

The Fantasy of a Yellow Vernacular: Mimetic Hunger and the “Chameleon Chinaman”

Frank Chin’s literary works, as I established in the previous chapter, derive much of their affective power from the ways in which they attempt to make a masochistic and melancholic attachment to black and white men the signature feature of both “inauthentic” and “authentic” modes of Asian American male identity. To be an Asian American man, in Chin’s account, is to hunger for the kinds of racialized masculinity that men of other races embody without effort. In this final chapter, I return to Chin’s essays in order to illuminate how such issues of interracial homosociality frame his conception of the distinctive qualities that comprise an “authentic” minority tradition. As I will make clear in this chapter, his writings on literature are shaped by a profound sense of competition and envy—indeed, of “belatedness”—vis-à-vis other minority cultures. What Chin’s aesthetic writings help us to engage with, in other words, are the particular forms of invisibility that Asian American writers confront as they attempt to write themselves into a literary landscape shaded primarily in black and white. It is that liminal space between the black and white literary traditions that Chin illuminates in his writing, and the palpable frustration that propels much of it brings to light the specific obstacles that structure that positioning. It is from this perspective of frustration that the compensatory and even transcendent promise of the aesthetic for men of color can perhaps best be sighted, shrouded in all its fantasmatic allure.

A vivid sense of the dilemma that Chin’s writings help us to understand

is conveyed in a 1976 essay that I mentioned briefly in my introduction to this study. In this piece, he recounts the trying experience of being asked to speak to the concerns of Asian American writers at the national convention of the Modern Language Association. The other members of this panel were Karl Shapiro, Ishmael Reed, and Thomas Sanchez, whom he describes as “well-known much-acclaimed writers, and poets,” who apparently wrote from minority traditions that had, in Chin’s view, become recognized parts of U.S. national culture:

I’m sure that everyone there had read Ralph Ellison’s *The Invisible Man* and Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*, and had heard of Martin Luther King, Jr., Langston Hughes, George Washington Carver, Leroi Jones, Eldridge Cleaver, and Thurgood Marshall. I’m sure everyone there had read something . . . at least a page . . . of a Vine Deloria work and Dee Brown’s *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* and knew there was a lot about Indians they didn’t know. I’m sure everyone there had read several works by Jews, like me . . . even not seeking Jewish works out I fall into a book by a Jew, even avoiding Saul Bellow and Philip Roth, who writes fine and I don’t really avoid. I read *Call It Sleep* by another Jew and like it. Great book. (13)

Whereas Jewish, Native American, and, above all, African American writers can count on readers to possess at least some degree of knowledge of their cultural traditions and history, Asian American writers, according to Chin, face a greater burden. They must address a pervasive ignorance concerning their experiences before their concerns as *writers* can even be voiced:

Before I could talk about our literature, I had to explain our sensibility. Before I could explain our sensibility I had to acquaint them with our history. Before I could acquaint them with our history I had to dispel the stereotypes they carried in their system like antibodies to the yellow truth. Before I could dispel the stereotype I had to convince them they held stereotypes about yellows. I didn’t like working for free trying to do the impossible only to make a fool out of myself again. (14)

The dilemma that Chin depicts here is not so dissimilar from the one that current Asian Americanists—writers *and* critics—face as they too address wider audiences. Despite the emergence since 1976 of a wealth of literary works and critical studies that have attempted in various ways to dispel this cultural ignorance, the singular burden of representation that Chin describes

is one that Asian American intellectuals still find themselves negotiating in their work.

The pressure to historicize that shapes nearly all Asian Americanist literary and cultural criticism is partly a response to this burden. Nearly all scholarly studies of Asian American literature thus begin by sketching out a specifically Asian American cultural history—a history that begins with the influx of Chinese immigrant labor in the nineteenth century, tracks the legislative and judicial exclusions that have impeded the access of various Asian groups to full U.S. citizenship, examines the impact of Asian immigrant labor, takes up the internment of Japanese Americans in World War II, explores the impact of various U.S. imperial endeavors in Asia on immigration patterns, and concludes with the increasingly heterogeneous and transnational quality of the Asian population in the United States in the wake of the immigration reforms of 1965. While the most influential recent critical studies—Lisa Lowe’s *Immigrant Acts* is exemplary in this regard—have placed this history in the contexts of globalization and U.S. imperialism and have also insisted on the centrality of Asian Americans to the construction of U.S. national identity, the monochromatic focus of this work has mirrored that of most African Americanist scholarship. Critics have tended to argue for—either explicitly or implicitly—a kind of Asian American exceptionalism.

The implicit mantra of much Asian American scholarship is that it is necessary to think *outside* the monochromatic terms that box in U.S. understandings of race—terms that tend, it is true, toward the erasure of those liminal racialized groups that are not in any simple way reducible to the binary of black and white. To a significant degree, my project also insists on the specificity of the problematics and pressures that shape the literary articulation of Asian American identity. But what I intend this study to question is an assumption that cultural assertions of Asian American particularity must necessarily be attempts to transcend the constraints of the black/white binary. In fact, literary assertions of a distinctly Asian American sensibility such as Chin’s do not necessarily seek to conjure forth a “yellow” space discretely separated from a black one and a white one. Indeed his account of an “authentic” Asian American cultural identity is defined by a rabid embrace of racial impurity—by an aggressively parasitic and putatively virile orientation toward cultural styles that “belong” to men of other races. What Chin ultimately prizes, as I will be arguing here, is a kind of vernacular subject that

bears no small resemblance to the ones championed by Ellison, Baker, and Gates—that is a kind of bluesman in yellowface, as it were, whose aesthetic manhood will be indexed by his capacity to ape the styles of other men and make them his own.

Like the African American writers whose works I examined in the first part of this study, Chin perceives literature as the preeminent domain in which an “authentic” and wholly virile vision of minority identity can be projected. For Chin inherits from writers like Ellison an aesthetic ideology that conceives of writing not only as a racially redemptive cultural practice, but also as one that enables resistance to racism’s most emasculating effects. The tradition he reworks as his own is structured by a gendered and sexualized symbolic vocabulary that identifies as racism’s most pernicious threat the potential emasculation, feminization, and homosexualization of the man of color. It is a tradition that finds an antidote for the “perverse” forms of interracial homosocial desire that racism threatens to engender in the more salutary forms of desire that the literary domain demands. The aggressive modalities of reading and writing that this aesthetic ideology privileges enable the expression of forms of male homosocial desire that are agonistic, mimetic, and violent. What thus passes for manhood in the writings of Frank Chin, in other words, is a kind of vernacular subjectivity whose formal resemblances to the one prized by Ellison (as well as Baker and Gates) are stunning.

