

## The Privilege of Mediocrity

For creators of color, the perceived need to be exemplary can be artistically stultifying. Instead, true freedom may lie in being allowed to be fine — or to fail

Adam Bradley | September 30, 2021

To accompany this essay, T commissioned a pair of original works by the Portland, Oregon-based artist Dana Paresa and Houston-based artist Trenton Doyle Hancock.



The Houston-based artist Trenton Doyle Hancock's *Torpedoboy and His 'Just So' Moment* (2021). © Trenton Doyle Hancock, 2021. Image courtesy of the artist and James Cohan, New York.

“As a Black creative, I’ve always been told that I must do more than my best just to be visible or have my ideas considered,” he says. “By centering on the life of a Black superhero, Torpedoboy, who fails miserably at his job of serving and protecting, I pose the question, ‘What if Black excellence itself had an identity crisis?’ Torpedoboy imagines what it might be like to be just good enough or just so. ... The rest of the world isn’t ready to handle such a situation, and Torpedoboy’s mediocrity gives way to an empty space. Perhaps this space is a good place to start over.”

IN 1994, THE 25-year-old stand-up comic Margaret Cho landed her own network series, loosely based on her life as a child of Korean immigrants. ABC settled on the title “All-American Girl” and slotted it at 8:30 p.m. as part of its Wednesday night comedy block, as the lead-in to Roseanne Barr’s “Roseanne” and Ellen DeGeneres’s “Ellen.” The network touted it as the first sitcom ever centered on an Asian American family. It wasn’t. Nearly 20 years earlier, in the fall of 1976, ABC had debuted “Mr. T and Tina,” a spinoff of “Welcome Back, Kotter” starring the Japanese American actor Pat Morita as a widower raising two children. Ratings were low and it was canceled after only five episodes. “All-American Girl” lasted longer, but barely; it was canceled at the end of its first season, after 19 episodes.

Watch a few minutes of “All-American Girl” and you can understand why it wasn’t renewed. It squanders Cho’s racy wit on bland material curdled by stereotype. Early episodes, in particular, rely on familiar culture-clash beats: squabbles between Cho’s character, also named Margaret, and her domineering mother, played by Jodi Long, who wants to fix her up with “a wonderful Korean boy”; tensions between Margaret, an underachieving college student who works part time at a cosmetics counter, and her “model minority” older brother, Stuart, a doctor, played by BD Wong. But in spite of its imperfections, one can sometimes glimpse the show that, given time, “All-American Girl” might have become. The ensemble cast is strong (the stand-up comic Amy Hill is an underutilized scene-stealer as the irreverent Grandma, a character that leans so hard into stereotype at times that she actually busts through to something real) and some of the late-season episodes experiment with unconventional storytelling structures (an episode guest-starring Cho’s then-boyfriend, Quentin Tarantino, riffs on elements of his film “Pulp Fiction,” released several months earlier).

Few mourn the death of a short-lived ’90s sitcom. Perhaps we should. When “All-American Girl” failed, it did not fail alone. Instead, networks used its lack of audience as incontrovertible evidence that American television viewers weren’t ready to watch a predominantly Asian American cast. Reflecting on the series in a 2004 interview, Cho recalled feeling the double burden of carrying a prime-time show and “holding the idea of an ethnic identity up.” It was simply too much to ask of a show that ran for some 20 minutes each week.

Another two decades passed before a network, ABC again, picked up a sitcom centered on an Asian American family, with Eddie Huang’s “Fresh Off the Boat” in 2015. (One can’t ignore the multidecade cycle — the same very nearly holds in Asian American film: 1961’s “Flower Drum Song,” followed three decades later by 1993’s “The Joy Luck Club,” followed a quarter century later by 2018’s “Crazy Rich Asians.”) “The fact that it took that long for any network to take that chance again shows you how high stakes it is for any show featuring Asian Americans to be on the air,” says Daniel Dae Kim, the 53-year-old Korean American actor, who, after standout performances on “Lost” (2004-10), “Hawaii Five-O” (2010-17) and many other projects, landed his first series-leading role, on Nat Geo’s “The Hot Zone: Anthrax,” a scientific thriller set during the post-9/11 anthrax attacks, which will begin airing in November. “We have the burden of feeling like if our shows fail, then it’s a referendum on the viability of Asian Americans as a whole.”

