

THE COLOR OF MASCULINITY:
RACIALIZED MASCULINITIES AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF
AMERICAN MANHOOD

By

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and
my sister, Hyejean Chung
for their infinite love and support.

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INTRODUCTION

The white stereotype of the Asian is unique in that it is the only racial stereotype completely devoid of manhood. Our mobility is that of an efficient housewife.

– Frank Chin

The one thing [whites] will not stand for is for a black man to be a man. And everything else is worthless if a man can't be a man.

– John Oliver Killens

Those “others” whose masculinity was problematized in their relation to hegemonic manhood were trapped by what we might call the “Goldilocks dilemma,” named after the heroine in the old fairy tale. Goldilocks, you might recall, found everything “too” much – either too hot or too cold, too big or too small – but it was never “just right.” So too for marginalized men: their expression of manhood was either insufficient or overly exaggerated as a compensation for insufficiency. It was seen always out of line, always inappropriate.

– Michael Kimmel

“The Goldilocks Dilemma”

The above epigraphs evince that a racialized male subject's ownership of his masculinity has been constantly contested within the American context. Conventional registers of masculinity dictate that a man of color cannot achieve a manhood that is “just right” as can his white hegemonic counterpart, whom dominant discourse configures as the “best possible man, the masculine ideal, the apex of civilization, [and] the greatest achievement of human evolution, progress, and history” (Bederman xi).¹ Hegemonic men

¹ Hegemonic masculinity has been succinctly defined as a culturally idealized form of manhood. Still, it is a nuanced term that includes “both a personal and a collective project, and is the common sense about breadwinning and manhood. It is exclusive, anxiety-provoking, internally and hierarchically differentiated, brutal and violent. It is pseudo-natural, tough, contradictory, crisis-prone, rich, and socially sustained” (Donaldson 645). Especially informative to my study of Asian American masculinity is Mike Donaldson's observation of how most men, even those who

have been crowned rulers over the domain in which men of color – whose expressions of manhood are never quite right – have been culturally marginalized, psychically alienated, and rendered politically impotent (Hamamoto 5). Proscribed to one extreme of the masculinity gamut as the “soft Other,” an Asian American man is branded as “inscrutable,” “childlike,” “indolent,” “always giggling,” “bowing and scraping,” “eager to please but untrustworthy,” “sexless,” “hairless,” “effeminate,” “invisible,” “mute,” “faceless,” and “passive” (Hagedorn xxii).² On the other end is his antithesis, the “too hard, too physical, too bodily” – i.e. too masculine – black man. Relegating him to “a kind of walking phallic symbol” (Baldwin 290), the hypermasculinity of an African

do not “practice” hegemonic masculinity, stand to benefit from its connection to the institutions of male dominance (646). This raises the question of Asian American men’s complicity, albeit inadvertent, in sustaining the hegemonic model even as they challenge its predominance over those who are marginalized by its dictates.

² I recognize that there are divergent representations of Asian American manhood (as well as that of African American). Such variables as one’s race, ethnicity, national origin, history, sexuality, gender, class, and age determine how the Asian American male subject in question is perceived. On the one hand, he is “lascivious and predatory” and thus poses (sexual) threats to white womanhood. Along these lines, Asian American male sexuality was something to be contained within the purview of antimiscegenation laws. The hypermasculinity of black men illustrates that being “too masculine” does not accrue social and political cachet for men of color and emasculates them instead. On the other hand, he is asexual or homosexual, which foddors public perception of his effeminacy. In addition, the contemporary “model minority” stereotype has exacerbated the preconception of Asian American men as passive and accommodating to white standards. A parallel stereotype for African American men is that of “Uncle Tom.” Yen Le Espiritu maintains that the initial construction of Asian American masculinity as “hypermasculine” was later reversed to “asexual” or “homosexual” (90). American history details how Asian American men were systematically desexualized: the exclusion of Asian women in the initial stages of Asian immigration to the United States, stringent antimiscegenation laws, the establishment of bachelor societies, etc. Notwithstanding their sliding position on the masculinity continuum, I agree with Espiritu’s contention that contemporary stereotypes of Asian American men are inclined to depict them as effeminate rather than hypermasculine.

American man, who is reduced to a mere dark, sexual, and violent body, does not translate to social prestige but paradoxically emasculates him.³

Although their “racial castration” debars full access to the socially constructed ideals of American (read: white, middle-class, heterosexual) manhood, men on the racial margins have defined their masculinity in terms parallel to those of hegemonic men: workers, providers, progenitors, protectors. Compelled to reconcile with this discrepancy, men of color have crafted strategies to survive in a “phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (Muñoz 4). This dissertation therefore attends to how men marginalized by their race unsettle the traditional contours of American manhood and interrogate the assumption that “masculinity is socially fixed, always recognizable, [and] is straight and white” (Bhabha 57). In this study of racialized masculinities, I pay particular attention to Asian American men whose approach to the dominant discourse is what José Esteban Muñoz terms “disidentification.” Disidentifying with straight white men in power, I argue, is *one* strategy among many that Asian American men utilize to “remasculinize” themselves in order to gain access to and thereby reconfigure the privileged space of American manhood.

Owing to the fact that the effeminacy of Asian American men is not biologically determined but socially manufactured within the American context, I submit that these men undertake a project of *remasculinizing* their cultural bodies by disentangling the knot of complicity among societal hierarchies of race, gender, and sexuality that

³ In *Slow Motion*, Lynne Segal points out that the “homology of the ‘black’ and the ‘feminine’ is hardly surprising” if we consider their shared experience of social subordination and cultural devaluation (180). She argues that stereotypes of black masculinity existed “precisely to provide the essential contrast with [hegemonic] ‘manliness,’ or ‘true’ manliness” (181).

emasculate them. In other words, if their experiences in America divest Asian American men of their masculinity – a loss which parallels social disenfranchisement – they then strive to recuperate their abbreviated masculinity by confronting the American majoritarian discourse through the implementation of disidentification. I do not imply that the Asian American men that fall under the purview of this project are representative of *all* Asian American men. Nor is it my intent to homogenize and thereby lessen the import of different historical contexts that enclose each ethnic group within Asian America.⁴ Instead I aim to examine Asian American men’s use of disidentification, which conveys their ambivalent relationship to conventional notions of masculinity.⁵

To this end, I read literary texts by and about Asian American men and consider how these men – both the authors and their protagonists – struggle to revise the dominant script of white male supremacy by undertaking the tactical maneuvers of disidentification. In the following chapter, I further elaborate on how Muñoz defines this term. While Muñoz’s work concentrates on the disidentification process of queer subjects, I theorize his paradigm of disidentification in regards to Asian American

⁴ Many indicate that a collective identity suppresses internal differences within a group. They claim that the insistence on rallying under a homogenous banner is as oppressive as the dictates of the dominant discourse (Medina 655). Keeping this caveat in mind, it may be important to see the unity of Asian America as more a “unity of community” rather than one of commonality (Medina 660). In any event, the diverse avenues by which Asian American masculinity has been analyzed in gender theory as well as Asian American studies attest to its heterogeneity. In the following chapter, I read Frank Chin’s *The Chickencoop Chinaman* as a paradigm of Asian American masculinity’s disidentification. In this play as well as his other fictional works, Chin employs as his main characters Asian Americans of different ethnic descent, which enables us to consider their disidentificatory practices, regardless of these men’s specific ethnic affiliation.

⁵ Asian American literary scholars that have made critical contributions to the discussion of Asian American masculinity, including Jinqi Ling, David Eng, and Richard Fung, mostly consider Asian American men who reclaim masculinity in ways that “*resist* a phallogocentric economy” (emphasis mine, Ling 312). Contextualized by the discerning observations of these critics and others, this dissertation examines Asian American men who are *actively engaged with* phallogocentric discourse so as to deconstruct it from within.

literature by close-reading Frank Chin's *The Chickencoop Chinaman* (1981), which I believe best exemplifies disidentifying Asian American men in action.

In brief, disidentification is an “ambivalent structure of feeling” that describes diverse methods by which those on the margins of the racial and sexual mainstream reconcile with the majority culture (71). Evocative of Homi Bhabha's analysis of mimicry in postcolonial subjects, disidentification is a blueprint for assaying minority subjects whose identities are structured through multiple and sometimes conflicting sites of accord and dissent with the cultural logics of heteronormativity, white supremacy, and patriarchy. Disidentifying subjects neither align themselves with nor against the dominant ideology but instead endeavor to transform it for their own cultural purposes. Taking into account the ambivalent way in which these minority subjects position themselves in relation to the mainstream, disidentification, then, is a concept that anticipates allegations of rhetorical doublespeak.

Asian American male subject's idiosyncratic method of disidentification involves parlaying the hypermasculinity of blackness, an act by which he invalidates the effete caricatures of Asian Americans and thereby reclaims his masculinity in the mainstream. Recognizing that a widespread presumption of their effeminacy derives from and is driven by the dominant discourse, Asian American men who disidentify override assimilation to the hegemony with the countercultural perspective afforded by African America. Put differently, if gender is, as Judith Butler contends, the “repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame,” then disidentifying Asian American men “do” the masculine gender by evoking black masculinity in order to expunge the historical, social, political baggage that is associated

with stereotypical perception of Asian American masculinity. By tapping into the oppositional forces of the counterculture, Asian American men escape being subsumed by a cultural logic that is self-destructive for non-hegemonic subjects. At the same time, these men understand that an absolute affiliation to the counterculture further removes them from the power base of American society. Asian American men, hence, retain ties to the dominant discourse by prioritizing the aspects of black masculinity – such as its implications of sexual virility and violence – that correspond to the conventional registers of manhood. Disidentification, in effect, allows Asian American male subjects to maintain a careful balance between the two dueling cultural spheres.

The disidentification of Asian American men is, without a doubt, convoluted. Albeit their ostensible resistance to the dominant discourse, Asian American men are not entirely divorced from the normative registers of masculinity and desire the cachet to which hegemonic men are privy.⁶ Moreover, disidentification of Asian American men entails essentializing blackness to better serve them in their endeavors; in so doing, they inadvertently elide that allegations of effeminacy and hypermasculinity are parallel strategies that the dominant discourse deploys in order to circumscribe all men of color within the fringes of society.

Hence I am most interested in delving the complexities of the disidentification process of both the Asian American protagonist and his writer. For one, do they try to downplay how they disidentify with hegemonic masculinity? If so, is this elision an intentional strategy or a genuine lack of awareness? Are these Asian American men

⁶ Gender theorists observe that men who actually correspond to the conventional registers of masculinity are small in number. Most men, nonetheless, benefit from the “institutions of male dominance” and hence are “complicit in sustaining the hegemonic model” (Chen 585, Donaldson 645).

embracing or exploiting black masculinity by essentializing blackness? How can the parodic implications of disidentification be reconciled? Do Asian American male writers italicize the issue of racial disparity among men at the risk of muting discourse about gender hierarchy? Do their polemics further alienate other people of color? The most pointed question of all: do these Asian American male writers (and their male protagonists) become a different kind of “model minority” in their reiteration of the oppressor’s logic? If Asian American men are not simply seeking to reap the fruits of patriarchal legitimacy and are indeed striving to implement a democratic definition of American manhood, then we must be more critical of the political and personal stakes involved in their remasculinization process (Chan 133).

In due course, I aim to interpose in the way we perceive men and manly ideals held within the racially stratified American society. This dissertation calls for a reconsideration of culturally defined ideals of manhood and their larger implications by elaborating on Asian American men who, in efforts to approximate the ideal, prioritize masculine expressions of those conventionally positioned in opposition to the ideal American man. In literary works by and about disidentifying Asian American men, I observe that the rubric of disidentification invariably collapses under its inherent paradox: a concomitant intent to be in and out of step with hegemonic men. If disidentification is ultimately rendered ineffective as a means to remasculinize Asian American men, it is still useful as a critical methodology with which to explore both the dangers and the empowering possibilities of occupying a third space that simultaneously intersects, transcends, and re-demarcates the binaries of black/white, in/out,

counter/culture, and masculinity/effeminacy.⁷ In the remainder of this chapter, I engage dialogically with scholars of Asian American studies and gender theory to elaborate on such issues as heteronormativity and masculinity studies, feminist opposition against ethnic homogeneity in Asian America, and the role of disidentification in the formation of a third space; I anticipate that these discussions better inform and contextualize this project.

“The Trouble with Normal”

This dissertation’s point of entry is an interrogation of American masculinity, which is constructed by and has come to emblemize American majoritarian discourse. As sanctioned agents of the hegemony, conventional men define normalcy in America. The “trouble with normal” is that normativity is then implemented as a governing system to regulate and discipline racialized subjects.⁸ Kaja Silverman suggests that it is the very preponderance of hegemonic men in American society that compels an investigation of “libidinal politics” through an analysis of masculinity; such an approach, according to Silverman, would “render null and void virtually everything else that commands general belief” (3).⁹

⁷ For the purposes of this project, I posit masculinity and effeminacy (in lieu of femininity) as an antithetical pair in that I discuss not women per se but men whose social and political status is analogous to those of women’s.

⁸ This line comes from the lyrics of Bruce Cockburn’s song; the trouble with normal, according to Cockburn, is “it always gets worse.” The discourse of normativity, which is used to regulate and discipline bodies that do not conform to societal norms, compounds the marginalization of minority subjects as normalcy is propagated as a governing concept in society.

⁹ I recognize that there have been comparable attempts from numerous camps – feminists and queer theorists, for instance – to destabilize the prioritization of white masculinity. Even within

In tandem, the growing popularity of men's studies in recent years provides fertile ground in which to reconsider American masculinity. R. W. Connell observes how masculinity has become

a popular topic across the advanced capitalist world, especially in the United States. Those of us who had been trying for a long time to call attention to this issue have watched [...] as books on masculinity climbed bestseller lists, television talk shows wrestled with the theme, and conferences, "men's gatherings," magazine and newspaper articles on masculinity multiplied. (ix)

As Connell points out, it has become quite trendy to talk about all things male, and men's studies are now established in popular and academic discourses.¹⁰

Even so, mainstream discussions about men have hesitated to broach issues that challenge the notion of hegemonic masculinity, now the universal referent, which is too

the fiction of traditional masculinity, we have encountered white men (e.g. F. Scott Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway, John Updike's Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom, etc.) whose divergence from the norm challenges its stability. Nonetheless, Kaja Silverman, whose *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* is an important precursor to my project, argues that examining "deviant" masculinities – whether their "deviance" derives from sexual or racial incongruity – is expressly effective in diluting the primacy of conventional male subjectivity; the mere existence of deviating masculinities (and our recognition of their presence) represents a tacit challenge to hegemonic masculinity and all that it connotes (1). Building on Silverman's work, which mostly elaborates on men marginalized by their sexuality, my project weighs in on race and gender in evaluating works by and about Asian American men and their disidentificatory acts.

¹⁰ The division between academic and popular discourse is exemplified by the discrepancy between the two largest groups that represent the men's movement. While there are several distinct clusters within the movement, Christopher Harding's essay, "What's All This About a Men's Movement," designates the "Mythopoetic Branch" and the "Profeminist/Gay Affirmative Branch" as the two largest. Spearheaded by the influential men's movement guru Robert Bly, the former, notes Harding, is "[by] far the biggest and fastest-growing segment of the movement" (xiii). According to Michael A. Messner, Bly's mythopoetic men's movement had, "for all intents and purposes, become *the men's movement in the popular discourse*" (italics mine, 8). Mythopoetic leaders preached to thousands of men – most of them white, middle-aged, and heterosexual professionals – to reunite with their "inner warrior," the "hairy man." On the other hand, Harding observes that the "Profeminist/ Gay Affirmative Branch," which promotes a renunciation of sexism, homophobia, and racism, has a "[virtual] monopoly on the content of the *university men's studies courses and academic journals*" (italics mine, xiv). Not only is this division between mainstream and academic discourses disconcerting, but it also prompts allegations that the men's movement and men's studies are still under the domain of hegemonic masculinity, blind to the struggles of men on the margins.

easily applied wholesale to groups that markedly differ in regards to race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class. Scholarly approaches to masculinity have instigated the deconstruction of the monolithic American manhood and acknowledged that within any given culture, there are various and competing masculinities yielding multiple ways to be a man. However, not enough productive conversations have taken place regarding various subordinated (in regards to race, class, and/or sexuality) men whose ownership of masculinity is still tenuous. Within academia, non-hegemonic masculinities are still commonly clustered together and collectively relegated to an afterthought.

Clearly, traditional understanding of American manhood has been disposed to elide the presence of American men who are marginalized by their race. Mike Donaldson observes that in spite of its social preponderance, hegemonic masculinity is inherently a “fragile” construct, precariously balancing on its strict demarcation from femininity, homosexuality, and effeminacy. Donaldson’s observation about the instability of hegemonic masculinity further informs my study of non-hegemonic men: it promotes a deeper insight into what is at stake for the power elite to stringently police and preserve the border between the core and the periphery. It becomes critical for these purveyors of the dominant discourse to take great measures to emasculate Asian and African American men because when they are circumscribed within the site of alterity, these men of color cannot threaten to “unravel” the construct of American manhood (646).

Moreover, the marginalization of Asian American men has been extended to their literary productions, which have been kept at bay from priority status within and beyond

(Asian) American studies.¹¹ In view of hegemonic masculinity's resolve and efficacy in suppressing Asian American male voices in the public sphere, this dissertation asks that we now bring critical attention to bear upon accounts of Asian American men who engage the exclusive fraternity of hegemonic men via disidentification with the aim to unravel the monolithic construct of and thereby reconfigure American manhood in the twentieth century.¹²

¹¹ Frank Chin and his exponents maintain that the immense popularity of Asian American women writers among mainstream readers has effected an under-representation of Asian American men, which precipitated as well as reinforced the feminization of Asian Americans. Asian American men are wont to be debarred from the American national identity more so than women, whose social reception has been tolerated, particularly if these women embody the conventional stereotype of hypersexuality. While the inclusion of Asian American women is admittedly limited, they are still privy to a social status which is foreclosed to their male counterparts who have been ablated from the national body as a result of a host of legal, socioeconomic and cultural forces. Accordingly, mainstream America is still more likely to perceive Asian American men as foreigners (i.e. Asians). In the rare case that an Asian American man is figured as "native," he is more often than not coded as inherently flawed to be a "real" man (Locke 2 – 3). For instance, his sexuality is unconventional or his self-sufficiency falls short. All told, Asian American men have been regarded as not quite American, not quite men.

¹² In *Manliness and Civilization*, Gail Bederman delineates the difference in meaning among "manhood," "manliness," and "masculinity" (5 – 19). Bederman observes the difficulty in demarcating these terms; first of all, the definition of "manhood" from which the two subsequent terms derive has varied according to time, place, and context. In addition, "manhood" remains an ambiguous and frequently misunderstood concept in that it subsumes disparate assumptions about its meaning. In her book, Bederman traces the history of "manliness" and "masculinity" to the turn of the century. She indicates that in the late 19th century, "manliness" encompassed a moral dimension. In other words, it denoted "character or conduct worthy of a man, [comprising] all the worthy, moral attributes which the Victorian middle class admired in a man [...] for example, sexual self-restraint, a powerful will, a strong character" (18). On the other hand, "masculinity" was devoid of moral or emotional meaning. It was used to refer to *any* characteristics that all men had, and consequently, "'masculine,' more frequently than 'manly,' was applied across class or racial boundaries" (18). By definition, *all* men were masculine although all may not have been necessarily manly. However, Bederman suggests that as the shift from "manliness" to "masculinity" took place, the definition of the latter began to evolve in order to encompass new connotations. By mid-twentieth century, "masculinity" had developed into the "mix of 'masculine' ideals more familiar to twentieth-century Americans – ideals like aggressiveness, physical force, and male sexuality" (19). Thus, the transition from "manliness" to "masculinity" was that from an "essence" to a "performance" of manhood; one's masculinity had to be proven not through its restraint but by the "acts and appearance of the body" (Kimmel 120). Notwithstanding the different undertones of each term, I still use "manhood," "manliness," and

In calling for a closer inspection of Asian American men and their disidentificatory practices, it is far from my intent to undertake a gratuitous interrogation of masculinity, stifle women's voices, or re-establish the omnipotence of masculine discourse within Asian America. In *Assimilating Asians: Gendered Strategies of Authorship in Asian America*, Patricia P. Chu suggests that Asian American male and female writers deploy differing "strategies of authorship" and generate distinct "narratives of self-formation, in addressing [...] assimilation" (4). Chu contends that even though there are occasional overlaps between the "gendered strategies" of authorship, Asian American men are more inclined to "internalize and adapt existing paradigms centering on male subjectivity," while women embrace strategies that women writers of others races have employed and which are better positioned to challenge and deconstruct hegemonic discourse (17 – 8).

While I agree with Chu's observation that there are divergent strategies of authorship, I find it problematic that she seems to neatly superimpose the resistance/accommodation binary over that of gender. Considering that recent trends in Asian American studies have shown to give preferentiality to literary works that espouse the resistant model, I have great reservations about Chu's intent to frame Asian American male narratives within the assimilationist paradigm; doing so is likely to demerit these works as well as deepen the schism between Asian American feminist scholars and cultural nationalists. I propose that in filtering literary works by Asian American men through the rubric of disidentification, we can achieve a more nuanced reading of what can be (mis)interpreted as an accommodationist impulse of Asian American male

"masculinity" as interchangeable terms as I believe their meanings are still conflated and are thus used synonymously in masculinity studies.

subjects. Along these lines, I find it critical to review how Asian American men challenge and modify the doxy of hegemonic masculinity even as they fetishize its sway over the “whole of our world” (Silverman 1). Moreover, I anticipate that a critical descant about racial and sexual hierarchies within the purview of masculinity studies will facilitate my inquiry of masculinity as a “political order” and preclude this project’s impedance by a “paralyzing politics of guilt,” which inevitably manifests when hierarchical orders are considered between the sexes (Tacey 50).

The Gender War in Asian America

James D. Riemer observes that literary works best reflect the changing ideals of masculinity because they provide an easily accessible format by which readers can examine the “multiplicity of ideals of American manhood, some of which at times conflict with one another” (290 –1). Literature, then, is a constructive site for critiquing myths and fictions about manhood, enabling its readers to trace not only the trajectory of how predominant ideals of masculinity have evolved, but more significantly, how minority masculinities are implicated in this process.

In this dissertation, I peruse literary works by Asian American male writers, who express, both explicitly and implicitly, their determination to disidentify with hegemonic discourse. These works substantiate that due to their transitional position within the interstices of cultural power structures, Asian American men maintain, at best, an ambiguous relationship with conventional registers of American masculinity. Occupying both the “center of the periphery and the periphery of the center,” Asian American men are marginalized in relation to hegemonic masculinity but are in a position of authority in

relation to Asian American women; according to sociologist Anthony S. Chen, Asian American men use their vantage in the gender hierarchy as a trump card to offset their compromised position in the racial hierarchy and parley a “hegemonic bargain” with mainstream definitions of manhood to facilitate their remasculinization (585).¹³

Feminist scholars have voiced concerns about the rise in the popularity of masculinity studies; they maintain that a further theorization of masculinity is gratuitous in that American culture is already heavily embedded within a masculine discourse. Within the cultural domain of Asian America, the gender divide has become manifest as dissonance between feminism and nationalism, which are positioned as oppositional

¹³ Anthony S. Chen has examined Asian American men’s problematic approach to the gender hierarchy. Asian American men exploit their centrality in the gender hierarchy, which is usually limited to their relationship with Asian American women. And they use their authority over Asian American women as a trump card to recompense their “racial castration.” Asian American men’s dominant position (in relation to Asian American women) enables them to strike a “hegemonic bargain” with the conventional registers of masculinity, which ultimately allows them to remasculinize themselves across-the-board. Chen indicates that there are four possible gender strategies – compensation, deflection, denial, and repudiation – that Asian American men can implement: compensation, which involves “undermin[ing] negative stereotypes [of Asian American men] by meeting the ideals of hegemonic masculinity”; deflection, which “diverts attention away from self-perceived stereotypical behavior”; denial wherein he “rejects the existence of stereotypes or their applicability to himself”; and finally, repudiation, by which he “disavows the cultural assumptions about masculinity that make such stereotypes possible” (585, 591). A hegemonic bargain takes place, according to Chen, in instances of compensation, deflection, and denial, all of which an Asian American man strategizes to obtain masculinity by “consciously trading on, or unconsciously benefiting from” the privileges of his gender; this mechanism, he says, is a bargain because it involves exchanging advantages of one social order (gender) for those of another (race) and it is hegemonic because it draws on and reiterates social perception of Asian American men as inferior (604). Chen indicates that repudiation is the only way to avoid participating in this hegemonic bargain, which I consider both unsatisfactory for and disadvantageous to Asian American men. Nevertheless, Frank Chin’s paradigmatic play, *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, anticipates a hegemonic bartering that coincides with repudiating normative definitions of masculinity. While Chen’s extensive research is informative, its inability to imagine tension, overlap, and convolution among the different strategies limits us from elaborating on Asian American men’s denunciation and fetishization of masculinity.

forces (Cheung 174).¹⁴ Cultural nationalists for one indicate that the history of Asian America validates its men's anxiety over the feminization of its cultural corpus. For instance, even though the number of male immigrants substantially exceeded that of female immigrants for almost a century, the stories told by the "woman warrior," the "Nisei daughter," and the women of the "Joy Luck Club" eclipsed the male narratives of Chinatown bachelors, immigrant laborers, and their "paper sons." Jinqi Ling remarks that perhaps it was not "illogical" for Asian American men to feel "betrayed" by feminist critiques of patriarchal oppression in their own ethnic community because they considered these "attacks" as analogous to majority culture's campaign to vilify men of color (320 – 1). Furthermore, while mainstream America was inclined to emasculate, stereotype, and exclude Asian American men from the national body, it adopted a more inclusive approach to Asian American women (Li 222.n.1). With only its women left visible in the public eye, Asian America became more susceptible to being classified as feminine.

Feminist scholars contradict the claims of cultural nationalists by maintaining that Asian American history was "normalized as masculine, with women's experiences,

¹⁴ Scholars of minority studies observe that feminist scholars are inclined to be in a dilemmatic situation of "expos[ing] the problems of male privilege" and "unit[ing] with men to contest the overarching racial ideology that confines them both" (Espiritu 104). Seemingly eliding this quandary that Asian American feminists confront, they have been charged of "racial infidelity" when they discuss the ethnic patriarch's oppression over Asian American women. Along these lines, Asian American feminists have accused cultural nationalists of downplaying Asian American men's perpetuation of sexism. Almost identical to the complaints leveled against black female critics by their male counterparts, cultural nationalists suggest that feminists are complicit in disfiguring Asian American men by "putting their gender before their race, their (white) feminism before their family, and inventing historical fictions that serve a feminist rather than a nationalist agenda" (duCille 559). Regardless of the in/accuracy of their criticism, we must recognize that Asian American men may have inadvertently emphasized racial oppression (and minimized the prevalence of gender domination), which undermines their ability to see themselves as both oppressed and oppressors (Espiritu 114).

contributions, and standpoints omitted, distorted, discounted, or rendered invisible” (Okiihiro 65). As a result, they have been critical of Asian American men who, in seeking the “rewards of patriarchal legitimacy,” prioritize the subversion of racial hierarchy over the patriarchal social order (Kim, “Such Opposite Creatures,” 75). They voice caveats against promoting a “heroic dispensation [...] albeit under the guise of Asian panopoly” and against using male aggression to subvert the dominant discourse which, feminist scholars argue, puts Asian American men at the risk of re-creating themselves in the image of their hegemonic oppressors (Cheung 244).¹⁵ For example, King-Kok Cheung criticizes Asian American male academics and writers comprising cultural nationalists (and accuses Frank Chin and the other *Aiiieeeee!* editors, in particular) for a “selective and tendentious invocation of [an] ethos [which] echoes Euramerican ideologies of masculinity” (177).

Despite its discerning insights, Cheung’s critique does not consider the *specific* way in which Chin and other Asian American male authors negotiate phallogentric discourse. Asian American men aim to simultaneously unsettle and retain the “problematic object” – dominant ideology that reinforces hierarchies of race and gender – so that they may access the “energy that [is] produced by contradictions and ambivalences” (71). It is this conflicted endeavor, which Cheung elides, that establishes Asian American men as disidentifying subjects. In addition, the conflict between

¹⁵ According to Jinqi Ling, most Asian American writing did not articulate explicit criticism of sexism as a social and political issue before the advent of the Civil Rights and feminist movements in the 1960s. Around mid-1970s, the issue of gender began to garner critical attention in relation to consideration of identity politics in Asian American literature; however, gender was viewed mainly as a feminist issue, “as if men can make full sense of their experience outside the social matrix of gender and, conversely, as if women’s articulation naturally constitutes their subjectivity irrespective of other historical considerations” (313).

nationalists and feminists is most problematic in its implicit suggestion of gender opposition as a “permanent feature of Asian American social relations” (Ling 322).

The contention between these gendered approaches to Asian America makes the stakes all the more higher to coordinate a critical congress, wherein we can pursue a dialogue with Asian American men alongside sharing the concerns of Asian American women. In so doing, we can grapple more extensively with issues of gender, which affords a more “contested, self-reflexive, and politically engaged” site for unpacking Asian American identity (Ling 313). I anticipate that converging the respective analyses from the opposite ends of the gender spectrum will be conducive to a critical examination of Asian American identity, history, and culture. Through a concerted endeavor, we can dismiss the misperception that a gender war is a pivotal issue in Asian America. Along these lines, King-Kok Cheung proposes a compromise; she suggests that Asian American men “refrain from seeking antifeminist solution to racism” (244) and that Asian American women employ a dual approach to hegemonic discourse by striving to destabilize patriarchy within their own cultural domain while concomitantly criticizing the marginalization of their male counterparts. In reconciling these divergent gendered approaches, we can ensure that a “source of unity and solidarity” in Asian America does not become a basis of “in-fighting” (Medina 656).

Feminists have also pointed out that their objectives for liberation require not only the rediscovery and revaluation of women’s culture, but also the critique of men’s culture as well. For example, black feminist critics have insisted on an increased focus on the depiction of black men by black male writers. bell hooks, for one, writes:

If we are ever to construct a feminist movement that is not based on the premise that men and women are always at war with one another, then we must be willing

to acknowledge the appropriateness of complex critical responses to writing by men even if it is sexist. Clearly women can learn from writers whose work is sexist, even be inspired by it, because sexism may be simply one dimension of that work. Concurrently, fiercely critiquing the sexism does not mean that one does not value the work. (*Yearning* 66)

To some extent, this project is a response to the call of feminist critics of color (like Cheung, hooks, and duCille) who prompt others to “traverse gender lines” in order to further obviate the opposition between men and women of color (Cheung 174).¹⁶

Beyond the Binary: Disidentifying Asian American Subject’s Construction of a Third Space

Social hierarchies of race, gender, and class are structured and upheld by sets of mutually exclusive binaries – white/black, male/female, bourgeois/working-class, citizen/alien (Espiritu 108). Asian Americans’ tenuous relationship with the hegemony fundamentally evidences their exclusion from mainstream America and has been exploited to oppress other people of color. Nonetheless, Asian Americans’ interstitial position as “middlemen” convolutes the dualism of social hierarchies.

According to Yen Le Espiritu, Asian Americans have been historically situated as *both* “like black” *and* “like white,” as well as *neither* black *nor* white. Similarly, Asian women have been both hyperfeminized and masculinized, and Asian men have been both hypermasculinized and feminized. And in social class and cultural terms, Asian Americans have been cast both as the “unassimilable alien” and the “model minority.” (108 – 9)

As Espiritu observes, coinciding with the pleasure of dual inclusion is the danger of dual exclusion. Asian Americans have, at once, exploited and been exploited by their position

¹⁶ In tandem, I aim to avoid recent trends to systematically mute male voices within academic discourse, which is informed by political correctness of anti-sexist and, more recently, anti-homophobic discourse. I hope to intervene in discussions of literary texts by and about Asian American men, which contextualize possible sexist, racist, or homophobic content without censoring them.

as the “buffer race” in the upkeep of the status quo which, admittedly, has provoked tension between Asian and African Americans. At times, Asian Americans forfeit their conflict-ridden “middling position” and revert to the binary logic. Ceding that it encompasses limitations, the interstitiality of Asian Americans, I argue, allows them to transform the antagonisms created by the convoluted dialectic of race, class, and gender into a positive force. Subsequently their in-betweenness facilitates the construction of a third space, which intersects, transcends, and re-defines the binaries of American society.

In tandem, this dissertation calls attention to minority-minority relations by re-evaluating Asian American masculinity’s disidentificatory practices, which involves prioritizing black expressions of manhood. Taking such an approach to the racial divide in America corrugates “what’s still a national landscape of Manichean race relations” (Eng 24). A common misunderstanding about African Americans and Asian Americans is that the experiences of these two minority groups are vastly different. In addition, the former is typically perceived as the most antagonistic minority and the latter as the most accommodating. There are, nevertheless, substantial records of parallels in their historical experiences in the social and political arenas as well as of the major part black culture has played in the formation of an Asian American ethos; black activism against institutionalized racism in the 1960s initiated similar movements in the Asian American community and inspired Asian Americans to assert themselves as a people of color (Wei 42).¹⁷ Despite clear evidence of the commonality and overlap between the historical and

¹⁷ Yuri Kochiyama, an Asian American activist, acknowledges that black activists such as Malcolm X, informed Asian Americans to question the pressure to conform to hegemonic culture

sociopolitical experiences of Asian and African Americans, the prevalent misconception of segregation between these two groups prompts scholars of multicultural studies to elide the parallels and interaction between these minority groups. Instead, much of the scholarly attention has been placed on each group's respective relationship to hegemonic culture.

At the same time, I do acknowledge the concerns of those who find it ill-advised to forge uncritical alliances among distinctly different racial and ethnic movements.¹⁸ There is much to be said about a “self-defeating *homogenizing* tendency [which] treats *all differences as the same*” (Medina 656). Keeping this caveat in mind, I observe that an Asian American male subject's use of a disidentificatory strategy is contingent on his recognition of the differences between expressions of African American and Asian American masculinities. Therefore, reading the racial margins through the rubric of disidentification does not facilitate forging a perfunctory alliance within racialized masculinity but provides a constructive site in which to discuss the different and shared aims of people of color.

More specifically, an extensive review of minority-minority relations (in addition to a continuous critique of minority-majority relations) intervenes in the fields of Asian

(134). In a word, black activism offered a method by which Asian Americans could claim an ethnic identity distinct from an assimilationist model.

¹⁸ It certainly is injudicious to sanction erasure of cultural differences within and thereby homogenize the multicultural site of the racial margins. Significant are the connections that have been forged between Asian and African Americans. At the same time, we should not elide the critical differences between the two groups, which historically have instigated tension between them. Furthermore, there is hardly uniformity *within* each group. For example, African Americans have been divided in their position towards the passing of the Chinese Exclusion act of 1882 (Hellwig 32), the internment of Japanese Americans during WWII (Greenberg 22), and most recently, the growing conflict with Korean Americans in the inner-cities.

American and African American literature. In lieu of perpetuating the “intellectual habits” of an American literary tradition that imagines ethnoracial groups as “discrete and preformed communities,” this project addresses the “Afro-Asian” conjunction within American literature (Jones and Singh 5) with the aim of proposing useful ways in which to bring these two fields into dialogue with one another. With its focus on literary interpretations of relationships between African Americans and Asian Americans, this project will differentiate itself from previous endeavors that define this relationship in terms of contention and dissonance and explore the symbiotic (and sometimes parasitic) nature of this conjunction.¹⁹ In due course, this dissertation’s dedication to exploring the third space between two extremes – e.g. male/female, cultural nationalism/feminism, assimilation/resistance, identification/counteridentification, black/white – enables me to become unfettered from such binary logic.

To a certain extent, this dissertation moves away from previous critical attempts to reappropriate masculinity for Asian American men by repositioning them in a cultural context of Asia/Asian America. Some critics are too eager to provide extensive details about Asian culture in order to explain how certain acts, considered unmanly by *American* standards, are quite the norm according to *Asian* standards. Others offer what they perceive as positive models for Asian American men; Cheung’s poet-scholar is one such prototype. Chin invokes Kwan Kung, or the warrior scholar, as an emblem of Asian

¹⁹ For example, Kwang Chung Kim’s *Koreans in the Hood* is a collection of essays which, all to varying degree, discuss how three metropolises – Chicago, New York City, and Los Angeles – have become sites of discord and racial strife. Many contributors characterize the relationship between Korean Americans and African Americans as that of dissent and conflict and underscore its significance as the “new urban crisis.”

masculinity to which Asian American men should aspire. By and large, I refrain from exploring archetypes of Asian masculinity which may, perhaps, be more obliging to Asian American men in that these models do not overlap seamlessly with mainstream America's definition of manliness.²⁰ This work, instead, evaluates (as well as embraces the shortcomings of) how Asian American men interrogate, reconcile with, and extenuate the prevalent definitions of American masculinity.²¹

Race-ing Gender, Gendering Race

Asian American experiences challenge the binary oppositions that bolster power structures in the United States and as a result, shed light on how the diverse hierarchies of race, gender, and class reinforce one another. In their groundbreaking anthology of Asian

²⁰ According to Robert Ruhlmann, two ideals of manhood – the scholar and the warrior – have coexisted in Asian cultures, heavily influenced by the Confucius philosophy. The former prioritizes knowledge and learning whereas the latter valorizes courage and military prowess. As a result, two distinct moral codes were developed for each ideal; a “scholar/gentleman” does not resort to violence because he lives by the maxim that “a superior man only moves his mouth but not his hand (i.e. he does not stoop to physical combat).” Conversely, a “warrior” does not brook disrespect because “he who does not take revenge is not a superior man.” Though contradictory, both codes have served as moral guidelines and enabled an individual to be flexible in following different moral advice according to different circumstances (i.e. during times of war or peace). Unlike American culture, which often advocates an ideal of manhood that is virile and aggressive, there is greater emphasis on intellectual advancement in addition to martial training in Asian cultures. Refer to Ruhlmann’s “Traditional Heroes in Chinese Popular Fiction” for further details.

²¹ It is worthwhile to consider the ways in which U.S. history intervened in the initial perceptions of Asian men, which transposed and consequently eradicated their histories and masculine traditions. For example, immigration policies and miscegenation laws encouraged formations of “bachelor societies.” Asian immigrants’ contributions to the building of the first transcontinental railroad (1862-1869) and their work on the Hawaiian sugar plantations were elided; italicized in their places were the droves of Asian immigrants who were employed in domestic positions – generally considered women’s work – to which they were given more ready access. Undoubtedly, the recurrence of passive, obedient, humble and effeminate Asian American men in the popular American imagination has underlined their disempowerment in the American polity. This project is informed by issues that Asian immigrant histories address and I acknowledge that, to a certain extent, an investigation of Asian masculinity and its process of transmutation can be useful. This dissertation, however, is invested in grappling with how Asian American men parley normative registers of American masculinity, which has undermined their claims to masculinity.

American literature, the *Aiiieeee!* editors criticize how racial stereotypes dovetail with sexual ones in the mainstream construction of Asian American manhood. Elaine Kim concurs that gender and race politics cannot function effectively in isolation from each other because the dominant discourse “plaits” them together: “[I]n the peculiarly American tangle of race and gender hierarchies, the objectification of Asian Americans as permanent outsiders has been tightly plaited with our objectification as sexual deviants” (“Such Opposite Creatures” 69). Owing to the intersectional politics of race and gender in Asian American literature, numerous critics have enunciated a need to undertake a pluralistic approach to deconstructing the “multiple antagonisms” of race, class, and gender because these are battles that cannot be fought independently (Medina 667). R. W. Connell maintains that gender is “one way of structuring social practice in general [and is] unavoidably involved with other social structures. [G]ender ‘intersects’ – better, interacts – with race and class” (75). Thus a consideration of race and ethnicity cannot but include a consideration of gender since race directly shapes the ways in which certain masculinities are gendered.²² Michael Moon italicizes that considering race and gender is important in that they are categories that “both construct and deconstruct” one another. Therefore a concurrent analysis of race and gender facilitates “destabiliz[ing]

²² Critics have indicated that employing such gendered terms as feminization and emasculation in regards to the experience of marginalized men is problematic in that it presupposes masculine superiority (Cheung 174). Jinqi Ling, on the other hand, points out the limitations of such criticism in its partiality for linguistic or philosophical interpretations. He contends that these terms must be considered within specific social and political contexts (313). Noting, in particular, the inconsistent attitude towards Asian American male sexuality – constructed either as “passive/languorous” or “primitive/kinky” – Ling enunciates that feminization and emasculation does not “overlap seamlessly” when situated within social and political framework. He delineates emasculation as a term that is more indicative of the “*overall* social consequence of the displacement of Asian men’s subject position,” and feminization as “*one specific form* of Asian American men’s racial gendering” (italics mine, 314).

both] as fixed categories, [unmasking them] as complex, contradictory, changing, malleable, and manipulable – the stuff of literature” (4).

Yen Le Espiritu suggests that recognizing the interconnectedness of race, gender, and class is to understand that “the conditions of our lives are connected to and shaped by the conditions of others’ lives” (118). Thus, comprehending the nexus between the power structures is to “explore, forge, and fortify cross-gender, cross-racial, and cross-class alliances” (119). In this vein, this project relies on a multi-axis approach in theorizing texts by Asian American men as they are sites of complex intersectional race and gender politics. Racialized masculinity is paradoxically positioned at both the center and the margins of countervailing hierarchies, rendering men of color, according to Anthony S. Chen, the most salient in studying masculinity (589). I will therefore research the intersecting articulations of race and gender identity in writings authored by these racialized men, and will move toward an understanding of the complex antagonisms generated by these texts. I hope to capture, albeit partially, the dynamics at the nexus of gender and racial concerns in contemporary Asian American male writers. This dissertation draws much needed critical attention to how Asian American men reconcile with their extrusion from the dominant ideal of manhood by focusing on discussions emerging from feminism, men’s studies, gender and race theories, and Asian American literary criticism.

Chapter Outline

This project interrogates racialized masculinity’s disidentificatory practices by reading literary works written by and about Asian American men. It also puts into

perspective the crisis of masculinity that occurred at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of twentieth century, when hegemonic masculinity attempted to “redefine and rechannel the expressions of a distinctly masculine identity in a culture where the alternatives for such expression were also being altered and limited by changes in the culture” (Reimer 294). In the ensuing chapters, I examine the way racialized masculinities vacillate between aggravating and neutralizing conventional masculinity. In particular, I read Asian American men against the dominant discourse of American manhood in order to examine how they simultaneously perpetuate and unsettle traditional indexes of American masculinity.

The core concerns of traditional masculinity studies, such as sexuality, violence, paternity, patriarchy, and work, are determined by how men define their masculinity.

Stimpson notes that:

[T]o be “masculine” is to have a particular psychological identity, social role, cultural script, place in the labor force, and sense of the sacred. [...] “Real men” should define themselves [...] in three ways. First, they earn money in the public labor force and support their families through that effort. Next, they have formal power over women and the children in those families. Being a man means being stronger than women and children. Finally, they are heterosexual. They sleep with women whom they dominate and bully the homosexuals whose desires openly surge elsewhere. (qtd. in Brod xii)

Also recalling Reimer’s observations about how American men, after undergoing the crisis of masculinity, strived to achieve a sense of manliness in a “commercial, urban world of diminishing opportunities” (293), I situate my discussion of Asian American masculinity within the normative registers of masculinity as figured by urban, heterosexual fathers, lovers, workers, and warriors, the main tropes in traditional men’s studies upon which my work offers a revisionary uptake. With the ultimate aim of reconfiguring notions of American masculinity, I purposely place Asian American men

within the traditional indexes of masculinity in order to investigate how racialized masculinities “disidentify” with hegemonic masculinity. The methodology of this project enables me to address shared concerns of masculinity studies as well as forge connections between African American and Asian American literature. Each chapter begins by situating the literature in a historical framework in order to consider the complexities of history and how it bears upon literary productions.

In the first chapter, “Dissin’ the Hegemony: Frank Chin and the Disidentifying Asian American Male Subjectivity,” I elaborate on José Esteban Muñoz’s definition of disidentification and examine how the Asian American male subject utilizes this rubric by close-reading Frank Chin’s *The Chickencoop Chinaman* (1981). The cultural politics of Chin’s paradigmatic text provides an initial case study of how the theorized process of disidentification is enacted by Asian American male subjects. In order to reclaim their sense of manhood, Chin’s two protagonists, Tam Lum and Blackjap Kenji, disidentify with hegemonic masculinity by privileging black expressions of manhood. In so doing, they essentialize blackness and reinforce stock images of Asian American women. The problematic corollaries of the Asian American male subject’s remasculinization, hence, compel a reconsideration of the troubling term of “masculinity.”

Chapter two, “Work Makes the Man: the Melanization of an ‘Oriental Yankee’ in Younghill Kang’s *East Goes West*,” explores labor, physicality, and masculinity through an analysis of Kang’s *East Goes West: the Making of an Oriental Yankee* (1937). Connell observes a tacit agreement in society that presumes being a breadwinner is a core part of being a man; thus definitions of masculinity are “deeply enmeshed in the history of institutions” – e.g. labor markets – “and of economic structures” (28 – 9). Examining

racialized masculinities in the workplace, then, is a logical point of departure since black migration and Asian immigration exacerbated the crisis of traditional masculinity. In addition, delegation of labor becomes a site of dissension between working class men of both races. Kang's novel takes place in Harlem, "the Negro Capital of the World," in the early twentieth century. Kang's protagonist Chungpa Han discovers that he must not only become an "Oriental Negro" in order to survive a harsh immigrant reality, but that he must become a black woman (Knadler 13). Chungpa is confined to domestic labor in the home, a role usually assigned to black women. Rather than "dissociating [... himself from] the 'black' and 'feminine' as the rite of passage into the fraternity of white citizenry" (Nelson 11), Chungpa "refuses such a practice of dis-identification" (Knadler 13). Stephen Knadler indicates that in so doing, Chungpa acknowledges that his "feminization is the price he must pay in order to fit into American society. [...] Rather than objectifying women to re-capture his 'phallus,' Kang figures this scene of his being 'turned' into a 'black woman' into a self-ironic joke that allows for the common economic strivings and anger at discrimination on the part of both black women and Asian men" (13). Chungpa's acquiescence may, on one hand, be a compromise of his masculinity, but he accrues subjectivity in his ability to unsettle the notions of gender and race.