The emphasis Chin places on the vernacular, which echoes that of the African American literary theories I have been examining, is evident in the following passages:

[The task of the minority writer is] to legitimate the language, style, and syntax of his people’s experience, to codify the experiences common to his people into symbols, clichés, linguistic mannerisms, and a sense of humor that emerges from an organic familiarity with the experience.¹

John Okada [the Japanese American author of the 1957 novel *No-No Boy*] writes from an oral tradition he hears all the time, and talks his writing onto the page.²

Discernible here is the claim, one that should be familiar by now, that a defining feature of “authentic” Asian American literary texts is their use of the vernacular. This assertion indicates the ideological debt Chin owes to the various blueprints for black writing that I examined in the first half of this

study. Like Ralph Ellison, he conceptualizes the minority writer's primary task to be one of mirroring and giving literary shape to the forms of cultural expression that are organic to working-class communities of color. The novelist John Okada's use of the vernacular is interpreted as bespeaking "an organic familiarity" with the Japanese American community he depicts; his intent is "to legitimate the language, style, and syntax of his people's experience." Chin also insists—as I will suggest later—that the literary posture necessary for the production of this vernacular mode of writing can only emerge through an agonistic struggle with other writers, a struggle that is conceived of in highly masculinist terms. The more historically proximate African American resource that frames Chin's elaborations of the Asian American literary "real" is the black nationalism of the late sixties and early seventies. Chin reiterates the assumption held by Black Arts writers that a properly revolutionary literature must use the language spoken by "the people." They advocate a kind of writing (to reformulate Harper's phrase) that is both "yellow" enough and "'virile' enough to bear the weight of a stridently nationalist agenda."³

A second claim also crops up persistently in Chin's writings on the aesthetic, however, a claim that would seem to undermine the first:

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 to talk one up from our experience. As a people, we are pre-verbal,—afraid of language as the instrument through which the monster takes possession of us. For us American-born, both the Asian languages and the English language are foreign. We are a people without a native tongue.⁴

For it is difficult to square his insistence that the writer should, following Okada's example, write "from an oral tradition he hears all the time" with his contention that "We are a people without a native tongue," that "we are pre-verbal." The very thing that would authenticate the literary tradition he seeks to identify—a distinct Asian American vernacular—is something that he also claims does not exist. Given this seemingly debilitating logical contradiction, the aesthetic Chin promotes seems to be a self-immolating one. It might be ventured that the apparent incoherence of Chin's aesthetic posture derives from his attempt to force a set of black nationalist arguments into a cultural context that is inappropriate to them. My intent in this chap-

ter is, however, to demonstrate the internal coherence of the vernacular theory subtending Chin's cultural nationalist aesthetic. This coherence only becomes discernible, however, if we recognize that his conception of the vernacular ultimately has less to do with the idioms, grammar, and syntax of "'street' discourse" than it does with the expression of a particular *attitude* toward language use itself—an appropriative, violent, and disfiguring attitude that Chin imagines to be the signature feature of those authorial subjects who, like Chu and Okada, allegedly give literary shape to Asian American vernacular forms of linguistic expression.

The lucidity of Chin's vernacular theory, in other words, only becomes apparent when we recognize its *formal* resemblance to that of writers like Ellison, Baker, and Gates—an unmistakable family resemblance in the notion of *aesthetic* subjectivity that lies at the heart of the vernacular traditions these writers celebrate. For in its outlines the vernacular subject that Chin heroizes, as I will be arguing, is virtually identical to the blues and jazz subjects lionized by Ellison and Baker, and the signifying subject celebrated by Gates. The essential vernacular subject for all of these writers is a mimetic subject, whose appropriating, cannibalizing, and aping of other men's languages is depicted as the authentic expression of a black or yellow soul.

"The Chameleon Chinaman": Mimesis as the Absence of Manhood

In order to identify the parameters of the Asian American vernacular sensibility that Chin heroizes in his aesthetic writings, it is necessary to begin by examining the space that would seem to mark its absence. For Chin finds the raw materials for assembling a yellow "signifying" tradition in the very site in which they would seem to be most nonexistent—in the "actual" linguistic practices of "typical" Asian American subjects. In fleshing out his claim that Asian Americans have no "native tongue," he identifies a certain relationship to language as characteristic of that community. This linguistic orientation—which is essentially imitative—is what Asian Americans apparently possess in lieu of a vernacular.

Chin will often evoke the linguistic absence that plagues Asian Americans by contrasting it with the monumental presence in American culture of black and also Chicano vernaculars. "We have no street tongue to flaunt and strut," Chin laments, "the way the blacks and Chicanos do. They have a pos-

itive, self-defined linguistic identity that can be offended and wronged. We don't" ("Backtalk," 557). And in *Aiiieeee!* Chin and his colleagues assert:

Blacks and Chicanos often write in unconventional English. Their particular vernacular is recognized as being their own legitimate mother tongue. Only Asian Americans are driven out of their tongues and expected to be at home in a language they never use and a culture they encounter only in books written in English. (32)

The ramifications of this linguistic lack are, in Chin's terms—which are always gendered—quite dire. In "Racist Love" he writes:

The deprivation of language in a verbal society like this, for the Chinese-American, has contributed to (1) the lack of a recognized Chinese American cultural integrity (at the most native-born Chinese-Americans are "Americanized Chinese") and (2) the lack of a recognized style of manhood.⁵

Why the existence of a "recognized style of manhood" is so tightly linked in Chin's writings to the existence of a vernacular has much to do with the influence of black nationalism. As Phillip Brian Harper and Robyn Wiegman have noted, the revolutionary subject this cultural movement attempted to inaugurate was imaged in both physical and discursive terms: it was housed in a hypersexual, physically powerful masculine body, and it spoke in the language of "the street." (We might also recall that Ellison, in his review of *Black Boy*, identified the power of Wright's blues-toned narrative as emanating from its proximity to the black male body, evoking the image of a "black boy singing lustily as he probed his own grievous wound.")

Since the image of Black Macho that subtended Black Arts projected both a linguistic and a corporeal style, Chin's lamentations over the absence of a comparable image of Yellow Macho locate this lack in both of these domains: language and the body. In his essay "Confessions of the Chinatown Cowboy," Chin states this association quite crudely: "deep down in the cultural subconscious, there's a link between tongue and balls that makes us sick."⁶ If Asian Americans are perceived as lacking "their own legitimate mother tongue," Chin suggests, Asian American *men* will be perceived as lacking "a recognized style of manhood." The male body becomes in Chin's writings, then, a terrain of signification in and of itself, an expressive medium interpretable through the same racial and gendered protocols as spoken language. It is worth recalling in this context Chin's cataloguing in

“Racist Love” of the various stereotypes that accrue to different races. The abundance of cultural images that ascribe a threatening heterosexuality to blacks and Mexicans—the “hostile black stud” and Santa Ana, for instance—calls attention to the way in which the “homosexual” Fu-Manchu fails to conjure a comparable sense of peril. Within the symbolic economy Chin describes, each of these threatening male stereotypes corresponds with a recognized style of racialized manhood. Unable to embody a manhood comparable to that conferred by the stereotype of the “hostile black stud” and having “no street tongue to flaunt and strut the way the blacks and Chicanos do,” Asian American men would appear to occupy an impossible position.

Bearing in mind that Chin’s polemics seek to “de-euphemize” the “self-contempt” in which Asian Americans are unknowingly steeped, we can see that his aim here is to instill in his yellow male readers a horrified recognition of the impoverished state of their linguistic and masculine identities—to engender in them the intensified sense of self-loathing that is the primary psychic state his literary works depict. As I argued in the previous chapter, the masochism that characterizes his most effective fictional and dramatic works is in fact a key component of the racialized masculinity he privileges. The melancholia that structures a piece like *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, therefore, is also very much operant in Chin’s aesthetic essays. His polemics seek to engender a melancholic longing for the vernacular—to make his yellow readers mourn the loss of a “street tongue” and of “a recognized style of manhood” that has (he also tells them) never existed.