It’s a common topic of conversation, in private though rarely in public, among creatives of color: Can we afford to make mediocre art? Black, brown, Indigenous, East Asian and South Asian — all of us carry a burden of representation that renders our individual failures representative of the group. When minority artists make films and television programs, write novels and plays, they do so under social pressures — both explicit and perceived, from outside and from inside their communities — that shape the decisions they make as creators and affect how audiences receive their art. Mediocrity, the freedom to make average or worse material and continue to enjoy opportunities, is reserved for the few, and those mostly white, male and straight.



Margaret Cho and her TV family in a 1994 episode of "All-American Girl." From left: J. B. Quon as Eric Kim, Amy Hill as Yung-hee "Grandma" Kim, Cho as Margaret Kim, Jodi Long as Katherine Kim, Clyde Kusatsu as Benny Kim and BD Wong as Stuart Kim. Courtesy of ABC Photo Archives/Disney General Entertainment Content via Getty Images

Indeed, one of the greatest underrecognized privileges of whiteness might be the license it gives some to fail without fear. Of course, that privilege is tempered by many factors: wealth, gender and sexuality, disability, as well as geography and cultural background. Still, in the United States, mediocrity is a form of power and exclusion that's just as much a function of white supremacy as redlining and voter suppression, though it may dress itself up in the garments of meritocracy. Historically, those who defined success and guarded the gates to opportunity in American cultural industries were white — something that is changing, though far from changed. In practice, meritocracy often functions as a veneer of objectivity, disguising systemic bias based on race, class and culture: a man-made construct meant to distance the men who made it from the act of its construction.

Glance across the American cultural landscape and you'll find a growing number of people of color who have gained the right to dictate the terms of their art, from [Shonda Rhimes](#) and Jennifer Lopez, who signed big-figure development deals with Netflix, to the showrunner [Misha Green](#), whose "[Lovecraft Country](#)," canceled by HBO after one season, was nominated for 18 Emmy Awards and who signed an overall deal with Apple. All of this success, however, relies on the doctrine of the exceptional individual. For long-established communities of racial minorities and recent immigrants alike, the promise of the American dream rests in what the philosopher [Michael J. Sandel](#) terms "[the rhetoric of rising](#)": a faith, largely illusory, that you can get as far in this country as your talents will take you. You might have to work twice as hard for half as much, but you are still the master of your fate. The phrase "Black excellence," for instance, gained traction in the late 1960s, after the legal victories of the civil rights movement revealed a society still deeply entrenched in racial inequality and division. In November 1969, the activist Whitney M. Young Jr., then the head of the National Urban League, wrote an editorial with the headline "Black Excellence Can Lead to an Open American Society" in which he called upon Black Americans to fight for their own freedom through "discipline and responsible action." Violent protests, Young argues, are unpersuasive. "We must pursue Black excellence," he writes, "the special responsibility to excel: To outthink, outperform and outdo those who would deny to Black people freedom."

**'We have the burden of feeling like if our shows fail, then it's a referendum on the viability of Asian Americans as a whole,' says the actor Daniel Dae Kim.**

Black excellence, however, only works as a means of upward mobility in a society largely free of racist structures and racist people. Perhaps, as Sandel argues, the very premise of meritocratic striving is flawed. “What if the rhetoric of rising no longer inspires,” he proposes, “not simply because social mobility has stalled but, more fundamentally, because helping people scramble up the ladder of success in a competitive meritocracy is a hollow political project that reflects an impoverished conception of citizenship and freedom?” Most Americans are not ready to entertain such a bold reframing of our civil order. Indeed, people of color are often the most outspoken supporters of the hustle and grind of American success. After all, just enough of us got rewarded by following this path of hard work and determination that it only underscored the viability of the myth. How can meritocracy be a myth when your cousin or your best friend’s sister-in-law made it big by outworking white folks? How can it be a myth when a Black and, in his words, “skinny kid with a funny name” worked so hard that he ended up in the White House? When a Black and Indian American woman did the same?

In the light of these hard-won individual efforts, the concept of a salvific mediocrity seems perverse. In 1963, when James Baldwin published *“My Dungeon Shook,”* his searing and searching open letter to his teenage nephew, he did not counsel mediocrity but its opposite. “You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being,” Baldwin writes. “You were not expected to aspire to excellence: You were expected to make peace with mediocrity.” How dare we, some 60 years on, suggest making peace with mediocrity? But Baldwin could not have predicted the costs of our constant strivings, for we’ve lived to see something he could not: the psychic toll of aspiring to excellence in a society that fails to recognize and reward it even when achieved.



