The Participant Zero in Satire

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Table of Contents

Abstract ***4***

Declaration ***6***

Acknowledgements ***7***

Introduction ***9***

Chapter Breakdown 11

Chapter One: The 'Participant Zero' in Satire ***15***

What is Satire? 15

Who is Involved in Satire? 24

The 'Participant Zero' 25

'The Politics of Fear' 31

Finding the 'Participant Zero' 42

Chapter Two: The 'Participant Zero' and the Audience ***47***

The Indirectness of Satire 47

Why is Satire Indirect? 51

Irony 57

Parody 59

Audience Reception of Satire 61

Indirect Satire and Controversy 68

Reducing the Risk of Indirect Satire 77

Chapter Three: The 'Participant Zero' and Risk ***82***

'The Make-A-Realistic-Wish-Foundation' 82

'The Ultimate Dream Foundation' 87

Charlie Hebdo 89

Alternatives to the *Charlie Hebdo* Approach 100

Chapter Four: The 'Participant Zero' and Let's Talk Trojan Bee ***103***

The 'Participant Zero' and My Creative Process 103

'White People, White Spandex' 104

'Let's Talk Trojan Bee' 108

'The Tick Tock Killer' 112

'Invasion Day' 116

The 'Participant Zero' and Identity 120

'Magpies' 127

'The Juansons' 131

'V-Beeb' 136

'Georgia O'Keeffe' 140

'The Eater' 143

'Captain Honor' 144

'Proposition 1' 146

‘A Short History of Guns in America’ 148
‘Cops Say the Darndest Things’ 153
The Creative Potential of the ‘Participant Zero’ 157
Conclusion ***160***
Works Cited ***165***

Abstract

Theorists such as Paul Simpson define satire as a mode of communication involving three distinct subject positions: the satirist (the creator of the satire), the audience (the consumers of the satire), and the target (the subject of the satire's attack). However, my exegesis argues that another position should be added to such models, in order to more accurately represent who participates in satire. I believe that the central action of satire, a satirist attempting to persuade an audience that a target is worthy of attack, cannot take place without at least some involvement of a fourth participant: *those who the satirist believes have been negatively affected by the target.* To put it simply, if a target has done something wrong, at least in the eyes of the satirist, then it follows that *someone* has been *wronged.* I call this position the 'participant zero', as without the alleged negative effects suffered by these participants, satirists would have no justification for attacking their targets.

The 'participant zero' is my contribution to original knowledge, but it has also been a significant challenge to my writing process. My creative artefact, *Let's Talk Trojan Bee*, is a collection of short stories written in the satirical mode. These stories attack a range of targets, such as income inequality, conspiracy theories, and anti-abortion laws. Whilst writing these stories, I became aware of the risk that some representations of the 'participant zero' could harm the real-world people and groups who fill this position. This risk is exacerbated by satire's indirect manner of attack, which often relies on audience members understanding the implicit meaning hidden within an explicit statement. Furthermore, satire's frequent strategy of attacking its targets by parodying and exaggerating their viewpoints can result in a warped representation of the 'participant zero', one which can be harmful even when audience members understand the satirist's intentions. My exegesis uses a number of case studies

to outline the potential risk that satire poses to the ‘participant zero’, as well as solutions to minimizing this risk. It then explains how these considerations affected my own writing process.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and to the best of my knowledge and belief, does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed

Alex Cothren

27/11/2020

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Introduction

Let's Talk Trojan Bee is a collection of short stories written in the satiric mode. Even before I conducted my literature review into how we define satire, I instinctively knew that these stories were *satirical*. This is partly because satire has been a passion of mine for as long as I can remember. I read *Mad Magazine* from an early age, and I was soon 'publishing' my own satirical cartoons and parodies for five cents a page. Before long it was hours of pinching myself to stay awake for the late screening of *Saturday Night Live*, or renting and re-renting VHS tapes of *Spaceballs* and *Blazing Saddles*. Later, when I cast my first ever vote for John Kerry in the 2004 U.S. Presidential Election, I was *certain* the Republicans had no chance after the nightly grilling I had watched them receive on *The Daily Show*. The rude awakening of that election day may have planted the seed of doubt about satire that now blooms in this exegesis.

In literature, too, I have always tended towards the satirical. I loved *Huckleberry Finn* as a kid, and I read *Animal Farm* long before I understood it wasn't *actually* about the inherent evilness of pigs. As my love for the short story form grew, it was fed by writers with a satirical bent, such as Kelly Link, George Saunders, Steven Millhauser, and Carmen Maria Machado. In recent years, my confidence to try and publish my own work has been boosted by the positive reception to Antipodean satirical short story writers like Ryan O'Neill, Julie Koh and Nic Low, the latter of whom I was lucky enough to meet when he granted the title story of my collection an award.

Although I have been a lifelong consumer and creator of satire, this exegesis represents my first experience of engaging with the theory of the mode. At first, my literature review confirmed what I instinctually knew: satire is a playful, indirect attack on a real-world target, and it manifests across every artistic medium imaginable. It was

only when I began to read theorists' accounts of who *participates* in satire that I noticed a discrepancy between these academic discussions and my personal experiences of creating satire. By this point in my fledging writing career, I had already published a few stories. This meant that my creative process now had to wrestle with the realization that my work would actually be *read*[1]. Furthermore, because satire deals with contemporary, real-world issues, and therefore involves real-world people or groups, there was a chance that my stories' audience might include some who were represented in my work. This was new and scary territory, and I became preoccupied with worries about how my work might harm some of the real-world people it involved. But *who* exactly was I worried about?

As I tried to pinpoint what concerned me most about my work, I realized that the current models of who participates in satire were insufficient. Theorists such as Paul Simpson define satire as a mode of communication involving three distinct positions: the satirist (the creator of the satire), the audience (the consumers of the satire), and the target (the subject of the satire's attack). None of these positions, however, were the cause of my unease. I wasn't worried about how I, the satirist, might be affected, at least no more than your average artist fears a bad review. I certainly wasn't worried about harming my target, as attacking those who angered me was a central motivation for writing satire in the first place. I *was* worried about causing inadvertent harm to audience members, but only those who were *involved* in my satire in a specific way. For example, if I am writing a story about how Donald Trump's policies have harmed immigrants, these immigrants are central to the story in way that transcends their involvement as mere potential audience members, yet they are not specifically represented by any of the positions. Furthermore, it is these immigrants—who I believe

[1] i.e. by people other than my Mum

have *already* been harmed by my target—that I worry most about. What if, in the process of attacking a target, my satire represents this group in a way that only compounds the initial harm I think they have suffered? This was the major concern that I felt for my work, but it could not be adequately explained through the three-position model of satire.

To fix this omission, I argue for a fourth position to be added to models of satire: *those who the satirist believes have been negatively affected by the target*. I am calling this position the 'participant zero', as without the alleged harm suffered by this participant, there would be no reason to attack a target, and therefore no reason to create satire in the first place. From this argument for the 'participant zero' stem further research questions that both my creative artefact and exegesis will attempt to answer. How should my new awareness of the 'participant zero' affect my creative process? Does the often-indirect method of satire's attack increase the risk of inadvertent harm to the 'participant zero'? And is there a way to limit this risk while also maintaining an effective attack on a target?

Chapter Breakdown

Chapter One introduces this concept of the 'participant zero' position in detail, using a case study of Barry Blitt's controversial *The New Yorker* cartoon, 'The Politics of Fear'. This cartoon was an attempt to satirize the racist and paranoid rhetoric surrounding the Democratic nominee for president, Barack Obama, and his wife, Michelle Obama. However, despite the Obamas being visually represented in the cartoon, their participation would not be recognized in the standard models of satire. The Obamas are neither the cartoon's creator, nor its target, and although they could be placed in the audience position, the personal impact the cartoon's publication had on them makes

them distinct from other audience members. Furthermore, analysis of the cartoon's reception suggests that some audience members were concerned about the cartoon's potential impact on the Obamas, and that this concern shaped their reception to the cartoon in ways that cannot be fully explained by the three-position model of satire.

After Chapter One makes the case for the importance of the 'participant zero' in analysis of satirical works, Chapter Two begins to consider how my own creative process has been affected by considerations of the 'participant zero'. My literature review has shown that satire's indirect manner of attack, including its frequent use of irony and parody, can result in audience members either misinterpreting a satirist's intentions, or else rejecting their strategy as potentially harmful to the 'participant zero'. I use three academic studies on the audience reception of satire to show how irony and parody can disrupt the interpretation of a satirical work. Taken together, these three studies suggest that the explicit message of a satirical work is often more influential than the implicit satirical intention. This has important consequences, as satirists often rely on their audience understanding, or accepting, the implicit intention behind a harmful representation of the 'participant zero'. Two further case studies highlight the growing awareness of how satire's indirect attack can harm those who fill the 'participant zero' position. First, the public reception to Calvin Trillin's poem, 'Have They Run Out of Provinces Yet', shows that even when audience members understand the irony in a harmful representation of the 'participant zero', they might still reject the satire's approach as too risky. Secondly, a case study of the *Chappelle's Show* skit, 'Stereotype Pixies', as well as Dave Chappelle's subsequent decision to quit satire, provides an example of a satirist worrying about the impact of their explicitly harmful representation of the 'participant zero'. While much of this chapter suggests that satire's indirect attack is incompatible with concern for the 'participant zero', two final case

studies—Julie Koh's short story 'The Three-Dimensional Yellow Man' and Michelle Law's parody speech 'Pauline Hanson'—provide examples of satire that uses irony and parody whilst also minimizing the potential harm to the 'participant zero'.

While these final two case studies in Chapter Two suggest approaches that can minimize the risk of satire, Chapter Three asks whether such methods might also make a satirical attack less effective. This chapter analyses the debate surrounding two high-profile controversies—*The Chaser's* 'Make-A-Realistic-Wish-Foundation' skit and the *Charlie Hebdo* Prophet Muhammad cartoons—in which some argued that the risk of harm, even inadvertent harm, is essential to both the effectiveness of satire and to freedom of expression in general. However, I argue that the harmful representation of those who fill the 'participant zero' position in these works—terminally-ill children and Muslims respectively—only serves to undermine the satirical attack by drawing attention away from the true target. In comparison, case studies of three satirical works that feature less harmful representations of the same 'participant zero'—*Black Comedy's* 'The Ultimate Dream Foundation' and cartoons by Carlos Latuff and Michael Shaw—show that minimizing the potential harm to the 'participant zero' can actually *increase* the effectiveness of the satirical attack.

The case study comparisons in Chapters Two and Three offer a way forward for my own creative process, and the impact this research has had on my short story collection is discussed in Chapter Four. Although each story's representation of the 'participant zero' brings unique concerns, I identify some common challenges that appeared across a range of stories. Firstly, a number of my stories initially used irony and parody to represent the 'participant zero' from the warped perspective of my target. However, my research in Chapter Two led me to rework these stories, with a focus on ensuring that my explicit representation of the 'participant zero' was not a negative one.

Secondly, stories told from the perspective of the 'participant zero' created a new set of challenges when those who fill the position belonged to a different identity group than my own. By incorporating doubts about my ability to authentically represent such perspectives, I was simultaneously able to explore my growing uncertainty about the effectiveness of the satirical mode itself. Finally, the last two stories discussed in Chapter Four show that concerns about the 'participant zero' can occur even when I use approaches that have previously minimized the risk of harm. This means there is no 'fail-proof' blueprint that a satirist can use when representing the 'participant zero'.

Although minimizing the risk of harm to the 'participant zero' in my stories was a significant challenge, it ultimately had a positive effect on my creative process. It pushed me to refine my satirical attack, and it inspired some experimental approaches to the short story form. When I first formulated the concept of the 'participant zero', I viewed it as an obstacle that I would need to circumnavigate in my writing. Years later, I now see it as just another tool in the satirist's belt, one which helps me channel the fury of the satiric mode in the desired direction. While I would never force considerations of the 'participant zero' onto another's creative process, it is my hope that this exegesis offers inspiration to fellow satirists concerned about the impact of their work.

Chapter One: The 'Participant Zero' in Satire

What is Satire?

Before exploring the role of the 'participant zero' in satire, I first need to define what exactly satire *is*. Although the etymology of the term 'satire' is disputed, many scholars believe it to be a derivation of the Latin word, *satura*, meaning 'full', or in conjunction with *lanx*, 'a full plate' (see: Condren 2012, p. 379; Elliott 1960, p. 102; Griffin 1994, p. 10; Quintero 2007, p. 6). An important early use of the term came from the first century rhetorician, Quintilian, who used it to lay claim to a certain type of poetry as uniquely Roman (Griffin 1994, p. 9). The fourth century grammarian Diomedes (in Coffey 1976, p. 9) described this poetry, written in dactylic hexameter, as 'abusive and composed to censure the vices of men', and Sigmund C. Fredericks et al. (1974, p. 3) write that 'criticism represented the common purpose of all the satirists'. This remains the case for contemporary conceptions of satire, with George Test (1991, p. 15) writing that amongst critical uncertainty about satire's definition, the assertion 'that satire is an attack is probably the least debatable claim that one can make about it'. Paul Simpson (2003, p. 3) describes how satire 'singles out an object of attack', and he believes that this attacking display is such a central aspect of satire that a work 'cannot, strictly speaking, be satire unless it demonstrates this capacity'. Ben Pobjie (2018) agrees, writing that 'satire always has a target' and that 'a satirical piece needs to take aim and attempt to demonstrate something objectionable about it'. Test (1991, p. 28) believes that a 'satirist is concerned with passing judgement', and Edward and Lillian Bloom (1979, p. 35) also view the satiric attack as essentially judgemental, writing that 'the satirist's concern is to track down and punish those he deems guilty of culpable error'.

Matthew Roller (2012, p. 287) offers a powerful vision of how this satirical punishment works:

> The satirist draws lines, demarcated in moral and aesthetic terms, between himself (along with other right-thinking people) and his targets. He seeks to tear down, stigmatize, and marginalize the individuals and groups he targets - to exclude them from what he presents as respectable society, and reduce them in status relative to himself and those for whom he speaks.

Critics believe that a crucial aspect of this satiric attack is that the target does not exist only in the text but has identifiable referents out in the real world of the reader. Justin E.H. Smith (2015) writes that 'satires satirize real-world targets', and that, as a result, 'satire is intimately connected to the real world…to a degree that most fictions are not'. Similarly, Test (1991, pp. 258-9) notes that as satire is a judgemental mode, 'the satirist needs a world of values and events to respond to [to] judge', and it therefore 'requires the audience to relate the work to a person, event, group, or other real entity from the world shared by the satirist and the audience'. Edward W. Rosenheim (1963, p. 31) agrees that a connection to the real world helps define an attack as satirical, saying that 'the objects attacked…must constitute historically authentic particulars, recognized as such by the audience'. Charles A. Knight (2004, p. 39) writes that this connection means 'the audience of satire becomes aware that its subject lies significantly outside of the text itself', and Massih Zekavat (2014, p. 7) describes how this awareness means that, for a satire's audience, 'merely the text is not sufficient'.

However, a survey of definitions of satire shows that an attack on a real-world target is not enough in itself to classify a work as satirical: the attack must also be in some way indirect, often using elements of wit and humour. Jamie Warner (2008) writes that satire's 'aggression is accompanied by play and laughter', while Alvin B. Kernan (1973, p. 118) believes that in order 'to be true satire, verbal aggression

must…be artfully managed, witty, indirect'. Nicholas Diehl (2013, p. 318) says that satire does not simply criticize its target, as the mode's 'commitment to wit and humor' results in it 'directing the mechanics of ridicule at the target as well as the mechanics of moral criticism'. Matthew Hodgart (1969, p. 11) also differentiates satire from other forms of criticism through the artistically playful way it attacks its targets, writing that in satire 'the criticism of the world is abstracted from its ordinary setting, the setting of, say, political oratory and journalism, and transformed into a high form of "play"'. As a result, Griffin (1994, p. 1) defines satire as existing on the border between serious criticism and playful art: 'like polemical rhetoric, it seeks to persuade an audience that something or someone is reprehensible or ridiculous; unlike pure rhetoric, it engages in exaggeration and some sort of fiction'. Although rhetoric is not always as purely direct as Griffin seems to suggest, his definition nonetheless shows how satire marries its intent to convince an audience with an indirect, playful method of attack.

Based on this literature review, I define satire as an indirect attack that critiques a real-world target. Before I begin using this working definition, however, it is important to address the limitations of my literature review. As the bulk of scholarship on satire is written by White, Western men who focus on satiric works created by other White, Western men, any definition of satire developed from this scholarship will have inevitable blind spots. Robert Phiddian (2013, p. 44) writes that 'the principal object being described by the bulk of satire theory' is 'classic literary satire, especially from classical Rome and eighteenth-century Britain', and Dakota Park-Ozee (2019, p. 601) writes that the result is 'geographic, racial, and cultural homogeneity of the satirical cannon [sic]'. Park-Ozee (2019, p. 600) explains that the homogeneity of this focus diminishes our understanding of satire: 'the study of satire…reliant upon case-studies of the work of white, male satirists has obvious limits; satirical critique from non-

western culture is ignored, racial minority and women's voices are marginalized, and the non-literary is excluded'. The narrow lens through which satire has been defined can make it difficult to analyse works by satirists who are outside its scope, a problem summed up by Stephanie Barbe Hammer (1990, p. 39) in her critique of Margaret Atwood's satirical novel *The Handmaid's Tale*: 'according to what standards should the quality of female satire be measured–should we base our assessment on traditional male conceptions of what satiric literature should be or upon an as yet undefined aesthetic of female satiric writing?' I have strived here to include scholarship that focuses on satire outside of the traditional canon in my literature review (see Ball 2003; Dickson-Carr 2001; Finley 2016; Hammer 1990; Kaufman & Blakely 1980; Marzouki 2015; Maus & Donahue 2014), but I nonetheless acknowledge that my working definition of satire may inadequately represent the diverse range of satirists and satiric works found around the globe.

However, as limited as it may be, my literature review of the above texts has shown me that the core definition of satire remains the same even when describing works outside the canon. For example, in his book on African American satirical novels, Darryl Dickson-Carr (2001, p. 1) describes how his chosen corpus' 'primary purpose is to criticize through humor, irony, caricature, and parody'. This is a description that fits neatly with my own working definition of satire. Similarly, the self-described purpose of *Skizofren*, the Moroccan YouTube show studied by Mohamed El Marzouki (2015, p. 287), is shared by many canonical satirists: 'our primary goal is to constructively critique and disclose the double-faced nature of public figures'. Finally, although Hammer (1990, p. 39) is weary of judging *The Handmaid's Tale* by the standards of a male-centric canon, she nonetheless admits that the novel 'in many ways presents a satiric text-book case', especially as it 'boasts what is perhaps the most

crucial element of satiric writing, namely, the clear existence of a topical political target'. These texts, therefore, have contributed to, rather than challenged, my definition of what satire is and does.

While not challenging my definition of satire, these texts have raised the importance of representing satirical voices beyond White, Western men. Park-Ozee (2019, p. 597) describes how a focus on the canon erases and undermines the work of already marginalised satirists: 'the revolution of the canon around certain races, genders, and socio-economic standings further silences marginalized voices to whom the critical nature of satire should offer the greatest opportunity to resist dominant narratives'. Therefore, expanding the range of voices in satirical theory is the goal of Dickson-Carr (2001, p.1), as he writes that 'many of the texts under exploration here have either suffered from varying degrees of obscurity or have been analyzed in ways that minimize the important role satire plays within their pages'. Similarly, Derek C. Maus and James J. Donahue (2017, p. xii) describe their goal as examining work unfairly overlooked in the past: 'it is our contention that there has, in fact, been a consistent—if also underappreciated—flow of satirical creativity by African American artists during the past three decades'. Ball (2015, p. 1) also aims to focus new attention to satirical texts beyond the traditional canon, this time the postcolonial novels of writers such as Salman Rushdie: 'despite its prevalence and popularity as a mode, satire has not yet been studied and theorized in a comparative postcolonial context'. In this exegesis, I have attempted to contribute to this ongoing effort of diversifying the satirical work studied in academia by including case studies of non-White or non-male satirists such as Julie Koh, Dave Chappelle, and the Black Comedy team.

Therefore, despite the limitations described above, my working definition of satire can also be used to describe the short stories that comprise the creative artefact of this thesis. In fact, even before conducting the above literature review, I instinctively knew that my short stories might be considered *satirical* because their impetus had come from a desire to engage playfully with real-world people, issues and events that angered, shocked, or worried me. I felt that I could recognize a similar engagement in a number of other creative works that I had encountered, and which I knew to be labelled 'satire', including the short stories of George Saunders and Julie Koh, the satirical online newspaper *The Onion*, television shows like *The Colbert Report* and *Chappelle's Show*, and cartoons such as Barry Blitt's 'The Politics of Fear'. Even though many of these works are not in the same medium as my creative artefact, they influenced me to write short stories that could be defined as satirical. This cross-pollination of media is one of the reasons my definition of satire deliberately avoids fixing it to a specific form. My research has shown me that the combination of characteristics that I define as satire has long transcended the narrow genre of *satura* poetry in which it began and can now be found in a wide variety of forms. Phiddian (2013, p. 45) describes how 'the satirical appears in all sorts of places', appearing 'across the literary genres and beyond in many other areas of cultural controversy, from political cartoons, through music, film and television…to the varied wonders of the blogosphere'. Similarly, Alastair Fowler (1982, p. 110) describes how satire 'can take almost any external form and has clearly been doing so for a very long time', to the extent that 'diversity of form is paradoxically the "fixed" form of satire'. This fluidity of form leads Knight (2004, p. 4) to define satire as 'not a genre in itself but an exploiter of other genres'. Ruben Quintero (2007, p. 9) agrees, writing that 'satire has an unparalleled facility at cuckoo nesting in different media and genres old and new'. John

Clement Ball (2003, p. 6) mirrors Quintero's image of the parasitic cuckoo bird by describing satire as a 'parasitic mode that adapts to and transforms its generic host', and Gerald L. Bruns (1979, p. 5) similarly describes how 'satire's own frequent formlessness forces it to inhabit the forms of other genres'.

If contemporary satire's formlessness means it cannot be defined as a 'genre', how then can we define it? One solution has been to classify satire not as a genre, but as a *mode.* If a genre is a noun (i.e. novel), then a mode is an adjective that modifies the noun (i.e. *comic* novel) (see Fowler 1982, p. 106; Frow 2006, p. 65). Like satire, which began as a specific genre of poetry but is now formless, 'modes start their life as genres but over time take on a more general force which is detached from particular structural embodiments' (Frow, 2006, p. 65). Since we cannot recognize a mode through its form, it instead 'announces itself by distinct signals', such as 'a characteristic motif…a formula; a rhetorical proportion or quality' (Hume, 2007, p. 305). For example, Kathryn Hume (2007, p. 303) defines nine 'family features' of the satirical mode, such as an attack and the use of wit to modify this attack, that 'can inhabit a text without defining the text generically'. Satire's ability to signal its presence without making structural changes leads Hume (2007, p. 303) to write that 'satire is better seen as a mode adaptable to various genres than as a genre or kind with an identifiable structure'. Phiddian (2013, p. 46; 46; 44) similarly describes how satires announce themselves, not through a 'brute, formal fact about texts', but 'a perception of purpose speaking rhetorically through them', and for this reason, he believes that it is 'more useful to conceive of satire as a mode rather than a genre'.

There are some critics, however, who go beyond defining satire as a literary or artistic 'mode' in the manner described by Fowler (1982) and John Frow (2006). These critics instead use a range of terms that emphasize how satire is a type of social action

that involves real-world participants, and which can result in real-world consequences. Jonathan Greenberg (2018, p. 11) writes that 'the idea of satire as a mode has its problems', as this classification can 'restrict criticism to the formal analysis of a text that is understood to be a self-contained artefact'. Instead, Greenberg (2018, p. 11) calls for classifying satire as a 'practice', or 'an intervention in a public arena of discourse'. Simpson (2003, p. 8; 187) agrees that satire operates at a level 'higher than what literary-critics traditionally mean by the term "genre of literature"', defining it instead as 'a form of dynamic social action which has palpable social and interactive consequences'. Likewise, Phiddian (2013, p. 44) writes that 'satire never has been an exclusively literary activity', defining it instead as 'a rhetorical strategy (in any medium) that seeks wittily to provoke an emotional and intellectual reaction in an audience on a matter of public (or at least inter-subjective) significance'. Hodgart (1969, p. 7) also chooses not to define satire as a mode of literature, but as a 'process of attacking by ridicule in *any* medium'. For this reason, Hodgart suggests that we 'abandon the traditional methods of literary classification', and instead focus on 'the satirist's attitude to life' and 'the special strategies by which he communicates this attitude in literary form'. Similarly, Test (1991, p. 12) writes that satire 'can neither be fully understood nor explained by the tools and approaches of literary criticism', while Catherine Keane (2006, p. 12) writes that 'we tend to feel more comfortable when we shift from talking about satire as literature to describing it as a kind of social practice'.

Although the above critics use a range of different terms to define contemporary satire, the common link seems to be that defining it as *merely* a mode is insufficient, as this sort of literary or artistic classification does not take into account the manner in which satire strives to interact with and intervene in society. As a creative writer, this feels correct to me, as my experience of writing in what would be classified as the satiric

mode felt drastically different from writing in other artistic modes such as the 'comic' or 'horror' mode. The difference is a certain heightened awareness of becoming involved in contemporary issues and debates, and of involving real-world people in my work. While writing my satirical short stories, I frequently thought about the specific people or identity groups from the real world represented in my fiction, and how they, and others, would view their involvement. Of course, these types of worries do not solely concern satirists. In the past, I have written stories that would not be defined as satirical, but which have still given me pause when I consider the impact they might have on real people in my life or in the wider community. Nonetheless, my awareness of various potential interpretations, and the consequences of these interpretations, felt especially keen while writing in the satirical mode.

This is not to say, however, that defining satire as a mode is incorrect. It seems to me that labelling satire as a 'mode' is the most accurate way to define a very slippery concept, especially as it helps us explain how a certain set of characteristics manages to manifest itself in just about any form of expression imaginable. I *do* believe, however, that any definition of the mode of satire needs to take into account the social aspects of satire discussed by critics such as Greenberg (2018) and Simpson (2003). These social aspects are especially important for this exegesis, which is an exploration of *who* satire involves, and how this involvement might affect them. The impetus for this exploration came from my own unease as I wrote my satirical short stories. I wanted to figure out exactly *who* I was worried about involving in these stories, and if there were any creative decisions I could, or should, make to reduce my unease about this involvement. This in turn led me to become dissatisfied with the current models outlining who participates in satire, as I felt these models did not adequately explain

my own creative anxieties. However, before explaining how these models can be improved, I first need to delineate who is currently considered to participate in satire.

Who is Involved in Satire?

Satire involves three participants: the satirist (the creator of the satire), the audience (the consumers of the satire), and the target (the subject of the satire's attack). Although the specific terms for these three participants may change, this same triad is used by a number of critics interested in how we define satire (see Young, Holbert & Jamieson 2014, pp. 1123-4; Stewart 2013, p. 206; Zekavat 2014, p. 7; Bogel 2001, p. 2; Simpson 2003, p. 86). It is important to note that although these models consider the participants' *positions* to be distinct, this is not to say that the specific individuals that fill these roles are. For example, a satirist could satirize themselves, or perhaps an identity group they belong to, and therefore simultaneously fill both the 'satirist' and 'target' positions. Similarly, if a satire's 'target' views the work in which they are involved, they would technically also become a member of the 'audience' position.

Another important disclaimer is that the positions in these models do not necessarily need to be filled by clearly recognizable, real-life individuals. For example, the satirical online newspaper *The Onion* does not attach the real names of its writers to the articles it posts. Who, therefore, do we deem to fill the 'satirist' position for these acts of satiric communication? I would suggest that it is sufficient to use the entity of *The Onion*, even if this is clearly not a specific person. A similar problem can also occur for the 'target' position of a satire. Simpson (2003, p. 71) identifies four types of satirical targets, and only one of them is what he calls a '*personal* target' focused on a 'particular individual'. The remaining types—*episodic* (an action or event), *experiential* ('stable aspects of the human condition'), and *textual* (language)—are

intimately related to real humans, but they don't single out specific individuals (Simpson, 2003, p. 71). Therefore, the 'target' position may be filled by someone as specific as 'Donald Trump', or something as general as 'corruption'.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that my use of the term 'participant' does not mean that those involved in an act of satiric communication are participating *voluntarily*. Simpson (2003, p. 8) defines the satirist and audience as consenting, or '*ratified',* participants who are deliberately participating in an act of satiric communication. In contrast, he defines the target as an involuntary, or '*ex-colluded'* participant (Simpson, 2003, p. 8). Although useful, this differentiation should not be thought of as definitive. For example, someone who has voluntarily accepted to be the target of a comedy 'roast' could be described as a 'ratified target'. In any case, my use of the term 'participant' simply refers to the fact that a person or group is 'involved' in a satire, whether or not this involvement is voluntary or involuntary.

The 'Participant Zero'

I will now move onto the key argument of this thesis, which is that another of these participant positions should be added to the standard model of satiric communication—that we should be using a satiric *tetrad*—in order to more accurately represent who is involved in satire. Before exploring this argument further, however, I first need to describe how those who are involved in the standard triad interact to fulfil satire's communicative goals. According to many models of satire, the satirist attempts to convince the audience that the satire's target deserves attack and critique. Knight (2004, p. 41) says that, as a result of 'satire's tendency to make attacks normally regarded as inappropriate or even unethical', a communicative act of satire relies on the audience's agreement that the attack raises valid criticisms: 'the addressee and addresser must

agree that the author's imaginative attack and the reader's actual condemnation are justified by the value articulated or implied by the satire'. Kernan (1973, p. 217) also believes that satire's otherwise socially inappropriate attack requires an audience convinced of its appropriateness when directed at specific target: 'the release of aggression is sanctioned only when the thing attacked is shown to be wrong and dangerous'. Therefore, Young et al. (2014, pp. 1123-1124) believe that for satire's communicative goals to be successful, 'there needs to be agreement between the satirist and the satiree that the satirized is worthy of and appropriate for attack'. Likewise, Bloom & Bloom (1979, p. 132) write that a 'satiric attack works only if the writer and his audience agree that the focal object deserves to be diminished or repudiated', while Rebecca Higgie (2017, p. 7) says that in order to 'support the satirist's judgement…the audience should sympathize with the satirist's attitude towards the satirized'.