When Chin adopts a more explicitly autobiographical stance in his essays, as he does in the aptly titled “Confessions of the Chinatown Cowboy,” he reveals how intimately his own psyche has been shaped by the rather mournful predicament he describes. In the following passage, he recounts an anecdote about growing up in Oakland, California, that recalls one of Kenji’s speeches in *The Chickencoop Chinaman*:

“Why can’t you boys, you Negroes and Mexicans,” the visiting cop said, all creases, jingling metals and hair on his knuckles, setting every Chinaman boy of us up for an afternoon of fights, “stay out of trouble like the Chinese? Mind your folks? Study hard? Obey the laws?” And there we Chinese men were, in Lincoln Elementary School, Oakland California, in a world where manliness counts for everything, surrounded by bad blacks and bad Mexican kids who were still into writing their names into their skin with nails dipped in ink. They had a walk, a way of wearing their pants on the

brink of disaster, a tongue, a kingdom of manly style everyone respected. Everyone knew what they called you because you had to, to survive in the yard. There we were. There I was, hair held up high and back with Tuxedo wax, edges of hair by my ears turned down and shaped into fake sideburns and spicurls, toothpick in my mouth, pants low, belt buckle on my hip, and black and white basketball shoes, suddenly stripped and shaved bare by this cop, exposed for copping another man's flash, imitating this from the blacks, that from the Mexicans, something from whites, with no manly style of my own unless it was Charlie Chan swish Fu Manchu. (89–90)

In the multiracial culture he describes, in which none of the acknowledged models of racialized masculinity are yellow, the only way for an Asian American male to pass as masculine is to engage in a kind of interracial performative mimesis. Yellow manhood is presented here as a signifying practice—as something one communicates through the repetition of stylized bodily gestures that belong, properly speaking, to men of other races. Chin suggests the assimilability of these markers of racialized masculinity in his physical self-description: “hair held up high and back with Tuxedo wax, edges of hair by my ears turned down and shaped into fake sideburns and spicurls, toothpick in my mouth, pants low, belt buckle on my hip, and black and white basketball shoes.” But while he thus brings into view the performativity—the iterability—of the masculinity he had attempted to copy as a boy, his anecdote is intended not to expose the tenuousness of racialized constructions of gender; his point, rather, is to underscore how a gendering binary works to affirm the difference between those races that signify a “troubl[ing]” and thus “authentic” racialized manhood and those that do not.

The policeman's hail, as Chin recounts it, forced him to experience the racial difference between his body and those of the other boys as comparable to a sexual one. The cop addresses the “Negroes and Mexicans” in such a way that imposes a binary distinction between those racial groups and “the Chinese.” To possess a male body marked as Chinese is, in the eyes of the law, to stay out of trouble, mind one's folks, study hard, and obey the laws. To possess a brown or black one is to do the opposite. It is also to be the only legitimate subjects of the “kingdom of manly style” that reigns in the schoolyard. The masculinity that the black and brown boys effortlessly perform, as it turns out, does not function as a modal, free-floating repertoire of gender codes that anyone can freely appropriate and copy. Rather, it is the special province of those boys who “writ[e] their names into their skin”—whose black

and brown skins already spell trouble. Chin's sense of being "suddenly stripped and shaved bare by this cop" mirrors the horror and recognition experienced by the little girl in the stock Freudian narrative who discovers her "castrated" state; like her, the boyhood Chin confronts the radical alterity of his body at the very moment he also realizes its embodiment of lack. The masculinity the other boys have written into their skins is one that Chin can only imitate. When he is exposed as a copy by the cop, his manhood suddenly seems as fake as the sideburns he has sculpted out of hair too straight to be black. He is not only apprehended for his acts of racial theft but also identified as a repeat offender: "for copping another man's flash, imitating this from the blacks, that from the Mexicans, something from whites." The boyhood Chin learns that to be seen as a little imitation man is to be seen as no man at all.

The significance of this anecdote is not simply the centrality of *lack* to Chin's depiction of the degraded state to which Asian American masculinity has been reduced; it is, moreover, the way in which that lack is linked with a kind of defective or failed *mimesis*—with a certain impoverished modality of assimilation. What Asian American subjects possess in lieu of a linguistic and corporeal style of their own is this feeble propensity for imitation. Elsewhere in "Confessions," Chin generalizes from the pattern he identifies in his boyhood self to assert that "the most typical Chinaman born in the most typical Chinatown" is "the chameleon Chinaman" (78). He cites as an example of this "chameleon Chinaman" a friend from childhood who now runs a grocery store in Chinatown: "My friend, born here, the American dream come true, a little business, last year's Pontiac, talks that fine English, sounds like Chicago on the phone, no pigtail and the walk, part Okie sashay, part black strut . . ." (78). This "copping [of] another man's flash" is symptomatic of a mimetic hunger that structures the psyche of all subjects who grow up yellow in a black and white world. To grow up in Chinatown, according to Chin, is to be

Hungry, all the time hungry, every sense was out whiffing for something rightly ours, chameleons looking for color, trying on tongues and clothes and hairdos, taking everyone else's, with none of our own, and no habitat, our manhood just never came home. Hunger and copycat. (68–69)

In "Backtalk," Chin suggests that "Hunger and copycat" not only describes the corporeal and linguistic vernacular of Chinatown, it is also indicative of a more pervasive Asian American cultural style:

The tongue-tying notion that everything out of your mouth is mimicry [sic] and ventriloquism has been built into our psychology in our seven generations here. And if our basic means of expression is mimicry and ventriloquism, then our art and culture is mimicry and ventriloquism too. Such is our self-contempt. (557)

This mimetic disposition is something that Chin depicts as having been installed in nearly all Asian American subjects by white racism. It is a psychic effect produced by the experience of always being perceived as a “handicapped native,” who is

neither black nor white in a black and white world. In his native American culture he has no recognized style of manhood, in a culture where a manly style is a prerequisite to respectability and notice. [. . .] In his use of language, voice inflection, accent, walk, manner of dress, and combing his hair, the handicapped native steps himself in self-contempt for being “quick to learn . . . and imitative.” At worst, he’s a counterfeit begging currency. At best he’s an “Americanized Chinese,” someone who’s been given a treatment to make him less foreign. (“Racist Love,” 72; ellipses in brackets are mine)

Chin’s tendency to deploy a homophobic symbolism to emphasize the perversity of the nonmasculine condition to which Asian American subjects have been reduced emerges in a particular figure that he uses at times to symbolize this predicament. As Chin fleshes out the “mimicry and ventriloquism” that defines Asian American expression, art, and culture, he gives to this linguistic disposition a homuncular specificity, a virtual (corpo)reality:

We don’t read, we memorize. Like *ventriloquists’ dummies*, we are the tools of other men’s languages. Strange words organize our experience and make us the realities, the embodiments, of words we don’t understand. Language should be a tool for organizing experience and reality, not vice-versa. (“Backtalk,” 557; my emphasis)

Without a language of his own, [the Asian American] no longer is a man but a *ventriloquist’s dummy* at worst and at best a parrot. (“Racist Love,” 77; my emphasis)

To be seen as a subject who only imitates speech is to be associated with a particular kind of “body”—one whose resemblance to a “queer” body can be readily seen. For let us consider what a ventriloquist’s dummy looks like. We

might imagine an artificially constructed man-like thing that appears to speak but whose words are actually spoken by a “real” man, a man whose body the dummy’s has been fabricated to resemble and upon whose lap he sits. And when we watch this little imitation man and listen to his imitation speech, we know that the tongue within his mouth, metaphorically speaking, is not his own.