Dana Paresa’s *Maka’ainana* (2021). Courtesy of Dana Paresa.

“While making this illustration, I was thinking about Hawaiian people’s social roles precolonization,” she says. “‘Maka’ainana’ refers to the common people of Hawaii, whose work sustains the land and society as a whole. Before capitalism, Hawaiians were efficient in their labor and had lots of leisure time. I think about this as one of the major differences in collectivist and individualist cultures.”

The last year saw a spike in reported cases of depression and anxiety among Black and Asian Americans as both communities grappled with the pressures of Covid-19, as well as a surge in targeted racist attacks. Asian Americans are roughly three times less likely to seek mental health treatment and more likely to consider and to attempt suicide than other racial groups. Black excellence is killing us. Living up to the model minority myth is killing us.

It should be OK to be Black and mediocre, to be mediocre and brown or Asian — or, for that matter, disabled and trans and any other identity frequently subjected to extra scrutiny — and still be treated with dignity. The problem, as with so many things in American society, is white supremacy. The challenge isn't — or at least isn't only — the judgment (which itself can be biased and flawed) but that being judged as falling short in a white supremacist society means radically different things depending on one's identity. Mediocre Black or Hispanic or Asian Americans prove the rule of racial inferiority for their entire community; mediocre white people implicate only themselves.

"I want to get to the point where Joe Schmo Black guy is just safe, can be ordinary — even mediocre," says John Jennings, 50, a professor of media and cultural studies at the University of California, Riverside, and a prolific illustrator, most recently of the 2020 graphic novel adaptation of Octavia E. Butler's "Parable of the Sower." "You don't have to be a superhero. You can just be regular and get to experience whatever you want without it having to mean so much."

**'I have all these big ideas of getting rid of the way we think about ambition,' says the novelist Sanjena Sathian. 'But I'm certainly not rid of it, and I don't think that I ever will be.'**

Mediocrity gets a bad name. Properly understanding it demands attention to etymology. The Oxford English Dictionary posits that the word entered the English language through the Latin term *mediocritas*, with the primary meaning of "a middle degree of quality or quantity." Mediocrity was used in this neutral, descriptive sense for centuries. Witness, for instance, the Golden Mean (the desirable middle between two extremes), which was sometimes referred to as the Golden Mediocrity. The O.E.D. traces the word's earliest recorded use as an antonym for superiority to the late 16th century, but even then the predominant usage remained as an objective descriptor.

In the natural world, mediocrity is, in fact, a virtue in circumstances when standing out can get you killed. Darwinian natural selection is often invoked as an analogy for the survival of the fittest in human society, but it's a flawed comparison. Evolution rewards adequacy more than excellence. "As far as nature is concerned," writes the philosopher Daniel S. Milo in his book "Good Enough: The Tolerance for Mediocrity in Nature and Society" (2019), "the world of human beings has room, wide and almost boundless, for the brilliant and for the dull, the expert and the dilettante, the toiler and the idler, the champion and the mediocre. If we hail the wisdom of nature, then we must recognize that the tolerance for mediocrity is a constitutive aspect of its genius."

In society at large, mediocrity is an underappreciated gift. To be mediocre is to be adequate, which is to say not *inadequate*. For artists, having an adequate command of multiple skills only enhances the exercise of their primary abilities, which is not only advantageous but potentially transformative. We live in the era of the artist as polymath, multihyphenate creators whose strength resides in the capacity to move capably — though not always perfectly — across a range of expressive forms. Janelle Monáe sings and dances and produces and models and acts and writes books. Lin-Manuel Miranda writes and raps and acts and produces and directs. Their art is rendered powerful and entrancing through the alchemy of these disparate forms.

Mediocrity is, alternatively, a way station on the journey to excellence, a space for radical experimentation and a momentary respite from the unrelenting tug of ambition. The right to be mediocre is also the right to psychic safety that, paradoxically, produces the conditions for artists to take risks. "What really moves creativity forward is fearlessness," says Kenya Barris, 47, the creator of "Black-ish," who earlier this year left a Netflix deal to launch a joint venture studio with Viacom CBS in which he is an equity partner. "To start to do something different, you have to be fearless. It's hard to be fearless when everything you do is being watched so closely."



Lena Waithe (left) and Kenya Barris (right) as themselves in *#BlackAF*. Courtesy of Netflix.

