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Author
Fan, Christopher Tzechung

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American Techno-Orientalism: Speculative Fiction and the Rise of China

By

Christopher Tzechung Fan

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Abstract

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American Techno-Orientalism asks how Orientalism and literary form have responded to China's post-socialist, post-1989 rise. It explores this question through readings of speculative fiction, in which Orientalism has been an aesthetic dominant since the 1980s, and demonstrates how technologically-inflected, future-oriented genres have transformed Asian racial forms as they have been mediated by Anglophone and Asian/American fiction. It argues that techno-Orientalist forms enable the depiction and racialization of new groups of economically privileged yet aesthetically underrepresented subjects like transnational workers holding H1-B visas, queer techno-cosmopolitans, and Asian/American math and science nerds. While these subjects are well known through caricature and stereotype, the texts examined in this dissertation reveal how such caricatures and stereotypes have adjusted to account for subjectivities newly privileged by deepening U.S.-China interdependency.

This dissertation also argues that a historically informed description of techno-Orientalist aesthetics will reveal how China's rise has rebalanced the East versus West framework that has hitherto grounded critiques of Orientalism. This development is due in part to how perceptions of U.S.-China interdependency, which conform and conflict with the more familiar logics of Saidian Orientalism, bring into focus historically and formally specific modes of Orientalism, which is typically treated as antinomic and transhistorical. Consequently, the techno-Orientalist forms in Japan-inflected novels like William Gibson's *Neuromancer* differ sharply from China-inflected novels like Maureen F. McHugh's *China Mountain Zhang*. These forms move away from an *aesthetic of reification* indexed to U.S.-Japan rivalry of the 1970s and 1980s, to an *aesthetic of totality* indexed to U.S.-China interdependency and attuned to social relations. As a consequence, fiction by Asian American writers like Ted Chiang and Charles Yu has developed along so-called "postracial" lines, as Asian and Asian American characters are complicated when mapped geopolitically rather than domestically.

For Amy, Eliot, and Casey

And for Stanley,
who would have understood all of this implicitly

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

Years ago, when choosing between graduate programs, an advisor said to me, “Berkeley will break you down. And it will build you back up again.” He was definitely right about the breaking down. There were times when I didn’t know if there would ever be any building back up—but I was indeed built back up. And I didn’t do it alone.

Many have lent their eyes, ears, and voices to the development of this dissertation, and have thus contributed to the rebuilding. Trinh Luu and P. J. Nadal have been shockingly intelligent and generous interlocutors. Kent Puckett’s imaginative and intellectual powers shaped this dissertation in surprising and productive ways. Shannon Jackson has been patient and gracious throughout this long process. Gautam Premnath was my earliest advocate in graduate school. But the heaviest lifting in the writing process was done by Colleen Lye, who has been the mentor I always needed, and whose impact on my life has been, and continues to be, immeasurable.

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Introduction

At the close of the American Century, "China" has become one of the most potent symbols of America's future. Since 1989, the U.S.-China relationship has been increasingly defined by interdependency rather than rivalry. Consequently, the conjecture that the U.S.-China relationship will dominate the 21st century has become something of an *idée fixe* in U.S. public discourse. How has China's singular rise transformed how Americans think about and represent Asian spaces and Asian characters? How has it interacted with contemporary American fiction? How has it influenced and complicated the way Asian Americans write fiction?

In pursuit of these questions, *American Techno-Orientalism* focuses primarily on speculative fiction, which, since the 1980s, has been dominated by Orientalist[1] tropes that have been highly responsive to geopolitics. It also turns to works of cultural production that have adopted speculative conventions. Taken together, these works bring into focus a shift in American Orientalism from the rivalry of the U.S.-Japan relationship of the 1970s and 1980s to the shared future of U.S.-China interdependency. Techno-Orientalism has undergone a corresponding shift from an *aesthetic of reification* that reduces Asian totalities to high-technological objects, to an *aesthetic of totality* that privileges social and infrastructural relations. If the key to techno-Orientalism's Japan-inflected forms (emblematized by William Gibson's 1984 novel *Neuromancer*) is the conversion of East Asian totalities into reified particulars, then such a conversion seems aptly designed for managing anxieties over a perceived invasion of Japanese capitalism through an operation of absolute Othering. If its China-inflected forms, in contrast, tend to convert particulars into totalities, then it is because the bright line between self and Other is either no longer so bright, or no longer useful to understanding interdependency. I argue that the historical specificity of techno-Orientalist forms has strengthened their association with realism, thus making them more attractive to writers of literary fiction. As Asian American writers find themselves lured by the speculative tropes that had previously stereotyped them, they are compelled to develop what Viet Nguyen has called "flexible" approaches to speculative fiction's deeply Orientalist conventions that include resistance, accommodation, and any number of approaches in between.[2] This dissertation thus proceeds from Nguyen's expansive analytic