A satire is deemed 'successful', therefore, if the satirist manages to bring the audience closer to the satirist's viewpoint regarding the target. Roller (2012, p. 299) describes how a satirist 'seeks to recruit this audience to his own side', whilst simultaneously 'isolating the target and excluding it from the community as he stigmatizes its moral failings'. Using a model of satire in which the satirist is point A, the audience is point B, and target is point C, Craig O. Stewart (2013, p. 207) describes how satire attempts to change the relationships between real-world participants: 'satire creates identification between A [satirist] and B [audience], placing these subject positions in a shared position of superiority and creating differentiation between these two positions and C [target]'. Likewise, Bogel (2001, p. 2) describes how, in a 'successful' satire, 'the reader's position…is expected to be aligned with the satirist's' as they 'share in the condemnation of the satiric object'. Conversely, satire that is 'unsuccessful' may move the relationships between the subject positions in the opposite

direction. Simpson (2003, p. 173) explains how 'unsuccessful' satire moves the audience *away* from the satirist's viewpoint, whilst also potentially moving them towards the target: '"failed" satire tends to wedge A and B apart, and as the bond between them lengthens, so that which connects B and C simultaneously shortens'.

It is important to note that those who fill the audience position are not homogenous, and that the interaction described above occurs on an individual basis. Ball (2003, p. 20) writes that although satirists may have an intended audience in mind, one who they think is likely to side with their attack, their *actual* audience will extend beyond this: 'a satiric work may assume an ideal reader who shares its standards of judgment, but it will not always get one'. In fact, given the ease with which satiric works can now be sent digitally around the globe, Ball (2017, p. 299) writes that a satirist's audience will almost certainly extend beyond that of their ideal reader: 'our globalizing, ever-more wired world of intermingled peoples, cultures, and ideas makes an assumption of shared norms even more suspect today'. Therefore, Simpson (2003, p. 154) emphasizes that the audience position 'is both heterogeneous in terms of its constituency and active (as opposed to passive) in terms of its general interactive predisposition'. Ann Johnson et al. (2010, p. 397) agree that audience members are 'active, selective, and motivated by interests that do not necessarily line up with those of a text's author', and they write that this will result in a diverse range of interactions with a satiric work: 'audience readings hold the possibility of a variety of readings, some highly idiosyncratic and others sharing common features'. A satire's 'success' or 'failure', therefore, is determined at the individual level, and it is entirely expected that audience members may have vastly different interactions with the same satiric work.

Of course, even on a person-by-person basis, it is still overly simplistic to reduce an artistic work to a binary of 'successful' or 'unsuccessful', and to base this 'success'

solely on how its satiric elements affect an audience member's view of a target. Phiddian (2013, p. 50) writes that satiric works have their own qualities worth appreciating beyond the communicative goal of distancing an audience from a target: 'it is genuinely possible to read a satirical text for an appreciation of the formal beauty and force of the language'. If, for example, someone in the audience position greatly enjoys the humour and descriptive language of one of my short stories, but ultimately is not convinced to share my viewpoint on the satire's target, should that short story really only be described as 'unsuccessful'? Furthermore, studies of audience reception to satire often feature examples where audience members recognize and enjoy a satire's comedic elements, but either misinterpret or reject the attack on the satire's target. For example, a 2009 study testing liberal and conservative audience members' responses to *The Colbert Show* found that 'both groups find Colbert equally funny', but 'differ in their perceptions of what or who is being parodied and/or satirized' (LaMarre et al., 2009, p. 225). Responses such as this create an incongruity, as Colbert has both 'succeeded' as a comedian and at least partly 'failed' as satirist. However, this incongruity can be reconciled if we consider the 'success' of an artistic work (i.e. whether the audience enjoyed its aesthetic qualities) to be distinct from the 'success' of the satire's communicative goal contained within the work. As a creative practitioner of satire, I am aware of this distinction during the writing process. The part of me working as a creative writer wants an audience member to simply enjoy reading my short story that satirizes right-wing conspiracy theories. As a *satirist,* however, I also want them to think less of said right-wing conspiracy theorists by the story's end. I admit that this distinction is still too simplistic, as aesthetics qualities such as humour and descriptive language are used to simultaneously entertain *and* convince an audience in a work of satire, and there is no scientific method to determine specifically which

elements of a work might be used for one purpose and not the other. Nonetheless, I think this distinction is still useful, as it helps to explain that when I describe a satire as 'unsuccessful', I merely mean that it has not managed to affect an audience member's view of a target in the specific manner described in models of satire.

A second, and possibly even trickier, problem is that a long line of texts—from William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley's (1946) 'The Intentional Fallacy', to Roland Barthes' (1977) 'The Death of the Author'—have eroded the foundations of authorial intention upon which these models of satire might be seen to rest. For if we believe that attempting to understand a satirist's original communicative intention is either useless or impossible, then a discussion on whether or not this intention has been 'successful' becomes valueless. In fact, Phiddian (2013, p. 46) at least partly attributes the decline in theoretical discussion of satire since the 1970s to this undermining of intention: 'if talk of authorial intention is forbidden, then discussion of satire is severely cramped'. The key to getting around this problem is to emphasize that each individual model of a satire is itself only an *interpretation* of the satirist's intention for that work. If someone constructs a model for one of my short stories and decides that 'right-wing conspiracy theorists' fill the target position, that is only one interpretation of the satirical intent of that story. Someone else could construct a different model for the same story, with perhaps 'left-wing snowflakes' now filling the target position. What links these two interpretations, or any other possible interpretation, is that they both recognize satirical intent. As Phiddian (2013, p. 49) writes, to define something as satiric means ascribing to it a specific intention: 'to construe a text as satirical is to construe it as making a point'. An audience member will interpret a work of art however they wish, but if they interpret this work to be satiric, then they are recognizing that it has the intention to 'move' them in the manner described in the models of satire. As

Phiddian (2013, p. 49) explains, without at least this *perception* of authorial intention, there is no satire: 'an audience needs to intuit and react to some level of satirical purpose…for a piece to work as satirical'.

Therefore, despite its simplistic nature, the basic model of satire is broadly true enough to use and to begin explicating the central recommendation of this exegesis, which is that the three participants included in these models are inadequate to fully understand satire and its effects on real-world participants. To clarify, I do not disagree with either the participant positions currently included in these models or the way these positions are said to interact to achieve satire's communicative goals. Instead, I am arguing that the central action of satire, a satirist attempting to persuade an audience that a target is worthy of attack, cannot take place without the explicit or implicit involvement of a fourth real-world participant: *those who the satirist believes have been negatively affected by the target.* To put it simply, if a target has done something wrong, at least in the eyes of the satirist, then it follows that *someone* has been *wronged.* For example, if we take the target of Jonathan Swift's classic satirical essay, *A Modest Proposal* (2017), to be British indifference towards the Irish poor (and I acknowledge that this is only one of a multitude of interpretations), this indifference is only worthy of attack because it has *negatively* affected the Irish poor (i.e. failed to help raise them out of poverty). It would not make sense for Swift to try and convince his audience to join in his condemnation of British indifference if this indifference did not affect the Irish poor at all, or perhaps affected them positively. In fact, without this negative impact on the Irish poor, it could be said that there is no cause to write *A Modest Proposal* at all. If a target's actions have not impacted anyone negatively, then there is no logical reason for a satirist to attack this target, and therefore no reason for an act of satiric communication to exist. For this reason, I am calling this fourth participant the

'participant zero', as without this participant the series of interactions that define satire would never begin.

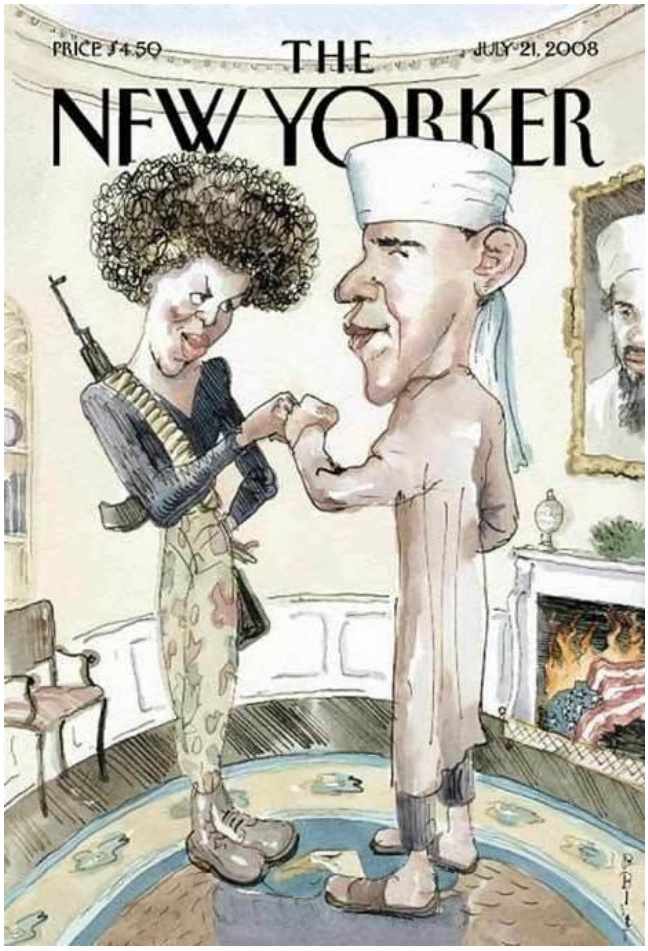
The importance of recognizing the role of the 'participant zero' in satire is increased by the fact that, like the other positions in models of satire, this position is filled by real-world participants. If, as has been shown earlier, the target position is filled by real-world people, it follows that the target's actions, those that have made them worthy of attack, would affect *other* real-world people. In the case of my model for *A Modest Proposal*, the 'participant zero' position is filled by the real-world 'Irish poor' (specifically of Swift's era). Like the target position, these real-world participants can be specific individuals (i.e. Elizabeth Warren *who has been negatively affected by Donald Trump*) or more general (the American public *who have been negatively affected by Donald Trump*). In either case, it is important to note that the involvement of these real-world participants in the 'participant zero' position is often *involuntary*. It is only Swift's interpretation, at least according to my model, that the Irish poor have been negatively affected by British indifference. The real Irish poor may have completely disagreed with both this interpretation and their inclusion in Swift's satirical essay. In fact, one of this exegesis' central concerns is the ethics of involving these real-world participants in satiric works, especially when this involvement might negatively affect them as much, or more, than the supposed actions of the satire's target.

'The Politics of Fear'

I will now move on to a more in-depth case study that aims to show why the inclusion of the 'participant zero' position in models of satire is helpful for both analysis of how satire 'succeeds' or 'fails', and considerations of satire's effect on real-world people. To do so, I will examine Barry Blitt's controversial *The New Yorker* cartoon, 'The

Politics of Fear', which appeared on the magazine's cover on 21 July, 2008. This cartoon (figure 1) was widely interpreted as an attempt to satirize the racist and paranoid rhetoric surrounding the then Democratic nominee for president, Barack Obama, and his wife, Michelle Obama. Blitt's cartoon depicts the pair fist-bumping in the Oval Office of the White House, alongside a portrait of Osama Bin Laden on the wall, with an American flag burning in the fireplace. Barack wears a turban and robe similar to the outfit he was pictured in during his 2006 Kenyan trip, while Michelle is dressed in military fatigues and has an AK-47 on her back. Elka M. Stevens and Tyson D. King-Meadows (2017, p. 86; 81; 81; 74) describe how the cartoon's use of these images 'unified disparate trepidations about the Obamas': that Barack Obama's Kenyan heritage meant he was 'a Muslim, Islamist, or even a partner in a Mujahideen dyad', that Michelle Obama's South Side Chicago upbringing had turned her into a 'Black anti-American radical', and that, together, the couple were 'exemplars of anti/un-Americanness'.

Figure 1 'The Politics of Fear'



Source: Barry Blitt, *The New Yorker,* July 21, 2008

In a news release announcing the new issue, *The New Yorker* explained how the cartoon's use of these controversial images was an attempt at satire: 'in "The Politics of Fear," artist Barry Blitt satirizes the use of scare tactics and misinformation in the presidential election to derail Barack Obama's campaign' (Allen, 2008). In an interview after the issue's publication, Blitt himself confirmed his satirical intent, saying that he found 'the idea that the Obamas are branded as unpatriotic' as 'preposterous' and that he had felt 'that depicting the concept would show it as the fear-mongering ridiculousness that it is' (in Stewart, 2013, p 199). *The New Yorker* editor David Remnick further underlined that the cover's purpose was 'to attack lies and misconceptions and distortions about the Obamas', and 'to satirize and shine a really

harsh light on something that's incredibly damaging' (in Rossing, 2011, p. 426). Many responses to the cartoon also recognized that Blitt intended the cartoon as satirical, with Stewart (2013, p. 205) writing that it was 'clear that the "Politics of Fear" cover was intended to be a saturated, or exaggerated, metonym for the Obamas and the discourse about them that had been circulating in certain communities and media outlets'. Likewise, Jonathan P. Rossing (2011, p. 426) writes that the cartoon's 'exaggerated image juxtaposes multiple racially motivated fears about the Obamas, stretching these caricatures to the point of unbelievable absurdity'.

'The Politics of Fear' can therefore be interpreted as satire that, according to models of satire used by Simpson (2003) and others, involves three real-world participants: the satirist, Barry Blitt; the audience, a group that would contain anyone who viewed the cartoon, although it might most pertinently consist of potential voters for the U.S. election in late 2008; and the target, which could be defined as both the 'misinformation' and 'scare tactics' used against the Obamas, as well as those who propagated them. However, this triad of participants conspicuously leaves out the two real-world people front and centre in the cartoon itself: Barack and Michelle Obama. The Obamas did not create the satirical work, so they cannot be included in the 'satirist' position, nor are they the work's target, at least according to this model's interpretation of the cartoon. Although some audience members may well interpret the Obamas as filling the cartoon's 'target' position, this interpretation would result in a different configuration of participants. Furthermore, while the Obamas *could* be included in the 'audience' position, as they would have presumably seen the cartoon just like anyone else, inclusion in this participant position alone is insufficient. Without the Obamas, the subjects of the 'scare tactics and misinformation' that the cartoon attempts to satirize, there would be no 'The Politics of Fear' cartoon, or at least the cartoon would not be

the same. For this reason, I argue that the Obamas need to be given their own position within this model: the 'participant zero' position.

Another reason for the inclusion of the 'participant zero' position is that it can help to more precisely explain audience reception and reaction to satire. Analysis of the reaction to Blitt's cartoon shows that some audience participants were concerned about the work's impact on the Obamas, and that this concern shaped their reception to the work in ways that cannot be fully explained within the standard triad model of satire. In such a triad model, Blitt's communication would have been 'successful' if he moved his audience closer to his viewpoint, which was that those who propagated the 'misinformation and scare tactics' about the Obamas deserved to be attacked. Conversely, Blitt's communication would have been 'unsuccessful' if audience participants moved away from Blitt and towards those who were denigrating the Obamas. However, a study by Stewart (2013) found that audience interpretation and reaction to the cartoon, and therefore the cartoon's 'success' or 'failure', was often heavily influenced by the audience's existing views on the Obamas. Stewart, analysing 375 'relevant' comments (comments discussing the cartoon's 'success' or 'failure' as satirical communication) on a *Huffington Post* article about 'The Politics of Fear', found that many audience members rejected Blitt and his attempt at satirical communication *despite* the fact that they essentially agreed with his viewpoint on the worthiness of attacking those who spread lies about the Obamas. In one respect, this was unsurprising, as Stewart (2013, p. 208) explains that he chose the *Huffington Post*—widely seen as a liberal-leaning publication—because he perceived their readers as overlapping with *The New Yorker's* audience: 'readers of The Huffington Post are reasonably similar to those of The New Yorker in that they tend to be older…largely White, affluent…and educated'. Stewart's assumption is that liberal audience members

would be expected to agree with Blitt's condemnation of those who spread false information about the Obamas. This expectation is borne out by the fact that none of the analysed commenters who judged the cartoon to be a 'failure' did so because they felt the attack on the target (those who propagated lies about the Obamas) was unjustified. In total, Stewart (2013, p. 209) found that 81.6% of commenters judged Blitt's cartoon to be a 'failed' attempt at satirical communication, with the biggest percentage of 'failure' comments (35.7%) rejecting the cartoon because the commenters did not believe the cartoon was trying to communicate ironically or satirically. These audience members thought that the target of the satirical communication was the Obamas themselves, and this caused them to reject the satirist's attack as misguided. This highlights both how the *Huffington Post's* audience was already inclined to agree with Blitt's subject position, and also how difficult satire—especially satire that uses irony—can be to interpret (I will discuss this issue further in Chapter Two). Nonetheless, this type of rejection of Blitt's satirical communication can still be explained within the triad model of satiric communication, with the Obamas' position as the target being rejected by some audience members as inappropriate and unworthy of attack by the satirist.

The next largest group (17.6%) of 'failed' comments in Stewart's study, however, is more difficult to explain using only the three standard participant positions. These commenters *did* recognize that the cartoon was ironic and satirical, and that it was *not* attacking the Obamas, but they still rejected it due to concerns that misinterpretation of Blitt's true intent might negatively impact the Obamas. Stewart (2013, p. 215) writes that these audience members 'recognize the image's pure persuasive potential but ultimately are more concerned about its negative ordinary persuasive effects on attitudes about and voting for Barack Obama'. Stewart (2013, p. 212) cites one audience

member who rejected the cartoon because the upcoming presidential election was 'too important for The New Yorker to be making fun of the fact that thousands of Americans REALLY think that Obama is a terrorist like Bin Laden'. This commenter clearly recognizes Blitt's satirical intent but is more worried about the potential negative effects for Obama and those who would benefit from his election: 'elections have turned on much smaller distortions' (in Stewart, 2013, p. 212). Many other responses, outside of Stewart's study, also rejected Blitt's cartoon because they feared it would negatively impact views of the Obamas. Paul Lewis (2008) wrote that the cartoon could potentially harm the victims it was trying to help: 'by ridiculing these ideas about Obama, is the New Yorker helping to peel away layers of conspiratorial mud? Or, in the subconscious minds of the masses, will the image simply reinforce lingering fears about the Democratic candidate?' According to Lewis (2008), the potential misinterpretation of the cartoon could directly affect Barack Obama and his election chances:

> If the 2008 presidential election is close enough for very small shifts in public opinion in even a single swing state to determine the outcome, and if enough people who see and misunderstand the Blitt cartoon have negative views of the Obamas confirmed and then decide to vote for Senator McCain, Blitt's work could backfired [sic] horribly.

Furthermore, Rachel Sklar (2008), writing in the *Huffington Post* article that Stewart analysed, believes that Blitt's cartoon might actually serve to embolden its satirical target at the expense of the Obamas: 'anyone who's tried to paint Obama as a Muslim, anyone who's tried to portray Michelle as angry or a secret revolutionary out to get Whitey, anyone who has questioned their patriotism – well, here's your image'. Therefore, some of the audience members who rejected the satire intended in 'The Politics of Fear' cartoon did so in a manner that is different from the standard model of satirical 'failure'. These audience members are distancing themselves from the satirist,

but not because they disagree with the satirical point being made, nor are they simultaneously moving towards the target. Instead, it could be argued that they are moving in a third direction, drawing themselves closer to the Obamas, and in doing so these audience members are rejecting both the satirist *and* the target. Without recognizing the Obamas' role in this satire, however, this effect upon an audience member cannot be as precisely explained. This is another reason for the inclusion of the 'participant zero' position in models of satire.

There is a third reason that we need to consider the 'participant zero' when analyzing, and also creating, satire: the real-world 'participant zero' may be personally affected by a satirical work in a way that differentiates them from those in the participant position of 'audience'. In this regard, it is worth analyzing the Obamas' response to Blitt's cartoon. Firstly, Barack Obama's election campaign quickly denounced the cartoon upon its release, with campaign spokesperson Bill Burton saying that despite *The New Yorker* editorial staff's claim 'that their cover is a satirical lampoon of the caricature Sen. Obama's right-wing critics have tried to create', the campaign nonetheless believed it to be 'tasteless and offensive' (in Allen, 2008). During a CNN interview with Larry King in 2008, Barack Obama also acknowledged that the cartoon may have had satirical intent, but stated that he believed that the cartoon's effect had been different from this intent: 'in attempting to satirize something, they probably fueled some misconceptions about me instead' (in CNN, 2008). Although this statement is similar to that of many audience members who agree with Blitt's viewpoint but see his cartoon as a 'failure' nonetheless, Obama's use of the first-person singular pronoun 'me' differentiates his response from these other commenters and critics. Perhaps sensing this, Larry King asked Obama about the personal, rather than political, effect the cartoon had produced: 'but didn't it personally sting you?' (in

CNN, 2008) Obama's response was to downplay the cartoon's impact —'I've seen and heard worse'—while also placing it within the context of a wider discourse that he had had to personally adjust to: 'when you're running for president for almost two years…you get a pretty thick skin' (in CNN, 2008). Associating the impact of the cartoon with years of adjusting to other types of hurtful discourse is a personal response that differentiates Obama from other audience members who may see the cartoon as offensive, but not as personally attacking them. This distance between the cartoon's effect on the Obamas and other audience members is further underlined by how Michelle Obama described the personal impact of the cartoon during her commencement address for Tuskegee University in 2015. After first acknowledging that Blitt's intent was not to harm her—'now, yeah, it was satire'—Obama (2015) then admitted that the cartoon had caused her significant discomfort: 'if I'm really being honest, it knocked me back a bit. It made me wonder, just how are people seeing me'. Like her husband, Michelle Obama's use of 'me' differentiates her from those in the audience position, and this differentiation requires a specific position for those who are *personally* involved in, and potentially affected by, a satirical work: the 'participant zero' position.

It is important to note, however, that a person does not need to be *specifically* named or represented in a satirical work, like the Obamas are in 'The Politics of Fear', to be affected by that work in a way that differentiates them from other audience members. For example, Black American writer Sophia A. Nelson (2008) describes how she and many professional Black women identified with Michelle Obama when they saw Blitt's cartoon:

> what Obama has undergone…is nothing new to professional African American women. We endure this type of labelling all the time. We're endlessly familiar with the problem Michelle

> Obama is confronting -- being looked at, as black women, through a different lens from our white counterparts, who are portrayed as kinder, gentler souls who somehow deserve to be loved and valued more than we do.

As a result of this identification, Nelson (2008) says that she felt personally harmed by the cartoon, despite understanding that it was an attempt at satire: 'the mischaracterization of Michelle hit the rawest of nerves'. Even though she, and other Black women, are not specifically represented in the cartoon, Nelson (2009) believes that their personal reaction to it differentiates them from other audience members: 'the magazine cover generated great outrage among many Americans, but black women found it particularly offensive since it employed the worst stereotypes of us'. Like Barack and Michelle Obama, Nelson's use of a first-person pronoun, 'us', shows that she believes she is personally involved in the cartoon. Therefore, Nelson's interpretation of the 'participant zero' for this cartoon could be expanded to include not just the Obamas, but anyone who personally identifies with the racist mischaracterizations of Black Americans that Blitt was trying to attack but may have inadvertently reinforced.

This expanded interpretation of the cartoon's 'participant zero' shows that the position can also be filled by a group of people, and that people associated with this group in the real world can be just as personally affected by their involvement in satire as someone who is specifically named or represented. Another example of this is the ongoing discussion about how Black Americans, specifically Black American middle- and high-school students, are affected by Mark Twain's (1986) satirical novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Although Twain's intent is contested, the book is nonetheless widely interpreted as a satirical attack on the slavery of the era in which the story is set, on the racism of the era in which Twain wrote the novel, and more broadly what James S. Leonard & Thomas A. Tenney (1992, p. 3) describe as 'the

wrongs done by white Americans to black Americans'. If, using this interpretation, we create a model for the satire in *Huckleberry Finn*, and place 'the wrongs done by white Americans to black Americans' in the 'target' position, it becomes relatively obvious as to who has been negatively affected by this target, and should therefore fill the 'participant zero' position: Black Americans. In this model, therefore, the 'participant zero' position is not filled by specific, identifiable individuals, but instead by a racial group made up of unspecified people. Nonetheless, people who identify with this racial group (Black Americans) can still have *personal* reactions to what they might view as their involvement in the satire, and the personal nature of this reaction differentiates them from other audience members (those who do not identify as Black Americans) who read *Huckleberry Finn.* For example, John H. Wallace (1992, p. 17) writes that being forced to read *Huckleberry Finn* 'is humiliating and insulting to black students', and he believes that the book 'contributes to their feelings of low self-esteem'. In fact, considerations of the book's affect upon Black American students have led to some recommending that it not be taught at or below the high school level. Peaches Henry writes how those opposed to *Huckleberry Finn's* place on school curricula believe that 'no amount of intended irony or satire can erase the humiliation experienced by black children'. In a letter to *The New York Times,* Allan B. Ballard (cited in Henry 1992, pp. 28-9) describes in detail the humiliation he felt while reading *Huckleberry Finn* in class as a junior high school student:

> I can still recall the anger I felt as my white classmates read aloud the word "nigger." In fact, as I write this letter I am getting angry all over again. I wanted to sink into my seat. Some of the whites snickered, others giggled. I can recall nothing of the literary merits of this work that you term "the greatest of all American novels." I only recall the sense of relief I felt when I would flip ahead a few pages and see that the word "nigger" would not be read that hour.

Clearly, this individual has been severely affected by his involvement, or what he perceives to be his involvement, in the satire of *Huckleberry Finn*, despite not being specifically represented in the text. Therefore, putting a participant like Ballard solely in the audience position is not sufficient, whereas placing him in the 'participant zero' position helps us understand how his involvement in the satire is different from those White classmates he describes. This is not to say that these White classmates would have had a homogenous reaction to the passage. Some may have been indifferent towards it, or even reveled in its use of a racial epithet, whilst some may have felt offended by the passage and sympathized with what Ballard was experiencing. Nonetheless, it is hard to see how any White classmates could have felt *personally* humiliated by the text, and this shows the need for an additional participant position.

Finding the 'Participant Zero'

I have shown that including both specific individuals and groups in the 'participant zero' position can help us better understand who is involved in satire and how they are affected by this involvement. It is now worth asking whether this 'participant zero' position can be filled for *every* satire. In short, the answer is broadly 'yes': each satire that attacks a target automatically involves a 'participant zero' as a result of this attack. This is because an attack on a target at least implies that the target has done *something* wrong, and it is difficult to think of an example in which someone could do something wrong without *anyone* being affected by this action. This is not to say that the target has *actually* harmed anyone, merely that the satirist makes this case. Furthermore, the existence of the 'participant zero' does not depend upon the satirist genuinely believing that this 'participant zero' has been negatively affected by the target, or even that the

target has done anything wrong at all. Satirists may well attack a target for personal motivations completely independent of any harm suffered by others. When they conduct this attack in the satiric mode, however, there is at least the pretense that the target deserves the attack because of something they have done, and this is turns creates the necessity of a 'participant zero' who has been negatively affected.

Of course, all of this discussion is based on an assumption that satire by definition involves an attack on a target. As shown in my literature review, this is an assumption shared by a majority of critics, but that does not mean it is universal. For example, Hume's (2007) exploration of 'diffuse satire'—satire in which there is no target—might have implications for the concept of the 'participant zero'. Exploring these implications is beyond the reach of this current study, but that does not mean that they may not present valid challenges to my findings. Broadly speaking, however, most definitions of satire have an attack on a target at their core, and the 'participant zero' position could therefore be filled for the majority of satires.

Although I am arguing that the 'participant zero' position is almost always available for consideration, I do not claim that the identity of a 'participant zero' is always obvious or easy to find, or that filling the 'participant zero' position always helps us better understand a specific satire's effect. Julie Koh's satirical short story, 'Cream Reaper', from her 2016 collection *Portable Curiosities,* is an example of satire in which the identity of the 'participant zero' is not immediately obvious. The story's plot revolves around Bartholomew G, 'the greatest food revolutionary of his generation', whose wildly successful new invention is an ice cream flavor that kills fifty percent of those who taste it (Koh 2016a, p. 69). The story is an attack on what Kerryn Goldsworthy (2016), in her review of the collection, describes as 'food fetishism', and

if we were to create a model for Koh's story, this 'food fetishism' could fill the target position. Filling the 'participant zero' position, however, is a bit trickier. Who exactly is negatively affected by this 'food fetishism'? One interpretation might be that 'food culture', and therefore people who care about 'food culture', are negatively affected by the way 'food fetishism' warps food into a game of one-upmanship: 'if a competitor does a deconstructed eggs Benedict, you do a *reconstructed* deconstructed eggs Benedict' (Koh 2016a, pp. 77-8). Although extrapolating why 'food fetishism' deserves Koh's satirical attack can lead us to this potential 'participant zero', it is certainly not as immediately apparent as 'the Obamas *who were harmed by those who spread lies about them*' or 'Black Americans *who were harmed by slavery'*. This shows us that although a 'participant zero' can always be found, it is not always an easy search to fill this position.

Just as the obviousness of the 'participant zero' varies, so too does its usefulness in considerations of a satire's reception and impact. In the case of 'Cream Reaper', it is unlikely that a 'participant zero' of 'food culture' would significantly affect an audience's reception of the story in the same way that the presence of the Obamas affected reception of the 'The Politics of Fear' cartoon. Those who rejected Blitt's cartoon whilst also agreeing with his attack did so because they were worried about how the Obamas were represented. It is hard to see how an audience member would similarly agree with Koh's attack on 'food fetishism' but reject her satire because of how 'food culture' is represented in the story. This is not to say that considerations of the 'participant zero' would have *no* impact on an audience member's reception of the satire: individual interpretations are mysterious and unpredictable. Nonetheless, it is highly possible that a model with only the three standard participants (satirist, target, and audience) could be used to explain how a majority of audience members respond

to ‘Cream Reaper’. Therefore, the presence of a ‘participant zero’ does not always help us analyze how a satire is received or interpreted.

