

Introduction

While the body of the black man has long been a focal point of the racial imaginary in the United States, the body of the Asian man has tended to figure as a kind of absence. Richard Fung describes this difference in the following terms: “whereas Fanon tells us, ‘the Negro is eclipsed. He is turned into a penis. He *is* a penis,’ the Asian man is defined by a striking absence down there. And if Asian men have no sexuality, how can we have homosexuality?”¹ This absence is discernible, Fung argues, in the two kinds of images of the Asian man that appear in North American popular culture: “the egghead/wimp” and “the kung fu master/ninja samurai.”² The first denies Asian male corporeality *in toto*, and the second only recognizes a body enveloped in “a desexualized Zen asceticism.”³ Even within the domain of gay pornography, an industry that trades on the hypersexualization of male bodies and the fantasies associated with them, Fung finds “narratives [that] always privilege the penis while assigning the Asian the role of bottom; Asian and anus are conflated.”⁴ David L. Eng takes Fung’s assertion as his point of departure in his book-length study of Asian American masculinity, arguing that the subjectivities of Asian men in the United States take shape in relation to a racist imaginary that effects a *racial castration*.⁵

These studies by Eng and Fung offer illuminating insights into the construction of Asian American masculinity, some of which I echo and amplify in this book; their mono-racial focus, however, leaves unexamined the black-Asian interracialism that initiates their inquiry. While Fung freely acknowledges that his own axiomatic formulation—“Asian and anus are conflated”—

emerges from an engagement with the work of Frantz Fanon, he and Eng do not explore how the dominant presence of certain images of black masculinity throws into relief the Asian American absence they examine. This book addresses directly the complex interplay between these overlapping and often conflicting representations of racialized masculinity, bringing into focus the interracialism earlier studies have left unaddressed. To engage in a comparative analysis of this sort requires mediating between two approaches: the first involves recognizing, as Fung does, key differences in how black and Asian masculinities are shaped by white racism's identificatory dictates; the second involves identifying certain points of convergence, teasing out certain strands of what David Lloyd and Abdul JanMohamed have termed "minority discourse." Although I later elaborate on the differences that Fung points us toward, I want to begin by identifying the commonalities.

The origins of "minority discourse," according to David Lloyd and Abdul JanMohamed, are to be found in the "damage" that racism inflicts on minoritized subjects: "we must realize that minority discourse is, in the first instance, the product of damage—of damage more or less systematically inflicted on cultures by the dominant culture."⁶ But as a discourse, minority discourse is not only "the product of damage," but also the narratives, symbols, images, and so forth that subjects of color might use to give representational shape to that "damage."⁷ In the masculinist fictions I examine in this study, I locate a particular strain of minority discourse in the gendered and sexualized rhetoric that men of color use to underscore racism's dehumanizing effects. I identify a more or less unified set of interpretive narratives that African American and Asian American writers have relied upon to depict the psychic damage inflicted by racism. Embedded in these narratives are a whole host of metaphors that are used to crystallize racism's injurious effects: metaphors of division, feminization, and homosexualization. I place particular emphasis on a highly disturbing figuration of male homosexuality—a homophobic symbolism that proves to be at once quite malleable and precise, that functions, in fact, to give a kind of aesthetic and analytic coherence to the works I examine.

I also identify a second, closely related strand of minority discourse that figures the literary realm as a utopian site in which the un-manning damage done by racism can be reversed. I map the features of a highly masculinist *literary* identity politics that is espoused by both African American and Asian American writers. In order to delineate this discursive element, I focus on

claims authors themselves make about the nature of the liberation to be gained via the aesthetic—claims that I locate in their writings *on* literature rather than in their literary writings. I do not imply that these writers succeed in becoming the racially “authentic” and wholly virile subjects they present themselves to be; rather, I analyze the paradigmatic fantasies they spin out about the “authentic” form of racialized manhood that they believe the act of writing literature enables them to personify.

In this introductory chapter, I delineate the various elements of the interconnected rhetorics of race, writing, and manhood mobilized by both African and Asian American writers. But in so doing, I explicitly acknowledge the temporal and ideological priority of *black* meditations on the central issues this book explores, a priority that Fung himself registers through his reference to Fanon. So, in this study as in his, Fanon comes first. The considerable interest that has surrounded Fanon’s work in the past fifteen years or so—an interest that has centered mainly on *Black Skin, White Masks*—has come from a wide range of theoretical and critical contexts: postcolonial studies, queer studies, African American studies, and, to an extent, Asian American studies. Since Fanon’s work is inextricably linked with psychoanalytic approaches that address the interaction between the racial and sexual aspects of subject-formation—an approach that my own study shares—it provides a useful point of entry into the problematics that I address here. I therefore turn first to a selective reading of *Black Skin, White Masks* in order to begin elucidating the theoretical infrastructure, as it were, of this book.

Fanon: Some Axioms

“Dirty Nigger!” Or simply, “Look, A Negro!” . . .

On that day, completely dislocated, unable to be abroad with the other, the white man, I took myself far from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object. What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood? But I did not want this division, this thematization. All I wanted was to be a man among other men. I wanted to come lithe and young into a world that was ours and to help to build it together.

—Frantz Fanon⁸

Scenarios like this one abound in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Indeed much of the interest that has surrounded this work in recent years stems, according

to Stuart Hall, from “the association it establishes between racism and what has come to be called the scopic drive—the eroticization of the pleasure in looking and the primary place given in Fanon’s text to the ‘look’ from the place of the ‘Other.’”⁹ Because of the attention that Fanon gives to racism’s scopic regime, his writings are often cited as evidence for the ways in which the binary of racial difference derives its discursive shape from that of sexual difference. Lee Edelman, for instance, has argued that Fanon’s rendering of white racism’s visual logic suggests “a borrowing from—and a repositioning of—the scopic logic on which the prior assertion of sexual difference depends.”¹⁰

In the passage above Fanon likens the experience of being subjected to the “look” of white racism to “an amputation, an excision.” As a consequence of the interpellative hails that accompany the visual apprehension of a subject as black—“Dirty Nigger!” “Look, a Negro!”—what was hidden “in” the body is forced, figuratively speaking, to come “out”; the “hemorrhage” that results is one that “spatter[s]” the “whole body with black blood.” This seeing and naming marks the body as black and as bloodied simultaneously, conflating identity with injury. To be captured by this “look” is not simply to be wounded; it is also to have one’s being reduced to the wound that black identity is.

While Fanon is not anatomically specific in his evocation of this “amputation,” it seems clear that he is suggesting a kind of castration. He does, after all, employ an autobiographical and consequently male persona in this passage. There is, moreover, the legacy of lynching, those rituals of racist brutality in which the castration of black men played a prominent part, that looms behind this passage. By invoking this practice, Fanon locates a subjective correlative to those male bodies dismembered and slaughtered by lynch mobs in the psyches of all black men who confront the “look” of white racism and find themselves crushed by its weight, reduced to the status of objects.

Rendered axiomatically, the claim that emerges from this passage can be put this way: *whites look at blacks in much the same way that men look at women*. The alterity that the black body signifies in the scopic regime of racial difference would presumably bear some resemblance to the alterity that the woman’s body signifies in the scopic regime of sexual difference. But the fact that *Black Skin, White Masks* (like the texts my study as a whole centers on) is a deeply masculinist and homosocial text, a slight modification of

this axiom is in order.¹¹ We might refine this claim as follows: *that white men look at black men in much the same way that men look at women—as bodies whose alterity is signaled by the wounds of castration they bear.* The black male experience Fanon renders, then, is one of being looked at as a body that has been castrated by the white male Other who looks—of being, in a sense, castrated by the looking itself.¹²

The psychic damage that racism inflicts on the black man, however, does not simply consist of being subjected to an emasculating racial “look” localized in white male subjects, for Fanon insists that this “look” provides the standpoint from which the black man comes to know himself. “On that day,” Fanon writes, “I took myself far from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object.” The “I” Fanon describes has taken epistemological shape through an identification with the “look” of the white man whom he is no longer able to “be abroad with.” This “I,” then, is the trace of a white male other that has been taken in, as it were, and become the perspective from which the black subject comes to see himself as “an object.” This “I” is no longer able to see himself as “a man among other men,” as possessed of a body “lithe and young.” Rather, he sees himself as housed in a body that has been “amputated” and “spattered with black[ening] blood.” He sees himself as “completely dislocated,” as “division,” as a subject lacking closure—lacking the wholeness and monadic integrity, the autonomous and autotelic sense of self that is imagined to be the sovereign birthright of white men.

Detectable here are resonances of the “to-be-looked-at-ness” that is, from the vantage point of classic psychoanalysis, a defining characteristic of normative feminine subjectivity, signaling as it does the “internalization” of a masculine “look.” These resonances further affirm racism’s emasculating effects. Indeed the intra-subjective alterity Fanon describes through this figure of “division” can be mapped along both axes of difference, sexual and racial. From the perspective of gender, this subject is unable to be a man because he is unable to be wholly himself—for his selfhood is divided from within, hollowed out by an epistemological identification with a white *male* Other, whose internalized and intransigent alterity monumentalizes the fractured state of his identity. From the perspective of race, the persistence “within” of that very same *white* male Other likewise marks an identity that can never be whole—can never be racially “pure,” in other words, consigned as it is to the shadowy liminality of an injurious hybridity.

It would be possible to marshal the resemblances that Fanon underscores between the visual economies that underwrite racial and sexual difference towards a kind of analysis that would, in effect, identify the fundamental interarticulation of misogyny and racism, thus suturing together a feminist politics and an antiracist one. It would also be possible to extend the Lacanian trajectory of Fanon's text in order to suggest that the lack, the division, the self-alterity, and the hybridity that the man of color is forced to exemplify is actually a psychic condition that is shared, though differently, by both colonizer and colonized—to make of Fanon, as Benita Parry has characterized Homi Bhabha as doing, “a premature poststructuralist,” or, as Hall puts it, “a sort of Lacanian *avant la lettre*.”¹³

These are not the ends, however, toward which Fanon directs his insights. It is important to keep in mind, as Hall reminds us, that the condition of the man of color as Fanon describes it is “a ‘pathological’ condition, forced on the black subject of colonialism” (27); it has, moreover, “the political question of *how to end this alienation* inscribed in it. Fanon cannot, politically, ‘live with this ambivalence,’ since it is the ambivalence that is killing him!” (27).¹⁴ As Fanon himself puts it, quite plainly, “*I did not want* this division, this thematization.”