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[1] Any study of American Orientalism must begin with Edward Said's *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978). For work that departs from the binarism of Said's Orientalism in favor of models of hybridity, affiliation, and/or sameness, see Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991); Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media & U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Colleen Lye, *America's Asia: Racial Form and American Literature, 1893-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Josephine Park, *Apparitions of Asia: Modernist Form and Asian American Poetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Daniel Vukovich, *China and Orientalism* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

[2] Viet Nguyen, *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). On the consequences of a myopically resistance-based Asian American politics and criticism, see erin Khuê Ninh, *Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature* (New York: NYU Press, 2011), who argues that the Asian American intellectual class's over-identification with a resistant subjectivity and rejection of the model minority as a "myth" requires holding to an argument that "trot[s] out [Asian America's] sub-par Southeast Asians, whose material deprivation is [the] only too-scant argument for the falseness of the model minority myth, and on whose continued failure must rest the hopes of entire academic and political platforms," 61. See also Colleen Lye, "Unmarked Character and the 'Rise of Asia': Ed Park's *Personal Days*," *Verge* 1.1 (Spring 2015), in which Lye responds to Walter Benn Michaels' argument that "antiracist directed politics serve neoliberal interests," 232. See Walter Benn Michaels, "Model Minorities and the Minority Model—the Neoliberal Novel," *The*

and archival ethos, which decouples Asian American criticism from a resistant Asian American politics's analytical orthodoxies.

While recent critiques of American Orientalism by Christina Klein, Colleen Lye, Melani McAlister, Richard Jean So, and Hua Hsu focus on the late-19th century through the Cold War, *American Techno-Orientalism* extends these critiques into the postsocialist period.[3] These studies also share in common a rethinking of Orientalism as a cultural, political, and epistemological relation that extends far beyond the antinomy and hierarchy critiqued by Edward Said. *American Techno-Orientalism* builds upon these expansions of Orientalist relationality by focusing on the geopolitical and economic interdependency that, for many observers, has defined the U.S.-China relationship since 1989. *American Techno-Orientalism* considers the implications of the emergence, and rise to predominance, of interdependency on Asian American fiction writers who, unlike previous generations of Asian American writers for whom Orientalism and anti-Asian racism very much followed the Saidian script, have come of age amidst cultural logics that do not follow that script, and that are deeply shaped by a broad, pragmatic acceptance of China's inevitable displacement of the U.S. as the world's leading economy and, perhaps, superpower. The Orientalism of interdependency begins with a conception of Asian America whose terms, rather than being opposed, in fact mediate each other. Neither the "yellow peril" nor the "model minority" stereotypes are adequate to containing the new representational demands of China's—and, by extension, Asia's—rise. And so the last two chapters in this dissertation consider what an Asian American literary studies might look like, and what kinds of texts might constitute its archives, if Saidian Orientalism were displaced.

The postwar "rise" of East Asian economies has inspired consistent reflection over the vicissitudes of American Orientalism. The past two decades in particular have seen increasing attention paid to "techno-Orientalist" formations: defined roughly as the conflation of Asian subjects and cultures with technological—especially high-tech—tropes.[4] The term was coined by David Morley and Kevin Robins in an eponymous chapter of their book, *Spaces of Identity*, in order to bring into focus a set of cultural, intellectual and political discourses attending Japan's post-World War II, technologically driven "economic miracle," and the anxieties it provoked in the U.S.. "Panic" is their term. A distinct cultural logic takes shape in these discourses: "If the future is technological, and if technology has become 'Japanised,'" they write, "then the syllogism would suggest that the future is now Japanese too. The postmodern era will be the Pacific era. Japan is the future, and it is a future that seems to be transcending and displacing Western modernity."[5] Put another way, this logic reduces the totality of postmodern futurity—

Cambridge History of the American Novel, Eds. Leonard Cassuto, Clare Virginia Eby, and Benjamin Reiss (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011); and *The Trouble with Diversity* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006).

[3] See Richard Jean So, *Transpacific Community* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); Hua Hsu, *A Floating Chinaman* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016).

[4] The conflation of technology and Asian subjects has been a legacy of Western culture since the Renaissance. See Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989).