It is also hard to see how Koh’s representation of ‘food culture’ could produce the same sort of personal reactions experienced by the Obamas in response to ‘The Politics of Fear’ or Black Americans in response to *Huckleberry Finn.* In these examples, people’s personal reactions to their involvement in the satiric work, such as Ballard’s humiliation and Michelle Obama’s claim that she worried about how she was being seen, differentiated them from other audience members who viewed the satire but were not involved in it. While some audience members who read ‘Cream Reaper’ may strongly believe that food culture is important, that doesn’t mean they are likely to see themselves as *personally* represented and involved in the satire to a degree that necessitates them being moved from the audience member position. Again, it is not *impossible* that someone may perceive themselves as being personally involved in the satire, but it is unlikely enough that this aspect of the story’s impact does not warrant scrutiny in the same way that *Huckleberry Finn*’s impact on Black Americans or ‘The Politics of Fear’s’ impact on the Obamas do.

Therefore, while the ‘participant zero’ is a tool that is always available for us to use, it is not always *useful*. The ‘participant zero’ may make an excellent contribution to our understanding of one satire’s reception and impact, and then make little or no contribution to our understanding of another’s. It is my hope that others will experiment with adding the ‘participant zero’ position to models of specific satires in which they have expertise and therefore test the concept’s usefulness. For now, however, I will move onto an exploration of how considerations of the ‘participant zero’ affected me during my own writing process.

Chapter Two: The ‘Participant Zero’ and the Audience

Chapter One made the case for including the ‘participant zero’ position in models of satire. It is my hope that doing so allows us to better understand *who* participates in satire, and *how* satire’s reception is affected by this participation. These concerns are for those who analyse satire and its reception. As a creative practitioner, however, my concerns have less to do with the *analysis* of satire, and more to do with the *creation* of satire. In this regard, the concept of the ‘participant zero’ moves from being an analytical tool to a creative problem: ‘how should my creative practice respond to my new awareness of the ‘participant zero’? If my goal, or at least part of my goal, is to attack targets who I feel have harmed others, then I need to consider the possibility that my own work might exacerbate this harm. Up until my research into the ‘participant zero’, this consideration was neither a part of my creative process nor a factor in how I judged other satirists’ work. When I first encountered Blitt’s cartoon, for example, I saw only a clever attack that mocked the misinformation being spread about the Obamas, and I was blind to the potential harm it might cause to the Obamas and others. As an audience member who was not personally involved in the cartoon, I failed to consider how those who *were* personally involved might be affected. This blind spot is what I aim to try and correct with this exegesis. I want to modify my creative process in such a way that I can attack the targets of my satire while also minimizing the risk of harming the real-world people who fill the ‘participant zero’ position in my stories.

The Indirectness of Satire

This challenge is complicated by satire’s often indirect method of communication. Research has shown me that satire frequently marries reasonably clear communicative goals (‘this target is worthy of attack’) with a playful and indirect method of

communication that can leave its diverse audience either struggling to recover the satirist's intention, or else rejecting its representation of the 'participant zero' as too risky. Both responses can be seen in Stewart's study of audience response to 'The Politics of Fear'. Blitt ironically represents the Obamas from the perspective of his target (those who propagate racist misinformation), and this meant that some audience members perceived the Obamas as the satire's target, while others rejected Blitt's strategy as harmful and risky. The potential harm of 'The Politics of Fear', therefore, largely comes from the indirect method of Blitt's attack.

This has led some writers, such as the blogger Kevin Drum (2008), to question whether Blitt should have made his intentions clearer: 'if artist Barry Blitt had some *real* cojones, he would have drawn the same cover but shown it as a gigantic word bubble coming out of John McCain's mouth—implying, you see, that this is how McCain wants the world to view Obama'. Similarly, Andrew Malcolm (2008) suggests that some form of explanatory caption may have minimized the risk of harm: 'a problem is there's no caption on the cover to ensure that everyone gets the ha-ha-we've-collected-almost-every-cliched-rumor-about-Obama-in-one-place-in-order-to-make-fun-of-them punchline'. Labelling satire in this manner is actually becoming more commonplace, especially online. Facebook and Google have both trialled labelling satirical content (see Garrett et al. 2019), and online fact checker *Snopes* frequently 'debunks' satirical news stories (Mikkelson 2019). A study by R. Kelly Garrett et al. (2019) found that labelling satire in this way was indeed helpful for audience members: 'users were less likely to believe stories labelled as satire, were less likely to share them, and saw the source as less credible. They also valued the warning'.

However, others have rejected claims that Blitt's cartoon needed a more direct method of attack, or else needed some sort of labelling for its audience. They argue that

making a satirist's intentions too clear would undermine a crucial element of the mode. An anonymous blogger responding to Drum's blog post argued that if Blitt's intention was made explicit, his cartoon would no longer be satire: 'the problem with putting a big Surgeon General's warning label on this satire reading NO! ! NOT REALLY ! ! ! BUT JOHN MCCAIN THINKS SO ! ! ! ! is that doing so would make it *not a satire*' (in Stewart 2013, p. 200). Lewis (2008) similarly mocked Malcom's suggestion that the cover include an explanatory caption:

> a caption? What would it have said? "The New Yorker would like to inform readers that the above depiction is supposed to be funny. We don't really think Obama is a terrorist and we like Michelle's hairstyle as it is. Just in case any of you should think us unpatriotic, we remind readers that the Stars and the Stripes should be kept away from fire at all times."

Cartoonist Tom Tomorrow also rebuked the argument that satire should be clearer in its intent. In a cartoon (figure 2) published to his blog on 16 July, 2008, a few days after the controversy over Blitt's cartoon began, Tomorrow (2008) took aim at the suggestion that 'satire does not work unless it *literally portrays* the intended target'. In the first of four cartoon panels, Tomorrow (2008) depicts Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden gazing at one another and declaring their mutual friendship, an ironic and satirical reference to the Bush administration's attempts to link the two as allies. Beneath this panel, Tomorrow (2008) cheekily admits that 'this cartoon doesn't work at all', because it is not explicit enough: 'there is *no way* for the reader to understand that its intended target was not Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden themselves'. In the next three panels, Tomorrow (2008) gradually makes his cartoon more and more literal and explanatory, until the final panel features George Bush admitting that Hussein and bin Laden's friendship is 'just a figment of my imagination, symbolizing the lies my administration spread in the run-up to the war', beneath which there is a further

disclaimer that explains how 'the artist is attempting to demonstrate the absurdity of the Bush administration's attempts to link Saddam and Osama'. Tomorrow's cartoon—which is itself satirical, as it attacks those who want more explicit satire—argues that satire without communicative risk is barely satire at all.

Figure 2 'Satire by the Book'

Source: Tom Tomorrow, *This Modern World*, July 16, 2008

Tomorrow's cartoon attacks those, like me, who seek to minimize the inadvertent harm their satire may cause. It is notable, however, that unlike Blitt's cartoon, Tomorrow's cartoon does not feature a potentially harmful representation of its 'participant zero'. If the target of Tomorrow's attack is *those who argue for less ambiguous satire,* then its 'participant zero' could be interpreted as *those who create satire that is ambiguous*. This group of people are not represented in the cartoon, meaning there is little chance that the sort of harm caused by Blitt's cartoon will be replicated here. Therefore, while Tomorrow argues that risk is inherent to the satiric mode, his own cartoon is not risky at all. This is despite the fact that Tomorrow adopts almost the exact same strategy as Blitt, with both cartoons attacking their targets by visualizing what they perceive to be their target's perspective. This shows that an indirect satirical attack does not *always* result in a potentially harmful representation of the 'participant zero', and that there is more nuance to the debate over indirectness in satire than those such as Tomorrow and Lewis suggest.

While I think Tomorrow's attack is reductive, as it fails to consider the nuance to this issue, I do agree that satire is a form of communication that is playful and indirect, instead of direct and didactic. I have not encountered any definitions of satire that do not describe this indirect and playful method of attack, suggesting it is a crucial element of the mode. Therefore, if I were to eliminate all communicative risk in my satire, I would render the entire issue of the 'participant zero' moot: I would be writing in another mode altogether.

Why is Satire Indirect?

The goal of my exegesis is not, therefore, to eliminate *all* risk from my satire. Instead, my goal is to understand *how* satire's indirectness can be potentially harmful to the

'participant zero', and then use this knowledge to *minimize* the risk in my own stories as much as possible. However, before looking at case studies in which satire has misfired due to its indirect attack, it is first worth asking *why* satire adopts this risky indirectness in the first place. Why do those who create satire not just attack their targets plainly, leaving as little doubt as possible to their intentions? Although almost every definition of satire describes its indirect method of attack, there are a variety of reasons given for *why* satire communicates so. One theory is that attacking targets indirectly helps a satirist avoid censorship or worse. Leonard Freedman (2012, p. 87) says that when powerful figures are satirised, 'some of those targeted are not amused', and their response is to 'try to censor the satire and its authors'. Freedman (2012, p. 87) further explains that this is especially the case in autocratic systems where satirists 'must play a dangerous game, confronting deletions, bans, and confiscations of their work', as well as 'personal penalties ranging from fines, prison, exile, even death'. Griffin (1994, p. 139) believes that to avoid these penalties, satirists are forced to use methods that can cloak their intentions: 'if open challenge is not permitted, writers will turn to irony, indirection, innuendo, allegory, fable'. Likewise, Test (1991, p. 18) describes how indirect communication can be 'a protective device that may save the satirist from persecution, prosecution, even death'. As an example of the necessity of indirectness for some satirists, Mahmud Farjami (2014, p. 239) describes how a number of Iranian satirists were detained after new laws passed in 2000 made it easier for the government to crack down on subversive publications. As a result, Farjami (2014, p. 230) writes that satire from this period was 'symbolic, abstract, and surreal rather than blatant, realistic, and literal to send a critical message more safely'. To illustrate the covert style of this period's satire, Farjami (2014, p. 230) uses Hadi Heidari's 2009 cartoon of a singing bird muzzled by musical notes, an indirect attack on the clashes between

protestors and police happening at that time. Similar studies on satire in China (see Davis 2016; Lee 2016) also describe how threatened satirists in that country are forced to attack their targets indirectly.

Although the need for indirect satire is clear in authoritarian countries such as China and Iran, it does not explain why satirists working in countries without such constraints also attack their targets in this way. An alternate theory, one that accounts for the preponderance of indirect satire in freer societies, is that this playful, indirect manner of communicating is an attempt to make the aggressive attack at the core of satire more palatable for audiences. Knight (1992, p. 29) writes that without a sense of play, satire would be socially unacceptable, as its 'intensity of attack, especially when the satirist is not justified by personal motives, violates the usual social prohibition against unmotivated assault, verbal or physical'. Similarly, Kernan (1973, p. 124) believes that a satirist delivers satire's attack in a playful manner because it shows that their anger is controlled and not dangerous: 'the release of aggression becomes acceptable because we are reassured through the presence of wit that the rational and conscious mind is still very much in control of the irrational and aggressive energies'. Test (1991, p. 4) writes that the addition of rational wit allows satire to turn aggression into something not only palatable for society, but actually useful: 'satire in its various guises seems to be one way in which aggression is domesticated, a potentially divisive and chaotic impulse turned into a useful and artistic expression'. Phiddian (2020, 16; 9) writes that such satire is useful because it has a 'cathartic capacity', which allows us to express strong emotions such as anger, contempt and disgust safely: 'it provides an outlet for public passions and dispute short of actual violence'. Charles E. Schutz (1977, p. 78) agrees, writing that satire allows its audience to 'express forbidden emotions and thoughts in a socially permissible and cathartic manner'.

Some, however, question whether this catharsis is only 'useful' for those in power. Amber Day (2011, p. 11) writes that by channelling their aggression into a playful, indirect attack, a satirist might be excusing themselves and their audience from engaging in actual social change: 'even if the satirist's intent is radical, she translates her anger and resentment into a satirical attack, purging both herself and her audience of the need for direct action'. Schutz (1977, p. 78) similarly believes that satire's audience is 'purged of the need for more direct action in expression of their aggressions'. Focusing on political satire, Maria Brock (2018, p. 288) writes that when aggression towards those in power is transformed into playful ridicule, it can lead to apathy amongst voters: 'the public can happily move from laughing about the exploits of politicians, can indeed turn to these shows as a form of release while simultaneously and passively continuing to vote for these same politicians due to the lack of any visible alternative – if they vote at all'. Jonathan Coe (in Bremner et al. 2010), himself a satirical novelist, writes that he is 'less and less convinced that satire is good for democracy' because its method of safely expressing aggressive emotions upholds, rather than destabilizes, the status quo:

> Far from tearing down the established order, most satire…does the exact opposite. It creates a welcoming space in which like-minded people can gather together and share in comfortable hilarity. The anger, the feelings of injustice they might have been suffering beforehand are gathered together, compressed and transformed into bursts of laughter, and after discharging them they feel content and satisfied. An impulse that might have translated into action is, therefore, rendered neutral and harmless.

As a result, Coe (in Bremner et al. 2010) believes that satire's powerful targets see its playful attack as helpful: 'it's no wonder that the rich and the powerful have no

objection to being mocked. They understand that satire can be a useful safety valve, and a powerful weapon for preserving the status quo'.

The above suggests that those seeking to change society should always express their anger in a much more direct manner than the playful attack associated with satire. However, a counterargument is that satire's playful attack is designed to engage audiences, inviting them to focus on difficult or complex issues they might otherwise ignore. Leonard Feinberg (1967, p. 85) writes that satire must engage its audience before it can convince them that its target is worthy of attack: 'the first problem of the satirist is to hold the reader's interest, while doing something other than what he is pretending to do'. Hodgart (1969, p. 20) agrees, writing that 'satire at all levels must entertain as well as try to influence conduct', while Griffin (1994, p. 161) notes that satire's communicative goals inevitably rely on an audience to be engaged enough to receive the work: 'no matter how instructive, the work that does not please will be thrown away unread'. Writing on satirical news shows such as *Full Frontal with Samantha* Bee, Lauren Feldman and Caty Borum Chattoo (2019, p. 281) say that these shows use playful humour as a way of engaging their audience with issues the satirists deem important: 'the allure of entertainment and humor in satirical news attracts attention to issues that people otherwise may ignore'. Similarly, Day (2011, pp. 164-165) describes how the activist campaign 'Billionaires for Bush' uses satire to draw attention to issues not commonly covered by the media: 'if campaign financing, ties to particular corporations, or budget deficits were not primary topics within mainstream reportage…the Billionaires attempted to reinsert them into public dialogue via media coverage of the group's appearances'. Participants in this campaign attract an audience by crashing high-profile events dressed as rich people and holding ironic signs—such as 'corporations are people too' and 'thanks for paying our fair share'—that indirectly

attack how the U.S. economy is rigged for the wealthy. Day (2011, p. 167) writes that the indirect manner of this campaign's attack is part of what engages its audience: 'part of the attraction for onlookers is the feeling that they are in on the joke when they understand the unsaid meaning'. According to Jane Fife (2016, p. 324), being forced to decode a distorted or indirect message, such as that offered by 'Billionaires for Bush', is enjoyable for some audience members, as 'when audiences interpret nonliteral language to get the humorous payoff, they often find the decoding pleasurable and develop a more favourable view of the communication'. Feinberg (1967, p. 265; p. 92) agrees, writing that 'the satire most likely to be understood is the poorest kind of satire', and he points to the difficult balance this requires of a satirist: 'the satirist has the problem of finding the golden mean between excessive obviousness, which makes satire too crude to be satisfying, and excessive subtlety, which keeps people from getting the point at all and leads others to reach precisely the opposite conclusion from that which the satirist intended'.

Of these three explanations for indirectness in satire, I identify most with the goal of engaging an audience. The stories in my creative artefact explore a number of difficult topics—such as offshore detention, income inequality and sexual harassment—that readers may either prefer not to think about, or else feel like they have already heard everything there is to know. Looking at these issues through a creative lens, one which hopefully engages my reader by inviting them to figure out the story's message or intent, is my method of drawing attention to, and offering a fresh perspective on, topics that I care about. However, this goal comes with great responsibility. By drawing attention to these topics, I am also drawing attention to the real-world people and groups who fill the 'participant zero' position in my stories. Many of those who fill this position, such as undocumented immigrants and Black

Americans, are frequently represented in unfair and harmful ways across the media. It is up to me, therefore, to ensure that my own stories do not add to these harmful representations. While I cannot control how every audience member receives my stories, I *can* think carefully about how my satire's indirect attack could misfire and cause harm in the real world.

Irony

To tackle this problem, the first question to ask is *how* satire attacks its targets indirectly: what is the cause of ambiguity in satirical texts? The most obvious answer is that satire is indirect and unstable because it is a frequent user of one of communication's most destabilizing forces: irony. Although there are a number of sub-types of irony in satire—such as dramatic irony, in which the audience possess information that a character does not—it is verbal irony that is mostly responsible for satire's indirect method of attack. Claire Colebrook (2003, p. 1) writes that the most simplistic definition of verbal irony is 'saying what is contrary to what is meant'. This simplistic definition, however, is potentially misleading. It suggests that an ironic utterance is like a lie, an attempt to hide the speaker's true meaning from the hearer. However, Colebrook (2003, p. 16) further explains that those who use irony in fact want at least part of their audience to understand the implicit meaning hidden away within the explicit statement: 'the simplest and most stable forms of irony rely on the audience or hearer recognising that what the speaker says can *not* be what she means'. Therefore, rather than trying to hide the disparity between intended meaning and actual statement, verbal irony in fact 'draws attention to the gap between saying and said, between speaking position and posited truth' (Colebrook 2003, p. 112). A classic example of verbal irony is a speaker who, while stepping out into a rainstorm, says to

a nearby hearer, ‘lovely weather, isn’t it?’ In this case, the speaker intends for the hearer to understand that they do not mean their explicit statement, and that they are in fact saying the opposite: the weather is bad. Salvatore Attardo (2006, p. 26) describes the successful uptake of such an ironic statement as ‘a two-step process in which one sense (usually assumed to be the literal meaning) of the utterance is accessed and then a second sense of the utterance is discovered (usually under contextual pressure)’.

Irony’s ability to make a point indirectly means it is a natural fit for satire’s method of attacking its targets. Irony can make an attack seem less aggressive, it can cloak the true meaning of satire from authority, and it can engage audiences by inviting them to decode its message. It is so useful for satire, in fact, that Warner (2008) believes ‘satire almost always employs the double-edged nature of irony’, and Simpson (2003, p. 52) agrees, writing that ‘it is the concept of *irony*, more than any other device, which tends to be regarded as the central mechanism in the production of satire’. Test (1991, p. 17) also believes that satire’s desire to attack indirectly is best served by irony, writing that ‘satire exploits the ability of irony to expose, undercut, ridicule, and otherwise attack indirectly, playfully, wittily, profoundly, artfully’. Such is irony’s importance to the mode, Greenberg (2018, p. 3) writes that it is hard to conceive of satire without it: ‘irony-free satire, if we can imagine such a thing, would lie at the edges of the satiric terrain’.

However, although irony helps satire attack its targets indirectly, it also increases the risk of this satiric attack either being misinterpreted, or else rejected by audiences for being too risky a strategy. Lisa Gring-Pemble and Martha Solomon Watson (2003, p. 136) write that although ‘irony is a useful tool for any satirist’, it is nonetheless potentially risky, as ‘the very nature of ironic discourse poses distinctive challenges for an author’. Colebrook (2003, p. 18-19) similarly concludes that irony is

risky because it relies on an audience capable of interpreting the satirist's intended meaning: 'to say one thing and mean another, or to say something contrary to what is understood, relies on the possibility that those who are not enlightened or privy to the context will be excluded'. Similarly, Greenberg (2018, p. 33) believes that even the simplest irony 'produces shades of meaning and ambiguity, and its indirect methods can be contradictory, confusing, and inconclusive'. As a result, Stewart (2013, p. 198) believes that using irony in satire is a 'risky rhetorical strategy' due to irony's ability to 'encompass multiple interpretations'. Similarly, Gring-Pemble and Watson (2003, p. 133) write that irony's 'polyvalent nature' means that 'its use as a rhetorical strategy to debunk a position is unpredictable'. As a result, Ralph M. Rosen (2012, p. 2) warns that irony's effect on the reception of satire can be extreme: 'irony can wreck [sic] havoc on satiric meaning'.

Parody

Like irony, parody is another frequently used technique that can destabilize the communicative goals of satire. Parody is a technique, often considered to be a genre in its own right, in which an artistic work imitates elements of something else, such as another artistic work, a person, or a medium. Unlike pastiche, however, which is *only* imitation, parody makes deliberate changes to the original source in an effort to say something about it. Therefore, Linda Hutcheon (200, p. xii) describes parody as 'a form of repetition', but one 'with ironic critical distance, marking difference rather than similarity'. Jason T. Peifer (2013, p. 159) likewise describes parody as commenting on that which it imitates: 'parody is designed to offer some form of commentary—whether positive or negative—through the contrast between the original voice and imitative'. This ability to offer commentary through imitation makes parody a useful technique for

satirists, and Hutcheon (2000, p. 43) writes that 'satire frequently uses parodic art forms for either expository or aggressive purposes'. Feinberg (1967, p. 185) writes that when satire parodies its target, it is able to attack both *what* they say, and *how* they say it: 'parody serves as criticism by emphasizing the affectations and excesses of style, and the superficiality and absurdity of content'. Greenberg (2018, p. 268) uses *The Colbert Report*, a satirical news show that ran from 2005-2014, as an example of satire that uses parody to attack both the style and content of its target. The show was an attack on both right-wing news punditry in general, and Fox News' *The O'Reilly Factor* specifically. Greenberg (2018, p. 268) writes that 'Colbert's visual style…mimicked that of O'Reilly and similar "opinion" shows', as 'the set, the graphics, even the structure of the show…directly parodied O'Reilly's'. The show's host, Stephen Colbert, also parodied Bill O'Reilly, the host of *The O'Reilly Factor*, himself: 'with Swiftian mimicry, he inhabited the O'Reilly persona, exaggerating the fallacies of O'Reilly's arguments and hamming up the bluster and narcissism of his style to achieve a *reductio ad absurdum*' (Greenberg 2018, p. 268). The end result, writes Greenberg (2018, p. 268), was not merely an imitation of a right-wing talk show, but a critical imitation that sought to expose its targets as hollow frauds: 'he effectively demonstrated how easy it was to be a loudmouth pundit, demystifying the authority of the TV personality'.

As with irony, however, the indirect way in which parodic satire attacks its targets can disrupt how it is received by audience members. Hutcheon (2000, p. 34) writes that parody and irony both require an audience to look past what is being explicitly presented or said, and to search instead for the implicit meaning: 'both irony and parody operate on two levels – a primary, surface, or foreground; and a secondary, implied, or backgrounded one…the final meaning of irony or parody rests on the recognition of the superimposition of these levels'. If a parodic text is not recognized

as parody, therefore, Hutcheon (2000, p. 94) writes that an audience member may not be primed to look for this implicit meaning: 'if readers miss a parodic allusion, they will merely read the text like any other'. Park-Ozee (2019, p. 954) explains that this can create problems for a satirist if they are attacking their target by parodying them, as 'when satirical cues or contextual knowledge are insufficient, audiences will often default to accepting the explicit message as true'. Heather L. LaMarre et al. (2009, p. 217) therefore describe how a parody intended to attack one's target can instead be interpreted as representing the satirist's views: 'when the audience judges the satirist to be sincere, then the statements the satirist makes are judged as representing the satirist's true beliefs'. As a result, Justin E.H. Smith (2019) writes that parody is a risky strategy, as imitating one's target too well can backfire, and may ultimately reinforce that which the satirist sought to attack: 'when satirists do their job convincingly, when they get too close to their target, it is easy to hear them not just as the channelers of the views expressed in the satire, but as defenders of these views as well'.

Audience Reception of Satire

A number of studies into the audience reception of satire underline how irony and parody can disrupt a satirical attack. Firstly, Kerry L. Pfaff and Raymond W. Gibbs Jr.'s (1997) study of the audience reception of James Finn Garner's satirical children's book, *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories*, shows that the author's use of these two techniques caused many audience members to attribute him with his target's views. Gring-Pemble & Watson (2003, p. 139) describe how *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories* parodies the form of a children's book: 'with large print, a thin compact size, and black and white pictures surrounding the first letter of the first word in each story, the book appears non-confrontational, innocuous, and lighthearted [sic] just another

collection of fairy tales'. However, the book is in fact a satiric work that uses 'ironic reversals in characterization and plots' in order to 'ridicule political correctness in all its alleged manifestations' (Gring-Pemble and Watson 2003, p. 139). For example, Garner's version of Little Red Riding Hood denigrates the woodchopper when he attempts to save her from the wolf: 'Sexist! Speciesist! How dare you assume that womyn and wolves can't solve their own problems without a man's help!' (Garner 1994, p. 4) By imitating and exaggerating politically correct language and concepts, Russell Miller (1994) believes that Garner's 'stories savage those who try to fix the world by fixing thought and language'. Garner himself, in an interview with the *Orlando Sentinel*, confirmed that the target of his attack was political correctness, saying that 'the whole PC movement is a misguided effort to change things by playing word games and trying to shame people into a certain type of Orwellian thought control' (in Carey 1994).

Therefore, one could interpret a model of *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories* as having 'political correctness' as the target of its satire, with those who have been shamed or forced into using political correctness as the 'participant zero'. However, Pfaff and Gibbs Jr.'s (1997) study into the audience reception of the book found that the indirect manner of Garner's attack resulted in many readers interpreting his intentions differently. In the study, sixteen university students read five of Garner's stories, and were then asked to describe what they thought the stories' intentions were. The results show that most did not interpret the stories as an attack on political correctness, with Pfaff and Gibbs Jr. (1997, p. 51) writing that 'only 21 of 93 responses (23%) seemed to show an unquestionable understanding that the author had satirical intentions, and that the object was political correctness'. In fact, Pfaff and Gibbs Jr. (1997, p. 51) note that not only did many respondents not understand that Garner was

attacking political correctness, they actually thought he was *endorsing* it: ‘many informants thought that the writer was actually endorsing political correctness, thereby aligning the author with the very opinions targeted in the satire’. Pfaff and Gibbs Jr. (1997, p. 53) believe that irony played at least some part in these misinterpretations of Garner’s intent, writing that ‘these participants simply were not sure if the author's attitude was ironic for at least one of the stories, even after instruction’. As a result, Pfaff and Gibbs Jr. (1997, p. 47) conclude that a satirist who attacks their targets indirectly ‘risks being identified with the very set of opinions and attitudes that he or she means to critique’.

However, it is not just the presence of irony or parody that destabilizes the reception of a satirical work, as audience members have their own perspectives and biases that increase the chance of an indirect attack being misinterpreted. Pfaff and Gibbs Jr. (1997, p. 53) note that the personal biases of those participating in their study, all of whom were university students, may have been an important factor in how they interpreted Garner’s intention: ‘undergraduate students at the University of California, Santa Cruz, are notoriously liberal in their political views and are often quite vocal in support of political correctness’. As a result, Pfaff and Gibbs Jr. (1997, p. 53) believe that ‘the readers' own perspectives bias them toward a politically correct interpretation of the stories’. The risk of an audience member’s bias affecting their interpretation is therefore an additional problem for the satirist, as Mark Boukes et al. (2015, p. 724) write that because audience ‘interpretations can be guided by existing beliefs’, they are vulnerable to ‘selective processing’, in which ‘people see reflections of their own preferences in the satire’. Ball (2017, p. 301) agrees, writing that ‘how satiric images or verbal representations are perceived is always, in part, a function of what one is predisposed to believe or agree with’. Park-Ozee (2019, p. 593) therefore writes that

satire can often be interpreted as defending, rather than attacking, its target: ‘an audience often sees reflections of their own opinions in the satire, even if they are those same norms and beliefs that the satire aims to critique’.

A 1974 study by Neil Vidmar and Milton Rokeach shows how an audience member’s bias can affect their interpretation of satire. The study focused on audience interpretations of Archie Bunker, a character from the television sitcom, *All in the Family,* who Vidmar and Rokeach (1974, p. 36) describe as ‘a conservative, superpatrotic working-class American who…is especially adept in the employment of ethnic slurs’. The show’s creator, Norman Lear, responded to criticisms of Archie Bunker by claiming that the character’s prejudices were meant to be satirized and that he was ‘a lovable bigot who helps us all laugh at ourselves and view our own behaviour with new insights’ (Lear 1971). However, Vidmar and Rokeach (1974, p. 37), intrigued by fan mail that seemed to ‘applaud Archie for his racist viewpoint’, decided to test a hypothesis that bias affected viewers’ interpretation of the show: ‘perhaps prejudiced and unprejudiced persons ascribe different meanings to the intent and outcomes of *All in the Family* episodes’. They interviewed 237 American adolescents and 168 Canadian adults from areas where the program was broadcast weekly, asking both groups for their interpretation on a number of aspects of the show. To gauge each respondent’s underlying prejudices, they also asked a number of ‘attitude’ questions designed to determine their audience’s underlying prejudices, such as ‘do you think Negros are as intelligent as white people?’ (Vidmar and Rokeach, 1974, p. 41).

The study’s findings seem to prove that each respondent’s prejudice played a large role in how they interpreted the show’s intentions regarding Archie Bunker, with Vidmar and Rokeach stating that viewer ‘reactions were related to or a function of prior attitudes’. These findings led Vidmar and Rokeach to conclude that ‘prejudiced persons

identify more with Archie, perceive Archie as making better sense than Mike, perceive Archie as winning'. The effect of this viewer bias meant that only ten percent of American respondents, and thirty-two percent of Canadian respondents thought that Archie was the person most made fun of in the show, statistics which Vidmar and Rokeach (1974, p. 42) argue run counter to the show's stated satirical intent: 'all too many viewers did not see the program as a satire on bigotry'. As a result, Vidmar and Rokeach (1974, p. 46) believe that the effect of this bias means 'the program is more likely reinforcing prejudice and racism than combating it'.

This effect is not unique to *All in the Family,* either. In fact, *Till Death Do Us Part,* the British television show on which *All in the Family* was based, had its own issues with biased audience members celebrating the bigoted Alf Garnett character. In his study of Alf Garnett, Charles Husband (1988, p. 158) describes how the character's displays of prejudices made him 'an emergent folk hero' to other bigots, for whom 'he was more a reinforcement of their biases than a challenge to them'. Therefore, Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering (2005, pp. 16-17) call this effect, in which 'what is being satirised becomes a source of celebration among at least a section of the audience', the 'Alf Garnett Syndrome'.