“The Chameleon Chinaman,” Part II: Masculine Mimesis

The liberatory potential of literature as Chin depicts it does not derive from its being located in a domain that is somehow free from the interracial mimetic desire that racism instills in Asian American subjects. Rather, the promise of redemption that he locates in the aesthetic stems from its potential to catalyze a different way of perceiving, depicting, and experiencing that mimetic desire. The literary affords an epistemological standpoint from which the “hunger” driving the “chameleon Chinaman” can be imagined as the expression of an aggressive, violent, and wholly virile agency. Literature—or at least those specific texts that he and the other *Aiiieeeee!* editors attempt to canonize—provides such a “corrective” view of Asian American language use:

Asian American writers—John Okada, Louis Chu, Lawson Inada, Toshio Mori, Hisaye Yamamoto . . . forty years of writing have taken the schizophrenic yakity yak we talk and made it a backtalking, muscular, singing stomping full blooded language loaded with nothing but our truth. No college course in American lit acknowledges them. Whites prefer to call us nuts, and ask us to put up the proof of a uniquely non-Asian, non-white Asian American sensibility, as if there’s none.

There’s plenty. (“Backtalk,” 557; ellipses are Chin’s)

Chin implies here that it is the translation of “the schizophrenic yakity yak we talk” into a written form that resignifies it as “a backtalking, muscular, singing stomping full blooded language loaded with nothing but our truth.” The key to this transformation lies, however, in the adoption of a certain interpretive framework—of a specifically *literary* hermeneutic. In the readings that Chin provides of the writers he heroizes, he models an interpretive mode that rewrites ventriloquism and mimicry as the expression of aesthetic intent. The authors he champions are distinguished not simply by their use

of the vernacular but by a certain aesthetic mastery that has less to do with, say, originality than it does with a certain Bakhtinian way of shaping and amalgamating pre-existing discourses and languages—with a certain command over the various *mimetic* aspects of literary representation.

Louis Chu's 1961 novel *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, for example, is valorized by Chin for its faithful depiction of the spoken language used by Chinese immigrants: "The manner and ritual of address and repartee is authentic Chinatown. Chu translates idioms from the Sze Yup dialect, and the effect of such expressions on his Chinese American readers is delight and recognition" (*Aiiieeeee!*, 16). In his appraisal of John Okada's 1957 novel, *No-No Boy*, Chin makes a similar claim:

The book makes a narrative style of the Japanese American talk, gives the talk the status of a language, makes it work and styles it, deftly and crudely, and uses it to bring the unglamorous but more commonly lived aspects of Japanese American experience into the celebration of life. The style and structure of the book alone suggest the Japanese American way of life of a specific period in history. (*Aiiieeeee!*, 26)

The characters that Okada depicts in *No-No Boy* are primarily second-generation Japanese Americans—*Nisei*—who speak an American English that is exceedingly colloquial, relentlessly slangy. It is a vernacular, in other words, that does not seem explicitly marked by any particular ethnic content. This much is apparent from a brief passage from *No-No Boy* that Chin cites directly in *Aiiieeeee!* in order to validate his claim that "John Okada writes from an oral tradition he hears all the time, and talks his writing onto the page" (25). The quote in discussion is as follows: "a bunch of Negroes were horsing around raucously in front of a pool parlor" (qtd. in *Aiiieeeee!*, 25). Chin's gloss of Okada's prose runs as follows:

Okada changes voices and characters inside his sentences, running off free but shaping all the time. . . . There is a quick-change act here among "horsing around" and "raucously" and "pool parlor." The style itself is an expression of the multivoiced schizophrenia of the Japanese American *compressed* into an organic whole. It's crazy, but it's not madness. (25; my emphasis)

The shifts in "voice" and "character" that Chin claims to see in Okada's sentences apparently express "the multivoiced schizophrenia of the Japanese American." But Okada doesn't merely ventriloquize the amalgam of lan-

guages that Asian Americans speak—"the schizophrenic yakity yak we talk"; he actively "compresse(s)" it "into an organic whole."

While passages like these seem to be making ontological claims about the existence of an Asian American vernacular, they are in fact establishing an epistemic standpoint from which "the Chameleon Chinaman" can be seen—or, rather, heard—as *actively and aesthetically* shaping, compressing, and, indeed, disfiguring the languages he "imitates." Chin attempts to ascribe to writers like Chu and Okada the kind of aesthetic agency that traditional literary protocols accord to "great" novelists. Instead of regarding Okada as a ventriloquist's dummy, we are to see him as "writ[ing] strong in a language that comes from home . . . from an oral tradition he hears all the time, and talk[ing] his writing onto the page" (25). This assertion—that Okada is able to orchestrate so masterfully the multiplicity of voices he hears in the culture around him because he is a great writer and that is what great writers do—is no less tautological than the one subtending Bakhtin's description of the discursive control exerted by novelists: "The prose artist elevates the social heteroglossia surrounding objects into an image that has finished contours, an image completely shot through with dialogized overtones; he creates artistically calculated nuances on all the fundamental voices and tones of this heteroglossia."⁷ The "sound" that Chin exhorts his readers to hear in the prose of Chu or Okada echoes that which is potentially audible in *Invisible Man*, the novel that Houston Baker, Jr., terms a "Blues Book Most Excellent." What Chin asks his readers to do as he guides them through a prose that appears unmarked by any dint of ethnicity is to *listen* for the sound of a certain masterful, literary intent. The emphasis that he places on the aural and oral dimension of this writing confirms the rhetorical power gained by asserting a given text's vernacular credentials: for the sound of the vernacular is, at bottom, the sound of a particular aesthetic agency, one that is imagined as racially authentic and that is propelled by a certain aggression.

The "deformation of mastery," "the phaneric display," the semiotic guerilla/gorilla warfare that Baker claims to detect in the works of the Harlem Renaissance is, in a sense, the expression of a racial antipathy toward white America that has taken linguistic form: the resentment or anger that being subjected to white racism has produced in the subjects of color can be seen as finding aesthetic expression through the mastery and deformation of "white" linguistic and literary forms.⁸ Chin discerns a similarly racially aggressive agency in works like *Eat a Bowl of Tea* and *No-No Boy*. "Chu's portrayal of

Chinatown," he writes, "is an irritating one for white audiences"; it "holds the white reader at a distance" because it is free of the exoticism that such readers have come to expect from literary works set in that locale (*Aiiieeeee!*, 16). That Chu's intention is to thus "irritat[e]" and "distance" white readers is also presumably evident in the language his characters speak, which "is offensively neither English nor the idealized conception that whites have of a 'China-man's tongue'" (16). This hostility toward a white reading public is apparently discernible in Okada's prose as well: the rapid-fire shifts in diction, "the voice changes" that typify his writing are apparently intended to "grate against the white tradition of tonal uniformity and character consistency" (25).