Artists, especially artists of color, are being watched more closely than ever these days. Part of this visibility is a consequence of social media; part of it, too, is heightened scrutiny, particularly when it comes to matters of race and gender, sexuality and class, all longstanding focal points for minority artists. On May 11, 2021, Donald Glover took to Twitter — something he rarely does — to voice concern over the cultural climate. “We’re getting boring stuff and not even experimental mistakes(?) because people are afraid of getting canceled,” he wrote in a since-deleted tweet. Of course, cancel culture affects white artists as well as minority artists. The difference, though, is that the lack of critical mass of creatives of color makes the loss of one come at a greater cost. “There’s some young Black comedian out there who isn’t a master but could one day become one, but it’s really gonna be hard for him because everything he does once he starts getting a little bit of recognition is gonna be massively more scrutinized than his white counterpart,” Barris says. “Just trying to form a voice is so difficult now. And I feel like that keeps us in a box.”

In the fifth episode of the first season of his series “*#BlackAF*” (2020), Barris — who plays a fictionalized version of himself — is in a box of his own construction. He’s committed to hosting a screening for an up-and-coming Black director whose film he can’t stand. He doesn’t want to criticize a fellow Black filmmaker in public, but he also doesn’t want to compromise his own standards. This ethical tension animates the episode. The turning point comes during an exchange in Barris’s fictional writers’ room, which, like his actual writers’ rooms, is multiracial. Noting his writers’ hesitancy to speak candidly about this Black film in mixed racial company, Barris offers everyone a pass. Real talk ensues.

“Is there a freedom in being allowed to make bad movies?” a white writer asks.

“That’s what King fought for,” Barris replies, a wry smile blooming on his face.

As he often does, Barris is stirring the pot. But there’s a baseline of sincerity here as well. “It’s the most divisive piece of art that I’ve ever created,” Barris says of that episode and of “*#BlackAF*” as a whole. “And I loved it the most.” Perhaps it’s no surprise the series is also among his most criticized. In June 2020, *IndieWire* assembled a round table of Black critics to address this specific episode. Their consensus can be summed up in the words of the critic Candice Frederick: “I didn’t love it. I didn’t hate it.” Not surprisingly, Barris took note. “It was like five Black critics, and they all got together and they were like, ‘The thing that we have in common is that we hate “*#BlackAF*,” ’” he says with a chuckle. “You don’t have one difference of opinion in the group?”

Barris is all for robust criticism. He prides himself on cultivating a broad creative community whose members aren’t afraid to call things out, even — especially — when it comes to Black art. He recalls igniting one conversation among a circle of creatives with the following provocation: “Hey, can Basquiat draw? Can you show me something that he obviously drew good?” Barris’s mischievous wisdom is at work here, poking at critical consensus while also honoring Basquiat’s artistic labor by engaging with it on the level of craft rather than cool. “We can look at his paintings and be like, ‘Well, I love this,’” he continues. Then he waits a beat. “But I’m still not sure he can draw.”



Jean-Michel Basquiat, circa 1985. Courtesy of Rose Hartman/Getty Images

“Believe it or not, I can actually draw,” Basquiat once said. The artist reportedly began sketching anatomical studies around age 7, when his mother gave him a copy of “Grey’s Anatomy” to distract him as he recovered from being struck by a car while playing stickball outside their Flatbush, Brooklyn, home. Years later, when asked how he first came to understand the role of an artist, Basquiat responded that he believed it was “somebody who could draw.” “But my ideas have changed since then,” he continued. “Now I see an artist as something a lot broader than that.” His paintings and sketches testify to the breadth of his evolving vision, as well as to his conscious exercise of imperfection in his art. Basquiat cultivated an aesthetic that submerged whatever mastery he had developed in rendering human form in favor of something more idiosyncratic and expressive. “I want to make paintings that look as if they were made by a child,” he told his friend Fred Brathwaite, as quoted in [a 1988 profile by Anthony Haden-Guest](#) for Vanity Fair. The power of Basquiat’s work lies in what the Italians call “sprezzatura,” that quality of studied nonchalance, of making difficult things appear effortless. It lies, in other words, in capturing a depth of feeling only accessible through mediocrity.