The “thematization” that Fanon illustrates—which establishes a relationship of equivalence between black men and women—is one he also rejects. The image of himself that the black man has internalized, which has taken shape through an identification with the white man's “look,” Fanon presents as the effect of a *faulty* optics of racial vision—a vision that *misconstrues* the stigmata of racial difference as being comparable to those of sexual difference. As Fanon deploys the image of castration to evoke the condition of the man of color, he emphasizes the unnaturalness, the perversity, of that imposition. He accentuates, in other words, the disjuncture between the *figure* of castration, which he uses to evoke the psychic condition of the man of color under racism, and the “intactness” of the black male body, which is erroneously being seen as Other. (The “whole” body Fanon describe as his own is not *literally* “amputat[ed],” but only appears so when apprehended from the perspective of white racism.) While the man of color—“lithe and young,” “a man among other men”—is anatomically endowed with the preminent signifier of manhood and all that would seem to entail, he has been mistakenly and unjustly denied access to the prerogatives that ought to be his in a social order whose patriarchal and homosocial character is taken for granted.

To the extent that freedom in Fanon's text is framed in masculinist and homosocial terms, as Terry Goldie has observed, his focus remains on racism's devastating effects on men of color. As such, colonial racism is vilified as a structure that depends upon and seeks to maintain an unequal distribution of patriarchal privilege. By using this figure of castration to measure the extent of injury that colonial racism inflicts on black men, Fanon makes use of a regulative standard that is calibrated as much by gender as it is by race. Preventing the black man from enjoying an equal share of the patriarchal dispensation is the particular form of misrecognition to which he is subjected and to which he subjects himself.

Fanon shares with the two U.S. writers who are the primary focus of this book the sense that racism's most pernicious effect is to deny men of color the prerogatives that ought to be theirs as men—those privileges that ought to be their sexual birthright in a social order whose homosocial and patriarchal nature is taken for granted. Like Fanon, Ralph Ellison and Frank Chin correlate the injurious effects of racism with its tendency to align the man of color with femininity. They both seek to elucidate the ways in which white men perceive and treat the man of color as both a racial and sexual Other. The attention that Ellison and Chin give to the racist "look" tends to localize it—as does Fanon—in the interracial homosocial regard of white men. Moreover, despite the disparities in the specific traits assigned to black and Asian men respectively (differences that are to some degree historically variable, as my study will show), what links these writers is their outrage at the fact that their racial difference from white men is apprehended as analogous to a sexual difference—that black and Asian men, however distinctly, are perceived and treated by white men in ways that are comparable to the ways in which men perceive and treat women.

Ellison and Chin also share with Fanon a broadly Freudian understanding of *why* it is that white men (mis)perceive men of color in the way they do. All of these writers suggest that if racism seeks to emasculate and feminize men of color, this reflects the fact that they are forced to function under racism as objects that satisfy the sadistic and erotic desires of white men. Homosocial forms of white male racism are presented, in other words, as having a fundamentally homoerotic component. The texts I examine emphasize this homoeroticism by rendering white racism equivalent to homosexuality.

As various commentators have noted, this logic is very much apparent in

the sixth chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*, in which Fanon attempts to demonstrate that “the Negrophobic man is a repressed homosexual” (156).¹⁵ Fanon makes this assertion in two different ways. First of all, he stresses how the black man functions as a kind of specular object for the white man. Fanon describes the “Negro myth” as containing within it those aspects of the white male self that have undergone repression, or been abjected: pre-eminent among these—and thrown into prominent relief by the white fixation with the black penis—are the biological, the sexual, and the genital:

Every intellectual gain requires a loss in sexual potential. The civilized white man retains an irrational longing for unusual eras of sexual license, of orgiastic scenes, of unpunished rapes, of unrepressed incest. In one way these fantasies respond to Freud’s life instinct. Projecting his own desires on to the Negro, the white man behaves “as if” the Negro really had them. . . . To suffer from a phobia of Negroes is to be afraid of the biological. For the Negro is only biological. (165)

Elsewhere Fanon writes: “In the remotest depth of the European unconscious an inordinately black hollow has been made in which the most immoral impulses, the most shameful desires lie dormant” (190). Lying in this hollow is the imago that Fanon terms “the biological-sexual-sensual-genital-nigger” (202). It is the erotic aspect of the white man’s disavowed identification with the qualities he ascribes to this “nigger” that inspires, according to Fanon, both fear and sexual desire.

Alongside this depiction of the white man’s homosexual desire, which underscores its identificatory aspect, is another that places emphasis on the sadism of white male racist practices:

Still on the genital level, when a white man hates black men, is he not yielding to a feeling of impotence or of sexual inferiority? Since his ideal is an infinite virility, is there not a phenomenon of diminution in relation to the Negro, who is viewed as a penis symbol? Is the lynching of the Negro not a sexual revenge? We know how much of sexuality there is in all cruelties, tortures, beatings. One has only to reread a few pages of the Marquis de Sade to be easily convinced of the fact. (159)

In Fanon’s text, homosexuality figures, on the one hand, as an ambivalent mimetic desire for the abjected aspects of the white male racial self and, on the other, as a sexualized sadistic pleasure that is gained through the inflicting of “cruelties, tortures, beatings” on other men. That Fanon’s “out-

ing” of the “homosexual” desire animating homosocial racism is accompanied by a homophobic revulsion is quite clear. Near the end of chapter 6, Fanon addresses himself directly to Michel Salomon—a French physician who had described “that aura of sensuality that [the Negro] gives off” (qtd. in Fanon, 201)—with the following statement: “M. Salomon, I have a confession to make to you: I have never been able, without revulsion, to hear a *man* say of another man: ‘He is so sensual!’ I do not know what the sensuality of a man is” (201–2).

Addressing such representations places critics who see their work as animated by both antiracist and antihomophobic concerns in a difficult position. One reader of Fanon who has responded productively to his treatment of homosexuality in *Black Skin, White Masks* is Diana Fuss. In her book *Identification Papers*, she argues that Fanon’s homophobia, as well as his “resolutely masculine self-identifications,” should be read as *reactive* and historically situated as a response that “take[s] shape over and against colonialism’s castrating representations of black male sexuality.”¹⁶ She further identifies a more specific “refusal” in Fanon’s equation of whiteness with homosexuality: “an implicit rejection of the ‘primitive = invert’ equation that marks the confluence of evolutionary anthropology and sexology and their combined influence on early twentieth-century psychoanalysis.”¹⁷

Fuss’s suggestions invite us to read such representations as attempting to negate and reverse white racism’s emasculating effects by insisting that it is the white man whose manhood is more severely compromised by the homosocial relations engendered by racism. What is perverse, in other words, about racism is not just that it forces men of color to adopt a feminized position, but also that it institutes a hierarchical form of homosociality that enables white men to indulge, in Fanon’s terms, “the most immoral impulses, the most shameful desires.” If the taxonomical trajectory of racist discourse reduces the man of color to a certain *racial* type—the essence of which is encapsulated by those marks of alterity that his body bears—this trajectory is reversed in these representations that similarly reduce the racist white man to a certain *sexual* type.

Versions of this homophobic symbolism that renders white racism equivalent to homosexuality will prove vital, as I will establish in later chapters, to the literary projects in which Ralph Ellison and Frank Chin are engaged. This particular anatomization of white male desire provides *Invisible Man* with its basic narrative structure and comprises the core of its symbolic econ-

omy; a modified, more *multiracial* version of this imagery structures Chin's assertions concerning the ways in which racist popular texts cater to both the sexual and racist fantasies of white men. My own approach to Ellison's and Chin's works—like Fuss's in regards to Fanon's—will likewise stress their reactive character. The “resolutely masculine self-identifications” and the homophobic equation of the white man with homosexuality that Fuss identifies in *Black Skin, White Masks* will be evident in their works as well; and their writings also take shape “over and against” certain “castrating representations” of racial difference.

I will not be treating this symbolism as *merely* reactive, however. What is unsettling about these representations, I contend, is not just the homophobia that structures them; it is also that this homophobia proves crucial to the analytical insights they offer into the libidinal economy of homosocial racism. These texts “out” the eroticism that underwrites the hierarchical forms of homosociality that racism engenders. But in so doing, they demonstrate how disturbingly apt a signifier homosexuality is for the “perverse” forms of white male desire that racist practices satisfy. In Fanon's writings as well as Ellison's, homosexuality signifies both the specular and identificatory desires that white men harbor for black men and also the sadistic desires that they satisfy through “cruelties, tortures, beatings.”

It is necessary to emphasize at this point that the white male desire Fanon vilifies in *Black Skin, White Masks* is an *interracial* homosocial desire. As such, it would seem that the palpable disgust with which he renders it—“I have never been able, without revulsion, to hear a *man* say of another man: ‘He is so sensual!’ I do not know what the sensuality of a man is” (201)—finds expression, in inverted form, in the paeans to the emancipatory potential of interracial fraternity that punctuate this text. Indeed, passages like the one below seem to confirm the truism that the most homophobic writings tend to be those that are the most steeped in male homosocial desire:

On the field of battle, its four corners marked by the scores of Negroes being hanged by their testicles, a monument is slowly being built that promises to be majestic.