George Jum also emerges as a significant character in his familiarity with Harlem and its denizens. George is a great romantic, an enthusiastic writer of love letters, and a connoisseur of Harlem nightlife. Although most reviewers have tended to overlook George as a minor character, I re-read George under the rubric of disidentification, which redeems him as a character deserving of critical attention. It is my contention that

George, in comparison to Chungpa, offers a more successful model of an Asian American male subject's employment of disidentification. By stylizing his body with black masculinity, George defines a new type of subjectivity that not only replicates but revises the American narrative of manhood.

Chapter Three, "'Papa's Maybes': Fathers Lost and Found in Gus Lee's *China Boy* and *Honor and Duty*," examines the author's ambivalence towards Asian American fathering in the formation of Asian American masculine subjectivity. Rife with father figures for young Kai Ting, Lee's two semi-autobiographical novels are constructive sites in which to parse the body paternal in relation to the masculinization of a "China boy." In lieu of K. F., his defunct Asian immigrant father, Kai relies on his boxing coaches at the local YMCA and his neighborhood friend Toussaint (Toos) LaRue, in particular, to survive a troubled childhood in the black ghetto. In *China Boy* (1991), Kai comes to prioritize black expressions of masculinity and aspires to become a black boy like Toos. In *Honor and Duty* (1994), Kai enters West Point upon his father's wishes even though he still struggles to reconcile with his model-minority father. It is at West Point, arguably the quintessential hub of hegemonic men, that Kai reconsiders his initial dependence on blackness to reclaim his masculinity. Osomosing the rhetoric of dominant discourse, Kai consequently shifts his allegiance from other men of color to the fraternity of hegemonic men. Read in tandem, Lee's two novels facilitate a constructive critique of the Asian American father and how he factors into the convoluted processes of disidentification.

In Chapter Four, "The Phallacy of Violence in Leonard Chang's *The Fruit 'N Food*," I consider the implications of violence in the construction of masculinity. Gender theorists have enunciated the importance of violence in understanding masculinity and

note that most incidents of aggression are “transactions among men” (Connell 83), rendering violence as a way of claiming or asserting masculinity in group struggles. A more compelling observation is the capacity of “collective violence among men” to effect progress in race and gender relations. As evidence, gender theorists cite how the two World Wars “produced important transitions in women’s employment, shook up gender ideology, and accelerated the making of homosexual communities” (Connell 84).

Tracing the “history” of Asian American men’s emasculation post WWII, this chapter discusses masculinity and violence in wars both fought between nations and within the inner-cities, with the latter typically considered chaotic and criminal when compared to the legitimacy that is granted to violence enacted in the context of war and militarism. I argue that Leonard Chang’s *Fruit ’N Food* (1996) re-imagines John Okada’s *No-No Boy* (1957) in the de-legitimized space of urban wars. Depicting urban metropolises as sites of contention and racial strife, Chang’s work foddors a consideration of how racialized masculinities must negotiate the deployment of violence. They anticipate the use of force as constructive, especially in regards to claiming masculinity within an urban ghetto that disenfranchises both black “assailants” and their Asian “victims.” However, the violence of racialized masculinity is always “colored” by their race and therefore unsanctioned.

In the final chapter, “Re-locating the Masculine ‘Real’: A Re-view of Disidentification in Frank Chin’s *Gunga Din Highway*,” I trace Chin’s literary vicissitudes by following his evolution from *The Chickencoop Chinaman* (1981) to his most recent novel *Gunga Din Highway* (1994). In this novel, Chin imagines multiple ways in which Asian American male subjects “survive” in a “phobic majoritarian

culture” by examining the lives of three Asian American men – Ulysses S. Kwan, Ben Han, and Diego Chang – on divergent paths of existence in American society (Muñoz 4). Many critics observe that around the mid-1980s, Chin alters his position regarding the influences of black masculinity and Asian heroic tradition in the remasculinization of Asian American men. Prior to his “transition,” Chin endorses articulating blackness in order to reclaim masculinity, but subsequently valorizes a heroic figure from Chinese classics, Kwan Kung, whom he esteems as the “heroic embodiment of martial-sufficiency – god of war, plunder, and literature” (“Not My Autobiography 120). In reading *Gunga Din Highway*, I examine Chin’s seemingly changed positions regarding the particular strategy of Asian American disidentification (i.e. prioritization of black expressions of manhood) and his renewed interest in Asian culture’s influence in the formation of Asian American subjectivity.

In sum, my dissertation examines the literary productions of Asian American male authors who argue that reclaiming “masculinity” by articulations of blackness is the most efficacious way to attain a position of privilege and prestige in American society: these authors with whom I converse consume black male bodies in order to ensure Asian American men’s claims to their distinct “maleness.” The writers’ disidentificatory stance towards hegemonic masculinity solicits consideration of the jeopardy that underlies their tendency to reinscribe one hierarchy – gender – for the sake of unsettling another – race.

CHAPTER I

DISSIN' THE HEGEMONY: FRANK CHIN AND THE DISIDENTIFYING ASIAN AMERICAN MALE SUBJECTIVITY IN *THE CHICKENCOOP CHINAMAN*

“Writin’ is Fightin’.”
– Muhammad Ali

“The Chinese Americans are a lovingly despised minority in America. I have been despised all my life in the country of my birth. Fear of white racism is a childhood disease. I am no longer a child. I don’t write for white acceptance. I don’t write to get along with anybody. I write to tell the truth. Writing is fighting. Nations come and go. It’s a good day to die. Let the good times roll.”
– Frank Chin

Frank Chin’s Tam Lum and Blackjap Kenji are, perhaps, not unlike other male characters within the literary tradition of Asian America; like most, Tam and Kenji lead a peripheral existence away from mainstream America. What makes them so distinct, nonetheless, is their fascination for and consumption of the “blackness of blacks” (Novick D3). They don’t “talk or dress or act like an Oriental” but instead give each other high fives, shout out Hallelujahs with religious fervor, “call each other [man] a lot, and generally spend a good deal of time half-pretending that they themselves are black” (Novick D3). For Chin, who claims that Asian Americans have not been men simply because they have not been “black ... [and] not cause[d] trouble” (“Backtalk” 556), Tam and Kenji ascribe themselves as masculine by invoking blackness, which has been historically tinged with hypermasculine undertones. We can easily discern that Tam and Kenji (alongside Chin) are unabashed about asserting their “prideful non-white identity,” which, unequivocally, warrants their articulation of authentic blackness.

Notwithstanding the simplicity of Chin's logic, his groundbreaking play, *The Chickencoop Chinaman* (1981), offers an apposite site to investigate a third way in which Asian American men reconcile with majoritarian discourse and, in particular, with conventional registers of masculinity. Past studies about Asian Americans have focused on two main methods of negotiation: accommodation and resistance. Viet Thanh Nguyen observes that these two polarizing positions are insufficient in representing the multiplicity and the flexibility of strategies that Asian American writers employ to navigate the oppressive social and political circumstances that incapacitate Asian Americans. While Chin's selective approach to the dominant discourse – in particular, his safeguard of the gender hierarchy – is admittedly problematic, Chin also offers a position in between and beyond these two extremes, which calls for a deconstruction of the binary of accommodation and resistance.

A cursory glance at Chin's work would disclose that his position is analogous, to a certain extent, to that of the Asian American intellectuals with whom Nguyen takes issue: literary critics and writers who prioritize a politics of resistance and opposition in that they perceive Asian America as a "place of resistance" (vi). Chin overtly encourages Asian American men to contest majoritarian discourse by destabilizing racial hierarchy. Chin's *method* of resistance is, however, what makes his argument distinctive; he indicates that the most effective way for Asian Americans to subvert white men's logic is by remasculinizing themselves through evocations of blackness. For Chin and the other Asian American male authors that I read in this dissertation, black masculinity, which is generally regarded as a source of tension in American sociopolitical structure, provides the best means to agitate and deter hegemonic discourse that feminizes Asian American

masculinity; in short, Asian American men's strivings for affiliation to the countercultural site of African America connote resistance in and of itself. An association with blackness facilitates Asian American men to "negate the negation" of their masculinity, in Abdul JanMohamed's terms. An Asian American male subject's articulation of blackness is then an empowering act in that it rejects social inscription of his body and bestows himself with the agency to reinscribe himself with a whole new set of social signifiers.

At the same time, Chin's strategy bolsters the very hegemonic discourse that he endeavors to disassemble. His enthusiastic endorsement of the remasculinization of Asian American men tacitly acknowledges and reinforces another aspect of hegemony: gender hierarchy. Chin, in effect, uses the same yardstick to measure both hegemonic and subordinated masculinities; his problematic stance suggests that minority male subjects sometimes simultaneously deploy contradictory strategies in order to survive in a majoritarian public sphere. This compels a normative framework on the experiences of non-hegemonic subjects. Chin's intentions aside, the "resistance" which his discourse creates does not categorically countervail the prevalent authority of hegemonic men. Ostensibly, Chin's critiques are leveled against the status quo of racialized and hegemonic masculinities, but his diatribe has also aggravated antagonism between Asian American men and women; the vitriolic feud between Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston partly derives from his discriminative approach towards the dominant ideology.¹ By

¹ In Asian American studies, Chin is perhaps best known for the war he tenaciously waged against such prominent Asian American writers as Maxine Hong Kingston and David Henry Hwang; Chin excoriates these authors as self-abasing fakes and sellouts who run white racist agendas, and publicly called for an alternative canon, which prioritizes works by writers whom he deemed "real." Criticized by many for his self-ratification as the "sole arbiter of truth" (Chu 172,

privileging such conventional “masculine” concepts as virility, violence, and physicality, Chin does not deconstruct but instead reinforces hegemonic authority within Asian America.

In this vein, this dissertation elaborates on the convoluted processes by which Asian American men rewrite the dominant script of masculinity. I contend that their revisionary narratives are not necessarily cataclysmic but indicate – both implicitly and explicitly – their desire for the white ideal, not as is but tailored to prioritize an associations with other minority male subjects, namely, African American men. This project cathects the extensive stakes for Asian American men in invoking blackness – or more specifically, black maleness – in order to reclaim masculinity. Nonetheless, as emblems of traditional registers of masculinity, white men emerge as a constant in this process of remasculinization for Asian American men. José Esteban Muñoz offers a method by which to better understand this problematic relationship between hegemony and its marginalized subjects: disidentification.² The rest of this chapter elaborates on José Esteban Muñoz’s definition of disidentification and how I theorize its distinct application to literary works by and about Asian American men. To this end, I close read Frank Chin’s *The Chickencoop Chinaman* (1981); this seminal play encapsulates that for

181), Chin’s relentless polemics about the state of the field have given him a reputation as a chauvinist, a nationalist, and somewhat of a rabble-rouser. Chin himself is said to have confronted great difficulty in trying to publish *Aiiieeeee!*, which was rejected several times by “white literary establishment [for] its allegedly excessive ethnic content.” Adamantly claiming that he does not want “America’s love [which is] no good [because] it’s racist love,” Chin considers the relative ease with which these authors sealed publication deals as evidence that they are “panderers of white literary establishment” (“Backtalk” 557; *Yardbird* vi, viii).

² Judith Butler explains disidentification as the source of destabilization of the signifiers of identity which, in turn, triggers a process of resignification; as a “site of rearticulation,” disidentification offers a way to resist the “sedimentation of signifiers” (*Bodies* 219 – 20). Muñoz’s work contributes to continuing discussions of “identity trouble” in queer and feminist theories.

the disidentifying Asian American men, blackness holds the promise of quintessential masculinity. Inevitably, we come to question the convoluted juxtaposition between Asian American and African American men, and whether the former unscrupulously *fakes* blackness to reclaim masculinity. A literary landmark, *The Chickencoop Chinaman* adroitly interweaves Chin's ideological design and agenda about the strengthening of Asian America.

Re-imagining the Contours of Disidentification

José Esteban Muñoz's *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999) offers a critical perspective on how those outside the racial and sexual mainstream negotiate the rubric of (white) heteronormativity. He reads public and semi-public performances of (queer *and* nonwhite) self in order to elucidate the construction of counterpublics that destabilize the preponderance of hegemonic discourse as well as provide minority subjects a site in which to attain social agency (1). Disidentification is, in effect, a strategy that "works on and against dominant ideology" by trying to transform a "cultural logic from *within*, always laboring to enact a permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of [...] resistance" (italics mine, 11).

A disidentificatory stance offers minority subjects an alternative mode of response to dominant ideology, diverging from the two customary options of identification/assimilation and counteridentification/utopianism. In a sense, it enables a minority subject to identify without losing sight of his difference or counteridentify while seeing his similarity to the mainstream. By collapsing both processes of identification and counteridentification in the formation of one's identity, disidentification elucidates the

“messiness of the process of identity-formation,” which cannot be abbreviated to a simple demarcation of similarities and differences (Medina 664).

I agree with Muñoz that the ambivalence that is inherent in the disidentificatory stance does not render it an apolitical middleground between resistance and accommodation; while its political agenda derives from anti-assimilationist thought, it forks from the rhetoric of resistance for strategic and methodological reasons (18). For one, an anti-assimilationist may *imagine* himself to have exited the “inescapable sphere” of hegemonic discourse (11 – 2). A disidentifying (male) subject, on the other hand, is fully aware of the powerful constraints and the staying power of hegemonic discourse. In lieu of attempting a futile escape, a disidentifying subject tactically and simultaneously works on, with, and against the dominant ideology so that he may deconstruct it from within. In other words, a minority subject recycles hegemony so that he may employ it for his own cultural purposes.

Nonetheless, the rubric of disidentification inexorably collapses under the weight of its inherent paradox: simultaneously occupying contradictory positions on the inside and outside of the hegemony. Subsequently, we observe that disidentifying subjects are compelled to revert to the binary options of assimilation and resistance due to the limitations of a disidentificatory approach to the dominant discourse. Disidentification, then, is an apropos theoretical paradigm by which to read the conflicted position of Asian American men, whose identity is a site of collision, or differently put, a moment of negotiation, between assimilation and resistance. Notwithstanding its limitations in disarticulating the majoritarian discourse about people of color, I still find disidentification useful in analyzing the *struggles* of an Asian American male subject

straddling the two extremes of a “‘bad subject’ who *imagines* [him]self outside the ideology or a ‘good subject’ who has an easy or magical identification with dominant culture” (italics mine, 12). I also find appealing Muñoz’s emphasis on the power of social critique inherent in disidentificatory acts, which figures largely in the literary texts that I read. Admittedly, the dominant discourse affords both pleasure and danger to racially marginalized subjects and as such, disidentification may beget mixed results for those who utilize its strategies to reconcile with the mainstream; I therefore submit that we highly regard disidentifying subjects’ *intent* to effect change in the racial status quo.

Reading against the backdrop of Muñoz’s informative study, I approach the works of Asian American male authors who write about Asian American men. King-Kok Cheung maintains that Asian American men, who are “seldom allowed by the dominant culture to *perform* ‘masculine’ roles, are self-driven to rehearse gender norms” (173). I argue that Asian American men are not simply reproducing “gender norms” as Cheung suggests but are, in fact, attempting to disidentify with them. As such, their objective is neither to align themselves with or against but to transform traditional indexes of masculinity with the goal of disturbing the rigid confines of the norm.

Though indispensable, Muñoz’s analysis of disidentification cannot be rubricated indiscriminately to my study of Asian American masculinity. For one, Muñoz converses with those on the sexual margins who disavow heteronormativity. I, on the other hand, detect urgency among Chin and his cohorts to establish the heterosexuality of their male protagonists, which they regard as a prerequisite to attaining the prestige of American citizenry. In tandem, Muñoz attends to the *performances* of queers of color, who deploy

different strategies from those of Asian American men. Both groups may be shooting for parallel ends – the deconstruction of the norm that marginalizes them – but they diverge in their methodologies. Highly aware of the performativity of their acts, Muñoz’s queers of color esteem the function of the spectacle; they stage over-the-top performances in order to destabilize hegemonic discourse. By contrast, the Asian American men that I examine are less aware of (and perhaps unwilling to acknowledge) the performative aspects in their acts of disidentification. In fact, in Chin’s *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, Tam and Kenji adamantly insist on the authenticity of their actions; they categorically deny that they are “performing” blackness or masculinity.

Perhaps most distinctive, Asian American men’s disidentification with their white counterparts is *triangulated* by their problematic relationship with African American men. Asian American men’s disidentificatory acts entail evoking blackness; simply put, they intervene in the white man’s discourse by identifying with the black man, who is positioned diametrically opposite to whites. In so doing, they obscure the stereotype of the effeminate Asian man, who has now become more “manly” – primarily by association. Asian American men’s method of resistance to what is mainstream, however, does not necessarily call for an upheaval of the cultural logic that sustains the primacy of white men. While Asian Americans prioritize black expressions of masculinity in a concerted effort to disband hegemony, these men also endeavor to attain the privileges of men in the mainstream by situating themselves within conventional registers of masculinity, which indicates that Asian American men also identify with the very structure with which they counteridentify: the dominant ideology of white heteromascularity. Ultimately, the Asian American male subject’s conflicted fluctuation

between assimilating to hegemonic masculinity and resisting against it highlights how their disidentificatory endeavors are still parasitic to the dominant ideology.

Recognizing a hegemonic social order which co-opts, incorporates, and displaces oppositional forces foregrounds the possibility of contamination. Although aimed to nullify a majoritarian discourse that feminizes Asian Americans, we can detect that Asian American men, not unlike their hegemonic counterpart, abbreviate black masculinity to connote the hypermasculine. In addition, disidentifying Asian American men uncritically position black masculinity in opposition to hegemonic masculinity, without taking into account that these two also forge a complex relationship of inclusion and exclusion, which is neither clear-cut nor completely rigid. Thus, in their process of disidentification, Asian American men compress what they aim to complicate: blackness, Asian Americanness, and maleness.

I interrogate Asian American male writers' problematic consumption of blackness in order to further consider their complicity in its essentialization. These writers have been blindsided by what cripples many critics of ethnicity, who, as Stephen Knadler points out, cannot "imagine a politics not mobilized around 'identities' – even as [they] 'de-essentialize' them." Fearing "the threat of 'derealization' and of political disempowerment," they still "capitulate to a reinscribed essentialist logic" (3). Bearing this quandary in mind, we must acknowledge that Asian American male writers may be disposed to congeal the categories of race and gender for self-serving purposes. We must also critique the colonial impulse behind Asian American writers' consumption of black bodies and the deployment of such essentialized representation of African American

masculine presence. Thus reading literary works by Asian American male authors involve coalescing the multiple processes by which Asian American and African American men interact with each other and with hegemonic masculinity.³

Frank Chin and Asian American Disidentification

Literary works by Asian American male authors facilitate interrogation of the disidentificatory practices of minority subjects by elaborating on what Muñoz indicates is a crucial aspect of disidentification: a *negotiation* between desire, identification, counteridentification, and ideology (15). At the vanguard of disidentifying Asian American male subjects stands the controversial author, critic, and activist Frank Chin; Chin's status in Asian American studies is paramount and scholars have hailed him as the "most insistent and influential story[teller] about the struggles of Asian American male authorship" (Chu 64).⁴ Certainly, there have been writers before Chin who have touched

³ On a conceptual level, the disidentification of Asian American men is akin to black males' employment of "cool masculinity," or "cool pose." Quoting Langston Hughes' "Motto," Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson explain that black men have relied on "cool pose" as a survival technique, a "creative strategy devised ... to counter the negative forces in their lives (105). Tomas Almaguer's study also shows that a display of hypermasculine façade is most often associated with cool masculinity; he, however, indicates that cool pose sometimes *defeats its own purpose* and further marginalizes race men because others misinterpret their actions as hostile (80).

⁴ The son of an immigrant father and a fourth-generation Chinese American mother, Frank Chin (b. 1940) was born in Berkeley, California and spent most of his childhood in the Chinatown of Oakland, California. Chin is a prolific writer; he has written novels, short stories, plays, comic books, and essays. He has also produced documentaries, worked as a script consultant in Hollywood, helped form the Asian American Theater Workshop in San Francisco, and taught college courses in Asian American literature. Undoubtedly, Chin's pioneering work as a playwright, novelist, and literary critic is paramount. First staged in 1972, his play *The Chickencoop Chinaman* (1981) was one of the first plays written by an Asian American to be produced in New York. Chin's first novel *A Chinese Lady Dies* won the Joseph Henry Jackson Award but was never published. (Publishers rejected Chin's second novel *Charlie Chan on Maui* when the owners of the Charlie Chan copyright threatened legal action). His collection of short

on the disidentificatory impulses of Asian American men to some extent. Still, the tenacity and rhetorical clarity with which Chin interrogates and explicates the precarious relationship between hegemonic and subordinate masculinities countenance the paradigmatic status of his work. And the fact that Chin's assertions have raised so many questions is a testament to their force, and at least some of the importance of his perspective lies in the debates that they have generated amongst Asian American literary critics.

In particular, *The Chickencoop Chinaman* is a touchstone text by which we can elucidate the contours of Asian American disidentification. Chin, Kenji, and Tam's negotiation with the hegemony is triangulated by constructions of blackness; by prioritizing and endeavoring to emulate black masculinity, both the author and his protagonists hope to disarticulate the dominant discourse about the effeminacy of Asian American men. Even as we acknowledge the efficacy of their strategy to dismiss stereotypes about unmanly Asian men, we must not elide how these Asian Americans become complicit in reinforcing stereotypes about black men, who are paradoxically too manly to be men by conventional standards. Chin and his two protagonists attend to issues – such as black fatherhood, hypersexual overtones of black masculinity, violent bodies of black men and their linguistic coup d'état – which are recapitulated in the

stories *The Chinaman Pacific & Frisco R. R. Co.* (1988) won the National Book Award. (Frank Abe notes that Chin did not notice the missing comma from the published title of his short story collection until it was too late; Chin originally intended the title to be read like a “series of three railroad destinations” (4), which underscores the importance of the railroad in Asian American history). While fully acknowledging Chin's influence in Asian American studies, Chin's vision of its direction has often been criticized for its misogynistic and homophobic tendencies. Jinqi Ling points out that Chin's construction of male subjectivity loses a “considerable degree of its force as a radical critique”; on the one hand, the dominant discourse resists “Chin's angry reversal” of stereotypes. On the other hand, Asian American feminists oppose to his emphasis on remasculinization at the risk of reinforcing stereotypes about Asian American women (319).

works of subsequent authors who explore the parameters of disidentification in Asian America.⁵

In *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, Chin collates his critical agenda regarding the discord between hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities and the accord between Asian and African American masculinities. Chin recaptures these moments of tension in a creative space to explore the complexities of disidentification, which renders this play particularly pertinent in a conversation about the (re)configuration of American manhood. In tandem, the stage, for Chin, is a constructive site which gives him the license to “give specular prominence to his political desire,” free himself from “Asian Americans’ self-effacing presence on the American scene through boisterous resistance,” and openly disrupt and violate social and cultural norms in a “highly associative space of transgression” (Ling 81).⁶ Accordingly, this play features two protagonists, Tam and Kenji, who are invested in juxtaposing Asian American and African American male bodies and histories. These two men mirror Chin’s belief that an alliance with African

⁵ Patricia Chu observes that although Chin is one out of four co-editors of *Aiiieeeee!* and *The Big Aiiieeeee!*, Chin alone signed the two introductory essays in their subsequent offprints (64). I believe, as does Chu, that it is not too far-fetched to consider the arguments that appear in these essays as his exclusively, albeit their initial joint composition, in that Chin explicitly claims ownership of these words.

⁶ Chin considers dramatic literature (and its corollary: the performance) as the most viable and visible means to force the mainstream to confront its complicity in constructing and reifying a racial hierarchy and “disturb[s] the immobility of Asian America that results from [an] internalization of racial inferiority” (Ling 81). Consequently, Chin founded the Asian American Theater Workshop in San Francisco, which he envisioned as an equivalent of Ireland’s Abbey Theater and as a site in which he could collaborate with other writers to forge a literary sensibility based on Asian American integrity. Chin now says he will have nothing to do with Asian American theater or actors, both of which have proceeded to produce a body of “irrelevant” work since his departure: “The fame junkies won out. I became too controversial. I took too long to get work up. I just did not satisfy the fame junkies’ need for fame and self-gratification. It’s a meat market for cuts of Yellow. [Asian American actors] don’t want to be Yellow. They want Whites to buy them and take them home” (qtd. in Abe 3).

Americans who are “a problem: badass” will allow them to accrue masculinity and the social cachet it entails (“Confessions” 74).⁷ Via his disidentifying protagonists, Chin imagines a revisionary narrative of their history, masculinity, and identity, which is conducive to his vision of Asian America. Tam and Kenji duly become physical manifestations of Chin’s political agenda to contravene the dictates of hegemonic discourse that relegate Asian American men to sociopolitical invisibility.

At this juncture, it is worthwhile to contextualize Chin’s play with a discussion of his stance on the strata within racialized masculinity. Conceding that Asian and African Americans are bracketed by a shared experience of disenfranchisement, the latter, Chin argues, is still at an advantage because African Americans possess “daring, originality, aggressiveness, assertiveness, vitality, and living art and culture,” which allows for a diffusion of their cultural achievements to all levels of American culture (“Backtalk” 556). Asian Americans, on the other hand, “one-up” other racially marginalized men in that they are the “only ones utterly without manliness, male sexuality, potency, virility, [and] male strengths” (qtd. in Tachiki 3).⁸ Chin argues that the misperception of Asian American men as unmanly precipitates their social and political marginalization and

⁷ Jinqi Ling notes that Chin’s “overtly oppositional literature,” which precipitated Asian America to raise its angry voice publicly, reflected the immense influence of black countercultural movements in the development of Asian American cultural sensibility (321).

⁸ Chin evidences this claim with his reading of Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* (1966). In “Confessions of a Chinatown Cowboy” (1997), Chin observes a dichotomization of racialized masculinities and reiterates narrator Richard’s “disgust and loathing” for Shorty, a “round, yellow, fat elevator operator” with “tiny, beady eyes [...] the complexion of a Chinese, a short forehead, and three chins,” who announces his plans to go up north one of these days and pass for Chinese (Wright 248). Subjected to general condescension, Shorty becomes of particular interest to Chin in that the (self) disdain for Shorty seemingly derives from his ability to pass for Chinese in a social context that parallels Asian-ness with servility and, in effect, unmanliness.

cultural elision. Chin's cure-all solution to the extreme debasement of Asian Americans is to diffuse them with the resistance inherent in black masculinity. To counteract their beset manhood, Asian American men, Chin argues, must re-charge their masculinity by aligning with the oppositional forces of blackness.

In essence, Chin proposes that Asian American men disidentify with hegemonic discourse by articulating blackness; the masculinity of black men, according to Chin, is sanctioned by the black vernacular. As an "ultimate sign of [their] difference," the black vernacular is something to be celebrated because it determines African Americans' "articulated, organic sense of American identity, verbal confidence, and self esteem" (Gates xix, Chin "Backtalk" 556). Black masculinity gains legitimacy by these men's capacity to "flaunt their street tongue and strut [...] their positive, self-defined linguistic identity" ("Backtalk" 556). The black tongue, as such, is a phallus, which not only destabilizes the notion that "correct English is the only language of American truth" but also enables African Americans to propagate an idiosyncratic culture through a whole range of distinctive speech acts (*Aiiieeee!* xxxvii).

Conversely, Asian Americans, as "linguistic orphans," lack a language, which is the "medium of culture and [their] sensibility, including the style of manhood"

(*Aiiieeee!* 35). Chin explains the linguistic predicament of Asian Americans:

Our condition is more delicate than that of the blacks because, unlike the blacks, we have neither an articulated organic sense of our American identity nor the verbal confidence and self-esteem [...] As a people, we are pre-verbal, pre-literate – afraid of language as the instrument through which the monster takes possession of us. [...] We are a people without a native tongue. ("Backtalk" 556)

Having no language of their own, Asian American men, therefore, are racially and linguistically castrated; they are left without the means to be manly in a logocentric society.

While the speech patterns of both Asian and African Americans may be “unconventional English,” Chin points out that correcting black vernacular runs the risk of creating antagonism; as language is an integral part of one’s identity, questioning his prerogative to articulate in his own tongue corresponds to challenging his masculine authority. For this reason, Chin proposes that Asian American men embrace the black vernacular, which, according to Chin, can bridge Asian Americans to the core of a phallogocentric society that is America. We can infer that by articulating blackness, Chin aims to appropriate its implication of resistance, with which Asian Americans can destabilize the status quo and challenge the oppressive expectations of the mainstream. A method of re-signification, the black vernacular enables Asian Americans to access the masculine language, history, and cultural identity of their racial brethren. This identity, according to Chin, can then be utilized by Asian American male subjects to rupture and subvert the hegemonic logic that immobilizes and emasculates them.

Chin recognizes that articulating blackness grants Asian Americans the means to declare their intellectual, cultural, and linguistic independence and assert their manhood; at the same time, Chin recommends that Asian American men do not diverge from but synchronize themselves with mainstream indexes of masculinity. Chin reasons that this infiltration into the hegemonic territory is necessary so that racialized masculinity may destabilize conventional definitions of American manhood from within. To a certain extent, it is understandable why Chin scaffolds Asian American masculinity with

hegemonic constructions of gender. However, Chin's proposed method is then rendered unsubstantial if it cannot deconstruct the hegemonic value system in toto. Most problematic is Chin's ambivalence in regards to certain aspects of the societal structures. For example, Chin does not contest but rather promotes the gender hierarchy. What's more, his mode of disidentification necessitates contriving a seamless connection between blackness and masculinity even as he and other disidentifying Asian American male subjects strive to fissure effeminacy and Asian Americanness. In trafficking a debilitating stereotype of black masculinity, Chin may find that, much to his dismay, his disidentificatory method implicates him and his protagonists as "yellow white supremacists" ("Confessions" 74). Furthermore, Chin's invectives against the feminization of Asian American men lead me to question if his frustration derives from the *reduction* of Asian American men to stereotypes or their reduction to *effeminate* ones. Elaine Kim befittingly indicates that a verbal tirade does not convey manliness; in lieu of expatiating on racist stereotyping, Kim suggests that we make an effort to elucidate Asian American manhood by ascertaining what is "masculine" and "Asian American" (90). In order to critique Chin's rubric of Asian American disidentification, it is imperative that we critically intervene in Chin's conflation of blackness and masculinity and his allegiance to the gender hierarchy.

The leitmotif of marginalization in *The Chickencoop Chinaman* is explicit from the onset. Chin's narrative of Asian American manhood depicts those immured in the underbelly of American society; the play mostly takes place in side-line locations – such as the Limbo, the ghetto, a "pornie house" at night, and Tam's nightmarish dream –

which bolsters the sense that minority subjects are peripheral to a mainstream existence.

Chin's protagonist, Tam Lum, is a man with a keen awareness of his marginality and emasculation. He notes:

Chinamen are made, not born. [...] In the beginning there was the Word! Then there was me! And the Word was CHINAMAN. And there was me. I lipped the word. [...] I lived the Word! The Word is my heritage. [...] Born? No! ... Created! Not born. [...] No more born than nylon or acrylic. For I am a Chinaman! A miracle synthetic! (6, 8)

In reiterating that he is made, not born, Tam acknowledges that he is a “verbal construct made of [hegemonic] cultural debris” and as such, is circumscribed within the dominant definition of “Chinaman” (Chu 72). At the same time, we can discern Tam's efforts to subvert his linguistic detention as he demonstrates his capacity to manipulate the dominant discourse by fluctuating his speech between “black and white rhythms and accents” (*Chickencoop* 6). Tam's linguistic flexibility highlights not only his verbal agency but also his cultural interstitiality. In tandem, Tam erases the body maternal from the narrative of his nativity, according to Patricia Chu, by describing his birth as a “verbal and volitional act rather than a physical [one]” (72); in so doing, Tam apotheosizes the figurative act of self-fathering and utilizes it to disassociate himself (and subsequently the cultural body of Asian America) from the feminine.

Tam discerns the prevalent misconception that a “Chinaman” cannot “master the white man's language” confines him to the lower echelon of society. Conventional English, the language of hegemonic men, is “alien and hostile” to a non-white sensibility and does not lend itself to conveying the Asian American experience (*Aiiieeeee!* xxxvii). Asian Americans are devoid of any viable means of self-expression, from which a style of manhood originates and as such, become vulnerable to the scrutiny, discipline, and

colonization by the dominant discourse. This “cultural imperialism” demotes Tam and Kenji to “ventriloquists’ dummies” and circumscribes them to the fringes of society (“Backtalk” 557). Chin explains how the deprivation of a distinctive language prompts the castration process of Asian American male subjects by tracing the basis of Tam’s nickname, Tampax. Evocative of femininity, Tam’s unusual moniker derives from the perception that Asian Americans cannot speak correct English; Tam explains how his “Chinatowng acka-cent” renders him a “mumbler, a squeaker” who speaks with a “rag in [his] mouth, which led to ragmouth, which ended up Tampax” (*Chickencoop* 11, 24). Reinforcing his association with effeminacy, Tam’s ostensible linguistic deficiency likens him to Helen Keller, the “Great White Motha . . . of Charlie Chan [who has] come to show Chinks and Japs” the way to assimilation without the violence of resistance (10–11).

If the hegemony imparts to Asian Americans that they do not “exist, [they] have no style, no language, no literature, and no history beside the white version of [their] history,” Tam and Kenji then counter their cultural anonymity by appropriating blackness (Kim 175). Locating a positive male cultural identity for men of color in black masculinity, these two embrace “the blackness of blacks” by talking, dressing, and acting black for most of the play. Blackjap Kenji is a middle-class research dentist who chooses to live in the black ghetto. Suffused with the “beat and brass, the runs and rim-shots of jazz,” Tam’s speech acts are “dazzling eruptions of verbal legerdemain” (McDonald xv). Tam’s linguistic enactment of blackness is absolute in that his black voice convinces others that he is in fact black. Although limited to the auditory, Tam manages to resignify himself with the racial markers of another’s and thereby dislocates the process of

hegemonic inscription on racialized bodies. Tam's disidentification effects integration of Asian Americans into a vibrant cultural arena of African Americans that is contiguous to yet cleft from mainstream America. As a result, Tam accomplishes in unsettling the "white version" of Asian Americans as culturally defunct, and Tam's disidentification transforms him from a "ragmouth" with a "birth defect" to a "multi-tongued magician" and a self-sufficient writer, whose masculine authority comes from his verbal dexterity (11, 24, 3). Empowered by his capacity to manipulate the language of hegemonic men, Tam is able to rewrite a history of Asian America, which does not promote self-contempt for its people.

Furthermore, Tam's adroit articulation of blackness facilitates his remasculinization by enabling him to recompense the absence of an Asian American male legacy with that of African Americans'. Tam injects Asian American heritage with "some flow, some pop, [and] some rhythm" by undertaking a project of producing a biographical documentary about a black fighter named Oualtine Jack Dancer, a former light-heavyweight champ (22). Tam anticipates that the act of re-telling Oualtine's pugilistic biography will supplement his autobiography, which outlines the emasculation of Asian American men in the cultural landscape of America.

Tam's memories of the boxing phenom are overtly "masculine" in nature; Tam fondly remembers Oualtine's boxing matches and relates one homosocial encounter between them, during which they "piss[ed] together into the bushes. [It] was a dynamite piss [and] the greatest piss we took in our lives" (41). Tam's evocation of the violence embedded in his "Popcorn stories" not only resonates with nonwhite men's recognition of militancy as a means to combat emasculation imposed by the dominant discourse but it

also follows the arch of American mythology surrounding the formative power of violence, through which the American national character was formed and regenerated (Slotkin 5).⁹ Tam also draws attention to the significance of fatherhood in defining manhood. In fact, Tam has come to Pittsburgh to touch base with Charley Popcorn, Ovaltine's ostensible father, whom the boxer describes in heroic terms.¹⁰

Tam's disidentification gains him access to a formative masculine cultural identity of which he has been previously deprived by hegemonic forces. Via the black vernacular, Tam draws on black (hyper)sexuality, the heroism of black fathers, and the history of a black boxer who violently subvert the hegemonic script about men of color. Nonetheless, Tam's disidentification does not quite achieve the desired outcome in the remasculinization of Asian American men. For one, Tam seemingly has not convinced even himself that his successful articulation of blackness has fully restored his manliness. Tam does not offset the chronic failure of Asian American men to "express themselves in the simplest form [of manhood], that of fathers and sons" (*Aiiieeee!* xlvi). In fact, Tam prompts the emasculation of Asian American men by asserting, "Chinamans do make lousy fathers" (23). He is contemptuous of his Chinese father, a "crazy old dishwasher" who wears underpants in the bath for fear that "old toothless goofy white ladies" would

⁹ Jeffrey A. Brown indicates that African Americans also have often embraced and cultivated the figures of the boxing phenoms Jack Johnson and Joe Louis in order to temper the depiction of black male as "symbolically castrated." Both boxers came to embody the "black hypermasculinity as a means to resist the emasculation of racism. [T]heir prowess in the ring [was] reinforced by widely circulated images of the two men shirtless and intimidatingly muscular" (29).

¹⁰ Patricia Chu observes Chin's *The Chickencoop Chinaman* pivots on the theme of an Asian American hero's search for a father-figure who can guide him to a formative masculine culture. The search for a paternal figure, "an original ancestor, to anchor and authorize [Tam's] efforts to 'author' himself, his film and his children" is continued throughout the play (75).

peek at him through the keyhole (16 – 7). Tam, in effect, renders himself a linguistic orphan; in rejecting his father, Tam severs himself from the history and the cultural legacy of his forefathers and obliges himself to “talk the talk of orphans” (8).

In the place of his defunct Chinese father, Tam venerates Charley Popcorn, a black father-figure and a boxing trainer of champions. As the lynchpin in the mythos of Ovaltine Jack Dancer, Charley enables Tam to tap into the violent as well as the hypersexual subtexts of African American masculinity. As the proprietor of a porno movie house, Charlie is a seller of sex. As such, he traffics sexually charged images of the Hong Kong Dream Girl, which reduces Asian American womanhood to a sexual commodity for the consumption of American men.¹¹ Even though Charley discloses that he, in reality, is not Ovaltine’s father, Tam cannot part with his deification of Charley as the incarnation of a constructive force in the identity formation of racialized men. Tam insists on believing that Ovaltine is Charley’s son and thereby preserves the patrilineage of black masculinity. And Charley, the “father of a champion,” remains an appealing figure for Tam in that the black father, who emblemizes violence, sexuality, and cultural creation, can guide Tam to rewrite his own narrative about masculinity, filiation, survival, and cultural inclusion (23). In the end, it is Charley, the “mighty black daddy,” who vindicates Tam’s Chinese father as the respect-worthy “Chinatown Kid,” a man who loved boxing and maintained a fierce sense of dignity (14, 46). The restoration of the

¹¹ It is important to remember that Asian American women have been sanctioned marginal inclusion into American society, a “courtesy” which has not yet been extended to their male counterparts. The acceptance of these women of color, nevertheless, has been contingent upon the conventional perception of their sexual availability to hegemonic men. As Charley’s commodification of Hong Kong Dream Girl evidences, such sexualized inclusion presents Asian American women with severe limitations and does not safeguard them from relegation to reductive stereotypes.

Asian American father is an important step in the remasculinization of Asian American men, but ironically undermines them because it is achieved via the authority of the black father.

Tam continues to incapacitate Asian American fatherhood by situating himself in the lineage of “self-contemptuous and paranoid Chinaman” (Ling 84). Like father like son, Tam wears swimming trunks to his bath and subsequently discredits himself as a father-figure for Robby, a multiethnic fatherless boy also searching for cultural belonging. Tam assures Robby that he is unfit as a father: “I am an old dude who tells kids [off-colored] jokes, bosses ’em around gruffly, roughhouses ’em, has a swell time, and forgets ’em, cuz that’s what adults do” (*Chickencoop* 18). Acknowledging his shortcomings, Tam does not want his children to “be anything like me or know me, or remember me” (27). Tam relinquishes fatherhood, an essential expression of masculinity, to his children’s “new, ambitious, successful, go-for-bucks, superior white daddy [who is] even a better writer than [him]” (27). Not only does Tam intern himself in a cultural vacuum by severing ties with his father, he also frustrates the transference of the Asian American cultural narrative by forsaking the progeny who can reinstate his paternity and masculinity.

Even though Tam exploits the hypersexuality of black men to remasculinize himself, his expressions of sexual prowess are limited to verbal rather than physical enactments. In the first scene, Tam meets Hong Kong Dream Girl who embodies the orientalist stereotype of Asian American womanhood; she is an exotic “wind-up dream girl,” “a Hong Kong flower, [his] sweet sloe-eyed beauty from the mysterious East” (5 –

6).¹² Tam charms her with his smooth talk and overtly sexual remarks. His linguistic seduction, however, fails Tam as his dream girl replies: “you sure have a way with words, but I’d like it better if you’d speak the mother tongue” (8). Tam’s sexual solicitations are frustrated as she giggles and runs off, unresponsive to his verbal sexual advances. Accordingly, a verbal enactment of blackness does not override one’s “oriental” exterior. Charley Popcorn cannot reconcile Tam’s and Kenji’s Asian faces with their black voices. Charley immediately marks them as “queers [...] that hold hands” and debars them from the fraternity of heterosexual men. Mere articulation proves to be insufficient to emancipate Asian American manhood from the stigma of effeminacy and asexuality.

Likewise, Tam’s evocations of violence remain mediated; his is linguistically executed in a verbal re-enactment of Ovaltine’s boxing career. Tam’s enthusiasm for Ovaltine’s physical aggressiveness is not transposed to Asian American male bodies and for the most part, Tam backs down from confrontation. During the rare occasion in which Tam strives to physically enact violence, he fails miserably. Tam tries to throw a punch but misses and falls on his face. He remains the “Chickencoop Chinaman [whose] punch won’t crack an egg” (51). Such instances reinforce the absurdity of Tam’s actions and more significantly, fail to undermine the stock images of Asian American men as

“mama’s boys and crybabies, not a man in all [their] males” (18). In fact, by the play’s

¹² Chin’s conflict with Asian American feminists derives from his position that Asian American men must reclaim their masculinity via a conventional method of sexual conquest; in one of his short stories, his protagonist declares, “I have to womanize! I have to womanize [because] I come from [...] Chinamen who were too many for women” (“Sons” 150). Chin places this urgency for womanizing in a historical context; he argues that Asian American men must contradict the history of the early immigrant experience and the bachelor societies in order to negate their effeminacy. Chin also aggravates his relationship with Asian American womanhood by perpetuating stock images of Asian American women as “dragon lady” or “lotus blossom”; Lee embodies the former and the “mechanical” and “doll-like” Hong Kong Dream Girl the latter stereotype in *The Chickencoop Chinaman* (5).

end, Tam remains an incompetent father, lover, and fighter. Although Chin maintains that Asian Americans can accrue masculinity by articulating blackness, his play demonstrates that verbal appropriation of blackness can only effect cosmetic changes and ultimately does not translate to remasculinization for Asian American male subjects.

Deploying disidentificatory maneuvers allows Tam and Kenji to steer clear of becoming white “ventriloquists’ dummies” in some respects. Still, two major concerns remain in determining the viability of disidentification as the consummate survival strategy for Asian American subjects: does disidentification, by the same token, occasion Kenji and Tam to become black ventriloquists’ dummies? Conversely, are Tam and Kenji “making it on the backs of black people” in the name of disidentification (19)? One of the final scenes literalizes the concern that Chin couches an expropriation of blackness in the mechanism of disidentification; Tam appears on Charley’s back, with “only the noise of him left” and admits “it’s talk. All talk. Nothing I can’t talk” (51 – 2). Though equivocal about the parodic nature of their mimetic acts, Tam and Kenji garner a visceral response from other characters in the play, who expressly denounce them for “mak[ing] fun of blacks” (13). Tam and Kenji are unwilling to admit that they are “fakin blackness for balls” (43). Adamant about the authenticity of his actions, Kenji categorically rejects his relegation to a simulacrum:

I’m imitating no black people. I’m no copy cat. I know I live with ’em, I talk like ’em, I dress, maybe even eat what they eat and don’t mess with other Orientals, Asians, whatever, blah, blah, blah. Maybe we act black but [we’re] not faking blackness. (19)

Kenji's assertion of authenticity reiterates Chin's qualms about instigating an inquiry of "the real and the fake" within his own work.¹³ Moreover, we can discern, precisely at this moment, the major pitfall of Chin's (and his two protagonists') method of disidentification – an essentialization of blackness – and a clear divergence from Muñoz's characterization of disidentifying subjects – an unawareness (or, perhaps, an intentional avoidance) of the performative implications of their actions. Kenji's active denial that he is faking blackness is problematic as is Tam's non-recognition of his subconscious desire to substitute his history with that of a black boxer. Chin, I believe, fails to indicate how Asian American men can deconstruct the effeminate stereotype without glossing over it with the hypermasculinity of blackness.