Barris exalts Basquiat’s greatness and his good-enoughness all at once. He claims for Basquiat what any artist would envy: the right to create, sometimes to fail, without fear. The privilege of mediocrity that Barris has in mind is not about abdicating judgment, extinguishing aspiration or resigning oneself to low standards. It is not, in other words, mediocrity as the aim of individual works of art. Rather, it is about recognizing the value of achieving a critical mass — what Viet Thanh Nguyen termed, in [a 2018 New York Times opinion piece](#) about “Crazy Rich Asians,” an “economy of narrative plenitude” — in which no single work by a minority artist is determinative of the group. Realizing this requires the confluence of multiple factors, primary among them being a wide (and in the United States that also means white) audience grown accustomed to seeing themselves in the stories of people who may not look like them. Only a constant stream of exposure can dislodge the white norm — in the world of the imagination if not in the world itself. To achieve this, the minority communities from which these artists emerge must support, or at least not repudiate, those artists who wish to enlist themselves in crossover creation.

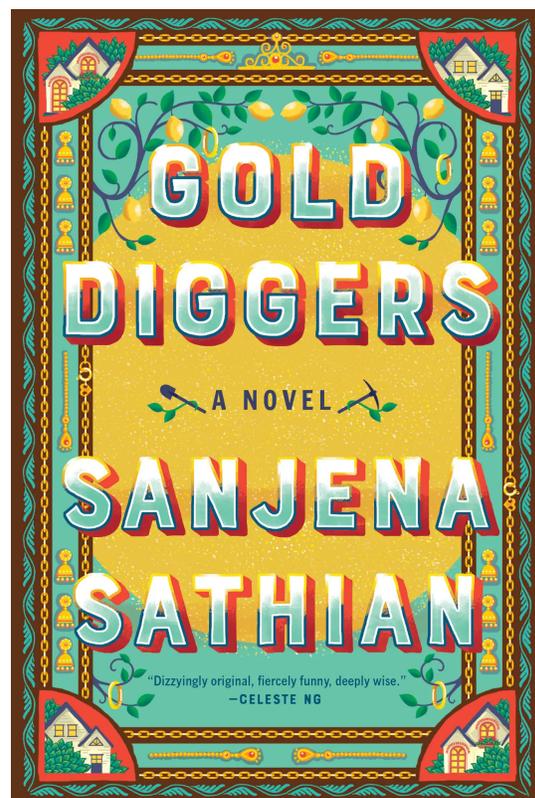
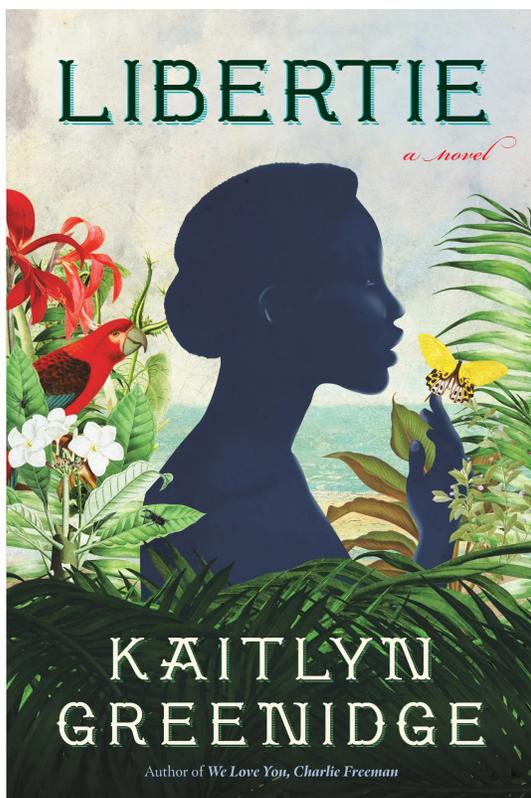
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Barris has heard the criticism from Black folks before: that his shows spend too much time explaining Black culture to non-Black audiences, that his characters are not representative of actual Black people. He remains unperturbed. “I used to wonder [why] I wanted to [work] on ‘Seinfeld,’” Barris says of his early days in the 1990s as a young writer in Hollywood. “I’d rather be on ‘Seinfeld’ than be on ‘The Game.’ Not because I felt that ‘Seinfeld’ was better, but I

understood that the way to enhance and broaden what our culture was was to be on NBC. Instead of speaking to four million people, speak to 30 million people. Start making the rhythms of our culture *the rhythms*.”

Mediocrity is a creative resource for minority artists in at least two ways. First, as a barometer: when a critical mass of opportunity means that no one work is taken as predictive. Second, as an imaginative resource: When mediocrity can be safely thematized in characters, when ambitious art is made about unambitious or even deeply flawed people, creatives of color wrest control from the narrow confines of others’ projections. The first mediocrity secures the freedom to take creative risks, to chart a path to goodness or even greatness. The second mediocrity establishes something perhaps greater still: the power to portray one’s group in full — neither as a racist trope nor as a manifestation of our ancestors’ wildest dreams.