And at the top of this monument, I can already see a white man and a black man *hand in hand*. (222; emphasis Fanon's)

Fanon's investment in the possibility of a more equitable and utopian homosociality between black and white men is also apparent from the pedagogic

imperative that structures *Black Skin, White Masks*: his intent, in part, is “to show the white man that he is at once the perpetrator and the victim of a delusion” (225). The “delusion” that Fanon wishes to make readers like M. Salomon confront and free themselves of is the interracial “homosexual” desire they harbor for the black man. Indeed, it is a mutual recognition between white man and black that marks the utopian telos toward which *Black Skin, White Masks* (much like *Invisible Man*) moves—and this despite the fact that the vast bulk of this text is devoted to anatomizing the psychic conditions that prevent such a recognition from taking place. Fanon’s desire, after all, is “to be a man among other men. . . . to come lithe and young into a world that was ours and to help to build it together.”

The representations I examine in this study evince a similarly profound if acutely ambivalent allegiance to this ideal of interracial fraternity that is directly proportional to their denigration of homosocial couplings that express this ideal in a radically desublimated form. What is apparent in them, in other words, is a version of the now familiar binary that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in her landmark study *Between Men*, has identified as crucial to the formation and maintenance of heteronormative masculinity: the discrete distinction between homosexual and homosocial forms of same-sex desire.¹⁸ In the texts I consider, however, this binary is used for racially specific purposes, to distinguish the perverse forms of masculinity and interracial homosocial desire that racism fosters from the more utopian forms that might emerge if white men were able to recognize themselves as, in Fanon’s words, “the perpetrator[s] and the victim[s] of a delusion.”

That the primary subject of this book is the work of two *writers* is not, however, incidental; the domain of literature does not assume a central place here merely because it offers a particularly illuminative perspective on a more pervasive cultural logic. For as a study of the literary ideologies that can subtend an antiracist politics it seeks to bring into critical focus the persistent and seductive belief that the domain of the aesthetic enables a measure of mobility and freedom from the repressive constructions of minoritized masculine identity that prevail in a racist social order. It is the perspective afforded by the aesthetic that is imagined as providing a stable epistemic standpoint from which debilitating forms of interracial male homosociality can be distinguished from those that are emancipatory, and from which compromised forms of racialized manhood can be distinguished from those that are “whole” and “authentic.” We can turn once again to *Black Skin, White Masks*

for a paradigmatic assertion of this aesthetic sentiment. For Fanon locates in the domain of art the kind of intersubjective vision that would enable men on either side of the racial and colonial divide to see each other as men:

The eye is not merely a mirror, but a correcting mirror. The eye should make it possible for us to correct cultural errors. I do not say the eyes, I say the eye, and there is no mystery about what that eye refers to; not to the crevice in the skull but to that very uniform light that wells out of the reds of Van Gogh, that glides through a concerto of Tschaikowsky, that fastens itself desperately to Schiller's Ode to Joy, that allows itself to be conveyed by the worm-ridden bawling of Césaire. (202)

It is the mediating gaze afforded by the aesthetic, Fanon contends, that makes it possible for men of different races to see each other truly, that corrects for the distortions produced by the optics of racism. The more utopian and equitable form of interracial homosociality that Fanon celebrates is thus linked with a virtual visuality that the aesthetic enables—a more “authentic” optics of homosocial recognition. This vision is discernible in the works of certain European artists like Van Gogh, Tschaikowsky, and Schiller; it is also “conveyed,” however, “by the worm-ridden bawling of Césaire.” This racially hybrid canon of artists—all male—fleshes out in the aesthetic sphere a version of the fraternity he imagines emerging in the political sphere after a revolutionary transformation of the colonial order: “at the top of this monument, I can already see a white man and a black man *hand in hand*.”

The gesture that Fanon makes in the passage above toward the utopian potential of art is more fully fleshed out in the writings of Ralph Ellison and Frank Chin, as later chapters of this study will make clear. The domain of literature, as these writers conceive of it, promises a measure of freedom from the perverse forms of interracial homosociality that racism engenders—a homosociality that allows white men to indulge their “most immoral impulses, the most shameful desires” vis-à-vis men of color, and that effects an emasculating identification of men of color with femininity. The division that Ellison and Chin posit between a racist and feminizing social order and the virilizing utopian elsewhere of art, then, might justifiably be seen as a reworking of “The Great Divide” that Andreas Huyssen has identified as a cornerstone of modernist aesthetic ideology.¹⁹ Indeed, the agonistic impulses operant in modernist texts, which claim their “cultural authority by opposing themselves to practices and spaces disparaged as feminine,”²⁰ are appar-

ent in Ellison's and Chin's aesthetic writings as well. The aesthetic postures that Ellison and Chin adopt, in other words, recapitulate, to a certain extent, the oppositional stance taken by male writers who are more conventionally thought of as modernist. But while this study will call attention to this ideological borrowing, my intent is not to enter into critical debates about the categorization or periodization of modernism as a literary movement—the issue of whether Ellison or Chin should or should not be considered modernist is not of primary concern here. By suggesting how certain modernist arguments comprise a component of the ideological framework that structures these writers' codifications of aesthetic, racial, and masculine authenticity, however, I am attempting to situate their writings in a broader cultural context. I am also seeking to emphasize the ways in which the racial and sexual identity politics that Ellison and Chin espouse articulate themselves as a *literary* identity politics.

In order then to clarify further the features of the identities that Ellison and Chin champion as “authentic,” I want to re-orient the issues I have thus far been discussing around the term *hybridity*, for it constitutes a key component of the racial, sexual, and literary rhetorics I will be exploring. The issue of hybridity, as Robert J. C. Young has argued, has always been at the core of modern conceptions of race. Since this term's original meaning in racial discourse had to do with the progeny produced by interracial heterosexual unions, it testifies to the fact that “Theories of race were [and are] always covert theories of desire.”²¹ While Young insists that “hybridity as a cultural description will always carry with it an implicit politics of heterosexuality,”²² in the representations I consider here it is framed much more prominently as an issue of homosocial desire.

Hybridity performs a central function in Fanon's depiction of the wounded and fissured subjectivity of the black man as it has been shaped by the scopic regime of white racism. It is, after all, a white male “look” that has, in a sense, been grafted onto the psyche of the black man that provides the perspective from which he comes to see himself as an object—that causes him to see himself as “amputated” and “spattered with black[ening] blood.” As such, the epistemological violence that white racism wreaks upon the black man is registered by Fanon as the imposition of an injurious racial hybridity. Hybridity is also central to Fanon's depiction of the Negrophobic man as a “repressed homosexual.” After all, this figure's homoerotic attraction to the black man—an attraction that is, in part, mimetic, and that

reduces the black man to a specular object—is presented by Fanon as a hybrid desire: a desire to have those “black” qualities that the white man has abjected—those qualities possessed in abundance by the “biological-sexual-sensual-genital-nigger”—re-grafted, as it were, to the white male self.

But if Fanon thus links hybridity to the “inauthentic” forms of masculine consciousness that are characteristic of the colonial racist regime he subjects to critique in *Black Skin, White Masks*, this does not lead him to embrace, by contrast, a notion of racial purity. His ambivalence toward *negritude* is well documented and clearly expressed in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Also apparent is his commitment to an intellectual syncretism—to a different modality of hybridity expressed through his deployment of Adler, Freud, Hegel, Sartre, and so forth. There is, finally, the hybrid canon of artists he invokes to suggest the utopian possibility of aesthetic vision: Van Gogh, Tschaikowsky, Schiller, and Césaire.

Ellison and Chin similarly distinguish between different modalities of racial hybridity. They, like Fanon, suggest that it is the homosexual hybrid desire of white men that gives racism its perverse structure, that engenders the potential feminization of men of color. And the desire that they install at the heart of the aesthetic subject they prize is also, I will be arguing, a hybrid and homosocial desire, though it is one driven by a violent and appropriative impulse that is, for them, quintessentially virile. The desire that animates the literary subjectivity they champion, in other words, is an aestheticized version of the *hybrid* desire that animates the “homosexual” white male racist—but it is one that has been appropriated, re-directed against its source, and submitted to a disciplined regime of aesthetic hygiene.

While I have been, to this point, identifying certain axiomatic assertions of Fanon that resonate in the writings of Ellison and Chin, I want now to call attention to a certain crucial difference. Fanon’s depiction of the white male racist as a “repressed homosexual” does not lead him to suggest that the man of color is thereby threatened with becoming homosexual himself. Rather, he contends that homosexuality among the colonized is a virtual impossibility. For the writers who are the primary subject of this study, by contrast, the homosexual of color comprises a central point of concern.

Fanon does devote considerable attention in *Black Skin, White Masks* to the sexual neuroses that afflict the colonized, but these are always rendered as diseased expressions of a *heterosexual* hybrid desire. He anatomizes in successive chapters a pathological desire for whiteness—which he terms a desire

for “lactification”—which can take the form of a black male fixation with white women or a black female fixation with white men; it apparently does not manifest itself, however, as a fixation with white objects of the same sex. While Fanon discusses in some detail the racially perverse yet sexually normative desires that colonialism engenders in black men and women, his discussion of black male same-sex desire is consigned to a single footnote in the sixth chapter that seems to deny its existence, or at least its significance.²³ It might be ventured that Fanon’s inability to acknowledge the possibility of black male homosexuality may have everything to do with the fervency of the interracial homosocial desire that propels the writing of *Black Skin, White Masks*. The desire he cannot seem to name is, after all, a sexualized version of the desire that frames his lyrical evocations of a homosocial postcolonial future: “I can already see a white man and a black man *hand in hand*.”

But while the black homosexual is thus disturbingly erased in *Black Skin, White Masks*, this figure features quite prominently in the works of a generation of African American writers who were greatly influenced by Fanon—writers like Amiri Baraka and Eldridge Cleaver who allied themselves with black nationalism. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has noted, homophobia constitutes “an almost obsessive motif that runs through the major authors of the Black Aesthetic and the Black Power movements.”²⁴ In part this homophobia expresses itself through characterizations of the racist white man that recapitulate Fanon’s findings in the sixth chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*. Baraka’s 1965 essay “American Sexual Reference: Black Male,” for example, begins with the infamous proclamation: “Most American white men are trained to be fags.”²⁵ But some of these writers would extend Fanon’s homophobic symbolism to suggest that *some* African American black men are “trained” by racism “to be fags” as well. According to Michele Wallace, it was Eldridge Cleaver who first introduced “the idea that black homosexuality was synonymous with reactionary Uncle Tomism,” an assertion that she characterizes as “one of his most dubious contributions” to the ideology of Black Power.²⁶ In the next section of this introductory chapter, I will detail precisely how the rhetoric of inauthenticity deployed by Baraka and Cleaver renders the black homosexual “synonymous with reactionary Uncle Tomism.”