While the 'Alf Garnett Syndrome' shows how audience bias can disrupt the interpretation of a satirical attack, Jody C. Baumgartner and Jonathan S. Morris' analysis of the audience reception of *The Colbert Report* shows that even when audience bias is accounted for, the explicit message provided by satire can be more influential and persuasive than its indirect attack. Although Colbert attempts to use his parody of Fox News talk-show host Bill O'Reilly to criticize conservatives, Baumgartner and Morris (2008, p. 627) wanted to test a hypothesis that 'Colbert's explicit criticism of liberals and Democrats will generate more pro-Republican

perspectives among viewers'. To do so, they split their subjects into three groups. One group watched a series of clips from *The Colbert Report*, a second group watched clips from *The O'Reilly Factor*, and a final group was given no videos to watch. The clips from both *The Colbert Report* and *The O'Reilly Factor* were on similar talking points, such as the United States' torture policy and a scandal involving Republican congressman Mark Foley. Both clips addressed these issues from what Baumgartner and Morris (2008, p. 629) describe as 'a decidedly pro-Republican position', with the difference being that O'Reilly was being serious while Colbert was being ironic and 'generating laughs'. Each group was then given a survey asking which U.S. political party they thought would be better at dealing with issues like the economy and the War on Terror, as well as asking how they felt about President George W. Bush. Finally, Baumgartner and Morris controlled their results by first asking questions regarding party preference and political engagement, ensuring that it was the effect of the video clips, and not underlying bias, that was being tested.

The study's findings show that it was Colbert's explicit statements, and not his ironical and satirical attack, that had the greatest effect on audience members. Baumgartner and Morris (2008, p. 630) write that Colbert's 'overt criticism of the Democrats appears to have had a persuasive effect in favour on [sic] support for Republicans'. Incredibly, Colbert's satirical pro-Republican character and real-life conservative pundit Bill O'Reilly had nearly the same effect on audience members: 'Colbert's positive effect on support for Bush rivals that of O'Reilly, showing again that Colbert's explicit criticism appears to be more persuasive than the implicit criticism' (Baumgartner and Morris, 2008, p. 632). Furthermore, Baumgartner and Morris (2008, p. 630) note that this 'finding holds even when controlling for party identification', meaning individual bias did not influence respondents like it did in the

study of Archie Bunker. Therefore, Baumgartner and Morris (2008, p. 627; p. 625) conclude that Colbert's attempt to attack the viewpoints of conservative pundits, in which he makes 'explicit links between the political left and the negative stereotypes attached to them', actually ends up at least partially serving his target's goals: 'Colbert may unintentionally be helping these commentators sway potential voters to the right'.

Taken together, these three studies suggest that the explicit message of satire is often the most impactful, regardless of the indirect attack that the satirist is trying to make. Ball (2017, p. 305) believes that this potential for the explicit message to overshadow the indirect attack is 'a perennial danger of satire', as what satirical communication 'offers up as a representation, in image or text, is more immediate, more-in-your face visible, more available than what contextually may be implied by and implicated behind that representation'. Baumgartner and Morris (2008, p. 626) agree, writing that 'there is some reason to believe that in the case of satiric humor the audience may be drawn to the explicit or direct message rather than the implicit or indirect message'. In a response to Blitt's 'The Politics of Fear', Harvard University psychologist Mahzarin R. Banaji (2008) explains how the explicit association between Barack Obama and Osama bin Laden (whose portrait is in the background of the cartoon) can overpower the ironic satirical message, even for audience members who understand Blitt's intent: 'to some part of the cognitive apparatus, that association is for real. Once made, it has a life of its own because of a simple rule of much of ordinary thinking: seeing is believing'. As a result, Banaji (2008) writes that Blitt's claim to actually be *attacking* such an association is irrelevant to the actual effect of his cartoon: 'there is no getting around the fact that the very association Blitt helplessly confessed he didn't intend to create was made indelibly for us, by him'.

Indirect Satire and Controversy

There are a number of real-world case studies that suggest an increasing awareness by both satirists and audience members of the potential for satire's explicit message to overpower its indirect attack. The first comes from the controversy surrounding Calvin Trillin's 2016 poem, 'Have They Run Out of Provinces Yet?' This doggerel poem, published in *The New Yorker*, is written in the voice of a food critic trying to keep up with the newest trends in Chinese cuisine:

> Long ago, there was just Cantonese.
>
> (Long ago, we were easy to please.)
>
> But then food from Szechuan came our way,
>
> Making Cantonese strictly passé (Trillin 2016)

As he describes the cuisines from a long line of provinces, he becomes increasingly exasperated about having to always be on top of the latest trendy food region:

> Now, as each brand-new province appears,
>
> It brings tension, increasing our fears:
>
> Could a place we extolled as a find
>
> Be revealed as one province behind? (Trillin 2016)

After admitting nostalgia for the 'simple days of chow mein', he returns to the poem's title, asking: 'have they run out of provinces yet?' (Trillin 2016)

Upon publication, the poem immediately provoked criticism for what critics viewed as both racist anxiety towards Chinese people as well as a commodification of their culture. Rich Smith (2016a) accuses Trillin of racist nostalgia for a past when 'white Americans—didn't have to deal with all of this complexity, all of these people with their foods and ideas and thoughts and personhoods'. Similarly, Timothy Yu (2016) writes that the poem is an evocation of dated anxiety about White America being overrun by Chinese people and culture: 'how else can we explain the abject *fear* that grips Trillin's speaker "as each new province appears," if not as an echo of the old

American fear of being overrun by the Chinese hordes?' While these critics attacked the poem for fearing Chinese people, Paula Young Lee (2016) accused the poem of commodifying Chinese culture and turning it into an object for White consumption via a 'centering of the white male gaze (or taste-buds) on the "exotic" cuisine that is Chinese', creating what she believes to be 'the implication that China becomes relevant by virtue of being consumed by urbanites who read The New Yorker'. Claire Fallon (2016) writes that this focus on consuming creates a racist 'us' versus 'them' dynamic: '"They," the entity throwing out province after province of Chinese cuisine, juxtaposes with "we," the gormless Western foodies slurping up each dish in turn. It is, quite literally, us vs. them'.

The response to this criticism, from defenders of Trillin, as well as Trillin himself, was to claim that the poem was satire, and that it was actually *attacking* the narrator's perspective by ironically inhabiting the voice of an ignorant food critic. Samuel Cohen (cited in Smith, 2016a) writes that Trillin is using irony to poke fun at people who really see Chinese cuisine in the manner of the narrator: 'he is not actually complaining about the variety of regional Chinese cuisines and he is not actually nostalgic for the days of chow mein. He is making fun of white people'. Natalie Raabe (cited in Wong, 2016), director of communications for *The New Yorker*, supported Cohen's interpretation, saying that the poem's intention was 'to satirize "foodie" culture'. In an email to the Guardian, Trillin (cited in Wong, 2016) himself confirmed that his intentions were satirical, saying that the poem 'was simply a way of making fun of food-obsessed bourgeoisie'. The defence of Trilling offered by these writers, one which other writers would subsequently challenge as missing the point, is that those who criticize the poem are doing so because they miss its irony. This line of defence

was neatly summarized in verse by the writer Joyce Carol Oates (cited in Gauthier, 2016), who tweeted about Trillin's poem with a short poem of her own:

> Misunderstood
> for writing funnily of food
> Dear Calvin Trillin
> has been grill-ed.

Such responses, however, ignore the complexity of much of the criticism of Trillin and his poem. Many of those who criticized the poem also recognized that it was satire and that Trillin's intent was to attack bourgeoise food fashion and critics. However, these respondents also argued that the poem's indirect attack on such food critics, as potentially worthy as it may have been, did not shield it from criticism of its explicit and potentially harmful representation of Chinese people and culture. In his response to the poem, Yu (2016) acknowledges that the poem's satirical intent was 'ostensibly poking fun at foodies chasing the latest Chinese regional cuisine', but nevertheless describes the 'sick feeling' that reading the poem gave him, describing it as 'the feeling you get when you are the butt of a joke'. Fallon (2016) similarly acknowledges Trillin's satirical intent, but argues that the poem is most harmful to the Chinese people ignored by Trillin's target:

> Perhaps Trillin really did want to make a point about moneyed white food critics, but it feels akin to taking a group of affluent students on a field trip to gaze upon the difficult living conditions of homeless people in their town. Those kids might learn a valuable lesson, but their education is being won at the expense of the dignity of those from whom they're learning. Every marginalized group or person is not a potential tool in the enlightenment of a white man.

Asian-American writer Ocean Vuong (cited in Smith, 2016b), who happened to be featured in the same issue of *The New Yorker* as Trillin, summed up the feelings of

many in a Facebook post where he questioned whether the poem's indirect satirical attack excused the potential negative impact of its explicit representation of Chinese culture:

> [The poem] does employ satire as its main conceit—which in and of itself is fine—satire being an effective and viable form of creative expression. My own question, as an Asian American, is whether such satire is defensible when it harms the culture it seeks to educate. In other words, does the mere replication of ignorance cure ignorance? And even if so, is it worth it when this results in the replication of hurt—hurt that has real social implications on real lives? The poem is racist not because it is 'out and out racist' but because it fails to consider the harm it creates for Chinese people.

In her witty poem responding to the controversy, Karissa Chen (2016) similarly describes the harmful effects of the poem's explicit message: 'while you were trying to make fun of foodie bourgeoise / You were perpetuating stereotypes of Asians egregiously'. For these writers, the 'satire defence' is not sufficient, because they believe the intent of the poem is less impactful than what is explicitly presented. This feeling was best represented in a tweet by Asian-American writer Celeste Ng (cited in Fallon, 2016): 'PSA: "It's satire!" should not be used as a safety net for poorly conceived, poorly executed, or unwisely published pieces'.

Whereas Trillin, besides a single email sent to news outlets, never seemed to engage with the controversy surrounding his work, Black American comedian Dave Chappelle became so worried about the impact of his satire that he eventually quit the television show he created. *Chappelle's Show* was a sketch show that ran on the Comedy Channel in the early 2000s, and it was one of the decade's most popular comedy programs, with the DVDs of season 1 & 2 selling in the millions. Part of the show's popularity was Chappelle's willingness to use humour to deal with racial issues.

Christopher John Farley (2005) writes that show was popular ‘because it talked about what America finds difficult to talk about: race’. Similarly, Katrina E. Bell-Jordan (2007, pp. 74-5) describes how Chappelle was ‘relentless in reminding us of the prevalence of prejudice and racial bigotry’.

In order to satirize issues to do with racism, Chappelle often ironically inhabited characters who represent exaggerated versions of racial stereotypes, described by Lisa Glebatis Perks (2010, p. 276) as ‘stereotypes on steroids’. In fact, Perks (2010, pp. 275-6) believes that some of these representations are so extreme that ‘*Chappelle’s Show* takes the antisocial qualities of African American stereotypes to a level rarely seen within the already troubling television landscape’. A number of critics also noted the risk of these potentially harmful representations, which relied on an audience capable of understanding the implicit criticism of the stereotypes. Jessie LaFrance Dunbar (2017, p. 79) believes that these ironic stereotypes place too much trust in their audience’s ability, or desire, to decode the indirect satirical attack: ‘the probability of “misuse” is exponentially increased with texts such as Chappelle’s race sketches, which rely on consumers to reject surface readings of ironic and satirical treatments in favor of actively deriving higher meanings’. Perks (2012, p. 291) also warns that these ironic stereotypes could reinforce, rather than destroy, existing prejudices: ‘exaggerated African American stereotypes could simply strengthen those semiotic connections’. After interviewing a number of students who watched episodes of *Chappelle’s Show*, Perks (2012, p. 296) indeed found that many audience members seem to have missed the ironical nature of the exaggerated stereotypes: ‘when asked to assess Chappelle Show’s racial representation, focus group participants’ responses frequently reiterated historical African American mediated stereotypes of criminality and violence’. Jessyka

Finley (2016, p. 247) underlines how this misinterpretation of the sort of ironic stereotypes used in *Chappelle's Show* could ultimately have a harmful effect:

> Satirical citation of racial stereotypes is prone to misinterpretation by audiences not attuned to its critique, and then it fails to be satire at all, failing to shift from comic to political discourse when interpreted as the unproblematic reinforcement of the very stereotypes the satire intends to undermine.

Eventually, Chappelle himself became so worried about the impact of his satire that he quit the show. According to an interview he gave to *Time*, the moment that changed his mind occurred during the filming of a sketch called 'Stereotype Pixies' (Farley 2005). In this sketch, characters are visited by 'pixies' that represent common stereotypes of their ethnicity. For example, the first section of the sketch involves a Black American man on an airplane who is asked whether he would prefer to eat chicken or fish, at which point a small pixie (played by Chappelle in blackface) appears and demands that the character fall in line with the stereotype that Black Americans will *always* choose chicken. When the 'Stereotype Pixies' skit aired, one of the programs co-hosts, Charlie Murphy (in O'Rourke 2016, p. 290), introduced the sketch by explaining that its intent was to show how prominent ethnic stereotypes can make people self-conscious and anxious about their own behaviour:

> have you ever been in a situation where you felt, like, racially insecure? I'm talking about the kind of situation where you alter your behaviour because you're afraid of how someone of a different colour may react, or they possibly may think that you're living up to a stereotype.

Similarly, O'Rourke (2016, p. 291) explains that 'the cartoon-like pixies reflect the paranoia of the realist black…subjects about how they are perceived by a predominantly white culture'. Therefore, a model of the pixie sketch might have 'racial stereotypes' as its target, and 'those whose behaviour is negatively affected by these stereotypes' as its 'participant zero'.

However, Dunbar (2017, p. 79) warned that the irony of the sketch might mean audience members would miss the intended satire: 'rather than read "The Blackface Pixie" as an indictment of black stereotypes and post-raciality, for example, many viewers are prone to view it as a vehicle through which minstrelsy is exalted as a form of entertainment'. O'Rourke (2016, p. 290) argues that the sketch is risky because its explicit message (Black Americans love chicken) is more entertaining than the indirect satirical attack (such stereotypes negatively affect daily behaviour): 'the entertainment value of the sketch is incongruent with its antiracist credibility. The quietly polite "real" Chappelle is not funny, and the only thing to laugh at in the sketch is the flamboyant minstrel pixie'. Bambie Haggins (2009, p. 248) describes how the potential prejudices of the sketch's audience, presumably the White audience members in particular, mean misinterpretation of Chappelle's intent is highly likely:

> as long as the assumptions implied by the race-baiting little demons…resonate in the hidden recesses of popular consciousness—not as critique but as confirmation—the road for racial satire, regardless of media outlet—will be arduous. In other words, as long as there is racism, doing racial satire will be problematic.

These worries hit home with Chappelle during the filming of the 'Stereotype Pixies' sketch in 2004. During the taping, Chappelle (cited in Oprah.com, 2006) heard laughter from one of his White crew members that disturbed him: 'somebody on the set [who] was White laughed in such a way—I know the difference of people laughing with me and people laughing at me—and it was the first time I had ever gotten a laugh that I was uncomfortable with. Not just uncomfortable, but like, should I fire this person?' According to Chappelle the incident made him rethink his responsibility regarding sketches that he describes as 'funny but socially irresponsible' (cited in Haggins 2009, p. 243), and he says he began to worry that he was reinforcing stereotypes: 'I don't want black people to be disappointed in me for putting that

[message] out there...it's a complete moral dilemma' (cited in Oprah.com, 2006). Haggins (2009, p. 234) describes how the incident forced Chappelle to come to terms with the risky nature of his satire:

> In the wake of the Nigger Pixie, Chappelle acknowledged the possible dangers inherent in comedy that challenges cultural, social, and political sensibilities and questioned whether his comedic discourse—as exemplified in his creation of little spectres of racial self-hatred—was becoming progressively more open to [mis]interpretation.

Chappelle's concerns regarding his work caused him to quit the show before season three went to air, forfeiting a $50 million contract in the process. Haggins (2009, p. 247) writes that once Chappelle fully understood the potential for his satire to cause harm, he felt he could no longer continue: 'his acknowledgment of his powerlessness and his complicity in producing comic discourse that could be—and was—mobilized in myriad unintended ways, eventually made it impossible for him to continue his relationship with Comedy Central'. In a tribute to the legacy of *Chappelle's Show*, Jason DeMarco (in Kameir & Tanzer 2016), creative director for Adult Swim, wrote that Chappelle's decision to walk away from his work, rather than allow it to be misinterpreted and misused, shows how important the original intent of his satire had been to him:

> Dave's decision to end the show and walk away from (reportedly) a massive payday — because he felt like he was in danger of people misunderstanding what he was trying to do by bringing up the very real and important issues about race at the heart of his comedy — speaks of just how personal his comedy, and the show, was to him.

Notably, Chappelle chose to return to stand-up comedy, where he had begun his career, a move that Haggins (2009, p. 247) believes helped him ease his anxiety because he could more easily read how a live crowd was interpreting his work: 'Chappelle's desire

to return to a space where reading the audience, correcting interpretation, clarifying politics, and disavowing misappropriated bits of comedic social discourse led him back to the direct autonomy and intimacy of stand-up'. His continued distrust of how audience members interpret his comedy was laid bare, however, during a rant at a stand-up gig in 2004, when he railed against those who had misunderstood or misused his work: 'you know why my show is good? Because the network officials say you're not smart enough to get what I'm doing, and every day I fight for you. I tell them how smart you are. Turns out, I was wrong. You people are stupid' (in Carnes 2004).

Chappelle's decision to walk away from satire, albeit into the still-playful mode of stand-up comedy, seems to be a warning of how unpredictable the mode's reception can be. Not all satirists will care about how their work impacts the real people and groups harmed by their targets, but Chappelle clearly does. I do too, and the audience studies and public controversies explored in this chapter have given me cause for concern. They tell me that the explicit message of satire is as important as the implicit one, and that claiming 'it's ironic' or 'it's satire' is not a sufficient defence for potentially harmful work. In particular, the strategy of imitating a target or foregrounding their viewpoints, even with parodic exaggeration or an ironic wink, is a dangerous one. This is because audience members, who bring their own perspectives and biases to a work, may be incapable or unwilling to uncover the satirical intention of a work. Furthermore, even audience members who *do* understand the satirical intentions may ultimately be influenced by the explicit representation of the 'participant zero', or else they may understandably reject the satire because they believe the harm of the explicit message outweighs the implicit criticism.

Reducing the Risk of Indirect Satire

This lesson has created a very tricky problem for my creative process: how can I make use of techniques such as irony and parody, so crucial to the satiric mode, whilst also trying to avoid causing harm to the 'participant zero'? The steps I took to find a solution to this problem will be discussed in Chapter Four. First, however, it is worth looking at two case studies of satiric works that use an indirect attack on their target, and yet also represent the 'participant zero' in a way that reduces the risk of potential harm to the real-world people and groups who fill this position.

The first of these examples is Julie Koh's short story, 'The Three-Dimensional Yellow Man', from her 2016 collection *Portable Curiosities.* The story is an attack on how Asians are stereotyped in Australia, especially in the media, with Sonia Nair (2016b) describing how Koh 'depicts the reductive ways people of colour are often perceived'. The story is personal for Koh, as she says that 'it articulates how I currently feel about being Asian in Australia' (in Nair 2016a). Therefore, a model of this short story could have 'those who propagate racist stereotypes about Asians' as its target, and 'those who have been harmed by racist stereotypes' as its 'participant zero'. Like Blitt's 'The Politics of Fear' or Trillin's 'Have They Run Out of Provinces Yet?', Koh (2016b) attacks her target by foregrounding its racist perspective. Her main character, 'the yellow man', is first presented as a stereotypical ninja character who 'grunted and roundhouse kicked his way through films, his only two speaking lines being: *You die now* and *Boss Man velly angry*' (Koh 2016b, p. 98). The yellow man is also given physical characteristics that are stereotypically Asian, including 'slit eyes, flat nose and jet black hair' (Koh 2016b, p. 98). Apart from creating a character that seems to embody stereotypical depictions of Asians, Koh (2016b, p. 103) also gives voice to racist paranoia towards this demographic: 'the yellows were beginning to amass cash—

probably through drug deals—to buy houses in white neighborhoods…it was getting worse than a zombie invasion'.

As case studies of Blitt's 'The Politics of Fear' and Trillin's 'Have They Run Out of Provinces Yet?' have shown, Koh's strategy of foregrounding her target's racist perspective could backfire by reinforcing these stereotypes in the minds of some audience members. However, unlike these other two works, Koh also explicitly *challenges* her target's perspective. For example, the yellow man steps out of the cinema screen at the beginning of the story, and is shown to be more complex than the one-dimensional ninja character he portrayed: 'he decided that, with his new-found dimensions, he would spend his time on intellectual pursuits, with a focus on the study of the representation of women in Italian neorealist cinema' (Koh 2016b, p. 98). Koh therefore immediately makes it clear that the yellow man does not conform to the stereotype created for him by the story's target. This is underlined when the yellow man is easily beaten up in a fight, as 'he knew much less about ninjutsu than about Fellini' (Koh 2016b, p. 107). The character then challenges the racist paranoia about Asians in a scene where he is interviewed at an arts festival: '*I've been wondering*, said the interviewer, *about the faraway places where all the yellow people come from. Why is it that I'm so afraid of going there? That's something for you to work out with your therapist*, said the yellow man' (Koh 2016b, p. 100). As Koh's story is mostly told from the perspective of its target, her satirical attack relies on audience members interpreting the irony in her racist depictions of Asians. However, by frequently challenging her target's perspective, Koh tries to ensure that even audience members who *do not* interpret her irony are left with a more balanced representation of Asian people than might have otherwise been the case. In doing so, she has at least reduced the potential harm to her 'participant zero'.

Unlike Koh's attack on the wide target of 'those who propagate racist stereotypes', Michelle Law's satirical speech, 'Pauline Hanson', focuses on and parodies a single person, the aforementioned One Nation politician. The work is part of *Seizure's* 'Rhetoric' series, which asked 'Australian writers to write a speech on behalf of a politician of their choice' (Allington 2015). Law's choice to write in the voice of Pauline Hanson might have been a risky one. Since coming to national attention in the mid-90s, Hanson has been notorious for making incendiary and racist comments, such as the claim, made during her 1996 maiden speech to parliament, that Australia was 'in danger of being swamped by Asians' (in The Sydney Morning Herald 2016). Hanson's rhetoric, which Richard DeAngelis (1998) defines as 'xenophobic populism' could therefore be defined as the target of Law's satire, making the 'participant zero' anyone who has been harmed by this rhetoric. If Law had chosen to attack this rhetoric by exaggerating it, in the manner of Colbert's parody of O'Reilly, she could have potentially run the risk of reinforcing it, and therefore exacerbating the harm to her 'participant zero'. This is especially true with Pauline Hanson, who has previously manipulated coverage, and even criticism, of her views to expand her popularity, with Kurt Sengul (2020) writing that 'the media have played a key role in the mainstreaming of Hanson and One Nation by consistently giving them a platform to voice far-right ideas'.

Law successfully avoids this trap, however, by twisting Hanson's rhetoric into a *positive* representation of the 'participant zero', while simultaneously attacking the fallacies in the real Hanson's combination of xenophobia and populism. Mark Rapely (1998, p. 325) writes that Hanson has always tried to present herself as someone representing the 'mainstream' of the Australian population: 'Pauline Hanson's political rhetoric is precisely constructed in order to emphasize the ordinariness, reasonableness

and commonsensical mass appeal of her views'. Having done so, she then tries to claim that the majority of Australians are against immigration and multiculturalism, as witnessed in her 1996 maiden speech to parliament: 'I and most Australians want our immigration policy radically reviewed and that of multiculturalism abolished' (in The Sydney Morning Herald 2016). Indeed, in Law's (2015) satirical speech, Hanson continues to present herself as representing the mainstream of Australia: 'I've always fought for mainstream Australia – *that* is something I'll always stand by'. However, this version of Hanson has come to the stunning realisation that mainstream Australia *is* multicultural: 'mainstream Australia has changed. We're speaking different languages, eating different foods, wearing different clothes and no one seems to care. No one believes that our livelihoods, lifestyles and even personal safety are at risk because . . . maybe they're not' (Law 2015). Therefore, if Hanson is to continue in her fight for the preservation of the mainstream, which 'as a woman who sticks to her principles' she most determinedly will, she needs to remove *herself* from the country: 'I renounce my property to its original owners. Following that, I will be deported to England' (Law 2015). Law's approach is brilliant because it attacks the logic of Hanson's hateful rhetoric without repeating its most harmful aspects. Instead, the new Hanson is forced to admit that her fear of multiculturalism was unfounded:

> 'the ghettos we once feared overtook Australian society. There were bustling restaurant precincts serving delicious halal certified food; exciting and profitable cultural festivals every other weekend; and beautiful temples where people engaged in peaceful prayer and denounced extremism. It was all disgusting and I didn't like it' (Law 2015).

Law manages to represent her satire's 'participant zero' in a positive light whilst also parodying Hanson's voice, and she inhabits this voice so successfully that the 'Rhetoric' series editor, Patrick Allington (2015), writes that 'it gives me hope, even if it's false hope, that I can recognise the new Hanson in the old'. Law's satirical attack

is still indirect, as it requires an audience member to interpret how this kinder Hanson is a denunciation of the real Hanson and her rhetoric. Audience members who do not interpret this irony, however, will still be left with a positive representation of the 'participant zero', something which would have been less likely if Law had exaggerated Hanson's hateful rhetoric.

Koh and Law therefore both show that the risk satire's indirect attack poses to the 'participant zero' can be creatively minimized. Both of their satiric works require that audience members decode the use of irony and parody to fully understand the intent of their satirical attack. However, unlike many of the other case studies explored in this chapter, both Koh and Law construct their satire in such a way that audience members are given a relatively positive representation of the 'participant zero' even if they do not 'successfully' decode the satire. This clever manipulation of satire's indirect attack has been an inspiration to my own creative process, and in Chapter Four I will discuss my own attempts to minimize the risk in my satire. First, however, I will ask whether altering a satiric work out of concern for the 'participant zero' might result in a less effective satirical attack.

Chapter Three: The 'Participant Zero' and Risk

Chapter Two discussed how satire's indirect attack risks harming the 'participant zero'. This chapter explores whether changing my satirical attack as a result of this risk might make my work less effective. In other words, if I change my stories and creative process out of concern for the 'participant zero', do I simultaneously decrease my chances of 'moving' an audience in the manner discussed in Chapter 1? Furthermore, is this element of risk fundamental to the mode, with satire's goal of attacking its target automatically generating the risk of collateral harm to the 'participant zero'? If so, can I even *be* a satirist and worry about the 'participant zero' at the same time? To help me work through these questions, I will look at two high-profile case studies in which satirists' representations of their 'participant zero' provoked debate between those who deemed the representations to be unnecessarily harmful, and those who argued that the risk of such collateral harm was an inherent part of the satiric mode. I will then compare these to some alternate satiric works that seemed to better minimize the risk to the 'participant zero', and yet still attacked their targets effectively.

'The Make-A-Realistic-Wish-Foundation'

The first case study I will look at is the 'The Make-A-Realistic-Wish-Foundation' skit by the satirical television show *The Chaser*. In this skit, a number of children, convincingly made to look like they are terminally ill, are visited in hospital by charity employees urging them to tone down their wishes for more realistic goals, such as a pencil case or a stick. The sketch ends with *The Chaser's* Chris Taylor turning to the

camera and asking: ‘why go to any trouble when they’re only going to die anyway?’ (The Chaser 00:00:53 – 00:00:57). Although a literal interpretation of the skit might be that *The Chaser* is attacking terminally ill children for their selfish wishes, a number of critics have interpreted these terminally ill children as actually filling the ‘participant zero’ position. Tim Kroenert (2009) writes that although ‘the true intention of the skit isn't immediately apparent’, he believes that the target may have been ‘our materialistic preoccupation [which] is so great that it pervades the minds even of children on the brink of death’. In this interpretation, terminally ill children would fill the ‘participant zero’ position, as they have been negatively affected by society’s ‘materialistic preoccupation’, albeit arguably much less so than by their actual illnesses. Although she interprets the skit’s target differently, Jessica Milner Davis (2016, p. 206) also believes that *The Chaser* was not intending to attack terminally ill children, believing instead that their target was the Make-A-Wish-Foundation, and other similar charities, who ‘fundraise for terminally-ill children – not to provide medical treatment, but to treat them to things which often they are too sick to enjoy, such as a trip to Disneyland or meeting a movie star’. In Davis’ interpretation, the ‘participant zero’ would be both the terminally ill children who receive gifts that they are too sick to enjoy, as well as the Australian public, specifically their ‘ultimately futile public sentimentality exploited by these organizations’ (Davis 2016, p. 206). Myles Bartlett (2009, p. 89) also believes that *The Chaser’s* target was not terminally ill children, arguing instead that the skit ‘attempted to satirise society’s attempts to alleviate our guilt at inexplicable suffering’. In this interpretation, those negatively affected by society’s ‘attempts to alleviate our guilt’ would fill the ‘participant zero’ position, a wide group that might include the terminally ill children who are not actually helped by these attempts. Finally, *The Chaser* team themselves confirmed that terminally ill children were not

the target of the skit, with executive producer Julian Morrow (in Howell 2009) releasing a statement saying that the show 'did not intend to hurt those who have been affected by the terminal illness of a child'. Therefore, although the *actual* target of the skit is difficult to ascertain, it seems clear that *The Chaser* team was not attempting to attack terminally ill children.