Admittedly, recognizing the heterogeneity of racialized masculinities has its payoffs. However, Richard Wright, Chin, and their fellow brethren forge tenuous connections between race and gender, facilitating the gendering of race and the racializing of gender. By doing so, they suggest gradations within the periphery wherein some are more marginalized than others. Moreover, the inclination to situate black masculinity in a position of power is problematic in that it undercuts the significance of the fact that the attributes that these writers demarcate as a source of black masculine authority are the very forces that disempower black men in American majoritarian discourse. In other words, the hypermasculinization of black bodies does not necessarily induct black men into hegemonic masculinity; the hypersexuality of black men does not

¹³ Chu contends that Ovaltine has already bested Tam in "self-fathering" by publishing his autobiography, in which he not only successfully reinvents Charley Popcorn as the "ethnic father of his dreams" but also authenticates his blackness; Tam bases his documentary on Ovaltine's book, which further implicates Tam and his history as not an original but an imitation (73).

affirm but rather divests them of their masculine privileges.¹⁴ In fact, it is the flipside of the same strategy that is mobilized to feminize Asian American bodies. Furthermore, questions remain about the transference of black masculinity onto Asian male bodies; is it viable and what unforeseen outcomes will ensue? I find that the uncritical reiteration of the status quo (in regards to race and gender) among the writers of Chin's camp redefine, and in effect, reinforce the boundary between the core and the periphery. I also find it a disconcerting tendency among these Asian American male writers to seemingly disregard the complexities of race issues inherent within definitions of masculinity and to be only invested in what could be construed as a co-optation of African American's "badass" moniker for their own purposes.

In the end, Tam's witty and flamboyant verbal prowess seems to reduce him to a mimic, though a brilliant one, in a "goddamned [yellow] minstrel show"; Tam lands back in the kitchen, armed only with a Chinese cleaver (43). Elaine Kim criticizes Chin's cynical treatment of Tam, particularly by returning him to the kitchen, which is one site of emasculation for Asian American masculinity. Kim intimates that in so doing, Chin

¹⁴ African American men's expression of masculinity is commonly perceived (by themselves and others) as "hypermasculine." Black masculinity considers its hypermasculine stance the most effective means to contest the social dominance of hegemonic men. Nonetheless, the "macho posturing" of African American men, according to Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien, can become problematic in that it assumes a form, which is not only oppressive to their female counterparts, but also self-destructive (113). Their hypermasculine imagery creates certain setbacks for black men; an emphasis on their physicality is rife with implications of violence, hypersexuality, moral depravity, and bestiality. In contemporary culture black men are often dehumanized and are likely to be perceived as primitive sexual predators, "beasts, rapists, gangsters, crack-heads, and muggers – literally as bodies out of control" (Brown 30). The staying power of such debilitating representation of black men discouraged disjunction between image and the real; marked as animalistic and lacking intelligence, assumptions of black men's hypersexuality / hypermasculinity reduced black men into bodies without mind.

discloses that he unfortunately is still encumbered by the very “plague” that he attacks: racist stereotyping (90).

Notwithstanding the merit of Kim’s critique, I posit that the intrinsic flexibility of disidentification accommodates Tam’s divergent positions from an eloquent hero to a glib copycat. Tam’s body duly becomes the site upon which the conflicting cultural forces merge; this juxtaposition indicates the dynamic negotiation entailed in the convoluted process of disidentification. Moreover, Chin privileges the use of disidentification over that of assimilation by comparing the “black-identified” Tam to his “white-identified” doppelganger Tom (Chu 74).¹⁵ Tom is the former husband of Lee, a multiracial woman passing for white. Tom is the model minority par excellence; he embraces the dress, manner, and conventions of the white middle-class. Tom conveys his complacency:

[Asian Americans] used to be kicked around, but that’s history, brother. Today we have good jobs, good pay, and we’re luck. Americans are proud to say we send more of our kids to college than any other race. We’re accepted. We worked hard for it. I’ve made my peace. (59).

Tom’s conversation with Tam reveals that the latter is against the racist logic of hegemony that aims to essentialize people of color into racialized constructions: “I can call you ‘Chinaman’ and insult you. ‘Chinese’ and insult you, ‘American’ ‘Chink’ ‘Jap’ ‘Japanese’ ‘white’ and insult you, ‘black’ and insult you” (63). Here, Tom’s aim is to underscore Tam’s tendency to be affronted too easily and he therefore misses the fact that Tam’s indignation stems from being compressed to racial and ethnic categories; as Tam’s foil, Tom telegraphs the importance of resisting against these reductive categories of race.

¹⁵ Ling comments that in the initial staging of *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, Chin cast the same actor to play the roles of both Tonto, the Indian companion to the Lone Ranger, and Tom, which is evocative of another (in)famous accommodationist character: Uncle Tom (89).

Tam discloses the close resemblance between Tom and his own previous self that rejected his ethnic identity and heritage. Tam recollects with regret that his previous attempt to delete his Asian-Americanness by marrying white. He also cedes that although assimilation is an expedient tactic of survival at times, it entails “almost suicidal doses of self contempt,” which undermines its role in establishing a productive sense of self (“Racist Love” 67). And Chin redeems the kitchen from a site of Asian American emasculation to one that reconnects Asian American men to their heroic past when Tam seems to hear the sound of a train, which evokes the memory of “granmaw’s pa coming home” (65).

I contend that disidentification is more than simply calling attention to the damaging effects of the dominant discourse; a struggle for the destabilization of the oppressor’s logic (regardless of its success) is a fundamental motive in employing the strategies of disidentification. In analyzing the possibilities of “politicizing disidentification,” Judith Butler contends that the political vindication of disidentification is the “democratizing affirmation of internal difference” within an identity group. According to Butler, repeated disidentification can progressively open up an identity group to difference and diversity (*Bodies* 219). In this manner, the disidentification of Asian American men is pivotal in reconfiguring conventional definitions of American manhood. The success of disidentification should therefore be measured, not by its in/ability to subvert the predominance of the hegemony, but by its adeptness in revolutionizing rigorous attitudes about gender, race, and national identity.

Chin's method of disidentification was, in some measures, provisional in undermining hegemonic constructions of Asian American men. On the one hand, his disidentification with hegemonic masculinity allows Chin to demonstrate his dedication to overturning the primacy of white men. On the other hand, Chin adumbrates his tacit desire for social prestige, which is embedded in his protagonists' overt acts of resistance toward hegemonic masculinity. Judith Butler concedes that the work of disidentification always remains unfinished, for "there can be no final or complete inclusivity" (221).

Muñoz also acknowledges the limitations of disidentification. He suggests that it is

not always an adequate strategy of resistance or survival for all minority subjects. At times, resistance needs to be pronounced and direct; on other occasions, [...] minority subjects need to follow a conformist path if they hope to survive a hostile public sphere. (5)

I contend that Chin, nonetheless, accomplishes what *he* has set out to do; Chin challenges the emasculating stereotypes of "Orientals" as "white male's dream minority" by characterizing Tam and Kenji as aggressive, foul-mouthed, and angry "Chinatown Cowboys" (qtd. in Kim 179).¹⁶ And Chin initiates the restoration of Asian American masculinity by redeeming Asian American men with the fundamental expression of masculinity: fatherhood. Kenji volunteers to be the father of Lee's unborn child, and Tam

¹⁶ Elaine Kim indicates that Chin endeavors to instill the history of American West with the Asian presence via cowboys. As Kim explains, "cowboys are thought of as manly and rugged; they are in stark contrast to the exotic stereotypes of [early Asian immigrants] as pigtailed heathens in silk gowns and slippers, whispering Confucian aphorisms about filial piety. Chin strives to differentiate [Asian] Americans from the unmanly and un-American stereotype of Asian culture [...] Chin wants [Asian] Americans to be associated with the men who built the railroads across the United States" (177). Here we can discern that in the earlier stages of his career, Chin identifies Asian culture as the source of Asian Americans' emasculation. Chin thus expresses an urgency to divorce himself from an effeminate culture of Asia and associate himself with the masculine culture of African America and the American West; in lieu of pigtailed Orientals, Chin valorizes black men and cowboys: rugged individuals who transgress the rigid cultural norms of the mainstream. Chin consequently changes his position about Asian cultural heritage, which I discuss in Chapter Five.

admits that he has never forgotten his children, Jonah and Sarah. Though mediated by Charley's words, Tam's "lousy Chinatown father" is rectified as "The Chinatown Kid," a gentleman who loved boxing and maintained a sense of dignity in the face of racism. Acknowledging the possibility that disidentification may be an "imperfect" solution for remasculinizing minority male subjects, Chin still must be recognized for establishing one of the "shaping paradigms of Asian American cultural studies" (Chu 65).

In the end, Chin is necessarily a "noise of resistance" to the hegemonic order by disrupting the silence that is imposed on people of color and enabling them to redefine their ethnic identities accordingly ("Racist Love" 65). Despite its occasional miscalculations, I still read Chin's disidentification as a milestone in the continued endeavors of marginalized subjects to effect change in the racial status quo. By striving to deconstruct the monolith of hegemonic masculinity, Chin and his protagonists critically affirm Asian American masculinity, which reconfigures the parameters of American manhood. Using Chin's framework to theorize Asian American literature, its scholars can attain more traction in critiquing the multiple (and at times contradictory) tensions that appear in these literary works. In reading the disidentification of Asian American men, the following chapters undertake a rigorous analysis of the political and personal stakes involved in what may possibly turn out to be a process of futility.

CHAPTER II

WORK MAKES THE MAN: THE MELANIZATION OF AN “ORIENTAL YANKEE” IN YOUNGHILL KANG’S *EAST GOES WEST*

Entrance into the work force has been, for most American men, a modern-day rite of passage. Work is the definitive factor by which men define themselves and by all accounts, it is a litmus test of their masculinity (Rubin 290).¹ During the turn-of-the-century, there was a discernible shift in the way that mainstream America began to perceive men’s bodies and their identities, which was heavily influenced by a convergence of socioeconomic and cultural changes that occurred at that time (Bederman 11). One of the major factors that contributed to the deflation of American (usually connoting white and heterosexual) men’s sense of masculinity in this period was the introduction of racialized masculinity into the work force: “immigrants and recently freed blacks ... demand[ed] recognition and rights, challenging native-born white men for dominance on what had been their turf” (Kimmel 85). For white men at the turn-of-the-century losing their exclusive claims to the workplace was tantamount to a dispossession of their masculinity. Once at the crux of masculine identity, work became an unstable

¹ Critics have outlined different ways in which work operates in relation to the formation of masculine identity. For example, Victor Seidler argues that work requires men to incorporate self-denial based on the Protestant ethic (111 – 3). Theodore Gradman’s perspective is less self-sacrificing; he contends that men consider work as the means by which to accrue “extrinsic” (social status) and “intrinsic” rewards (self-expression and fulfillment). Ultimately work is critical in men’s construction of self as powerful, self-reliant, and competent (105). He also observes that heterosexual men, in particular, equate success at work with increased capacity to impress and “win” a mate and in this sense, femininity becomes a prerequisite as a source of validation.

source of masculinity for hegemonic men when men of color began to lay claims to its privileges.

The turn-of-the-century marked the watershed years during which white men began to face serious contenders for jobs that they were able to formerly cite as theirs only. Hence it is not coincidental that white men who found themselves in the midst of a “crisis of masculinity” colligated discourses of masculinity and physicality.² The two became inextricable as a particularly acute focus on masculinity and the male body surfaced. Hegemonic men encouraged the conflation of masculinity and physicality in order to destabilize the emerging threat of women on traditionally male occupations by using physical strength as a demarcating factor. It was within this time span that the definition of masculinity specifically came to denote the opposite of femininity. What’s more germane in a consideration of racialized masculinity is that certain groups of men came to be labeled as effeminate; they were stripped of their masculinity, contingent on their race, sexuality, and class, all of which, in due course, determined their occupation.³ In efforts to reassess masculinity as a protean ideological construct, which is constantly being made, this chapter investigates the ways in which racially marginalized men reconfigured the parameters of American masculinity during the turn-of-the century.

² Bederman cautions against the use of the term “crisis” because it presupposes masculinity as a “fixed essence that has its good moments as well as its bad” (12). In *The American Man* (1980), Joseph and Elizabeth Pleck survey the changing definition of (hegemonic) masculinity; the Plecks’ understanding that the definition of masculinity encompasses permutation immediately dismisses the notion of fixity when regarding the American man.

³ Joseph and Elizabeth Pleck identify five general periods of masculinity; the turn-of-the-century falls under the “Strenuous life period” (1861 – 1919). For a more detailed review of the five phases, refer to *The American Man*.

Immigration is a movement of laborers and since the mid-nineteenth century, black migrants and Asian immigrants began to challenge white men's exclusive claims to wage earning work. Not only did they become vital in the labor force, these nonwhite men began to occupy an important role in the growth of American industry and agriculture. In essence, they participated in shaping the contours of urban America. At the same time, the increased dependency on the laborers of the racial margins begot a pervasive concern that their "effeminate progeny" would replace the "manly populations" of Nordic descent. In particular, protests about the "wretched yellow under-fed coolies, with women's garments over their effeminate limbs" became endemic (Kimmel 92).⁴ The feminization of nonwhite men was actively pursued in order to minimize their threat to "native-born white men." It is without much difficulty or hesitation that scholars of minority men's studies position nonwhite men as casualties and adversaries of dominant discourse; our next step, then, is to grapple with racialized masculinity's ambivalence towards the hegemony.

This chapter examines what may be one of the earliest accounts of disidentification by Asian American male subjects; I read Younghill Kang's *East Goes*

⁴ Najia Aarim-Heriot revisits the historical examinations of anti-Chinese sentiments in the mid-nineteenth century. She notes that negative images of the Chinese were longstanding even before the arrival of the first Chinese labors, and over time, the antagonistic attitude toward Chinese immigrants only escalated even though the white labor market in California was still "relatively insulated" from Chinese competitors. Thus hostility against the Chinese derived from reasons beyond grievances about the American labor market; for instance, the U.S. received 27 million European immigrants during and after the passing of the first Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. Aarim-Heriot suggests that the conspicuity of the Chinese immigrants targeted them as the whipping boys for the impersonal forces of post-bellum economic depression: the premise of industrialization, mass production and distribution was too complex to grasp and the Chinese immigrants offered a readier and tangible explanation for the discrepancy between a white worker's expectations and reality. Accordingly, she contends that the denunciation of the Chinese was more a byproduct of racism that informed the criteria by which the membership to American citizenry was determined (4 – 8).

West: The Making of an Oriental Yankee (1937) in order to investigate how Asian immigrant subjects negotiate the rigid confines of the dominant discourse by forging alliances with other men of color.⁵ Due to their unstable position within the American landscape, these Asian immigrants are not as explicit as some of their successors in articulating their disidentificatory desires; in some cases, these new Americans seem to reiterate the “negrophobic” discourse of the mainstream.⁶ Despite their occasional

⁵ Younghill Kang (1903 – 1972) was born in Hamkyong Province, which is located in northern Korea. Not unlike his protagonist Chungpa Han, Kang came to America 1921, just three years before the passing of the exclusionary laws, which banned Koreans from entering the U. S. for more than three decades. While working at various jobs to support himself, Kang attended classes at Harvard and Boston Universities. He worked as an editor at *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and lectured in the English Department at New York University. Here, Kang was befriended by Thomas Wolfe, who ultimately helped Kang publish his first book *The Grass Roof* (1931), which details young Chungpa Han’s life in Korea to the point of his departure for America. Considered Kang’s “most important work,” *The Grass Roof* was translated into several languages and won Le Prix Halperine Kaminsky in 1937 (Kim 33). In 1933, Kang published *The Happy Grove*, which is a children’s book based on the first part of *The Grass Roof*. Kang later noted with regret that his first novel was eclipsed by Pearl Buck’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Good Earth*, which was published in the same year. From 1933 to 1935, Kang went to Europe with a Guggenheim award and in 1937, Kang published his second novel *East Goes West*, which continues with Chungpa’s story in America. Though Kang regarded his second novel the more important one, “more mature in style and technique as well as more highly developed in content,” it was not as well received as *The Grass Roof*. *East Goes West* was published during the years of recovery after the Great Depression while the novel recounts the previous decade of hope and anticipation when Asian immigrants flocked to the United States in search of the “Gold Mountain.” Kang married a Wellesley-educated American woman, Frances Keeley, whom many critics now suspect helped Kang immensely in editing his novels. Their family lived in “genteel poverty” while Kang worked as a translator of Korean literature and book reviewer for the *New York Times* on Asian culture. Throughout most of his life, Kang remained a perennial wanderer of sorts; according to Elaine Kim, Kang was “never afforded a permanent niche in American life. Always a visiting lecturer, he was never offered a stable teaching position. Instead, he traveled from speaking engagement to speaking engagement in an old Buick, spellbinding Rotary Club audiences with his recitations of Hamlet’s soliloquy and his lectures on Korea” (43). Crediting Kang as the forefather of Korean American literature, Kim emphasizes the significance of *East Goes West* in the literary history of Asian America as a “cultural bridge” that allows readers to gain the valuable perspective of an Asian immigrant making a transition to Asian American (32). For a more detailed biography about Younghill Kang, please refer to Elaine Kim’s “Korean American Literature” and Sunyoung Lee’s “The Unmaking of an Oriental Yankee.”

⁶ Yen Le Espiritu notes that because Asian immigrants were not allowed to become naturalized citizens, their alien status rendered them more vulnerable to discipline and exploitation (29).

circumlocutions, it is evident that these disidentifying Asian American subjects' intent is to critique the racial hierarchy, which beleaguers *all* men of color. Kang has been esteemed as a "representative of the genesis of Asian American literature" by his personal success in making a transition from Asian to Asian American (Kim *Asian* 33). In *East Goes West*, his second novel, Kang draws on his own immigrant experience to discuss the Americanization of Asian (male) immigrant subjects. Arguably his most accomplished work, *East Goes West* has been lauded for not only tracing the early Asian immigrants' struggles to survive marginalization, but also for providing a "vividly realized account of the heady cultural mix" taking place on the fringes of American society (S. Lee 377). And in so doing, Kang pluralizes and calls for a transcendence of a racially bifurcated America.

Kang's protagonist, Chungpa Han, arrives in New York, just before the passing of the 1924 exclusionary law, which specifically targeted the Japanese and Koreans and banned them from immigrating to the U. S.⁷ From the onset, we see that early Asian Americans occupied an unstable position in society – both as a desired source of cheap labor and a menace to keep at bay from the "fraternity of white citizenry" (Nelson 11).⁸

⁷ The exclusionary laws were first passed to ban the immigration of the Chinese in 1882, then the South Asians in 1917, and were extended to include Koreans and Japanese in 1924. The Immigration Act of 1924 nullified the 1907 Gentleman's Agreement, which had terminated all labor immigration from Japan but had allowed the entry of wives and children of Japanese residents in the U. S. It was not until the McCarran Walter Act of 1952 and the Immigration and Nationality Act came into effect that the U. S. government lifted some interdictions against Asian immigrants (Chan 140 – 2).

⁸ As Rachel C. Lee notes, early journalistic representations of Asians glossed over differences in their nationalities and thus "indiscriminately applied" characteristics of any one Asian nation to all Asian immigrants. For example, the Asians were "the yellow peril," who posed great threat to the American labor forces, "serv[ing] as solid, unassimilable, racial wedges for the purpose of splitting the modern labor movement" (251). Elaine Kim agrees, "many of the depictions of Chinese have been generalized to Asians" (*Asian* 4). Consequently, with minor exceptions, the

Chungpa encounters a medley of minority subjects – ranging from fellow immigrants to nonwhite Americans – most of whom are forced to work a variety of menial jobs to survive the harsh realities of a racially-hierarchized society. As Chungpa soon discovers, the jobs most readily available to Asian immigrants like himself are domestic work, for which the main competitors are other men and women of color. Easily eliding the Asian immigrants’ history as “physical” laborers doing plantation, railroad, mining, or fieldwork (Kim *Asian* 23), Asian American men’s early employment record in urban life branded them as epicene. In effect, *East Goes West* delves into how the immigrant experience does not provide Chungpa with the “makings” of an Oriental Yankee but rather relegates him to an “Oriental Negress” (KJ Lee 343; Knadler 103). The importance of Kang’s novel derives from its capacity to not only capture the immigrant urban life in the 1920s but also to shed light on how Asian American men must negotiate their masculinity within an environment that systemically endeavors to undermine their gender identity.

Furthermore, the unfeasibility couched in the notion of an “Oriental Yankee” elicits an understanding that *East Goes West* is less about Chungpa’s pursuit of futile ways to assimilate to hegemonic masculinity, but more about how Chungpa seeks ways to negotiate and express his masculine subjectivity in America. Chungpa’s equivocal stance towards the hegemony manifests in his vacillating encounters with two Korean American expatriates, To Wan Kim and George Jum. The former is the exemplary “Oriental,” who is cultured, exotic, affluent, enigmatic, and an aficionado of fine arts.

incipient representations of Chinese American men have been extended to Asian American men in general. For the purposes of this essay, Asian American will be an all-inclusive term referring to men of Asian descent.

Kim's life ends tragically after his unrequited love with a Boston socialite, Helen Hancock. However, Chungpa is also befriended by a character that actively disidentifies with the conventional ways of becoming a man in America; George Jum has been largely overlooked as a minor figure and has been criticized for his enthusiasm for assimilation (S. Lee 378). A revisionary take on George involves a consideration of his disidentification and how his perspective informs that of Chungpa's. It is, in fact, George, who successfully learns how to articulate "the language of gyp," the language of the underclass who must contend with hegemonic discourse (Kang 274). By stylizing his body with black masculinity, George defines a "new type of subjectivity that does not just replicate the racialized and nationalized narratives" (Lowe 70); in a word, George's ambivalent relationship with hegemonic masculinity is precipitated by his active embrace of blackness in order to reclaim his sense of manhood in America.

Thus I situate my reading of the slippage between the contradictory desires of disidentifying subjects within an analysis of the tendentious positioning of work and labor in the perception of nonwhite men. I anticipate a simultaneous attention to issues of masculinity, race, hegemony, and work will enable me to elaborate on the ambivalent linkages between labor and masculinity. In this vein, this chapter calls for a closer inspection of men's working lives; Cecile Jackson notes that, surprisingly enough, the working man has been a relatively overlooked aspect of discourses pertaining to masculinity and also to (post-feminist) gender division of labor, which tends to favor a "default" discussion of women's perspectives. The workplace, which has been customarily gendered as a male space, does not necessarily confer gender authority for all men who are cleaved only by their race. Although nonwhite men were actively

“recruited” – be it by force or by economic incentives – to expand the American labor force, they were marginalized within the workplace and circumscribed from access to privileges enjoyed by white men.

One of the highlights of Kang’s *East Goes West* is its detailed depiction of a panoply of ethnic characters; Kang’s novel will be a permanent fixture in American literary history for its “richly entertaining and informative account of the cosmopolitan subculture of immigrants in the twenties and thirties” (S. Lee 394). At the same time, we must be careful not to relegate Kang’s novel as a historical record that documents early twentieth century immigrant subculture, as this curtails a comprehensive understanding of *East Goes West*. While literary works by minority writers tend to be “bifocalized” in that they mainly investigate minority subjects’ negotiation with “hegemonic cultural formations,” I agree with Stephen Knadler’s observation that Kang’s *East Goes West* is “trialectical” by navigating in the contact zone between the Asian immigrant and nonhegemonic subcultures, rendering heightened visibility to non-dominant groups within America (86). By restoring the “Negro question” within a personal history of an Asian-American-in-the-making, Kang transitions away from minority-majority relations to that between different ethnic sectors. As a result, both Kang and his protagonist Chungpa parry “the overdetermined binary logic” that obstructs diverse avenues by which different minority groups might coalesce (Knadler 86 – 7). Before we enter the critical space that Kang’s text offers for an investigation of early twentieth century immigrant texts, it is important to contextualize *East Goes West* within a historical survey of the “Afro-Asian conjunction” (Jones and Singh 5).

The “Negro problem” and the “Chinese question” have been harnessed together in the social, historical, and political contexts of America, but the early encounters between Asian immigrants and African Americans have all but escaped scholarly attention. What little has been uncovered about the relationship between the two groups seems to suggest that their histories began to significantly intertwine in the mid-nineteenth century, specifically in California.⁹ Very few records have been found concerning Asian immigrants’ stance and response to the racial diversity in America,¹⁰ but Arnold Shankman and David Hellwig have reviewed black periodicals from the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth centuries in order to elucidate the “ambivalent friendship” between African Americans and Asian immigrants. Both Shankman and Hellwig agree that although many assume that blacks were either indifferent to the Asian immigrants or reacted in a similar manner as did the whites, the early relationship between the first Asian immigrants and the African Americans was more complex and heavily determined

⁹ According to Arnold Shankman, the number of African Americans in California was relatively small and the Asian population soon outgrew that of blacks: “In 1860, there were 4,086 Negroes in California. [...] The black population of California grew at a slow rate until the twentieth century. On the other hand, the Chinese population of California grew rapidly in the 1860s, and by 1870 there were nearly 60,000 Chinese in the state” (*Ambivalent* 24). While the heavy concentration of the Asian immigrant population in the Pacific coast was conducive to researching the racial dynamic between blacks and Asian Americans, Shankman and Hellwig seem to suggest that their findings can be geographically extended beyond California. A more recent study contends that America’s racial anxiety over its destiny as a “composite nation,” which resulted in the passing of the exclusionary laws, impelled Sinophobia to a national level from a “sectional disease” (Aarim-Heriot 5). For an insightful study about Asians beyond the West coast, refer to James W. Loewen’s *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White* (1971).

¹⁰ Most Asian immigrant workers “vanished without leaving behind much written account of their individual lives in America (Kim *Asian* 23). It is difficult to know how these early Asian Americans perceived their immigrant experiences; the harsh conditions of their daily lives did not make it amenable for them to leave records of their experiences. The language barrier also made writing difficult, although they rarely left records in their native languages.

by issues of labor.¹¹ While the black reaction to Chinese immigration fluctuated from opposition to camaraderie, African Americans, for the most part, rejected the anti-Chinese sentiments that derived from racism against people of color.

True to form, blacks who first came face to face with the Asian immigrants ineluctably reiterated the white population's ethnocentric sentiments of fear for and aversion to the "Celestials."¹² They were initially prone to the belief that "John Chinaman, the almond-eyed son of Confucius," was an opium addict, who was "clannish, pagan in religion, immoral and secretive in habit, and a threat to their economic well being" (Hellwig 37). Reproducing public opinions about the exotic and the surreptitious Asians,¹³ blacks voiced concerns about cultural differences between Asia and America, which they feared would deter Asian immigrants from assimilating to American culture. Another growing concern for some black leaders was the fear that the influx of Chinese laborers would displace the freemen and "cripple the advancement of the ex-slaves"

¹¹ The ways in which certain anti-exclusionists exaggerated, distorted and stereotyped the qualities of Asian immigrants aggravated anti-Asian sentiments; supporters of non-exclusion promoted the stereotype of the compliant and industrious Asian so that they would appear more favorable than the unruly and disgruntled Irish and African Americans. In particular, the industrialists often advocated non-exclusion to advance their own capitalist purposes; they exploited Asian immigrants to drive down the cost of labor, use as a "wedge" against unions, and inculcate the idea among white workers that their status could be elevated by the entry of the Asians as society's new underclass (Takaki 232 – 240).

¹² As is demonstrated in Kang's novel, the opposite case also held true; both blacks and Asian immigrants perpetuate the stereotypes of each other. According to Stephen Knadler, upon arriving in the U. S., Asian immigrants, more often than not, acquired "Negrophobia" in order to distance themselves from blacks' marginal status (87). By so doing, the Negrophobic Asian immigrants inadvertently participated in and reinforced the hegemonic discourse which invidiously disenfranchises all minority subjects.

¹³ Rachel C. Lee notes that journalistic texts depicted Asians as both threats and exotic commodities, which American consumers could own and thereby "defuse" the threat they posed by "domesticating" the exotic (253). Since white consumers were the usual targets, their black counterparts had to resort to other methods by which they could debilitate the menacing John Chinaman.

(Hellwig 27); it is not surprising that labor issues worsened contention between nonwhite men who had to be wary of additional competition from any source.¹⁴

Furthermore, leaders such as Philip Alexander Bell, the editor of the San Francisco *Elevator*, edged away from the Chinese because they thought that connections with such an unpopular group as the Chinese were in California at that time would prove to be disadvantageous to African Americans. In fact, Bell urged his black readership to leave the Chinese to “let them ‘paddle their own canoe’” (qtd. in Hellwig 29).¹⁵ In “The Negroization of Chinese Stereotypes,” Dan Caldwell observes that in mid-19th century California, the Chinese immigrants and blacks were bracketed together for no other reason than their non-whiteness. According to one anonymous writer to the *Daily Alta*

¹⁴ With the steady influx of Asian immigrants, it became more fashionable for whites to hire Chinese maids, cooks, and butlers in place of their black domestics; as David Palumbo-Liu notes: “the ‘presentability’ of the ‘oriental’ is thus of higher value than the productivity of the ‘Negro’; the east domesticated and put into service is a sign of cultural capital that surpasses the actual value of the ‘Negro’” (119). Kang broaches this issue of “Oriental” presentability versus black efficiency in *East Goes West*: at his very first post as a houseboy, Chungpa learns that he and Mr. Pak replaced a “very tall Negro” who was able to do the work of two but was deemed less presentable by the lady of the house (63). The perceived immediacy of the issue propelled newspapers with black readership to report on accounts of the “strenuous brown brother [who] bid fair to excel the Afro-American.” There were also reports that Asian servants were “more and more in demand every year in New York. They are looked upon as more capable than any other kind of domestic help” (Shankman “Asiatic” 573). Upon encountering such stories in the newspaper, black domestics, porters, bellboys, and chauffeurs became concerned; with such high tensions running between blacks and Asians, some black editors drew even more attention to common misconceptions about Asians in order to firmly establish a collective nay against them. Yen Le Espiritu, however, maintains that it was not their “presentability” but their “exploitability” which made Asian Americans more preferable to white employers (110).

¹⁵ At this juncture, it is important to note that there was hardly a collective African American response to Asian immigrants, which greatly varied by time, geography, and among different groups. Bell’s *The Elevator* often published stridently anti-Asian editorials, articles, and letters. A prominent black San Franciscan, William H. Hall, regularly contributed op-ed pieces in *The Elevator*, in which he countered the anti-Asian position of its editors; at the same time, his disapproval was sometimes tempered by concerns that the rights of Southern blacks might be undercut by the newcomers. Contrary to *The Elevator*, Frederick Douglass’ *The New Era*, approximated his broadminded perspective. And groups like the Colored National Labor Union, who endeavored to bring attention to the particular problems and demands of black workers, called for unity of all workers, regardless of their racial affiliation.

California in 1853, the Chinese’ “physiognomy indicates but a slight removal from the African race” (qtd. in Caldwell 128). From a legal (and scientific) standpoint, the Chinese, in essence, had become black and had acquired all of the “negative” characteristics of that classification (130); accordingly, common perceptions of blacks and Chinese were conflated and shared.¹⁶ A magazine called *The Wasp* portrayed the Chinese with stereotypical black characteristics – very dark brown skin, thick lips, and black curly hair (130). Complaints from the likes of Hinton Helper, a racist Southerner, circulated about Asians and blacks living “side by side in characteristic filth and degradation”; the common assumptions about “evils of all colored people” not only promoted the “negroization of the Chinese stereotype,” but also reinforced a strict dichotomy between those who were white and those who were not (127 – 8). Black leaders were troubled by their affiliation with the Chinese, who were even more disenfranchised than were African Americans; what concerned them the most was that blacks could easily become the next target of the public’s denunciation of the Chinese.

At the same time, the black population vocally condemned discrimination against the Asian immigrants. Unavoidably, African Americans shared other Americans’ anti-Asian sentiments and endorsed widely-believed prejudices against Asian immigrants. Still they opposed anti-Asian exclusion and discrimination laws for their white supremacist thrust. As one D. Augustus Straker reasoned, “the opponents of the Chinese are the opponents of the Negro” (qtd. in Hellwig 31), and black leaders were careful to disassociate themselves from the whites whose antagonism derived from racism against

¹⁶ Luther W. Spoehr suggests the possibility that that in the absence of the blacks in late nineteenth century California, the anti-black sentiments were extended to the Chinese (185).

non-white people.¹⁷ Although the majority of African Americans were geographically removed from the Chinese and the loci of anti-Chinese agitation, they were familiar with the controversy, especially with the racist connotations of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. As the *Christian Recorder* noted:

Only a few years ago the cry was, not “The Chinese must go,” but “The niggers [sic] must go;” and it came from the same strata of society. There is not a man to-day who rails out against the yellow man from China but would equally rail out against the black man if opportunity only afforded. (qtd. in Hellwig 31)

Many blacks stood in the forefront in demanding that the Chinese be granted rights like other newcomers.¹⁸

All in all, despite occasional complaints of economic competition from the Asian immigrants, geographical distance separated most blacks from the masses of Asian immigrants, which minimized the rivalry between the two groups.¹⁹ The small number of

¹⁷ Following the humanist tradition, such distinguished and well-respected black leaders as Wendell Phillips, Frederick Douglass, and William Lloyd Garrison, among others, opposed the persecution of Asian immigrants. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, Frederick Douglass publicly voiced his views on the “Chinese Question” numerous times in his contributions to *Douglass Monthly* and *The New Era*; his 1869 speech, “Composite Nation” best articulated his perspective: “I want a home here not only for the negro, the mulatto and the Latin races; but I want the Asiatic to find a home here in the United States, and feel at home here, both for his sake and ours.” At certain moments, Douglass’ speech reiterated stereotypes about the “industrious, docile, cleanly, frugal” Chinese, who are “dexterous of hand, patient of toil, marvelously gifted in the power of imitations, and have but few wants.” On a fundamental level, however, Douglass condemned exclusionary policies as undemocratic, un-American, and a contradiction of the “composite nationality” that the Americans had become (qtd. in Foner and Rosenberg 209 – 45).

¹⁸ Hellwig does observe that the black’s advocacy for the rights of the Chinese was fortified only after rumors of importing Chinese labor in the South subsided. With the steady decline of blacks’ economic and political status, however, they became more inclined to criticize America’s “open-door immigration policy” (28, 37).

¹⁹ Shankman’s and other historians’ findings seem to indicate that blacks, much like their white counterparts, did not differentiate their attitudes toward Asian immigrants of different nationalities. Blacks’ indiscriminate stance toward Asian immigrants is seemingly mirrored by Shankman and other historians, who haphazardly alternate between using “Orientals” and more

African Americans in California also contributed to the curtailing of contention. It is, then, of interest to examine how Kang replicates (or transforms) this black-Asian relationship in a new urban setting of New York.

The North – New York, in particular – became the destination for many blacks in the late nineteenth century because as one man commented, up North, “a man could feel more like a man” (Laurie 158). Considered the “Negro capital of the world,” Harlem, in the teens and the twenties of the twentieth century, was synonymous with opportunity for black Americans. I submit that New York takes on a similar meaning for Asian American men in view of the fact that Chungpa considers it as a “magic city” that can regenerate the masculinity of nonhegemonic men. From the turn of the century until the 1929 Great Depression, Asian American men, who were marginalized in the “least desirable sectors of the labor market,” still occupied the lowest echelons of society (Chan 8). Though the largest Asian American community was located in San Francisco, New York is the city of Chungpa’s dreams; it is, in essence, “an idea, a ‘mental utopia,’ a place of

specific ethnic markers. Although Shankman’s study separately examines African Americans’ reaction to Chinese and Japanese immigrants, his findings suggest that they responded in a like manner towards both groups of immigrants. Blacks were not alone in eliding the different cultures and the complex international politics among Asian countries. As noted above, after surveying several twentieth century American journals to examine the early portrayals of Asian Americans, Rachel C. Lee concluded that they were often clustered together as coming from the “East in general” (251). But on certain instances, both blacks’ and whites’ reception of the Japanese varied from that of the Chinese. For instance, after Japan won the Russo-Japan War in 1905, blacks reveled in the Japanese victory as proof that “white is not always the conqueror when pitted against other races” (Shankman “Asiatic” 570). Widely circulated black periodicals – such as the *New York Age*, *The Voice*, *Horizon*, and the *Colored American Magazine* touted the Japanese as the first “colored race that merited respect” from the U.S. (Shankman *Ambivalent* 42). Black leaders urged African Americans to emulate the diligence and the enterprise of the Japanese people. Not surprisingly, after the outcome of the Russo-Japan War, whites became more guarded against the Japanese as “serious contenders” and a possible threat to white’s manly dominance (Bederman 198). The Japanese, who were thought to have proven their masculinity through imperialistic race war, were considered manly competitors for white laborers and likely to emasculate white men as breadwinners.

regeneration, a dream full of magic and mastery, a ‘glorious vision’ of enchantment and romance, a spiritual home” (Kim *Asian* 37). It is, also, a masculine space, which promises him with “opportunity, enterprise, prosperity, success” (Kang 6). Younghill Kang’s *East Goes West* is, perhaps, one of the first literary works to explore in a meaningful way a nexus between Asian and African Americans.²⁰

A majority of the earlier reviews overlooked a crucial aspect of Kang’s novel: the intersections between the lives of African Americans and Asian immigrants. Instead, the tendency has been to misread it as little more than a “charmingly informative memoir,”

²⁰ Wallace Thurman, whom Langston Hughes hailed as a “strangely brilliant black boy,” was an unconventional but popular writer during the Harlem Renaissance. In his novel, *The Blacker the Berry...* (1929), Thurman introduces a multiracial character, Alva, whose “mother had been an American mulatto [and] his father a Filipino. Alva himself was small in stature as his father had been, small and well developed with broad shoulders, narrow hips and firm well-modeled limbs. His face was oval shaped and his features were more oriental than Negroid. His skin was neither yellow nor brown but something in between, something warm, arresting and mellow with the faintest suggestion of a parchment tinge beneath, lending it individuality. His eyes were small, deep and slanting. His forehead high, hair sparse and finely textured” (97). Alva works as a presser at a laundromat, the only job for which he has any skills (168). Other than imprinting “oriental” features on Alva, Thurman does not directly address his Asianness any further; no one in the novel, not even Alva, makes remarks about Alva’s Asian heritage. It is interesting to see, nonetheless, how Alva complicates notions of black masculinity for Thurman, which is demonstrated by Thurman’s deployment of Alva as straddling masculinity and effeminacy. Emma Lou Morgan is Thurman’s heroine, whom he explains is both a victim and perpetrator of intraracial prejudice. Trapped in a society that worships and religiously replicates white standards of beauty, Emma Lou’s dark skin is a millstone that she cannot ever seem to shed, no matter how many arsenic wafers she eats or how often she blanches and cakes her face with vanishing cream and powder, bleaching ointments, peroxide solutions, and heavy makeup. Emma Lou moves to Harlem in search of a community that will embrace her as she is; instead, she finds Alva, who is only willing to put up with Emma Lou as a sugar mama. Emma Lou is tantalized by the “mysterious slant and deepness of [Alva’s] oriental-like eyes” and his “non-Negroid” face “neither brown nor yellow in color, but warm and pleasing” (121, 107); in other words, Emma Lou locates Alva’s masculine appeal in his Asianness. By the end of the novel, Alva’s alcohol addiction and homosexual tendencies are unveiled, and he fathers a child who is both mentally challenged and physically deformed. Ironically, it is Alva’s “Orientality” that ascertains his homosexuality and becomes a marker of his effeminacy. Throughout the novel, Alva is mostly identified as black; when he finds himself in a compromising situation, however, Alva’s “oriental” features prompt his racial castration. Alva’s body offers an apposite site wherein we can grapple with the reciprocity and the blurred boundaries between such categories as blackness, Asian Americanness, masculinity and femininity.

which faithfully reproduces a Korean immigrant's experience in America (S. Lee 378). Fraying the boundary between fact and fiction, most contemporary reviewers even failed to distinguish Kang from his protagonist, Chungpa Han and considered Chungpa a character sketch of Kang. Uncritically equating Kang and Chungpa, some early reviewers occasionally replicated extensive sections from *The Grass Roof* and *East Goes West* as substitute for biographical sketches on Kang. Conversely, they used Kang's biography without discretion to analyze and make conjectures about his novels. In her review, Katherine Woods declares that the book is "of course, *not a novel* [but] a candid record of 'the making of an Oriental Yankee'" (italics mine, 11).²¹ Even more recent reviewers engage in a nonsensical word play, remarking that Kang's books – referring to both *East Goes West* and his first novel, *The Grass Roof* – were "more properly novelized autobiographies rather than autobiographical novels" (Wade 57). Several well-known Asian American critics substantiate a conflation between Kang and Chungpa; Chung-Hei Yun identifies Chungpa as the "narrator-author" (80). Elaine Kim comments that for the most part, early Asian American literary voices tended to be autobiographical and spoke "primarily from the perspectives of an elite class of educated, nonlaboring immigrants" ("Korean" 158).²² To a certain extent, Maxwell Perkins, Kang's editor at Charles

²¹ Contemporary reviews of *East Goes West* include R. M. L., "Review of East Goes West, by Younghill Kang." *The New Republic*. 8 Dec 1937: 153 – 4; Elsie Weil, "Of Orientals Shipwrecked in America." *Books: A Weekly Review of Contemporary Literature*. 3 Oct 1937: 3; Katherine Woods, "Making of an Oriental Yankee: Younghill Kang's Story of his American Experiences Is a Lively and Revealing Venture in Autobiography." *New York Times Book Review* 17 Oct 1937: 11; Maxwell Geismar, "Gentle Arapesh." *The Nation*. 30 Oct 1937: 482.

²² Kyhan Lee notes that 1905 was the watershed year in Korean immigration. Prior to 1905, Korean laborers immigrated to the States for economic reasons, whereas the new throng of Korean immigrants post-1905 mostly came for political and intellectual ones; characteristically, a large number of the new immigrants were political refugees and young students (63). Thus, the

Scribner's Sons, manipulated the reviewers' misreading of Kang's work; perceiving the book not as a novel but as an autobiography, Perkins "unambiguously used Kang's own life as the standard against which to judge the manuscript's narrative [...] even suggesting that it be titled 'The Americanizing of Younghill Kang'" (Lew 174). He even intentionally left "mistakes, awkwardness, and foreignism" in Kang's prose to enhance the exotic appeal of the writer (Wade 59).