The writings of black nationalist writers like Baraka and Cleaver provide a crucial relay point between the works of the two writers who are the central concern of this study, Ellison and Chin. While the ascendance of Black Power, as Darryl Pinckney has observed, “nearly buried [Ellison’s] reputa-

tion” in the sixties and seventies, these writers actually espoused, as I will be demonstrating, quite similar aesthetic and political views.²⁷ What becomes obscured by Ellison’s explicitly antagonistic relationship to black nationalism is the fact that he shared with his ideological opponents the view that racial and literary forms of “inauthenticity” were linked to non-normative forms of masculinity, hybridity, and interracial homosocial desire.

My analyses of the homophobic symbolism that subtends black nationalist discourse also provide a necessary preface to the analyses that I will be later offering of Frank Chin’s writings. Gates suggests that the homophobia and misogyny apparent in the writings of the major black male authors of the late sixties and seventies reflect a wider convergence of racial and sexual discourses in cultural nationalism more broadly: “national identity became sexualized in the 1960s, in such a way as to engender a curious subterraneous connection between homophobia and nationalism.”²⁸ This sexualization of national identity is very much in evidence in the work of Frank Chin, who spearheaded an Asian American literary movement that was clearly modeled on Black Arts. He was the primary ideological spokesperson for a group of Asian American male writers who sought, in the early seventies, to project a literary vision of *Yellow Power*, as it were, one that would not “fall(s) short of the vision Malcolm X and other blacks had for their ‘minority.’”²⁹ While this ideological debt has been noted by critics, its complexities and its ramifications have not, I contend, been sufficiently explored. Indeed, I argue that this black-Asian interracialism—which reworks the central homophobic symbolism of black nationalism, and which has both emulatory and antagonistic elements—is crucial to understanding the sexual and literary politics of the Asian American cultural nationalism inaugurated by Chin’s writings.

*Figurations of the Homosexual in Black Nationalist Discourse:
The “White Negro” and the “Eternal [Black] Faggot”*

The ideological foundations of the cultural nationalism espoused by proponents of the Black Arts movement have been subjected to several cogent critiques over the past two decades. Feminist scholars have called attention to the misogyny and masculinism of black nationalist discourse. Drawing on the work of Paula Giddings and Michele Wallace, Madhu Dubey has observed that it was “the black man [who was presented] as the true subject of

black nationalist discourse.”³⁰ Black nationalists thus maintained that the emancipation of the black race as a whole would only be achievable through the liberation of the black man from the various structures that held him down. In their rhetoric, the black woman was often presented as “an obstacle between black men and their revolutionary future.”³¹ Such representations tend to echo the pathologizing view of black family life offered by the much-derided Moynihan Report: as Dubey notes, they cast “the black woman as an active agent of the black man’s economic and social emasculation,”³² blaming her, in effect, for wielding an inordinate and “unnatural” amount of matriarchal power—power that should have been patriarchal, and that should have been wielded by black men. The black woman was thus linked with two other figures maligned by Black Arts writers: “the white [male] bourgeois subject, and concomitantly, . . . the middle-class Negro [male] who, as a ‘link between the slave and the new man,’ had to be destroyed.”³³ In *Are We Not Men?*, Harper adds another figure to the list of “Others” against which black nationalist discourse projected its idealized revolutionary black male subject—the black homosexual—thereby highlighting its homophobia along with its misogyny.

To the extent that a discourse of *gender* frames black nationalism’s rendering of these four figures as “obstacle[s] between black men and their revolutionary future,” they are depicted as agents who effect the emasculation of black men—who deny black men the patriarchal prerogatives that ought to be theirs as men. If these figures then comprise the “Others” of the revolutionary male subject posited by black nationalism, its rhetorical maneuvers can be read as attempts to identify and neutralize the threat of emasculation posed by each. A paradigmatic rhetorical strategy that black nationalist writers adopt, then, is to depict these figures in terms that stress the *femininity* they exemplify or should exemplify. Black women are thus exhorted to adopt a more “natural” subservient role, to serve as breeders and caretakers for the revolution—to, in a sense, re-feminize themselves.

When interpreted in terms that privilege the interarticulation of race and gender, it makes sense that the three *male* figures vilified by black nationalist discourse—the black male bourgeois subject, the white male bourgeois subject, and the homosexual—are depicted in similarly feminized terms. It makes further sense that the femininity of middle-class men, both black and white, would be asserted in black nationalist rhetoric through descriptions of such men as homosexual. Indeed, as Phillip Brian Harper notes,

homosexuality is “the primary signifier” for “a failed manhood”; as such, “Black Arts judgments of insufficient racial identification” carried with them the charge that racially inauthentic—and inadequately virile—black men were, in reality or in effect, homosexual.³⁴

In the following, I hope to supplement Harper’s account of the homophobic symbolism that subtends the black nationalist rhetoric of authenticity by moving beyond its *gendered* significance and foregrounding the issues of *desire* and *racial hybridity* that are also inscribed in it. The black homosexuality disparaged by Amiri Baraka and Eldridge Cleaver involves not only a willful acceptance of the emasculation and feminization that racism seeks to effect, it also signals a sexualized capitulation to the intrasubjective racial “division”—the hybridity—that racism seeks to impose: it is expressive of an identity that lovingly accepts and embraces the white male other “within,” an identity that takes what we might call its orificial shape through a cross-gender identification with a sexually receptive femininity. For the “failed manhood” and the “inadequately developed consciousness” of the figures vilified in this rhetoric are linked with a certain fantasmatic conception of the gay male body, which helps to explain the disturbing ease with which this body comes to function as an apt symbol for the injurious hybridity to which black men are subjected by white racism’s identificatory dictates.³⁵

To this extent, my analyses of this symbolism in this section seek primarily to extend the reach of Harper’s analyses, placing emphasis on how rhetorically effective and figuratively complex this symbolism turns out to be. In the next section, as I trace Chin’s translation of this homophobic symbolism from the African American context to the Asian American one, I will be highlighting the intensified sense of racial self-loathing that would seem to emerge from this borrowing. For the subject position occupied by the homosexual in black nationalist discourse—a figure defined by a certain modality of racial hybridity that locates him in a liminal space between black and white—approximates the subject position occupied by Asian American men: both the homosexual of color and the Asian man are, in other words, figured as “yellow” men, a catechesis that would seem to have a corrosive effect on the project of cultural nationalism that Chin espouses. But before I explore the shape that this borrowing takes, I need first to analyze in some detail the ideology that is being borrowed. I thus begin my analysis of the homophobia in black cultural nationalist rhetoric by focusing on Amiri Baraka’s 1965 essay, “American Sexual Reference: Black Male,” which begins

with the notorious proclamation “Most American white men are trained to be fags” (216).³⁶

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The homosexuality that Baraka ascribes to white men in this essay is, in the main, a characteristic of middle-class white men. By “faggotry” he refers to an effete sterility, an alienation from physicality that afflicts the white male bourgeois subject. While such subjects may enjoy a virtual monopoly over patriarchal power as a result of their class-position, they are also, as a consequence, *feminized*, as they become increasingly distanced from their corporeal selves. Black men who thus emulate this model of empowerment—those who aspire to become middle-class—will meet the same fate as they are seeking a form of integration that is “merely [a] whitening to fit the white soul’s image. It is also, for the black man, a weakening” (226).

But there is another dimension to the white man’s “faggotry” as defined by Baraka, one that exceeds its function as a signifier of a compromised gender and class identity; it emerges through his discussion of those white men who seem to be most removed from the values of their compatriots—the beatniks, the “white Negroes” celebrated by Norman Mailer. According to Baraka, “the alienation syndrome” that defines the identities of most American white men “is most pronounced in the sensitive, the artists, etc., because what they claim as motive for their lives they try to understand as being separate from the rest of the culture” (219). The difference between the typical white man and the beatnik, then, is not one of kind but of degree. The white Negro does not in fact stand apart from the dominant culture he appears to rebel against, according to Baraka; rather, he merely makes manifest what is latent in the larger racial unconscious:

For a man to be living in a certain social order, in fact, to have benefited by the order (and the filth of its image) and yet to have no connection with it is unrealistic in the extreme. The artist is the concentrate, as I said, of the society’s tendencies—the extremist. And the most extreme form of alienation acknowledged within white society is homosexuality. The long abiding characterization of the Western artist does not seem out of place. (219)

Why this association of the Western artist with homosexuality is not “out of place” is apparently because the artist is self-consciously aware of and indeed gives lyrical expression to a deeply felt homosocial longing that other white

men repress. What homosexuality then names is the *identificatory* desire for blackness that is explicitly expressed in texts like Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*:

The beatnik longs for experience he understands is missing from his reality. Jack Kerouac's virtuous, mysterious, sensual black is drawn from his conscious/unconscious understanding that the white man is in evil withdrawal from the sweetest feelings in life. The beatnik or white Negro, as Mailer called them, wants out of the mainstream ofay world, and sees the Negro as the image of such alienation. (228–29)

The beatnik thus stands in roughly the same relation to the normative white male subject as the pervert does to the neurotic in Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*: the former acts out (at least through his writing) the unconscious fantasies that the latter represses. There are obvious echoes here of Fanon's characterization of "the Negrophobic man [as] a repressed homosexual" (156): although the beatnik is a *Negrophile*, his desire—which is exemplified by Kerouac's desire for the "virtuous, mysterious, sensual black"—also bespeaks an "irrational longing for unusual eras of sexual license, of orgiastic scenes, of unpunished rapes, of unrepressed incest" (*Black Skin*, 165). This hybrid homosocial desire Baraka also finds exemplified by "a white boy Negroes on the Lower Eastside call Superspade, in honor of his dedication," who has wholly adopted the language, the gestures, and the clothing of urban blacks (228).