Regardless of *The Chaser's* intent, however, the skit provoked a negative reaction, with many calling the representation of the terminally ill children harmful. Davis (2016, p. 206) writes that the negative reaction to the show was immediate: 'over 60,000 people in Sydney alone switched off and critical phone calls and on-line comments continued over the next few days'. This outrage was particularly raw amongst those who had experienced the pain of terminally ill children, with Nicole Brady (2009) writing that 'parents of deceased children rang in to speak of their shock that the ABC would put such a thing to air'. Mex Cooper (2009) quotes such a parent, with an anonymous father of a terminally ill child saying, 'I will now have to go and accompany my wife who is presently consoling our son in his bedroom about his pending fate and agonising death which this show did nothing but exacerbate the issue'. Similarly, the anonymous mother of a child with cancer told Erin McWhirter and Paul Kent (2009) that she wanted *The Chaser* taken off the air, as 'they no longer deserve a platform in which they can inflict so much pain, especially on a community of people who are potentially dealing with one of the hardest things a parent will ever deal with'. As a result of this audience backlash against the skit, the show was pulled from the air for two weeks and the head of ABC TV Comedy, Amanda Duthie, was removed from her post.

Due to its use of terminally ill children, this skit clearly crossed a line for many audience members. As a parent of a young child myself, I can sympathize with those

who were harmed by the skit. Both the premise and execution of the skit seemed callous and unnecessarily cruel to me when I first viewed it, and the evident harm it caused to innocent parties is exactly the type that I want to avoid with my own satire. However, according to a number of writers, including some satirists and comedians, the risk of this harm is an inherent part of working in the satiric mode. The comedian Dan Ilic (in Houston 2009) says that the satiric mode *The Chaser* works in means that causing offence, even inadvertent offence, is inevitable: 'someone's always going to be offended by something, and it's impossible to tell who's going to be offended by what'. Furthermore, Ilic (in Houston 2009) believes that this risk of harm is part of what defines satire: 'the point is to subvert public opinion. To use shock tactics to highlight issues and at the same time, hopefully, to entertain people. And whenever you do that, of course you're going to upset people'. Kroenert (2009) agrees that satire must be willing to take risks to achieve its goals: 'satire needs to be bold. It risks making people angry, or causing offence, or failing to provoke laughter, in order to achieve its purpose'. In fact, Stuart Munckton (2009) notes that *The Chaser's* popularity as a satirical television show has come at least in part from such risk-taking: 'this success is tied to their willingness to challenge the status quo. They are at their funniest in their role as outsiders throwing rocks at the establishment — irreverently mocking its pretences and pomposity'. As a result, Munckton (2009) worries that the two-week suspension given to the show is a warning sign for Australian satirists: 'the decision to suspend The Chaser is a blow to free speech. It sets a dangerous precedent of silencing comedians whose job it is to satirise society'.

The debate over the skit suggests a real-world group like terminally ill children are always risky to represent, regardless of the satirist's intent, and that the decision to do so comes down to whether or not one is willing to cause collateral harm in their

satirical attack on another target. However, a closer analysis of *The Chaser* skit shows that there is more nuance to this issue. The problem with the 'Make-A-Realistic-Wish-Foundation' skit is *not* that it chose to represent terminally ill children as its 'participant zero', but that it did so in a way that overwhelmed the true purpose of its satirical attack. Firstly, the satirical intent of the skit is so unclear that even after reading everything I can on it, as well as watching it for myself a number of times, I remain uncertain as to who or what *The Chaser* were actually attacking. As a result, the explicit criticism of the sick children—described by Davis (2016, pp. 206-7) as 'negative, hectoring comments about children's selfishness and their need to be taught to think about others'—is so overpowering that it is only my personal goodwill for those involved with *The Chaser* that dissuades me from thinking that they are actually attacking sick kids. Kroenert (2009) also seems to have had his interpretation of the skit at least partly affected by his existent views of *The Chaser* cast member Chris Taylor: 'surely no one thinks Taylor is such a cad that he'd begrudge a dying child their final wish'. For those who are *not* predisposed to think of *The Chaser* positively, however, it would be completely reasonable to interpret the skit as attacking terminally ill children. Furthermore, the child actors look realistically sick, making it difficult to focus on anything but the sad nature of their condition. As a result, Davis (2016, p. 207) believes that *The Chaser's* satirical attack was overwhelmed by the images of the terminally ill children, as despite the playful nature of the mock advertisement used by *The Chaser*, 'any cartoon-style endistancing was overwhelmed by the audience's sympathy being engaged for the sad-looking children who were disappointed with their presents'. Like Davis, Bartlett (2009, p. 89) writes that the natural sympathy audience members felt for the children overwhelmed the skit's satirical attack: 'whatever satirical point The Chaser might have intended was buried beneath a surge of public outrage insisting

vulnerable children be forever off-limits as the perceived targets of jokes'. Finally, aside from the muddled delivery of its satirical attack, there is an imbalance between the harm caused by the skit's target, whether it is charities or society's 'materialistic preoccupations', and the much more significant impact of the terminal illnesses that affect children. Therefore, even if it were clear that something like 'materialistic preoccupations' was the target of the skit, it is reasonable to expect that many audience members would still reject the ironic hectoring of terminally ill children as unnecessary and harmful.

'The Ultimate Dream Foundation'

Therefore, the effectiveness of the 'Make-A-Realistic-Wish Foundation' skit's satirical attack is potentially *decreased* by its risky representation of the 'participant zero'. The poor construction of *The Chaser's* skit is further underlined by another TV skit, entitled 'The Ultimate Dream Foundation', that successfully incorporates terminally ill children into its satirical attack. This skit comes from the ABC program, *Black Comedy*, which is a comedy sketch program created by a team of Indigenous Australian comedians and writers. The premise of 'The Ultimate Dream Foundation' is very similar to that of *The Chaser's* skit, with a young terminally ill Indigenous girl being visited by a pair of charity workers who ultimately refuse to grant her wish. Unlike the children in *The Chaser's* skit, however, this girl's request is far more serious: she asks the charity workers for 'my people's land back' (*Black Comedy* 00:01:10 – 00:01:12). The charity workers try to ply the girl with a visit from Indigenous Australian AFL player Adam Goodes instead, but she refuses the offer. When the charity workers regroup out in the hospital hallway, one of them describes their choice: 'we either give the Aboriginal people their land back, or we cure cancer' (*Black Comedy* 00:01:56 – 00:02:03). After

a brief montage of scientific-looking images, the skit ends with the charity workers returning to the girl's room with a green vial in their hand, telling her that they no longer have to fulfil her request because they have indeed managed to cure cancer.

Despite the similarities between the two skits, the *Black Comedy* team manages to represent terminally ill children in a way that does not overwhelm their satirical attack. Firstly, the target of the *Black Comedy* skit can be interpreted as the colonisation and theft of Indigenous Australians' land, which is a far more serious target than *The Chaser's* 'materialistic preoccupations' or exploitative charity organisations. Because the *Black Comedy* skit's target is so serious, it is not overwhelmed by the representation of the 'participant zero', in this case a terminally ill girl, who is also a stand-in for the wider 'participant zero' of Indigenous Australians. Aside from achieving a better balance between the 'participant zero' and the target of their satire, there are other elements of *Black Comedy's* representation of the terminally ill girl that stop this 'participant zero' from overwhelming their satirical intent. Unlike in *The Chaser* skit, where the sick kids' wishes are labelled as examples of their 'extravagance and selfishness' (*The Chaser* 00:00:36 – 00:00:38), there is no explicit attack on this Indigenous girl. Therefore, even those who miss the irony of the skit (i.e. that White Australia is more likely to cure cancer than offer serious reparations), would still be unlikely to interpret the skit as an attack on terminally ill children. Furthermore, whilst the terminally ill children in *The Chaser* skit are little more than props, the terminally ill girl in the *Black Comedy* skit is an empowered and inspiring character. She dominates the power relations between her and the charity workers, coolly rejecting the charity worker's offer of a high-five, and barely hiding her disgust when she is offered a visit with a footballer instead of her true wish. Whereas the sick kids in *The Chaser* skit are cruelly called out for being selfish, the *Black Comedy* character is shown to be

incredibly self*less*. She reacts to the announcement that her cancer is cured with disappointment, saying 'screw you' (*Black Comedy* 00:02:37 – 00:02:38), because she understands what this means for the larger issue of Indigenous Australian land rights.

Unlike *The Chaser*, the *Black Comedy* team did not suffer a public backlash for their portrayal of terminally ill children, suggesting that the skit did not have the same harmful impact. Admittedly, this could simply be a product of *Black Comedy* having a smaller audience, or perhaps *Black Comedy's* audience interpreting irony better. Regardless, a comparison between the two skits shows that satirists can manage the risk of representing real-world people and groups, such as terminally ill children, and still create powerful satire. In this case, the key concern becomes not *who* is represented, but *how* they are represented. There are therefore a number of questions that I can include in my own creative process, such as *is the target of the satire sufficiently serious to warrant the representation of this 'participant zero'?* and *what is the explicit message that I am giving about this 'participant zero'?* Of course, the process of thinking through these questions does not automatically eliminate the risk of causing inadvertent harm. Some audience members may still accuse the *Black Comedy* team of inappropriately representing terminally ill children in their skit. However, I am still inspired by how these satirists have managed to attack their target without simultaneously harming their 'participant zero'.

Charlie Hebdo

While the controversy over the 'Make-A-Realistic-Wish-Foundation' skit was contained to Australia, a complex global debate about satire and free speech erupted after the terrorist attack on the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. On 7 January 2005, Saïd and Chérif Kouachi entered *Charlie Hebdo's* headquarters armed with guns

and began an attack that killed twelve people, including a number of the magazine's cartoonists and staff. The Kouachi brothers identified themselves as belonging to the terrorist group Al-Qaeda, and it has been reported that they had attacked the magazine because of its satirical cartoons depicting the Islamic prophet Muhammed (see BBC News 2020; Bilefsky & de la Baurne 2015). Ayesha Ashfaq & Savera Shami (2016, p. 127) note that these depictions of Muhammad were part of *Charlie Hebdo's* 'strictly anti-religion, anti-racist and left wing' ethos, and that Islam was not the only religion targeted: 'the magazine has critiqued Islam, Catholicism, Judaism and a number of public figures'. Nonetheless, in many branches of Islam, any depictions of Muhammad and other prophets are forbidden (Ashfaq & Shami 2016, p. 130), and Libby Nelson (2015b) writes that 'many Muslims consider portrayals of the Prophet Mohammed to be a serious insult and religious offense'. As a result of this offense, Daniel Ortner (2016, p. 12) writes that *Charlie Hebdo* 'had been the target of Islamic fundamentalism for years', and Cristina Silva (2015) describes how 'the magazine for years received threats from social media users because depictions of the prophet are forbidden in Islam'.

In the wake of the attack, many argued that at least some of *Charlie Hebdo's* satire depicting Muhammad was not actually targeting the prophet or the Islamic religion which he represents. Jacob Hamburger (2017) argues that the magazine is actually attacking fundamentalist Muslims who *Charlie Hebdo* believe pervert the Islamic faith and hurt other Muslims in the process: '*Charlie Hebdo*'s cartoonists attempted to highlight common ground with their Muslim countrymen through a critique of fundamentalism'. Katha Pollitt (2015) agrees that the magazine does not depict Muhammad in order to attack Muslims in general, but only to attack extremists: '*Charlie* doesn't mock Muslim people; it mocks *fundamentalism*—the narrow, bigoted,

superstitious version of Islam'. Hamburger (2017) was working at *Charlie Hebdo* as a translator in 2006 when the magazine put out a cartoon cover of the prophet crying and declaring 'it's hard being loved by jerks' (Ashfaq & Shami 2016, p. 127). This cartoon referenced the protests that followed the Danish magazine *Jylland Posten's* publication of twelve cartoons depicting Muhammad, and Hamburger (2017) claims that staff deliberately took steps to ensure they differentiated between general Muslims and fundamentalists: **'**as they put together the February 8, 2006, special issue, which reprinted the Danish cartoons alongside their own caricatures, they took great pains to make explicit the distinction between a critique of Islam and fundamentalist ideology, and attacks on the Muslim community'. Hamburger (2017) believes that the caption of the 2006 special issue cover cartoon, which read 'Mohammad overwhelmed by Fundamentalists', illustrates how the magazine at least attempted to make 'this distinction crystal clear'. With the addition of this caption, one could reasonably interpret a model of this cartoon as having fundamentalist Muslims as the target, and Muhammad and the general Islamic faith as the 'participant zero'. A similar model could also be interpreted from another controversial cover depicting Muhammad. In this October 2014 cartoon, titled 'If Muhammad Comes Back', Muhammad is shown with a sword held to his neck by a character in combat boots and a balaclava, a reference to the Islamic extremist group ISIS. A cartoon bubble emanating from Muhammad reads, 'I am the prophet, asshole', while the ISIS member shouts, 'shut up, infidel!' (in Taub 2015). In reference to the cover image, the magazine's editor, Charb, told the *Cairo Post* that ISIS ' to a point where they could consider the Muslim prophet an infidel' (in Jacobs 2015). Therefore, this model would once again have Muhammad and the general Islamic faith as its 'participant zero', as they have been affected negatively by the satire's true target: Islamic extremists.

However, the sensitive nature of depicting Muhammad means that, regardless of what position the prophet filled in *Charlie Hebdo's* satire, the editors knew they were in danger of both causing harm and potentially provoking a violent reaction by publishing these cartoons. If *Charlie Hebdo* had ever been in doubt as to the possibility of serious repercussions, these doubts would have been extinguished after their office was fire-bombed in 2011. *Charlie Hebdo* had recently put a cartoon of Muhammad on its cover with the caption '100 lashes if you don't die laughing' (in Taub 2015), and after the attack, the magazine's website was hacked with a message that accused the magazine of 'abusing Islam's almighty Prophet with disgusting and disgraceful cartoons using excuses of freedom of speech' (in Julin 2018, p. 165). Furthermore, their publication of Muhammad cartoons in 2012 worried the French government enough to close a number of overseas embassies and consulates, and to install riot police around the magazine's office in Paris (BBC News 2012). Therefore, Virginia Ingram (2015, p. 2) writes that *Charlie Hebdo* understood that their depictions of Muhammad might lead to repercussions and that they 'persisted with their satirical attack regardless of the negative consequences'. Andrew O'Hehir (2015) agrees that 'Charlie Hebdo knew they were inviting the hatred of zealots', and that they had 'become accustomed to death threats'. As a result, Anshuman A. Mondal (2018, p. 39) believe that *Charlie Hebdo* seemed to publish 'without due regard for or indeed complete indifference to the consequences'.

In the aftermath of the 2015 attack, many praised *Charlie Hebdo's* decision to publish the Muhammad cartoons, which they knew risked serious repercussions, as a brave defence of free expression. Andrew Solomon and Suzanne Nossel (2015) write that the purpose of the Muhammad cartoons is to 'resist religious extremists' attempts to redraw the boundaries of free speech by using violence', and that the magazine's

decision to publish the cartoons is 'in defense of norms to which free societies subscribe'. Similarly, Alain Mabanckou (in Pen America 2015) says that members of the magazine killed in the attack 'died because they believed there were no taboos when it came to exercising free speech, and that you couldn't simply choose to ignore certain subjects'. Jordan Weissmann (2015) similarly praised *Charlie Hebdo's* courage and contribution to the defence of free speech:

> The editors and cartoonists murdered in Wednesday's attack on French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* are now martyrs for the cause of free speech. Threatened with death for publishing drawings of the prophet Mohammed meant to mock Islamic radicals, they refused to censor themselves, and so were gunned down. They died bravely for an ideal we all treasure.

After the attack, *Charlie Hebdo* received the 2015 Pen/Toni and James C. Goodale Freedom of Expression Courage Award. In their *The New York Times* op-ed, PEN American Centre's Solomon and Nossel (2015) wrote that the award had been bestowed upon the magazine due to its 'bravery in defending the right to be disrespectful'. At the award ceremony, *Charlie Hebdo* editor Gérard Biard (in Pen America 2015) described how the attack had transformed the magazine's satirists into 'a global symbol, the incarnation of freedom of expression and freedom of conscience'. Matthew Yglesias (2015) also believes that the magazine's decision to depict Muhammad and the subsequent repercussions means that the cartoons' initial satirical intent has been transformed into a defence of freedom of speech: 'unforgivable acts of slaughter imbue merely rude acts of publication with a glittering nobility. To blaspheme the Prophet transforms the publication of these cartoons from a pointless act to a courageous and even necessary one'.

Such a viewpoint suggests that the decision to publish a potentially dangerous satirical representation is essentially a test of courage in the face of any possible

repercussions. However, in the aftermath of the attack, a number of critics contested this line of thinking, arguing instead that the representations of Muhammad were offensive and harmful, and that praising *Charlie Hebdo* for publishing them is wrong. John Allemang (2015) compares the magazine's depictions of Muhammad to other bigoted stereotypes, such as 'the grasping hook-nosed Jew, the buck-toothed coolie Chinaman, the wide-eyed, simple-minded, naturally rhythmic Negro'. Therefore, Allemang (2015) argues that one should not praise *Charlie Hebdo's* cartoons of Muhammad if they also find these other historical depictions offensive: 'if we can summon up disgust for these failures of pre-enlightened satire, it shouldn't be hard to empathize with those who see the same forces at work in contemporary caricatures of Muslims'. Furthermore, Nelson (2015b) writes that using these cartoons to attack Islamic extremists ignores the offense it causes to non-extremists: 'many Muslims—not just extremists—consider it blasphemous to draw the prophet Mohammed at all, let alone in the crude, satirical way of Charlie Hebdo'. Ball (2017, p. 306) similarly writes that the decision to depict Muhammad, regardless of the manner of representation, is harmful to more than just extremist Muslims, as the cartoons 'could readily be seen to be racist, demeaning, and excluding Muslim immigrants from a national discourse controlled by the non-Muslim majority…because simply by existing they contravened Islamic injunctions against representing the Prophet visually in any way'. The writer Deborah Eisenberg (in Greenwald 2015) wrote an open letter to PEN America protesting the decision to award *Charlie Hebdo* on the basis that their depiction of Muhammad was harmful to France's Muslim population: 'to a Muslim population in France that is already embattled, marginalized, impoverished, and victimized, in large part a devout population that clings to its religion for support, Charlie Hebdo's cartoons of the Prophet must be seen as intended to cause further humiliation and suffering'.

Margot Patterson (2015) similarly believes that the cartoons were harmful to France's Muslim population, even if attacking this group was not *Charlie Hebdo's* original intent:

> even if the cartoons of Muhammad were not expressly designed to humiliate a marginalized population, that is their effect. In publishing them, Charlie Hebdo was appealing to anti-Muslim sentiment in France and mocking those members of society least able to defend themselves.

Therefore, Max Fisher (2015) writes that those lauding the Muhammad cartoons have overlooked those who are harmed by the cartoon *besides* extremists: 'raising these cartoons to something much grander does have victims…those victims are society's weakest and most vulnerable, in this case the Muslim and non-white subjects of Charlie Hebdo's belittling ridicule'.

The debate about *Charlie Hebdo's* representation of Muhammad, and Muslims in general, has therefore become locked into two opposite positions. One sees the cartoons as examples of free speech that must be defended at all costs, and the other sees satirical cartoons that, regardless of the inexcusability of the terrorist attack, were unnecessarily harmful and should not have been published in the first place. Lockyer and Pickering (2005, p. 6) neatly sum up this clash as an 'at times open conflict between those concerned to protect freedom of speech and those concerned to protect minority, oppressed or previously persecuted groups from the public expression of bigotry, misprision, abusive stereotyping, discrimination and hatred'. Ashfaq & Shami (2016, p. 128) similarly describe the debate as a 'dispute between defenders of freedom of expression and defenders of responsible freedom in ethnic, racial and religious satire'. Jane Weston Vauclair (2015, pp. 7-8) neatly outlines the difficult questions facing those who try to decide which side of this debate they should support: 'could *Charlie Hebdo* effectively be sidelined as a case of egregiously irresponsible and offensive satire, even if the attacks per se were inexcusable? Or could they instead be adopted as martyrs of

free speech, who had proved to have a backbone of conviction and courage that had been lacking elsewhere in the media?' Weissmann (2015) criticizes any 'all or nothing' solution to the Charlie Hebdo problem, arguing instead that both sides' viewpoints can be acknowledged simultaneously: '*Charlie Hebdo*'s work was both courageous and often vile. We should be able to keep both of these realities in our minds at once, but it seems like we can't'. Yousef Munayyer (2015) agrees that acknowledging both sides of this debate is the most productive solution: 'I respect the right of Charlie Hebdo to express what they want while simultaneously having no respect for most of the distasteful content they produced. If only more people could see that these two views are not mutually exclusive we would be in a better place'.

An approach that simultaneously acknowledges both viewpoints seems to be the best way of navigating the complexity of the *Charlie Hebdo* case. However, this approach does *not* clarify how I should proceed with my own representations of the 'participant zero'. If I feel one of my stories may be harmful to the person or group filling the 'participant zero' position, should I change the story or not? According to the discussion above, if I change the story, I am surrendering my right to freedom of expression. If I *don't* change the story, however, I might be inadvertently hurting a person or group of people who I was attempting to defend or help. Therefore, whilst agreeing to see both sides of the *Charlie Hebdo* debate is good in theory, it is not as useful when it comes to the practical decision-making that it is at the core of the creative process. The solution that I have found to this apparent impasse is to separate the two main intentions of *Charlie Hebdo's* Muhammad cartoons—to satirically attack a target and to defend the right to free speech—and focus only on how successfully the cartoons achieve the intention that *my* stories share: attacking a target. While I can appreciate the bravery of the magazine staff's decision to publish material that they knew could

result in serious repercussions, my own stories are not, at least *intentionally*, designed to be statements defending free speech in the manner of the Muhammad cartoons. I have not deliberately sought to represent anyone in a manner that I know might provoke serious repercussions, and I therefore cannot really describe any of my representations as defiant, courageous, or brave statements about free speech.

Therefore, as my stories do not share *Charlie Hebdo's* intention to make a statement on free speech, any decisions to change how I represent my 'participant zero' should not be viewed as a failure to uphold this intention. What my stories and at least some of the *Charlie Hebdo* Muhammad cartoons *do* appear to share, however, is the intention of satirically attacking a target. While it is impossible to know the exact intentions behind each of the magazine's Muhammad cartoons, it is reasonable to interpret cartoons such as the 2014 cover image of Muhammad and the ISIS member or the 2012 cover image of a crying Muhammad 'overwhelmed by Fundamentalists' as making a statement beyond simply defending free speech. If the 2014 cartoon only intended to depict Muhammad as a provocation against those who seek to curb their free speech, there would be no reason for the rest of the cartoon's commentary on how extremists would deem even a returning prophet as insufficiently devout. Furthermore, Hamburger's (2017) behind-the-scenes description of the process behind the magazine's 2012 'crying Muhammad' cover shows that the team intended for the cartoon to make a point, via satirically attacking Islamic fundamentalists, beyond the free speech statement inherent in depicting the prophet.

Therefore, if I focus only on the satirical intention of the Muhammad cartoons, what can these satirical works teach me about how I should represent the 'participant zero' in my own stories? The conclusion that I draw from these cartoons is that by choosing to depict their 'participant zero' in a manner which the cartoonists *knew* would

provoke a reaction, they may have also detracted from their cartoons' ability to deliver their satirical attack. As writers such as Eisenberg (in Greenwall 2015), Nelson (2015b) and Ball (2017, p. 306) have noted, depicting Muhammad is offensive to more than just Muslim extremists, meaning any nuance in the separation that the cartoonists were trying to make between moderate and fundamentalist Muslims may have been lost. Tim Parks (2015) notes that those not immediately offended by the depiction of Muhammad will likely understand the cartoon's intent, but that others may be too enraged to reach this point: 'when I see *Charlie Hebdo*'s cartoon entitled "Muhammad overcome by fundamentalists," showing a weeping Muhammad saying, "It's tough being loved by assholes," I smile and take the point. For a Muslim reader, perhaps the point is lost in the offense of a belittling representation of a figure they hold sacred'. However, the potential for the cartoons' representations of Muhammad to overwhelm their satirical message does not only apply to Muslim audience members. As Laura Miller (2015) notes, the racial stereotypes used to depict Muhammad, such as 'a long nose, scraggly beard and turban', might also distract Western audience members from the cartoon's true target: 'these images sound a deep, disturbing chord in Western hearts and minds, recalling the racist cartoons used by Nazi propagandists and American white supremacists to demonize minority groups and justify violence against them'. Crucially, Fisher (2015) believes that these types of representations are not necessary to the cartoon's satirical attack, and that by choosing to use them, the magazine risks turning the audience's focus from the satire's target to its creator: 'these features are not necessary for the jokes to work, or for the characters to be recognizable. And yet Charlie Hebdo has routinely included them, driving home a not-unreasonable sense that the magazine's cartoons indulged racism'. Ball (2017, p. 305) agrees that these types of offensive representations can overwhelm satire's attack, distracting audiences from the

work's true target: 'given sensitivities around representation, particularly of oppressed or minority groups, sometimes it is simply a satiric work's topic or dominant image, quite apart from the intended message or target, that prompts criticism and is seen to have crossed that elusive "red line"'.

Therefore, not unlike *The Chaser's* use of terminally ill children, the harmful representation of the 'participant zero' in the Muhammad cartoons may ultimately undermine the effectiveness of the satirical attack. However, some have argued that these crude, stereotyping representations are simply part of the cartoon medium, and that there is little *Charlie Hebdo* could have done to avoid them. In response to critics who believe that *Charlie Hebdo's* depictions of Muhammad recycle offensive stereotypes, Miller (2015) wonders if there were really any alternative options for the magazine's cartoonists:

> How then does a cartoonist like the late Stephane "Charb" Charbonnier represent Islam and Mohammed? Is there even a way of caricaturing a Middle-Eastern man of the 6th century that *wouldn't* strike the eye…as racist? Is it just about the nose? Would it be okay if Mohammed were depicted as possessing an idealized, small-nosed visage, unlike anyone else in Charb's wide repertoire of freaks and grotesques, who range from the various popes to Jesus himself, depicted nude and sodomizing his heavenly father?

Miller (2015) then stretches this point to include representations of Muslim extremists: 'is there any depiction at all of a Middle-eastern man with a beard and turban that would not give offense to such critics?' If such representations are seen as harmful, Miller (2015) argues that any satirist seeking to avoid them, while still tackling issues such as Islamic extremism, would find it difficult to get their point across: 'how, then, should Islamic extremism be portrayed in a political cartoon? As some non-human symbol? That's certainly possible, yet it also imposes an extreme constraint on artists attempting to represent acts that are in fact perpetrated by human beings'. This raises a difficult

question for satirists looking to learn from the case of *Charlie Hebdo*: was there *any* way that *Charlie Hebdo*, working in the cartoon medium, could have attacked its target without simultaneously using representations that it knew would likely cause harm?

Alternatives to the *Charlie Hebdo* Approach

While I acknowledge that the cartoon medium brings with it a set of difficulties that are different from those presented to a short story writer, a case study of two cartoons related to the *Charlie Hebdo* controversy shows that there is almost always a creative alternative to risky representations, a lesson that can then be transferred to *any* satirical medium. The first example comes from the Brazilian cartoonist Carlos Latuff (in Nelson 2015a), who, one day after the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, tweeted a cartoon with the title, 'Charlie Hebdo attack has another victim'. In this cartoon, two figures wearing black clothes and balaclavas are shown firing into a building with a '*Charlie Hebdo'* sign and a pool of blood trickling out of the front door. This red pool of blood initially grabs one's attention, so it takes a moment to realize that the attacker's bullets actually pass *through* the building to hit a mosque in the cartoon's background. The cartoon's intent is clear enough to make its caption almost redundant: non-extremist Muslims will ultimately suffer from the attack perpetrated by extremist Muslims. The intention of the cartoon is not dissimilar to some of *Charlie Hebdo's* cartoons, such as the 2014 'returning Muhammad' cartoon and the 2012 'crying Muhammad' cartoon, which attempt to draw a distinction between extremist and moderate Muslims. Unlike the *Charlie Hebdo* examples, however, Latuff manages to make this point without any risky representations that threaten to overwhelm his attack. Firstly, he avoids depicting Muhammad, a move that would offend many of the Muslims that his cartoon purports to be defending. Secondly, his depiction of the attackers avoids the ethnic stereotypes, such as large noses, turbans, and long beards, that were common in *Charlie Hebdo's*

depictions of Muslims. Instead, Latuff's attackers are covered almost head to toe in black, a move that not only avoids the stereotypes of their ethnicity but also powerfully represents the attackers as evil forces devoid of *any* human characteristics. Therefore, in the process of commenting on the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, Latuff has also managed to avoid some of the magazine's techniques that flawed their own satirical attacks on extremist Muslims.

Although the Latuff cartoon arguably attacks extremist Muslims in a more effective manner than the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons, it does not make the same statement on free speech that those cartoons did. However, another cartoon frequently shared in the aftermath of the 2015 attack manages to make a similar statement on free speech while *also* creatively avoiding risky representations such as *Charlie Hebdo's* depiction of Muhammad. This cartoon, by American cartoonist Michael Shaw, was actually created in 2006, in response to the controversy over *Charlie Hebdo's* republication of the *Jylland-Posten* Muhammad cartoons. However, it went viral on social media in the wake of the 2015 attack (The Daily Edge 2015b), with many believing that it made a similar statement on the importance of free speech to those made by *Charlie Hebdo*. Unlike the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons, however, Shaw's cartoon does not feature any potentially harmful representations of Muhammad or Muslims in general. In fact, the cartoon does not feature *any* representations of a real-world person or group at all. It is simply an empty square, above which a caption reads: 'please enjoy this culturally, ethnically, religiously, and politically correct cartoon responsibly. Thank you' (Shaw in The Daily Edge 2015a). Shaw (in The Daily Edge 2015a) writes that his intention was to show how near-impossible it is for cartoonists to avoid harming *someone* in their work: 'it's taking the idea of creating a completely unoffensive cartoon to an absurd dimension'. Before it went viral in 2015, Robert Mankoff (2012) used the cartoon as

an example of this problem for cartoonists, writing that 'when dealing with a subject like religion or ethnicity in cartoons, it's hard to avoid offending someone somewhere sometime'. German Lopez (2015) writes that *Charlie Hebdo* believed in 'not allowing offense-takers to dictate standards for everyone else', and that Shaw's cartoon therefore reiterates 'a point that Charlie Hebdo has been making for years'. However, whether or not one agrees with this argument, Shaw's cartoon makes this point so intelligently that it actually *undermines* the *Charlie Hebdo* Muhammad cartoons. Compared to the blunt force of the Muhammad cartoons, with their obviously harmful depictions of the prophet, Shaw manages to make a potent point about free speech while also avoiding any risky representations that might distract from this point. Therefore, while it is obviously impossible for all satirists to specifically follow Shaw's non-representation template, the cartoon nonetheless proves that it is *not* impossible to devise creative solutions that prevent obvious harm while also making potent satirical statements.