When Chin discusses in more detail the kind of writing that white readers might find "irritating" or "distan[cing]," he does identify certain linguistic tendencies with which Asian Americans have tended to be associated: bad grammar, indecipherable accents, broken English. The propensity of white readers to interpret stylistic idiosyncrasies on the part of individual Asian American writers as evidence of a less-than-thorough command of English is exemplified for Chin by William Saroyan. Saroyan wrote an introductory essay to Toshio Mori's *Yokohama, California* (1949)—a collection of loosely connected short stories modeled on Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*—in which praise is intermingled with condescension:

Of the thousands of unpublished writers in America there are probably no more than three who cannot write better English than Toshio Mori. His stories are full of grammatical errors. His use of English, especially when he is most eager to say something very good, is very bad. Any high school teacher of English would flunk him in grammar and punctuation. (qtd. in *Aiiieeeee!*, 23)

Okada's *No-No Boy*, according to Chin, was ignored by critics and reviewers because they were likewise "embarrassed by Okada's use of language and punctuation" (23).

Chin's intent in these polemics is to draw out the racial condescension that frames how white Americans view Asian American language use in general and how they thus perceive the literature produced by Asian American writers in particular. Any deviation from standard English on the part of Asian American subjects, even among those born and raised in the United States, tends to be perceived as the atavistic eruption of an inassimilable Asianness. Chang-rae Lee's novel *Native Speaker* is also concerned with this

predicament. In the following passage, Lee's narrator describes the anxieties that shape how he perceives the English that he and his interlocutor, another Korean American man, both speak:

We joked a little more, I thought like regular American men, faking, dipping, juking. I found myself listening to us. For despite how well he spoke, how perfectly he moved through the sounds of his words, I kept listening for the errant tone, the flag, the minor mistake that would tell of his original race. . . . When I was young, I'd look in the mirror and address it, as if daring the boy there; I would say something dead and normal, like, "pleased to make your acquaintance," and I could barely convince myself that it was I who was talking.⁹

The anxiety that Lee describes is the linguistic effect of being perpetually perceived as a native speaker in training—or, in Chin's terms, as a "handicapped native," as an American subject whose nativity will always be perceived as a kind of masquerade. The ramifications of this for the writer of fiction are clear enough: any deviation from standard usage will likely be discerned not as the expression of literary creativity but as "the errant tone, the flag, the minor mistake that would tell of his original race." Chin's advocacy is intended to make his readers grant Asian American writers the same kind of creative license as white and black writers—to make them regard the "broken English" spoken by Asian Americans as valid forms of cultural expression rather than evidence of a perpetual foreignness or of an innate linguistic inferiority. He seeks to raise the possibility that Asian Americans as "a new folk in a strange land" might in fact "develop new language out of old words" (*Aiiiiieee!*, 22). To see the prose of a Toshio Mori, a Louis Chu, or a John Okada not as "broken English," but rather as the expression of a creative impulse to *break* English and make it anew, will result, Chin hopes, in an altered view of Asian American language use more generally. If a logic, an order, an intentionality and agency can be seen as shaping these literary representations, then Asian Americans might come to perceive the English they speak not as mangled but as a "new language" that has been "developed . . . out of old words."

But as they ever are in Chin's writings, the illuminating elements of his polemics are encased in a rhetoric that is highly problematic. What is troubling about Chin's assertions becomes apparent in the gendered terms through which he defines the linguistic sensibility he wishes to celebrate as

“ours.” At times, he resorts to a virulent misogyny in order to evoke the aggression he wants his readers to hear in the language he celebrates. In “Confessions of a Chinatown Cowboy,” for instance, Chin models the altered view of Asian American signifying practices he wishes to promote by describing the language of Mr. Mah, a Chinese language teacher he knew growing up, as a “real Chinatown buck buck bagaw, an angry quick-tripping tongue promiscuously raping all the languages we knew, raping them of sense.”¹⁰ The essay “Racist Love” closes with a diatribe directed against an unnamed white female editor. This editor had apparently written to Jeffery Paul Chan, asking him to make a couple of grammatical corrections to his short story “Auntie Tsia Lays Dying,” which was to be published in an anthology entitled *Asian-American Authors* (1972).¹¹ Her request, which is cited directly in the text, reads as follows:

We are . . . distressed about using the word *lays* instead of *lies* in the title of your story and in a sentence near the end of the story. You see, if teachers or students using the book come upon a word usage that they think is incorrect, they write to the author or to us asking what dictionary or other source authorizes it. (qtd. in “Racist Love,” 79)

Chin and Chan’s response:

Great white bitch goddess priestess of the sacred white mouth and dumb broad ventriloquist whose lips don’t move fine and doesn’t know us Chinamans mean to reverse the charges with our writing. The object of our writing is no different from that of any other writer. We mean to inject our sensibility into the culture and make it work there. That means we are the teachers. People should ask what dictionary or other sources authorize what we say, how we talk. That’s a part of learning how to read. She is illiterate, so self-righteously illiterate, I’m going to write about her. (79)

Even when it not expressed in such openly misogynistic terms, the masculinist quality of the vernacular sensibility Chin champions is quite apparent. The “backtalking, muscular, singing stomping full blooded language loaded with nothing but our truth” is a vernacular that is animated by a highly masculine aggression.

In an essay entitled “Afterward,” Chin offers some glimpses into how his own training as a writer—even when it came from racially condescending white male teachers—helped shape his sense of the destructive impulses that

animate the process of writing. Apparently referring to his experiences at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, Chin recounts how his teachers—Thomas Gunn, Philip Roth, Jackson Burgess, and Marvin Mudrick—responded to his creative efforts with both praise and condescension. During his time there, Chin realized that “the English I was writing as mine wasn't English to anybody else in the English business.”¹² Indeed, he was sometimes treated as a non-native speaker, struggling with an English language that was not his own: “Years ago when Thom Gunn looked up from what I thought were the best poems ever written and asked me if I had trouble with the language, I blanked out, gave up poetry and laughed at the memory” (15). But apparently not all of the responses he received from these teachers troubled Chin: “I didn't worry about being misunderstood, cuz everyone seemed to be able to read me without losing their mind or my sense” (16). Indeed, Roth and Mudrick *were* apparently encouraging to him, though in a somewhat odd way. They were willing to see in his writing a creatively destructive agency even if they were unsure whether his English was really English: “Philip Roth said he liked my novel but wondered if I had to destroy the English language to write it”; “Marvin Mudrick told me I'd invented a new language for a new experience” (15–16).

These exchanges occurred before he met the Asian American writers with whom he would edit the *Aiiieeee!* anthology and before they “discovered” together the works of Louis Chu, John Okada, and others—a time when “the only references I had were my instincts, and common sense that refused to believe stereotypes and racist renditions of my people that were never remotely confirmed by anything my people did” (16). But even then, Chin insists, he possessed a firm conviction that to develop his identity as a writer (to devote himself to the “stern discipline” of literature, as Ellison might put it) he would have to engage in agonistic struggle with those figures—apparently all male—who possessed a literary power he wished to supersede: “My models were men whose voice and language had a commanding presence and set me off to cap them or make something I sensed just out of their word power” (16).