Interestingly, the white male figures Baraka discusses who exemplify the bohemian "faggotry" of the White Negro are never depicted as engaging in sex with black men. The desire in question here—to use the distinction that Freud makes in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* between the two components of the sexual instinct—seems to have a homosexual *object* (which corresponds to "the person from whom sexual attraction proceeds") but not a homosexual *aim* (which is "the act towards which the instinct tends").³⁷ Because the homosexuality that Baraka ascribes to a Kerouac or a Superspade is so focused on *object* rather than *aim*, it comes across as rather chaste, especially as his discussion of it is contained in an essay replete with detailed inventories of the *heterosexual* white fantasies that subtend racism. The "homosexuality" of these artists or would-be artists is expressed not through carnal acts but rather through literary depictions of interracial longing (Kerouac) or through the adoption of black cultural styles (Superspade). The *virtual* quality, then, of the "homosexuality" typified by these figures seems

to be explained by Baraka's contention that they embody "the most extreme form of [an] alienation" that is pervasive among white men—an alienation specifically from their biological and sexual selves. The white bohemian, in other words, like most white American men, is so estranged from his own physicality that he cannot act out his homosexual desires corporeally and can only give expression to them in his art. To give this homophobic logic its crudest formulation: the beatnik, as the most extreme kind of white man, is such a faggot (i.e., alienated from his own body) that he cannot even be a proper faggot (i.e., fuck or be fucked by other men), and all he can do instead is be a faggot-artist.

The malleability and capaciousness of the figure of homosexuality as it is deployed by Baraka attests to its disturbing rhetorical power in underscoring both the perversity and pervasiveness of white male racism. While Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman have argued that homophobic discourse always pivots around the figure of a penetrated male body, in Baraka's essay no such image is in evidence.³⁸ As I will show in the next chapter, this rather labile figuration of a white male homosexuality that is both everywhere and nowhere is what gives Ellison's first novel its symbolic coherence, structuring its depiction of the libidinal economy of homosocial racism. This semiotic flexibility, I will also be demonstrating, is also what gives Chin's homophobic depiction of white racism its rhetorical power, though his deployment of this symbolism will be modified in light of the different qualities that the racist imaginary attributes to the Asian male body. But while I will be treating these writers' representations of the white racist as homosexual—and the crucial differences between them—at some length in these later chapters, I want to turn now to a consideration of the figure of the *black* homosexual. Of particular interest here is the heightened concern with "sexual aim"—with the image of homosexual copulation—that characterizes such representations.

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The first line of Baraka's "CIVIL RIGHTS POEM" mirrors the opening of his essay, "American Sexual Reference: Black Male," though the racial identity of its referent is different:

Roywilkins is an etemal faggot
His spirit is a faggot
his projection

and image, this is
 to say, that if I ever see roywilkins
 on the sidewalks
 imonna stick half of my sandal
 up his
 ass³⁹

What is striking about this passage is that the “faggotry” that roywilkins is alleged to embody seems, at least initially, rather noncorporeal—it is an expression of his “spirit,” his “projection / and image.” There is no stated reference to any sexual object toward which roywilkins’s allegedly homosexual desire is directed. There is, moreover, no explicit mention of sexual aim, of any sexual act that his body performs. The implied symptom, then, of his homosexuality seems to be his attitude toward whites, a racial-political moderation that is defined elsewhere in Baraka’s writings as a cowardliness.

The poem pivots, however, around the phrase, “this is to say,” which suggests that the “true” meaning of roywilkin’s homosexuality, depicted in insistently abstracted terms in the first four lines of the poem, is to be gleaned from the corporeal action fantasized in the concluding four lines. There is something about the “image” of roywilkins as “an eternal faggot” that incites the speaker of the poem into an act of violence. Put more prosaically, the poem basically states the following: roywilkins is such a faggot that the mere sight of him makes me want to kick his ass. But the somewhat awkward poetic embellishment given to the stock threat issued by the poem—which might more ordinarily read “imonna kick his ass” or even “imonna stick my foot up his ass”—by the phrase “half of my sandal” seems coyly to whisper a certain accusation about what the “image” of the faggot’s body seems to “say”: namely, that this is a man whose backside is permeable to (and perhaps in need of) another man’s penetration. Implied here in other words is that roywilkins is the kind of man who is accustomed to certain men—i.e., white men—entering his body, and the joke of the poem is the speaker’s imagined substitution of a different organ of penetration altogether.⁴⁰

What I am suggesting here is that cultural nationalist writings that make use of this kind of homophobic symbolism draw upon a quite specific representation of gay male bodies that is central to the dominant conceptions of homosexuality. Enabling homosexuality to serve as a “primary signifier” of racial inauthenticity and masculine inadequacy is a pervasive homophobic

fantasy about the *sexual aims—the specific acts of sexual contact*—toward which male homosexual desire is assumed to direct itself. Hovering over this poem, in other words, is the ghostly presence of a quite specific representation of gay male bodies, one that is, according to Leo Bersani, “the vicious expression of a more or less hidden fantasy of males participating, principally through anal sex, in what is presumed to be the terrifying phenomenon of female sexuality.”⁴¹ In being penetrated, gay men are perceived as indulging in “the suicidal ecstasy of taking their sex like a woman.”⁴²

This particular fantasmatic representation of the gay male body—which links it with a “suicidal ecstasy”—lies at the heart of Eldridge Cleaver’s notion that black male homosexuality, as Wallace puts it, “was synonymous with reactionary Uncle Tomism.”⁴³ I want to turn now to Cleaver’s elaboration of this idea in “Notes on a Native Son,” an essay in which he levels a brutal attack on a black writer who was apparently referred to by some as “Martin Luther Queen,” James Baldwin.⁴⁴ In contrast to the texts I have been analyzing thus far, this essay is much more explicitly concerned with the *act* or *aim* that is definitional of homosexuality. It also suggests how the figure of the black homosexual is linked—via desire and identification—to those other Others of black nationalism, the white man and the black woman.

While Cleaver’s apparent objective in this essay to evaluate the works of a writer he describes as “a fascinating, brilliant talent,”⁴⁵ much of it reads like a psychoanalytic case study of a mode of black subjectivity that men like Baldwin exemplify. What Cleaver seems to find of primary value about Baldwin is that his work makes visible a psychic structure that is apparently difficult to detect:

Self-hatred takes many forms; sometimes it can be detected by no one, not by the keenest observer, not by the self-hater himself, not by his most intimate friends. Ethnic self-hate is even more difficult to detect. *But in American Negroes, this ethnic self-hatred often takes the bizarre form of a racial death-wish, with many and elusive manifestations.* Ironically, it provides much of the impetus behind the motivations of integration. (100–101; my emphasis)

At the most basic level, this “racial death-wish” has two components: the first is a loving and identificatory attitude toward white culture and white people; the second is a hatred of black culture and black people. Given the simple symmetry of this psychic structure as Cleaver describes it, it is not entirely

clear why he insists on the difficulty of detecting its presence. (I will have more to say about this momentarily.) But the value of Baldwin's writings—which the essay stresses throughout—would seem to stem from their rendering explicit the twin impulses that constitute the racial death-wish:

There is in James Baldwin's work the most grueling, agonizing, total hatred of the blacks, particularly of himself, and the most shameful, fanatical, fawning, sycophantic love of the whites that one can find in the writings of any black American writer of note in our time. (99)

Indeed, Cleaver praises Baldwin in *Notes of a Native Son* for being “frank to confess that, in growing into his version of manhood in Harlem, he discovered that, since his African heritage had been wiped out and was not accessible to him, he would appropriate the white man's heritage and make it is own” (100). In making explicit *his* identificatory desire for whites, Baldwin directs attention to the existence in other black intellectuals of the very same desire:

In this land of dichotomies and disunited opposites, those truly concerned with the resurrection of black Americans have eternally to deal with black intellectuals who have become their own opposites, taking on all of the behavior patterns of their enemy, vices and virtues, in an effort to aspire to alien standards in all respects. The gulf between an audacious, bootlicking Uncle Tom and an intellectual buckdancer is filled only with sophistication and style. On second thought, Uncle Tom comes off much cleaner here because usually he is trying to survive, choosing to pretend to be something other than his true self in order to please the white man and thus receive favors. Whereas the intellectual sycophant does not pretend to be other than what he actually is, but hates what he is and seeks to re-define himself in the image of his white idols. *He becomes a white man in a black body.* A self-willed automated slave, he becomes the white man's most valuable tool in oppressing other blacks. (102–3; my emphasis)

At the psychic level, the kind of black intellectual that Baldwin exemplifies, then, is defined by a kind of racial transvestism: “his behavior patterns,” his “vices and virtues” are all modeled on white standards. What Cleaver denounces here is a *psychic* disposition that is characterized by an idolatrous and mimetic desire for whiteness, a traitorous identification with the “alien standards” set by the enemy that reduces one to a “tool” useful for “oppressing other blacks.”

Cleaver's critique of black intellectuals follows a radically desublimating trajectory, deploying a series of corporeal metaphors to deflate their aspirations. Even as he characterizes the "intellectual sycophant" as being driven by an impulse "to redefine himself in the image of his white idols," Cleaver calls attention to the limits placed on this impulse by the blackness of the body: unable to become a white man, the intellectual sycophant becomes instead "a white man in a black body." This particular corporeal metaphor identifies an *intrasubjective* structure that is self-enclosed and self-immolating. (It recalls Fanon's "thematization" of the man of color's psyche under colonial racism as riven by an interracial and intrapsychic "division.")

The figure of the "bootlicking Uncle Tom" to whom Cleaver likens the "intellectual buckdancer," however, calls attention to the body in a different way: it suggests a form of *intersubjective* contact toward which the self-loathing black man is oriented—a homosocial act toward which this interracial mimetic desire is inclined. According to Cleaver, the desire to "become(s) a white man in a black body" can take the physical form of a black male body on its knees or perhaps prostrate before the body of a white man. "Bootlicking" constitutes, in other words, the physical expression of the racial death-wish.