As Katherine Woods commented: Kang is "no cynic. He never picks up a big stick. He merely tells us what happened, good and bad, the sad and the merry, and always alive" (11). Such perspective is contingent upon reading Chungpa as an ingenuous immigrant who has yet to educate himself in the ways American. Ceding that Kang's work sometimes invites the readers to conflate the author and his protagonist, it is still important to interrogate, amid such critical duress to demote *East Goes West* from a work

earliest Asian American writers, according to Elaine Kim, were "not representative of the general population of Asian Americans. Foreign students, scholars, and diplomats [...] comprised a disproportionately large part of the early Asian American literary voice. Their writing is characterized by efforts to bridge the gap between East and West" (italics mine, *Asian* 24). Lee, however, does acknowledge that, although the early intellectual Korean immigrants and the first labor immigrants may have differed within the category of social status in Korea, their lives were not much different in America. In tandem to their studies, these "refugee students" worked on farms, railroads, and mines, and those in the cities earned their livelihood as cooks, waiters, and houseboys (64). Kang makes a similar observation in *East Goes West*; among Chungpa's nine Korean co-workers in a New York restaurant, there are "three Ph. D.s from Columbia [University], and two more to be next June; a B. A. and B. S. and one M. A." (87). Lee contends that while Kang, by virtue of his privileged background, may not have offered a representative voice for Korean Americans of his generation, Kang still may have been one of a few that were educationally equipped to "assume the difficult role of [a] cultural ambassador" (65). Walter Lew, on the other hand, is quite critical of Elaine Kim's reading of Chungpa as an "aristocrat." Lew argues that the Korean "yangban (i.e., literati or scholar-official class)" usually comprise "non-officeholding families in remote village," who lived in genteel poverty, often surviving by farming. That Chungpa came from a family of modest means is confirmed, says Lew, in *The Grass Roof* and *East Goes West*, both of which depict Chungpa's resources as being severely limited during his childhood and student years, and he only survives "through the pragmatic devising of temporary employments of himself" (176). It seems more likely that albeit his education and "yangban" status, Chungpa's life blended in with those of the "commoners" in his small village neighborhood as well as the tight-knit Asian immigrant community.

of creative achievement and literary import to a derivative personal account, why these reviewers and critics seem so determined to void Kang of his capacity to critically recreate American society within the pages of his novel. What's at stake for these reviewers is twofold; at a visceral level, highlighting the autobiographical dimension of *East Goes West* effectively authenticates its "oriental" peculiarity via Kang, its quaint Asian writer-protagonist whose lacking literary and linguistic faculties only allow for an unsophisticated narrative about himself. And they adumbrate the threat of the unassimilable immigrants by plugging *East Goes West* as a naïve immigrant author's charming recollection about his attempts to Americanize himself. Eliding the literariness of Kang's text not only reassures the readers that it corroborates the "mythologized story of the immigrant self-made man," who ultimately embraces the "whiteness of a naturalized consciousness" (Knadler 95), but dismisses the slightest reservation that an "outsider" would dare to critique or that there is, in fact, anything to reprove in the racial stratification of American society.²³

Kang critics of late have become more inclined to discourage the uncritical merging of Kang and Chungpa – or a transmogrified entity that Walter Lew drolly dubs "Khan" (176) – which, they claim, is indicative of a "presumption of artlessness in Kang's work" (S. Lee 379). Undermining any prospects of complexities in *East Goes West*, Lew argues, dilutes the significance of the novel's place within Asian American

²³ Despite her understanding of *East Goes West* as an autobiographical work, Elaine Kim does not seem invested, as Knadler indicts, in cataloging Kang's narrative as simply another "American success story." She objects to readings of Asian American autobiographical works that focus on the immigrant subject's *degree of success* because of the sociological implications involved. According to Kim, a pervasive assumption is that the criteria for success for an Asian-American is determined by the degree of his "Americanization," presumably obtainable at the expense of one's original Asian identity ("Korean" 159). Such a reading, I concur, is unproductive in that it does not fully dissect the convoluted processes involved in acculturation.

literary history and prevents readers from appreciating the novel's "trenchant ironies and satire" (176). And subsequent re-readings of *East Goes West* have lauded it as a "remarkable narrative of great complexity" (Palumbo-Liu 117), which provides a "highly sophisticated satire" about Asian immigrants' "misguided optimism and naiveté" and the "arrogance and ignorance" of the white American consciousness (Kim "Korean" 159). In tandem to a critical shift in the evaluation of *East Goes West*, we must also take into account that Kang himself perceived artists as fundamentally "propagandists [who] propagandize themselves." Parallel to Kang's creation of a savvy character who appropriates his own history to appeal to the avid consumers of the Orient, Kang exploits his readers' desire for the exotic by playing off the assumption that *East Goes West* is an autobiography. By propagating the presumption of synonymy between himself and Chungpa and reinforcing the misperception of artlessness, Kang is able not only to demonstrate to the American reading public that he is "citizenship-worthy" but, at the same time, to subvert the "crippling limitations" placed on immigrant authors and establish himself as a published writer (S. Lee 390).²⁴ Thus it is his careful mediation between the mainstream and the periphery, which enables Kang to become the protagonist of the proverbial American success story (J. Kim 51). In other words, Kang's

²⁴ In *Narrative as Rhetoric*, James Phelan observes that when authors intentionally employ naïve narrators, they do so in order to italicize the impression of progression; in other words, a naïve narrator's account of his story suggests that "the action is unfolding before [the readers] rather than being told after the fact." Although a naïve narrator tends to tell his story at some unspecified point after the experience, and logically should reflect his new perspective, it does not (103). The narrator's naiveté, according to Phelan, is strategically implemented so that the intimation of his changed attitude does not obstruct the power of the narratives. Phelan further argues that the readers' recognition of the narrator as someone naïve rather than highly sophisticated enables them to dismiss feelings of mistrust for the narrator as someone that is being "insincere, or deliberately withholding his knowledge for his own artistic purposes" (103). It is my contention that Kang wittingly characterizes Chungpa as a naïve immigrant to serve a dual purpose: garnering the appeal of the mainstream readership and covertly conveying a counterhegemonic message through Chungpa's seemingly innocuous observations.

mastery over the fragile balancing act of accommodation ultimately renders both him and his magnum opus an ideal site to examine the tactics of disidentification in play.²⁵

Recognizing the analytical capacity of *East Goes West*, critics have begun to italicize the cross-cultural convergence of Asian and African Americans in *East Goes West*. An African American presence permeates Kang's narrative, especially with its comprehensive descriptions of Harlem when it was "in vogue." Albeit obliquely, Kang "speaks through" two black characters, Lorenzo and Wagstaff, in order to critique America's discrimination against ethnic minorities (J. Kim 55). Wagstaff, in particular, expands Chungpa's understanding of surviving in the peripheries of a society that is racially discriminatory. Kun Jong Lee surveys at length the black presence in *East Goes West*, which is represented not only by black characters but also by jazz and other African American cultural and literary traditions. Highly regarding Kang's pioneering endeavors within Asian American literary history to critically approach popular stereotypes of African Americans, Lee notes that Kang "finds archetypal features behind the stereotypical images of African Americans, and delineates with understanding and sympathy their foibles, problems, fears, sufferings, frustrations, and aspirations" (331, 358). What these critics elucidate is Kang's recognition that Asian Americans and African Americans alike were tangential figures in America. However, Kang's critique against the racism inherent in dominant discourse is somewhat obscured in that it is his black characters that voice more explicit and forthright denunciation while Chungpa

²⁵ In contrast, Elaine Kim claims that although the literary merit of *East Goes West* prevails over that of *The Grass Roof*, the latter was better received by both the critics and the general reading public while the former was largely ignored. Kim attributes this discrepancy to Kang's deviation from the golden medium between an accommodationist and a hard-line position by "dar[ing] to present an unflattering view of the underside of American life" ("Korean" 158).

remains more subtle about his reproach. In so doing, Kang replicates stereotypes about the “aggressive” blacks and the “passive” Asians, and he retains a tentative position towards African Americans throughout the novel.

Chungpa mirrors Kang’s ambivalence to the hegemony by concurrently reiterating and destabilizing essentialist notions of blackness; previous critical interpretations about the Black-Asian conjunction in *East Goes West* are confined to Chungpa’s disconcerting oscillation. On one hand, Chungpa reinforces popular stereotypes about African Americans as “more primitive, natural, exotic, and subliminal” than whites (KJ Lee 332). According to Stephen Knadler, Asian immigrants often acquired “‘Negrophobia’ that acted as a strategic anxiety” for assimilation into mainstream society (87). Chungpa visits Harlem on his second day in New York and is immediately attracted by the colorful atmosphere of Harlem. The unique milieu of the “Negro Kingdom, [which is] more secret, more mysterious, more luxuriant, more soft, more exuberant” – is attributed to the conjuring of “the spice of Africa” and the degenerative and “flamboyant lazy magic [of] Negro jazz.” Without any “standardization,” the laughter which seems to pervade Harlem is “more hearty, the air was richer in suggestion, more emotion-filled; the colors had more depth, so had the smells; the lights . . . seemed mellower, gaudier, [and] more picturesque” (Kang 20). Not yet having “unacquired” his “Negrophobic” mindset, Chungpa’s characterizations of Harlem and its inhabitants are evocative of stereotypical assumptions about blackness.

Thus Chungpa seems generally confused and frustrated when he realizes that his societal position parallels that of African Americans: two days after he arrives in New York, Chungpa is sent to the Harlem branch of YMCA to find a job. But once he gets

there, Chungpa is told that there are no jobs for him because the available positions must not be given to a “Negro or an Oriental ... precisely because [the] branch *was* up in Harlem” (Kang 20). Chungpa’s admission of bitter disappointment is immediately followed by his primitivist caricatures of Harlemites, which evidences that Chungpa is promptly becoming familiar with hegemonic discourse. Having learned from random conversations with strangers that “an American should not [...] want to look like an ‘Indian,’” Chungpa stops at a barbershop to get his hair cut before his interview with Mr. Allen at the Harlem YMCA (18). For Chungpa, his long hair symbolizes his exclusion from the majoritarian discourse, and he is quick to assume an accommodationist position by uncritically adhering to the rules of white patriarchy – represented by Mr. Allen, whom Chungpa is eager to impress – in order to avoid being demarcated alongside the “Indians,” and others in a similarly disenfranchised position.

On the other hand, Chungpa considers Harlem as an embodiment of the spirit of the age and a “metonym for all modern American culture.” Knadler argues that Chungpa’s equation of modern America with Harlem invalidates the conventional (mis)understanding that Chungpa reiterates “the rhetoric of primitivism” (99). Chungpa also astutely discerns the commonality in the situation of all racialized masculinities and is empathetic towards his fellow inhabitants in the margins of American society. The image of the imminent lynching at the end of the novel – considered comparable to Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) – is often invoked as the moment in which Chungpa conclusively acknowledges the shared fate of blacks and Asians in America. In his nightmarish dream, Chungpa descends into and is confined in a “dark and cryptlike cellar [...] under the pavements of a vast city” by torch-bearing white men, armed with clubs

and knives. Entrapped in the cellar with Chungpa are “some frightened-looking Negroes,” all of who are about to be mobbed and set on fire by the “red-faced men” (Kang 401). Chungpa unmistakably aligns himself against the murderous racism of hegemonic masculinity. However, Chungpa’s subtle renunciation of racism is confined to a negative depiction of the irrational and sadistic “red-faced men.” Chungpa evades any overt criticism against his victimizers; instead, the dream is re-interpreted with a Buddhist explanation, with inspiring regenerative implications. Despite Chungpa’s attempts to defuse the pessimism the final scene, the readers are left with an insidiously persistent presence of the fear felt by the victimized. Chungpa does, indeed, empathize with blacks but this identification, for Chungpa, derives from a shared affliction of marginalization and is, by no means, constructive.

Notwithstanding the merit of filtering *East Goes West* through Chungpa’s perspective – who is, after all, the main protagonist – Chungpa’s problematic “balancing act” regarding African Americans has troubled readers and critics alike. Reading Kang’s novel with George Jum at its core, however, the readers become privy to a whole new understanding of the nexus between African and Asian Americans as well as Kang’s own convoluted gesturing toward disidentification. Knadler maintains that the same qualities which endeared *East Goes West* to mainstream readers caused its depreciation among Asian American ones who valorize counterhegemonic strategies above accommodation; in other words, Kang failed to appeal to Asian Americans, who are inclined to read for resistance. I take issue with Knadler’s willingness to dismiss the subversive subtext in *East Goes West*, which stems from his focus on Chungpa. Contradicting the notion that

the black persona is positioned as a “fundamentally negative figure against which [white Americans] have defined their quintessential American identity” (qtd. in KJ Lee 339), I submit that George embraces and stylizes himself as the black (male) persona. In so doing, George not only articulates his own masculinity but also complicates and reconfigures *the* quintessential American identity as malleable and encompassing of all American subjectivities, regardless of their racial and ethnic affiliation.

George is, perhaps, the most misunderstood character in the novel. He has received cursory – and mostly unfavorable – consideration from critics as well as the other characters in the novel: George is a “hedonist,” a typical “playboy,” the “Americanized Pagan,” a failed actor, and an unemployed cook who “fancies himself a dapper New Yorker.” The ever-flippant and “obscenely Westernized” George shamelessly “flirts, necks, drinks, and tells dirty jokes” like an American frat boy (E. Kim *Asian* 38, Chu 31, Knadler 100, Kang 54, 56). Moreover, George is criticized as the most “assimilationist” character in the novel because of his practicality and materialistic attitude by which he fares better than other Asian immigrants in the money-oriented American society (KH Lee 73, Wand 42). These critics, however, elide the specific ways in which George achieves success; whereas others succumb to the white logic, George survives and thrives by his dexterous maneuvering of a disidentificatory strategy.²⁶

²⁶ The characterization of George as a lady’s man parallels that of Lorenzo, a cook for a family that takes Chungpa in briefly; the resemblance between the two enables Kang to evoke hypermasculinity of black male subjectivity in order to combat the feminization of Asian American men. The threat of racialized masculinity (and of miscegenation) is marginally transposed to Chungpa via George. Under the guise of grooming Chungpa as his number one salesman, Mr. Lively surreptitiously suggests that Chungpa work as a “housemaid” at his home. When George comes to visit with his girlfriend June, Chungpa is immediately perceived as a threat to Elsie Lively, though Chungpa explains that George is not like most Asians. The Livelys solemnly decree that Oriental boys should not go around with American girls because it goes

The African American presence in *East Goes West* is employed to “blacken” America; Knadler claims that in so doing, Kang is able to divulge how heterogeneity has been stifled by dominant discourse. He contends that Kang and Chungpa critique white America by learning the language of gyp, or in other words, taking on the black perspective (99). Chungpa picks up the concept of “gyp” from Wagstaff, a black student who works at a “yessuh” job as an elevator operator (Kang 296). Wagstaff urges Chungpa to “learn the language of gyp, learn to gyp too. Confess honestly that right isn’t might, but might is right, always since the world began (274). Despite Wagstaff’s insistence that Chungpa “learn to gyp,” Chungpa’s assumption of a black perspective remains a contentious topic due to his ambivalence towards blackness.

There are several indications that Chungpa ultimately fails to articulate the language of the gyp or disidentify with hegemonic masculinity. For one, Chungpa is unable to persuade Wagstaff of parallels between the “Oriental’s” position and that of African Americans. Chungpa’s relationship with Wagstaff ends with the terrible flop of Chungpa’s party: Chungpa is dismayed to discover that his multicultural guests – the WASP Charles Evans, his Italian friend Cortesi, Wadanabe, Eugene, the Chinese student, Lopez, Wagstaff – will have nothing to do with one another (298). Chungpa and his party become representative of the splintered landscape of America, in which no one can successfully take on the perspective of another.

Also interesting is Chungpa’s encounter with Elder Bonheure, an African American preacher from Boston. The perennial subject of Bonheure’s Holiness Church,

against what God intended (161). George’s difference derives from his expressions of a masculine identity that acknowledges Asian American (male) sexuality. At the same time, it is rather telling of Kang’s ambivalence that he tempers George’s precarious sexuality by characterizing him as a fop, which induces allegations of homosexuality.

observes Chungpa, is “sex-morale” (369). As such, Bonheure’s sermons and the testimonials of his congregation are permeated with issues of sex, which reiterates the stereotypical correlation between blackness and hypersexuality. When Bonheure invites Chungpa to speak as part of his ministry, Chungpa starts his speech with a “Washingtonian message of self-help and discipline” (Knadler 104). He urges his audience to “make something of yourselves. Be educated. [...] Don’t depend on your leaders. They can’t help you. Nothing can, but your own will to make something of yourself” (Kang 367). According to Knadler, Chungpa is delivering here “less an accommodationist message than an indirect warning to the congregation to distrust ‘good-time’ con-artists and ministers who might abuse their trust and need for uplift” (104). This incident, nonetheless, becomes further evidence of Chungpa’s inability to articulate the “language of gyp”; for every caveat the congregation comes back with “Hallelujah! Praise God! Christ is here!” (Kang 367). Not only does Chungpa fail to communicate his message to his audience, he becomes the “miracle” that confirms their faith in what Bonheure preaches. In tandem, Chungpa, although marginally differentiated, is reinscribed by the stereotypical construction of the Chinaman as an uncivilized and illiterate “alien”: during Chungpa’s testimony, one woman cries out, “Chinaman can speak, too! Chinaman can read!” (367). However, the fact that Chungpa is still marked as a Chinaman (and not a Korean American) indicates that he is still circumscribed within a race logic that cannot discriminate between Asian American subjects and their stereotypes. After Chungpa’s speech, Bonheure tells him that “some words you don’t speak right. [...] It’s genu-wine, you know, not genuine” (367). Even as

Bonheure's lack of education is satirized (Knadler 104), Chungpa is still susceptible to Bonheure correcting the mispronunciations of the "Chinaman."

George, on the other hand, proves to have mastered the language of gyp, which he demonstrates by successfully maneuvering and prevailing in a work place that is unwavering in its endeavor to disenfranchise him. George's articulation of gyp is distinguishable from performing racial mimicry; it is the method by which he articulates his masculine subjectivity. George transgresses the racial boundaries and immerses himself in black cultural expressions. George feels entitled to call himself a fellow Harlemiter; he frequents Harlem nightclubs, shares in the insider jokes, and woos a cabaret dancer, June. To George, Harlem is a place of no standardization, which he enters of his own accord so that he may disidentify with the dictates of hegemony. George's disidentification becomes more apparent when posited against To Wan Kim, a fellow expatriate whom Chungpa befriends.

Kim represents the Oriental par excellence; he is the cool, aloof, melancholy, and "handsome Easterner with nameless elegance," who conveys an "Asiatic gentlemanly reserve" (Kang 93, 164). Kim no longer considers himself Korean due to his extended absence from the homeland; instead, he is a cosmopolitan – belonging to all and none – and thereby occupies a ghostly position in the new world. Inconsistent with his transmigrant temperament, Kim demarcates the rigid confines between diverse cultural spheres and purports that a coalescing of two distinct cultures is unfeasible (165). Kim embodies the rigid containment of a binary logic. For Kim, negotiation equals transgression, and in his company, the only kinds of cultural consumption that Chungpa witnesses are exploitative ones. Chungpa accompanies Kim to a party in Greenwich

Village; the party scene is a “jungle shrine,” decorated with “obscene” African idols and peopled by drunk disciples of African jazz, which sound “mechanized and artificial” even to Chungpa’s inexperienced ears (173, 176). A girl engaged in a drunken dance demands that Alfred, a young African American man, “act like a child [...] d-dance and sing – and be-be a Negro” (175). The girl’s annoyance with Alfred who refuses to act his race does not extend to Kim, who, for the most part, assumes a passive façade. Kim speaks only when he is spoken to about subjects apt for an “Oriental artist” like his brushwork or European abstract artists. As a matter of fact, Kim and Alfred remain calm, collected, and reticent about the flagrant spectacle of the party scene. Though they are set apart from the rest, whose skewed perspective of the Harlem Renaissance tropicalizes black cultural expressions to primitive and essentialized stereotypes, both are very much the tacit enablers.

Despite his disdain for and disenchantment with the Western way of thinking, Kim cannot divorce himself from its logic by perpetuating the popular stereotype of “Orientals” as the exotic other. Kim is tragically caught in the racial and cultural boundaries that he tenaciously establishes, and Kim’s inability to disidentify with the dominant discourse portends his tragic ending; as Chungpa observes, Kim’s death is intrinsically connected to his inability to “nod his head to a syncopated tune” of the blues (397). Kim remains the exotic Asian until the end, and is not outfitted to traverse the racial boundaries. Kim cannot subvert and thus never sheds the cloak of Oriental mystery given him by the hegemony. Kim hopes that his physical and temporal distance from Korea will elicit a racial separation; by his binary logic, Kim’s renunciation of his Asian heritage renders him non-Asian, if not white. At the same time, he must embrace an

assimilationist position, which requires him to retain such “Orientalist” charms as passivity and exoticism. Still, Helen’s family is unwilling to recognize Kim as a suitable mate and Kim is effaced from the American landscape. Kim’s displacement becomes absolute as he loses “Helen of the new age of time” (390). Until the end, Kim is trapped in a binary logic; Chungpa comments that Kim has only two roads ahead of him – one that leads him to Helen and the democratic America that she embodies and the other to Communist Russia. Kim chooses Helen over Russia and Helen’s death inevitably leaves him with a solitary option. In losing Helen, Kim is not only debarred from American manhood but is expelled from the social order; he even loses his tenuous position as an exotic Asian with the demise of his family’s wealth, his sardonic intellectualism, and artistic talent. His presence in America is completely expunged, as even his final resting place is lost.²⁷

George, on the other hand, exemplifies fluidity and constructive merging of cultural spheres. More importantly, George is someone who can skillfully engross himself in the “personality of a crowd” yet not loses sight of his own identity (78). George invites Chungpa to the mecca of black America, a place that defies and destabilizes the norms of the hegemony. Under the auspices of George, Chungpa enters Harlem and encounters a tall black dancer who subverts hegemonic masculinity; not only does she challenge the norm of American womanhood, which dictates that she is “weak and ornamental,” she caricatures and thereby destabilizes the notion of black hypersexuality (80). Chungpa also meets such characters as June, who suggests that a

²⁷ For expressing her miscegenational desire by pursuing a relationship with Kim, Helen is banished from polite society to various mental sanatoriums for rest cures, and finally dies in a rest home (388).

separation between the external and the internal is feasible, indicating that Chungpa may have a chance to realize his dream of becoming an “Oriental Yankee.” June, who whimsically changed her name from May when she met George, is the “boneless” dancer whose elasticity amazes Chungpa. Though her stark white body requires that she stain her body brown for her act, June is differentiated from the mechanical dancers on Broadway’s minstrel shows because she is a white girl with a “Negro soul” (81). Discerning June’s duality, Chungpa realizes that it is possible to transgress the racial marker of one’s body and embrace the essence of another.²⁸

That Chungpa’s emasculation is effected by his marginalization within the workplace is implied several times throughout the novel. Entrance into the economic life of Americans is noted as the most formidable task that all immigrants undertake (277). There is an awareness among Asian immigrant workers that within the socioeconomic reality of the New World, where “the only goal for a man is money and power,” these goal are unattainable for men who are not men in the eyes of American society; were they to achieve the manly goal of money and power, they would not be admired but hated and feared (231). While this exclusion disillusioned many an immigrant worker, George actively enters the “borderland spaces” of the disenfranchised (Knadler 86) in order to

²⁸ Kang offers no explicit indication that June may be biracial, although he makes allusion to June’s “warm eyes [...] that have got real connection,” the “chalky” pallor of her white skin, her “poinsettia” lips, and her “lazy, magnetic laugh” (79, 81, 83), which are analogous to features often used to describe mulatto women. Historical references indicate that internalized racism prompted a preference for light-skinned mulattoes in the 1920s Harlem, even if it meant that the dancer/actress had to artificially darken her skin to don a more “authentic” look. It is less important to determine whether or not June is biracial; what I italicize is that Chungpa believes her to a white woman who transcends racial boundaries and thereby subverts hegemonic discourse.

articulate his masculinity. In regards to work, Chungpa is feminized from the onset: his first job is as a houseboy, during which he is instructed to not only wear an apron that makes him “look like a woman on the lower part of his body” but also act like a “shy Korean bride” (Kang 61, 63). This initial experience is extended to Chungpa’s subsequent posts. Chungpa briefly works for a box-making factory alongside black women, who comprise the majority of the workforce. Parallels between Chungpa and his (female) co-workers are clearly drawn when a girl puts her friend’s hat on Chungpa’s head to see if he looks like a “negro woman” (Kang 132). Furthermore, David Palumbo-Liu notes that Chungpa expresses an aversion to the “logic of [American] work environments” (121). Chungpa is reluctant to touch on “the vulgar topic of money,” becomes bemused amid the hustle and bustle of his surroundings, and is frequently fired because he does not “square with American efficiency” (Kang 29, 91). In other words, Chungpa cannot habituate himself to the impersonal “regimentation” of the work place, although the enterprise of modern America had initially prompted his emigration from the antediluvian East (312). Over and above the “womanly work” made available to Asian American men, Chungpa’s inability to internalize the work ethic – which is essential to the American definition of manhood – is what hinders him from claiming his masculinity.

Nonetheless, I observe that Chungpa implicitly resists his feminization: for instance, Chungpa continuously stresses his ineptitude as a houseboy and a salesperson for Mr. Lively. Owing to the fact that these are stations, which oblige him to assume a subordinate, if not servile, position to hegemonic men, I submit that Chungpa intentionally falls short in order to deter his relegation as a tractable source of labor. In

addition, Chungpa describes in detail his success as a farmhand doing manual work at the Higgins' farm (208). He also draws the readers' attention to his "worker's hands" which, despite the efforts of his dear dead grandmother to groom him into a scholar, were "broad and spare, padded firmly and thick, the hands of some archaic generation close to the antique plough" (166); Chungpa's hands, which "looked like those of a person of action" connect him to the land: a site of masculine labor (166). Although the problem again lies in that Chungpa is not explicit about his intentions to disarticulate hegemonic discourse, we can still infer that Chungpa, in his circumlocutious way, strives to revise the effeminate construction of Asian American masculinity.

Conversely, George, formerly an ambassador to Washington from Korea, quits his job and opts to become a cook: "The wages of a good cook are \$50 a week with board, room and laundry. Better than a bank clerk or a college instructor, you will find. And it's much better money than when I was an ambassador" (35). Exchanging his diplomatic duties for culinary ones, George is nonetheless successful in re-masculinization by firmly situating himself in the American workplace, thanks to his shrewd understanding of his positionality within the American labor force, his practicality, and his efficiency in executing his job as a cook. Although George deviates from the conventional registers of masculinity, he is still able to capture the true essence of American life – that is, materialism – through his disidentificatory tactics, which entails positioning himself alongside the disenfranchised.

George espouses black expressions of masculinity to deter hegemony's interpellation of Asian American men as effeminate, and Kang partakes in the subversion of the American norm by creating a character that actively challenges and counteracts the

dominance of white men. Nonetheless, Kang's ambivalence tempers the significance of George's acts of disidentification; he risks evoking homosexuality and effeminacy by portraying George as a fop. Furthermore, George is exiled from the mainland and relocated to Hawaii after his failure as an actor in Hollywood. Kang ultimately distances himself from George and renders insufficient George's disidentificatory strategy, which falls short in permanently situating George in (mainland/mainstream) America.

Moreover, Chungpa's search for the "makings" of an "Oriental Yankee" – a third space in which one can skillfully maneuver between assimilation (becoming a "Yankee") and resistance (remaining an "Oriental") – seems to remain inconclusive. Chungpa's positionality in America is left bifurcated: American or Asian. Chungpa expresses his misgivings when Senator Kirby urges Chungpa to consider himself American, not Asian: "I can see you have come to America to stay [...] Now you must definitely make up your mind to *be* American. Don't say, 'I'm a Korean' when you're asked. Say 'I'm an American'" (383). Chungpa regards Senator Kirby's blind optimism with suspicion and persistently attempts to point out the futility of his attainment of an American citizenship.

Nonetheless, when Chungpa finds himself upon a precarious bridge between the East and the West in a penultimate dream, Chungpa relinquishes his reach for the East, which has now become a "never-never land," and instead clutches what epitomizes America: money, contracts and business letters, and his keys, especially to his American car (400). And albeit his introduction to alternative ways of becoming a man in America, Chungpa reverts to an assimilationist track and seeks to masculinize and Americanize himself by pursuing Trip; she is his Helen and the attainment of her white female body will signal his successful acclimation to white American standards. Though he forgets his

childhood friends Yunkoo and Chak-doo-shay at the other side of the bridge to join Trip, she immediately deserts Chungpa as his dream concludes with his confinement in the cellar with African Americans facing imminent lynching.

Despite the frenetic vacillation between “accommodation” and “resistance,” Kang’s *East Goes West* initiates constructive discussions about the troubled process of identity formation for early Asian immigrants before the creation of an Asian American ethos. Admittedly, these Asian American male subjects’ unstable positions as alien immigrants stymies a full realization of their disidentificatory desires. However, I argue that their affiliation to the counterculture of African America is not cursory but results from an acknowledgement of their shared affliction by the racial hierarchy that excludes men of color from American manhood. In this manner, Kang’s novel not only explores disidentification as a viable strategy for the realization of Asian American masculinity but also exemplifies its limitations; yet the slippages that occur in the disidentification process allows us to delve into the unresolved conflict between the multiple ways of belonging in America.

CHAPTER III

“PAPA’S MAYBES”: FATHERS LOST AND FOUND IN GUS LEE’S *CHINA BOY* AND *HONOR AND DUTY*

“Chinamans do make lousy fathers.”
– Frank Chin, *Chickencoop Chinaman*

“As long as you can, you will please the father,
the most holy and fragile animal.”
– Chang-Rae Lee, *Native Speaker*

“I wrote [my father] out of *China Boy* – he became an absentee father.
Had I written the truth, he would have become the bad guy.”
– Gus Lee

In Younghill Kang’s *East Goes West*, a minor character Pak laments his diminished opportunities of becoming a father by coming to America; he bemoans that no children signifies “no more [him]!” This is sin! This is crime of ... race suicide!” (60). The previous chapter discusses labor as one site of masculinization for Asian American men; at the same time, it usually extracted them from the home/land and the role of the father. Fatherhood and its correlation to masculinity has been a steadfast topic in the general discourse. Several decades into the twentieth century, public interest in the paterfamilias mounted as the “listless, lifeless, enervated [and] feminized” men of the postwar era became a huge social issue. The “enervation of American manhood” was commonly attributed to “archetypally absent fathers,” first away to war and then to work (Connell 10). Due to its perceived effect on the formation of male identity, fatherhood has been increasingly emphasized as the role that truly matters to a man. “Healing the

father wound” has thus been foregrounded as the most effective way to recapture American (national) manhood and in this regard, sincere efforts have been made to resituate the father into the domestic setting so that he might not only reinforce his own masculinity but also ensure that of his son’s.

The Asian American father remains a tangential figure within the context of American manhood; as such, the perfunctory concession of Asian American men’s fathering capacity alerts us to their precarious position in the coterie of hegemonic men. The historical narrative of Asian America offers countless examples – from the bachelor societies to bans on interracial marriages – of how its men were frustrated from the onset in achieving fatherhood and hence, their masculinity. Elided in the larger social context, Asian American fathers have been, more often than not, characterized as intimidating, distant, and dismissive tyrants who browbeat their families into submission. Prevailing depictions inexorably relegate these men to absent patriarchs who unduly demand respect and are stringent enforcers of the Law. Though not quite included into the national body, Asian American fathers have nonetheless become complicit in the hegemonic oppression of other minority subjects who are already demoralized by racism.

Gus Lee chronicles an Asian American son’s tenuous and conflicted relationship with his Chinese immigrant father in his two novels.¹ *China Boy* (1991) and its sequel

¹ Gus Lee (b. 1946) was born in San Francisco as the first son and the youngest child of five. His two novels *China Boy* (1991) and *Honor and Duty* (1994) closely trace Lee’s own life; like his protagonist Kai Ting, Lee was five when he lost his mother to cancer and had a difficult childhood. Lee recalls that he was always subjected to curious stares as a “different fish in the pool” as his family moved from a predominantly black neighborhood to a predominantly white one (Elgrably). At home, Lee did not get along with his stepmother Edith (after whom *China Boy*’s Edna is modeled). Following his father’s wishes, Lee attended West Point for three years but left after receiving failing grades in math and engineering. Lee went on to get his bachelor’s and law degrees from University of California at Davis; during this time, he also served as the

Honor and Duty (1994) are semi-autobiographical novels, in which Lee recounts the poignant coming of age story of young Kai Ting whose parents – a dead mother, absent father, and abusive stepmother – are remiss of their custodial duties. Thus read in tandem, Lee’s two novels elucidate the intricate mechanism of Asian American identity formation and foster critical discourse on the minority subject’s extensive process of reconciliation with the hegemony.

Lee’s first novel trails a lone “China boy” through the rough-and-tumble neighborhood of the San Francisco Panhandle in the 1950s.² Under the guidance of a

project coordinator of the Asian American Studies Program. After receiving his law degree, Lee served in the army as a prosecutor and judge advocate. Due to his superiors’ “reluctan[ce] to put an Asian soldier in a command position,” Lee was not sent to Vietnam (“China”). Instead, he was sent to Korea, not for active combat duty, but to investigate foreign national recruits. After his hitch in the army, Lee returned to California where he worked as an attorney and legal educator. Lee soon became fully committed to his writing and his first novel *China Boy* was a runaway success and was selected by the Literary Guild, *The New York Times* as the “Best of 1991,” and by the American Library Association as “Best for the Last Fifty Years” (Guthmann C – 1). *Honor and Duty* received similar acclaim; it was selected by the Book of the Month Club, *The Chicago Tribune*’s “Best Ten Novels of 1994,” and was placed on the mandatory reading list at West Point. His third novel *Tiger’s Tail* (1996), which was based on his experience in Korea, also became a best-seller. His courtroom experience was the basis of his next mystery fiction, *No Physical Evidence* (1998). In 2003, Lee published his first non-fiction book, *Chasing Hepburn: A Memoir of Shanghai, Hollywood, and a Chinese Family’s Fight for Freedom*, which centers on the life of his parents in Shanghai during the Chinese civil war. Lee now lives in Colorado Springs with his family and his newest novel, *Methods of Death*, is forthcoming.

² Located in the middle of the San Francisco Bay, Angel Island was the entry point for immigrants from Asia, just as Ellis Island on the opposite shore was one for European immigrants. In order to facilitate the implementation of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the Bureau of Immigration erected an immigration station on Angel Island. From 1910 to 1940, the station processed most Asian immigrants to the United States; many of them were detained on the island as long as two years in bleak and unsanitary conditions while they were interrogated on the minutiae of their immigration applications. Many immigrants expressed their anger, sadness, and frustrations about their initial reception in America by carving poetry on the wooden walls of the island’s buildings, which have been anthologized as an important part of the Asian American narrative (“Angel”). In the early 1970s, these poems were rediscovered on the walls of the barracks and in order to preserve them for historical interpretation, the station was designated as a state landmark in 1976. Almost two decades later in 1997, the Angel Island Immigration Station was declared a National Historic Landmark (“Angel”). In tandem, the formation of an urban Chinese community, according to Ronald Takaki, began in San Francisco. For Chinese

neighborhood friend Toussaint (Toos) LaRue and his boxing coaches at the YMCA, Kai embarks on a rigorous path to the “violence and the realm of the fist” that is American manhood (*China* 66). Lee resumes Kai’s story in *Honor and Duty*, and the readers are reacquainted with Kai, who now attends West Point. Both novels highlight Kai’s continuing struggles to come to terms with his Chinese immigrant father K. F. who, throughout the span of the two novels, vacillates from an antipathetic “lousy” father to a “holy” one, deserving of honor and filial duty.³

Meanwhile, both father and son seek inclusion into American society even though they are distressed by its racist discourse that breeds self-hatred in Asian American men. Initially, the two devise contradictory survival strategies to reconcile with their marginality in American society; with a white wife in tow, K. F. takes a “major-league step toward cementing the American assimilation” (58). In contrast to his accommodationist father, young Kai undertakes a campaign of resistance. Owing to his sentience of the shared affliction which racially marginalized people share, Kai strives to become a black Panhandle “streetfighta” – a feat that is a “competitive, dangerous, and harshly won objective” (2, 4). Kai apprehends that the struggles of a Panhandler boy, who is armed only with his anger and his fists, is “really an effort to fix identity, to

immigrants, San Francisco was *Dai Fou*, or “Big City” and large numbers of Chinese laborers from rural and mining areas flocked to San Francisco as the “locus of industry” (79). Several writers have recognized the significance of San Francisco in the annals of Asian America. Frank Chin venerates “Frisco” as the city in which the history of Asian America began: “Frisco,” says Chin, “is the soul of [Asian] America” (“Letter” 2). In an interview, Gus Lee commented that in *China Boy*, San Francisco is not merely a setting but “a character, a player, a force which, in the case of so many of us, acted as a caring parent and a willing guide” (Guthmann C-1).

³ Ting Senior is inconsistently referred to as T. K. in *China Boy* and K. F. in *Honor and Duty*. In this chapter, I refer to Kai’s father as K. F. I hypothesize Lee corrected T. K. to K. F. in the sequel. I base this on the fact that the father’s given name is indicated as “Kuo-fan” elsewhere (*China* 8).

survive as a member of a group and even succeed as a human being” (3). Kai is confident he will realize his goal, even though he is cognizant that it is made all the more difficult because of his ethnic affiliation. Kai’s disidentification in the first novel hence entails a China boy’s earnest efforts to transfigure his Asian Americanness with blackness in order to confound and disrupt the oppressor’s logic that denigrates all people of color.

The breakdown of the Asian American father-child relationship is a recurring theme in contemporary literary works and Lee’s *China Boy* offers three such examples; not only Kai but each of his parents have discorded with their respective fathers before the Ting family left China. As such, Lee’s works provide viable sites in which to discuss the ethnic patriarch and in particular, how K. F. factors into the convoluted processes of Kai’s disidentification over the course of both novels. Still, Asian American literary critics have been inclined to set Lee’s writings aside. Most reviews focus on Kai’s contentious relationship to whiteness as embodied by his stepmother, Edna McGurk Ting, which conceivably is incidental to K. F.’s absenteeism from the Ting household (as well as the novel). A major part of this chapter, hence, is invested in drawing attention to Kai’s toxic relationship with his model minority father K. F. who, to a greater extent, guards himself and his history from Kai and inadvertently colludes to keep his son’s masculinity in check.⁴ I argue that Lee’s first novel, in particular, elucidates the tension between racialization, masculinization, and patriarchy, which prompts critical inquiry into the reciprocity between the public and domestic spheres in the emasculation of Asian

⁴ Of his two novels, Lee says both were books that “had to be written in order to save me and my son from repeating the errors of the past. [They] reminded me of the father I was supposed to be, and described the father I could be, if there were any fairness in the world. [Writing them] was a huge wake-up call as to the real priorities in my life, which had nothing to do with professional accomplishment, but everything [to do] with taking care of my family and being the best I could, relationally, with everyone I knew” (Elgrably).

American male subjects. For instance, K. F.'s social invisibility is reassigned to the Ting household as he is immobilized to intervene on the behalf of his children who are neglected by Edna, his new wife.⁵ In tandem, Edna's maniacal efforts to expunge "China" from the boy as well as eject the boy from the home are paralleled by Kai's infirmity in the streets of the Panhandle. By delving into the dysfunction of the Ting household, we expand our understanding of Kai's disidentification, which is represented as his resistance against the two prevailing hegemonic proxies in his life: K. F. and Edna.

China Boy italicizes the notions that manhood is not given but is earned as Kai undergoes a series of physical and emotional battles to legitimize his masculinity without the paternal guidance of K. F. In lieu of cataloging K. F.'s shortcomings as a parent, this chapter re-reads Lee's *China Boy* by concentrating on the ramifications of Asian American fathering (or lack thereof) in the context of a bildungsroman of a young Chinese American male subject. Lee and his protagonist's equivocation about the body paternal galvanizes critical re-consideration of Asian American fatherhood in the formation of minority masculine subjectivity. In *China Boy*, Kai disidentifies with the dominant discourse and defies his own assimilationist father, who subsumes the model minority stereotype of his own accord. At the same time, Lee tacitly imparts his unease about Kai's disidentificatory strategy by brushing his protagonist with a touch of comicality; Kai's determination to become black is depreciated as a facetious act. Lee's dismissal of Kai's distinctive method of disidentification prompts his readers to

⁵ By the time Edna enters the Ting household, the two eldest children, Jennifer Sung-ah and Megan Wai-la, had already left home for college. Edna, says Kai, considered the remaining two Ting children, himself and his older sister Janie Ming-li, as burdens who are out to ruin her wonderful [new] life with K. F. (*China* 65).

interrogate what is ultimately at stake for Kai and Lee in disarticulating the majoritarian discourse via appropriating blackness.

Accordingly, the latter part of this chapter reads Kai's trials and tribulations in the Panhandle against his West Point experience in order to critique Lee's shifting position regarding Kai's deployment of the disidentificatory strategy. In *Honor and Duty*, Lee again intimates the limitation of Kai's disidentificatory acts. At West Point, Kai is no longer an awkward and scrawny China boy who has a laughable desire to become a black boy. Instead, he is a charmingly witty and brawny Chinese American cadet whose resolve to become Mr. All-American is no laughing matter. Set between a "wide sparkling azure river and hard-rocked, deep-green forested mountains," West Point becomes Kai's arcadia wherein he can "merge directly into the white tapestry of American history" (*Honor* 31, 57). Within this citadel of hegemonic masculinity, Kai finds himself increasingly drawn to his father's assimilationist strategy as Kai struggles to negotiate his position within his Asian American family and among his white peers to whom he constantly feels inferior.

Kai tries to uphold a semblance of simpatico to the African American community via Sam Marse, a black BP (barracks policeman/building janitor), but his endeavors are sparse and cursory; he occasionally evokes Toos, Momma LaRue, and Deloitte (a.k.a. Sippy Suds), but Kai in effect disconnects himself from his bulwark during his difficult childhood in the Panhandle. Kai's conversion is, perhaps, predictable when we learn the meaning of his name. As Mah-mee explains to her young son:

"Here," she said, "is your family name. Ting means 'human,' 'individual.' [...] Kai means 'reform,' 'educate,' 'improve.' [...] You will learn the noble strokes of your noble name" (47)

Read in concert, Lee's strategic shifts in alliance from black expressions of masculinity in *China Boy* to white ones in *Honor and Duty* become evident a fortiori. Therefore, it is important to determine if Lee embeds a subtext of improvement by transitioning from a black-identified protagonist to a white-identified one over the course of the two novels. In light of Kai's ostensibly amended position regarding the assimilation/resistance binary, it becomes imperative to delve into the underlying politics that motivate Lee's muted depiction of K. F. and how the evolving portrayal of the Asian American father impinges on Kai's reassessment of disidentification. Gus Lee acknowledges that he "soft-pedals" K. F.'s role in the two novels, lest Lee Senior is rendered the "bad guy" by association (Guthmann C-1). We must thence interrogate if Lee perpetuates dominant social structures by portraying a resistant minority subject who, in due course, osmoses the Law of the Father. Ultimately, I posit in this chapter that Lee's two novels yield critical insights about the gordian processes of disidentification, especially calling attention to the slippage between consuming blackness and destabilizing the hegemony.

In "American Fathering in Historical Perspective," Joseph H. Pleck, a renowned scholar in masculinity studies, outlines the revolution of fatherhood in the course of American history. Pleck traces the archetypal father's "his-story" back to the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: a period in which fathers were generally regarded as the "moral overseers" (84). A colonial father was a "*visible* presence, year after year, [and] day after day" as the family's ultimate source of moral teachings and worldly judgments (italics mine, 84 – 5). During this period, a father was tightly interwoven into the whole fabric of his children's lives, playing a key role in every aspect – such as religious and

moral education, courtship, occupation, and so forth. The notion of reciprocal duty was central in the relationship between father and child, especially if it was a son; there was a strong emotional component to a son's rapport with his father in that he was seen as an extension of his father.

Fathers began to lose visibility from the home in the nineteenth century, a dynamic which continued into the mid-twentieth century. Work and war removed the father from the domestic sphere, and his role in relation to his family decreased and became more indirect as the mother's role began to gain precedence. While men solidified their role as the "distant breadwinner" by being and becoming men in the public sphere, their position and authority within the home was increasingly destabilized, and fatherhood was relegated to "almost entirely a Sunday institution" (Pleck 88). Ironically, while men were in full pursuit of their masculinity in the frontlines of war and labor, the enervation of American manhood became a growing concern in the twentieth century. Cultural critics stridently attacked urbanization, immigration, and what they considered most egregious, the feminizing effect of the body maternal on all aspects of American society. After the Second World War, mainstream America leveled extreme criticism against "megaloid momworship" (Pleck 90), and mothers were even blamed for the mental and emotional collapse of American military men during the war. Social anxiety over excessive mothering (especially in relation to boys' development of male identity) recharged discussions of a father's significance in child rearing as a "sex role model" – a positive image of involved fatherhood, deriving from an earlier image of colonial fathers (90).

The postwar father was, nonetheless, marked more by his absence than by his presence as social perception of his role as a distant breadwinner still prevailed. On the one hand, work and fatherhood began to be polarized as distinct and competing sources of masculinity. On the other hand, reconciliation between the different ways of achieving manhood was emphatically pursued in order to resurrect the father's place within the family unit. The restoration of the Father became more critical with the emergence of parallel concerns about the "domesticated dad," who was "technically present" but barely there due to his weakness and passivity within the home. In the public's mind, the unavailability of fathers – due to absence or passivity – was the main source behind the epidemic of juvenile delinquency in the 1950s (91).

From outward appearances, Gus Lee's *China Boy* reads like a sociological case study about paternal deprivation involving a domesticated Chinese American dad who is "archetypally absent" and his unruly son who is on the slippery slope of becoming a would-be hoodlum. K. F.'s unavailability does not stop with his children but extends to the readers as he assumes near invisibility throughout the majority of the novel.⁶

At this juncture, it is important to address the autobiographical aspect of Lee's narrative. In the past several decades, chronicles of the Asian American experience have become more accessible, and it is no surprise, according to John C. Hawley, that a majority of these accounts are autobiographical – "either directly so, or in rather *loosely*

⁶ Lee's text seemingly utilizes chapter titles as indicators of people, places, and events that occupy a significant position in Kai's life. As a small detail, the noticeably missing chapter devoted to "Father" in *China Boy* speaks volumes by indicating K. F.'s absence from his young son's life. Lee finally assigns a chapter to K. F. in *Honor and Duty*, which appears only after Kai starts school at West Point, which is "filled with sons of ambitious fathers. [West Pointers] are all platforms for their [fathers'] hopes, their ambitions. West Point is a father's totem" (*Honor* 363).

disguised fiction” – themes commonly addressed in these works, such as the immigration blues, the quest for home, and discovery of self, are “at the heart of these writers’ concerns (italics mine, 184).

For the most part, *China Boy* and *Honor and Duty* are narrated by an older and wiser Kai, who reflects back on his formative years with a more informed perspective. Lee makes it all the more difficult to demarcate fact from fiction by conflating himself with the narrator Kai who, at times, appears to be omniscient. Such blurring of the lines between the lives of the author and his protagonist cannot but provoke allegations of “artlessness” in his works. In the previous chapter, I discuss how Younghill Kang’s use of his own experience incited quite a few of his reviewers to (dis)regard *East Goes West* as an uncritical memoir for many years. I firmly believe that neither Kang’s nor Gus Lee’s works should be depreciated on those grounds alone.

Nonetheless, Lee is distinguished from Kang by obliquely acknowledging the factuality of his text and thereby gives some credence to accusations of the “artlessness” of his works. For one, Lee admitted in several different interviews that he tempered the characterization of K. F. because he is not an “advocate of vengeance” and such a (faithful) representation would have discomfited Lee Senior, who was extremely displeased, in any case, with the way Lee depicted Edna (Guthmann C – 1). Lee also commented that he would not have written *China Boy* had his stepmother Edith not passed away (Sherwin, “Lee’s Third Novel”). Though his works are creative reworkings of his past, I surmise that Lee’s gesture of respect for his father and stepmother indicates that much of the details in the books are bona fide replicas of former events: these concessions somewhat substantiate the claim that Lee invites his readers to see himself

and Kai as one and the same. James Phelan observes that every narrator is, in essence, distinguishable from but also a surrogate for the author (61). Even so, I observe moments in both texts, in which Lee interjects himself into the story at the risk of compromising the literariness of his text. One indication is Lee's differing behavior towards Kai in the hood and Kai at West Point, which is extremely telling of narrator Kai's (who is an approximation of Lee) reassessment of disidentification and his ambivalence towards hegemonic discourse. A more exigent matter to address in a critical reading of Lee's works, then, is not a categorization of what's real and what's imagined but an interrogation of the manner in which Lee beguiles, to a certain extent, his actual ideology of minority survival in a majoritarian society.