But after discovering the language in which Chu and Okada wrote, Chin found that

I wasn't likening myself to everybody I was reading about. Everybody I was reading about was likening themselves to me. I read Chu and Okada with an arrogance, and authority that was emotional, inarguable and prejudiced

toward white notions of quality writing. I discovered the destroyed English language I wrote naturally, Philip Roth had mentioned, a new language for new experience Marvin Mudrick and Jack Burgess see as my invention, in the books by dead men. There were depths and resonances and significant quick touches and flicks of words taking me into recognition effects so rhythmic and total, I knew their writing had me as no other ever had. (16)

We should recognize here a significant difference between Chin's account of his literary motivations and Ellison's. While Ellison seeks to write himself out of the shadow of certain literary "ancestors" that might be perceived as rivals—Richard Wright, most prominently—Chin welcomes his "discovery" of a comparable set of Oedipal figures. Chin relishes the opportunity to conjure forth the kind of rivals Ellison goes to great lengths to pretend he never had. He evokes a primal horde of literary ancestors that would enable him to present his own writings as emerging out of the depths of a tradition.

The literary "fathers" that Chin constructs out of figures like Chu and Okada play the same competitive role as the one Ellison denies to Wright: to provide the "son" with models to emulate and exceed. Like the white writers who were Chin's initial exemplars, Chu and Okada are "men whose voice and language had a commanding presence and set me off to cap them or make something I sensed just out of their word power." Hence his reverence for these earlier authors takes the form of "an arrogance, and authority." The "depths and resonances," the "recognition effects so rhythmic and total" that Chin experiences while reading "the destroyed English language" in which these writers write, does not leave him abject before his predecessors; although he "knew their writing had me as no other ever had," he has the sensation that "[e]verybody I was reading about was likening themselves to me." What he wants most from these paternal figures—what he claims to get from them—are powerful rivals, ideals of yellow literary power against which he can measure his own.

East Meets Western: The Swordslinger and the Martial Artist

The formal similarities between the vernacular subject that Chin heroizes in his aesthetic writings and the ones codified by Ellison, Baker, and Gates should now be quite apparent. The style or sensibility that all of these writ-

ers celebrate as racially authentic is one that manifests itself through an appropriation of linguistic materials taken from other racial sources. The agonism upon which it is predicated, moreover, takes the same kind of virilizing shape as that which propels “the strong poet,” in Harold Bloom’s formulation, to develop his own vision as he absorbs and reshapes the vision of the writers he has been influenced by. Chin’s aesthetic theory also shares with Ellison’s a claim that *literary* manifestations of the vernacular draw from, reproduce, and refine a popular set of cultural practices that are identified with a particular “folk” community that is demarcated in spatial and class terms. In an earlier chapter, I traced the persistence of these concerns in Ellison’s various and successive codifications of the black constituency he claimed to speak for in his writing: in his Marxian phase, he (along with Wright) celebrated the folk forms of the working-class population that became urbanized during the Great Migration; after Wright’s death (and as he became intent on separating himself from his former mentor’s legacy) Ellison began to focus on the working-class black community of the American Southwest, with the jazz and Renaissance man ideals that were characteristic of *his* “people.” It is this evocation of everyday cultural practices such as the blues, the jazz dance, the dozens, and so forth—practices that are claimed as the inspiration and model for his own literary project—that Ellison uses to establish his own credentials as an authentic literary spokesman for the “ordinary” American Negro. They comprise the populist veneer that works to deflect any charges of elitism that may be directed at him.

Chin also evokes a set of folk culture practices as providing the model for his own aesthetic endeavors. In contradistinction to Ellison—and somewhat surprisingly, given the profound disdain with which he generally treats the mass media—the cultural practices he celebrates involve the passionate devouring of popular culture. Indeed, the vernacular for Chin—as befitting the postmodern moment in which he writes—involves an extravagantly parasitic relationship to a racist popular culture. The parasitic relationship between the Asian American “real” and the “fake” images promoted by the mass media is suggested by the title that he and his colleagues assigned to their groundbreaking anthology, *Aiiieeee!*. This title refers to the voices of those Asian Americans

who got their China and Japan from the radio, off the silver screen, from television, out of comic books, from the pushers of white American culture

that pictured the yellow man as something that when wounded, sad, or angry, or swearing, or wondering whined, shouted, or screamed “aiiiieeee!” (xi–xii)

In lower case, “aiiiieeee!” signifies the voice ascribed to Asian Americans by the stereotypes promoted by a racist culture industry. In upper case, AIIIEEEEE! apparently signifies something else:

Asian America, so long ignored and forcibly excluded from creative participation in American culture, is wounded, sad, angry, swearing, and wondering, and this is his AIIIEEEEE!!! It is more than a whine, shout, or scream. It is fifty years of our whole voice. (xii)

The scream that this anthology is imagined as voicing—“AIIIEEEEE!!!”—is a near replica, with one crucial exception, of the scream it is supposed to drown out, the “aiiiieeee!” uttered by the yellow man as depicted by the “pushers of white American culture.” The only way to read the difference between “aiiiieeee!” and “AIIIEEEEE!!!” is via the hermeneutic mode codified by Gates and Baker, as a kind of “repetition with a difference” or an act of semiotic “guerilla/gorilla warfare.” The “authentic” Asian American subject that this inaugural collection attempts to bring into being takes shape not through an utter negation of the stereotype, but through a willful aping of it. This appropriation will be animated by an aesthetic intent shot through with aggression.

In “Confessions of a Chinatown Cowboy” (the title of which also attests to the parasitic relationship to mainstream culture that he consistently maintains) Chin finds a precedent for the adversarial yet appropriative relation to popular cultural forms to which *Aiiieeee!* gives expression in the decoding practices that he and other Chinatown boys engaged in as they greedily devoured films:

Like the languages the Chinese brought over 120 years ago that developed into an instrument of a Chinese-American intelligence, making sense of a mess of weirdness and happenings that didn’t happen in China, and the kung fu that became high class dirty street fighting, the Chinese movies that I grew up with, that grew me up to figure in the myths of a teacher, a quest, a gang and bloody death, were only academically Chinese. As parts of my life, and the lives of maybe 200,000 like me, second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh generation, born here, bred here, home here, the

Chinese movies are not foreign entertainments, nor is the meaning we take from them particularly Chinese. (94)

The fact that these films were Chinese seems initially a crucial issue here. But Chin insists that to him and his peers these films “were only academically Chinese,” that they were “not foreign entertainments, nor [was] the meaning we [took] from them particularly Chinese.”