But when Cleaver suggests that Uncle Tom actually "comes off cleaner" than "an intellectual buckdancer," he raises the possibility that not all corporeal performances of servility are transparent expressions of a self-debasing black male desire. Apparently some instances of "bootlicking" ought to be read as acts of strategic mimicry: "usually [Uncle Tom] is trying to survive, *choosing to pretend to be something other than his true self* in order to please the white man and thus receive favors." The distinction introduced here between two *modes of racial performance* suggests, moreover, a discrete distinction *between two different models of black manhood*. One kind of black man, exemplified ironically by Uncle Tom, remains insulated from the unmaning effects of whatever humiliating acts of racial self-abasement he is forced to commit in "trying to survive" and thus retains his "true self"; another kind of black man expresses and exposes the essential falsity of his self in the orientation of his mind and body toward white men.

What emerges through this figure of the bootlicking Uncle Tom is an epistemological uncertainty that Cleaver attempts to resolve through a hermeneutic practice that is essentially homophobic in structure. To the problematic I raised earlier—namely, how one can detect the presence of the racial

death-wish in a black subject given its “many and elusive manifestations”—the solution Cleaver offers involves being able to differentiate between certain black male bodies that are driven by the impulse of “trying to survive” even as they assume the “bootlicking” posture and those that adopt that position because they are driven by the genocidal impulses of the racial death-wish. The litmus test for distinguishing between the two involves testing for the presence of a suicidal identification with a specific manifestation of black female sexuality (as I will show momentarily); it involves distinguishing between non-homosexual men who may play Uncle Tom and even lick the white man’s boots without having these behaviors express their “true sel(ves)” and homosexual men whose sexual receptivity to white men is the transparent signifier of a suicidal and ultimately genocidal death-wish.

The significance of a black homosexuality that takes the white man as its object for Cleaver is that it represents the ultimate corporeal manifestation of the racial death-wish that animates all self-loathing black men. If the contradiction that defines this debased racial masculine identity is the impulse to “become(s) a white man in a black body,” then “the black homosexual,” Cleaver writes,

when his twist has a racial nexus, is an extreme embodiment of this contradiction. The white man has deprived him of his masculinity, castrated him in the center of his burning skull, and when he submits to this change and takes the white man for his love as well as Big Daddy, he focuses on “whiteness” all the love in his pent up soul and turns the razor edge of hatred against “blackness”—upon himself, what he is, and all those who look like him, remind him of himself. He may even hate the darkness of the night. (103; my emphasis)

We should then emend Harper’s assertion in order to account for the specific form of homosexuality that comes to serve in Cleaver’s writings as “the primary signifier” for a “failed manhood” that is coextensive with an “insufficient racial identification” with blackness (50). The homosexual in question is one whose “twist has a racial nexus,” who takes the white man as his sexual object. Moreover, as Michele Wallace has noted, he is a homosexual who adopts the passive role in his sexual relations with white men: “If one is to take Cleaver at his word, the black homosexual is counterrevolutionary (1) because he’s being fucked and (2) because he’s being fucked by a white man.”⁴⁶

If, as Leo Bersani has argued, the homophobic fascination with gay male

sex is animated by a specific fantasy of men experiencing “the suicidal ecstasy of taking their sex like a woman,” the version of this scenario Cleaver offers in his writings is colored by a particular racial and sexual history. In order to assert that the black gay man’s assumption of the passive and receptive role is the expression of a “suicidal ecstasy,” Cleaver constructs a genealogical account of this particular manifestation of homosexual desire. The black man who is fucked by the white man, as Wallace notes, “reduces himself to the status of our black grandmothers who, as everyone knows, were fucked by white men all the time.”⁴⁷ The significance for Cleaver of the enforced miscegenation that slavery depended upon is that it inaugurated an interracial heterosexuality whose ultimate aim was genocidal. The penetrated and penetrable body of the black woman serves as the privileged object of not only the sexual desires of white men, but also their genocidal impulses as well:

What has been happening for the past four hundred years is that the white man, through his access to black women, has been pumping his blood and genes into the blacks, has been diluting the blood and genes of the blacks—i.e. has been fulfilling Yacub’s plan and accelerating the Negroes’ racial death-wish. (102)

Through this allusion to Yacub, the arch-villain in Elijah Muhammad’s cosmology who seeks to eradicate the black race through miscegenation, the sexual desire of the white man vis-à-vis black women is rendered genocidal. As Wallace has observed, it is the position of being fucked that is being rendered abhorrent here, and black women are simply reduced to this position: as possessions of white men they are “symbol(s) of defeat,” or as possessions of black men they are “spoils of war.”⁴⁸ Evacuated of agency and desire in Cleaver’s account, they are consigned to one of these roles, dependent on the balance of power between black and white men. Black homosexuals “with a racial twist,” however, are vilified in much the same terms, as they are mainly reduced by Cleaver to the same position as black women: as sexually receptive objects of white male penetration.

Cleaver asserts the pathological character of a black male sexualized desire for white men by emplotting the violent heterosexual history of slavery in the family narrative defined by Freud as the “negative Oedipus complex.” Cleaver’s account of the psychogenesis of this racial-sexual perversion neatly parallels this lesser-known variant of the classic psychoanalytic tale of sexual development, in which the male child identifies with and desires the

“wrong” parental figures.⁴⁹ Instead of identifying with the paternal figure—“Big Daddy,” the white man—the black homosexual desires him; this desire, moreover, is framed through an identification with a maternal figure, the black female slave, and thus takes a feminine, which is to say passive, turn. And because the black homosexual’s desire for the white man is facilitated through this identification with the sexuality of black women, he will attempt to provide “Big Daddy” with the same “gift” offered by his mothers and grandmothers, a miscegenated child:

It seems that many Negro homosexuals, acquiescing in this racial death-wish, are outraged and frustrated because in their sickness they are unable to have a baby by a white man. The cross they have to bear is that, already bending over and touching their toes for the white man, the fruit of their miscegenation is not the little half-white offspring of their dreams but an increase in the unwinding of their nerves—though they redouble their efforts and intake of the white man’s sperm. (102)

Black men who submit to the penetration of white men are, in other words, courting a white male desire that fuses sexuality and violence, a desire whose privileged objects have been the bodies of black women. But what the black homosexual’s “intake of the white man’s sperm” produces is not a racially debased offspring, but the very sexual neurosis—“the unwinding of . . . nerves”—that defines his identity. His impossible desire to make his body and self whiter—to make them “yellow,” as it were—takes shape as a desire to make his body more “feminine,” more maternal. This passive sexual orientation is the signature feature of a black subjectivity whose libidinal structure has been fundamentally shaped by a racist violence that it has lovingly incorporated, a sexualized violence whose aim is to eradicate the black race by producing white(ned) offspring. To submit willingly and pleasurably to the penetration of the white man is to internalize this sexualized genocidal desire as a racial death-wish.

Here we witness a key set of symbolic substitutions, the codification of a master trope essential to the negotiation of intraracial division in black nationalist projects (and also to Asian American cultural nationalism, as I will suggest momentarily). What I have been attempting to specify are all the meanings that condense in a cultural nationalist symbolism whereby homosexuality comes to serve as the “primary signifier” of an identity that is racially inauthentic and inadequately masculine—meanings that exceed its

function as a signifier of gender. The aspect of this homosexual figure that I want to emphasize most here is *the interracial mimetic desire* that is said to be constitutive of it. The formula that Cleaver provides for this disposition—"a white man in a black body"—encapsulates a form of racial subjectivity that recent theorists and critics have tended to characterize as hybrid.⁵⁰ The term hybridity expresses a conceptual view of identity that stresses—often in evaluatively neutral, descriptive terms—its necessary racial and cultural impurity: in reference to subjects of color, it suggests the presence "within" them, as it were, of whiteness. As I suggested in my references to Fanon at the outset of this study, this "thematization" of intrapsychic hybridity as "division" functions as a sister trope to emasculation and feminization in suggesting the unmaning effects of racism. In the view of the *nationalist* writers I am examining here, however, the condition of hybridity is often given the pejorative label *assimilationist* or *integrationist*. The traces of whiteness within the black psyche are rendered as markers of *an assimilationist desire—which is to say an interracial mimetic desire—to become white*.

The black man who is defined by this subjective orientation is then rendered as being driven by a homosocial mimetic desire that specifically takes the white man as its object: he wants to "become(s) a white man in a black body." This homosocial assimilationist desire finds what Cleaver terms its "extreme embodiment" in the body of the black homosexual, "already bending over and touching [his] toes for the white man." There is a peculiar twist to the path of identification that is introduced by the homosexual body: for it is only through a corporeal identification with his black mothers and grandmothers that the black gay man gives sexual expression to his mimetic desire for white men. To render explicit the sexual mechanics that are implied here: it is assumed that the black man will serve as the "bottom" in these exchanges, that his desire will take corporeal shape through an identification with a sexually receptive (black) femininity, that he will seek to become the white man by inviting the white man to come into him. If homophobic fantasy tends to associate, as Leo Bersani has argued, the rectum with the grave, homosexual receptivity with death, this linkage is given a "racial twist" in these writings: for the white male desires that are expressed in modern interracial homosexual exchanges are depicted as continuous with a sexualized racist desire that white slave owners expressed by impregnating their female slaves. Insofar as this enforced miscegenation is rendered as genocidal—leading to the gradual eradication of the black race through the

dilution of black blood—the black homosexual can be depicted as giving expression to what Cleaver terms a “racial death-wish.”

