value the company gives him is so demeaning. The choice to blow the upper limit is an outburst and defiance at being unable to realize more of his value. Deepak was never afraid of pain, just of being stuck. When Deepak cracked and is dragged out from the building, the narrator thinks Deepak is too weak, too experimental. In missing that Deepak is tired of the limits imposed on him, the narrator is desensitized to the devaluation of himself and fellow colleagues. Deepak's cracking up is not considered a tragedy but a misfortune due to the honor Deepak retains. The true tragedy is in the narrator's failure to see that limiting his own potential has ultimately changed his outlook and actions for the worst.

## Freedom as Making Personal Choice without Dependence

While the misfortune of Deepak's death is so to speak buried by the corporation and by extension and association the narrator failing to recognize human value, the tragedy remains in the story. Kirthi's story is tied to finding the tragedy of being unable to act upon and form deep human relationships. Kirthi's devaluation is a post-tragedy. Her death too like Deepak's is metaphorical and spiritual, represented by the constant brokenness of being a heartbreak specialist. Kirthi still has her body intact and can work. However, she works because she is a zombie, destroyed on the inside: "There are two hundred forty-seven ways to have your heart broken, she says, and I have felt them all," she tells the narrator (Yu 21). In other words, Kirthi has baggage. For Kirthi, work is an expression of being hollow. She works because the corporation has taken away the history and security of her family. Work represents a generational curse that goes unaddressed because of the corporation's influence on the livelihood of its people. The narrator does not yet believe this will be his fate even though he senses something wrong with Kirthi:

But, see, the way the market works, sellers like us, we never get full value on our time. It's like a pawnshop. You hock your pocket watch to put dinner on the table, you might get fifty bucks. Go get it a week later and you'll have to pay four times that to get it back.

Same principle here. I love Kirthi, I do. But I don't know if I could give sixteen years of my life to get her father out. I could do it if I knew she loved me, but I don't know it yet. (Yu 27)

The narrator rationalizes his decision not to commit to Kirthi as a logical one; he does not realize how his decision has ultimately been influenced by the fact that the corporation is defining the

terms of his life for him. Neither does he see that he is fated to follow in the footsteps of Kirthi's family should he persist. This is further tragic because the narrator is already unable to form true connection with people and justifies this as normal. Through Kirthi's story, it is the reader who can construe a warning. Kirthi's character illuminates a capitalist narrative that one stays to lose further along the timeline. However, it is the narrator making a bad choice simply because it is part of what the corporations want that can be read as the true denial of human value and the ultimate tragedy.

Kirthi's narrative under capitalism contrasts sharply with the narrator's inability to see past the devaluation. It takes a rejection of another person's warnings and efforts to save him; but ultimately, this plot is written for the reader to unpack and reflect that there is a tragedy in being too far gone. Kirthi is not simply a messenger but a sacrificial figure. Through her pain, she tries to show the narrator a life outside the corporation. She also gets the narrator to experience her freedom by buying a ticket with all her money to engage the transfer protocol after she resigns:

She has moved to a place where I will never find her. Probably where no one will ever find her. A new city. A new life.

She paid for this time herself. She wanted to let me in. For once. Just once. She must have used up everything she had saved. The money was supposed to be for her father but now, no need. (Yu 31)

In this shared experience, Kirthi shows the narrator what it is like to be free from the burden of money and rhetoric of late capitalism: the exigence and attraction. The corporate devaluation upon her father and herself has been thrown off. This includes the pull of prestige that kept her father accumulating corporate obligations and liabilities. Kirthi also reveals to the narrator the

color of the ocean (Yu 33). The ocean is a symbolic representation of imperial power, exploration, innovation, and the vast unknowability of forces that had ultimately brought globalization to their doorstep. The ocean forces the narrator to confront his smallness and lostness as a soul trying to search the depths of himself. It is overwhelming. And for just one time the narrator seems to wish that he was Deepak, hoping to speak a language that could grant him a better life. "Okay, so. Okay, so. Okay," the narrator repeats like Deepak as if both deeply hurt by the corporation and also wishing that language could do more for him (Yu 33). Perhaps he is ready to confront the truth of capitalism, perhaps that is what Deepak experienced: a death to the corporation and a longing for newness elsewhere. So, the reader reads a tragedy into the narrator's story because they know narrator has chosen poorly.



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