Chin seems to contradict himself, however, in the very next few sentences when he underscores a crucial difference in the heroic masculinity that these Chinese films endorse and the one popularized in Hollywood films:

The most popular Chinese movie is the swordslinger, a form comparable to the American western that serves the same popular function of articulating the culture’s fantasy of ballsy individuality. The a-man-has-got-to-do-what-a-man-has-got-to-do ethic of gunslinger balls that says the individual rides alone, fights alone and duels man-to-man, is exercised only by fools and the bad guy in Chinese movies. The bad guy, a man invincible in individual combat, goes down under the gang swords of a hero, who’s stepped out into life to learn that the lessons of the master’s school were right, that a man invincible in individual combat will go down in gang action, that the individual needs friends. (94)

This passage asserts a discrete distinction between the more communal sense of male heroism operant in the Chinese “swordslinger” and the more individualistic one sanctioned by the American Western. This claim would seem, then, to contrast a Chinese heroic ideal to a white American one. It also appears to identify a specifically Chinese meaning that is *encoded* in the swordslinger, which shifts the emphasis away from Chinese American *decoding* practices. But Chin then turns to a number of American films that also heroize a more collectively oriented masculine ideal:

The balls that the Chinese movie celebrated in Chinatown was gang balls and didn’t really clash with John Wayne, who was an extension of the master in *Red River* and *Flying Tigers* and fit right in with street gangs. When Frankenheimer’s *The Young Savages* hit the streets, Chinatown had been ready a long time with gangs. His movie just gave us names for our gangs. We discovered names. Names were big. From the dap-down-inspired badass Puerto Rican gang in *The Young Savages*, one Chinatown gang took the name of the Horseman, and was home! That was a good movie. Most were and are fatal doses of white supremacy. (94–95)

Despite its apparent logical inconsistencies, Chin's account of the viewing practices he and his boyhood friends engaged in asserts that they were able to engage in rather selective and empowering acts of identification, which could occur both intra- and interracialy. What they somehow were able to make coherent was a specifically *Chinese American* ideal of masculinity that was figured in "myths of a teacher, a quest, a gang and bloody death," that was predicated on the possession of "gang balls" rather than on "a-man-has-got-to-do-what-a-man-has-got-to-do ethic of gunslinger balls." It is, then, a virilizing capacity for mimesis that comprises the very heart of the Chinese American masculine ideal that Chin was drawn to as a boy; as such, it comprises the populist counterpart of the *literary* sensibility he champions, one that is driven by a competitive desire to "cap" those men who function as one's teachers, one's literary "fathers"—those men who constitute both one's rivals and one's "gang."

Chin's remembrances about growing up in Oakland's Chinatown are reminiscent of Ellison's account of his boyhood in Oklahoma City. The mimetic hunger that Chin and his peers were able to satisfy through their devouring of popular culture has its counterpart in Ellison's reminiscences about "the voracious reading of which most of us were guilty and the vicarious identification and empathetic adventuring which it encouraged."¹³ The ideal of Renaissance man worked to set the black boys of Oklahoma City on a quest for "examples, patterns to live by," and so they created "[f]ather and mother substitutes," "fabricated [their] own heroes and ideals catch-as-catch can, and with an outrageous sense of freedom."¹⁴ What made those borrowings expressive of this distinctly Negro American sensibility, Ellison insisted, was the "reckless verve" that glowed through each appropriation;¹⁵ the sense that behind these boyhood acts stood "a traditional sense of style" that was shared by bluesmen, jazzmen, and certain novelists—"a yearning to make any- and everything of quality *Negro American*; to appropriate it, possess it, re-create it in our own group and individual images."¹⁶

Ellison was quite comfortable asserting the basic similarities between this distinctly Negro American style of appropriation and a more broadly American one, since he explicitly believed the two traditions were interwoven. Chin's initial formulation of the imitative style he claimed was expressive of authentic Chinese American manhood also had a nativist emphasis: the "Chinaman sensibility" he celebrates is emphatically *Chinese American*; it is only "academically Chinese." As some critics of Chin have remarked, how-

ever, a certain “turn” is apparent in his polemics that dates roughly from the late eighties—a shift in rhetoric that may have been prompted by his anger at the “falsified” view of Chinese culture that he saw writers like Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan promoting in their popular and well-received works.¹⁷ There seems to be lessening emphasis on the nativist—which is to say, U.S.-centered—focus of his earlier polemics and an increasing attention to what might be termed a diasporic Chinese or even global-Asian sensibility. The canonical articulation of Chin’s revised account of an *Asian*—as opposed to Asian American—authentic tradition is contained in the prefatory essays that were included in a sequel to the first anthology, *The Big Aiiieeeee!*, which was published in 1991. Much as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., offered in his work a diasporic genealogy for the African American cultural practice of signifying—finding precursors to the figure of the signifying monkey in various African and Caribbean cultures—Chin identifies in his later polemics an “authentic” Asian heroic tradition; the Asian American writers he validates as authentic allegedly draw from this tradition.

The texts that comprise the origin of all “authentic” Asian and Asian American literature are a set of Chinese classic texts: *The Art of War*, *Water Margin*, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *Journey to the West*, and *Chushingura*. Their plots, by and large, feature the same elements as the swordslingers he described in “Confessions of the Chinatown Cowboy”: “myths of a teacher, a quest, a gang and bloody death.” In a 1988 interview with Robert Murray Davis, Chin insists that this heroic tradition is a populist one: “This is not high culture. This is real low down comic book, cookie tin, calendar art kind of culture.”¹⁸ In describing the highly conventionalized form that characterizes the popular form of Cantonese opera, Chin places emphasis on its orality:

Chinese opera, Cantonese opera is like that [oral]. A Cantonese opera would open with someone coming out and making a general statement, a rephrasing of the mandate that kingdoms rise and fall, nations come and go, and this play that we are going to see is at a point in history where everything is falling apart and fucked up and we are going to see what happens. Each character would come out and introduce himself, depending on the stature of the character, with a couplet, a quatrain, or pages of couplets and quatrains. Giving their history, setting their voices. And the form of the classic novels of the heroic tradition, every Asian kid has known for a thousand years, is oral. (92)

Chin concludes from these conventions, moreover, that

The form is Saturday matinee serials. All action. Nouns and verbs. Our hero boom boom boom to the brink of doom and whoops! Live or Die? You wanta know, friend? To find out, read on . . . modeled on professional storyteller's chat notes. The exact telling of the story depended on the storyteller's sense of money and rapport with the audience. (92)

This orality, then, this emphasis on action, and therefore this proximity to the formulas of "Saturday matinee serials"—all of these are elements that Chin has attempted to incorporate into his own works:

In *Three Kingdoms*, *Water Margin*, and *Monkey*, the novels and the operas there is always an exuberance in the language and the style I tried to transfer to my work. I write to be heard. So, if you read my stuff silently and your lips are moving, that's good. It helps if you sit in front of your TV set tuned to a Western. (92–93)

By aligning his own work with this Chinese folkloric tradition, one that is wholly compatible with the staple forms of American popular culture, Chin characterizes his own writings as populist, however avant-garde or experimental—however elitist—they might seem. His is a writing that attempts to speak to those readers who—like him—have learned a particular mode of reading through an immersion in these Chinese classics and also in U.S. mass media.

At another point in this interview, Chin explicitly defines his ideal audience—the only one that wholly understands what he is trying to do—as immigrants:

Immigrants who know *Three Kingdoms* and *The Water Margin* have enjoyed my work. There are bilingual puns and little plays on the heroic tradition to let them know exactly what my characters are stupid about. So my ideal audience would be composed either of immigrants fluent in American English and history or, as I would prefer, American born who were knowledgeable about the basic works of a universal Asian childhood. (91)

When Davis wonders whether such an audience might be "a little hard to get," Chin points to the recent influx of Chinese immigrants: "new Chinese coming in from Cambodia, Thailand, Laos, Viet Nam, Singapore, mainland China, everywhere" (91). The hope he sees in this potential audience derives from the fact that "They are bringing the real stuff with them, the stuff that

the original immigrants brought over, the literature, the civilization, the values—all in translation and comic books” (91).