My research into Charlie Hebdo, *The Chaser*, and their alternatives, shows that minimizing the risk of inadvertent harm does not have to equate to 'declawing' one's satirical attack. In fact, the examples provided by *Black Comedy*, Carlos Latuff and Michael Shaw suggest that a satirist can *improve* the effectiveness of their satirical attack by carefully considering how its 'participant zero' is represented. This finding is supported by my own experience in writing the satirical short stories that make up the creative artefact of this thesis. To detail this experience, I will now turn to a discussion of how my theory of the 'participant zero' has impacted my own creative process.

Chapter Four: The 'Participant Zero' and *Let's Talk Trojan Bee*

The 'Participant Zero' and My Creative Process

This chapter focuses on how considerations of the 'participant zero' affected my creative process. It examines, in detail, how the theoretical discussion in the first three chapters has altered the stories that make up my creative artefact. I do not claim, however, to be capable of discerning how every single creative decision was affected by the 'participant zero'. Writing a story involves countless creative choices, many of which a writer may be unable to explain precisely. Was a particular word chosen to help the representation of my 'participant zero' or just to aid the rhythm of a sentence? Did that sudden middle-of-the-night story idea arrive because of my theoretical research on the 'participant zero', or because of a horror movie I watched when I was twelve? This is further complicated by the fact that choices can often fulfil multiple aims: that word was chosen because it helped the representation of the 'participant zero' *and* the rhythm of the sentence.

The best I can do here, therefore, is to highlight the major creative choices that were connected to the challenge of representing the 'participant zero' in my satire. When these creative choices are grouped together, they begin to reveal general trends about how my creative process was affected by my research. The first major trend is that I became wary of representing the 'participant zero' from the perspective of my satire's target, especially when this representation might be offensive and rely on my audience members correctly decoding the irony in my statements. In contrast, the second major trend was concerns about representing the 'participant zero' when those who fill the position belong to a different identity group than my own. Finally, even

when I design my stories to avoid the above approaches, a number of stories have shown me that concerns about the 'participant zero' can still arise. This shows that there is no single blueprint a satirist can use if they want to completely avoid potentially harmful representations of the 'participant zero'. Nonetheless, my overall experience during the writing process of *Let's Talk Trojan Bee* has been a positive one, as I have consistently found that paying attention to my representations of the 'participant zero' can lead to new creative directions that minimize the risk of harm to those who fill this position, while also improving my short stories by inspiring experimental approaches to form and perspective.

The biggest finding from my research was that I should be wary of creating satire that relies on my audience decoding the implicit meaning in a harmful representation of the 'participant zero'. At the beginning of my writing process, before my thinking on the 'participant zero' had settled, my stories frequently represented the 'participant zero' from the perspective of my satire's target. As a result, these representations were often deliberately negative, as I wanted to attack my targets by showing how they viewed the 'participant zero'. This approach is risky, however, as it relies on an audience member understanding both *who* the target of the satire is, and *why* I have chosen to include a negative representation of the 'participant zero'. As my analysis of satiric works such as Blitt's 'The Politics of Fear' has shown, it is reasonable to expect that many audience members will either not the decode the irony in this representation, or else will reject it as a harmful representation *regardless* of my intent. Once I understood the risk of this approach, I returned to a number of completed stories in an attempt to assuage my concerns about the 'participant zero'.

'White People, White Spandex'

The first section of writing that gave me real unease about how I was representing the 'participant zero' is a passage from the first story I wrote for this thesis, 'White People, White Spandex'. In this story, an elderly black man has been released from a long stay in prison, for a crime he did not commit, into a future New York in which advances in brain interfacing technology have left him unable to find his bearings and complete even the simplest of tasks. The inspiration for the story came from two directions. The first was a short *Al Jazeera* film about Otis Johnson, a Black American man released from prison after forty-four years. In the film, Johnson (in Boffeta & Belhumeur 00:01:11-00:01:32) describes how confused he was by advances in technology: 'the majority of people were talking to themselves. Then I looked closely, and they seemed to have things in their ears…I thought in my mind, what everybody became CIA or agents and stuff like that?' Johnson was convicted of assaulting a police officer, a crime which he continually denied even though a confession might have earned him early parole (Morris 2017). In his profile of the case, Kadish Morris (2017) writes that Johnson clearly suffered an injustice: 'court files verify Otis' arrest was based on mistaken identity, racism and carelessness by the NYPD, the prosecutor and court appointed lawyer'. The image of this innocent man wandering bewildered through what appeared to him as an incomprehensibly futuristic New York stayed in my mind, as it seemed a potent symbol of how the barriers of institutional racism can leave people left behind.

The power Johnson's story held over me was enhanced from time I spent on a number of noxious alt-right websites, such as *Breitbart* and *The Daily Stormer*. After the shock of Donald Trump's election in 2016, I was trying to understand the mindset of people who could elect such a clearly racist person. These websites were equally shocking and fascinating: bad for one's faith in humanity, but excellent for satiric

fodder. Amongst the trash I encountered was a common belief, hinted at in the articles but explicitly stated in the comments sections, that systemic or institutional racism in the United States is a myth, and that minorities only have themselves to blame if they fall behind. This kind of thinking is exemplified in a range of comments found in the *Breitbart* article, 'Ben Stein on NFL Protests: There's No Institutional Racism in America at All Anymore' (Poor 2017):

> Blacks need racism. Without it, they'd have to accept responsibility for themselves' (866-347-2423 (ICE)! 2017); Anyone of any race who works hard in school and has a strong work ethic has the door to success wide open to them' (M Wayne 2017); There is nothing Blacks love more than a good excuse. "Racism" is the excuse that has worked up to now. It's getting a little old and played-out though (John C. 2017).

Clearly, the case of Otis Johnson underlines how ignorant such comments are. Here is a Black American who, as a result of systemic racism in the justice system, and through no fault of his own, has fallen significantly behind and now faces an enormous struggle just to put his life back together. In order to attack those who ignore or discount the disadvantages created by institutional racism, I wanted to include my target's perspective on my Black character's situation. Therefore, whilst helplessly trying to order a hamburger in an entirely 'online' restaurant, my Black character asks a White character for help, only to be subjected to a rant that is only slightly more ridiculous than the viewpoints I found on *Breitbart:*

> Maybe if all that slave money my family made in the 13th Century or whenever it happened was still around and I could pay for a real hospital room rather than watch my wife go bald and die in a room full of twenty other bald and dying people so that every time you walk into the room it's like you're peeling back the lid of a sardine tin full of very sick people one of whom you love, maybe then I would feel guilty about it, but even then probably not, because who has the time to feel guilty about something you did not do two thousand years ago or whenever it happened, especially when you're working seventeen hour days sticking little product-partially-

> made-in-the-U.S.A. stickers on microwaves made entirely in China except for the stickers, just for the privilege of watching the woman you love whose hair used to smell like orange peels cooked in cinnamon go bald as a bat and her skin now turning a puke yellow?

When I first wrote this passage, I believed that the exaggeration in the rant made it obviously ironic. I clapped myself on the back for skewering those in the *Breitbar*t comments section by echoing, and then exaggerating, their own words. The more I investigated *Breitbart*, however, and came to understand the insane partisan bubble its readers lived in, the more I was unsure about how effective that skewering really was. Would far-right audience members blush when they saw their ignorance amplified and exposed, or would they nod their head in agreement with statements like 'who has time to feel guilty about something you did not do'? It wasn't only the extremists on *Breitbart* that I worried about either. My family is originally from the United States, and although my parents are Democrats, most of my family lives in conservative parts of the country. I wouldn't call them extremists, but they still live in their own bubble, and their viewpoints are significantly different to mine. In fact, I had been visiting these relatives when the 2014 Ferguson protests over police brutality and institutional racism were taking place, and I was shocked at how different our interpretation of events was.

My initial worry was that ironic passages such as this were 'too ambiguous', and my research proposal for this thesis focused on the dangers of such ambiguity in satire. It was only when I asked myself the question of *who* this ambiguity might negatively affect that I began to develop the concept of the 'participant zero'. I realized that I didn't care if someone thought *I* held views similar to this character. What worried me was that I might be reinforcing these views in someone else, or, even worse, influencing someone more neutral to sympathize with the character. Furthermore, my research into the concerns about *The Colbert Report* and Blitt's 'The Politics of Fear' cartoon led me to realize that even audience members who understood the irony might

be swayed by the ‘extreme’ of this character’s situation and become subconsciously sympathetic to some of his other viewpoints.

In the end, it seemed like the only way to alleviate my unease was to cut the passage from the story. This felt like a big deal at the time. I liked the passage. I had worked hard on its rhythm, and many of the man’s pathetic excuses made me giggle each time I read them. To this day, I am constantly searching for a story into which I can shoehorn a factory that only sticks partially-made-in-USA stickers on otherwise Chinese-made products. I was also worried that cutting the passage was cowardice. Would the effect of my new understanding of the ‘participant zero’ consist entirely of me deleting pieces of writing I liked in order to appease an inscrutable and possibly insatiable ‘unease’? Maybe I just wasn’t brave enough to be a satirist.

A month or so later, however, I reread the story with fresh eyes, and I found that my worries were unmerited. Not only did removing that passage make me feel a bit more confident about the satirical effect of the story, it also improved the flow of that particular scene. In the new version, the deep well of the character’s racism is only hinted at, which I think gets the point across without descending into the distracting eccentricities of his personal situation and views. This realisation may seem minor, but it was a big breakthrough for me at the time. I had been worried that any changes made in consideration of the ‘participant zero’ would automatically reduce the bite of my satirical attack, as if the two concerns were on opposite ends of a weighing scale. Learning that a change could achieve two positive results at the same time was like having my cake and eating it too. Happily, I would find that such considerations of the ‘participant zero’ would frequently improve my stories throughout my creative process.

‘Let’s Talk Trojan Bee’

If cutting the passage from ‘White People, White Spandex’ seemed difficult at first, however, it was nothing compared to the changes that I felt were required for the story that would eventually become ‘Let’s Talk Trojan Bee’. This story had also been inspired by my time on right-wing websites, where I encountered a conspiracy theory that billionaires like George Soros were sending immigrants from Mexico and Central America into the United States in order to weaken the country and precipitate a ‘White genocide’ (see Binder; Lavin; Heath et al. 2018). Those who spread these conspiracy theories heartlessly ignore the more obvious causes of undocumented immigration: violence in immigrants’ home countries and, increasingly, the effects of climate change (see Milman et al.; Shepherd 2018). My initial strategy for attacking these conspiracy theories was to write an absurd story in which a globalist organisation kills off the United States’ bee population, leading to emergency shipments of ‘saviour bees’ from Central America that are in fact transmogrified human immigrants, and who then turn back into humans once across the border. Like the White character’s rant in the original version of ‘White People, White Spandex’, I was attempting to use an exaggerated version of my target’s view of the ‘participant zero’, in this case undocumented immigrants, in order to make my satirical point. Early drafts of the story were told from the perspective of a far-right American blogger trying to sound the alarm about this issue. At first, I thought the insanity of this conspiracy theory, that undocumented immigrants were transforming into insects to sneak across the border, would make it obvious that I was attacking, not supporting, the blogger’s views. However, as I became less sure about how successful this irony would actually be, I began to feel uneasy about how I was portraying these immigrants. The blogger constantly refers to the immigrants as sneaky opportunists with malicious motives for entering the U.S. There was a real danger, I realized, that some audience members would have their existing hatred of

undocumented immigrants reinforced by my story, and others would be subconsciously prejudiced even as they understood the irony in my approach.

Despite my growing reservations about the story, I didn't want to cut it entirely. I had put a large amount of work into it, and I still felt a lot of anger about these conspiracy theories. After all, if I can't satirize something that genuinely boils my blood, why I am even doing this? I began playing around with my approach, seeing if I could reduce the unease I felt whilst also keeping my satirical attack intact. Between sections of the story, I started putting in quotes from various media sources, such as *The New York Times* and *National Geographic*, that rebutted both the blogger's conspiracy theories and his general misinformation about undocumented immigrants. These quotes explained that immigrants weren't turning into bees, they were simply coming into the country because the same climate change that had killed off American bees was also devastating the immigrants' home regions. These quotes also suggested that the shadowy globalist organisations the blogger was focused on were nothing but a paranoid's bogeyman. I then cut out some of the blogger's more offensive representations of undocumented immigrants, such as a section in which he outlines how they deliberately give birth to 'anchor babies' when they arrive in the U.S. because this makes them harder to deport. When I first started this story, I was still under the impression that this sort of 'ironic racism' could be excused by a satirist's otherwise noble intentions. However, my research into the effects of such satire, including the studies conducted on audience reception to *All in the Family,* had disabused me of this notion. Once again, I could imagine audience members, including my own relatives, nodding along in agreement with harmful representations of a group who were meant to be the 'participant zero' of my story. I therefore cut the worst sections out and

included more quotes that realistically portrayed undocumented immigrants as people who did not want to leave their home, and who were scared and tired by their travails.

By focusing on my representation of the story's 'participant zero', I had changed the story into something which was potentially less harmful. However, there was a problem: the story wasn't any good. The changes had reduced the potentially negative impact of the blogger's racist and bizarre version of reality, but in doing so I felt like I had tipped my hand *too* much. It was obvious that this person was an idiot, but his idiocy seemed harmless compared to the long quotes from *The New York Times* reassuring the reader that not everyone felt like this. I tried to up the stakes by ending the story with the blogger instigating a mass shooting at a farm where he believed 'beemigrants' could be found. This was better, but I felt like the change made me lose focus on the true target of the satire: not the sad individuals who believed this conspiracy trash, but the media organisations that peddled it. To fix this, I started including quotes from alt-right websites and right-leaning media sources like Fox News alongside the quotes from the other media organisations. I loved the way this back and forth between two vastly different perspectives looked. In fact, I realized that this back and forth between organisations was *more* interesting than my blogger character. I therefore cut the sections involving the blogger out completely, leaving only the media snippets to tell the entire story.

This final version is far more powerful than the original version. Instead of telling the story from the offensive perspective of a barely believable character, I have used a kaleidoscope of perspectives, so that the reader has to try and piece together the truth themselves. This is a bewildering experience that any modern news consumer can identify with. However, while this approach helped me alleviate my unease about how I was representing the 'participant zero', this final version is actually *more* open to

interpretation than the original version. This might seem like a failure. If my initial worry regarding the 'participant zero' was due to research showing how satire results in a wide range of audience interpretations, doesn't adding ambiguity to the story increase my concerns about being misinterpreted? In this case, I worry less about my representation of the 'participant zero' being misinterpreted because I haven't exaggerated already offensive views about undocumented immigrants. Whereas the original story relied on audience members seeing the irony in my character's exaggerated representations of undocumented immigrants as malicious and sneaky, this new version offers arguably *less* offensive representations of immigrants than those that already exist across the media spectrum. This more neutral ambiguity means that it is highly possible someone could read this story with a partisan view and leave with the exact same view. I am far more comfortable with this outcome than having someone leave with a more exaggerated version of their extant racism, or having a reader understand the irony but still have an image of immigrants forcing out 'anchor babies' lodged somewhere in their subconscious. Nonetheless, if I wanted to use the 'safest' representation of the 'participant zero', I would have used the second version of the story, in which it is clear that the conspiracy theory is the raving hallucination of a single madman. This shows that although the risk to the 'participant zero' can be creatively minimized, the less risky approach to a story is not always going to be the most powerful one.

'The Tick Tock Killer'

The confidence I gained from my complete transformation of 'Let's Talk Trojan Bee' led to me dust off another story I had previously abandoned. I wrote an early draft of this story, eventually titled 'The Tick Tock Killer', after attending my colleague Amy

Mead's presentation on the media coverage of the Gillian Meagher case. In 2012, Gillian Meagher, a young Irish woman living in Melbourne, was raped and murdered while walking home from a Brunswick pub. My colleague's presentation discussed the sensationalist media coverage of the murder, comparing this to the media silence on much more common incidents of domestic violence and femicide. Mead posited that our focus on tragic high-profile 'stranger' cases, like the Gillian Meagher case, may distract us from more common but no less tragic incidents of violence against women. Around the time of this presentation, I had also just subscribed to Netflix for the first time, and in the wake of Amy's presentation I noted how many true crime and serial killer documentaries were available to stream, many of them about sensationalist murders of women.

To attack society's obsession with such murders, as well as its blind spot regarding more common cases of violence against women, I created a story told from the perspective of a male homicide detective bored with the quotidian cases he encounters daily. This detective, who pines to be the star of a Netflix true crime series, arrives at an apartment where a woman has been murdered, and he begins to concoct a bizarre serial killer theory involving a fetish for clocks, while ignoring all the evidence that the woman's partner is the true culprit. Despite the rest of the precinct's protestations, the detective keeps up his ridiculous search for a serial killer in 'a black trench coat and a ski mask and probably a Flavour Flav clock hung around his neck'. He ultimately sabotages the case, resulting in the actual murderer being set free and the detective being fired. With his obsession driving him to madness, the detective murders his own wife and sets up a crime scene filled with clocks, all the while narrating a true crime voiceover in his head.

Despite working on early drafts of the story for months, I eventually decided to abandon the idea altogether. I had two issues with the story. The first was that in order to enter the mind of someone obsessed with sensationalist violence against women, I had to show the sort of media he was consuming. To do so, I made up a bunch of fake true crime series involving bizarre serial killers, such as one who grinds up his female victims into dogfood and another who uses his female victim's bones to build houses. The violence was extreme, but I felt it *had* to be extreme to explain how someone, a detective no less, could be driven to concoct such a wild 'clock-killer' theory. I also hoped that the exaggerated nature of the violence this character was consuming would highlight society's very real obsession with milder but still sensationalist violence. However, I soon began to worry that I was contributing to, rather than exposing, this obsession with sensationalist violence against women. If someone liked this sort of stuff, I realized, they'd probably *love* my story. And if this was the case, I would only be further adding to the blind spot I felt many had for the story's 'participant zero': women who suffer from domestic violence but are largely unheard in the media.

The second issue was that the character was unbelievable. It was a bit of a stretch to suggest that too much Netflix could lead a homicide detective to suddenly engage in such bizarre behaviour. In an alternate version of the story, I gradually revealed that the detective had accidentally killed his wife during a fight that morning, and that his obsession with proving his serial killer theory was actually an attempt to cover his own tracks. This motivation made a touch more sense, but it didn't help me attack my satirical target: sensationalistic media coverage that distracts us from the issue of domestic violence against women. At the time, I simply couldn't see a way forward for the story, and I moved on to other projects.

After reworking ‘Let’s Talk Trojan Bee’, however, I decided to have another go at this story. One lesson I took from that previous story was to abandon my approach of telling the story solely from my target’s perspective. Instead, I started writing from the perspective of someone who agreed with *my* point of view. This new character, based on the original character’s bewildered partner, is a rookie female detective on her first case. She arrives at the same crime scene as the original version, but this time she recognizes that it is a domestic murder, and it is everyone *else* who is convinced that there is more going on. I liked this swap: it allowed me to attack the same issue without engaging in the same troubling elements as the original version. As this character is *not* obsessed with sensationalist violence, I could reduce the amount of violence that is shown in the story. There are hints that the character lives in a society obsessed with this violence, but they don’t actively consume it themselves. The character is also able to voice their concern about society’s obsessions via complaints that everyone at the detective precinct is ignoring that the case is a clear example of domestic violence.

This approach of telling the story from a viewpoint closer to my own had a flow-on effect of solving my second problem: the motivation of those overlooking the obvious domestic murder. When I brainstormed why an entire detective precinct might simultaneously overlook something so obvious, I realized that rather than being *influenced* by true crime shows, they could actually be *participating* in one of these shows themselves. In an alternate world in which police departments are funded by the reality television shows that broadcast their cases, there would be natural motivation to investigate ‘exciting’ crimes that would garner ratings and keep the money flowing in. Although there are obviously some fantastical elements to this premise, it helps me focus on the target of my satire. Just as I didn’t want to attack a single conspiracy theorist in ‘Let’s Talk Trojan Bee’, in ‘The Tick Tock Killer’ I went from attacking one

crazy detective to a larger social problem. This creates a sharper satirical attack, as this obsession with sensationalist violence against women cannot be dismissed as the quirk of one disturbed individual. This new premise also inspired me to write the story in a sort of quasi-screenplay style that mirrored the half-real, half-sensationalised true crime genre. I loved writing in this style, as it helped me attack some of the genre's clichés and falsities at the same time that I attacked its obsession with sensationalist violence against women. However, were it not for my concerns about how I was representing the 'participant zero', and the subsequent reworking of the story, I never would have experimented with this style of writing. This shows that although concerns about the 'participant zero' can lead to creative problems, such as those that initially caused me to abandon 'The Tick Tock Killer', the process of overcoming these problems might produce new and exciting solutions that sharpen a story's satirical attack.

'Invasion Day'

Like 'The Tick Tock Killer', the story 'Invasion Day' benefited from a renewed focus on the 'participant zero', one that led to a reworking of my original premise and approach. The first version of this story used a third-person omniscient narrator to tell the story of a family who are attacked in their home by a group of Indigenous Australians. I wrote the early drafts of the story while the proposals to change the date of Australia Day and to recognize Indigenous Australians in the constitution were being contested in the media (see Maguire 2016; Westcott 2018). I was bewildered by those who thought that these proposals, so minor compared to the injustice suffered by Indigenous Australians, were going too far or were somehow unfair to the non-Indigenous population of Australia. I had also recently seen *The Purge* (2013), the first movie in a horror franchise centred on a premise that, on a certain day each year, all

crimes are allowed in the United States. Although I wasn't exactly *inspired* by the movie, as it is pretty terrible, its concept seemed like a useful way of attacking those who feared proposals designed to offer repentance to Indigenous Australians. I had a hunch that people who were against these small steps towards reconciliation were, at least subconsciously, scared that if they acknowledged the injustice of this country's founding, the next step would be Indigenous Australians demanding retribution. I began to wonder what such retribution might look like in these paranoid minds, and I came up with an Australian version of *The Purge:* a day each year, 'Invasion Day', in which Indigenous Australians can do whatever they want without repercussion.

I began working on a draft, partly parodying *The Purge,* in which a White family is under siege from Indigenous invaders in their home. Once again, however, issues surrounding the representation of the 'participant zero' and issues surrounding the mechanics of the story seemed to appear simultaneously. From the moment I conceptualized the story, I knew I wanted to avoid the sort of ironic racism that had featured in early versions of 'Let's Talk Trojan Bee'. I had learned enough about the 'participant zero' by this point to know that a stereotypical representation of the Indigenous characters' appearance, behaviour and language was not something I wanted to engage in. This was tricky, however, as the entire premise of the story required that I portray Indigenous Australians from the perspective of those who are paranoid about what reconciliation might lead to. For the story to work, the Indigenous Australian characters needed to be scary; they needed to be the 'bad guys'. My solution to this problem was to have these Indigenous invaders dress up in colonial garb: pantaloons, tricorn hats, and white face masks. To complete the picture, these characters would deliberately speak in old-timey English slang, playing the role of invaders that had traumatized their ancestors. This fit with the story's premise, as the invaders were

recreating the trauma of the original invasion, and it also allowed me to avoid potentially harmful representations of Indigenous Australians.

Although this solution allowed me to minimize the risk of harming the 'participant zero' in my story, there were some plot mechanic issues that I was struggling to fix. There was some good tension in early scenes showing the invaders breaking their way into the family's house, but it was hard to keep this tension going. Once the invaders were inside and had shown off their weird British accents for a while, I wasn't really sure where to send the story next. There were two issues here. The first was that for the story to work as horror, I really needed the Indigenous Australians to do some terrible, dark things to this White family, and this would of course only further increase my concern over the story's reception. I was worried that some might interpret the horror elements of the story as a literal warning that giving in to the debated proposals was a slippery slope for non-Indigenous Australians, or that Indigenous Australians are just waiting for an excuse to unleash violence upon other Australians. The debate around these proposals was still raging as I wrote, and, as I strongly support both proposals, the thought of in any way affecting their acceptance, unlikely as this might be, was off-putting to me. The second issue was my disinterest in the actual plot of the story, including the fate of its characters. It was only the *premise* that I found interesting. Maybe it was because I was heavily into my research on audience reception of satire at the time, but I began to wonder *more* about what impact a high-profile movie with such a premise would have on the public debate surrounding these proposals, and *less* on how to make my own story interesting enough to gain any audience at all. The issue of the 'participant zero' in satire was no longer just a part of my creative process for writing stories: it was now a topic I wanted to explore in the stories themselves.

This realization seemed like an important breakthrough, but it left me no clearer on how to actually proceed. How do you tell the story of audiences reacting to a story you haven't actually been able to finish? I was also still worried about how audience members might interpret the story as a warning against the proposals. As a result, I was left stuck and frustrated. During this period, I was trying to read anything I could find on *The Purge* films that had initially inspired my premise, hoping that something would spark a new direction. There isn't much academic work done on the films, so I was mostly reading articles on pop culture websites, including a number of 'listicles' ranking the various films (see Pan 2018; Kennedy 2019). I realized that I could write my own listicle for a hypothetical film franchise based on my initial premise, and I immediately saw how such a parody article could help fix two of my problems. Firstly, I would only need to outline the movie's premise, the element that interested me in the first place, without having to actually flesh out the narrative itself. In fact, I could extend my original premise over multiple movies, exploring how the audience reaction to one film shaped the next, as well as impacted the discussions around Indigenous issues in Australia. Secondly, I could briefly mention moments of Indigenous Australians perpetuating violent acts, something which was necessary to making these films' horror premise work, whilst simultaneously using the voice of the listicle author to contextualize and even critique this potentially harmful representation of Indigenous Australians.

With some of my concerns about the 'participant zero' assuaged, I wrote a story that used a listicle overview of the *Invasion Day* franchise to trace a racist, right-wing movie director's rise to become prime minister of Australia. This rise is partly assisted by a well-meaning Indigenous director whose own satirical entries in the franchise attempt to use irony to attack opponents of 'change the date', but who can only watch

in horror as audiences completely misinterpret her point. This reworking of the original premise and approach resulted in a far richer story, one that satirically attacks those who are against reconciliation whilst simultaneously exploring the potential dangers of the satiric mode itself. I would return to this method of foregrounding my personal doubts and fears about satire again in stories such as 'Magpies' and 'The Juansons'. At the time, however, I was simply relieved to have once more found a creative solution to my concerns about the 'participant zero'. I had once been worried that my reluctance to parody my target's voice, or to otherwise centre their perspective in my stories, would impinge my creativity, forcing me to abandon exciting ideas or styles of writing in an attempt to fix my unease about this approach. As so much of my favourite satire—from *The Colbert Report* to Swift's 'A Modest Proposal'—gets its power by representing the 'participant zero' from its target's perspective, I was worried my own satire would be toothless or bland if I avoided this method of attack. Instead, I have found that avoiding this common approach in satire has forced me to think outside the box, leading to richer ideas and more original styles of writing.

The 'Participant Zero' and Identity

This is not to say, however, that avoiding an approach that represents the 'participant zero' from the target's perspective is a foolproof cure for the concerns raised in chapters 1, 2, and 3. In fact, I have found that the opposite approach, centralizing the perspective of the 'participant zero', can bring its own set of difficulties. In particular, there is the significant problem of inhabiting the voice or writing the experiences of someone who is of a different identity group than myself, particularly if those groups are historically marginalized or disadvantaged. Of course, this problem is not unique to the concerns surrounding the 'participant zero', or to the satiric mode. Even if I were writing in

another mode, say horror or romance, I would still have to come to terms with the dilemma of representing an identity group other than my own. This dilemma is both a creative problem—*how* to represent perspectives and experiences that may be vastly different from your own—as well as an ethical one—*should* one tell a story that may belong to a different community? The ethical side of the problem is made trickier by the fact that White, male writers like me generally find it much easier to publish their work compared to other identity groups. Thus, one of my stories about the experiences of another identity group might be blocking a marginalized writer that could tell a similar story more authentically.

This is a complex problem, one on which an entire thesis could be written. I do not have the space here to represent the nuances of the debate over whether or not writers should attempt to write beyond their own identities, nor to offer an expansive list of the broad range of advice available to those who *do* choose to make this leap. Furthermore, although this is an issue that I wrestled with during the course of my writing process, it is not *the* issue at the heart of this exegesis, which is focused exclusively on concerns related to the 'participant zero' in satire. Nonetheless, although the problem of writing beyond one's identity is a separate issue from concerns over representations of the 'participant zero', these two concerns naturally dovetail when the 'participant zero' is from a different identity group than the satirist. If a writer's lack of understanding results in a representation of the 'participant zero' that relies on clichés and stereotypes, this representation can be harmful, even if the satirist is attempting to be sympathetic towards those who fill this position. As Brandon Taylor (2016) writes, a representation does not need to be deliberately offensive in order to harm, as 'there are many ways that a story can harm':

> When an author conjures up a Latina cleaning woman who is old and slow and barely speaks English but leaves her home, the people who love her, and the dignity of her life on the cutting

> room floor, he is performing a violence. When an author rests a book on the thinly drawn metaphor of black bodies being torn asunder by some mysterious force that ends their lives just before adulthood, they are engaging in the ugliest exploitation of black trauma in America.

Therefore, although the dilemma of writing outside one's own identity group is a separate issue, one which also occurs outside of satire, it is still a prescient issue for satirists concerned about their representations of the 'participant zero'. As such, it has been a major concern during my writing process for a number of stories. The first story in which I had to come to terms with this problem was the aforementioned 'White People, White Spandex'. This story is written in the first-person perspective of an elderly Black American. As this is a different identity group than my own, I had to decide whether or not I was prepared to tell the story from this perspective. To do so, I referred to three questions that the writer Alexander Chee (2019) says he uses when asked about this dilemma in his writing workshops:

1. Why do you want to write from this character's point of view?
2. Do you read writers from this community currently?
3. Why do you want to even tell this story?