Circumscribed by Lee's relationship with his own father, Kai's recollection of K. F. in *China Boy* is inconsistent. On one hand, Kai does not gloss over K. F.'s absence from the Ting household; K. F. is, for all intents and purposes, a bystander in his son's life. On the other hand, Kai goes to great measures not to discount K. F. as an "invisible man" in the account of his early childhood. In fact, Kai depicts his father as a larger-than-life manly man who flies airplanes, fixes guns and cars, and is admired by American generals. This irresolution, I posit, stems from the fact that as an informed narrator, Kai anticipates the transition in his relationship to K. F. by the end of *Honor and Duty*. As a result, Kai's narrative is very much invested in restoring K. F.'s patriarchal presence.⁷ To Kai, his father is "handsome, direct and dashing" and was a "decorated war hero, a

⁷ In an American context, K. F.'s patriarchal incompetence is determined by his absenteeism and deficiency as a provider. From the perspective of "traditional" Asians, such as Mah-mee and Uncle Shim, K. F. is lacking as a proper "Asian" father in the sense that he not only forsakes his duty to "transfer scholarship" but prefers to teach his son about "killing other humans and about the foreigner, Thomas Jefferson," the hegemonic father par excellence (208).

former biplane fighter pilot, a paratrooper trained by the American army, an infantryman trained by the Germans” (46, 69). Kai remarks that his father’s war record, in addition to his wealthy and privileged background, his current career as a banker, and his Oriental “exotica” are what appealed to the woman who would become his stepmother, Edna McGurk (57). Edna, who had read all of Pearl Buck’s novels about China, is intrigued by K. F.’s foreignness when they meet at a USO function for veterans and widows. Connected by the “patent, irresistible marks of loss” (57), it is specifically their contrasts – Edna’s Nordic features and his “Oriental” ones, which she encountered time and again in Pearl Buck novels – that draw them together.

We discover, nonetheless, that not all of what Edna equates with K. F.’s manly appeal is transferable to an American context. Though a banker, he is poor. Born into a family of means and affluence, K. F. has since lost ties with his wealthy Chinese relatives. Once a military man, he is forced to forfeit his chance to serve in the American army because his immigrant status renders him invisible in the eyes of American armed forces. What’s tragic is that his racial castration is self-inflicted; *China Boy* implies that it is K. F.’s assimilationist tendencies which prompt him to willingly sacrifice his Chinese American identity, heritage, and fatherhood. K. F. yields himself voluntarily and unconditionally to America. Kai describes his father as a “descendant of warriors” who was devastated by China’s vulnerability to foreign invasion during the war and disillusioned by the obsolescence of traditional China (19).⁸ K. F. forsakes the cultural heritage of the “old world” which, according to him no longer counts in what a man does

⁸ Lee also subtly indicates K. F.’s racial castration by noting that he was born in the same month and year as P’u-yi, the ill-fated Last Emperor of China, whose place in history is marked by his powerlessness.

(54). K. F. regards the antiquated customs of his fatherland as an “unbearable liability” for an Asian American man because they warrant “invitations to rapine, catastrophe, misery” (212). Old-world wisdom, concludes K. F., is “*nothing* against an airplane with guns and a pilot who knows how to kill” (54). America and Americans came to signify strength and authority, which K. F. sees as absent from China, whose national fortitude was overthrown by colonial powers. Subsequently, K. F. disassociates himself from the Chinese, who have been feminized by their military defeat and aligns himself instead with the triumphant Americans, whose masculine authority derives from their technologies of violence. Kai remarks that K. F. became “increasingly anti-Chinese” in order to “succeed in his new world” (21). For K. F., “blessed with a West Point [and] far removed from the enduring memory of his critical father,” America is now home. He hopes that America, “*Mei-gwo*, the Beautiful Nation, the Pretty Country,” will restore his broken spirits and manhood (54).

R. W. Connell suggests that while many men live in “a state of some tension with, or distance from, the hegemonic masculinity of their culture and community,” they still are complicit in its continuance (11). According to Connell, men are inclined to tacitly consent to hegemonic discourse because they stand to benefit from the “patriarchal dividend.” In other words, men understand that they can only benefit from living in a society governed by patriarchy. In K. F.’s case, it is difficult to imagine what he considers as the upshot of his complicity, and furthermore, why he fails to recognize that his non-white status positions him at the extreme end of hegemonic masculinity. K. F. takes excessive measures to erase his ethnicity and re-invent himself as a standard American: he communicates his “rabid Pro-Americanism” and demands that there be

“[n]o more ancestor worship! No more stinking joss sticks! Firecrackers to chase spirits! No!! We should be celebrating Thanksgiving and Fourth of July! And memorizing goddamn Constitution!” (*China* 70).

Though K. F. continues to faithfully abide by the tenets of conventional masculinity, he finds that he cannot “make himself [a] Ward Cleaver” (112). K. F. remains a disappointment both as a provider and a father, which anticipates the futility of his acts of masculinity; though he maintains the title of being the sole breadwinner, the Ting family becomes increasingly destitute. K. F. participates in Edna’s physical and emotional abuse of Janie and Kai by taking away their father; the only one who can safeguard them from harm’s way. Just as K. F.’s authority is denied by the hegemony in the public sphere, Edna wields the power in their relationship and overrides his decision at every turn. For example, when Edna decrees that Uncle Shim be banned so he may not contaminate Kai with Chinese culture, K. F. can only voice meager protests. Edna is the keeper of law and order in the Ting household and she mandates that the Tings be American; Kai remarks that he and Janie “lived in an obverse world, where we did not have to wait for Father to return home for imposition of sentence” (170).

K. F.’s obsolescence becomes particularly evident when he allows Edna to expunge Janie’s presence just as she swept out the memories of the children’s Mah-mee, Dai-li Ting; the readers discern that his experience in America has clearly rendered K. F. a broken man. In *Honor and Duty*, we learn that Edna expels the insubordinates – i.e. Janie and Kai – from the home. Several years before Kai leaves home to attend West Point, Janie is sent to foster care and is banned from not only from her home but her family. Telling Janie that she is no longer part of the Ting family, Edna orders Janie

“never [to] call or write to your father or your brother ever again (238). Thus Janie, like her mother Dai-li, is transformed into a “nonperson, relinquished and forgotten” (241). Paralleling herself with a governmental institution, Edna reasserts her position of power as she decrees Janie as a non-American and threatens to turn Janie over to Immigration. As a “Chinese man [who] could not know the rules of this new nation,” K. F. forfeits his patriarchal cachet to the “American woman [who] knew all the answers” (239). K. F.’s remark regarding his daughter’s unwarranted expulsion discloses his utter despondency: “[y]es, it was so sad, so hard. But... What can a person do?” (239). K. F.’s masculinity is clearly tied to a different time and place, one that is beyond America. K. F.’s disavowal of his ethnic heritage is, in fact, a rejection of selfhood. Severed from a cultural tradition that can sanction his masculinity, K. F. cannot circumvent his racial castration in the new land. As Yichin Shen observes, K. F. “offer[s] his phallus as well as his own offspring on the altar of [...] the American goddess” (110). His defeatism, in the end, marks K. F. above all else.

K. F.’s emasculation derives from white oppression of racialized male subjectivities, which is manifested in *China Boy* through domestic violence. While it may be atypical for a woman to be the main perpetrator of racial violence, Edna meets the sole criteria of whiteness necessary to occupy this position. Edna embodies the doctrines of white hegemony that marginalizes racialized (male) subjects. Shen’s contention about how domestic violence engenders racial castration is convincing, but I am disinclined to limit hegemonic oppression within the body of white femininity. In addition, Edna and her bouts of domestic violence function in different ways in relation to Kai and to K. F. Her predominance in the home attenuates the construction of Kai’s masculinity. The

diminution of K. F.'s masculinity, however, is effected by American hegemony itself and his assimilationist desire.

Therefore, I see Edna's tyranny as a symptom rather than the cause of K. F.'s emasculation. For one, Lee intimates that K. F.'s castration is already in process prior to Edna's addition to the Ting family. The American Army disregards K. F. as an eligible enlistee by identifying him as an immigrant (and non-American) from a war-stricken country: his immigrant status renders him a foreigner and non-American. K. F.'s war records become meaningless and he is forced to relinquish an integral part of his masculine identity – that of a military man. In this way, K. F.'s manhood is institutionally demoted. Furthermore, the degeneration of his fatherhood corresponds to K. F.'s relocation to America. In an interview with Elisabeth Sherwin, Lee made a backhanded remark that his father deserted his family during the war. His mother, who was determined not to be an abandoned wife, came to America in pursuit of her erstwhile husband; Sherwin suggests that the family reunion in San Francisco was not a happy event for the adults involved (“Lee Fans”). This biographical detail is not part of the novel itself and Kai takes extra measures to characterize his parents' marriage as one of great love and respect, which could “never be replaced” (*China* 53). In fact, Kai even remarks that K. F. married Edna for his young son's sake. In any event, Lee's oblique reference to his own father's willingness to relinquish his role as father/husband extends the readers' understanding of K. F.'s detachment from his wife and children after their emigration from China.

In *China Boy*, K. F.'s undermined fatherhood is indicated by his lack of involvement in Kai's conception:

[Mah-mee] scrutinized naked male Rodin statues while thinking reproductive thoughts in an effort to make her fetus a son. Fearlessly, and in opposition to the embarrassed grumbling of her husband, she pinned pages from art books on the walls of their bedroom [which] all displayed the male organ. Mother would hum her favorite Christian hymns while looking at the pictures, praying in her wonderfully eclectic way to God Almighty, Michelangelo, and the yin, the Goddess of Fertility. She lit joss sticks [...] visualizing male babies. [...] She attended Episcopalian churches and overdonated, murmuring, “For my Son, whom You will give me, thank You. (25)

Kai’s Mah-mee assumes all credit for his birth. Described as a transaction between the gods and an Asian American woman, K. F. is displaced from the conception of his only son.

The initial disjunct between father and son continues throughout *China Boy*. K. F. makes fruitless attempts to be a father to his son. He introduces American culture to his family via the cinema in order to Americanize himself and his family by participating in a distinctly “American ritual [of] the fifties” (26). Through the new-world medium of the cinema, K. F. imparts to his children his vision of America: it is a land which worships “John Wayne, Robert Mitchum, Victor Mature,” and other hegemonic men (26). In tandem, father and son take a rare moment for a male-bonding experience; K. F. takes Kai to the park so that he can teach his son how to play catch. Although K. F. envisions a typical afternoon of enjoying America’s favorite pastime, Kai is confounded by his father’s uncharacteristic behavior and wishes his K. F. would stop the “ball torture” and return the mitt and ball to the store (92). When he cannot communicate a father-son bond to Kai, K. F. resigns almost immediately and leaves Kai with hollow fatherly advice to keep on trying. He abandons Kai once more as K. F. fails to tell his son how and with whom Kai is to carry on his performance of American boyhood.

In yet another stilted effort to be fatherly, K. F. tries to convey life's wisdoms to Kai. After a two-week absence, K. F. takes Kai to his office at the China Lights Bank. Though Kai senses his father "desperately trying to make a connection," K. F. fails to impart knowledge and wisdom to his son (182). Kai, in turn, feels himself "slip away" from his father (92).

[H]e said, "Never steal. [...] He added, Always work hard. Then you can name your ticket. You understand?" I shook my head, worried. I did not know why I would want to name a ticket something else. [...] [K. F.] did not know how to decode children, for he had never seen the process in his own home. I wanted to help him, but I felt constricted, struggling against the limitations of understanding and language. (182 – 3)

Parallel to K. F.'s inability to "decode" children, Kai finds his father's message incomprehensible. Father and son have cleaved from one another and both are helpless to enhance mutual understanding between them. Kai does not know how to articulate his questions – about Mah-mee, China, and how to be an Asian American man – in a way that he can assure K. F.'s comprehension. Kai senses that in any event his questions would never be satisfactorily answered. All the same, Kai puts his father at ease: "Okay, Father. I work hard," responds Kai, although he is discouraged about ever engaging in a meaningful dialogue with his father (183). K. F. transfers his unproductive method of masculinization to Kai, namely, assimilation. In so doing, K. F. distances himself further from a viable avenue of re-masculinization: fatherhood.

K. F.'s emasculation is, without a doubt, intensified and complicated by race in his relationship to Edna, who represents the America that K. F. wants to embrace and be absorbed by. K. F.'s marriage to Edna does not legitimize his masculinity but italicizes his social prostration because she signifies the dominant discourse, which subjugates minority subjects. In fact, Edna is the inversion of the elusive white woman who grants

citizenship to the racial others. Numerous minority male authors have employed white female bodies to represent their ideal of America.⁹ In effect, a white female body emblemizes a “trophy,” which is awarded to racial (male) others who have succeeded in fully acclimating to white American standards. Patricia Chu observes that “the appearance of desirable but elusive white women in Asian American men’s texts marks the struggles of Asian American males to establish identities in which Americanness, ethnicity, and masculinity are integrated [as well as those] to establish their literary authority and a literature of their own” (28). Despite his best efforts, K. F.’s marriage to Edna fails to fully Americanize him in the eyes of the mainstream. As the discussions above evidence, K. F. is still obstructed from gaining full access to the social cachet of hegemonic masculinity. In regards to Kai, Edna’s unavailability is absolute. She remains an “agent of emotional estrangement” (*China* 66) and as such, Edna can neither be the “trophy” nor the mother who inducts him into white America.

Kai is initially drawn to Edna because she looked “remotely like a Western version” of his Mah-mee (56). Missing his dead mother, young Kai desperately wants Edna to like him, read to him, hold him, and kiss his nose as his mother did (59). The same “exotic” difference that Edna found charming in K. F. is repulsive in her young stepson. Kai internalizes Edna’s hatred of his ethnicity and begins to loathe “what it is in his face that makes Stepmother Edna so violent, so angry” (76). To heal his psychological wound inflicted by Edna’s racism, Kai strangely turns to several Edna substitutes. The

⁹ For instance, in *East Goes West* Kang explores the trope of the white female body via two pairs of interracial lovers: Chungpa Han’s fixation on Trip and To Wan Kim’s destructive courtship of Helen Hancock. Carlos Bulosan’s *America is in the Heart* describes the protagonist Carlos’ problematic friendships with Helen and Marian, and in Shawn Wong’s *Homebase*, the readers are privy to Rainsford Chan’s ruminations about a blond-haired “dream girl,” who comes to signify his “capture of America.”

first Edna stand-in is Anita Mae Williams, a stunningly beautiful girl with a “delicate, angelic face,” whose “careful, watchful grace [...] suggested unattainable royalty” (*China* 120). Kai admits that he loved this neighborhood girl in “some strange and inexplicable way” (82). Anita, like Edna, can only impart violence and frustration; Anita badly beats the seven-year-old Kai and remains elusive as she rejects the twelve-year-old Kai’s marriage proposal (122). In *Honor and Duty*, Kai is consumed by his love for another Edna proxy, Christine Carlson, a blond beauty from Kai’s dominantly white high school (89). For Christine, Kai’s most appealing attribute is his difference from other (American) boys. Although they engage in a brief sexual encounter, what Christine ultimately wants is not Kai’s love but his friendship and adoration; Christine imagines that she is a “virgin poetess” and he a “platonic audience, throwing roses at [her] moonlight poetry” (183). Although Christine is attracted to Kai’s “anachronistic” allegiance to honor and duty, she decides that entering into a miscegenational relationship with Kai would be tragic and disastrous (185). In this way, Edna and her two surrogates’ rejection of Kai is indicative of his exclusion from American manhood.

As the paradigmatic whiteness in *China Boy*, Edna is the wicked stepmother par excellence whose danger lies in her allure. She is a highly educated and “primly handsome” woman who, Kai notes, smells like roses (55), and it is specifically her stature, wondrous beauty, and “perfect diction” which “scare[s] [Kai] down to [his] socks” and compels him to listen carefully to what she dictates. In the dearth of positive depictions of whiteness in *China Boy*, Edna’s white female body becomes the site of intersection between whiteness, power, and oppression (Malcolm 414). Kai likens her arrival into the Ting household to “the way the Germans marched into Paris, certain [of]

conquest and totally prepared to suppress resistance” (*China* 55 – 6), and the Ting household is immediately rendered into a battlefield between conflicting cultural ideologies. Shen observes that it is atypical for a white woman to be chosen to articulate and compel hegemonic discourse onto racialized (male) subjectivities (110). Nonetheless, the fact that she is a graduate from Smith and a socialite from “an insular inner circle of elite Philadelphia society,” seems to validate her as an apt candidate. Edna executes her subjugation and discipline of the racial other with the utmost competence; in an efficient manner, she presides over Kai and his family as the master of the house. Kai sardonically remarks that Edna “missed her calling when the SS closed its ranks to all comers after the demise of Hitler” (*China* 75).¹⁰ Very much like the German SS, Edna is ready to expunge all things “foreign” to “normalize” her domain.

Cheryl Alexander Malcolm contends that whiteness is solely to blame for the dislocation of the individual. Notwithstanding the tacit consent from the assimilationist K. F., Edna is ultimately the one that puts Kai in the dangerous position of confronting the African American boys on the streets (416). In this sense, Edna is analogous to white America that kept the early Asian immigrants at bay with its exclusionary policies. Furthering Malcolm’s contention about Edna, I suggest that Edna’s bullying of her two younger stepchildren surpasses a visceral intent to intimidate. Her brutality is more detrimental and malevolent than any other violence that Kai confronts on the streets of the black ghetto; if Edna signifies the majoritarian discourse, we ascertain her abusive

¹⁰ The parallel drawn between Edna and the Nazis not only underlines the repressive and tyrannical nature of her behavior but also aligns her with a German ally, the Japanese, who devastated most of Asia during WWII. In addition, Edna’s actions become comparable to those of Nazi Germany who “conferred the status of ‘honorary whites’ on the Japanese” for their shared objective (Malcolm 416).

behavior as that of the hegemony intent on breeding “docile” bodies out of minority subjects.¹¹ As the agent of whiteness, Edna duly disciplines Kai by meting out harsh physical punishments when she perceives that he is acting out a “horrid, devillike resistance” through bodily transgressions, “usually involving facial expressions [and] illegally spoken Chinese” (*China* 72, 78).

Edna’s most insidious method of oppression is implemented by her bouts of “linguistic” appropriation. Edna hierarchizes the family according to their capacity to articulate English. Janie, for the most part, is able to avoid Edna’s wrath because her “rapid grasp of American dialogue placed her beneath the perfect enunciation of Edna” (75). K. F.’s marginally flawed speech is exoticized as a “unique hybrid” of Chinese, English, and German accents. However, Kai’s “gibberish of eclectic sounds” infuriates Edna and bolsters her estimation of white supremacy (75). Edna imposes a linguistic tyranny over her domain:

“We are only to speak English henceforth. [...] Absolutely *no* Chinese, in any form. The removal of this *foreign* food will help, since I understand that no proper words exist to describe it. Kai that means no singing songs in Chinese. Jane, that means that you will say nothing behind my back that I cannot understand. There will be no breaching of this policy.” (77)

Edna communicates terror and intimidation and enforces assimilation upon Kai, Janie, and K. F. by her linguistic proficiency. She aims to homogenize, and in so doing, marginalizes minority subjects who do not comply. Edna, the sanctioned agent of the dominant discourse, declares that Kai’s fractured English excludes him from the

¹¹ Already rendered “docile” by her gender, Janie’s punishment, Kai observes, tends to be more psychological than physical. For the most part, Janie does conform to proper social conduct: she was not violent, respectful towards her teachers, and did very well in school (261). However, it is Janie, via her “passive resistance,” who bravely wages war against the tyrannical Edna (260). In *China Boy*, Edna banishes her to the attic, which once held the family crate from China that Edna burned and we later learn in *Honor and Duty* that she is sent away to a foster home.

American corpus. Not only does Edna ascribe Kai as un-American, she also dehumanizes him by ridiculing Kai for badly operating the “tongue of a monkey” in ludicrous attempts to speak English (65).

The cultural violence of “standardization” is carried out by Edna’s “English only” policy and the ensuing injunction against Chinese food (Shen 102). As such, she systematically annihilates Asian American-ness and renders it antithetical to hegemonic discourse. For one, Edna expunges from the home Dai-li, the Chinese mother, who is the Tings’ connection to their Chinese past; Edna maligns her as a “corrupt,” and “illiterate” foreigner whose “moral fiber was rotten to the core,” and worse, a “terrible mother and cook” (78, 84).¹² Demonstrating her resolve, Edna destroys the Ting family crate, which contains the remnants of their past: photo albums, Dai-li’s wedding gown, which her three daughters had hoped to wear on their wedding day, Kai’s Chinese pens and inks, and the calligraphy of Uncle Shim, and K. F.’s military memorabilia, including his “identity papers, photos and letters from war buddies, his old uniform, and Sam Browne belts” (*China* 85). She demotes the artifacts of a Chinese-American (family) history into “trash,” which is “filthy,” “foreign,” “awful,” and “dirty,” and these become an “offering

¹² If Edna represents America, Kai’s Mah-mee, Dai-li Ting, embodies China and its traditions; Dai-li declares with pride that she is “first and foremost, an honoring daughter” of China (34). Kai falls into depression when he can no longer recall his Mah-mee’s face with clarity. He equates the loss of her memory with that of selfhood: “I had lost her face and I felt my own features fall apart” (288). Dai-li’s influence over her son Kai is noteworthy particularly in regards to his affinity for African American culture; she is empathetic towards the African Americans and draws parallels between the Asian/American and African American experiences (34, 45). Kai’s trepidation about his impending fight with Big Willie is abated when he sees a picture of his mother (302). Kai’s recollection of his mother is not always positive; at times, his portrayal of Dai-li approximates the “Lotus Blossom” stereotype, which demeans Asian/American women. Though Kai indicates Dai-li’s femininity as a source of her power over hegemonic men, we can infer that Dai-li’s use of her feminine wiles is also amiss in that she is excluded from Kai’s life by her death. In *Honor and Duty*, Kai can hardly recall his Mah-mee’s memories and considers Edna his “real” mother.

to assimilation” (85, 213).¹³ In so doing, Edna not only severs Kai and his sisters from their ethnic heritage and deters the formation of an Asian American identity, she also further castrates K. F. by discarding his badges of masculinity.

In so far as Edna is a medium by which Lee conveys how racialized (male) subjects are disfigured by the oppressive enforcement of the hegemonic discourse, she offers Kai two options by which to survive under the reign of white supremacy: either assimilate (like K. F.) or risk expulsion (like Kai’s three sisters). Kai, however, prevails in gaining access to American manhood by a denunciation of hegemonic discourse that only serves to disempower racialized (male) subjects. Ultimately Kai declines both the conditional invitation to inclusion and the violent threats of exclusion that hegemonic discourse extends to people of color. Kai instead implements the survival strategy of disidentification, which enables minority subjects to transcend the binarity of assimilation and resistance.

When Edna assures Kai of inclusion, it hinges on his strict adherence to the edicts of white America. Cognizant that his compliance can only effect effeminacy, Kai constructs a diacritical ingress into American manhood; Kai’s triumphant achievement of masculinity is guided by the encouraging hands of his black father, Toussaint (Toos) LaRue. In the absence of K. F., Kai is rewarded with a diverse assembly of father-figures, who act as conduits in his painful and violent passage into manhood in the streets of a

¹³ Edna’s contempt of “uncleanliness” of the family crate is evocative of past racist rhetorics. Rachel C. Lee indicates that during the turn of the century, Asian immigrants were reviled for their supposed “unclean” habits and morals. Mainstream America likened “uncleanliness” to nonconformity to (white) American standards and it speciously steeped the discourse of “uncleanliness” within scientific terminology to “make ‘cultural difference’ a dirty word.” The supposed “unhygienic nature” of the Asian other triggered an irrational fear of infection within white America; accordingly, early Asian Americans were vilified as “carriers of disease” (252).

black urban ghetto. Kai, the “no-question-about-it nonfighter,” is bullied daily by the Panhandle “streetfighters” who dub him “China Boy” to express his “Martian nature” (2, 14, 64). Kai recognizes that in his neighborhood, “China [...] is more bizarre, more remote, than a distant planet” (64). Toos, a young African American boy, is the only one who befriends Kai when others seek to trample on this “alien” intruder in the Panhandle. Toos ushers Kai into American boyhood by taking the time to show him the ropes, explain things to him, and welcomes him into a loving home and church.

Toos’ name evokes Toussaint L’Overture, the founding father of Haiti. L’Overture (which means “the opening”) was added to “Papa Toussaint’s” name because many Haitians believed that he opened the way to freedom for their people. Toos is not unlike his namesake; he is the “Saint of the Streets” who delivers Kai from the murderous hands of his aggressors, both on and off the streets. Describing the “theory of fights” as the main avenue into manhood, Toos encourages Kai to become a “streetfighta” so that he may survive the rough and tumble world that is white America (2, 98). Under the patronage of Toos, Kai learns how to achieve his objective of becoming an “accepted black male youth in the 1950s” (4). Furthermore, Toos’ validation of Kai’s blackness garners him acceptance in the forbidding streets of the Panhandle (*Honor* 17).

Shim *dababa* (Uncle Shim) is another one of Kai’s surrogate fathers. A close friend of Mah-mee’s, Uncle Shim bridges Kai to the age-old culture of China and the wisdom of his Asian heritage. There is also Hector Pueblo, a Latino mechanic who comes to Kai’s rescue when a neighborhood girl beats him; Tío Hector tenders to Kai the “Panhandle *walkando*, street face, and Spanish” (182). Besides Toos, the most noteworthy father-figures are the members of the YMCA triumvirate – Tony Barraza,

Bruce Punsalong, and Barney Lewis – who, individually and collectively, play a major role in Kai’s transformation from “Chicken Little” to a bona fide Panhandle “streetfighta” (2, 3). Each had endured his own hardship: “They grew up in the depression [and] carried the burden of not being Anglo-Protestants at a time when being different implied inferiority [which] was difficult to challenge” (147). These non-hegemonic men dispense their “fatherly” advice about how to utilize and conquer pain in the process of masculinization. Contradicting Edna’s “mindless” infliction of pain, Kai’s putative fathers impart a valuable lesson of how to use pain constructively to enhance “endurance and [...] the value of victory” within the context of the organized violence of boxing (So 144).

In particular, Kai’s main boxing instructor, Tony Barraza gives Kai “gold” by sharing his time, experience and offering patience and nourishment to build up the body and soul of his apprentice (177). Finally, the YMCA itself functions as a proxy father; the organization founded to boost the solidarity of “young, Christian men” is a formative site in which one learns the “manly art of self-defense” (285). The YMCA not only introduces Kai to the “baseline ethos of boyhood,” but embraces Kai within the camaraderie of a fraternal community (256). Thus, Kai’s entrance into this incubator of masculinity allows him to regularly rehearse masculine identification.¹⁴

Lee reconfigures the body paternal by its depiction as a multiethnic composite. He also redeems the ethnic patriarch as a champion of other minority subjects. Yet these

¹⁴ Sports has long been regarded as the best medium to visualize masculinity. Since the mid-twentieth century, boys were particularly encouraged to participate in sports because of the widely held belief that sports socialized them by imparting “manly” values and behaviors; all in all, sports has been generally recognized as a socially-endorsed method to craft men to fit the dominant form of masculinity.

father-figures are, on an individual level, lacking to a varying degree. For one, Uncle Shim is as removed from Kai as is K. F. Although precipitated by Edna's forbiddance, he disappears from Kai's life after Dai-li's death. In addition, Uncle Shim evokes the desolate uncles of "bachelor societies," particularly after he takes Kai to meet the twelve elders of Chinatown. Although Kai is in awe of these "patriarchs [of] grand authority," he also notes that these are lonely old men, who were "shunted by error or happenstance into solo orbits around uncaring communities, [and] left to remember the past while their days dwindled" (249).

Still enshrined in the past, Uncle Shim is oblivious to the daily perils that Kai confronts in contemporary America and disapproves of Kai's efforts to masculinize himself in the American context. He counsels Kai to follow a Chinese model of manhood; he encourages Kai to embrace the life of a learned and peaceful scholar, which we later learn is what his Mah-mee wanted as well. Uncle Shim's advice to become a "thinker" is rather inapt, Tony Barraza insists, for a boy trying to survive in a place, which will only allow him to live if he fights (235). When Kai's other father-figures come together to collectively prepare Kai for his fight with Big Willie, Uncle Shim, not unlike K. F., is MIA and is not available to tender his paternal guidance, which Kai frantically seeks.¹⁵

In tandem, Kai's "putative godfathers" at the YMCA are not exculpated from their shortcomings as fathers: for one, none of them are family men. Tony himself is a failed father who is estranged from his own son (147). Their biggest liability as Kai's

¹⁵ During the fight, Kai hears the collective voice of his other fathers cheering him on. Kai is also heartened by the ghostly presence of his mother. Uncle Shim and K. F.'s lack of involvement in Kai's regenerative fight with Big Willie reiterates the deficiency of Asian American fathers.

primo pater is that they are, in the end, only capable of transferring the dominant expression of masculinity via the organized violence of boxing. As such, Kai's boxing coaches inadvertently become adherents of the hegemonic discourse. Boxing, a "regimented and controlled form of combat," argues Christine So, conveys a false sense of order to those on the racial margins, who are subjected to the "chaos of a multilingual, multicultural America" (145). So maintains that in the contrived space of a boxing ring, violence cannot be "eradicated, only regulated" (144). While the pugilistic exercises offer Kai viable means to gender his body as male, the science of boxing is ultimately "nationalist [and] assimilationist" (Nguyen 95).

I recognize that boxing as a "formative" and "disciplined" mode of violence facilitates Kai's process of remasculinization. Nonetheless, it is my contention that the actual achievement of manhood occurs not within the realm of organized sports but in the anarchic street of the black ghetto via Kai's execution of a "degenerative," "unrestricted," and illegitimate mode of violence (Nguyen 95). Streetfighting is, according to Kai, the final test of manhood: it measures "a boy's courage and test[ing] the texture of his guts, the promise of his nascent manhood, [and] his worthiness to live" (90). Kai's first bout on the streets is with Jerome Washington. Jerome (a.k.a. Lucky) was one of the "China Boy Bashers," a pack of neighborhood boys specifically organized to torment Kai (92). Though frightened at first, Kai's mounting confidence renders him a "historic rebel [and] a renegade warlord" (271). Kai's first victory against a "tough Basher" garners him acceptance from the other Panhandler boys.

This incident allows us to infer that Kai is masculinized in the streets by his interaction with blackness, all of which are not violent. Several times in *China Boy*, Kai

observes the similarities between the Asian/Americans and African Americans. Kai identifies with his black neighbors as he remembers Mah-mee's empathy towards African Americans, who shared in Asian Americans' affliction by war and racism (35, 45). Kai bolsters the black-Asian conjunction by drawing parallels between the Chinese *hwa*, language, and the black patois of the Panhandle, which "depended on inflection and musical tone and were indifferent to conjugation" (63). Kai also considers Toos' mother, Mrs. LaRue, as Chinese, only "she just didn't *look* it" (138). Kai values the concurring sentiments of the Tings and the LaRues that "honor families, war, percussion, and elders" and discounts their racial differences (63).

In this vein, I argue that even a contentious relationship with blackness has regenerative value for Kai. For example, Kai's conflict with blackness appears in the form of his fight with Big Willie in *China Boy*. Kai makes the grade in the pivotal test of his masculinity by prevailing in his confrontation with Big Willie. Essentially, Big Willie is recognized as the one who invites Kai to American manhood by "inviting [Kai] to Fist City" (320). Most importantly, Kai's triumph on the street triggers his coup at home against Edna who is the embodiment of the dominant discourse. Notwithstanding the restorative value of violence in Kai's life, Lee aims to erase the negative implications of a black-Asian conflict. For one, the sight of the prostrated Big Willie reminds Kai of Jerome (a.k.a. Lucky)'s mother, Mrs. Washington, who is victimized by an abusive husband. In that moment, Kai no longer sees Big Willie as his persecutor but as a boy demoralized by the harsh way of life in the Panhandle and extends his hand as a conciliatory gesture (317). In addition, Malcolm observes that Lee makes further attempts

to solidify the camaraderie among the racial others by having Mrs. LaRue tend to Kai's wounds that Big Willie inflicts (420).

Above all, Kai's constructive interaction with blackness, which is manifest as Toos' steady guidance and enduring presence throughout Kai's formative years, enables him to achieve manhood by the end of *China Boy*. Toos recognizes violence as a necessary evil in order to survive in the urban ghetto and cautions Kai against its misuse. For instance, when Kai intimidates smaller kids with his boxing prowess, Toos admonishes Kai as a father would a son (274). Toos teaches Kai how to carry himself like a man and shake someone's hand with a firm, manly grip (144). In lieu of insisting that Kai conform to either blackness or whiteness, Toos stresses the importance of retaining ties to his Chinese heritage. Toos reappropriates "China" from a marker of his alterity to a positive reminder of Kai's ethnic heritage. Toos even teaches Kai how to laugh and thus passes on the important lesson on the "power of humor and camaraderie" (So 144); blitzed with a fear of the "Teeth God" for most of his boyhood, Kai joins in the pleasant sounds of delight that escape Toos, which remind Kai of the "distant laughter of his father" (110).

Most notably, Kai learns black English and even traditional black folk songs from Toos. His folksongs about mothers and trains and his "Papa ditty" mediates a re-union between Kai, fatherhood, and the Asian American male heritage of "railroad building" (Malcolm 418).¹⁶ Considering that Edna's reign of brutality hinged on her mastery of "standard" English, it becomes of exceeding significance that Toos equips Kai with an

¹⁶ It is significant that Toos' reconnects Kai to the Asian railroaders in that many Asian Americans regard the transcontinental railroad as one of the historical landmarks that bears witness to Asian American manhood and their presence across the American landscape.

alternative form of English that allows Kai to enunciate his subjectivity. Accordingly, Kai's masculinity is reinforced interdependently with his verbal mastery of black English. Kai subverts hegemonic discourse by a verbatim reiteration of Toos' words: *I ain't fo' yo' pickin-on, no mo'!* (322). Kai's triumphant articulation of blackness disrupts the notion that America is demarcated by whiteness, and Lee reverberates this defiance in his novel, which is beset with the "Chinese *hwa*" and the "black patois of the Panhandle."

Bearing in mind that Lee prioritizes the affinity among people of color in *China Boy*, his position regarding whiteness is problematic. We can discern Lee's unease at his portrayal of Kai as a disidentifying subject, even as he approbates blackness as a seminal force in the construction of Asian American masculinity. In order to reassess disidentification and blackness in Lee's schematic of minority experience, we must first interrogate Lee's positioning of *China Boy* in the genre of the bildungsroman, which closely follows a protagonist's journey to establish himself as a "good citizen" of his nation. Becoming a good national subject is a task, which requires one to relinquish his "particularity" and "difference" (Chu 12). Patricia Chu suggests that this genre is a particularly contested site for minority authors who aim to accomplish contradictory objectives in their writing: legitimizing the Americanness of themselves and their protagonists and creating a narrative tradition that acknowledges and validates the sensibility of their ethnic identity. Asian American writers inevitably transform the genre since their position in the social order is demarcated from that of the genre's "original" Anglo-Protestant subjects (12). For these authors, the bildungsroman, then, is a genre that facilitates their disidentification: on the one hand, they adhere critically to the literary

tradition of the genre. On the other hand, they rework the conventions of the genre to render it pertinent to an Asian American experience.

Though the bildungsroman facilitates an Asian American author's disidentification, it is a genre which, in due course, encourages assimilation by discouraging the politicization of minority works. Chu indicates that Asian American authors tend to highly regard the accessibility of the bildungsroman because novels with overt historical or political implications are more likely to be received with antipathy and resistance. Mainstream readership is more likely to identify with the protagonist by the universal appeal of the "coming-of-age" story, and minority writers are reassured of their capacity to transcend political difference (16). I find it troubling that Lee chooses to structure *China Boy* within the conventions of a genre that is driven by a conciliatory impulse. We must hence consider what is at stake for Lee to couch his assimilationist aspirations within Kai's narrative of resistance against Edna, the agent of hegemony and reassess the prevalent perception of *China Boy* as a novel of resistance to whiteness.

For one, there is no doubt in the reader's mind who the arch villain is in *China Boy*. Yet Edna's actions are vindicated to a certain degree by Lee's recognition of her as a victim of circumstance: Edna "had not wanted us," Kai concedes. "Her connection was to Father. Nor had she wanted stepmother status any more than any rational person might. She simply wanted a happy marriage" (65). Ironically, Lee makes Kai extenuate Edna's violence as that of a dissatisfied wife and unprepared mother; Edna's abuse, hence, is rationalized and sanitized by the words of her victim.

In tandem, Lee portrays Edna as a woman constantly disillusioned by men; her first husband becomes a wartime casualty. His death leaves her a "lonely bereaved

widow” instead of the “happy wife of a good lawyer, without [...] children” (69). In her second marriage, Edna dreams of becoming a sophisticated socialite wife of a Chinese-American banker. Unfortunately, she ends up a “mother [...] without the money, the temperament, or the training” (69). Kai exonerates Edna yet again by expressing sympathy for her “self-inflicted wounds” of hatred and isolation in an unfamiliar territory of Asian America. Kai renders Edna a fellow sufferer of “cultural chauvinism” (69). Edna is deserted in the racial margins with the others; her only link to this foreign land – her husband K. F. – takes lengthy and frequent business trips. Edna’s ignorance of the Chinese culture makes her a target of ridicule and she is disgraced at her own wedding banquet. The other Chinese American wives slight her and she fears the streets and the neighbors in the Panhandle. The extremity of Edna’s segregation renders her an “alien in *her own land*” (italics mine, 138). Accordingly, her injunction against the Chinese language – as a “talisman for poverty, exclusion, isolation” (71) – is attributed to her growing apprehension for the unfamiliar. Edna contaminates Kai with her disdain for the “unfamiliar” and provokes his self-hate. Gazing at himself in the mirror, Kai spews vituperations that reiterate Edna’s vitriol: “You’re an ugly piece of a dark, squinty-eyed, fat-lip shit,” Kai tells his reflection (*Honor* 92). Kai’s internalization of Edna’s racism exposes the atrocity of such discourse. A virtue in and of itself, I consider Kai’s magnanimity toward Edna’s transgression as a way to simply evade rather than having to subvert hegemonic oppression.

I contend that disidentification is more than simply calling attention to the damaging effects of the dominant discourse; a struggle for the destabilization of the oppressor’s logic is a fundamental aspect of a disidentificatory strategy. Thus I consider it

problematic that Lee sidesteps from clarifying where he stands on the issue of minority survival in a majoritarian world. Starting with his confounding leniency for Edna, I see Lee continue down a road of compromise, rather than of confrontation, with whiteness. Kai forges a closer friendship with Tony Barraza than his other two fathers at the Y; though all three are recognized as non-hegemonic, Bruce Punsalong and Barney Lewis are more racially-marked than their Italian American colleague.

Another way in which Lee skirts the issue at hand is through Kai's affinity for Jewish Americans. In comparing Edna to the German SS, Kai parallels an Asian American's circumstance with that of the Jews in Nazi Germany. Historically ascribed as black, Jewish Americans have also been circumscribed within the racial margins. At the same time, their externals set them apart from African Americans as the model minority. Kai hopes that if he is "really, very good," he will be rewarded by coming back Jewish in his next lifetime (*China* 240); this indicates that Kai may have an inkling that being Jewish is even better than being black, given the former's capacity to occupy dual position in the racial hierarchy (Malcolm 422). For Kai, the appeal of appropriating a Jewish American identity, then, lies in that it enables Kai to enjoy the best of both worlds: retain the constructive influence of black America on other people of color as well as enjoy the privilege of white America.

Lee's second novel casts further doubts about Lee's perception of the black identified Kai in *China Boy*. In *Honor and Duty*, Lee gives an account of Kai's West Point years. Having attended the same institution, Lee recognizes the "iconic value of this most American of academies" (Hawley 185). For Kai, West Point is a constructive site in

which he can legitimize not only his gender but also his national identity. A school for “only *true* Americans,” West Point is an approximation of America (italics mine, 30).

Therefore, an access to its ivy halls places Kai on par with hegemonic men who comprise the student body. Uniformly white, male, American, West Pointers, notes Kai

averaged six feet in height and 700 on the verbal and math portions of the Scholastic Aptitude Test. [A majority of us were] student body presidents *and* varsity team captains, [...] Eagle Scouts. I thought all the tall, broad-shouldered, straight-nosed blond guys with good grades in America had come. Most were Protestants from middle-class homes with good skin and smooth consciences who had been the pride of their high schools. (54 – 5)

Kai appreciates the homogeneity that West Point effects: it is a “sanctuary” with “food, sports, an all-male faculty, and uniforms that made everyone look alike” (31). With his “wrong face, [...] wrong in color and culture,” Kai is cognizant that he does not “fit the profile” (53, 55).

At the same time, Kai has high hopes that West Point will allow a China boy and the white boys to transcend their racial differences and uniformly become cadets. Kai has learned the value of being a collective from an earlier experience. In *China Boy*, we learn that Kai’s experiences at the YMCA contribute to his masculinization in two ways; not only does Kai acquire boxing skills but he is included in the camaraderie among its members. He befriends two boys, Leroy Jones and Connie Dureaux, at the Y, and the three become known as “fuckentwerps.” For Kai, the “collective in the curse” connotes belonging in an exclusive club of American boyhood (256). He remarks: “I wasn’t alone. I had never been so elevated in society, so unified with others, so accepted and true to the baseline ethos of boyhood” (256). Kai discerns in this moment that he can garner acceptance by expunging his individuality. Along these lines, Kai aims to thwart a squad leader from circumscribing him within corpus of a lynched Chinaman: when ordered to

“verify [his] alien nature,” Kai feels that he is entitled to claim, “I AM AN AMERICAN – JUST LIKE EVERYONE ELSE!” (13). Yet, Kai is compelled to concede to his racial difference and offers a compromise: he identifies himself as a Chinese American (13). Having internalized the denigrating discourse of racism, Kai admits to his inferiority by noting that it is “not very merry” to be an Asian American (14). Ultimately, Kai aims to subsume his racial difference within the collective identity of a West Pointer.

Upon entering this hotbed of hegemonic masculinity, Kai endeavors to disassociate himself from other minority subjects who may deter his entrance into American manhood. Arriving at West Point, Kai is welcomed by an African American janitor. While Kai appreciates the presence of another man of color, the initial greeting between a “Negro elder” and a “Chinese youth” is pervaded by a sense of farewell (2). The rest of the novel pertinently relays Kai’s deviation from his earlier identification with blackness. Kai voices regrets about:

[his] childhood campaign to become a successful Negro youth. [West Point] would hate my efforts at blackness, my eclecticism, my pure Asiatic blood. [...] This is not time to look like the United Nations rolled into a small, clucking rabbit. (13)

Kai acknowledges that his identification with blackness was an apt survival strategy during a particular moment in his life and that he “had not turned Negro from hanging with Toos” (21). We learn that Kai was amenable to altering his initial survival tactic when his family moved from the Panhandle to a predominantly white neighborhood: “Again,” says Kai, “I mimicked, switching adjectives, gestures and attitudes, putting one more cultural mile between me and my Chinese youth and the fading borders of my recent past” as a black youth (48).

In an attempt to erase his recently black-identified self, Kai finds another “Toos” in his new neighborhood, Jack Peeves, who also takes Kai under his wings. Jack is an “updated” version of the black, lower-class, fatherless Toos; he comes from a white, middle-class family, with a mother, a father, and even an uncle. Kai envies Jack’s close relationship with his father, who is a chef that fills his home with food. Kai’s new friend provides him with food and his hand-me-downs. Kai recognizes that wearing Jack’s old clothes “did not make [him] white” just as an association to Toos did not “blacken” him. However, Kai credits the clothes as more effective (than his propinquity to Toos) in transforming Kai from a “sad, lame, emasculated Chinese in American movies” to heroes of such movies (21).

At West Point, the readers see Kai’s successful appropriation of a West Pointer identity. He comes to embody what the Academy stands for: “idealism, service, honor” (364). Kai’s embodiment of the values of West Point, “a place that was all yang, male force” corresponds to the physical changes in Kai’s newly masculinized body (415). Lee’s readers and other characters common to both novels are struck by Kai’s bodily transformation, remarking on his “massive size and gargantuan appetite” (Hawley 186). By the sheer bulk of his body, Kai combats the invisibility of Asian American male subjects. In this way, Kai’s achievement of a hegemonic identity is immediate and absolute; returning to the Y after a year at the Academy, Kai realizes that he is “no longer one of them” (160).

Kai’s departure from the Y signals a comparable move away from Toos, Momma LaRue, and Sippy Suds: his Panhandle patron saints. Even as Kai appreciates Toos’s significance as a friend who had given him second chances, Kai’s revisionary take on his

friend relegates him to an effeminate role of a “blond fairy godmother in a pastel blue dress with a magic wand” (65). Sippy Suds (a.k.a. Deloitte) writes Kai a letter, to which he never responds. Although promising Momma LaRue he would not “drift out” on them, Kai loses touch with the LaRues. Kai loses “Momma’s cup,” which symbolizes her warm embrace and the “sanctuary of their apartment [...] with the sureness of a lifeguard throwing a rope” (70). The segregation between Kai and Toos, it would seem, is absolute. In rare moments in which Kai calls out to his old friend, Toos never responds. I read Kai’s deviation from the bulwarks of his troubled childhood as a sign of his unwillingness to decline West Point’s invitation to “merge directly with the white tapestry of American history” (57). A chance to be an extension of hegemony, it would seem, no longer necessitates Kai to disidentify with its conventions; in other words, Kai chooses to assimilate to whiteness, rather than endeavoring to subvert its racist rhetoric via an identification with blackness. In addition, Kai’s desire for whiteness is evidenced not only by his adoration of Christine Carlson (who incidentally will not have him) but his refusal to marry Pearl, a Chinese American woman who is wealthy, beautiful, and well-educated. Kai wants to be American and Christine, whom Kai regards as “Miss America,” is the only one that can grant his wish (91).