What is condensed in this representation of the homosexual is a set of desires that are depicted as not only contiguous but permeable: an interracial homosocial assimilationist desire to become like the white man; an intraracial cross-gender identification with a sexually receptive femininity; a racial death-wish that signals the internalization of a sexualized and genocidal racist hatred whose privileged objects have been women of color. It is over and against this model of identity that nationalist rhetoric projects its vision of racial and masculine authenticity. The “authentic” identity that Cleaver and Baraka attempt to identify in their writings is not constructed in a simple binary opposition to white manhood; it is, more precisely, triangulated by a hybridized third term: the black man who wishes (at the level of his sexual fantasy) he were female, and who wishes (at the level of racial fantasy) he were white. The hybridity of this vilified figure locates him in a kind of netherworld of race and gender, identifying with figures whose identities he can never wholly claim as his own (the black female slave, the white male slave owner), a neither-nor-ness that seems to locate him in the sexual limbo of “faggotry” and in the racial limbo of a “yellow” liminality.⁵¹

Asian American Cultural Nationalism: The “Uncle Tom Minority”?

In the sentence above, I have used the word “yellow” advisedly. For as I shift into a brief account of Asian American cultural nationalism, which I will explore at length in later chapters, I want to explore for a moment the catchrestic set of meanings that congregate around this term. Yellow, within the African American context, has been used as a term that refers to biracial subjects—those hybrid subjects who possess white blood as well as black; it is also a term that resonates with meaning in U.S. discourses of masculinity, referring to men who exhibit a glaring absence of the qualities of courage and fortitude so essential to traditional conceptions of manhood. Given these two meanings of the term, it would seem that the “inauthentic” manhood that black nationalist rhetoric denigrates is also, in a sense, a “yellow” manhood. This term points toward the miscegenated body that emblem-

tizes the “perverse” desire for a white(ned) body that purportedly characterizes homosexuals like James Baldwin and the alleged cowardice of integrationists like “roywilkins.” But since yellow is also the color that has most often been used in U.S. racial discourse to refer to “Orientals” (at least to those of East Asian descent), the question that thus emerges is whether the first two meanings of “yellow” in black nationalist discourse might shade over into the third—whether men who are *racially* yellow in the sense of being Asian might also be perceived as yellow in those other senses, as harboring an idolatrous and indeed sexualized desire for whiteness, and as lacking the qualities of conventional manhood.

By raising this issue I am not suggesting that there is an implicitly anti-Asian sentiment that subtends black nationalist denunciations of the “inauthentic” form of black manhood exemplified by the homosexual: indeed, no such sentiment is apparent in the texts I have been citing. Moreover, black nationalism’s Third Worldist outlook and resistance to the war in Vietnam was predicated on a sense of solidarity with Asians abroad; moreover, the prominent roles played by Yuri Kochiyama in Malcolm X’s Organization for Afro-American Unity and by Richard Aoki in the Black Panther Party suggest the ways in which black nationalist activists were open to alliances with Asians in the United States.

I call attention to this potential conflation between these three different meanings of yellow because, as I will demonstrate below, it occupies a central place in the cultural nationalist polemics of Frank Chin. Chin was and is the primary spokesperson for a group of male writers who are generally credited with producing the seminal articulation of Asian American cultural nationalism. Often referred to as the *Aiiieeeee!* group or the *Aiiieeeee!* editors, Chin along with Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong edited an influential collection of Asian American writings that was first published by Howard University Press in 1974. In their preface to this volume, which was entitled *Aiiieeeee!*, Chin and his colleagues announced that their intent was to refute a vision of Asian America “that reinforces white racist stereotypes and falls short of the vision Malcolm X and other blacks had for their ‘minority’” (xix). As can be discerned from their evocation of a political leader who has been described as “a Black Power paradigm—the archetype, reference point, and spiritual adviser in absentia for a generation of Afro-American activists,”⁵² the *Aiiieeeee!* editors’ assumptions concerning

what an adequate cultural nationalist evocation of their minority would be like were significantly shaped by the rhetoric of black nationalism. The allusion to Malcolm X—who was famously eulogized by Ossie Davis as “our manhood, our living, black manhood!”⁵³—also hints at the gendered dimensions of this cultural nationalist project; it is symptomatic, moreover, of a rhetorical strategy the *Aiiieeeee!* editors characteristically adopt—they invite their readers to see the Asian American population through black nationalist eyes and to identify those who exhibit the same markers of “inauthenticity” catalogued by writers like Baraka and Cleaver.

The primary object of the *Aiiieeeee!* editors’ critical wrath is a group of Asian American writers—mostly female and/or foreign-born—who project a view of Asian Americans that corresponds, in their opinion, to the stereotypes embodied by figures like Charlie Chan and Fu-Manchu. It is against these promoters of a “fake” Asian American cultural identity—one that affirms white racist stereotypes—that Chin and his colleagues pit their exemplars of the “real.” The stereotype that the *Aiiieeeee!* editors accuse “fake” Asian American writers of promoting and identifying with in their work is described in explicitly gendered terms. The following passage—which appears in the 1972 essay “Racist Love,” coauthored by Frank Chin and Jeffery Paul Chan—makes this quite evident:

The white stereotype of the Asian is unique in that it is the only racial stereotype completely devoid of manhood. Our nobility is that of an efficient housewife. At our worst we are contemptible because we are womanly, effeminate, devoid of all the traditionally masculine qualities of originality, daring, physical courage, creativity. We’re neither straight talkin’ or [sic] straight shootin’.⁵⁴

The Asian American subjects they castigate are those whose racial consciousness has apparently been framed through an identification with this “womanly” and “effeminate” stereotype. As King-Kok Cheung has observed, there is a pronounced misogyny in this passage as well as a veiled homophobia: it simply takes for granted that “womanly” qualities are “contemptible”; consequently, it also denigrates “effeminate” men who harbor those qualities.⁵⁵ What’s only implied in the passage above, however, is rendered explicit in the one below, which is from a later essay:

It is an article of white liberal American faith today that Chinese men, at their best, are effeminate closet queens like Charlie Chan and, at their

worst, are homosexual menaces like Fu-Manchu. No wonder David Henry Hwang's derivative *M. Butterfly* won the Tony for best new play of 1988. The good Chinese man, at his best, is the fulfillment of white male homosexual fantasy, literally kissing white ass. Now Hwang and the stereotype are inextricably one.⁵⁶

The *Aiiieeee!* editors' characterization of David Henry Hwang (whom they seem to confuse with his dramatic creation, Song Liling, the protagonist of his *M. Butterfly*) resonates with Cleaver's description of the black homosexual, "already bending over and touching [his] toes for the white man." Throughout their writings, the *Aiiieeee!* editors deploy—as do Cleaver and Baraka—the figure of the homosexual as a privileged signifier for a masculine identity "devoid of all the traditionally masculine values" and thus indicative of a "fake" racial consciousness, wholly defined through an identification with the stereotype.

In later chapters, I explore more fully the misogynistic and homophobic symbolism that structures the rhetoric of (in)authenticity deployed by Chin and his cohort, a rhetoric that derives from the writings of the Black Arts movement. What I want to highlight here, however, is an apparent conundrum that these Asian American writers face as a consequence of this ideological borrowing. For the qualities identified as markers of inauthenticity in black nationalist discourse—markers of a "yellow" manhood, as it were—and which are ascribed to a certain sector of the African American populace, would seem to adhere—on their account, at least—with a particular resiliency to the Asian American population as a whole.

That black nationalist rhetoric might attach the qualities it associates with the "inauthentic" to the Asian American population *in toto* is in fact suggested by the authors of "Racist Love" themselves. In that essay, Chin and Chan describe a political rally held in San Francisco's Chinatown in 1969, during which David Hilliard of the Black Panthers apparently "told the Chinese-Americans they were the 'Uncle Tom minority' and were contributing to holding the blacks back" (74). They also refer to a scene from Richard Wright's autobiography, *Black Boy*, that would seem to anticipate Hilliard's assertion. They introduce this passage in the following way:

We meet Shorty, an elevator operator in the deep South. Shorty needs a quarter for lunch and tells the white man, "I'll do anything for a quarter." He offers the white man his ass to kick. The white man kicks,

then throws a quarter on the ground. Shorty picks it up with his teeth, the white man says. Shorty, by white Southern standards, is assimilated and happy. (74)

Chin and Chan then quote directly from Wright's text:

"I'm going north one of these days," Shorty would say. We would all laugh, knowing that Shorty would never leave, that he depended too much upon the whites for the food he ate. "What would you do up north?" I would ask Shorty. "I'd pass for Chinese," Shorty would say. (qtd. in "Racist Love," 74)

While the authors of "Racist Love" characterize Shorty's "comparison of himself to the Chinese" as "loathsome," neither of them, as David Leiwei Li has observed, "disputes the role Hilliard assigns the Asian American or argues against his misconception that the Asian is part of the institutional infrastructure that subordinates African Americans."⁵⁷

Hilliard's view of the role that Asian Americans occupy within U.S. racial hierarchies—while partially a "misconception," as Li notes—is not exactly an anomalous one. It reflects, as Gary Okhiro has observed, a pervasive U.S. optics of race that is insidiously monochromatic,

a construct of American society that defines race relations as bipolar—between black and white—and that locates Asians (and American Indians and Latinos) somewhere along the divide between black and white. Asians, thus, are "near-whites" or "just like blacks."⁵⁸

Hilliard's contention that Asians represent the "Uncle Tom minority" does not simply present them as "near-whites," however;⁵⁹ neither are they described as "just like blacks." Rather, Asian Americans are presented as being just like *certain* kinds of blacks: those, in particular, who are derided in nationalist discourse as Uncle Toms; those who are driven by a cowardly integrationist politics that expresses an idolatrous desire for whiteness, like Baraka's roylwilkins; those who offer up their asses for the white man to kick, like Wright's Shorty, or, to fuck, like Cleaver's Baldwin.