For 'White People, White Spandex', the second of Chee's questions was the easiest to answer. Chee (2019) writes that it is important to read authors from the identity group you are trying to portray, as 'people don't often know their blind spots until they do a simple audit of their bookshelf'. In this respect, I was already reading not only Black American writers like Toni Morrison and Paul Beatty, but more specifically Black American satirical short story writers, such as Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah and Nafissa Thompson-Spires. I doubt that Chee believes simply reading such authors immediately fixes a writer's 'blind spot'; I am certainly under no illusions that it does. Nonetheless, I did find this reading to be helpful in giving me insights into elements of Black American experience that I might not otherwise have considered. For example, in

Adjei-Brenyah's short story, 'The Finkelstein 5', the main character uses a mental 'Blackness scale' to monitor how he talks, looks and acts. The higher he gets on this scale, the more uncomfortable he makes the White people around him: 'he felt his Blackness leap and throb to an 8.0. The people grew quiet' (Adjei-Brenyah 2018, p. 4). As he is aware of this effect, the character deliberately lowers his 'Blackness' according to the situation: 'he'd look for something to wear to the interview, something to bring him down to at least a 4.2' (Adjei-Brenyah 2018, p. 3). Reading Adjei-Brenyah's story made me think about how my elderly Black character would conduct himself upon his release from prison. In the first scene of the story, he gets off a bus in Harlem, only to be immediately trampled by a crowd of people who can't see him, as he isn't 'online'. In my early drafts, the character reacts angrily to this crowd, shouting and cursing at them as he is repeatedly bumped to the ground. After reading 'The Finkelstein 5', however, I reconsidered this reaction. This was how *I*, a White person who has never been imprisoned, might act, but was it really a realistic reaction from someone who has already suffered injustice at the hands of White people, and who may reasonably fear being put in prison again? In the next draft, the character reacts carefully, and he is eager not to bring attention to himself: 'that's my bad…I don't want any trouble'. This reaction feels more likely, and it also improves the story, as a later scene in which the character *does* react angrily in the presence of White people now carries greater weight. While it would be wrong to assume that this change represents *all* Black experience—there may be plenty of Black readers who read the story and wonder why the character acts so obsequiously—it is still an example of how reading stories by another identity group can help a writer avoid some of the 'blind spots' Chee discusses.

Thompson-Spires' writing was also instructive for me, not least because she has described her own concern over how audiences interpret her satire. In a 2018 essay for

Literary Hub, Thompson-Spires (2018b) writes how the approaching publication date of her satirical short story collection is making her nervous about how her work will be interpreted: 'I have worried about whether people will inadvertently learn "the wrong lessons" from my attempts at problematizing social and identity constructs. Will I teach someone to…reify racist, sexist, ableist, or fetishistic gazes instead of challenging them?' Although she writes that these worries can never be entirely assuaged, Thompson-Spires describes a number of rules that she nevertheless sets for herself in an attempt to make her feel more comfortable with her satire. One of these rules is to avoid graphic details of violence against Black people, which Thompson-Spires (2018b) describes as 'black suffering porn' that only desensitizes readers: 'the more we see black suffering, the less some of us feel its reality'. In Thompson-Spires (2018a) story, 'Heads of the Colored People: Four Fancy Sketches, Two Chalk Outlines, and No Apology', this omission of graphic violence, far from diluting the power of her story, actually helps her to satirize how police brutality has become so common that it is in danger of becoming banal. The story begins with vibrant descriptions of two Black American characters, only for their deaths at the hands of police to be relegated to a quick aside in which a third character is 'trying to not to remember the sight of the two dead bodies that had appeared casually in his news feed' (Thompson-Spires 2018a, p. 21). The frequent nature of this tragedy is further underlined when the narrator trusts that the reader will have encountered a sufficient number of such incidents to be able to imagine the scene themselves: 'you should fill in for yourself the details of that shooting as long as the constants (unarmed men, excessive force, another dead body, another dead body) are included in these details' (Thompson-Spires 2018a, p. 28).

After reading both 'Heads of the Colored People…' and Thompson-Spires' discussion of her work, I was convinced to go back and alter the ending of 'White

People, White Spandex'. Initially, the story ended with the main character being shot by police after he inadvertently shoplifts an item he can't even see. I immediately recognized the graphic description of this incident as the 'black suffering porn' that Thompson-Spires criticizes and avoids, and so I chose to cut that section out. The story instead ends with the shop attendant merely calling the police, or in the ominous language of this futuristic world, 'summoning' the police. It's a minor change, but one that both helps reduce the fetishization of 'black suffering' that Thompson-Spires has taught me to be wary of, whilst simultaneously creating a more powerful, open-ended conclusion. As anyone familiar with the police brutality against Black Americans will know, the mere suggestion of police intervention is enough to cast this character's immediate future in doubt, leaving the actual violence itself unnecessary.

Although I believe that reading Black American satirists definitely helped me improve my representation of my 'participant zero', this does not answer the question of whether or not I should be attempting to tell this story, in this manner, to begin with. In this respect, Chee's first and third questions were the hardest for me to come to terms with. My initial response to Chee's first question—why do you want to write from this character's point of view?—is that writing from *another* point of view could be harmful. The identity of my target for this story, those who deny that institutional racism still exists in the United States, is not monolithic, but I think it is fair to say that the majority would be White. Therefore, while I certainly don't share my target's viewpoint, I am closer to their identity, so it might naturally make more sense to tell the story from this perspective. However, as discussed earlier in this chapter, just writing a small section from this perspective made me very uncomfortable, as my research has shown that even ironically giving voice to such racism can have a harmful

effect. In this case, therefore, I would argue that writing from a different identity group's point of view is potentially *less* harmful than writing from my own.

Of course, this justification neatly sidesteps Chee's third, and most difficult, question: why do you even want to tell this story? Why write the story of a wrongly imprisoned Black American re-entering a futuristic world in the first place? As described earlier in the chapter, the inspiration came from reading about the true story of Otis Johnson. However, the *satirical* angle to the story came from realizing that this true story could be used as a riposte to a viewpoint that I believed was racist and worthy of attack. As such, the goal of the story was never to offer an authentic portrayal of Otis Johnsons', or any Black American's, experience, something which would be very difficult, if not impossible, for me to achieve. I have tried to convey this by avoiding the sort of fleshed-out character study one might expect in a realist story, and by focusing almost entirely on action. My reading has helped me convey some aspects of Black experience, but I have resisted having my character offer deep insights into what it is like to be a Black American. However, despite my attempts to signal that I am not trying to offer an authentic portrayal of Black American experience, there is still something undeniably troubling about a White satirist using a Black character to attack a (mostly) White target. I feel like I have done everything I can to minimize the potential harm to this 'participant zero', but it is possible that the decision to tell this story is simply wrong to begin with. Chee (2019) believes that writers who ask him for advice on writing about another identity group are often just seeking his permission: 'many writers are not really asking for advice—they are asking if it is okay to find a way to continue as they have'. I hope that I have engaged with Chee's questions deeply enough to disrupt and challenge my writing process, and to avoid simply 'continuing' as I was before. Nonetheless, this is an issue that will continue to raise its head in my satire in

the future, and I need to continue to think through and challenge any decision to write from another identity group's perspective.

'Magpies'

I found it frustrating that I was not able to find a more comprehensive creative solution to the concerns surrounding the 'participant zero' in 'White People, White Spandex'. As I began working on early drafts of other stories in which I also felt I needed to write from the perspective of different identity groups, I was determined to try more radical approaches. The first story that I sought to challenge myself with was 'Magpies'. Originally, I set out to tell this story from the perspective of a refugee arriving in Australia after a long, harrowing stay in offshore detention. My main concern was to emphasize the benefit this character could bring to Australia, showing how they could contribute to their new community if they were given the right support. During my time at an ESL school, I was lucky to meet a number of refugees who were desperately trying to improve their English so that they could continue with the careers they had left behind. These were doctors, dentists, teachers, and lawyers, all of whom had their lives upended because of violence or political upheaval in their home countries. It should not matter, of course, whether refugees have professional qualifications or are quickly able to contribute to the economy; the simple fact of their humanity should be all the reason we need to offer them a safe harbor. Nonetheless, I have frequently encountered a narrative that many refugees are a burden to Australia at best, or a danger at worst. Even those who are sympathetic to refugees, and disapprove of the way Australia handles them, can be guilty of thinking that they are all desperate cases who come from impoverished backgrounds with little-to-no education. I know this because, frankly, it is something I was guilty of before encountering people who expanded my

understanding. Therefore, I included myself in the target of this satire: *those who perpetuate or believe harmful narratives about refugees in Australia*.

Rather than tell the story in the voice of this target, a tactic my research has led me to be wary of, I chose to do the opposite, telling the story from the perspective of a young Afghan medical student whose reasons for escaping to Australia, as well as his later professional success in the country, directly rebuts these negative narratives. Unlike in 'White People, White Spandex', I felt it was important that my representation of this 'participant zero' and their experience be realistic and detailed, as this would help to undermine the negative stereotypes about refugees that I was attacking. I therefore spent a large amount of time researching refugee experiences, using texts such as *From Nothing to Zero: Letters from Refugees in Australia's Detention Centres* (2003), *No Friend but the Mountains* (2018), and *From Under a Leaky Roof: Afghan Refugees in Australia* (2005), as well primary interviews with refugees on websites such as *Right Now* (2013) and *ABC News* (2012). Although I believe that I did this research to the best of my ability, there is also a limit to what such research can achieve. Therefore, I wanted this story to somehow honestly acknowledge the gap between second-hand research and first-hand experience. To do so, I changed the story so that the perspective now came from a White, male Australian journalist who was interviewing my refugee character. The research this journalist had done prior to the interview mirrored my own: 'my web browser crowded with tabs: Google maps, Google images, Wikipedia entries on Quetta, Jakarta and Nauru'. He also shares my doubts about the ability to fully understand the experiences of this other person: 'you can sit in a dark room all you like, but it's never the same dark as a tarp over your head, waiting for the truck to slow, the guns pointing at you in the sudden light'. By writing from this new character's perspective, I was able to use a detailed narrative of refugee

experience, while also acknowledging the limits of my ability to fully understand these experiences.

Although using a White, male character helped me create a more honest representation of the 'participant zero', it also resulted in a new concern. In this new version of the story, the journalist is returning to interview a refugee whom he had helped rescue from a secret offshore detention program many years ago. However, by both shifting to the journalist's perspective and making the journalist the 'hero' of the story, I realized that I was engaging in the 'White saviour trope'. Focusing on the 2009 film *The Blind Side*, Julio Cammarota (2011, p. 243) defines this trope as when 'a white person guides people of color from the margins to the mainstream with his or her own initiative and benevolence'. Norman Denzin (2014, p. 1) similarly describes this trope as occurring when 'a white messianic character saves a lower- or working-class, usually urban or isolated, nonwhite character from a sad fate'. As Cammarota (2011, pp. 243-244) writes, a key element of this trope is that the non-White character, in this case my refugee, is seen as a passive actor in the story's narrative: 'the movement occurs through the "smarts" of the lone saviour and not by any effort of those being saved'. As such, Denzin (2014, p. 2) believes that this trope reinforces a harmful stereotype that non-White people are helpless without White support: 'such imposing patronage enables an interpretation of nonwhite characters and culture as essentially broken, marginalized, and pathological'. The inclusion of this harmful trope in 'Magpies' was especially egregious considering that I had wanted to *attack* narratives that viewed refugees as helpless. Therefore, in trying to fix one issue—my reluctance to write from the perspective of another identity group—I had inadvertently created a problem that was even *more* harmful to the 'participant zero' in this story.

I was at an impasse with the story, stuck between two approaches that seemed equally harmful. I put the story away for a while, and when I came back to it, I realized that the answer to my problem had been inside the story all along. In both versions of the story, the refugee character *thinks* they are leading a successful life in Australia, only for it to be revealed that they are in fact still in detention, and that their time in Australia has been an illusion created by something called a DGS, or Dream Generating System. My original purpose for using this fictional technology was to underline the discrepancy between the dreams and aspirations of refugees who set out for Australia, and the harsh reality they encounter when Australia does not allow them to follow these dreams. However, I now saw how this element of the story could be used to counteract the 'White saviour trope' that I had unwittingly introduced into the story. What if the journalist's role in saving this refugee from offshore detention, his moment as a 'White saviour', was itself just a dream? What if this person wasn't a journalist at all, but just someone who wanted to do good things, but never had the actual guts to do so? Each night, when this character puts on their DGS and goes to sleep, their dreams are of heroically breaking non-White refugees out of detention centres. During the day, in reality, they do nothing to help those in need.

As I tried this new approach, I could feel the target of my satire shifting. I still wanted to counteract the narratives of refugees being helpless burdens. I therefore kept most of the research in the story, and the sections about the refugee's experiences and reasons for coming to Australia were still as realistic as I could manage. With the new use of the DGS, however, I was also attacking those who *do* understand the truth about refugees, but don't do anything to change their mistreatment at the hands of the Australian government. This new attack is also directed at myself and my own inaction. Sure, I have attended a few marches, signed a few petitions, and so on, but that doesn't

feel like enough. Furthermore, I sometimes worry that writing satire becomes a way of *excusing* my own inaction. It would be nice to think that a satirical short story about refugees will change peoples' minds and bring an end to Australia's heinous offshore detention programs, but I am under no illusions that this is the case. Therefore, writing satire in the hope of helping refugees is not unlike dreaming about helping them. It may feel good in the moment, but it doesn't achieve much, at least compared to other more radical actions.

I was excited by the way 'Magpies' turned its attack on me, the satirist, whilst also making its original attack on harmful narratives about refugees. This sort of dual approach—satirizing a target whilst simultaneously casting doubt on satire itself—also worked well in 'Invasion Day'. Furthermore, it seemed like an honest representation of my relationship with satire at the time. I still enjoyed writing in the mode, and I still loved experiencing a cleverly constructed satirical attack in any medium. However, my research into the 'participant zero', and the satiric mode in general, was making me more aware of the mode's limitations and dangers. Finding a way to acknowledge these concerns not only helped me represent the 'participant zero' in a less harmful way, it also reenergized my passion for writing in the mode.

'The Juansons'

I took this new energy into an extensive restructure of the story, 'The Juansons'. I had started working on this story early in the Trump presidency, when one of the major news stories was the ICE raids accosting and deporting undocumented immigrants across the country (see Dickerson & Kanno-Youngs 2019). People who had spent years peacefully building up their lives and connections to their communities were suddenly being uprooted and tossed out of the country. It disgusted me that someone's

immigration status was a sufficient excuse for ripping apart lives and communities, and I wanted to attack both those who authorized these deportations and those who either supported or ignored them. To do so, I originally wrote a fifteen-thousand-word draft about an undocumented immigrant, from an unnamed Central American country, who arrives in the United States and slowly works her way up through a succession of low-wage jobs until she is leading a middle-class family life, only to then be suddenly deported. To emphasize the suddenness of such deportations, I set the story in a futuristic world in which teleportation allows people to travel from one place to another instantly. Thus, the character is simply going about their day at a shopping centre when they are caught in a 'raid' that instantly teleports anyone without official documentation out of the country. This technology also allows people to change their appearance and alter their language capabilities. Therefore, my migrant character arrives in the United States as a tall, blonde White woman who speaks English, and she keeps her identity a secret her entire life for fear of deportation. I felt like this secret identity was a good metaphor for the anxiety undocumented immigrants were reporting during the Trump presidency.

Although these futuristic elements meant my story was clearly not intending to be realistic, I still worried about writing from the perspective of another identity group. I had conducted extensive second-hand research into the Central American immigrant experience, reading non-fiction texts like *Enrique's Journey* (2007), *The Far Away Brothers* (2017), and *Seeking Refuge: Central American Migration to Mexico, the United States, and Canada* (2006), as well as interviews with Central American immigrants featured on websites such as *The Immigrant Story* (2020) and *My Immigration Story* (n.d.). Like during the writing process for 'Magpies', however, I had my doubts as to how effective this research could be in bridging the gap between

second-hand knowledge and first-hand experience. I also wanted to turn the lens of my attack back on myself, as I had done in that earlier story. I therefore initially wrote an entirely different story, from the perspective of a White woman living in the American suburbs, whose neighbours suddenly disappear. She eventually realizes that her neighbours, who had appeared White, were in fact undocumented immigrants caught up in a nation-wide raid. At first, she feels betrayed by her neighbours, who she had long been friends with, but as she sees the racist reaction of others in her community, she begins to understand why they kept their true identity a secret. As she thinks back and connects the dots, we get a glimpse of these lives that have been destroyed by deportation, which the character equates to her own loss of a husband and son in a car crash. Despite her anger, however, she doesn't really *do* anything about the raids, with the story ending with her sitting at her computer angrily 'writing a letter to her senator'.

In this new version of the story, I had followed almost the same blueprint as 'Magpies'. I showed my research of another identity group's experience through the lens of someone who I felt more capable of inhabiting. I should note that I do not identify as a woman, so I am still writing from a different identity group to my own in this story. However, the gap between my experiences and that of a middle-class, White American woman at least *feels* smaller to me, and I felt more capable writing from this perspective than that of a Central American immigrant. Furthermore, this story focuses on what I *share* with this White woman, an inability to produce meaningful action in the face of something that I know is wrong, but which doesn't directly affect me. Like 'Magpies', therefore, I am also attacking my own inaction while simultaneously attacking my original target, in this case the mass deportation of undocumented immigrants.

Unlike ‘Magpies’, however, this approach did not result in a satisfying story. Firstly, the story did not offer enough of the migrant character’s experience for their deportation to really hit home. We get only brief glimpses of their life through the White character’s flashbacks, and this is not really enough to convey the hard years of struggle that have been undone by their sudden deportation. It was also hard to show how this teleportation technology, which was crucial to the story, actually worked. I was left resorting to an ‘information-dump’ in which my White character *reads* about the technology, and that felt very awkward. To fix these issues, I experimented by inserting the first act of my original story, a section that tracks the migrant character’s immigration from her unnamed country to the apartment in New York where her cousin is waiting for her. This original section was written in the third-person perspective, and deliberately kept a distance from the character’s innermost thoughts for fear of overstepping my ability to convey what they were experiencing. This approach didn’t really work when the story was fifteen-thousand-words long. It felt *too* distant, and my hesitancy to flesh out the character made them seem thin and fake. As a short segment, however, this sparseness felt more natural. Through action alone I could intimate that this character was leaving their home out of desperation, and that their arrival in the United States was equally terrifying and exciting. Furthermore, I could introduce the futuristic teleportation technology much more naturally, as the character actually interacts with it on their journey.

I liked how the two different sections complimented each other in the story. I felt like the first half of the story represented my understanding, as limited as it is, of the migrant experience, and the second half represented my, and others’, failure to fight back against Trump’s disgusting deportation policy. However, as I continued to draft this new version of the story, I realized that I wanted a more dramatic ending than

simply having the White character sit down to write an angry letter. As satire, it made sense for all the drama that had come before to end so limply. After all, the story was an attack on not just the deportations themselves, but the society that allowed them to happen. What makes sense in planning, however, doesn't always feel right in practice. The more I wrote, the more I felt that this White character was *desperate* to do something, she just didn't know what. Even though I knew a new ending would somewhat dampen my satirical attack, the story still needed it.

To come up with a different ending, I added a new element to the story. In the original version of the story, the entire family—mother, father, and son—are deported. In this new version, the son is not caught up in the raid, and ends up coming to the neighbour for help. This actually makes more sense, as children born in the United States are citizens, even if their parents are not, and the child would therefore not be caught up in a raid that targets the undocumented. The inclusion of the son also meant that the White character could do more than just write an angry letter. In the new version of the story, she hides the boy from the police and helps him track down his family. However, this new version went too far in the other direction: the White character's barely believable role in uniting this family was another example of the 'White saviour trope'. I decided to end the story with her hiding the boy from the police, which was a more realistic intervention, but the story still needed an image that was dramatic enough to conclude the narrative on the right note. After what felt like an endless number of rewrites, I came up with the idea of the White character needing to hurt herself in some small way to protect the boy. In the final version, with the police knocking on her door, she sends the boy upstairs to hide, but then realizes that he has bled on her kitchen floor. Worried that the police may notice this blood and find it suspicious, she picks up a knife and without thinking 'plunges it into the fat of her palm'. I liked the energy of this new

ending. It represented the character's *desire* to help without turning her into an unrealistic 'White saviour'. Although it is violent, the gesture is still small. It is not enough on its own to solve this huge humanitarian crisis, or to even solve this one family's problem. Nonetheless, whereas 'Magpies' seems to suggest that small gestures, like writing satire, are completely futile, 'The Juansons' ends on a slightly more hopeful note for both the 'participant zero' and the satirist.

'V-Beeb'

In both 'Magpies' and 'The Juansons', the dilemma about how to represent the experiences of a 'participant zero' from a different identity group than my own eventually led me to creative solutions that *also* allowed me to express my doubts about satire itself. I have found this honest approach to writing satire, in which my personal fears and doubts are foregrounded, to be an exciting way of adding complexity and ambiguity to my original ideas. However, this does not mean that it is *always* the best solution for a story. For example, I wanted the story 'V-Beeb' to keep a tight focus on its target, and for its satirical point to be as clear as possible. Like 'The Juansons', the story features a female protagonist living in a Western country, a perspective which I would normally feel comfortable, although not complacent, about attempting to represent. However, a crucial difference is that this character has had an abortion, a specific experience which I was not sure I could authentically represent. This experience is crucial to the story's premise, which is about a young woman who is forced to raise a digital baby, or 'V-Beeb', after she is caught by the government in an alternate United States in which abortion has been outlawed. Although I felt unsure about how to represent this experience, I also did not want my doubt about this

dilemma, or about satire's effectiveness in general, to cloud my attack on the story's target: those who seek to ban abortion, and their true motives for doing so.

The impetus for the story came during the period in which numerous states in the U.S. passed laws that all but banned abortion (see Lai 2019). However, for years prior, I had already been thinking about a story premise that combined two of the most convincing critiques of the 'pro-life' movement. The first is that many in the 'pro-life' movement are in fact merely 'pro-birth', as their interest in the well-being of young children, particularly those in disadvantaged areas, wanes once they are out of the uterus. A number of writers have voiced variants of this critique, but its most devastating proponent is Sister Joan Chittister (in Levinovitz 2017):

> I do not believe that just because you're opposed to abortion, that that makes you pro-life. In fact, I think in many cases, your morality is deeply lacking if all you want is a child born but not a child fed, not a child educated, not a child housed. And why would I think that you don't? Because you don't want any tax money to go there. That's not pro-life. That's pro-birth.

The second critique is that many in the 'pro-life' movement are more interested in controlling women than they are in saving unborn children. Laurie Penny (2019) writes that the conservative politicians who passed anti-abortion laws in Alabama and other states are using the pretext of protecting the unborn to mask their real goal, which is to supress the autonomy of women: 'these laws are not about whether a fetus is a person. They are about enshrining maximalist control over the sexual autonomy of women as a foundational principle of conservative rule'. As such, Penny (2019) believes that banning abortion is just the beginning of a larger plan to control women's bodies, and that the 'eventual aim here is to put women's bodies under strict and brutal state surveillance'. Jill Filipovic (2019) likewise agrees that banning abortion acts as a way of suppressing women's autonomy: 'if you don't want women to be equal, a great way to force that ideal is to strip women of our rights to our own bodies and reproductive

decisions. And the goal of abortion opponents is clear: they do not want women to be equal players in society'.

I wanted to attack those who seek to ban abortion by braiding these two critiques of the 'pro-life' movement into one story. To do so, I created a futuristic technology that connects the hologram of a baby to a user's brain, so that the user feels extreme pain whenever this 'V-Beeb' is in distress. In an alternate U.S.—at least for now—in which abortion is a federal crime, those who have covert abortions are tracked down and given one of these 'V-Beebs' as punishment. Abandoning or starving the baby causes the user extreme pain, and the digital food required to keep it fed is prohibitively expensive. Thus, my main character, an up-and-coming artist who can barely afford to keep a roof over her head, is forced to empty her entire savings just to keep her 'V-Beeb' from going hungry, as there are no support options for her. Out of money and delirious with pain, she accepts a government-sponsored arranged marriage, and is soon trapped in a suburban house, with her former dreams and goals suppressed.

I was happy with how the struggles of my character attacked the heartlessness of the 'pro-life' movement and the true motivations of the conservative politicians who seek to ban abortions. However, I was very uncomfortable about representing the character's experience of having an abortion. To assuage this unease, I tried to conduct as much research as I could into the experience of having an abortion, including the reasons women choose to have an abortion, the actual physical experience itself, and the way these women feel about the experience later in life. Luckily, there are a number of excellent websites that allow women to share their personal stories about abortion, such as *Exhale* (2020), *1 in 3* (n.d.), and *Shout Your Abortion* (n.d.). After reading hundreds of such stories, however, I only felt more uncomfortable about representing these experiences. Part of my discomfort was due to the gap between first-hand

experience and second-hand research, an issue which had also given me cause for concern with other stories. The bigger problem, however, was that it was impossible to represent the incredible diversity of these stories in just one character. My initial plan had been to flesh out the character's backstory by including some quick flashbacks that showed why she had chosen to have an abortion. However, because my story was a satirical attack on the issue of banning abortion, I was worried that whatever unique details I revealed about this character's experience would be seen as symbolic for *all* women who make the decision to have an abortion. As my research had shown me, there is absolutely no single abortion experience that can represent all the others. Each experience—before, during, and after—is unique, and the most important common thread is simply that each woman made a personal choice about her own body and her own life.

Once I understood this, I began to see how my initial plan to flesh out the particulars of my character's reason for having an abortion might actually undermine my attack. The goal of my story was not to reveal why women choose to have abortions, or how this decision affects them. It was to attack those who seek to take this choice away. By trying to explain my character's choice, I risked appearing to justify a decision that I do not believe requires any justification at all. In fact, Emily Douglas (2012) warns that representing a woman's reason for having an abortion can be seen as an invitation for an audience to pass judgement on this choice:

> there's a danger that seeking to understand more about the circumstances of women's abortion choices reiterates the same power dynamic we're fighting against: that a broader public is entitled to know why a woman is getting an abortion, find out all about her life, and make up their minds about her decision.

Although my intentions were to support a woman's right to choose, focusing on the reasons for that choice meant I may have inadvertently reinforced the position of those

who believe they have the right to intrude on the relationship between a woman and her body.

In stories like ‘Magpies’ and ‘The Juansons’, I made a deliberate choice to consider myself as belonging to both the satirist and target position, and I reworked my stories accordingly. In ‘V-Beeb’, it was a shock to realize that I was guilty of a version of the intrusive hubris that I was attacking my target for. Unlike those earlier stories, however, ‘V-Beeb’ did not require an extensive rework. All I had to do was delete my feeble attempts at representing an experience that was not as integral to the story as I had once believed. These cuts did not disrupt the flow of the story, further proof that they were superfluous to my satirical attack in the first place. My only further change was to add two lines of dialogue to an early scene in which federal agents have arrived at my character’s door. When one of these agents asks her why she chose to have an abortion, her reply is aimed at all intrusive men, including myself: ‘if you actually cared, you wouldn’t try to understand’.

‘Georgia O’Keeffe’

Although coming to terms with the dilemma of representing the experiences of the ‘participant zero’ in ‘V-Beeb’ was an arduous process, the actual changes to the story were quick and minimal. This shows that not *all* stories require extensive reworking in order for me to feel comfortable with their representations of the ‘participant zero’. For some stories, in fact, my first approach naturally led to a representation of the ‘participant zero’ that I did not consider to be potentially harmful to those who fill the position. These stories seemed to hit a ‘sweet spot’ in which I avoided representing the ‘participant zero’ from the ironically offensive perspective of the target, while simultaneously feeling comfortable with how I was telling the story from either the

perspective of the 'participant zero' or a neutral perspective. For example, the story 'Georgia O'Keeffe' is told from the first-person perspective of the 'participant zero', and despite this character being from a different identity group than my own, I did not feel concerned about writing from this perspective. The main character and 'participant zero' of the story is a White, middle-class woman whose memory of her mother is affected by her abusive, army veteran brother and a mysterious new technology. The story, which I began shortly after the 2016 election, is an attack on the bizarre nostalgia for a non-existent idyllic past that is summed up in President Trump's 2016 campaign promise to 'Make America Great Again'. To attack this nostalgia, I wrote about a futuristic technology that can create holograms of deceased people via others' memories of them. However, when a brother and sister use this technology to recreate their mother, the way they choose to remember her is so different that they create a horrific mishmash. The brother remembers her as an idealized 'angel in the house', while the sister, who remained living with the mother after the brother had run away from home and their abusive father had died, has more authentic memories of an independent woman with a passion for art and whiskey. When these competing versions of one person fail to gel, the brother turns off the sister's access to the hologram, an ending that I thought represented the victory of Trump's backwards-looking vision.

As I wanted the reader to understand that the sister's version of the mother was more accurate, thus rebuking Trump's idealized past-America, I felt that I needed to tell the story from her perspective. The story is therefore told in close first-person, including the character's inner thoughts, memories, and even dreams. This approach was obviously a risk, as I do not identify as a woman. Therefore, any attempt to inhabit the body and mind of a woman in my fiction brings with it the potential to get something horribly wrong. Despite this risk, however, my concerns about representing this

'participant zero' were not serious enough to warrant an extensive reworking of the story's premise or approach. Although it is difficult to dissect *exactly* why I feel comfortable writing from one character's perspective and not another's, I think there are a number of discernible reasons that explain why this story did not cause the same concerns as many of the others. Firstly, as in 'The Juansons', the female character is White, middle-class, and living in a Western country, all of which are experiences that I share and feel capable of representing. Furthermore, unlike in 'V-Beeb', the character does not encounter specific situations, such as having an abortion, that are beyond either my personal experience or that of my identity group in general. Finally, because I am not attacking my target over their harmful narratives about female experience, I was less nervous about how an audience might misinterpret my representation of these experiences. For this story, I imagine the 'participant zero' to be *anyone*, regardless of gender, affected by Trump's, or any politician's, impossible desire to go back to an idyllic past that never existed. This is obviously a much broader 'participant zero' than specific identity groups such as Black Americans or undocumented immigrants. In stories such as 'White People, White Spandex' and 'The Juansons', I was concerned that any mistakes I made in representing these specific identity groups might reinforce the harmful narratives about these groups that I was intending to attack in my story. As 'Georgia O'Keeffe' is not specifically focused on how Trump's backwards-looking vision harmfully portrays women—although I can certainly imagine such a story being written—I am therefore less concerned about how an audience might misinterpret any mistakes I make while representing my female character's experiences. Of course, this does not erase the potential for my mistakes to cause harm *beyond* that which I am attacking my target for. A stereotypical or otherwise offensive representation is harmful regardless of a story's purpose. I have therefore still been careful about how I represent

this character, but these precautions are outside of my concerns for the 'participant zero', and they were not enough for me to feel like I needed to rework my approach to the story.