[5] Morley and Robins, 168. Just a year later Morley offers a striking revision to this description: "If the future is to be technological," he writes, "and the *Orient* is fast colonizing the realm of high technology (cf. Singapore as the first 'fully wired,' postmodern city-state) then it must follow that the future will be *Oriental*, too." See David Morley and Kuang-Hsing Chen, "EurAm, modernity, reason and alterity: or, postmodernism, the highest stage of cultural imperialism?" in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, eds. Morley and Chen (London: Routledge, 1996), 350, my emphasis.

the fullness of its speculative time-space extension—not to a Japanese tropology, but to something even more specific: a *technological* Japanese tropology that welds the technological to concepts of futurity. Moreover, what emerges from the Japan-focused discourses that Morley and Robins analyze is the composite figure of a cybernetic Asiatic that focalizes stereotypes of an emotionless yellow peril intent on invading the U.S. and installing some version of Oriental despotism.[6] Out of this fear, provoked by a complex phase of the U.S.-Japan relationship in which Japan threatened to overtake its geopolitical and economic benefactor, techno-Orientalism produces a coherent, reified object: an object, it should be noted, rich enough to inspire a literary genre and one of the most enduring aesthetics of the late-20th century: "cyberpunk" science fiction (SF).[7]

Since Morley and Robins, a great deal of scholarship has developed their model of techno-Orientalism, including that of Wendy Chun, Betsy Huang, Lisa Nakamura, and Toshiya Ueno, as well as the dozens of contributors to special issues of *MELUS.*, *Camera Obscura* and *Amerasia*, and the anthology *Techno-Orientalism* edited by Betsy Huang, David Roh, and Greta Niu.[8] This scholarship begins appearing in the 1990s, but by 1995, when *Spaces of Identity* appeared, techno-Orientalism could already be said to have lost its referent. "Japan Panic" had been subsiding for nearly half a decade: a decade that would come to be called Japan's "Lost Decade" of economic stagnation. Nonetheless, most of these writers conduct their analyses through the lens of an antinomic Orientalism that takes as its premise the irreconcilability of East and West. In this regard, I feel that they are by and large reproducing what Anne Cheng calls "the fundamental paradox at the heart of minority discourse," which is "how to proceed once we acknowledge, as we must, that 'identity' is the very ground upon which both progress and discrimination are made."[9] The cultural logic of "Japan Panic" continues to shape the archive

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[6] Morley and Robins, 150, 151, 154.

[7] In his book on postmodernism, Jameson's first footnote states, "This is the place to regret the absence from this book of a chapter on cyberpunk, henceforth, for many of us, the supreme *literary* expression if not of postmodernism, then of late capitalism itself," 419n1. Later in that essay, he describes cyberpunk as a "degraded attempt—through the figure of advanced technology—to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system," *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991), 38. For a fuller discussion of cyberpunk as keyed to Japan's economic miracle and postmodern space, see "The Constraints of Postmodernism," in *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). The "techno-Orientalism" that Morley and Robins describe is closely aligned with a historicization of Japan's post-World War II "economic miracle," and the "Japan Panic" experienced by Americans—especially those involved with the auto industry—in the 1970s and 1980s: "If the future is technological, and if technology has become 'Japanised,' then the syllogism would suggest that the future is now Japanese too. The postmodern era will be the Pacific era. Japan is the future, and it is a future that seems to be transcending and displacing Western modernity," *Spaces of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 168.

[8] See Wendy Chun, *Control and Freedom* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006); Betsy Huang, *Contesting Genres in Contemporary Asian American Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Lisa Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet* (Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press, 2008); Toshiya Ueno, "Techno-Orientalism and Media Tribalism: On Japanese Animation and Rave Culture," *Third Text* 13.47 (1999): 95-106; R. John Williams, "*Technê*-Zen and the Spiritual Quality of Global Capitalism," *Critical Inquiry* 37 (Autumn, 2011): 17–70; Stephen Hong Sohn, ed., "Alien/Asian," special issue, *MELUS* 33.4 (Winter, 2008); Wendy Chun and Lynne Joyrich, eds., "Race and/as Technology," special issue, *Camera Obscura* 24.1 70 (2009); Lisa Nakamura and Victor Bascara, eds., "Asian American Cultural Politics Across Platforms," special issue, *Amerasia* (forthcoming, Summer, 2014); Betsy Huang, Greta Niu, and David Roh, eds., *Techno-Orientalism: Science Fiction History, Literature, Media* (forthcoming, 2014).

[9] Anne Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 24.

and logics of techno-Orientalist critique, leaving us to wonder whether techno-Orientalism might be, in the final analysis, homologous with a historicization and poetics of "Japan Panic."