The subjectivity that is gained through this immersion in the key texts that comprise “the basic works of a universal Asian childhood” is one that is potentially inoculated against the more pernicious effects of a white racist American popular culture. It is, moreover, a subjectivity that knows how to absorb and appropriate from other cultures—even those steeped in an anti-Asian racism—those elements conducive to the development of a racially authentic form of Asian American manhood. It is, therefore, a subjectivity that is defined by—to rephrase Ellison’s formulation—“a yearning to make any- and everything of quality [*Asian*] *American*; to appropriate it, possess it, re-create it in our own group and individual images.”

What lies at the heart of the classic tradition Chin codifies is, in fact, a subject whose essential Asianness and virility is indexed by an extraordinary capacity for mimesis—a mimesis that bespeaks a combative will to power. In an essay entitled “Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and Fake” (1991), Chin describes what he identifies as the Chinese “real.” He claims that the “authentic” Chinese subject is basically a martial subject—a subject steeped in a heroic tradition that teaches him that “life is war and behavior is strategy and tactics,” that “Living is fighting” and “Life is war.”¹⁹ Within this tradition, “All art is martial art. Writing is fighting” (35). The essence of Chinese identity can thus be detected in the *pedagogical* structure of the martial arts: “One learns tai chi, kung fu, and martial art by *memorizing* a set of poses, stances, and movement in a specific order and rhythm. Then one recites the moves of the set” (36). The Chinese subject begins as a passively mimetic subject—a disciple—imitating movements scripted by others. But later, this memorization enables a sort of creative play. Eventually one moves “from recital to internalization. One is no longer reciting the set from memory; the set is now an animal in one’s instinct” (36). Instead of being a group of formal movements exterior to the subject, the set becomes something *inside* the subject. According to Chin, this is “the way Chinese learn everything: [through] memorization, recitation, and internalization” (36). Chin calls this “the internal process” (36).

But what is it, exactly, that gets internalized by this process? It turns out to be the master. As one employs “the internal process” to master a set, one also internalizes the master who invented the set. One learns to become a “real” Chinese individual by learning to imitate another, by internalizing the iden-

tity of the master to such a degree that his “sets” become “an animal in one’s instinct.” One’s identity itself is an improvisational copy of an original. And if Chinese civilization is coterminous with and equivalent to “Confucianism,” as Chin claims, then insofar as we express this heroically mimetic power, we express our essential Chinese identity by turning ourselves into copies of Confucius, who Chin identifies as a “strategist, a warrior” (34).

The essentially martial Chinese subject Chin celebrates in his more recent writings is nothing less, I am arguing, than an Orientalized version of the “chameleon Chinaman” he had championed in his earlier writings. If the very essence of Chinese identity is expressed by “the internal process” through which “we” “learn everything,” then Chineseness comes to be defined as a prodigious capacity for imitation. The heroic individual, the fighter, is a subject whose ethnic identity is expressed through mimesis. What it means to be Asian is to always be in the process of becoming an other. Within the terms of this logic, it becomes possible to retain one’s essential Asianness even if one follows the teachings of a white or black “Master,” because such an imitative disposition is, after all, the very expression of the Asian individual’s martial soul.

The Dream of the Vernacular

In my analysis of Chin’s aesthetic writings, I have attempted to draw out their resemblance to those of Ellison, Baker, and Gates—a resemblance in the centrality they accord a certain conception of the vernacular subject in their evocations of an authentic and racially distinctive literary tradition. As Diana Fuss has suggested, the “dream of the vernacular” that haunts such writers has much to do with the ultimately *fantasmatic* sense of reconnection to *working-class* communities that it enables: by claiming an allegiance to the vernacular, professionalized writers of color can affirm an organic link to a “people” that they are—economically speaking, at least—no longer actually a part of.

There is, however, another aspect of the fantasmatic allure that a vernacular conception of the literary holds for *male* writers of color. The various codifications of the vernacular subject that I have been examining all insist on a certain modality of homosocial assimilationist desire that is both racially distinctive and wholly virile. The “perverse” version of this desire is

the debasing self-abnegating desire for whiteness that is depicted with disturbing ease and persistency through a certain homophobic symbolism—a symbolism that turns the “faggot” of color into the master signifier of the idolatrous and libidinally charged desire for white masculinity that a racist and patriarchal social order encourages men of color to harbor. The antidote, as it were, that a certain conception of the vernacular proffers does not work by alleviating this debilitating and debasing desire; rather, what the domain of the literary promises to engender is an altered way of experiencing and expressing this desire. The aping of white literary and discursive modes apparent in vernacular literary works can be seen as an act of semiotic “guerilla/gorilla warfare”; as the expression of a “yearning to make any- and everything of quality *Negro American*; to appropriate it, possess it, re-create it in our own group and individual images”; as products of “the internal process” through which the mimetic martial artist develops his own style.

Given the fact that this vernacular subject is a kind of linguistic cannibal—promiscuously devouring and mangling whatever languages and discourses may come his way—it would seem that the orality with which he is identified is not simply aural but also alimentary. For Chin, at least, the vernacular subject he champions is one that has no taste; he is defined instead by an immensely unfinicky appetitive urge:

Hungry, all the time hungry, every sense was out whiffing for something rightly ours, chameleons looking for color, trying on tongues and clothes and hairdos, taking everyone else's. . . . Everything [is] copycat. Hunger and copycat. (“Confessions,” 68–69)

To be a “chameleon Chinaman” is to be driven by this mimetic impulse: one is always on the prowl, looking for objects to cannibalize: “tongues and clothes and hairdos.” And since that desire to imitate is likened to a kind of hunger, its objects are always subjected to a digestive violence. In his paean to the digestive prowess of the Chinaman identity, which appears in the aptly titled short story “The Eat and Run Midnight People,” Chin celebrates a cultural identity that is defined by a staggering capacity to eat damn near anything:

Being a Chinaman's okay if you love having been outlaw-born and raised to eat and run in your mother country like a virus staying a step ahead of a cure and can live that way, fine. And that is us! Eat and run midnight people, outward bound . . . we live hunched over, up to our wrists in the dirt

sending our fingers underground grubbing after eats. We were the dregs, the bandits, the killers, the get out of town eat and run folks, hungry all the time eating after looking for food. . . . We eat toejam, bugs, leaves, roots, and smut and are always on the move, fingering the ground, on the forage, embalming food in leaves and seeds, on the way, for part of the trip when all we'll have to eat on the way will be mummies, and *all the time eating anything that can be torn apart and put in the mouth*, looking for new food to make up enough to eat. . . . I'm proud to say my ancestors did not invent gunpowder but stole it. If they had invented gunpowder, they would have eaten it up sure, and never borne this hungry son of a Chinaman to run.²⁰

Orality functions for Chin as the means by which he seeks to remasculinize by de-eroticizing the identificatory relationship to men of other races that is at the very heart of the Asian American masculinity he advocates. While this interracial mimetic desire can be seen to resemble a homosexual desire, Chin insists on its virility by emphasizing its oral and appetitive manifestations. The Asian manhood Chin celebrates in his work is embodied by a paradigmatic organ, but not the usual one. It is erected upon an essentially oral foundation: the mouth almighty.