'The Eater'

As the comparatively smooth writing process for 'Georgia O'Keeffe' shows, I am less concerned about my representation of the 'participant zero' when the group filling the position is broader than identity groups like Black Americans or undocumented immigrants. This also helps to explain the smooth writing process for 'The Eater', a story in which the protagonist and 'participant zero' is a nameless, raceless male character about whom I have given as few personal details as possible. The story is a grotesque attack on the 'trickle-down' economic theory, which posits that cutting taxes for the rich will stimulate business investment and eventually spread the wealth to the lower classes. To attack this ridiculous theory, which has been disproven time and time again (see Pearl 2019), I created a futuristic restaurant for the uber-wealthy in which the customers don't actually chew or swallow their own meals but instead send chunks of food down tubes to workers in the basement below. These workers chew the food and, via a mouth-implant, transmit the flavours to the wealthy customers above. Occasionally, some of the food that comes down the tube is coated in expensive edible gold, and the workers swallow this so that they can later extract it from their faeces for small amounts of money. This is the only wage they receive, and this system therefore keeps the workers alive in a holding state of precarious poverty, at least until the restaurant decides to save money by using fake edible gold, thus cutting off the workers' one revenue stream.

To help me attack how the ‘trickle-down’ theory only serves the wealthy, I deliberately kept the protagonist of this story as anonymous as possible. This character is given no name, and their lack of identifying features represents how the wealthy view them as a faceless, replaceable cog in the economic machine. Because this character is anonymous, I did not have to worry about how specific people, like Barack Obama, or specific identity groups, such as Black Americans, might feel about how they are represented in the story. My only concern was that low-wage workers, or perhaps hospitality workers, might have been harmed by a representation that made them appear like hopeless victims. However, even this minor concern was alleviated by the ending to the story, in which the character is shown to not roll over and accept their fate, but instead manages to turn the tables on their employers. Of course, there are still audience members who might see themselves as represented by this ‘participant zero’, and who might therefore feel harmed in some way by the story. One danger of a broad ‘participant zero’ is that it invites a wider range of audience members to see themselves as represented, and the more audience members who see themselves as represented in a story, the higher chance that *someone* will be hurt. Nonetheless, my concerns about the ‘participant zero’ were minimal during the writing process of ‘The Eater’, especially compared to many other stories in my creative artefact.

'Captain Honor’

The writing process for ‘Captain Honor’ was also mostly free of concerns about the ‘participant zero’, but for an entirely different reason. Unlike ‘The Eater’, the ‘participant zero’ in this story was much more specific: women whose claims of having been sexually abused or harassed by famous men were ignored until the #MeToo movement emerged. As positive as the achievements of the #MeToo movement have

been, it is horrifying to consider how long men like Harvey Weinstein and Louie C.K. were protected by those around them. I wanted a story that attacked how slow society had been to believe those who accused these men. To do so, I knew I wanted to use a neutral perspective—belonging to neither the accuser nor the accused—that could represent the slow transformation of a famous man's public status from hero to villain. After a few drafts, I settled on a famous man's Wikipedia page that is updated throughout the story as his accusers' claims gradually gain traction in the public consciousness. However, instead of writing a page for a man in the entertainment industry, I decided to instead write one for a superhero, the eponymous Captain Honor. This takes the story into the fantastical, but it also symbolizes how these real-life men used their 'hero' status to get away with abusing women for so long.

The neutral perspective from which the story is written instantly took away two major concerns I may have had about representing the 'participant zero'. Firstly, if I had written the story from the perspective of the superhero, his lies and denials may have been *too* convincing, and my audience may have misinterpreted my attacks for support. As it is, the superhero's denials are instantly contradicted by other perspectives. Furthermore, although the Wikipedia page may be 'neutral', the entries to this page make it clear by the end of the story that the superhero is indeed guilty of the accusations levelled against him. Secondly, if I had written the story from the perspective of the female accusers, I may have overstepped my ability to represent another's experiences. Although I have felt reasonably comfortable writing from the perspective of women in stories such as 'Georgia O'Keeffe' and 'The Juansons', writing authentically about the experience of being sexually abused or harassed would have been much more difficult. Even if I had conducted research using texts written by women who have experienced this, I am not sure this would have been enough to fully

appreciate and describe how such an event affects a person. I could have acknowledged my doubts about this in the story, as I have in stories such as 'Magpies' and 'The Juansons', but I didn't want to risk making the satirical attack of this story unclear. I wanted to keep *this* story focused on its target: the famous men who committed these acts and those who protected them. Therefore, I feel that the story's approach of using a neutral perspective both sharpened my satirical attack and minimized the risk of harm to the 'participant zero'.

'Proposition 1'

I also used a neutral perspective in the story 'Proposition 1', although in this case the risk to the 'participant zero' would likely have been minimal regardless of my approach. This story began with a thought experiment that didn't have a particular satirical target in mind: if humans suffering from the advanced stages of climate change found refuge on another planet, would those who hadn't believed in, or had wilfully ignored, the coming climate disaster be welcome? My wife's answer was a resolute 'hell, no'[2]. However, when I asked the same question to others, their answers were mixed. What if this new planet had a referendum on this issue, I wondered. And what if this referendum introduced the same type of political polarization that had sunk *our* planet in the first place? By showing such a referendum, I realized, I could attack how political polarization blocks our ability to solve the most pressing problems.

The approach of using a neutral perspective came naturally to this story. I knew that I wanted to tell the story in the form of a voter's guide explaining what the referendum was about, as well as offering arguments for and against the proposed bill.

[2] Maria, this is why I love you.

I also wanted to ensure that the arguments from supporters and opponents of the bill were equally convincing, and that each side's personal attacks muddied the legitimacy of the other's claims. It was important to me that this story made each side appear equally guilty of acts that lead to political polarization. Even though I am unapologetically of the Left, I can still admit that the demonizing and delegitimizing of political opponents, which has corroded our ability to compromise, is a sin attributable to all sides in our politics. Thus, the target of the story is the process of political polarization in general.

The story's broad target leads to an equally broad 'participant zero': those who have been negatively affected by political polarization, especially in regard to the issue of climate change. The broadness of this group means that there is little risk of harm to the 'participant zero'. It is hard to see how someone might be hurt by my representation of this group, as I am not aware of any harmful narratives about 'people affected by political polarization' that I may be inadvertently reinforcing. This is not to deny the *possibility* that an audience member may see themselves in this group and somehow be harmed. However, such a misinterpretation would be so far beyond the realm of my creative control that it is not worth being concerned about. Instead, my greatest concern with this story was that my *target* might be misinterpreted. As the story occurs on a planet inhabited by those who believed in and took action against climate change, I worried that audience members might interpret my target as something along the lines of 'those who use climate change to create political polarization'. Although I do believe that all sides are at least partly to blame for political polarization, I would hate for the story to be interpreted as an argument that climate change is a hoax created for political reasons. Even this minor concern, however, was assuaged by adding some context in the 'background' section of the voter's guide that describes the effects of climate

change on the original Earth: ‘the Midwest is a perpetual blizzard; the Southwest is unbearably hot; and a state-wide forest fire has devastated California’. This additional context, which is usually included in such voter guides anyways, relieved my concerns, as most audience members would understand that I am not denying climate change’s veracity in my attempt to attack political polarization.

The writing process for ‘Proposition 1’ was therefore almost entirely free of the type of concerns that necessitated creative problem-solving in many of my other stories. This is unsurprising, as the story uses both a neutral perspective and a broad ‘participant zero’, two approaches that have been shown to help avoid concerns before. This was also the third story in a row, after ‘The Eater’ and ‘Captain Honor’, that had a comparatively smooth writing process. As a result, I began to wonder if my research into the ‘participant zero’ had started to affect how I conceptualized stories from the first moment a spark of an idea came to me. Or perhaps the very ideas themselves were being subconsciously filtered by my knowledge of the ‘participant zero’, with those that I knew would lend themselves to less troublesome approaches being promoted ahead of others? Although there is no way to know for sure, just pondering these possibilities began to make me feel paranoid. It is definitely useful to know what types of approaches have helped me overcome my concerns about the ‘participant zero’ in the past, but I don’t want this knowledge to block potential story ideas before I even have a chance to be challenged by them. After all, some of my best work has come as a result of extensively reworking approaches and premises that initially made me feel uncomfortable.

‘A Short History of Guns in America’

I was therefore strangely thrilled when one of my later stories, 'A Short History of Guns in America', showed that a representation of a 'participant zero' can make me feel uncomfortable even when I least suspect it. Like 'Captain Honor' and 'Proposition 1', this story is told from a neutral perspective, an approach that I had started to automatically associate with minimal risk to my 'participant zero'. In this case, the story is written as if it is a chapter in a history textbook, complete with subheadings and a simple, unemotional writing style. It lays out a historically accurate timeline of guns and gun control in the United States, albeit with a crucial substitution. In this alternative history, the weapon of choice is America is *bears*, not guns. Thus, the Second Amendment reads 'to arm bears', instead of 'to bear arms'; John F. Kennedy was 'crushed to death by a grizzly bear sent leaping from a Dallas book depository'; and the NRA opposes bear control by arguing that 'the only way to stop a bad bear with a chainsaw is a good bear with a chainsaw'. By replacing an inanimate object with a wild animal, I was attempting to draw attention to America's insane relationship with its guns, and to attack its continuing inability to pass reasonable gun control laws.

Due to this story's approach, I was confident that there was minimal risk of harm to the 'participant zero'. In this story, the 'participant zero' position is filled by a broad group of *anyone* affected by gun violence in the U.S., although the story also includes some specific people who have been affected by gun violence, such as John F. Kennedy. However, the representations of specific people who fill the 'participant zero' position are brief, containing only the most basic facts about their role in the history of guns, and there is very little about these representations that could be deemed harmful. Furthermore, as the story was not told from a pro-gun perspective, I did not have to worry that I may have ironically represented those harmed by guns as unimportant or

somehow deserving of their fate. It therefore appeared that my initial approach to a story had once again precluded any potential concerns about the 'participant zero'.

This changed, however, when I tried to write about one of the most important moments in the history of U.S. gun violence: the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. In 2012, Adam Lanza shot and killed twenty-six people, including twenty young children, at an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut. This remains the fourth-deadliest mass shooting in the United States, and the young age of the children, all of whom were less than seven years old, only compounds the tragedy. In the aftermath of the attack, the NRA pressured a number of U.S. senators into blocking even modest gun control legislation, with President Obama (in Sink 2013) describing the unsuccessful measure votes as 'a pretty shameful day for Washington'. Therefore, referencing the Sandy Hook shooting was important to my story, as it is one of the clearest examples of America's inability to fix its addiction to guns.

When it came time to write this section, however, I began to worry about the inclusion of this 'participant zero'. I could imagine the pain a parent of one of the children killed at Sandy Hook would feel if they somehow came across my story. I was confident that I was neither saying anything harmful about those killed in the attack, nor appearing to support the shooter or those who oppose gun control. Nonetheless, the method with which I was attacking my target—switching guns for bears—was playful, silly, and fantastical. While my research has shown that such playfulness is common in satire, it struck me here as an inappropriate way to represent the real-life murder of young children. This was, admittedly, a hypocritical response. After all, I had felt no such compunction for including the 'participant zero' of John F. Kennedy, or those killed in an earlier mass shooting that I had referenced: the 1949 'Walk of Death'. Perhaps it was the recency of the Sandy Hook shooting that affected me more than these

other events. Or maybe it was the birth of my own child, and the thought of arriving at his school one day to find a crime scene. Regardless of the cause, writing the words 'Sandy Hook' in this story actually made me physically ill, and no amount of rationalization could erase that feeling.

My initial response to this concern was to simply change some details of this shooting, whilst keeping its historical place in a timeline of guns in America intact. Thus, Newtown's Sandy Hook Elementary became Cambridge's John Dods Elementary, and Adam Lanza became Patrick Sloan. This was a small change, but it was enough to minimize the risk of harm to the 'participant zero'. I hoped that anyone who might be understandably upset about the use of such a recent tragedy would see these changes as a small gesture acknowledging the pain of those involved in the shooting. Furthermore, because I kept the underlying significance of the shooting intact—it was still a horrific attack that killed a number of young children—I could include real historical details about the shooting's aftermath, such as Congress' failure to approve gun control legislation. It seemed like I had found a simple compromise that assuaged my concerns about the 'participant zero' without damaging my satirical attack.

As I pressed on with the story, however, I realized that this small compromise had actually significantly affected my writing process. Up until the Sandy Hook shooting, I had tried to keep my 'bears' history as close as possible to the real history of guns in America. Throughout the story, I had used real places, names, dates, and quotes. The only changes I made were cosmetic, such as changing the Winchester Rifle for the Winchester Grizzly. The changes I made to the details of the Sandy Hook shooting were just as small as these other changes, but they were made for a different reason. This alteration of history, unconnected from the central substitution of guns for

bears, threw me off, and it seemed awkward to simply continue as I had before. As I still wasn't willing to use the correct details regarding the Sandy Hook shooting, the story had reached an impasse.

I put the story away for a while, and when I returned to it, I realized that this change in approach could actually present me with a creative opportunity. I had long been struggling with how to end the story. What event could act as a suitable bookend to this alternate history of guns in America? Trump's election? The 2017 Las Vegas shooting, which was the worst in U.S. history? Perhaps the more recent 2019 El Paso shooting? None of these events felt like a significant moment in gun history, probably because they, like many other events, had *failed* to alter the bizarre relationship the United States has with its guns. In a story so reliant on real history, how was I going to find a satisfying ending?

The changes I made to the Sandy Hook shooting, as minor as they were, opened up the possibility that I could stop following history and instead create something new. Why not use these changes as a branching-off point into an alternative history? At first, I played around with an ending in which the parents of those killed in the Sandy Hook/John Dods attack are *successful* in pressuring Congress to enact significant gun control legislation. This initially seemed like a nice way of attacking the real-life inaction on gun control. However, it began to feel a little bit *too* neat, and I realized that I actually wanted the story to represent the stagnation and frustration of the real fight for gun control in America. To do so, I played around with a number of possible endings, before one finally stuck. In this version of the story, the father of one of the children killed in the shooting decides that the country would be safer if they replaced bears with a less harmful weapon: guns. The father invents this new weapon, and this alteration to history allows me to explore the continuing deadlock on the gun problem

from a unique angle. In this alternate history, the Republican politicians are *anti*-guns, as widespread adoption of the weapon would hurt the profits of the Republican-supporting National Repeating Bears Association, the bear-version of the real-world NRA. In contrast, the Democrats are *pro*-gun, as they see the weapon as the best way to stop the out-of-control 'mass bear attacks' plaguing the country. By switching the two parties' positions on guns, I could illustrate how politics has stymied, rather than solved, the gun problem in America. Without my initial concerns for the 'participant zero', however, I never would have found this new ending.

Like many of the other stories in my creative artefact, the changes I made to 'A Short History of Guns in America' were initially designed to minimize the risk of harm to the 'participant zero', but they then also opened up new creative possibilities that improved the story. What is particularly interesting about this story, however, is how unexpected my concerns for the 'participant zero' were. The story does not adopt the potentially harmful perspective of its satirical target, nor does it attempt to represent the experiences of an identity group different than my own. Avoiding these two dilemmas has largely helped me avoid concerns about the 'participant zero' in my other stories, but that was not the case here. This shows that there is no blueprint that a satirist can follow to completely avoid potentially harmful representations of the 'participant zero'. When I step back and examine the trends of my writing process for the creative artefact, I can see that there are certain approaches which I need to be wary of in regard to the 'participant zero'. This is *not* the same, however, as saying that avoiding such approaches is a guarantee that I will feel comfortable with a representation of the 'participant zero'.

'Cops Say the Darndest Things'

The final story written for my creative artefact shows that the reverse of this finding is also true: approaches that I have learned to be wary of can still produce representations of the 'participant zero' that carry minimal risk of harm. This final story, 'Cops Say the Darndest Things', is written from the perspective of my target, an approach that I have avoided elsewhere, but I managed to find a compromise here that minimized the risk of harm to the 'participant zero'. I started the story soon after the murder of George Floyd, the Black American killed in Minneapolis by a police officer who kneeled on his neck for over eight minutes. Like many others, I was outraged when I saw the video footage of George Floyd's death. What struck me the most was how relaxed the police officer, Derek Chauvin, seemed as George Floyd begged for air beneath him and eventually went unconscious. The other three officers gathered around Chauvin appeared equally at ease. Such is their body language, one could easily imagine that they were gathered around a BBQ chatting about a baseball game, instead of quietly murdering another human being. The idea for the story began with these observations: I wanted to attack the impunity with which police feel they can perpetrate violence against Black Americans. To do so, I wanted to write a story focused on the conversations of police officers standing over bodies of dead or dying Black Americans. The five scenes that make up this story each feature bizarre situations that combine to ask a single question: what would it take for a police officer to actually be worried about the consequences of killing a Black American?

As my research had made me wary of representing the 'participant zero' through the perspective of a story's target, my first instinct was to tell this story in a way that would avoid such an approach. Initially, I tried to write from the perspectives of the Black Americans who are being assaulted—or, in one case, the soul of a Black American floating above his own corpse—as they listen to the police officers' bizarrely

relaxed conversations. However, I quickly realized that this approach was making me uncomfortable. It is difficult enough for a White writer to attempt to write from the perspective of a Black American, but it is another thing entirely to try and accurately represent this voice at the moment of their death, when they are filled with fear and rage over the injustice that is occurring due to their race. My early attempts to do so were inauthentic at best, and potentially harmful at worst. However, I also knew that I didn't want to try and represent what the police officers were thinking or feeling. It is awful to imagine the disgusting thoughts swirling around Derek Chauvin's mind as he killed George Floyd; I had no interest in putting those thoughts to paper.

In the end, I compromised by telling the story using only the police officer's dialogue. In this new version, the unnamed police officers are represented solely through their dialogue, with no additional description of what the characters are thinking or feeling, or of the scene around them. This new approach helped me overcome two of my biggest reservations about how I represented my target. Firstly, I avoided a close first-person perspective that might include the repulsive inner thoughts and feelings of these police officers. Secondly, by not describing the scenes in which this dialogue was taking place, I avoided showing the violence these police officers were perpetuating against the Black Americans. The lesson I learned from Thompson-Spires about avoiding 'black suffering porn' was still strong in my mind, and I had no interest in foregrounding the pain inflicted upon my story's 'participant zero'. In fact, the presence of the 'participant zero' is only obliquely referred to in the dialogue, which captures my initial goal of showing how police officers feel such impunity that they barely notice the people they are murdering.

Even though I was not directly representing the 'participant zero' in the story, I still knew that I needed to proceed carefully. I wasn't using my targets as close first-

person narrators, but I was still relying solely upon their perspective of the events, and their dialogue could reinforce harmful narratives about Black Americans. To minimize the risk of this possibility, I set myself two ground rules for the story. The first was that the police officers were not going to say anything derogatory about those they had harmed in the story, or about Black Americans in general. It may have been realistic for these police officers to use racial epithets or stereotypes to describe those they had killed, but I didn't want to reinforce such harmful representations of Black Americans in the story. The second rule was that the officers wouldn't deny responsibility for their actions, nor would they blame their victims for the violence they had perpetuated. In one of my early sketches for the story, an officer blamed his decision to shoot an unarmed Black American on the 'drug-induced, zombie-like fury' state of his attacker, despite the fact that the dialogue gradually makes it clear that the victim is an elderly Black woman who was coming out of a church. Despite the obvious ridiculousness of the officer's excuses, I wasn't comfortable in relying on audience members to see through these lies, and I didn't want the story to in any way be seen as excusing police brutality. I therefore did not use that particular section, and in other sections, the police officers admit what they have done without blaming the violence on their victims.

These two ground rules helped me minimize the risk of a premise and approach that initially seemed impossible to marry with my concerns for the 'participant zero'. This is not to say that I have *no* concerns about the story, however. I'm sure there are some who would argue that telling a story about police brutality from the perspective of the perpetrators is harmful in and of itself. Furthermore, even though I have tried to make these police officer characters as detestable as possible, there will probably still be some audience members who sympathize with these characters, and who may perhaps even misinterpret them as being the 'participant zero' of the satire. Therefore,

the compromises I made with this story have not completely eliminated the potential to cause harm to the 'participant zero'. Instead, they have only minimized this risk to the extent that I am comfortable enough to offer the story to the world. How the world then reacts is out of my hands.

The Creative Potential of the 'Participant Zero'

This dynamic is true not only for this final story, but for the collection overall. Although I am confident that I have minimized the risk of harm posed by my representations of the 'participant zero' to the best of my ability, I am not naïve enough to think that this risk has been eliminated entirely. The key finding of this chapter, therefore, is *not* a foolproof method for eliminating all concerns about the 'participant zero'. When I step back and examine the trends of my writing, I can see how certain approaches produce representations of the 'participant zero' that I am more consistently comfortable with. I can also identify approaches that I should be wary of using without careful consideration. However, as the final two stories of this chapter show, 'safe' approaches can produce potentially harmful representations of 'participant zero', while 'risky' approaches can be creatively managed in ways that assuage these concerns. Therefore, it would be fraudulent to end this exegesis with some sort of 'participant zero' blueprint that guarantees fellow satirists a risk-free final product.

Instead, my key finding is that a satirist, or at least *this* satirist, should not be worried about their concerns for the 'participant zero' inhibiting their writing process. As many of my stories can attest, the process of working through and minimizing the risk to the 'participant zero' can also lead to exciting new creative possibilities that improve the artistic work. Furthermore, worrying about the 'participant zero' does not have to mean muzzling one's work or dulling the fury with which one attacks the true

target. In fact, concentrating on these concerns may actually *sharpen* the attack, or perhaps broaden the narrow focus of an attack into something more honest and ambiguous. Concentrating on the 'participant zero' is undeniably *challenging*, and it would be easier to throw up one's hands and claim that the unpredictability of audience interpretation makes the whole process futile. There have certainly been moments in which I have been tempted to do just this. By forcing myself to push past these low points, however, I have learned that such challenges are healthy for my creative process, and that concerns for the 'participant zero' can be a catalyst for more than just risk-control.

As a result, my creative process has also reinvigorated my love for the satiric mode. There were times during my research that I wondered whether or not I really wanted to continue writing satirical stories. Was the risk of inadvertent harm too great? These concerns have never disappeared altogether, but I have come to understand that I wouldn't *want* them to disappear. Because satire so often deals with controversial and divisive issues, and because its texts are released to a public who vary widely in their beliefs and biases, satire is an inherently risky type of communication. This risk is in fact part of its power; it's part of why I love writing in the mode. I find that there is an adrenaline rush to writing about real events and issues, and nothing sparks my creativity more than the question of *how* to attack those who I feel are worthy of rebuke. Focusing on the 'participant zero' has not diminished the thrill of risk or dampened the fury that brings me to the page in the first place. In fact, focusing on the real people who fill this position has helped heightened both of these sensations: I am reminded of why my anger is justified in the first place, and of the real consequences that could result from the misdirection of this anger.

Of course, all of this is personal, and it is only one way of addressing the tensions of being a twenty-first century satirist. I certainly do not view concerns for the 'participant zero' as some sort of litmus test that defines a work of satire as ethical or unethical. Nor do I doubt that satirists unaware of the 'participant zero' can still operate with conscientious care for those who may be affected by their work. For those who are receptive to the concept of the 'participant zero', however, I hope that it is another useful tool in their belt. Good luck to you out there: may your poison arrows fly true.

Conclusion

The ‘participant zero’ can be a useful tool for both studying and creating satire. Firstly, a fuller understanding of who is involved in an act of satire can help us more accurately analyse the public reception of a satiric work. The controversy surrounding satire such as Blitt’s ‘The Politics of Fear’ and Trillin’s ‘Have They Run Out of Provinces Yet?’ can largely be explained by focusing on the concern some audience members felt for the ‘participant zero’. However, some of those who defended these works focused instead on explaining the satirists’ intentions, and then blaming audience members for misinterpreting the true targets of the satirical attack. If the importance of the ‘participant zero’ to audience reception is established, it might help us avoid this type of inaccurate refutation of an audience’s reaction. The concept might also allow audience members to better explain *why* they have rejected a satiric work. In general, the conversations we have about satire and its impact will be more nuanced, and this may help us avoid polarized debates that are satisfactory for neither the satirist nor the audience.

To help establish how the ‘participant zero’ can affect the ‘success’ or ‘failure’ of a satiric work, it would be useful to have audience reception studies consider this position when they are either designing their audience surveys or grouping their data. For example, Stewart’s analysis of the audience reception to the ‘The Politics of Fear’ benefits from how it categorizes the ‘failure’ comments into different groups, including some that indicate the commenters’ rejection of the cartoon based mainly on their concern for the Obamas (Stewart 2013, p. 209). Grouping such comments together allows Stewart (2013, p. 211) to explain why a significant percentage of audience members understood and agreed with Blitt’s intentions, but still rejected his approach:

‘these comments are framed such that the commenter certainly understands the satire but fears that others will not’. If researchers design their survey questions or categorize their responses in a way that recognizes the relationship between the audience and the ‘participant zero’, they may avoid falling into the trap of thinking that the audience only rejects a satirical attack when they misinterpret or disagree with its choice of target. Furthermore, if these studies begin to frequently incorporate the ‘participant zero’, we may get a better sense of how important audience concerns for this position are compared to other reasons for rejecting, or accepting, a satiric work. In Stewart’s study, roughly a fifth of all commenters understood Blitt’s intentions but still rejected the cartoon out of concern for the Obamas. This is a significant portion of the audience, but without more data it is hard to draw wider conclusions about the importance of the ‘participant zero’ to the reception of satire.

While trying to understand the effect of the ‘participant zero’ on audience members, we should also examine satiric works that may not be thought of as ‘ethical’ enough to qualify as satire. Although this exegesis has mostly focused on case studies of satiric works that have progressive and anti-discriminatory intentions that match my own, satire is not exclusive to a single ideology. In fact, Phiddian (2013, p. 52) writes that ‘satire brings with it no default ideology’, and he notes that ‘satirists worked for the Nazis as well as against apartheid’. Viveca S. Greene (2019, p. 6) therefore writes that a thorough examination of satire requires us ‘to abandon the pretense that satire works only toward progressive ends’. Perhaps in recognition of this painful truth, there has been a recent swell of scholarship examining far-right satire and its role in recent events such as the 2016 election of Donald Trump (see Greene 2019; Lamerichs et al. 2018; Nagle 2017). Greene (2019, pp. 68-69) describes the need to understand how such satire may have efficiently achieved its goal of ‘mainstreaming’ radical, far-right

ideology: ‘we need to attend to how the extreme right has appropriated satire to infiltrate the ballot box and the box office, to wage war on progressive values on social media and college campuses, and to incite brutal killings in a Pittsburgh synagogue and a Charleston church’. Although I do not claim extensive knowledge of far-right satire, I have encountered enough of it online to notice that it almost always avoids ironically representing its ‘participant zero’—usually white, Western men—in a negative way. Instead, these satiric works prefer to focus on offering explicitly harmful representations of their target, meaning that even audience members who either misinterpret or reject their satirical attack are left with a negative image of those who fill the ‘target’ position. It is somewhat disconcerting to note that I recommend this exact approach in Chapter Four, where I discussed reworking a number of stories to avoid negative representations of the ‘participant zero’. If the far-right has indeed made effective use of its satire, therefore, their approach to representations of the ‘participant zero’ may be a crucial element of this success, and I believe that this hypothesis is worthy of further investigation.

Aside from the analysis of satire, the ‘participant zero’ can also be a tool for creative practitioners working in the mode. Of course, the question of whether or not the ‘participant zero’ is important enough to affect the creative process is a personal decision for each satirist. For those who share my desire to minimize the risk of inadvertent harm, this exegesis has delineated how paying close attention to the ‘participant zero’ can be a significant step towards achieving this goal. However, reducing the risk of inadvertent harm is not the *only* creative use of this concept. Some satirists may find that their increased awareness of the ‘participant zero’ does not equate to a desire to portray those who fill this position in a more positive light. In fact, they may find that their satire is improved by a more *negative* representation of the

'participant zero', one which blurs the boundary between this position and the target of their satire. For example, if I was to write a short story attacking Donald Trump's attempts to delegitimize media organisations such as CNN, I may think that the conduct of these media organisations is at least *partially* responsible for the harm they have received. Thus, while they would still be filling the 'participant zero' position in my satire, I would not avoid representing their flaws. Such an approach would lead to a more ambiguous satirical attack, but this can be a positive attribute for some satiric works.

Regardless of their goals, I would love to see satirists experimenting with how they incorporate considerations of the 'participant zero' into their work, not least of all because I can learn from their efforts. Of course, I am not done exploring how the 'participant zero' affects my own creative process. As the final two stories discussed in Chapter Four show, concerns about the 'participant zero' can arise even when I use approaches that have previously minimized the risk to those who fill this position. This shows that the 'participant zero' will continue to challenge me for a long time to come, and this is a challenge that I relish. To keep my creative process from getting stale, I also plan to experiment with approaches that I have previously been wary of, such as representing the 'participant zero' from the perspective of my target. Although my research in Chapter Two highlights the danger of this approach, too much of my favourite satire—from Jonathan Swift's 'A Modest Proposal' to *The Colbert Report*—uses this approach for me to completely reject it. Is there a way to have my irony cake and eat it too? It seems a tricky proposition, but I always back the power of creativity to find a solution. Furthermore, my experience has taught me that the more difficult a creative challenge, the greater the reward. As a result, my exploration of the 'participant zero'—both its challenges and possibilities—is only just beginning.

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