Established by Washington and Jefferson, the archetypal fathers of hegemony, West Point itself becomes “the biggest freaking father in the world” that imparts the code of conduct by which American men live (364). In coming to West Point, K. F.’s dream school where his heroic best friend General Schwarzhedd attended, Kai embraces the idea of mirroring his father’s assimilationist life. Kai even reconciles with his dying stepmother Edna. Kai redeems her to a certain extent by depicting Edna as a lonely

woman who sincerely wanted to be a mother to him. In the end, Edna becomes a repository of the maternal presence in Kai's life; not only is she likened to Momma LaRue but Edna reconnects Kai to his Mah-mee by returning the photograph of Dai-li to him (354).

Kai ultimately flunks out of West Point by getting a failing grade in "Juice," an Electrical Engineering course. Kai discovers that his aversion for this subject stems from the fact that K. F. had tutored Kai in math, hoping that his son would turn out to be a math prodigy (360 – 2). We learn about a watershed moment between young Kai and his father during a math tutoring session, when Kai, overcome by the "insanity god," resisted and hence enfeebled K. F.'s authority through laughter (361). Kai indicates the irony of his situation: he fails math and engineering, in which Asian/Americans are known to excel. As a further irony, K. F. had wanted Kai to succeed at West Point, but he, in effect, is the reason for his son's failure.

Hawley observes that Kai's failure at West Point frees him from "the massive institutionalization of patriarchy" that it represented (188). West Point is the site of reconciliation wherein Kai realizes that "for all the *gahng* and *shiao*, the math and Confucius, the hunger and hard times, I just wanted my dad to like me" (216). Nonetheless, I concur with Hawley's contention that Kai's departure from West Point does relieve him from his "paterphobia" (416) and occasions reconciliation with K. F., who finally shares his poignant story of self-redefinition as an Asian American (416). Kai also discovers that K. F.'s form of "tough love" stemmed from his own feelings of inadequacy in math, from which he had hoped to spare his son (419). The novel ends with father and son standing together on the balcony of their home. K. F., observes

Hawley, makes his first “happy affirmation” in the novel: “No ... we not jumping. We climbing up American ladder!” (422). Moreover, Kai’s reconciliation with his Asian American father anticipates his reconnection with Pearl and Asian American femininity. Hawley concludes that Gus Lee successfully recreates, within an Asian American context, the “classic struggles of Oedipus and Telemachus [...] who seek to discover their fathers without killing them in the process or losing a secure sense of themselves as significant individuals” (184). Hawley’s observation, however, further legitimizes my contention that Lee’s novels are, in essence, recapitulations of a Western master narrative about fathers and sons, which is indicative of Lee’s accommodationist inclination.

Notwithstanding the recuperative significance of the final scene in *Honor and Duty*, I argue that owing to Lee’s earlier investment in deploying a disidentificatory strategy, such an ending is problematic in its evocation of the model minority ethos. Accordingly, the significance shift in the increasingly white-identified Kai’s tone and voice in *Honor and Duty* necessitates a reconsideration of Lee’s positionality on the viability of disidentification as a survival strategy for Asian American male subjects.

Christine So observes that Lee performs a balancing act between “reinforc[ing] American myths of blind inclusion” and mediating or even contradicting a nationalist rhetoric (141). It is So’s contention that Lee, particularly in *China Boy*, uses humor strategically to “highlight the division between majority and minority cultures” and also Kai and Lee himself (142). So asserts that humor affords a means of expressing and releasing “cultural anxiety about the current multicultural agenda”:

Lee’s humor accomplishes a variety of seemingly contradictory objectives: it once again identifies and alters the inherently alien nature of Chinese-Americans; it confirms and ultimately closes the presumed cultural gulf between African

Americans and Asian Americans; and it revises and yet assuages mainstream American fears about the unassimilability of both groups. (152)

According to So, Lee secures his own inclusion into mainstream America by ridiculing Kai's unattainable goal of becoming a black boy. In other words, Lee is "in" on the joke whereas Kai does not understand why his desire to transgress racial boundaries is met with scorn. In tandem, Lee highlights the insurmountable difficulties that Kai faces in becoming black so that he may appease mainstream American's anxiety over minorities and their successful integration into hegemonic discourse (So 147). In effect, Lee reinforces the concept of racial distinction in order to temper white America's apprehension of the unfamiliar.

Though So's arguments are convincing to a certain extent, her analysis of Lee's endeavors for a "blind inclusion" into the mainstream at the risk of Kai's exclusion invalidates her observation about Lee's balancing act between assimilation and resistance to a "nationalist rhetoric" (141). Were we to take So's claim at face value, Lee not only assimilates to the dominant discourse but quashes Kai's attempts to resist against it by relegating them as anxiety-relieving devices for the mainstream. So's analysis prompts further consideration of what compels Lee to couch his assimilationist agenda within a narrative of a minority subject who alleges to resist hegemonic discourse by an identification with African Americans. To this end, we must also interrogate how a story of "bad-Asian-turned-good" is more effective in getting Lee "in" with the mainstream versus a straightforward story of a "good" minority who upholds a majoritarian discourse. In my estimation, Lee defeats his own purpose in his negotiation with whiteness by debarring Kai from hegemonic discourse. I partly attribute Lee's precarious negotiation to what I see as Lee's intentional conflation between Kai and himself; in

other words, Lee and Kai cannot be on opposite sides of the divider between majority and minority cultures because they are inexorably connected by Lee's own admission that Kai's stories are based on the autobiographical details of his life.

It is evident that Lee's conflict with whiteness and the readers' unclarity regarding Lee's position derive from the novels' circumscription within the binary options of assimilation and resistance. If this is indeed the case, we must conceptualize ways in which to read Lee's novels beyond these polarizing positions. For one, the range and complexity of Lee's black and white characters provides a more realistic representation of American society. And while communities are still racially demarcated in Lee's portrayal of America in the mid-twentieth century, Kai's motility, which affords him the ability to transgress racial boundaries, anticipates the obscuring of such barriers.

Christine So notes that Kai begins to deconstruct the binary by embracing a multicultural positionality. In *China Boy*, Kai is pressed to choose between being Chinese and being American. Kai devises two alternative options in response to this dilemma, which has always plagued hyphenated Americans. For one, Kai opts for a third option of being black in order to expose the limitations of the "either/or" racial categories that circumscribe Asian Americans. In tandem, Kai chooses the YMCA, an organization which appreciates "individuality, history, and the diversity of its members" (*China* 145).

Furthermore, Kai's reconnection to his Asian American cultural heritage, not only by recuperating his relationship with his father but also with Asian American femininity (represented by his long-lost sister Janie, dead mother Dai-li, and ex-girlfriend Pearl), augurs the construction of an Asian American ethos, which facilitates Kai's establishment of a strong sense of self and subsequently, of his masculinity.

In this chapter, I discussed how “organized” violence is lacking in reclaiming the masculinity of Asian American men. In the following chapter, I close read Leonard Chang’s *Fruit ’N Food* to further elaborate on Asian American masculinity’s deployment of “degenerative” violence in the context of urban riots.

CHAPTER IV

THE PHALLACY OF VIOLENCE IN LEONARD CHANG'S *THE FRUIT 'N FOOD*

“Violence is as American as cherry pie.”
– H. Rap Brown, Civil Rights activist

“Life is war. Let the good times roll.”
– Frank Chin

“Being a warrior is not an occupation but a male identity.”
– James W. Gibson

“[Asian Americans] are most pointedly,
a *weapon* deployed against black America.”
– Vijay Prashad

Gus Lee establishes the black ghetto of San Francisco in the 1950s as a constructive site for Kai Ting, who undergoes a violent rite of passage into manhood. For Kai, the streets of the Panhandle signify not only an arena wherein he validates his masculinity by becoming a “streetfighter” but also a safe haven away from white oppression, embodied by his stepmother Edna. Still, Kai’s ultimate relocation from the Panhandle to West Point telegraphs the instability of the ghetto as a formative locus for Asian American remasculinization. Moreover, the imminent dangers that await Kai in the urban landscape (e.g. Big Willie and the Bashers) indicate that African and Asian Americans are on a dangerous collision course. The conflict within the racial margins has become more evident by a crop of inner-city riots that broke out in the last decade of the twentieth century. In particular, the 1992 L. A. conflict became a pivotal moment in the

history of Black-Asian conjunction in America. This tragic event was set in motion by the spectacle of an African American man's violated body. What ensued was the devastating display of racialized masculinity's outraged and violent bodies responding to the institutionalized violence of racism. Described as the "worst riots of the century," the mayhem was explained away as the unfortunate corollary of antagonism among the co-inhabitants of an American megalopolis, which has mutated from a melting pot to a boiling cauldron of racial tension.

With mounting racial tension in L. A., the public's attention was quickly averted from the broken body of Rodney King to montages of a menacing throng of racialized bodies. According to a *Newsweek* survey, a majority of mainstream television viewers counted as most frightening amid the deluge of disconcerting images of civil unrest and racial dissonance was the live footage of white truck driver Reginald Denny being beaten by African American youths (Mably 37); the militant black male body eclipsed all else to become a "dangerous abstraction of racial violence" (Smith McKoy 5).¹ Then, a rather

¹ Edna, who represents the dominant discourse in Gus Lee's *China Boy*, monitors Kai's every move – from his facial expressions to his table manners – and Kai, the minority subject, is vulnerable to the regulation and discipline that the hegemony imposes. Edna's oppressive surveillance of Kai's body parallels the voyeuristic gaze of the media. During the L.A. riots, the media was held largely accountable for skewing the coverage of the events and thereby aggravating race relations between African and Asian Americans in order to serve the political and economic interests of hegemonic masculinity. A study of America's most influential media outlets revealed that the media elite is composed mainly of white males in their thirties or forties, coming from affluent backgrounds (Lichter 20 – 2). Although we should steer clear of making generalizations about the media based only on the outcome of this study, we can presume that, to a certain extent, the media is formed by a hegemonic perspective. During and after the riots, some found the white media complicit in fabricating the conflict between the troubled communities. For instance, the media cited the Harlins' case in relation to that of Rodney King; Latasha Harlins, an African American teenager, had been shot the year before by a Korean American storeowner, Soon Ja Du, who suspected that the girl was shoplifting. By effecting an unwarranted overlap of the two incidents, the media aligned the Korean merchant Du with the white aggressors who brutalized Rodney King. Such "manipulation" by the media triggered a disproportionate awareness of the black-Korean conflict, and deflected onto Korean Americans

remarkable image was captured by a *Newsweek* photographer: a young Korean American man, brandishing a gun, is wearing a T-shirt with the famous 1964 photograph of Malcolm X holding a rifle and pulling back the curtains to peer out a window. Lettered above the image of Malcolm is his credo “by any means necessary.” The accompanying article further insinuates that the gun-toting Korean American “vigilantes” were ready to act on Malcolm’s solemn vow (“Siege” 38). Although the caption of the photo grimly states that this ravaged landscape is not America, this tragic incident serves as a violent reminder of the incorrigible racial conflict of a multiethnic nation.

Evoking traumatic memories of the L.A. riots, Leonard Chang’s *The Fruit ’N Food* (1996) brings together the tortuous issues of race, violence, and masculinity as it relates the story of a young Korean American’s journey back to his old neighborhood, which has now become a volatile site of racial friction.² Thomas Pak is an itinerant loner

the public outrage the King incident provoked. The hegemony, conversely, were allowed an easy way out of the racial conundrum that encased those on the racial margins; one gang member remarked, “It’s not a Korean/Black thing. [...] There were problems but [the media’s contrivance of a black-Korean conflict] was a diversion to get us not to think about the real problem, which is the oppressor, which is the major majority which are whites” (Abelmann 157). The media’s undue focus on the racialized bodies in midst of violence, while “erasing the white bodies that instigate and initiate the violence” rigidified the racial divide (Smith McKoy 18).

² Leonard Chang is a second-generation Korean American novelist. He has also written numerous short stories, which have been published in a variety of literary journals. His first novel, *The Fruit ’N Food* received the Black Heron Press Award for Social Fiction in 1996. His next novel, *Dispatches from the Cold* (1998) won a “Goldie,” awarded by the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* to outstanding local writers. *Dispatches* is about a young man who inadvertently becomes involved in a disparate world after he receives misdirected letters from a working-class white man named Farrel Gorden, who violently hates his new Korean American boss. Chang’s next three novels – *Over the Shoulder* (2001), *Underkill* (2003), and *Fade to Clear* (2004) – are mystery novels, which feature Allen Choice, a Korean American private investigator. Chang’s work is distinct in that his protagonists are self-proclaimed “ethnic dunces” – i.e. they tend to be *gyupo*, or Americanized Koreans who do not heed much to their ethnic heritage. With the exception of *The Fruit ’N Food*, Chang’s novels distance themselves from a discussion of race and ethnic conflicts, even as his protagonists cannot be divorced from issues of race. Chang tends to deal with character-driven issues in his work. Chang’s recent novels allow us to consider the on-going

who moves back to Kisdan, Queens after losing his last job as a waiter in Boston. Severed from his own family, Tom is hired by the Rhees, a Korean immigrant family who owns a mom-and-pop grocery store near his apartment. The Rhees cater to a predominantly black clientele, and Tom soon finds himself in the midst of intense racial tension that threatens to undermine the multiethnic community of which he inexorably finds himself a part. Tom's violent response to the turbulent forces of race, class, and gender converging uncontrollably around him has detrimental implications not only for himself but also for the other inhabitants of the racial margins. Not unlike the loaded image of the gun-toting, Malcolm X T-shirt wearing Korean American man, Leonard Chang takes an unflinching look through the eyes of Tom Pak at the uneasy juxtaposition between the ghettoized Asian and African Americans and their violent embrace of American manhood.

The urban disturbances compel a consideration of the correlation between masculinity and violence, the theories of which have been mostly deterministic. The prevalent assumption is that "boys will be boys," and violence and aggression are intrinsic to masculinity. Conventional wisdom dictates that men are biologically

shifts in Asian American identity and themes by demonstrating his intent to "detail the Korean American experience as distinctly American." For example, Allen Cho changes his last name from the Korean "Choi" to the less ethnic-sounding "Choice," which emblemizes the issues with which an Asian American subject must contend as he negotiates his position as Asian/American. Chang relates that he was initially pressured to play up the ethnic angle to allure a mainstream readership still hankering for the "next Amy Tan." Admitting that it was difficult to deter the exoticization of his books, Chang asks, "[w]hat better way [is there] to normalize the Asian American male than to have him deal with everyday life" ("Chang")? Though Chang has begun to receive critical acclaim from the mainstream press, his work has been somewhat overlooked by Asian American literary scholars; one can speculate that Chang's downplaying of race/ethnicity issues and his preference for the mystery/crime genre are some contributing factors to the scholarly neglect of Chang's work.

hardwired to be dominant and aggressive, and that their violent behavior is “natural” because they cannot be trained otherwise (Connell 22). Men’s predominance across the spectrum of violence partially demonstrates that the masculine culture textures men for a predisposition toward violence, the performance of which is regarded as a prerequisite for the presentation and the preservation of masculinity.

In “Hypermasculinity and Prison Violence,” Hans Toch details the significance of violence (and the willingness to use it) in establishing one’s masculinity among male inmates, a group of men whose masculinity has been institutionally divested. Toch observes that a male prisoner, usually in his twenties or thirties,³ whose sense of self-worth has been diminished with incarceration, tends to rely on violent redress to validate his “manly” status and to diminish risk of victimization. In other words, hypermasculine posturing and its corollary of overt violence are survival strategies utilized within the prison culture.

It is far from my intent to condone violence or rehash discussions of biological essentialism here. Nor do I wish to reinforce the stereotype of racially marginalized men as criminals and social delinquents by drawing extraneous (if not improper) parallels between them and the subjects of Toch’s study. Nonetheless I find useful Toch’s

³ Toch observes that an inmate’s violent demonstrations of hypermasculinity reach a statistical peak relatively early and lose impact in inverse ratio to his age. Furthermore, he suggests that the protraction of such conduct usually results in an inmate’s mental deterioration; the attenuating physicality of an inmate renders a hypermasculine demeanor no longer viable and thereby challenges and distorts his sense of self. With the increase in age and decline in physicality, most hypermasculine men find themselves unable to confront their vulnerability. Some turn to a “manly” solution of drugs and alcohol to anesthetize themselves from unwanted, unmanly feelings (175). Substance abuse also allows the fading macho to maintain the fantasy of hypermasculinity by condemning himself to a “hero’s death” and restoring his status by “stoic acceptance of his manly fate” (175). Still there are others who come to consider and accept the rules of being a man minus the machismo.

observation about how men whose masculinity have been compromised counteract their emasculation by deploying violence to restore the masculine equilibrium; when assailed or impugned, “real men” are expected to combat victimization through violent measures. “Real men” do not “cry [but] get mad and make [others] cry instead” (Toch 173). In essence, violence functions as a corrective or a compensatory mechanism, which enables disenfranchised men to re-assert their masculine credentials. In my discussion of racialized masculinities, it is less important for me to prove the validity of an essential reciprocity between masculinity and violence than to examine the prevailing assumption that the two are conflated. This facilitates my consideration of how nonhegemonic men utilize violence, albeit its negative ramifications, to counter the effects of a social hierarchy that emasculates them.

Though informative, there is a major omission in the existing considerations of violence and masculinity: race matters when violence is the means by which one reclaims his masculinity.⁴ An act of violence is colored by the race of its agent, which then determines whether society will regard it as an act of heroism or of criminality. Sheila Smith McKoy adeptly observes that when race is implicated, society is inclined to “blacken” the violence, and the violent body of racialized masculinity is immediately marked as criminal. The convergence of toxic violence and blackness is “the pattern of institutionalized racism,” and even though racial violence is often enacted by “white bodies that represent the violent embrace of white racial domination, [it] is never read as a white phenomenon” (5). Once blackened, violence no longer restores but rather

⁴ Sheila Smith McKoy notes that in an American context, race riots are “always imagined as violence involving black people, of black bodies perpetually defined and affected by violence [...] The violent and violating black bodies are the ultimate markers of racial difference” (5).

invalidates one's masculinity. While violence has long been sanctioned and even encouraged as an acceptable means of solving conflict, it is consistently vitiated and delegitimized when it pertains to racialized male bodies. For the men in the racial margins, violent expression of hypermasculinity, then, is a bankrupt method to reclaim their masculinity as it increasingly obscures the boundary between destruction and self-destruction and further confines them to the outer edges of society.

In particular, this chapter examines how violence functions differently for hegemonic and racialized masculinities; while violence is sanctioned and "regenerative" for hegemonic men, it is invariably "degenerative" and (self) repressive for their racialized counterparts. In his brief exercise of violence, Tom imagines that he is coming to the aid of the Rhees whose American Dream is dangerously nearing collapse with the pending bankruptcy of their store. However, as James Baldwin once remarked, "violence and heroism have been made synonymous except when it comes to blacks," and Tom's gestures of heroism fail to remasculinize him in the end. Tom's racialized (and thus unsanctioned) body "blackens" and renders destructive his appropriation of violence. Violence ultimately becomes another source of repression for Tom in that he is circumscribed to occupying the two invalidating positions of victim and social miscreant.

Given the inefficacy of violence to redeem marginalized men as "real" men, we must consider why Tom pursues this seemingly futile avenue. Tom initially does not attach much importance to the idea of racial difference, which prompts his unawareness of the fact that his form of violence is socially unsanctioned and therefore lacks regenerative value. As such, Tom disapproves of Mr. Rhee's hesitance to use force against his would-be assailants. Moreover, among the numerous characteristics that

comprise hegemonic masculinity, violence is the only channel open to Tom: it is the only way that Tom can tap into the dominant discourse to “take care of business” like a real man. Confined within the ghetto with no familial ties, no sense of an ethnic heritage, no financial resources, and no vocational expertise, Tom is not unlike the male prisoners of Toch’s study in that he is left in dire straits without viable measures to gain access to the constructive sites of remasculinization. In effect, Tom hazards relying on violence to accrue his social stature because it is the only criterion that can connect him to hegemonic masculinity.

At this juncture, this chapter’s consideration of race, violence, and masculinity will be better informed by an elaboration of how violence is demarcated into “legitimate” and “illegitimate” forms by the race affiliation of its agent. In “The Remasculinization of Chinese America: Race, Violence, and the Novel,” Viet Thanh Nguyen expands on the works of scholars such as Susan Jeffords and Richard Slotkin, who survey the “historical and contemporary functions of violence in American society” (89). The formation of the American national character, according to Slotkin, can be traced to the violence of the early American settlers who confronted and regenerated the unknown territories of the new land. The early Euro-Americans’ exercise of violence was posited against the dangerous violence of the American wilderness. It was condoned, even vindicated on the grounds that it served to civilize the unruly and the barbaric. This initial perception of American national manhood was absorbed into a hegemonic masculinity whose violent exploits have since been socially and historically validated.

Nguyen supplements these earlier studies by delineating the pervasiveness of violence in American culture and how its nonwhite inductees apprehend the necessity to practice violence themselves (89). Nguyen notes that after the inauguration of Asian America in 1968, young Asian Americans recognized that their body politic was a violent one. They were determined to remasculinize themselves as well as “the historical memory of their immigrant predecessors” within the context of America, which has had a long tradition of deploying violence to define itself (88). Using Frank Chin’s and Gus Lee’s works as examples, Nguyen claims that post 1960s Asian Americans identified the male body as a “site for a series of activities and movements that will serve to regenerate masculinity through violence” (88). The Asian American male subject, once recuperated of his masculinity, can then be “discursively transformed into a representative of the larger ethnic and national community” (88). Accordingly, a new generation of Asian Americans endeavored to reconfigure violence, which, in the past, had systematically demoralized and objectified their “Oriental” forefathers; they re-appropriated violence as a tool that Asian Americans could use to garner agency and to stake out their place in America.

Moreover, Asian Americans’ long encounter with violence educated them about the varieties of American violence, which are bifurcated into legitimate and illegitimate forms. The legitimate violence that hegemony claims for itself is regenerative and sets “an American Self” apart from racial and gendered Others. Conversely, in its illegitimate form, which is usually displaced onto blackness and the ghetto, violence is

“degenerative” (89).⁵ Asian Americans came to understand violence as part of the initiation process into the “complexities of American inclusion and exclusion, mobility and inequality” (88). In other words, a “productive” appropriation of violence implies a successful assimilation into America and an admission to the hegemonic masculinity whose violence is sanctioned as law. Thus it has been key for Asian American men to align themselves with the hegemonic masculinity in order to obtain permission to articulate the dominant discourse. This entailed distinguishing themselves from the racial and gendered others, namely, other men and women of color, onto whose bodies “illegitimacy” is displaced.

I concur with Nguyen that using violence to assimilate to an American norm, however, places Asian Americans in a paradoxical position in that hegemonic violence does not discriminate among people of color; emasculation, as American history documents, has been the American state policy applied wholesale to those in the racial margins. Hence, men of color maintain a conflicted relationship with the hegemony in that they have become the repository of perceived threats against Americanness. While nonhegemonic men continue to be influenced by the indices of traditional masculinity and count on “conventional” methods to assert themselves as men, they are consistently excluded from American national manhood. Therefore, subordinated masculinity’s appropriation of the normative registers of American manhood does not necessarily result in access to the mainstream.

John Okada’s *No-No Boy* (1957) depicts marginalized men’s centripetal move to the sanctioned site of violence: the military, which is considered the most forceful

⁵ Not only urban rebellions but all collective action undertaken by people of color – e.g. the Civil Rights Movement – was portrayed as the irrational and illegitimate work of “troublemakers.”

institution in constructing images of masculinity. The “young, well-muscled, and *white*” body of the soldier/warrior was believed to best embody the attitudes and behavior of traditional masculinity; a soldier’s robust physique not only conveyed his strength but that of the “nation he represented” (italics mine, Faludi 16). The realities of the “wounded and damaged” casualties of war as well as the presence of racialized men in the military were strategically elided. And even as the war in Asia increased the visibility of Asian Americans, the attention that they received was far from favorable. Okada’s *No-No Boy* thus illustrates how the discourse of war and its association with formative violence fails to recuperate the masculinity of Asian American men “deeply wounded by racial violence and discrimination.” Ultimately, Okada’s recuperation of Asian American masculinity is compromised because he attempts to construct a “usable manhood” within the confines of the dominant discourse, thereby accommodating it (Nguyen 62 – 3).⁶

No-No Boy’s protagonist Ichiro Yamada is a Japanese American internee who was imprisoned for draft resistance during World War II.⁷ The title of Okada’s novel refers to the problematic internment of Japanese Americans by the U.S. government, which justified the relocation of over 120,000 Japanese Americans to internment camps

⁶ African American men who enlisted during World War II also found themselves debarred from active combat and an opportunity to participate in exercising a formative form of violence; instead they were restricted to Jim Crow units, which were assigned non-combatative, “menial” duties such as digging latrines, building roads, loading ships, working as cooks in the mess halls, or cleaning after other (white) officers. In *No-No Boy*, Ichiro recalls how one soldier “swore and ranted” about how all Nisei soldiers were imprisoned in a warehouse by other “American soldiers with machine guns” when the president had come to visit the camp in which they were stationed (121). These Japanese American soldiers are perceived as the enemy, even though they had enlisted to fight for America.

⁷ Unlike his protagonist, Okada served in the Air Force during World War II, and Jinqi Ling suggests that Okada’s status as a veteran licensed him to deal with the no-no boy issue, with which Japanese Americans were still struggling to come to terms, long after the war was over (362).

as a “military necessity” (Ling 31).⁸ A Nisei (American-born, second generation Japanese American), Ichiro feels caught between the two warring nations of Japan and America. Ichiro is jailed for disloyalty when he answers “no” and “no” to the two questions on the War Department’s Selective Service questionnaire.⁹

After his release from prison, Ichiro returns to the dilapidated Japanese American community in Seattle, which has been encroached on by African American ruffians; a “bunch of Negroes hors[ing] around raucously in front of a pool parlor,” notes Ichiro, “made everything look older and dirtier and shabbier” (Okada 5). Ichiro sees the black presence in his old neighborhood as indicative of the declining social status of postwar Japanese Americans and for this reason, Ichiro resents their incursion into what he deems his territory.

At the same time, Ichiro’s disdain for African Americans is paralleled by the “despising hatred” with which Ichiro himself is greeted (3). Ichiro experiences a strange sense of release by the hostile reception from Eto, a Nisei veteran. Dressed in a “pair of green fatigues, U. S. Army style,” Eto becomes a composite of “accuser,” “God,” and the

⁸ The U.S. government cited “national security [...] against possible Japanese sabotage” as the rationale for relocating Japanese Americans from the West Coast to internment camps in desolate inland areas. Jinqi Ling notes that although never explicitly articulated, the American policy makers firmly believed that Americans of Japanese ancestry were all involved in “subversive activities on behalf of the Japanese militaristic government” (31).

⁹ In 1943, the War Department required all males of Japanese ancestry over the age of seventeen to complete a Selective Service questionnaire as a security-clearance measure in order to recruit Nisei men into an all-Japanese American combat unit. Two key questions were: “Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States, on combat duty wherever ordered? Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor, to any foreign government, power or organization?” (qtd. in Weglyn 136). With the issue of Executive Order 9066, most Japanese Americans were already confined to internment camps in remote areas, but these no-no boys were imprisoned separately for lack of fidelity to their country.

“jury that [impels Ichiro] to seek pardon for [his] great sin” of treachery (4). As a no-no boy, Ichiro feels that he is deserving of Eto’s contempt and condescension and bends before Eto, whom Ichiro believes possesses superior masculinity.

From the onset, *No-No Boy* conflates the two groups of racially disenfranchised men even as it displays their mutual disdain. The new African American locals taunt Ichiro, jeering at the “Jap-boy” to go back to “To-ki-yo.” And Ichiro looks down on the “friggin’ negroes [sic]” who fritter away their time “smoking and shouting and cussing and carousing [on] the sidewalk [which] was slimy with their spittle” (5). Conceding that his black tormenters are “on the outside looking in [...] just like him” (159), Ichiro grasps that the boundaries that separate assailant/victim and black/yellow are indistinct. Despite the potential for an empathetic bonding between these men of color, the two disparate groups become each other’s persecutors as their unrelenting antipathy for the hegemonic forces that marginalize them is displaced onto each other. Opening with a disheartening portrayal of anger and conflict within the racial margins, the rest of the novel traces Ichiro’s efforts to break out of this quagmire of (self) hate and emasculation.

Reinforcing Ichiro’s symbolic castration, Ichiro is helpless to protect himself from physical assault; resentful and ashamed of Ichiro’s no-no boy history, his brother Taro provokes his “hoodlum” friends to assault Ichiro. The physical beating is only punctuated by verbal abuse as they use racial slurs to objectify Ichiro. To add to his humiliation, one of them even attempts to strip Ichiro of his pants. The figurative act of Ichiro’s castration is nearly literalized when one of his attackers “slips [a] knife blade under [Ichiro’s] leather belt” (79). The bullies only retreat when Kenji, who is armed with a cane and more importantly, with a reputation for being a “kill-crazy [...] madman” during the war,

intervenes (80). Feeling “stripped of dignity, respect, purpose, [and] honor,” the guilt-ridden Ichiro avoids meeting his old friends who bravely went to war for their country (12, 35). The incident further reinforces to Ichiro the belief that war is what “good” men do for the benefit of the greater good and demonstrates how it can afford Asian American men in particular a chance to prove that they are “soldiers of democracy [...] not houseboys” (Takaki 123).

Met head-on with his emasculation, Ichiro traces its source to his father’s “houseboy” status; described as being “gently spoken,” “feeble,” and “fearful,” among other things, Pa performs many of the domestic duties such as cooking and cleaning. In addition, Pa passively endures his wife’s verbal tirades as well as physical beating from his son. Ichiro considers Pa’s passivity (which is starkly contrasted to his mother’s prepotency) as another indication of the emasculation of Asian American masculinity.

Comparing his father to an “old woman” (Okada 6), Ichiro remarks:

Pa’s a nobody. He’s a goddamned, fat, grinning, spineless nobody. Ma is the rock that’s always hammering, pounding, pounding, pounding in her unobtrusive, determined fanatical way. (12)

Ichiro not only harbors significant resentment towards Pa who has bequeathed to Ichiro a legacy of emasculation, he rails against Ma whom he feels compelled him with the filial duty to become a no-no boy. Ichiro blames Ma for appropriating his agency; he believes it was Ma who “opened [his] mouth and made [his] lips move to sound the words that got [him] two years in prison” (12). Ichiro bitterly remarks that the machination of his feminized father, his fanatical mother, and Japan condemned him to a life of effeminacy in America (115). The correlation that Ichiro draws between the body maternal and the no-no boy experience further italicizes the feminization of the Japanese American (male)

experience during the Second World War and Ichiro's eagerness to reclaim his masculinity.

In addition to his rebellion against the maternal body, Ichiro makes several attempts to prove his masculinity: he validates his heterosexuality with Emi, searches for worthwhile work, and establishes a masculine bond with a Japanese American veteran, Kenji (Nguyen 76).¹⁰ Viet Thanh Nguyen argues that Ichiro is most disempowered by his invisibility in the public sphere and for this reason, obtaining a public identity best denotes the recovery of his masculinity (67). If masculinity is accrued proportional to social visibility as Nguyen maintains, then proving his heterosexuality has marginal value for Ichiro. Although sexual prowess is conventionally an indication of dominant masculinity, Ichiro's private and illicit sexual encounter with Emi does little to promote his entrance into the public – and hence masculine – sphere.

Similarly, Ichiro's "masculine" bond with Kenji is lessened in its social impact. Kenji is no more visible than Ichiro. In fact, as a wounded veteran, Kenji is doubly elided from a war hero's public platform as a result of his injuries as well as his status as a nonwhite soldier. His own masculinity undermined, Kenji's attempt to masculinize Ichiro by introducing him to Emi is of little consequence; Emi's status as a married woman renders their relationship an extramarital affair, to which Ichiro cannot lay a legitimate claim. Furthermore, Ichiro suspects that he is sent in as Kenji's "substitute" (Okada 89). The heteronormative currency of Ichiro's sexual experience is undercut by the fact that the liaison was prearranged by Kenji and Emi, and is not necessarily a result of Ichiro's

¹⁰ Emi is a Nisei woman for whom both Kenji and Ichiro harbor romantic feelings. She is waiting for the return of her husband, Ralph, who left her alone on the family farm to serve his second hitch in the army.

masculine agency. Recognizing his limited involvement in the sexual liaison with Emi, Ichiro finds himself unable to act as “his body [became] taut and uncomfortable [and] he lay stiffly, star[ing] at the ceiling” (90). It is only after Emi initiates their sexual encounter that Ichiro is able to resume heterosexual activity.

Ichiro’s success in finding worthwhile work in Portland fails to recuperate his masculinity and instead further undermines it. Ichiro believes that a potential employer, Mr. Carrick, offers him a job out of guilt and pity for the internment and continued disenfranchisement of Japanese Americans. Ichiro declines Mr. Carrick’s offer by repeatedly professing that he is not a veteran; by doing so, Ichiro implies that a no-no boy is undeserving of Mr. Carrick’s apologetic gesture towards “loyal” Japanese Americans. Thus, Ichiro’s three different endeavors to re-insert himself into the public sphere and reclaim his masculinity are rendered moot. For these reasons, the participation in war and its nexus to formative violence is identified as the most effective method of remasculinization, and Ichiro’s exclusion from this site of regenerative violence singularly determines his emasculation. Ichiro firmly believes that his manhood would have been undoubtedly regenerated in the masculine sphere of war by allowing him to depart the feminized space of his Asian American home and partake in exercising a formative mode of violence. Ichiro understands his brother Taro’s “frightened urgency to get into uniform” to prove his disaffiliation from the emasculated Ichiro (81). Lacking a military past, Ichiro feels that his body is attenuated into “an empty shell” and his deep sense of shame leads to intense self-hatred (60).

Ichiro fails to recognize that even gaining access to the legitimized site of violence cannot fully remasculinize men on the racial margins because their acts of

violence are always colored by their race. Ichiro is envious of the terminally wounded veteran Kenji and desires to trade places with him. Ichiro entreats Kenji to transfer his wounds to him; Ichiro implores, “give me stump which gives you the right to hold your head high” (64). Despite Kenji’s impending demise, Ichiro does not doubt that his friend is in a better position than he is. Kenji’s “eleven inches which are beginning to hurt again,” believes Ichiro, will enable Kenji to put his “one good foot in the dirt of America and know that the wet coolness of it is [his] beyond a single doubt” (64): alive or dead, Kenji is now a permanent part of America. For Ichiro, Kenji’s deformed leg is metonymic of the phallus, which offers both proof of inclusion and the credential of masculinity.

Nonetheless, Ichiro elides the fact that Kenji’s disability excludes him from other venues of performing masculinity, such as expressing his love for Emi or entering the workplace. It is, ironically, Kenji’s participation in the war, which has rendered his “phallus” defunct; Kenji remarks that he is “only half a man and when [his] leg starts aching, even that half is no good” (89). Kenji’s war wounds call attention to his discrepancy from the white male war hero. As a “powerful symbol of America in the postwar imagination,” the white male war hero alone was deemed capable of bolstering America’s identity as a “masculine nation” (Faludi 18). Moreover, Kenji’s war injuries that Ichiro so envies will eventually remove Kenji from the American landscape, depriving this fallen soldier of his rightful claim.

The other Japanese American veterans do not appear to fare any better as most of them return to Seattle’s ghettoized “J-town” and its rundown pool halls and nightclubs. Despite “going off to war and packing a rifle,” these former soldiers are no different from

the no-no boys; they are still “Japs” as the army failed to do “anything about [their] faces to make [them] look more American” (Okada 159, 163). The novel ends violently: Freddie, a no-no boy, lies dead and Bull, a Nisei veteran, is his murderer. When the police come to take him away, Bull is reduced to a bawling baby, whose cries are not dignified like a man in grief or a soldier in pain but are “loud gasping beseeching howls” of an “infant [abandoned] in darkness” (250). Violence is a catch-22 for racialized men. The legitimized violence of war and its promise of remasculinization remain out of reach for both Ichiro who is inflicted with a festering psychological wound and Kenji whose wound is physically debilitating. As Jinqi Ling notes, the “price for either complying or failing to comply with the pressures exerted by the dominant discourse” is equally high, indicating that violence always situates Asian American men in a lose-lose situation in regards to their masculinity (367).

Albeit a “glimmer of hope,” the “promise” of American manhood remains a “faint and elusive insinuation” for Ichiro (Okada 250 – 1). The readers are left with a pervasive sense of despondency and uncertainty at the novel’s end, which perhaps reflects the fact that Okada wrote *No-No Boy* prior to the inauguration of a politically assertive and radically inclined Asian American ethos of the 1960s. In fact, Ichiro is, according to Nguyen, a “pre-Civil rights, pre-Yellow power version” of Asian American masculinity, who, still circumscribed in a temperate state, could not hazard communicating a revolutionary viewpoint (63).¹¹ Even as the war rhetoric enabled hegemonic masculinity

¹¹ Okada’s *No-No Boy* predates the texts that Nguyen examines – Frank Chin’s *Donald Duk* (1991) and Gus Lee’s *China Boy* (1991) and *Honor and Duty* (1994) – in conjunction with the issues of race, violence, and masculinity. Nguyen contends that although Okada was invested in recuperating the wounded bodies of Asian American men and considered violence as a tenable way for Asian Americans to achieve manhood, they were prevented from articulating such a

to overcome its identity crisis and to reclaim its authority in the 1960s, the discourse of war was not amenable to the remasculinization of racialized male subjects as Okada's novel evidences.¹² Post-1960s Asian American men hence worked "within and against" the dominant discourse governing masculinity in order to remasculinize themselves alongside hegemonic men; Nguyen observes how Asian American men endeavored to maintain the masculine dominance in the public sphere – i.e. solidify the gender hierarchy, while destabilizing the racial hierarchy that subordinates them (89). Though not articulated as such, we can discern from Nguyen's claim that the remasculinization process of racialized men followed a disidentificatory trajectory in relation to the dominant project to restore American masculinity.

In addition to advocating a disidentificatory strategy toward hegemonic masculinity, prominent figures in Asian America including writer-activist Frank Chin proposed that Asian American men align themselves with black masculinity, which assumes a more confrontational and revolutionary attitude towards hegemony. As a matter of fact, Chin espoused that Asian Americans adopt an "outlaw" mode of violence

"radical" standpoint by the harsh ideological constraints of Cold War politics (71). At the time of its publication in 1957, both the mainstream and Asian American readers slighted *No-No Boy* and by the time it became a classic in the Asian American literary canon two decades later, Okada had regrettably passed away. Okada spent much of his life feeling disappointed by the underappreciation of *No-No Boy*. After his death, his wife destroyed much of his work, which included an unfinished manuscript of his second novel.

¹² Refer to Susan Jeffords' *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* in which she discusses how American manhood suffered an identity crisis during the 1960s and the 1970s, which was brought on by numerous changes that occurred on the national and international fronts – e.g. The Civil Rights Movement, the inauguration of Asian America, the antiwar movement, foreign economic competition, the uncertainty of the Vietnam War, etc. Jeffords details how hegemonic masculinity remasculinized itself through the discourse of the Vietnam War, which functioned to mitigate the consequences of the cultural, political, and economic changes which threatened to lessen white male authority.

by turning American violence against itself in order to remasculinize Asian America. Not without merit, Chin's advice still garners little result for Leonard Chang's Tom Pak, whose implementation of "ghetto violence" only serves to mire him deeper into a state of physical and social emasculation. Tom's deployment of violence enables him to tap into the hegemonic construction of manhood; however, his is relegated to an outlaw approach, which hastens the codification of Tom's body as "savage, illegitimate, decrepit, and ineffective" (Nguyen 96). By the end of *The Fruit 'N Food*, Tom is hospitalized, half-conscious, blind, and hardly motivated to rehabilitate himself toward a productive existence.

Leonard Chang's *The Fruit 'N Food* recasts John Okada's *No-No Boy* in the context of an illegitimate war of inner-city violence.¹³ Just as Kenji and the other Japanese American veterans are unable to reclaim masculinity in a sanctioned site of violence, Tom's marginalization is accelerated when he enlists as a combatant in an unsanctioned war of urban riot, which is fought among the renegade minorities within the confines of the ghetto. Though seminal in and of itself, violence becomes devoid of its formative qualities in the ghetto, which the mainstream regards as a site of physical and moral degeneration. Tom disidentifies with the dominant discourse of legitimate violence and subverts the characterization of Asian American men as victims of racial violence.

¹³ Other apparent similarities between Okada's and Chang's novels are: the Rhees and the Yamadas own stores in areas that are progressively populated by African Americans. Both novels intimate a growing hostility between Asian and African Americans. Ichiro and Tom each sees his father (figure) as a man whose social subordination is exacerbated by domination from the body maternal. The "mother" of each novel receives the blame for the protagonist's heightened sense of emasculation. Both Ichiro and Tom resort to a sexual expression of their masculinity but discover it fails to fully reclaim their manhood. Ichiro and Tom diverge in utilizing violent measures for remasculinization; one evades and the other embraces, but neither can escape emasculation.

Tom's race, however, blackens and delegitimizes his acts of violence. Tom is placed in a position of vulnerability by wielding violence deemed "ghetto" by hegemonic standards, and he becomes more susceptible to hegemonic masculinity's discipline over the violent body of the racial other. Tom achieves minor success in destabilizing preconceptions about pusillanimous Asian American men. Tom's disidentificatory tactic, nevertheless, is predetermined for inefficacy in his recuperation of masculinity; violence is unfailingly degenerative for men of color, and it is inclined to prolong their deposit in the fringes of American manhood.

It is important to note that in *The Fruit 'N Food* Tom occupies a space that is ostensibly devoid of hegemonic masculinity. In fact, the violent re-construction of Tom's masculinity seems to derive solely as a response to black violence leveled against Asian Americans. Notwithstanding the "ostensible" absence of the hegemony in Chang's novel, the conflict between the two minority groups cannot fully be understood without examining their respective relationships with the dominant group, which is ever-present in its spectral or metonymic form (e.g. the media). We must understand inner city violence within the context of discontent toward prevalent and pre-existing social conflicts and economic frustrations that people of color experience in mainstream America.

At first, Tom's sense of alienation from both Asian and African Americans allows him to consider himself tolerant of both, but his experience in the ghettoized Kasdan increasingly obstructs his identification with his black neighbors. The residents of the ghetto engage in violent clashes, which are likened to territorial wars fought between warring nations, and Tom and the Rhees are constantly wary of victimization by their

“supposed” black assailants. Tom’s gripping account of the complexities of urban racial strife not only frames the immigrant story gone awry but testifies to the oppressive struggles of those on the racial margins whose lives are complicated by the congealed cultural markers of race and ethnicity. *The Fruit ’N Food* also demonstrates that race relations can never be clear-cut and that the racial divide cannot be demarcated into a simple dialectic of black aggressors and Asian victims, especially given that violence does not discriminate between the two groups in the American context and functions similarly for them both.

Chang selects Tom as his protagonist; a loner and a drifter in practice and in spirit, he is a directionless college dropout with little prospects for the future. After his mother’s death in his childhood, Tom was passed around from one relative to another because his father was unable to take care of Tom. For a brief period during this time, Tom even lived in Korea but he knows very little, if anything, about Korea and being Korean. His father finally sent for Tom after several years but by then the two were too estranged to bridge the gap; the father and son lived like “strangers,” who only spoke about the “most innocent and mundane” things (13). In college, Tom became even more indifferent towards his father’s attempts to communicate; his father’s unread letters were discarded after Tom checked the envelopes for checks. When his father passed away, Tom did not even attend his funeral. In retrospect, Tom realizes that his father had done his best, and Tom is regretful that he had let a selfish “adolescent hatred” keep him from reconciling with his father (12).

With few ties to his family and its history, Tom considers himself an American who happens to be of Korean descent. Tom remains on the periphery of mainstream America, but he does not particularly ascribe his marginalization to his minority status. Homeless and broke, the antiheroic Tom undermines stereotypes of Asian Americans as successful, intelligent, and tunnel-vision moneymakers. Accordingly, Tom is an antithesis to the stereotype of the submissive Asian Americans, for whom assimilation into mainstream America is perceived to take precedence over all else. In a sense, Tom's divergence from a stereotypical Asian American initiates his destabilization of the dominant discourse, which is intent on inscribing his racialized body as a compliant "model minority." Tom's minor stab at unsettling the hegemony is a trajectory that he tenaciously pursues by appropriating violence to remasculinize himself.

Tom has no sense of belonging and does not explicitly profess any desire to belong. Nevertheless, Tom's return to his childhood neighborhood Kasdan is precipitated by a nostalgic need for familiarity. Tom admits that part of the appeal of working at Fruit 'N Food is "some inexplicable link to his past" (13). To his dismay, Tom hardly recognizes Kasdan, which he remembers as a "well-kept, lower-middle-class area, with Italians and small pockets of blacks, Latinos, and Asian" (42). He is disheartened that Kasdan's Korean community has all but disappeared. There is a small cluster of stores with Korean signs and the Korean church that Tom's father attended has been replaced by a dirty grey parking structure with "indecipherable graffiti." A "thin layer of grime" has descended on the neighborhood, now populated by multiple generations of lower class African Americans (42 – 3).