What these examples suggest is a convergence between the figure of the inauthentic in black nationalist rhetorics of identity and the location that Asian Americans occupy in dominant U.S. mapping of race relations. To be an Asian American is to be like an African American who wants to be

white—it is to be trapped in the perpetual motion of a failed racial mimesis. The citations of Wright and Hilliard in “Racist Love” suggest that men who are *racially* yellow (i.e., Asian American men) might be perceived as yellow in the other two senses: as harboring an idolatrous mimetic desire for whiteness that can take a homosexual form, and as lacking in “traditional masculine qualities” like “daring” and “physical courage.” What’s somewhat surprising about the *Aiiieeeee!* editors’ assessments of the Asian American population is that they seem to affirm, rather than to deny, the racial analogies drawn by Hilliard and Wright.

In their discussion of the stereotype, for instance, the authors of “Racist Love” give the impression that the “contemptible” judgments of the Asian American population they ascribe to Hilliard and Wright might actually be accurate. Indeed, the clean distinction between the stereotype and reality that the *Aiiieeeee!* editors underscore throughout their writings—the neat binary between “how we are seen” and “how we are” they insist upon—is always turning against itself, even at the grammatical level. In the phrases they use to describe the stereotype, there is a preponderant use of the first person plural “we,” which is nearly always coupled with a version of the simple predicate “are *x*.” So instead of phrases like “we are seen as womanly, effeminate, etc.” we find phrases like “we *are* womanly, effeminate, etc.” Their persistent use of the formulation “we are *x*” signals a disturbance of the boundary between the “fake” and the “real”: it suggests that the stereotype is not simply a fictive image superimposed upon “us,” but it also expresses something of “our” actual experiences and identities. The notion that the stereotype so intimately shapes the identities of Asian Americans is asserted in the following passage from “Racist Love”:

In terms of the utter lack of cultural distinction in America, the destruction of an organic sense of identity, the complete psychological and cultural subjugation of a race of people, the people of Chinese and Japanese ancestry stand out as white racism’s only success. (66)

As a “subject minority,” Chin and Chan continue, Asian Americans have been “conditioned to reciprocate [white racism] *by becoming the stereotype*, live it, talk it, embrace it, measure group and individual worth in its terms, and believe it” (66–67; my emphasis).

In Chapter 3, I will explore at length Chin’s depiction of an Asian

American masculinity that is wholly shaped by an identification with a racist stereotype, a subjectivity that mirrors black nationalist representations of the “homosexuality” as “the primary signifier” for the compromised forms of manhood embodied by men of color who willingly acquiesce to white racism’s identificatory dictates. For now, I want simply to indicate that in Chin’s account of this “inauthentic” form of Asian American masculinity, he foregrounds the same kind of feminizing mimetic desire that is ascribed by black nationalists to the figure of the black homosexual. In an autobiographical essay entitled “Confessions of a Chinatown Cowboy,” Chin asserts that “the most typical Chinaman born in the most typical Chinatown” is “the chameleon Chinaman.”⁶⁰ Lacking an ethnically distinct ideal of virility of “their own” with which they can identify, Asian American men are left imitating “styles” of masculinity that belong, properly speaking, to men of other races:

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 [sic], with none of our own, and no habitat, our manhood just never came home. Hunger and copycat.⁶¹

But the “solution” that Chin prescribes for this problematic interracial mimetic desire that threatens to homosexualize Asian American men, as I will also be demonstrating, is not the eradication of this desire, but rather its melancholic intensification via the aesthetic. For in his evocation of the literary domain as a site where Asian American men might resist this racist unmanly, the wholly virile and racially authentic masculinity that he codifies is not only defined by an aggressive and violent mode of homosocial mimesis, it is—at bottom—a virtual copy of the aesthetic subjectivity memorialized in Ellisonian evocations of the African American vernacular.

To arrive at an understanding of the attraction that the cultural nationalist rhetoric of African American writers holds for the *Aiiieeee!* editors, it is necessary to recognize how the vision of racial and masculine authenticity they appropriate from and share with writers like Cleaver, Baraka, and Ellison is framed by a certain conception of *literary* identity. If Asian Americans are perceived within the U.S. racial imaginary as a “womanly” race, and if they also perceive themselves that way, this feminizing view can best be corrected, Chin and his colleagues insist, by fashioning wholly virile and racially distinct forms of manhood within the domain of literature. It is only by forg-

ing a *vernacular* vision of Asian American manhood, they insist, that the feminizing and emasculating effects of racism can be combated.

Vernacular Manhood

As I will demonstrate in later chapters, the aesthetic theories codified by Ellison and Chin privilege a subject whose racial and masculine “authenticity” is underwritten by his ostensible link to the vernacular forms of cultural expression that typify working-class communities of color. To cite Harper’s characterization of the vernacular pretensions of Black Arts writers, Ellison and Chin claim to be “incorporating into their work the semantics of ‘street’ discourse, thereby establishing an intellectual practice that was both ‘black’ enough and ‘virile’ enough to bear the weight of a stridently nationalist agenda.”⁶² But as I will be arguing, such vernacular theories—including those articulated in a post-structuralist idiom by Houston Baker, Jr., and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.—rather than highlighting the grammar, syntax, or idioms of “‘street’ discourse”—privilege instead a certain signifying intent. It is this intent, which is ultimately authorial in nature, that Frank Chin asks us to “hear” in the texts he deems “authentic,” works that have purportedly “taken the schizophrenic yakity yak we talk and made it a backtalking, muscular, singing stomping full blooded language loaded with nothing but our truth.”⁶³ It is this intent that Ralph Ellison asks us to hear in the jazz-inflected tradition of cultural performance in which he places his own writing: a tradition that “expresse[s] 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.”⁶⁴

This intentionalism is not unique to such ethnonationalist evocations of the vernacular. The distinction that Ellison and Chin make between spoken vernaculars and their literary deployment is, for instance, very much akin to the one that Mikhail Bakhtin posits between the “organic” hybridization of languages that occurs as a consequence of intercultural contact and the “intentional” hybridization of language that is characteristic of novelistic discourse.⁶⁵ Robert Young notes that this Bakhtinian distinction foregrounds the agency of the writer: “As with carnival and heteroglossia, it is the organizing intention of the artist that dialogizes hybridity,” thereby enabling it to take on a “contestatory” force.⁶⁶ But in my analyses I bring into focus how

the “contestatory” force—the aesthetic intent—that comprises the essence of the vernacular subjects championed by Ellison and Chin is depicted not only as racially authentic but also as wholly virile. What these writers valorize (as do Baker and Gates) is a *masculine* figure who speaks back from the racial margins, whose linguistic prowess lies in his deft capacity to repeat parodically and subversively the languages that constitute the center, none of which he should be able to claim as properly his own. He is defined by a violent and aggressive capacity to incorporate, appropriate, and mangle whatever linguistic materials enter into his verbal domain.

In order to clarify the masculinity that is ascribed to these aesthetic subjects, it is necessary to bring into sharper focus an aspect of vernacular theories—even those couched in post-structuralist terms—that has been noted by Diana Fuss. In reference to the work of Gates and Baker, Fuss writes that “The key to blackness is not visual but auditory; essentialism is displaced from sight to sound.”⁶⁷ But the *orality* the vernacular privileges suggests not only its auditory dimension, it also points toward the aggressive *identificatory* impulse to which the vernacular subject gives expression. Implicit in Ellison’s rendering of the vernacular subject and much more explicit in Chin’s is a certain *alimentary* imagery, which figures the syncretic and appropriative sensibility being championed as the expression of a relentless mimetic hunger. Chin’s cultural legacy as a “Chinaman,” he insists, is a heroic orality that is essentially appetitive—or, as he puts it in the aptly titled short story, “The Eat and Run Midnight People,”

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.⁶⁸

Though Ellison’s aesthetic writings rely less centrally on this kind of alimentary imagery, he and Chin both lionize a vernacular subject that is a

kind of linguistic cannibal, promiscuously devouring whatever languages and discourses that may come their way and making them their own. Implicit, then, in the exempla of literary identity that these writers celebrate is a particular *psychological* disposition: the man who can subversively imitate the voices of other men is one who is driven, at least figuratively, by a violent and cannibalistic mimetic impulse to murder and devour them.

The mode of identification expressed by this mimetic desire is one that Kaja Silverman, drawing on the vocabulary of Max Scheler, has termed “idiopathic.”⁶⁹ In her study *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, she describes idiopathic identification as “conform[ing] to an incorporative model, constituting the self at the expense of the other who is in effect ‘swallowed.’”⁷⁰ She further notes that this form of identification “sustains conventional masculinity.”⁷¹ A primary reason why the aesthetic functions in these writers’ works as the masculine domain *par excellence* is that it enables them to project a certain view of racialized manhood that is predicated on this virilizing idiopathic identification.

Although Ellison and Chin both present their writings as emerging from the depths of a distinct *minority* tradition, the literary genealogies they trace for themselves include writers of other races. While they stress the distinctiveness of an African American or Asian American cultural sensibility, they also invoke a *hybrid* canon of male artists whose works provide their own with models that they both seek to emulate and supersede. But the African American or Asian American distinctiveness of the sensibilities they champion, however, is to be found in the muscularity with which other cultural forms are absorbed, reworked, and remade. The ethnonationalist aesthetics that these writers champion, in other words, are predicated on a modality of hybridity that emphasizes a highly aggressive and appropriative—an idiopathic—form of identificatory desire, one that is depicted as manifestly virile. The attraction that the literary sphere holds for them, moreover, has to do with the more utopian forms of male homosociality it is believed to engender. As one voice striving to achieve a singular literary identity by struggling against literary antecedents and brethren of all races, the male writer of color perceives himself achieving not only a measure of manhood, but a particular form of homosocial intimacy, one that is expressed through the complexly agonistic interplay of authorial voices rather than through the potentially “homosexualizing” forms of male-male contact that characterize the prevailing social order.

The hybrid homosocial desire—the interracial mimetic hunger—that lies at the heart of the vernacular subjects canonized by Ellison and Chin is, at bottom, a highly idealized, homophobically sanitized version of the hybrid homosexual desire that white racism attempts, in their view, to engender in men of color. In the literary sphere, the feminizing and passive assimilationist impulse that is characteristic of the “homosexual” posture in which white racism threatens to place men of color is re-presented as a more virile and active kind of mimetic hunger.