In February 1926, the N.A.A.C.P. magazine *The Crisis* published a piece by its editor, W. E. B. Du Bois, under the headline “A Questionnaire.” Du Bois posed seven questions intended for artists — fiction writers, poets, painters and more — on how Black people should be portrayed in their work. The questions leave no doubt about where Du Bois himself stands. For instance, question six asks: “Is not the continual portrayal of the sordid, foolish and criminal among Negroes convincing the world that this and this alone is really and essentially Negroid, and preventing white artists from knowing any other types and preventing Black artists from daring to paint them?”



Almost a quarter century earlier, Du Bois had popularized the concept of “the talented tenth,” his belief that “[t]he Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men.” It was contingent, he argued, upon “the Best” of the race to “guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst.” His “Questionnaire” expanded this gospel of excellence into the imaginative realm, as well. Mediocrity or worse must be rooted out not only in life but in art. Later, in 1993, the historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham coined the phrase “politics of respectability” to describe a belief that individual moral and behavioral reform among Black Americans could counter pervasive racist images and perhaps even help fix the entire system of race inequality in the United States. In the years since, the concept of a politics of respectability has been adopted and adapted by other minority groups as a strategy for assimilation and advancement.

Kaitlyn Greenidge’s 2021 novel, “Libertie,” seems at first to follow a well-worn path of respectability politics. Greenidge drew inspiration from the story of Susan Smith McKinney Steward, one of the first Black women to earn a medical degree in the United States and the first to practice medicine (between 1870 and 1895) in the state of New York. What preoccupied her imagination, however, wasn’t the extraordinary life of McKinney Steward but the more ordinary life of her daughter, Anna. In the novel, Greenidge reimagines Anna as a character named Libertie, a college dropout who falls in love, gets married, has a child and moves with her husband to Haiti, only to have her marriage fall apart.

In Greenidge's recasting of these historical circumstances, she weaves a mother-daughter story of divergent ambitions. Catherine Sampson (Greenidge's character inspired by McKinney Steward) has a fantasy of a mother-daughter medical practice, a dream that Libertie tries to share but ultimately rejects. By centering the narrative on Libertie, Greenidge fixates on the flip side of ambition and achievement. It is a book with big emotional stakes told within the confines of a life made modest by design. "Libertie's story questions the idea that extraordinary Black people are the only ones who deserve recognition, respect, rights and understanding of their humanity," Greenidge says. "It rejects the idea that ordinary Black people are somehow beneath notice or have to prove that they deserve those things."

The most revolutionary thing a creator of color can imagine right now might just be an average character — not the first that or the first this, not a superhero or a saint. Daniel Dae Kim had this idea in mind when he decided to produce a new dramatic comedy series starring the actor and comedian Ken Jeong. "Shoot the Moon," now in development at Amazon, follows life on the other side of the American dream: After losing both his marriage and his career, Jeong's character must find meaning in failed ambition. By centering a character that plays against the model minority archetype, the series advances a broader vision of Asian American experience. "This is the story of grappling with all those things *while* being Asian American, amid these expectations of us," Kim says.

We have reached the limits of what the politics of respectability in art can achieve for minority communities. It's time to explore the full range of experience. "I think it is significantly more radical to let your characters be badly behaved," the 29-year-old novelist [Sanjena Sathian](#) says. In "[Gold Diggers](#)," her 2021 debut novel, she does just that. Her story follows two Indian American characters, Neil and Anita, living on the outskirts of Atlanta. "Gold Diggers" dilates the space of realism, introducing an alchemical magic by which Anita and Neil learn how to imbibe the ambition of others in their community by melting down pilfered gold jewelry — a wild manifestation of the psychic toll of the model minority myth on the South Asian community. "For me, the book is both kind of a loving sendup and also includes a lot of deeply critical feelings about the politics that take hold in my community," Sathian says. "Certainly, sometimes I feel hypocritical because I have all these big ideas of getting rid of the way we think about ambition, but I'm certainly not rid of it, and I don't think that I ever will be."

Perhaps the next step for creators of color lies in this: not extinguishing ambition but redirecting it toward making art that illuminates those places that might be unremarkable, imperfect, even sources of shame. "If you turn all of that energy — that ambition externalized as a need to overachieve — if you can make all that nervous energy serve in making something, then I think we're on to something," Sathian adds. "Art is so sacred for that reason."

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