Despite his efforts to stay uninvolved, Tom cannot remain on the outside as the racial tension between Korean American merchants and their African American patrons escalates. Tom soon becomes over-sensitized to the issues of race and ethnicity as he receives unrelenting reminders of the dangers of living and working in a neighborhood splintered by racial, cultural, and generational differences. Excessive media coverage and editorials about urban conflicts among people of color prompt Tom's undue fears that "Judgment is coming" to the "whole city [made] uneasy" by racial disturbances (29, 104). In tandem with the voyeuristic gaze of the media, which keeps surveillance over and italicizes the "racist legacy" of the inner cities, Mrs. Rhee's scrutinizing gaze over black bodies marginalizes them into criminality and Asian American ones into victimhood (25). The Rhees are constantly on guard for the black "drug man" whose "many stealings" and "hold-ups" deprived them of "almost hundred dollars in past three months" (16 – 7). Mrs. Rhee, in particular, persists in conveying her contempt for and "irrational" suspicion of blackness (36). Despite her husband's admonition, she urges Tom to also "watch for *gumdnggee*," a "bad word, like nig ... nigger [sic]" explains Mr. Rhee apologetically (16 – 7). Though Tom is surprised and offended by Mrs. Rhee's racist behavior, Tom unwittingly finds himself replicating her paranoid fears and hatred of blacks, who come to signify an abbreviation of violent persecution leveled against Asian Americans.¹⁴ Just as Okada's Ichiro is conflicted by his "double consciousness,"

¹⁴ The tension between African and Korean Americans garnered national spotlight with the L.A. riots, but the possibility of a violent outburst was intimated in the years prior: Ice Cube's "Black Korea" (1991) and Spike Lee's 1989 movie *Do the Right Thing* delineate the mounting friction between the two minority groups. Ice Cube raps about the black frustration, which rails against Korean Americans' disrespect for their black neighbors:

Every time I want to go get a fucking brew

Tom struggles to negotiate his burgeoning ethnic allegiance to the Rhees and an antiracist discourse, which safeguards all racialized subjects.

Not unlike Ichiro and Kai before him, Tom's achievement of manhood is forestalled by his disconnect from a strong paternal presence. Not only was Tom estranged from his father but the mild-mannered and affable Mr. Rhee, who becomes a surrogate father for Tom, is overshadowed by the overtly brazen Mrs. Rhee, whose dogged determination for success overwhelms Tom at times. Mr. Rhee's kindness is shown from the very beginning when he offers a gift of three grapefruits to Tom who has lost his wallet and cannot afford to pay. He invites Tom to share their daily lunch, meager though it is, and he shields Tom from Mrs. Rhee's unreasonable rants about coming in

I gotta go down to the store with the two
Oriental one-penny-countin' motherfuckers;
They make a nigger [sic] mad enough to cause a little ruckus.
Thinking every brother in the world's out to take,
So they watch every damn move that I make.
They hope I don't pull out a Gat, try to rob
Their funky little store but, bitch, I got a job.

So don't follow me up and down your market
Or your little chop suey ass will be a target
Of a nationwide boycott.
Juice with the people, that's what the boy got.
So pay respect to the black fist
Or we'll burn your store right down to a crisp.
And then we'll see ya...
'Cause you can't turn the ghetto into black Korea.

In Lee's movie, a Korean American storeowner and his African American patrons hurl racially slurred epithets (directed toward each other) at the viewers. This immediately involves the viewers in the name-calling between Korean Americans and African Americans. Confronted by the hateful words, the viewers become more sensitized to each word and what it really denotes. And a forced participation in this caustic exchange compels the viewers to recognize the dangers of inadvertently accepting and reiterating stereotypes, which people are tempted to retain because they bring a semblance of order to a "more opaque and complicated modern life" (Adorno 484). Ice Cube's and Lee's elaborations on the race conflicts in the inner cities enable us to ascertain that the most detrimental aspect of urban disturbances lies in the reification of racial stereotypes, which can only beget further discord between the "money-grubbing bigots" and the "black perps."

late or not keeping a close enough watch on the customers-cum-shoplifters. Mr. Rhee befriends Mr. Harris, an elderly African American man whose wife had died two years earlier when *gang-peh*, gangs, attacked her.

Mr. Rhee owns a gun and his store has been held up four times in the past. Despite having a strong motive occasioning him to use deadly force to protect his family and property, Mr. Rhee recognizes the drawbacks of using violence to combat violence. Therefore, Mr. Rhee is adamantly against relying on a weapon to shield himself from being victimized; violence, for Mr. Rhee, cannot be a means to even out his compromised manhood in the mainstream and the periphery of America. In prioritizing the maintenance of peace in his family as well as in the larger community, Mr. Rhee encompasses an alternative Asian American manhood that is distinct from the American national masculinity, which traditionally defines itself through violence. Tom however criticizes Mr. Rhee for needlessly placing himself in a position of vulnerability, which Tom believes will invite future predation. If Mr. Rhee offers Tom an alternative masculinity to adopt, his model is ultimately an unappealing one for Tom because Mr. Rhee's conciliatory demeanor implicates him as a "model minority," which post-1960s Asian Americans consider a feminized position marking their inferiority.

Initially nonconfrontational, Tom is disconcerted by the sight of the pistol that the Rhees keep under the counter. He stares at it from afar, not wanting to touch nor disturb the gun. Tom feels "vaguely uncomfortable" by its presence, believing that there is "something menacing about having a gun within his reach" (27). However, Tom's fascination with the gun grows as he becomes increasingly mistrustful of other people of color who appear to him either as junkies or drunks, intent on abusing and undermining

his sense of autonomy. Tom eyes with suspicion his customers who come in to buy beer, looking strung out, with their “harried, bloodshot eyes” (25). In reiterating Mrs. Rhee’s irrational fear of victimization, Tom ends up reinforcing the dominant discourse, which gratuitously packages threats to the hegemony in black bodies.

Just as Okada renders the body maternal a source of emasculation for Asian American male subjectivity in *No-No Boy*, Chang’s portrayals of Asian (American) women ostracize them from the remasculinization process of Asian America. As one example, Tom remembers his Korean grandmother as a callous woman with “three front teeth missing [and] her wrinkled sunburnt face yelling at him [and making him cry] for breaking something” (59). Tom posits his grandmother as a source of his infantilization; likewise, Tom feels deprived of his agency by Mrs. Rhee’s covert insistence that he side with her and use violence against “their” prospective attackers. Tom regards Mrs. Rhee as an agent of hegemonic violence in that she reiterates racist discourse of “Negrophobia” (Knadler 87).¹⁵ When Tom starts working at the Rhee’s store, he is troubled by Mrs. Rhee’s bigotry and refuses to go along with her hypervigilance toward the black customers, whom she treats as latent criminals. Tom feels uncomfortable as she stares at a tall black man with long dreadlocks with “her arms folded across her chest, feet apart,

¹⁵ It is interesting to note the gender divide in the delineation of Asian American women in the context of urban conflicts. Whereas Chang’s depiction of Mrs. Rhee renders her a consummate bigot, the three (female) documentary makers of *Sa-I-Gu* (which literally means “four-two-nine” or April 29, the date that the L.A. riots began) endeavor to nullify a widespread portrayal of Asian American women as “inarticulate” and “hysterical” victims of racism and to give voice to these women doubly “othered” by their race and gender. Poignant stories of the shattered dreams of Korean Americans comprise *Sa-I-Gu: From Korean Women’s Perspective*, which attempts to counter the one-dimensional media representations of Korean Americans as inarticulate, overwrought, or hypervigilant. The documentary clarifies from the outset that the Korean American standpoint will be prioritized. According to Kim and her co-producers, the Korean American perspective was grossly neglected and misconstrued as Korean American voices were persistently expunged from public discourse about the riots or were often rendered unintelligible and therefore un-American.

chin jutting forward, [...] her body motionless” (34 – 5). Tom recognizes that, to a certain extent, Mrs. Rhee is also a pawn of hegemonic men; she is circumscribed within the racial margins, which she sentinel on their behalf at her peril. Like her neighbors, Mrs. Rhee must weather the harsh realities of racism, which are indiscriminately impinged on all minority subjects. Tom resists against undertaking such a self-degrading position. Aligning himself against Mrs. Rhee, who at once represents and takes the fall for hegemonic men, Tom retorts that he “wasn’t a security guard [and] wasn’t a cop” (55). Nevertheless, Tom contracts Negrophobia from Mrs. Rhee, and his antagonism towards other men of color intensifies accordingly.

Adding to the strain provoked by racial hyperawareness, Tom is in a disoriented state the whole time he works at the Fruit ’N Food; an insomniac, he is sleep deprived, exhausted, and frequently suffers from caffeine headaches. Tom also has recurring nightmares about being immersed in whiteness, foreshadowing his impending blindness. Often in a haze, two separate encounters offer Tom peace and clarity: a sexual relationship with the Rhee’s rebellious and self-absorbed teenaged daughter June/Jung-Me and a violent confrontation with blackness.¹⁶

Though troubled by June’s age, Tom is comforted by her presence, which seems to dissipate the “emptiness” of his life (94). Tom is able to alleviate the stress of the daily

¹⁶ Perhaps to obviate the homosexual inscription of Asian American male bodies, Chang and Okada establish the heterosexuality of Tom and Ichiro very early on in their novels. Although their heterosexuality does little to restore the masculinity of the two protagonists, it keeps them from further marginalization as sexual “deviants.” Despite an ostensible conflict with blackness throughout the novel, Tom, interestingly enough, tries to achieve his manhood by employing hypermasculine methods of sexual potency and violence, which have been traditionally associated with black masculinity. Black men’s bodies have been unduly perceived as a composite of excessive virility, physicality, and violence. Such perception has been a source of their social emasculation in that the black men were regarded as lacking the mental capacity to keep the excess of their masculinity in check.

grind by sexual and verbal interchanges with June. In June, Tom finds a confidante to whom he can unload his worries about the racial tension that he confronts with increasing frequency. Tom finds June's warm body reassuring in the austere atmosphere of his apartment and the Rhee's store. Nevertheless, Tom's sexual relationship with June is unable to fully empower him. Late one night when Tom is out on a date with June, the store is burglarized and Mrs. Rhee is badly hurt. Tom feels especially guilty because he and June were having sex when Mrs. Rhee was attacked. His inability to protect Mrs. Rhee abates his sense of manhood even as it is being validated by a sexual encounter with June. The novel intersects scenes of Tom and June's date with those of the break-in at the store; the overlapping image of him and June in bed with that of Mrs. Rhee being held up at gunpoint is a frightening one for Tom as he inadvertently conflates himself with Mrs. Rhee's attacker (89).

Sexual intercourse is transformed into an act of violence against Asian Americans as parallels are drawn between Tom and the "black man with grey teeth [who] scream at Mrs. Rhee to give him the money" (80). Waving his gun back and forth in front of Mrs. Rhee's face, the intruder grabs Mrs. Rhee's breasts and leaves her in a puddle of blood (81). As Tom lies next to June, he thinks that she might resemble a younger Mrs. Rhee. When the bruised and battered Mrs. Rhee returns to the store, Tom is surprised by how young she looks with her hair "falling [down] loosely" like June's (94). After he and June engage in sex, Tom is intrigued by the sight of his mid-section, which is streaked with June's menstrual blood: "his groin and lower abdomen were smeared with circular patterns of red, and his still hard sex was covered with a mix of blood and semen" (128). Thinking that the blood seems more like his, not hers, Tom stares at his bloodstained

body, which looks like he had been in an accident and feels a “strange sadness” as he cleans June’s blood off him (128). In this moment, Tom’s sexuality situates him as both aggressor and victim, two positions that appear to be contradictory but are fundamentally parallel for racialized masculinity.

Given that the illicit nature of Ichiro and Emi’s relationship does not facilitate Ichiro’s entrance into the public sphere, Tom’s sexuality does not fully recuperate his masculinity compromised by violence. Just as the “black fist” aggressively exacts respect from the people (Ice Cube “Black Korea”), Tom begins to consider violence as the most effective way to recover his lost sense of manhood. Tom acts on a misguided belief that violently subverting the race equation of “Asian=victim and black=perpetrator” will abet his transition from the feminized victim to the aggressive victimizer. Tom comes to see the gun and its promise of violence as the most effective way of regaining his masculinity, which was compromised by the threats of racial violence against the passive and compliant Asian Americans. Exasperated by Mr. Rhee’s unwillingness to use the gun to protect his family and property, Tom silently vows that he would “never let [such a thing] happen. He’d shoot before anyone would hit him” (86). Sex with June offers Tom a momentary release from the agonizing state of mental and physical exhaustion, but it is only when Tom uses violent measures to protect Mrs. Rhee from her would-be attackers that he is able to “sink away instantly [...] into a deep, quiet sleep,” for the very first time since his arrival in Kasdan (112).

Unnerved by the earlier attack, Mrs. Rhee cries out in fear and pain during a minor altercation with a black couple at the store. Tom takes matters into his own hands and pulls a gun on Mrs. Rhee’s alleged attackers. By disregarding Mrs. Rhee’s plea to

“push the alarm! Call police,” Tom refuses to align himself with or rely on representatives of hegemonic masculinity; Tom protests an identification with the sanctioned enforcers of hegemonic violence, who are intent on subduing racialized male bodies to docile ones. At the same time, he is determined to “stop anything and anyone” who tries to “hurt and hold up and beat or shoot” him or the Rhees. Tom thus responds to the “black fist,” which calls for him to seize respect by force, if necessary. Tom turns to point the gun at the black couple, yelling “don’t ever touch [Mrs. Rhee] again do you hear me don’t ever touch her again” (110). After the incident, Tom does not relinquish the gun but puts it into his pants (111); the gun epitomizes Tom’s phallus, by which he can reclaim his masculinity through enacting violence against destructive black bodies. Tom’s method of disidentification is to rally with blackness in order to confound the dominant discourse that determines Asian American male bodies as effeminate and acquiescent. Even as Tom disidentifies with hegemonic violence by responding to the call of the “black fist,” the power that it invokes is ironically used to subdue blackness as well as demote Tom to a social menace.

In tandem, Tom’s exterior appears to reflect his heightened aggression: Tom is transformed from a “young Asian Christ” with his “gaunt face, deep set eyes, [and] long hair, tied in a ponytail in back” to a “big man with gun,” whose physicality ostensibly manifests his increased militancy (10, 212). However, when Tom brandishes a gun, he is no longer the “big man” but an out-of-control “crazy sucka” who is a threat to social order (111). Because Tom only has access to an illegitimate form of violence, the efficacy of Tom’s disidentificatory strategy is severely limited from the get-go. Despite Tom’s endeavors to subvert the dominant discourse by deploying “ghetto violence,” Tom

remains an “unmanly” Asian American from a hegemonic perspective; seen through the lens of the camera, Tom is still a “skinny, gaunt” Asian with long hair (141). Tom’s attempt to remasculinize himself via violence proves to be a bankrupt method because he ultimately fails to destabilize stereotypes about Asian American masculinity.

Tom is further marginalized when his misappropriation of “ghetto violence” provokes a massive protest against the Rhee’s store from the African American community, frustrated by racial discrimination. As the boycotters level racist slurs against Tom and the Rhees, Tom is taken back to his childhood, a time when he was defenseless against racial violence. At this moment, Tom prepares to combat these hateful words, which “blend together around him [trying to] sink him” with his tightened fist (184); Tom’s response derives from his mistaken belief that one can only counter violence with violence. The police momentarily thwart a violent outbreak between the two warring factions but, in fact, the presence of the police and the media – lawful agents of hegemonic masculinity – escalate the intensity of the conflict, despite Mr. Rhee’s desperate gestures of conciliation.

The tension between the Korean American and African American communities and between the Rhees and Tom reaches a climax when the Rhees discover Tom’s intimate relationship with June. Tom’s guilt-ridden outburst coincides with the explosion of the boycott into a race riot, and again, the visceral Tom is conflated with the violent and violating black bodies of the rioters. Tom tries to escape from the store and forget his feelings of guilt for causing the boycott and for betraying the Rhee’s trust by sleeping with June. Tom returns only to discover that the store is ravaged beyond recognition. In a discombobulated state of devastation and chaos, Tom witnesses Mr. Harris, who is a

regular at the store, being mugged by Asian *Gang-peh*, gangs. Once again, Tom confronts violence with violence and once again, violence does not reward Tom by restoring his agency. A gang member shoots and blinds Tom, leaving him comatose.

When he regains consciousness several months later, Tom finds himself in the hospital, paralyzed and enveloped in that “whiteness he had dreamed about” (215). The Rhees, he learns, have lost both the store and the American Dream that it epitomized. In the metropolis where Chungpa Han found camaraderie with his African American neighbors almost a century ago, Tom discovers only racism and conflict, which both remain unresolved by the end of the novel. To reclaim his masculinity, Tom blackens his body, which in turn blackens his violence into illegitimacy. Ironically, Tom wakes into a world of whiteness that erases all markers of difference but discovers that the whiteness is “an ever-lasting blinding coldness like a cruel sun” (215).

Tom is overwhelmed by a sense of despair that he has not felt since he started to work for the Rhees. For a brief period, Tom manages to reinscribe the urban ghetto of Kasdan as a space of inclusion: home. As he lies half-conscious in a hospital bed, Tom nevertheless realizes that his experience at Fruit 'N Food was “meaningless, really” (225). Though he aspired to belong to the Asian American community, which the Rhees represented, Tom understands that he was mistaken to believe that he “belonged there, belonged somewhere” (225). Tom has fallen further into the margins of a segregated ghetto, which, in Chang’s novel, shows no chance for a genuine reconciliation among its disconnected inhabitants. Cognizant that he has “nothing to come back to,” Tom departs from the real world; he ignores his counselor’s prompting to “react to the world around him,” and increasingly withdraws into a world of his dreams (226). Tom’s bedridden and

emaciated body relegates him as “nothing,” and Tom’s earlier concern about the insignificance of his existence is confirmed in the end (8, 218). In a sense, alienation and emasculation are two interlocking forces that collude in the eradication of Tom and other racialized subjects from the fraternity of American manhood. Chang offers no closure as he leaves the blind and disabled Tom, not caring about different measures that he could have undertaken to “avoid what wasn’t an inevitable conclusion of violence” – i.e. a way to resolve interracial conflict that debilitates the marginalized by perpetuating racial fears and economic despair (225)

Race when coupled with violence always relegates subordinated men into a no-win situation; in this respect, perhaps the irresolution and the hopelessness that pervades the novel’s end is to be expected. Nguyen states that when the Asian Americans embarked on the project to regenerate Asian American masculinity through violence, they did so believing that the remasculinized male body would then discursively restore the collective body of Asian America. In Nguyen’s estimation, those who succeed in reclaiming their masculinity are able to do so because they learn to reinscribe the urban ghetto from a “space of exclusion” to a “space of inclusion” (98). Notwithstanding that Tom is predestined for failure by embracing an illegitimate form of violence to remasculinize himself, his fall from grace is still underscored by Tom’s disaffection from the Asian/American community and the futility of his efforts to belong.

Moreover, Tom’s misappropriation of violence devastates Kasdan and reinforces society’s misconception of this multiethnic neighborhood as a place of degradation. Tom’s exercise of illegitimate violence to reclaim his masculinity ultimately reiterates hegemonic anxiety of violent racialized bodies losing control and wreaking havoc on the

social order. Tom inadvertently reinforces the dominance of hegemonic masculinity as its sanctioned representatives, the police, are sent in to regulate the anarchy spawned by the unruly denizens of the racial margins and racial violence is, once again, used to emasculate people of color. If Younghill Kang, Gus Lee, and Frank Chin offer examples, in which the readers can ascertain disidentification as an effective strategy in Asian American men's subversion of the hegemony, Leonard Chang's experiment with disidentification diverges from the three previous examples as Tom's disidentificatory tactics do not yield any merit and instead further debilitate his chances to recuperate his masculinity. Though Tom locates a means to remasculinize himself within the "black fist," Tom's disidentificatory strategy is impinged on by the discourse of American violence, which delegates its formative attributes only to hegemonic men. In the end, violence blackened by Tom's racialized body cannot effect a formative juxtaposition between Asian and African Americans because his delegitimized violence cannot transform the ghetto into a locus of inclusion and reconciliation. It is impossible for Tom's unsanctioned use of violence to rework Kasdan into a "Black Korea," wherein Asian and African Americans can converge. The urban landscape remains a demarcated ghetto in Leonard Chang's *The Fruit 'N Food*.

Thus, we return to the opening image of the Asian American man in a Malcolm X T-shirt. Elaine Kim was asked to write an opinion piece for a subsequent issue of *Newsweek*, and she recounts how the editor insisted that Kim insert a reference to "Korean American cowboys" in order to "dramatize the 'resistance' of Korean Americans to black violence" (qtd. in Palumbo-Liu 188). An aggressive reconfiguration

of the model minority, the Korean American cowboy, maintains David Palumbo-Liu, would have served as a “defamiliarized image of white America’s manifest destiny” (188).

In Palumbo-Liu’s estimation, the Malcolm X T-shirt wearing Asian American gunman does indeed represent Asian America’s resistance to blackness; he contends that the Asian American male subject in the *Newsweek* photograph performs “perverse ventriloquism” of the “dominant white ideology,” to which racialized subjectivities have a “tenuous and contingent relation” (187). Not unlike Mrs. Rhee in Chang’s *Fruit ’N Food*, Palumbo-Liu aligns Asian Americans with the dominant discourse and recasts the racial violence between Asian and African Americans during the 1992 L. A. Riots as a revised version of a familiar narrative of the black-white conflict. He contends that the image of Malcolm X is “torn out of its historical context” and misappropriated to “speak for another who in turn serves the function of the absented dominant” (187, 193). Thus, by their perverse ventriloquism of the dominant discourse, Asian Americans, according to Palumbo-Liu, exploit a black iconic figure to collude with hegemonic masculinity in its oppression of African Americans.

However, Palumbo-Liu elides Asian American agency in his interpretation of the *Newsweek* photograph; in fact, he does not take into consideration that this Asian American man, not unlike Tom Pak in *The Fruit ’N Food*, actively embraces black culture as his own specifically to differentiate himself from the more conciliatory stereotype of the model minority (Nishime 45 – 6).¹⁷ Though Tom can be as easily

¹⁷ In her essay, LeiLani Nishime discusses the Seoul Brothers as another example of disidentifying Asian American (male) subjects. Nishime points out that one member of the Seoul Brothers, two Korean American rappers who appear in Renee Tajima-Peña’s *My America ... Or*

accused of misappropriating the “black fist,” we must still credit Tom for adamantly refusing to align himself with the dominant ideology that endeavors to subjugate all minority subjects. Contradictory to Palumbo-Liu’s contention, the *Newsweek* image can exemplify an Asian American subject’s disidentification with the dominant discourse; he subverts the hegemonic inscription on his body and demonstrates his ability to reinscribe himself with a whole new set of social signifiers.

LeiLani Nishime asks that we use this seemingly incongruous overlap of Asian American and African American (male) bodies to “open up other discursive spaces” (47). In re-reading Chang’s Tom Pak against this framework, we discern that Tom, though misguided, perhaps, in his methods, endeavors to extricate himself from hegemonic discourse that marks him as a feminized victim. Tom works against the racial violence of the hegemony and attempts to manipulate it to his advantage in destabilizing the supremacy of white dominance. Tom’s failure to reclaim his masculinity through violence may not be a consequence of his shortcomings but of the propaganda of formative violence, which mythically regenerated American national manhood. In this context, we can re-interpret the frustration that meets the readers at the end of Chang’s novel as, perhaps, his tongue-in-cheek way of frustrating the dominant discourse that

Honk If You Love Buddha, is wearing the same Malcolm X T-shirt and that “their very name locates its humor in the homonym between soul and Seoul [...] Homonym bleeds into metonym and Korean American identity becomes linked to an African American one” (46). In essence, the Seoul Brothers’ music effects a productive juxtaposition of Asian American and African American identities. Their rap music does not simply replicate or exploit but extends a cultural artifact that is distinctly marked as African American: the Seoul Brothers “embrace and assimilat[e] [black] culture as a way of understanding an [Asian American’s] place in America” (46). In mobilizing blackness to claim Asian Americanness, the Seoul Brothers reject conforming to the traditional dichotomies but situate themselves in a disidentificatory position, which “triangulate[s] both the dominant and the subaltern and is identical with neither” (47).

seeks yet another stereotype – the Asian American cowboy – to delimit Asian American subjectivity within its boundaries.

Finally, Tom Pak invites us to reconsider the troubling terminology of “masculinity.” In *Disidentification*, José Esteban Muñoz indicates that masculinity is a category that continues to prioritize a hegemonic rubric, which is cordoned off to those beyond the norm (58).¹⁸ As Tom’s case best illustrates, reading Asian American male bodies through the reductive lens of masculinity, hence, enunciates their sociopolitical prostration (Eng 1 – 4). Just as the violence that Tom deploys is rendered futile by its

¹⁸ In *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America*, David Eng also grapples with the viability of “masculinity” as a term to describe Asian American masculinity. Eng discusses how Asian Americans are subjected to multiple castrations by way of their race, gender, sexuality, history, and politics. And he implies that reading Asian American male bodies through the reductive lens of “masculinity” is what prostrates them sexually as well as divests them of all vestiges of sociopolitical power. Eng’s concerns about the subliminal meanings that we convey in our use of certain terminology caution us against (mis)using “masculinity”; along these lines, I submit that we consider an alternative term: subjectivity. While the two terms have become ambiguous and obfuscated in critical and literary studies, prior analyses have shown that the interchangeability of “subjectivity” and “masculinity” is not necessarily sustained in the specific context of nonwhite men. “Masculinity” has been a source of anxiety for nonwhite men in that normative definitions of masculinity have situated them in a compromised position of conflict and contradiction. It is, however, Keith Clark’s contention that even as racialized *masculinity* is undermined and misrepresented as “faux” (1), racialized *subjectivity* need not be an inverted version of hegemonic patriarchal masculinity. In his reading of David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly*, David Eng addresses how Song’s masquerade as a woman and its underlying inferences of homosexuality may compromise his *masculinity* in the traditional sense of the word. But Song’s subterfuge, according to Eng, does not necessarily deprive him of his *subjectivity*. In fact, Song’s ability to manipulate gender norms and his irreverence for hegemonic society’s inscriptions on his body explicitly convey subjectivity, reinforcing his subject position. Song’s traverses across gender boundaries demonstrate his agency to define himself as well as a capacity to subvert conventional constructions and tenets of gender. Albeit the denotative proximity of masculinity and subjectivity, Clark explains that the latter involves the “degree of agency one exercises in self-definition and identity formation.” In demarcating subjectivity and masculinity, Clark offers a viable apparatus for scholars of minority studies by which they can analyze how nonwhite men “reconfigure and refashion definitions of self that may counter conventional constructions and tenets” (2). What these critics’ discussions ultimately indicate is that we should not allow terminology to restrict our understanding of nonwhite men’s complexities. Both terms are used, for the most part, indiscriminately in this project; however, if “masculinity” is, in due course, a disabling and an unachievable category for men beyond the mainstream, Clark and Eng offer us an alternative (and perhaps more apposite) term – subjectivity – which is less inclined to evoke the linguistic and philosophical baggage tied to its definition.

illegitimacy, the masculinity that Tom endeavors to reclaim by his use of violence remains out of his reach given that it barricades the entrance of nonhegemonic men. Consequently, *The Fruit 'N Food* intimates that Tom is doubly bound for a downfall as he seeks to embrace something intangible to men of color – masculinity – by means that further delegitimizes their existence – violence.

As a novel heralding the coming of the new millennia, Chang's novel seemingly challenges us to shift away from the archaic "masculinity," a term mired in convoluted discourses of gender, to "subjectivity," a more progressive, gender-neutral term that seeks to destabilize the gender hierarchy. Tom's existential crisis alerts us that the impasse in which Tom finds himself stems, not necessarily from an exigency to reinstate his gender identity, but from his unsatisfactory search for subjectivity, or "agency one exercises in self-definition or identify formation" (Clark 2). Tom's initial anxiety over his lost wallet, and more importantly, his lost identification cards, prompt Tom to reflect on his identity: "without his wallet," Tom ponders, "he had no identification. He had no identity. [...]. Maybe now without his wallet he didn't exist" (8 – 9). A shift from masculinity, a disabling and unachievable concept for racialized masculinity, to subjectivity allows us revise our understanding of Tom's disidentification. By no means does it yield any desired effect for racialized masculinity. Nonetheless, Tom's act of resistance against the dominant discourse, in and of itself, becomes significant in his endeavors to locate his identity in the blended community of Kasdan. The next chapter on Frank Chin's *Gunga Din Highway* (1994) will continue to chart the trajectory from "masculinity" to "subjectivity" in Asian American literary arena.

CHAPTER V

RE-LOCATING THE MASCULINE “REAL”: A RE-VIEW OF DISIDENTIFICATION IN FRANK CHIN’S *GUNGA DIN HIGHWAY*

[Gunga Din] carried me away / To where a dooli lay,
An’ a bullet come an’ drilled the beggar clean.
’E put me safe inside, / An’ just before ’e died,
“I ’ope you liked your drink,” sez Gunga Din. [...]
You Lazarushian-leather Gunga Din!
Though I’ve belted you and flayed you,
By the livin’ Gawd that made you,
You’re a better man than I am, Gunga Din!

– Rudyard Kipling, “Gunga Din”

It is in the fairy tales that we learn what it is to be an individual. [Asian Americans] need to know the fairy tales to see for ourselves, to understand in the terms that our ancestors understood, the idea of [Asian] individuality, the ideas of [Asian] manhood and womanhood [...] as expressed in the stories that were created to codify [...] that vision of the world that life is war.

– Frank Chin

We have taken a literary journey throughout Asian America, during which we have examined how its male subjects contend with their exclusion from American registers of manhood. Along the way, we have met a diverse band of Asian American men spearheaded by Frank Chin. By delving into the experiences of Chungpa, George, Kai, Ichiro, and Tom, we have been able to canvass how Asian American men disidentify with the dominant discourse regarding masculinity so that they may lay legitimate claims to its ownership. We have observed the lives of disidentifying Asian American male subjects, who erase hegemonic inscriptions of effeminacy from their bodies and emblazon them instead with (hyper)masculine markers they borrow from black men. In

so doing, we have extended our understanding of the cultural interactions taking place not only between the core and the periphery but also *within* the racial margins. If the fundamental purpose of disidentification is to enable the subordinated subjects who employ its strategy to disarticulate the dominant discourse about them, then Asian American masculinity's particular mode of disidentification elucidates his conflicted endeavors to simultaneously countervail as well as access the preponderance of hegemonic men. In effect, inconsistency is innate to the Gordian processes of disidentification. For this reason, disidentification is hardly foolproof; its strategies beget ambivalent results for Asian American male subjects who rely on its counterhegemonic propensity to destabilize the racial status quo in the United States. At times, conflicts of interest breed dissonance between disidentifying Asian American men and other people of color. We have seen, nonetheless, how disidentification enables these male protagonists to locate an alternative way to achieve manhood in expressions of black masculinity.

A prolific writer, Frank Chin reiterates (or belabors, according to some) the importance of instilling a hypermasculine martial ethos in Asian America in both his fictional and critical works. While Chin has been accused of unscrupulously replacing hegemonic narratives about Asian Americans (especially about men) with his own, Chin's works still merit substantive study especially in regards to his problematic retention of certain hallmarks of the dominant discourse, namely his stance on black masculinity and its tentative relevance to Chin's distinct mode of disidentification.

Readers observe that in the earlier stages of his literary career, Chin distances himself from Asian culture; American nativity, according to Chin, is central to Asian

American “sensibility” (“Fifty” xxi). Chin calls it a false myth that Asian Americans have “maintained cultural integrity as Asians [and] that there is some strange continuity between [...] China [and] American-born Asian” (“Fifty” xxiv). At the same time, Chin argues that calling attention to the distinction between these two cultures is “neither a rejection [...] nor a contempt for things [Asian], as the whites and the [assimilationist] Chinatown Establishment would make them out to be. It is calling things by their right name” (xxv). To a certain extent, Chin is vindicated in claiming agency to demarcate what is uncritically conflated, and his efforts to interrogate and thereby demystify the “strange continuity” between Asians and Asian Americans are commendable.

Even as Chin underlines the salience of distinguishing the sensibilities of “Asian-born” and “American-born,” he calls for the “American-born” to align themselves with African Americans:

The Asian culture we are supposedly preserving is uniquely without masculinity. [...] The black man’s pride in his African heritage [...] enhances and informs his American voice and achievement. [...] However, our supposed Asian identity is used to exclude us from American culture. (“Backtalk” 556).

Chin concedes that Asian culture has been misappropriated as a basis for Asian American exclusion. He praises the black man who takes pride in his ethnic heritage even as Chin disassociates himself from his own. On the one hand, the “resistant” African Americans are “cultural achievers, in spite of white supremacist culture (xxv). On the other hand, the “accommodating” Asians are cultural washouts who tend to be subsumed by white supremacist culture. Chin subsequently promotes an alliance with blacks for their shared sensibility of those subordinated by the racial hierarchy in America.¹ We can discern that

¹ There are some adept literary analyses which examine the intersection between Asian Americans and African Americans in Frank Chin’s works. Nonetheless, a majority of Chin critics

Chin locates Asian culture as a site of emasculation for Asian Americans and black culture as apropos in how it seeks to restore Asian American men in the masculine equilibrium. Likewise, Chin equates reclaiming one's masculinity with affirming one's Americanness: to garner public acceptance as an American man denotes inclusion into the American public sphere.

In a previous chapter, we read *The Chickencoop Chinaman* (1981) as a paradigmatic text, illustrating how Asian American men grapple with the emasculating effects of a dominant discourse. In this play, Chin argues that Asian American men reconcile with the societal denigration of Asian American masculinity by reinscribing their bodies with articulations of blackness. However, several critics have pointed out that we can detect a shift in Chin's outlook on Asian culture around the mid-eighties.

According to Patricia Chu, Frank Chin begins to acknowledge the impact of Chinese culture on the social and cultural formations of Asian America in the mid-eighties.²

gloss over this motif by simply indicating that his writing is “inspired by the heroics of the Black power movement” (Wong 48). Chin himself underlines the camaraderie between Asian and African Americans; for example, Chin has expressed his appreciation to Howard University Press for agreeing to publish *Aiiiiieee!* when it had been repeatedly rejected by white publishers for its “excessive ethnic content”; African Americans have been, according to Chin, “quicker to understand and appreciate the value of Asian American writing than whites. [...] The blacks were the first to take us seriously and sustained the spirit of many Asian American writers. It was not surprising to us that Howard University Press understood us and set out publishing *Aiiiiieee!* with their first list. They liked the English we spoke and did not accuse us of wholesale literary devices” (*Yardbird* vi, viii). Furthermore, Chin acknowledges his collaboration with the outspoken African American writer, Ishmael Reed, to whom he dedicates his most recent essay collection, *Bulletproof Buddhist* (1998) (Anderson 70).

² In this chapter, I use “Chinese” interchangeably with “Asian” so I do not lose the pan-ethnic connotations Chin evokes when he collapses the definitions of the two categories. Cognizant of the oversimplification entailed in conflating the two terms, I still do so under the premise that Chinese culture has imparted an influential presence on the cultural production of other Asian countries as well as that of Asian America.

While Chin continues to imbue the Asian American experience with martial terms, he redefines the cultural identity of Asian America by tracing a heroic tradition in Asian “fairy tales.” It is during this time that Chin initiates his re-vision of Asian America based on selective readings of such classic Chinese tales as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *Water Margin*, and *The Art of War* which, in his estimation, best epitomize the male heroic tradition.³ Chin emphasizes the importance of certain rebels and outlaws in these mythic narratives and argues that they are appropriate heroes for modern Asian American men (Chu 170 – 1). Chin situates an essentially martial view of the world at the core of the Asian “real,” which he then safeguards from the self-abasing “fakes and sellouts” who “so boldly fake the best-known works from the most universally known body of Asian literature and lore in history” (“Come All Ye” 3). In a sense, Chin becomes a “textual fundamentalist” (Chu 180); his high regard for these mythic narratives as cultural weaponry propels Chin to vigilantly keep in check the literary production of other Asian American authors who allegedly distort and falsify these constructive “fairy tales” in order to pander to a mainstream literary establishment.⁴

³ Chin chooses, as keynotes for Chinese American character, three Chinese (or “Chin-ese,” according to Patricia Chu’s description) classics: *Art of War*, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and *Water Margin* (Chu 175). Written by Sun Tzu during 6th century BC, *Art of War* is a war manual, which has long been praised as the “definitive work on military strategies and tactics (“Art”). *Three Kingdoms* and *Water Margin* are novels by Luo Guanzhong (c. 1330 – c. 1400). Loosely based on official history of that period, *Three Kingdoms* narrates the events following the fall of the Han Dynasty until the establishment of the Chin Dynasty. The novel describes the various groups struggling for control of the empire through decades of civil war and shifting alliances between three main contenders (“Romance”). The source of *Water Margin* is traced to the folklore of Song Jiang, who led a band of outlaws in a revolt against corrupt politicians which lasted from around 1115 to 1121 (“Water”).

⁴ Chin contends that myths are “by nature, immutable and unchanging because they are deeply ingrained in the cultural memory, or they are not myths. New experience breeds new history, new art, and new fiction.” In this vein, Chin sees the revisions of “fake” writers who re-imagine “universal Asian” myth in the context of contemporary America as acts of distortion (“Come All

As a result, Chin's fictional and critical work written after his "transition" frequently evokes the figure of Kwan Kung, an ancient Chinese warrior that embodies martial heroism and a masculine code of honor.⁵ Chin makes a corresponding change to Asian American men's game plan for disidentifying with majoritarian discourse. In lieu of valorizing black masculinity as he does in *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, Chin "returns to the grounds of [Asian] American historical specificity" (Li 219) by celebrating the "heroic tradition" of Asia and establishing Kwan Kung as the model that Asian American men should emulate in order to reclaim their manhood in contemporary America.

Chin's transition compels us to interrogate the (de)merits of his initial disidentificatory tactic involving the appropriation of black masculinity. For one, does his earlier emphasis on black maleness derive from a misguided attempt to expropriate and essentialize blackness to serve his purpose? Furthermore, is Chin's transition triggered by an awareness that misrepresenting black masculinity defeats his ultimate purpose of eradicating the fake fairy tale of Asian American effeminacy? In extricating blackness

Ye" 29). Conversely, Maxine Hong Kingston defends her "alleged" deviation from traditional Asian myths as necessary in a 1980 interview with *New York Times*: "We have to do more than record myth [...] That's just more ancestor worship. The way I keep the old Chinese myths alive is by telling them in a new American way" (26).

⁵ Kwan Kung is a popular folk hero who "fought many battles, was brave, generous, loyal to the Han dynasty [...] He was a powerful giant, nine feet tall according to one legend, with a beard two feet long. His features were of a swarthy color [and] his whole appearance inspired a feeling of terror" (Doré 73). In *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, Kwan Kung is esteemed not only for his valor but for his great integrity and loyalty. Elevated as the beloved god of many households, Kwan Kung accompanied many a Chinese immigrant on the journey to America as his patron deity. Chin apotheosizes Kwan Kung as the "heroic embodiment of martial-sufficiency – god of war, plunder, and literature – violent revenge, and the destroyer of magic, and the consummate insurrectionist, champion of the downtrodden and oppressed against corrupt officials, corrupt countries, corrupt states, corrupt empires. This Kwan Kung is a heroic image of the individual universal in the Chinese culture" ("Not My Autobiography" 120). Thus Kwan Kung is, for Chin, the warrior par excellence, who can best combat the passive and accommodating figures of Gunga Din and Charlie Chan.

from an abbreviation as the quintessence hypermasculine, it is seemingly at stake for Chin to demonstrate his ultimate departure from the “hegemonic norms of inscription” on racialized bodies (Li 219). If we are to see Chin’s transition as an effort on his part to try and right a wrong, we must then consider if Chin’s subsequent deviation from the tutelage of black masculinity stems from a constructive cognizance of his initial shortcomings in misappropriating blackness.

Thus, this chapter investigates the shifts in Chin’s views on disidentification and Asian American remasculinization since the initial production of *The Chickencoop Chinaman* in 1972. An analysis of his most recent and ambitious novel *Gunga Din Highway* (1994) will enable us to better understand how this later work reflects Chin’s modified position regarding Asian Americans’ particular mode of disidentification and its reliance on black expressions of manhood. Before examining *Gunga Din Highway*, a review of his literary works seems to be in order; a brief assessment of Chin’s oeuvre imparts deeper understanding of how Chin re-evaluates his project a decade later, especially in regards to black masculinity and its formative impact on the process of Asian American remasculinization.

In “Fifty Years of Our Whole Voice,” an introductory essay of *Aiiieeeee!* (1974), Frank Chin argues that Asian Americans are rejected not only by white America but also by Asia, both of which are not “equipped to define [Asian Americans] except in the most superficial terms” (viii). And mirroring that rejection, many of Frank Chin’s early writings revolve around a male protagonist that is alienated from his family and his ethnic and larger communities. In reviewing Chin’s early short stories, Elaine Kim calls

attention to Chin's bleak portrayal of Chinatown and its people: it is a virtual graveyard of bachelor old-timers who await death.⁶ Kim observes that Chin ghettoizes the community of Chinatown, which he likens to a "funeral parlor [...] or a pathetic minstrel show" (Kim 79), and its inhabitants are either derogated to subhuman creatures and mechanical wind-up toys or written off as "Chinatown queers" and honorary whites: the Chinamans are, in Chin's estimation, a dutiful race of sissies" (*Year* 119; "Confessions" 74). The aggressive, logorrheic, backtalking young male protagonists of Chin's earlier works reject the marginal space of Chinatown where they face the dangers of hostility, exclusion, exoticization, dehumanization, and self-hate.

For example, Fred Eng in *The Year of the Dragon* (1974) is a forty-year-old bachelor who is employed as a Chinatown tour guide at his father's travel agency. Fred holds himself in contempt for becoming a tour guide, which by Chin's definition is a "despised and perverted [...] Chinaman, playing a white man playing Chinese" (qtd. in McDonald xxii). Fred forfeits his dreams of becoming a writer when he is summoned back home by his father who insists that "Chinatown always you home" (108). Fred despairs at the ironclad hold Chinatown has on its subjects; it is the "only place [that] will ever have any right to [him]. Only this Chinatown has the right to judge [him]. To kill [him]" (76). Fred resents Pa's terse command that his son "be Chinese now!" and he rails against the coercive forces that oblige him to undertake an Asian identity (93):

⁶ In her essay, Elaine Kim critiques three of Chin's short stories: "Food for All His Dead" (1962), "Yes, Young Daddy" (1970), and "Goong Hai Fot Choy" (1970). Kim notes that "Goong Hai Fot Choy" ("Happy New Year") comes from an unpublished manuscript entitled *A Chinese Lady Dies*. This piece and "Yes, Young Daddy" appear in Chin's collection of short stories *The Chinaman Pacific & Frisco R.R. Co.* (1988). Kim suggests that the protagonists of the first two stories, Johnny and Fred, evolve into the main character of the last piece, Dirigible who, in turn, develops into Tam Lum, the main figure in *The Chickencoop Chinaman* (78).

I'm not Chinese. This ain't China. [The] language is foreign and ugly to me [...] Just because we're born here don't mean we're nobody and gotta go away to another language [Chinese] to talk. (115)

Once aspiring to write the “great Chinese American novel,” Fred is imprisoned in Chinatown – a linguistic “chickencoop” – which keeps him from “drop[ping] his phony [Chinatowng] acka-cent” and subsequently reduces him to a jester-figure in a yellow minstrel show (83). Fred is, hence, debarred from achieving an authentic sense of self that is divorced from its confines (71). Chinatown, in essence, is an “existential space,” which can only present its occupants with liability and dilemma (Li 217). Declaring in despondence that he is “shit. This family is shit. Chinatown's shit [because] you can't love each other around here without hating yourself” (124), Fred regards Chinatown as a place that breeds self-contempt.

For Chin and his protagonists, Chinatown and other ethnic districts – e.g. Koreatown or Li'l Tokyo – are not autonomous communities; built on “racist love,” they are at once emasculated and emasculating ghettos, complicit in perpetuating “popular racist ‘truths’ that make up the Oriental stereotype” (“Fifty” xxv).⁷ In *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, Kenji indicates this as the very reason that he chooses to live in Pittsburgh, which “ain't exactly famous for no Chinatown or Li'l Tokyo, you know” (20). Protesting against residing in a place that expects him to “get into silk robes and walk around like [a] fool” (22), Kenji considers the black ghetto home; not only does he live with black people, Kenji talks, dresses, and even eats like them (21). Kenji angrily repudiates his Asianness and proudly claims himself, instead, the “black one. ‘Blackjap Kenji’ [who]

⁷ Patricia Chu notes that “racist love” is a precursor of the “model minority” paradigm, which depicts Asian Americans as exemplary (and more favorable) minorities. Racist love entails identifying Asian Americans as amenable and submissive which, according to Chu, are “thinly disguised form of American orientalism” (65).

hates yellow-people” (20). Kenji, like Chin’s other protagonists, considers Chinatown and Li'l Tokyo a peripheral space, which, unlike the black ghetto, entails damaging ramifications for an Asian American’s production of a masculine self. For these Asian American pioneers of disidentification, home is the black ghetto wherein they osmose the rhetoric of resistance of a masculine people.

In depicting Chinatown as a place of death and decay compounding the cultural, social, and political bankruptcy of its inhabitants, Chin seems to rationalize his young male protagonists’ urgency to escape from Chinatown and an Asian identity. What Chin’s characters find frustrating about this ethnic enclave is that “everybody’s Chinese here” (qtd. in Kim 80). Chin holds responsible the Chinese’ stronghold of their ethnic culture, which voids Asian American men of their agency: in a word, Chinatown is a degenerate holding space that Chin (and his protagonists) must transcend in order to become productive Americans.

Furthermore, captivity in Chinatown renders Asian American men an “endangered species” by the exodus of Asian American women whose population is already small in number (*Year* 85). The exiting women are inclined to marry outside their (ethnic) community. When Fred’s sister Mattie in *The Year of the Dragon* returns to Chinatown with her “China-crazy white husband” Ross, Pa Eng worries of the impending extinction of his family: “And no more blood. No more Chinese babies born in a family” (69, 109). Asian American women’s departure from Chinatown and its men reiterate a stereotypical perception of Asian American men as “mama’s boys and crybabies, not a man in all your males” (*Chickencoop* 24). For Chin, who gauges one’s masculinity through his sexual prowess, the absence of Asian American women from Chinatown

becomes another source of Asian American men's emasculation; in *The Year of the Dragon*, Fred urges his brother Johnny to leave Chinatown, which stymies remasculinization through sexual means, and "get a white girl while you're young" (123).

Failing to escape Chinatown himself, Fred is subsumed by the stereotypical Chinatown tour guide and resigns himself to becoming Pa's "Number One Son, all day long, saying 'Gee, Pop!'" (128). In the final scene, Fred appears "dressed in solid white [and] a white slightly oversized jacket"; as his Chinaman father's heir, Fred, in effect, becomes a "shrunk Charlie Chan, an image of death" (141). Chin places at the center of his earlier works young male protagonists who are angry, frustrated, and lost in Chinatown. As a result of their circumstances, they are only offered two defeatist options of being "Chinese. Charlie Chan or a nobody" to whites or a "mad dog to the Chinamans" (117). Those who do not choose either option turn to other means – e.g. a hypermasculine black ethos in *The Chickencoop Chinaman* – for reprieve from marginalization and emasculation.

As previously noted, Chin's readers observe a shift in his writings around the mid-eighties, during which he forges a new vision of Asian America based on his reading of classic Chinese epics. In "Come All Ye Asian American Writers," which appears in *The Big Aiiieeee!* (1991), Chin emphasizes the importance of recovering the works of the writer of the real and reinforcing their cultural currency in the literary arena of Asian America. Chinatown is no longer a place of death and decay wherein early Asian immigrants clustered together to preserve their "alien culture" ("Confessions" 60). Instead, it is redeemed as a formative site in which to retrieve the works of the real.

Moreover, Chin releases the inhabitants of Chinatown from being complicit in its making; “it was not us,” asserts Chin, “that created a game preserve for [early Asian immigrants] and called it ‘Chinatown’” (“Confessions” 60).

In tandem, Chin and other editors of *The Big Aiiieeeee!* own up to their accountability in the elision of Asian narratives providing “background and contents of the real” (xv); they confess that it would have been easier to collect these essential stories had the new generations of Asian Americans

paid attention to the Cantonese operas and Kabuki we were taught as youngsters. [...] It would have been easier had we not erased the stories the old folks, the busboys, and the immigrants told to describe [Asian cultural artifacts] found on the shelves and walls of Chinatown and Li'l Tokyo shops and restaurants. (xv)

The recovery process, according to *Big Aiiieeeee!* editors, was rendered more arduous by such fake writers as Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, and David Henry Hwang who “fake all of Asian American history and literature” in order to “legitimize their faking” (3). Because fake work, warn these self-proclaimed guardians of the real, only breeds fake work, the fake fairy tales and their fake version of history contributed to the perpetuation of damaging stereotypes about Asian Americans.

In order to reinstate the real in Asian American culture, Chin recommends a re-reading of three Chinese classical novels – *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *Water Margin*, and *Journey to the West* – for their subversive and martial subtexts. Chin commends these mythic narratives for their exploration of “the ethic of private revenge,” “the individual-as-soldier’s constant battle to maintain personal integrity,” and “the idea of the oppressed people rebelling [against] the corrupt state (39). These “fairy tales” are valuable, says Chin, for the parallels that can be drawn between the mythical outlaw-

heroes and the early Asian immigrants.⁸ The hardships of the immigrant experience enabled early Asian Americans to identify with these folklore heroes and use the wisdom of these age-old tales to survive in the “Gold Mountain.” In this vein, Chin redeems and embraces the term “chinaman” and “cleanses its image of historical pollution” (Li 185).

Both Chin’s critical and fictional works start to reflect his revision of Asian American cultural identity, particularly by featuring protagonists who embrace, rather than discard, their Asian heritage. Along these lines, Chin promotes Kwan Kung, a warrior deified in “Chin-ese” texts (Chu 175), as a figure for Asian American men to emulate in their recuperation of masculinity. Ensuing the transition in the way he regards ethnic heritage, Chin revises how he strategizes disidentification: Chin gives priority to an “Asian” measure instead of undertaking an African American one in critiquing the hegemonic discourse about manhood. Taking advantage of the flexible positions to which the rubric of disidentification lends itself, Chin scrupulously applies Chinese cultural tradition to his fictional worlds in hopes that such application will transcend to the real.

For example, *Donald Duk* (1991) recounts the coming-of-age of its eponymous twelve-year-old protagonist. Donald is a young boy growing up in San Francisco’s Chinatown. Donald is saddled with a cartoonish name that he despises, but worse, he is deeply ashamed of being Asian American because his immigrant forefathers, according to his teacher Mr. Meanwright, were “passive,” “non-assertive,” “timid,” and “helpless against the relentless victimization by aggressive Americans” (2). Donald comes to hate

⁸ Some critics point out that in his eagerness to valorize the outlaw-heroes of these Chinese classics, Chin glosses over certain negative aspects about them. For example, Chin highly praises the leadership of Song Jiang in *Water Margin* but elides that it is Song who ultimately sells out his brothers and surrenders to the Sung emperor.

everything Chinese; he wants instead to be Fred Astaire and “dance on the grave of his heritage” (89).

However, Donald’s Asian American forefathers intervene in his dream to help young Donald to move beyond a racial self-loathing. In a dream sequence, Donald returns to the year 1869 and rediscovers the history of the Asian immigrant laborers who built the Central Pacific railroad in world-record time. Donald recaptures the cultural and historical implications of early Asian railroaders within American history. Armed with this knowledge, Donald confronts and subverts Mr. Meanwright’s falsified version of Asian American history in the classroom, which is transformed into a site of his triumph (150 – 2).

Donald’s reconciliation with his cultural forefathers prompts one with his estranged father, King Duk, who closely resembles Chin’s ideal of Asian American manhood: King is a heterosexual family man, a successful Chinatown restaurateur, and was on the “security staff of the US army chief of staff” during the last war (8). King not only lives by Chin’s credo – life is war – but literally and figuratively embodies Kwan Kung on stage; a legendary Kwan Kung performer, King is reputed to become “Kwan Kung himself when he “wears the mask of Kwan Kung on stage” (100). Donald watches proudly as King plays Kwan Kung for the Chinese New Year’s Parade. This celebration of their Asian heritage restores Chinatown as a vital and formative site of Asian American cultural identity, which, unlike his earlier works, is peopled by creative, artistic, proud, and self-affirming Asian American men. By the novel’s end, Donald successfully converges the dual cultures of America and Asia in the formation of his

identity.⁹ Donald's ultimate transformation, as we can see, mirrors Chin's changed demeanor toward the role of Asian heritage in the cultural construction of Asian America.

In *Gunga Din Highway* (1994), Frank Chin continues to emphasize the Asian "real," which he locates in diverse sites of Americana; his most ambitious novel, Chin revisits and extends many themes that appear in his earlier works: deconstruction of racist stereotypes, the failure of Asian American fatherhood, intersections within the racial margins, gender conflict between Asian American men and women, and valorization of the heroic tradition. Textured by an eclectic juxtaposition of ideology, history, and culture, the peripatetic novel takes its readers for a wild ride through a convoluted landscape of Asian America. The readers traverse from

the Mother Lode country of California during World War II to the coffee houses of San Francisco in the 1950s, then to Seattle riots and a rock-flamenco-blues festival and a radical group [meeting] in the late 1960s whose marching song extols Mao Tse-tung to the tune of the Mickey Mouse Club song, then to off-Broadway [...] in the 1970s, then to middle age and disillusion in the 1980s, and finally to a bizarre genealogical revelation in the 1990s. (Davis 360 – 1)

Featuring mature male characters who have gained access to Kwan Kung and the heroic tradition that he embodies, this novel is yet another skirmish in Chin's long campaign against hegemonic forces which orientalize, abbreviate, and distort Asian American culture. While *Gunga Din Highway* recycles Chin's earlier ideas, he re-imagines them in, perhaps, a less didactic manner; reserving his invectives only for the "fake Asian

⁹ Chin uses this novel to foreground his didactic agenda of educating his mainstream readers about "real" Asian fairy tales. Susan B. Richardson claims that an "uncharacteristically solicitous" Chin positions Donald's best friends Arnold as an "*alter ego* for white readers" who asks on their behalf questions about cultural or linguistic matters (58, 60).

Americans,” Chin allows his male protagonists more leeway to digress from his initial blueprint for achieving a formative Asian American masculinity.

The title of Chin’s latest work evokes Rudyard Kipling’s famous ballad, “Gunga Din” (1892). One of Kipling’s best-known poems, the eponymous character is an extension of the stereotypically passive Asian American man who forfeits his life in order to accommodate the needs of hegemonic men.¹⁰ Kipling’s narrator is a British soldier whose life is saved by Gunga Din, a native Indian water-bearer. Though he is also wounded, Gunga Din manages to bring water to this soldier. Gunga Din eventually dies, but not before entreating the soldier to enjoy his drink. The narrator facetiously comments that he hopes to see Gunga Din again in hell where the latter will be still serving drinks to the “poor damned souls.” Anticipating the continuance of the master-servant relationship even into the netherworld, the authoritative voice of the British-male-soldier-narrator deems Gunga Din acceptable, in spite of “’is dirty ’ide,” due to his enthusiasm for assimilation: “’E was white, clear white, inside.”

Chin appropriates this figure in order to critique Asian Americans (artists in particular) who “achieve fame and wealth at the expense of their racial selves or cultural tradition” (Ho 159); for Chin, these “fake” Asian Americans are all Gunga Dins, from whom he must safeguard the “authentic” Asian American manhood. By inviting his readers into the lives of Ulysses S. Kwan, Diego Chang and Benedict Han (a.k.a. Ben Mao), Chin revisits the issue of Asian American male subjects’ emasculation in the social and political terrain of America and imagines multiple ways in which Asian American

¹⁰ The poem inspired a 1939 adventure film, starring Cary Grant and Douglas Fairbanks, about three British soldiers and their native water-bearer, who fights against his own people to help the British army in colonial India. In the film version, a young boy plays the part of Gunga Din, a casting which further infantilizes the Asian male character.

men reconcile with the dominant inscription on their bodies as Gunga Dins and Charlie Chans.

A mélange of rambling subplots, the novel's main plot revolves around the experiences of this defiant trio. If the "fake" version of Asian Americans defines them as "anti-individualistic, mystic, passive, collective, and morally and ethically opposite to Western culture," Chin establishes his protagonists as three distinctly individualistic, artistic, and aggressive regular Joes who happen to be Asian American ("Come All Ye" 9). The three meet at Chinese school in early 1950s, and they cultivate an enduring friendship by re-enacting the oath of blood brotherhood of the Peach Garden in *Three Kingdoms*. Chin correlates his novel with the Chinese epics by having each of his male protagonists: Ulysses, Ben, and Diego embody the heroic characters that appear in this ancient Chinese fairy tale. Ben is Lowe Bay, the "*pretender* to the throne of the Han," Ulysses is Kwan Kung, and Diego is Chang Fay (73, italics mine).¹¹ In tandem, these three are reminiscent of Chin's other backtalking protagonists from the past, but they diverge from Chin's earlier protagonists in that they assume mature and self-affirming attitudes toward their Asian-Americanness and masculinity.

These three men are not "heroes" perhaps in the American sense. Ulysses is a college dropout and never marries, which means he has no "legitimate" progeny to carry on his cultural heritage. Ulysses comes to appreciate the anonymity of the racial margins and does not much desire to venture beyond its boundaries. He ends up writing zombie movies for Hollywood; proclaiming "no more doing it for the people," Ulysses thereby

¹¹ In reviewing *Gunga Din Highway*, Wen-ching Ho notes that the some titles of the episodic narratives that comprise the novel are translations of well-known Chinese idioms. According to Ho, however, in most cases, it is difficult to determine the connection between an episode and its subtitle (161).

embraces the self-serving art of commercial writing (346). Ben is a cuckold, a failed father, a plagiarist, a pretender, a sellout, and “Mr. Asian American Studies” (277, 262); he freely takes from Ulysses’ old letters and Fu Manchu novels for his creative thesis, “Fu Manchu Plays Flamenco” which, to everyone’s surprise, is chosen to be staged in New York.¹² The play, despite giving Ben his “Warholian fifteen minutes of fame” renders the Asian American trio “ornamental Orientals” (217, 254). Diego, married and divorced, is “just another horny Chink,” a pariah, and a mediocre musician (276). Living on the fringes of society, Diego is further obscured as his friends’ “entourage [and] the family drunk” (278).¹³

In a nutshell, these three are, by no means, upstanding citizens; they are anti-establishment, non-conformist hippies who indulge in sex, drugs, and alcohol. On the

¹² Fu Manchu is the master criminal that appears in a series of detective novels by Sax Rohmer (a. k. a. Arthur Henry Sarsfield Ward). Best remembered for his creation of this master villain, Rohmer was one of the most successful writers in the 1920s and 1930s. The first Fu Manchu story, *The Mystery of Dr. Fu Manchu*, was serialized from 1912 to 1913; it features Commissioner Nayland Smith and Dr. Petrie in their recurring roles as adversaries of Fu Manchu who conspires to overthrow the “white race” by unleashing the power of the “Yellow Peril.” The Fu Manchu novels spawned a number of films made from the 1930s and onward and even a TV series in the 1950s. Though the novels themselves do not clarify what ethnicity Fu Manchu was, they alluded that he came from the Far East. When the novels were adapted for film, Fu Manchu was transformed into a Chinese character (“Fu Manchu”). The racist undertones in the characterization of Fu Manchu render him a controversial figure still, especially in Asian American studies. The *Aiiiiieee!* editors describe Fu Manchu as a construction of racist hate (whereas Charlie Chan is one of racist love); Fu Manchu, who lacks physical essence and poses homosexual threats is rendered, by villain standards, considerably less intimidating (*Aiiiiieee!* xi). Epitomizing the “Bad Asian,” Fu Manchu remains a problematic figure for Chin and his colleagues: “even the bad yellow [is a] subcutaneous white supremacist” (*Big Aiiiiieee!* 9).

¹³ It is important to take note of the fact that all three protagonists are, in some measures, artists. Patricia Chu recapitulates Eric Sundquist’s and Nina Baym’s thesis, which suggests that “novels about artists are in fact about the authors themselves. Writing a narrative about oneself may [be] a bizarre act of self-fathering. [...] American authors have been particularly obsessed with fathering a tradition of their own, with becoming their ‘own sires’” (69). Considering these critics’ observations in tandem to Chin’s belief that Asian Americans are “self-begat” (*Gunga* 93), we can read *Gunga Din Highway* as the paramount evidence of Chin’s dedication to establish an Asian American cultural agnation that is no longer encumbered by the baggage of hegemonic discourse.

upside, nonetheless, these men *are* anti-establishment, non-conformist outlaws who thumb their noses at conventional definitions of masculinity and Asian American-ness; they take pride in their difference and triumph in worlds of their own making. Chin's three protagonists are able to thwart cultural expectations about Asian Americans and their manhood in their idiosyncratic ways. If Chin's earlier protagonists are, as victims of cultural alienation, left in a state of frustration and futility, the accomplishments of Ben, Diego, and Ulysses lead the readers to draw the conclusion that constructive self-realization cannot be achieved without taking one's ethnic heritage into account. The affirmation and prioritization of their Asian American culture indicate their departure from a reliance on black masculinity to challenge and effect change in – to disidentify with – mainstream America.

From the onset, Chin expounds that he is involved in a continuous process to erase the powerful stereotype of Charlie Chan, whom Frank Chin finds so contemptible in his effeminacy.¹⁴ Chin casts Charlie Chan as the ancestor of his main protagonist,

¹⁴ A “fat inscrutable, flowery but flub-tongued effeminate little” detective and a father of eleven, Charlie Chan is a fictional character created by Earl Derr Biggers in 1925 (*Aiiiiiiii!* xi). Biggers, a writer of detective and mystery stories, developed Charlie Chan on the experiences of a Chinese detective in Honolulu named Chang Apana for his novel “The House Without a Key” (1925). Biggers wrote six Charlie Chan novels from 1925 to 1932. Biggers’ novels generated numerous movies about Charlie Chan, all of which gained wide popularity. A TV series (39 episodes) was in syndication for two years in late 1950s, and in the 1970s Hanna-Barbera Productions made an animated series, noteworthy only because it was the one occasion in which Charlie Chan was played by an Asian American actor, Keye Luke. There were two movies made in the 1920s which starred Japanese actors and several of Charlie’s sons had been played by Chinese American actors in the 1930s movies, including Keye Luke as the eldest son and Benson Fong as Number Three son (“Chan”). Charlie Chan is, perhaps, best known for saying “absurdly cryptic, pseudo-Confucian” aphorisms in broken English:

“Observe.”

“Necessity mother of invention, but sometimes stepmother of deception.”

Ulysses S. Kwan. *Gunga Din Highway* begins with the narrative of Longman Kwan, Ulysses' father. He is an actor whose roles include the stock Asian character in war movies: Longman is the embodiment of "The Chinaman Who Dies" (8). Longman's biggest role was that of Charlie Chan's Number Four son and he now desires to be the first Asian American actor to play Charlie himself in the upcoming movie. Not only does he want to play the part but Longman also wants to live the part of Charlie Chan, whom he sees as the "perfect Chinese American":

As God the Father gave up a son in the image of the perfect white man, to lead whites to walk the path of righteousness toward salvation [...] so the White Man gave up a son in the image of the perfect Chinese American to lead the yellows to build the road to acceptance toward assimilation. Ah, sweet assimilation. Charlie Chan was his name. (13)

Longman's desire to embody a figure of assimilation anticipates the conflation of his "reel-life" and real life; by his conformist behavior, Longman's identity is already subsumed by that of the sycophantic Charlie Chan.

Longman's accommodationist demeanor dissolves the relationship between father and son; Ulysses grows up despising his "lousy Chinaman" father.¹⁵ Born as a result of

"Boy scout knife, like ladies' hairpin. Have many uses."
"Chinese people interested in all things psychic."

Crafted from "racist love," Charlie Chan is a "good Asian" (compared to Fu Manchu, a "bad Asian" and a byproduct of racist hate) who "cheerfully" cedes to his inferiority in the racial hierarchy (Kim 4). Calling him a "fake Asian pop icon," Jessica Hagedorn places Charlie Chan in the "demeaning legacy of stereotypes that includes Fu Manchu, Stepin' Fetchit, Sambo, Aunt Jemima, Amos N' Andy, Speedy Gonzalez, Tonto, and Little Brown Brother" (*Charlie Chan is Dead* xxii).

¹⁵ In naming his protagonist Ulysses Kwan, Chin pays tribute to both Kwan Kung and the Homeric mythic figure that embodies hegemonic masculinity. According to Crystal S. Anderson, naming his character after the "most famous heroic figure in Western literature demonstrates [Chin's] awareness of the characteristics that define men in mainstream Western culture [and Chin] seeks to imbue [his Ulysses] with these manly characteristics" (68). Other critics have also pointed out that Chin's Ulysses can also be read as an homage to James Joyce's

Longman's bigamous and incestuous marriage to Hyacinth, baby Ulysses was sent away to live with a white retired Vaudeville couple for the first six years of his life.¹⁶

Aunt Bea and Uncle Jack are "blue-eyed, white haired old white people" who are now retired from Vaudeville, a site of subversion and performativity (51). And despite their good intentions, this white suburban couple makes Ulysses aware of racial and ethnic categories by teaching him to answer that he is an "American of Chinese descent" to account for his physical difference when a one-eyed soldier derogates him as a "Jap kid," an enemy (52). By inscribing Ulysses with racial and ethnic markers, subsequently heightening his race-consciousness, Ulysses' ersatz parents circumscribe him in a hegemonic framework.

In tandem, they relegate Ulysses to a "little Chinese dolly" and in so doing, they hail him into his social and ideological position (51); though well-meaning, Aunt Bea and Uncle Jack interpellate Ulysses as an emasculated Asian American male subject. This incident hence flags the moment of Ulysses' racial interpellation in which Ulysses, a racially subordinated subject, realizes his displacement from a shared circle of whiteness that encompasses the blue-eyed Aunt Bea, Uncle Jack, and the one-eyed World War Two

Leopold Bloom and Stephen Daedalus in *Ulysses* (1922). The style which Chin incorporates in *Gunga Din Highway* – the employment of multiple narrators, stream-of-consciousness, parody, jokes, wordplay, multilingual puns, allusions – is also reminiscent of Joyce's literary techniques. Also, Chin, like Joyce, draws heavily from mythology, history, and literature when writing his novels. Elsewhere, Chin expressed his hopes of re-creating Ireland's Abbey Theatre, a project in which Joyce was involved. Chin subsequently founded the Asian American Theater Workshop in San Francisco (Abe 3). Nonetheless, it is highly problematic on Chin's part to name his protagonist after an iconic male character in the tradition of hegemonic masculinity and invoke Western literary heritage (via Joyce, albeit the revolutionary potential of his work), both of which he endeavors to destabilize.

¹⁶ With the impending deaths of his father Longman and his brother Longman, Jr. (a. k. a. the Hero), Ulysses learns of his fathers sexual exploits from Joe Joe, a half-brother from his father's first marriage to China Mama. Joe Joe reveals that Junior is, in fact, the offspring of his father and his maternal grandmother, who is also his father's sister.

veteran. These enforcers of the racial hierarchy render young Ulysses a “good soldier” who, under their collective gaze of surveillance, learns to stand up straight, keep his clothes clean, and not let on when neighborhood bullies taunt him (52).

Ulysses is abruptly returned to his “real” family, from whom he has been separated during his formative years. Hence Ulysses regards them as “strangers whose language means nothing to [him]” (53) and he, likewise, becomes “strange to the Chinese of [his] family, [...] and am stranger in town, the stranger in the family ever since” (59). In particular, Ulysses is rendered unfamiliar by his American voice, which contains “nothing Chinese” (75). Ulysses’ familial and linguistic disconnect stymies him from achieving a sense of belonging in his ethnic community. In tandem, Ulysses’ alienation is exacerbated by the extended absence of his womanizing father Longman, who would rather chase a pipe dream of becoming the next Charlie Chan in Hollywood than be a positive male role model for his son.

In Longman’s absence, Mr. Mah (a.k.a. the Horse), his teacher at Chinese school, becomes a father figure. The Horse recuperates the importance of Asian cultural heritage to Ulysses and his friends. Through the teachings of the Horse, Ulysses comes to understand the precariousness of his racial identity as neither entirely Asian nor American:

“I can teach you to read and write Chinese,” the Horse said, “but you will never be Chinese. And by now you should all know no matter how well you speak English and how many of the great books of western civilization you memorize, you will never be bokgwai, white European Americans. The Chinese kick you around for not being Chinese. The whites kick you around for not being American.” (93)

Nonetheless, being neither, reassures the Horse, places Asian Americans in an advantageous position of distinctiveness; they are “pure self-invention [or] self-begat”

(93). In a word, Asian American subjects have a capacity, like no other, to define themselves discretely from the cultural spaces that they occupy even as they access its cultural resources. Prompting his students to appreciate their Asian American individuality, the Horse counsels them to “learn everything Chinese and American [...] so as to see the difference between the real and the fake, the knowledge of what being neither Chinese nor *bokgwai* means” (93).

Acknowledging that they, to a certain degree, retain ties to the cultures and histories of Asia and America, the Horse still illuminates that the “self-begat” have the agency to forge their own paths in the tortuous landscape of Asian America. The Horse, in essence, requires his students to develop a cultural consciousness that allows them to navigate both cultural spheres of the “Chinese” and “bokgwai.” Ultimately, the three protagonists come to realize that rather than conforming to just one culture, they have the agency to move flexibly between the cultural realms of Asian/America.

Intermittently overlapping, the lives of these three friends take divergent paths. Of the three, Ben Han is the most acculturated; Ben likes Ulysses, who “speaks English like an American” and favors the “scary science fiction stories horror stories” that his friend writes because “there were no Chinese in them and no one could tell a Chinese had written them” (75, 77). Ben is the only one that admires Longman and enjoys watching his Charlie Chan movies, which he considers “so American” (76). Ben maintains a difficult relationship with his mother, Orchid Han, an opera star-turned-insurgent who fought against the Japanese during World War II (73). Likewise, Ben is inclined to

disassociate himself from an Asian culture that prevents him from a complete inclusion into mainstream America.

An opportunist, Ben exploits his “ethnic insiderism” to gain access to the dominant society. He plagiarizes Ulysses’ writing to complete his play *Fu Manchu Plays Flamenco*. Ben’s *Fu Manchu* further extends its connotation as a homosexual menace by appearing on stage in full dominatrix regalia (258). Not at all troubled by his reinforcement of an “ornamental orientalia” in his play, Ben rationalizes his role in the propagation of “white racist fantasy,” which hypersexualizes Asian American women and asexualizes their male counterparts. Ben argues:

[T]he only way we can make it in America is to sell ourselves. No one wants to buy our folk tales. But they like buying exotic Oriental women and Oriental men who are either sinister brutes or simpletons. So why not sell it to them? (254, 262)

As long as he stands to profit, Ben fashions inauthentic versions of Asian culture without qualms in order to curry favor with the mainstream, and his play spurs Ben into embracing his status as “Mr. Asian American Studies,” bringing him even closer to an assimilationist position of a conservative and politically correct model minority (277).¹⁷

Ben’s marriage to Pandora Toy, the self-proclaimed “Neurotic Exotic Erotic Orientoxic” woman is another indication of Ben’s acculturation (251).¹⁸ Like many of

¹⁷ Here, Frank Chin levels criticism against Asian American scholars through his depiction of Ben; incapable of becoming a “writer, a poet, a novelist, a writer of short stories” – i.e. a literary artist who writes of the Asian “real” – Ben ends up teaching Asian American studies (324). Chin implicates scholars of Asian American studies as model minorities who endorse the dispersal of writing by fake authors by failing to critique and read these works against the “real” Asian fairy tales.

¹⁸ Herself a stereotype of “doll-like” Asian American women, Pandora Toy is seemingly a satirical commentary on the literary work and political stance of Maxine Hong Kingston. In relation to Pandora’s character, Chin makes numerous references to Kingston’s works; for example, Pandora steals her husband Ben’s “contemplative expressionistic Christian confession”

Chin's female characters, Pandora is a ruthless and insensitive Asian American feminist who shamelessly exploits her "exoticism" and despises her own culture because it is "unmanly" (251). Assuming an authentic voice via her ethnic affiliation, Pandora confirms that Asian (and Asian American) men are patriarchal barbarians who consider "belching at the dinner table good manners" (251). Pandora's misrepresentation of Asian American culture provokes contention with Ulysses; he reproaches Pandora for distributing these "fake" Asian fairy tales which he deems are simply "rewrite[s] of Pearl Buck and Charlie Chan and Fu Manchu" that reinforce the perception of Asian Americans as "a race of soft men" (261, 252). Pandora becomes as adversarial to the fulfillment of Asian American manhood as the hegemonic men who voraciously consume her version of Asian and Asian American culture. Chin quickly intervenes in Ben and Pandora's Charlie Chan ways by disrupting their discourses and shifting to Ulysses, who restores Fu Manchu as an Asian American masculine culture that "kicks white racism in the balls with a shit-eating grin" (261).

Conversely, Diego, a flamenco guitarist, is "blackened" by his speech and his association to African American culture. Diego has been inculcated with African American culture since childhood: "He lived [...] on a Negro street, in a Negro neighborhood. Diego talked like Negroes. He said he liked Negroes better than *lofan*" (76). Contrary to assimilationist Ben, Diego considers African Americans as "really American" (76). Diego's affinity for African Americans, nonetheless, does little to

and revises it into a memoir of her girlhood called *Conqueror Woman* (289). Kingston herself created a parodic figure of Chin a few years earlier in *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1989). In Chin's works, Asian American women consistently have no currency in the disidentification of their male counterparts; Asian American feminists are allegedly complicit in emasculating Asian American men by targeting them as embodiments of the oppressive patriarchy over which the feminists endeavor to triumph.

legitimize his subjectivity; instead, it implicates Diego in criminal activities. Ben remembers that in their childhood, Diego always had “secret stuff,” and “secret places he knew how to sneak into free” (77). Later on, Diego exploits his position in the Chinatown Black Tigers, an activist group which is modeled after the Black Panthers, in order to swindle money from the “tongs, the Chinatown Chamber of Commerce and the restaurant owners,” to whom he makes false promises of effecting more social justice (214).

In tandem, Diego’s assumption of blackness does not masculinize but hypersexualizes him; when he is Ulysses’ understudy in Ben’s play, Diego’s goal is to “fuck like a star while you can, man” (276). When Diego follows Ben into the Asian American studies program as a counselor, he sleeps around with his students (326). His marriage dissolves when Diego’s wife Ava learns of his infidelity with a massage parlor madam (322). Marginalized in his own community as a malefactor who is likely to “get horny for [his friends’] daughters,” little is expected of Diego who is “just another horny Chink” (276, 337). Diego becomes “the animal of the city, the black Chinaman, the urban aborigine” (337) and is subsequently relegated to the extreme fringes of most cultural venues. In effect, Diego’s overdependence on the hypersexual subtext of blackness to accrue his masculinity backfires and results in this black Chinaman’s excommunication from both the core and the periphery of America. In the extremity of Diego’s segregation, we can detect the change in how Chin reconceptualizes disidentification: Asian American men render their process of remasculinization more precarious by relying on blackness as a triangulating figure in their negotiation with American manhood. They must hence dispose of what has proven to be an ineffective method of disidentification and strive to remasculinize themselves through an affirmation of their cultural heritage.

Likewise, Ulysses' narrative is a palimpsest of black masculinity; Ulysses sees himself in the story of a black man, who was abandoned and raised in Chinatown (98). Ulysses befriends Jason Peach, an intelligent and politically-minded black youth and forges a formidable relationship with him as blood brothers (116). Ulysses expresses contempt for Dr. Larry, a "Chinaman grocer who bad-mouths Negroes in Chinese [...] right in front of his black customers, and thinks it's smart and funny"(98). Ostracized in the Asian American community for his reputation as an "oddball yellow nigger [sic]" (96), Ulysses still takes pride in the comparison.

Ulysses' backtalking ways implicitly evoke other Chin protagonists who emulate the bold defiance of black masculinity. Via his association to blackness, Ulysses, like Diego, is endowed with sexual prowess, which he overtly displays to claim his manhood. Ulysses relates with much pride of his "glorious years of [white] womanizing," working as a brakeman on the railroad (163). His relationship with Asian American women remains troubled; for the most part, they avoid Ulysses due to his reputation for being "oversexed" (164).

Ulysses is still differentiated from Diego as the former follows his mentor Mr. Mah's advice to balance the multicultures that he encounters. Therefore, Ulysses is not subsumed by his sexuality and his sexual escapades with white women become a healing process by which Ulysses recovers from the wounds of racial castration. By correlating Ulysses with the railroads (and their historical implications in the remasculinization of Asian American men), Chin heals not only the wounds of Ulysses but also those of his immigrant forefathers. In a sense, Ulysses' sexual penetration of white women mirrors

the Asian immigrant railroaders' penetration of America's virgin land: both become, in Chin's and Ulysses' estimation, masculine and heroic conquests.

Although a shared experience as the disenfranchised prompts Ulysses and Diego to align themselves with black masculinity, they understand the demarcation of Asian and African Americans; in a conversation with a white fellow brakeman, Johnny Yuma, Ulysses ascertains that he is a "minority *they* like better than the Negro minority. But one look at [him] and they won't like [him] that much better" (155). Ulysses recognizes that the racial divide between Asian and African Americans is further congealed by the former's tenuous position between black and white as the "buffer race" (Espiritu 108).

Ulysses acknowledges that an uncritical conflation of Asian and African Americans is counterproductive when he is sent into a black neighborhood to cover a riot. Regarded as a "brother," Ulysses is expected to relay details about the riot without contaminating it with a white perspective (172). Though he has identified with blacks since childhood, Ulysses is forced to admit to himself that just because he is not white, it does not make him a black "brother." This realization bolsters Ulysses' sense that he does not belong in the black ghetto:

I don't know this ghetto. This ghetto doesn't know me. I have no sense of where the railroad is from here. [...] I'm a Chinaman. Why am I trying to feel like I've been here before? Since leaving the Mother Lode, I haven't live in a home. [...] Wherever I am, I don't *live* the part. I'm on location, *playing* the part. (173, 177 – 8)

Ulysses feels lost in this black neighborhood and tries to gauge his way to the railroads, which leads to the history of Asian American men. Ulysses views this ghetto as disjunct geographically, historically, and sensibility-wise, from the Mother Lode, the locus of the

Asian “real”: his home. An imposed camaraderie between the two racially subordinated groups prompts Ulysses to feel “pretentious, icky, and had” for “*playing* the part” instead of “*living*” it (173, 178). The unbridgeable racial gap also becomes evident when Ulysses is assaulted by a crowd of black youths who do not acknowledge his “nonwhite” status; to them, Ulysses is just another Charlie Chan, a “jiveass rubber Chink token” (173, 179, 188).

Moreover, Chin’s parodic portrayal of the Black Panthers italicizes Chin’s advancing separation from black masculinity. According to Crystal S. Anderson, Chin reduces the Black Panthers to their superficial elements – e.g. “their black berets and black leather jackets and black shades and black jeans” (*Gunga Din* 212) – and thereby relegates the heroism of the Black Panthers as disingenuous (73). Anderson argues that by disfiguring the iconic presence of the Black Panthers, Chin undercuts the historical significance of the movement, which was highly regarded as a positive model for change within and beyond the African American community (74).

Although discerning, Anderson’s analysis overlooks the fact that the main target of Chin’s criticism is not the Black Panthers but the Chinatown Black Tigers who ostensibly emulate the iconic group in order to achieve their sometimes criminal purpose under the guise of effecting racial justice. To a certain extent, the relationship between the two groups is mutually exploitive: the Black Tigers approximate the slogans of the Black Panthers to violently assert their identity and the Black Panthers befriend the Black Tigers to claim Mao’s revolutionary ideology, which “they don’t understand [but] swear by” (*Gunga Din* 212). Nonetheless, Chin levels more criticism against the Chinatown Black Tigers who are inauspiciously inaugurated in jest when Diego declares himself its

commandant and Ulysses its “Power-to-the People Minister of Education” as a joke (218). Their derivative group attracts “would-be punks” who are adamant to prove wrong the blacks’ accusation that “The Chinese are the Uncle Toms of the nonwhite peoples of Amerika!” (212 – 3). The Black Tigers mimic the external trappings of the Black Panthers without actually embracing the “noble social motives” of their parent group (220); the Black Tigers march in “black tanker jackets, black jeans, and black hair pompadoured high,” chanting praises about Mao Tse Tung (213).

When his niece becomes a true believer in the Black Tiger movement, Ulysses becomes conflicted by his involvement in the group:

How can I tell her the Chinatown Black Tigers [...] are all a shuck, a scam to cop chump change, a way to make a name doing the Chinatown Black Tiger show? Power to the People! Right on, brothers and sisters! Right on! It’s silly putty, easy money. The Chinese in Chinatown don’t talk like us. [...] The Chinatown Black Tigers are bullshit. (218, 220)

Ulysses recognizes the “Chinatown Black Tiger show” is a “showbiz” in which he and Diego are involved for fun and chump change; “when the chump change goes,” Ulysses predicts, “no more Black Tigers” (219 – 20). Chin seems to indicate that forging an uncritical coalition between Asian and African American masculinity demotes Asian American men to a “conscious and knowing clown” (218). By alerting attention to the reality of the Chinatown Black Tigers as nothing more than a “yellow minstrel show,” Chin undertakes an ironic stance regarding his past work, which sanctioned Asian American’s assumption of blackness to reclaim his masculinity.

In this vein, Chin attacks hegemonic discourses about Asian Americans by reappropriating denigrating expressions about them. While preparing for the staging of Ben’s play in New York, Ulysses is criticized for singing various versions of “Ching

Chong Chinaman.” Ulysses responds by pointing out that he sings because the song is specifically “racist and makes fun of the Chinese” but that he is doing so in a satirical manner. He explains that “satire is where you make fun of how *they* think and what *they* say in order to make *them* look *stupid*” (256 – 7). Ulysses’s reasoning indicates that Chin has made a transition in his views of Asian American disidentification; no longer relying on an appropriation of blackness to destabilize the hegemony, Asian American male subjects disrupt its damaging discourse by confronting head-on the racist slurs that emasculate them by their racist logic.

The novel tracks Ulysses through his various excursions to his final destination as a writer of zombie movies in Hollywood; devoid of any racial markers, the commercial writing to which Ulysses resorts is a far cry from his initial valorization of his Asian American cultural heritage. Writing Asian American activist theater for a brief period, Ulysses soon becomes disillusioned with the state of Asian American theater: it is a “meat market” of budding Charlie Chans who want to be stars rather than artists. Ulysses chastises these actors’ desire to be accepted by the mainstream and to incorporate the mainstream into Asian America by staging Western classics with all Asian American cast members (283 – 4).

Ulysses gives up on cultural reform and becomes a writer of zombie movies; he declares, “no more doing it for the people. No more agonized poetry” (346). Here, we discern that Ulysses’ decision to depart from the activist movement is informed not only by frustration but fears of being subsumed by “the people,” even those with “aims and opinions similar to [his] own” in that their “ideals [...] become sacrosanct dogma” (305).

Ulysses thus comes to prioritize individual agency over group or community interest, which is yet another monolith that obstructs the achievement of his authentic self.

What remains problematic to steadfast readers of Chin's works is that when Ulysses frees himself from cultural expectations, he severs himself not only from those imposed by the hegemony but also by his ethnic heritage; by choosing to write zombie movies, "with no [Asians] in them and no one could tell an [Asian] had written them," Ulysses chooses to divorce himself completely from not only racial issues but the cultural history of Asian America (77). Notwithstanding the dilemma the readers are left with by Ulysses' decision, we can still merit that Chin attributes his three characters with individual agency by which they can autonomously, albeit problematically for the reader, negotiate their experiences as subordinated men in mainstream America. Furthermore, we can read this as an indication that Chin has become less dogmatic about how to achieve Asian American identity and more inclusive of those who diverge from his prescription.

This chapter has followed the trajectory of Frank Chin's literary vicissitudes. From this vantage point, we can reassess Chin's flexible deployment of disidentificatory tactics in *Gunga Din Highway* by considering the radically different ways in which the three friends develop agency. Undoubtedly, *Gunga Din Highway* shows that Chin continues to be invested in countering the authority of hegemonic masculinity. Staking claims to the racial margins that he and other racialized subjects occupy, Chin makes honest endeavors to transform the periphery into a constructive site for its inhabitants. *Gunga Din Highway* closes with the life of each character continuing still and flourishing by his own definition: Ben has reconciled with Pandora, Diego is a doting father, and

Ulysses has garnered mainstream acceptance for his zombie movies. And Ulysses, or Kwannie as he is sometimes called, reconciles, albeit tenuously, with his father by paying his respect at Longman's big Chinese funeral; in so doing, "Kwannie" (evocative of Kwan Kung) signals his enduring ties to the cultural sphere of Asian America.

In tandem, Chin alludes to a renaissance of Asian America as he overlaps the image of a dying Longman-cum-Charlie Chan with the birth of a new generation of Asian Americans. Out with the old and in with the new, Chin seems to say, as Ulysses drives a new immigrant couple to the hospital for the impending arrival of their child. The novel leaves us with an optimistic image of Ulysses getting the green light to go ahead on the road to a new Asian America.

No longer caught in the racial binary of black and white, Chin expands the parameter of Asian America. His revised panorama of Asian America is, as this novel illustrates, one that resulted from his reevaluation of the heroic tradition of Asian culture. Patricia Chu contends that Chin's return to the Asian heroic tradition is "a creative, polemical gesture [and] a *cultural opening*, rather than an authoritative act of cultural retrieval to whose authority and fidelity others should defer" (187, italics mine). In this vein, Chin's revised outlook on the disidentification of Asian American men does not close the door on forging formative alliances with other forms of racialized masculinity; instead, articulating blackness and assuming the heroic "real" are complementary acts that coalesce to reclaim agency for all racialized male subjects.

Some critics argue that Chin ultimately fails to envision a mode of masculinity not based on dominance. Crystal S. Anderson notes that notwithstanding the positive implications in Chin's conflation of black masculinity and Asian heroism, his methods of

remasculinization “fail to offer alternative definitions of masculinity outside the aggressive vein. A more flexible form of heroism would create a more comprehensive discourse on masculinity rather than just one that confronts emasculating forces” (73). Undoubtedly, in choosing to promote the Asian warrior Kwan Kung, who shares an explicit pathos with hegemonic men, Chin reverts to conventional registers of masculinity. Perhaps the individualism of Asian American masculinity may have been further underscored had Chin selected a divergent model – the scholar figure, for example – to counter the excessive machismo of traditional norms. At the same time, these critics do not dispute that Chin has made great contributions to minority literary studies in his dual endeavors to disarticulate hegemonic discourse and rearticulate a formative identity for racialized subjectivities.

For over two decades, Frank Chin has adopted diverse strategies to empower Asian American men. As his social and political perspectives have evolved, so has his vision of how Asian American men reconcile with hegemonic definitions of American manhood. Chin remarks: “The Chinese look on all behavior as tactics and strategy. It’s like war. You have to know the terrain. You don’t destroy the terrain, you deal with it. We get along, not because we share a belief in God or Original Sin or a social contract, but because we make little deals and alliances with each other” (310). With the terrains of America in flux, we can expect that Chin’s mission to reclaim subjectivity for people of color will continue.

AFTERWORD

In “*The Woman Warrior* and My Freshman English,” Wai Fong Cheang relays her account of teaching Maxine Hong Kingston’s seminal text at her freshman seminar at a Taiwanese university. Cheang recollects that to her surprise, many of her students became “little outspoken Frank Chins” who angrily demanded that Cheang delete *The Woman Warrior* from her syllabus for upcoming semesters; not unlike Chin, these Taiwanese Gen Y-ers were critical of the “authenticity of the [Asian] culture [Kingston] represented” (9, 13 – 4). In recounting Cheang’s experience, it is not my intent to referee the protracted debate between Chin and Kingston and finally declare Chin the winner. Instead, I call attention to the continuing currency of Chin’s rhetoric regarding Asian/American literature even as his visceral vituperations against the predominance of hegemonic men appear to be rather archaic in an increasingly multicultural society that takes pride in its diversity.

As we have seen in the preceding examinations of literature by and about Asian American men, Chin’s call for camaraderie within the racial margins prompted scholars of minority literature to pay particular attention to minority-minority relations and how they mediate and allow us to extend our understanding of minority-majority relations. In reading Asian American literary works through the critical paradigm of disidentification – which affords Asian American men the means to challenge majoritarian discourse by appropriating black masculinity – we have been able to elucidate the racial strategies of survival and patterns of interaction between Asian American and African American

masculinities. In tandem, we have gathered a better grasp of masculinity as a nuanced and evolving term that is informed by hierarchies of gender, race, class, and sexuality.

While this project proposes to elaborate on how disidentifying Asian American men who prioritize black masculinity reconfigure the national body of the American man, there are other venues by which we can further expand its scope. For one, I still find “masculinity” a troubling term. In *Disidentification*, José Esteban Muñoz also expresses his resistance against “masculinity” which, as a category, continues to endorse and privilege a heteronormative rubric. To Muñoz, “masculinity” is a cultural imperative; it enacts a mode of manliness, which is “calibrated to shut down possibilities and energies” of those beyond the norm. Muñoz counsels masculinity studies scholars to question the heteronormative and masculinist contours of their projects so that they do not inadvertently reproduce the “phobic ideology” which impinges on the term (58). If “masculinity” is, in due course, a disabling and an unachievable category for men beyond the mainstream, it is critical that we find a befitting term, which is less mired in linguistic and philosophical quandaries.

Another line of inquiry involves an investigation of how Asian American female and queer subjects disidentify with hegemonic discourse; owing to allegations of sexism and homophobia in Chin’s works, we can extend our understanding of how Chin’s rubric operates by considering the divergent gendered strategy of disidentification. Along these lines, we should also examine how (and if at all) the construction of Asian American masculinity is inversely implicated in the disidentificatory acts of other people of color and black men, in particular. Finally, although invoking the pan-ethnic collective in my use of the term Asian American, this project focused on particular ethnic groups –

namely, those deriving from the three North Asian countries of China, Korea, and Japan – within Asian America. Accordingly this study of Asian American masculinity will be better informed by examining the relationship between the different ethnic sectors under the Asian American umbrella and how the methods of disidentification diverge along the lines of ethnicity. All in all, the convoluted process of disidentification renders it a viable framework by which we can not only destabilize the alleged monolith of American manhood but deepen our understanding of the evolving literary landscape of Asian/America.

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