In fact, Morley and Robins admit this retrospective framing quite readily in their conclusion: "Japan Panic," they write, "seems to be fading" as attention shifts to the "Tiger" economies of Southeast Asia.[10] What they do not have the time or space for, however, is to take the measure of how "Japan Panic" might in fact only name a single aspect of a broader, late-20th century techno-Orientalism. One of the primary instigators of that panic was a contest in the American auto industry between a Japanese Toyotism and a weakening Fordist labor system on the American side.[11] This drama did not unfold only at the level of rhetoric and discourse. In 1982, it erupted in tragedy with the murder of Vincent Chin—a Chinese American who his murderers, two recently laid-off autoworkers, insisted was Japanese and had cost them their jobs. During this period, the cultural task of imagining a foil for the idealized American autoworker privileged the production of forms like the reified techno-Asian body. While the deadly racialization forced upon Chin shares few surface features with cyberpunk's signature tropes—"console cowboy" heroes triumphing over artificial intelligence antagonists, Japanese cityscapes, ninja-like characters, and stateless multinational corporatocracies—both are motivated by the same cultural logic. This conversion of totalities into reified particulars (e.g., stereotypes) is, I would argue, a hallmark of what we might call *Japan-inflected* techno-Orientalism.

Given Morley and Robins' goal in *Spaces of Identity* of understanding how globalization's displacement of Eurocentric modernity has intensified nativisms and discourses of identity, it makes sense that subsequent techno-Orientalist scholarship has been primarily concerned with stereotype analysis.[12] Wendy Chun's reading of Orientalist and self-Orientalizing "cyberpunk" SF, for instance, brilliantly demonstrates how the globalization of stereotypes produces new heterogeneities.[13] Greta Niu, in an important revision to Morley and Robins, argues that techno-Orientalism *disavows* the relationship between Asian subjects and technology, in addition to conflating them.[14] And in his introduction to the "Alien/Asian" special issue of *MELUS*., Stephen Hong Sohn argues that the techno-Orientalism interrogated by his contributors' essays evidences the "re-articulation and re-emergence of the yellow peril."[15] Building upon these critiques, what *American Techno-Orientalism* works towards is an account of techno-Orientalism as a privileged optic for perceiving the dynamics of contemporary

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[10] Morley and Robins, 170.

[11] A contest dramatized in Ron Howard's 1986 film *Gung Ho*. Vincent Chin might therefore be considered the paradigmatic victim of Japan-inflected techno-Orientalism.

[12] Along similar lines, Fredric Jameson reads the cityscape of Ridley Scott's 1982 film *Blade Runner* as a space in which "the opposition between inside and outside is annulled," and thus homologous with the absence of civil society in Oriental despotism. Betsy Huang sees the ubiquity of Oriental spiritual atavisms in American science fiction as evidence of "the West's enduring ambivalence toward 'Orientals' as both necessary instruments for *and* impediments to progress." And Greta Niu points to a more specific sense of this "impediment" in techno-Orientalism's penchant for ignoring "the history and constructions of relationships between Asian people and technology." See Fredric Jameson, "The Constraints of Postmodernism," in *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 155, 158; Betsy Huang, "Premodern Orientalist Science Fictions," *MELUS* 33.4 (Winter 2008): 24; Greta Niu, "Techno-Orientalism, Nanotechnology, Posthumans, and Post-Posthumans in Neal Stephenson's and Linda Nagata's Science Fiction," *MELUS* 33.4 (Winter 2008): 74.

[13] Chun, *Control and Freedom*, 179–80.

[14] Niu, 74.

[15] Stephen Hong Sohn, "Introduction: Alien/Asian: Imagining the Racialized Future," *MELUS* 33.4 (Winter 2008): 10.

capitalism. For this potential to be met, however, we need to look beyond *re*-articulations and *re*-emergences of yellow peril stereotypes, to the ways that techno-Orientalism in fact *increases* representational bandwidth when it comes to depicting geopolitical futurity.

One solution to the impasse of stereotype critique is, as this dissertation proposes, to use China's post-1989 rise as a complicating context to antinomic Orientalism. At the same moment that "Japan Panic" was receding, China's economic liberalization was taking off, in large part because its relationship with the U.S. began deepening into the interdependency that currently has come to characterize it. A transnational division of labor began to take shape that positioned China as the workshop to the world: a division of labor made possible in the 1980s by the development of just-in-time information and production processes between U.S.-based Wal-Mart and production sites in China. On the other side of this division of labor is a racialized relation with the developed world's "creative class" (Asian Americans increasingly included) providing the immaterial labor of design, while the developing world provides manufacturing labor.[16] This division is captured efficiently by the slogan inscribed on the back of all recent Apple products: "Designed by Apple in California. Assembled in China." Technology and Orientalism in these discourses certainly intersect, but in a rather different way than techno-Orientalism's Japan-inflected modes. Above all, techno-Orientalism's China-inflected forms *place no special emphasis on technology*. For instance, as a certain genre of China coverage now reminds us on an almost daily basis, our electronics are produced by mostly Chinese—and mostly female—assemblers laboring in inhumane working conditions.[17] These discourses are overwhelmingly concerned with non-technological issues like human rights, democratic reform, and authoritarianism. The iPod does not therefore stand in for Chineseness as the Walkman once did for Japaneseness.[18] Instead, it is read as a symptom of a global supply chain in which consumerist desire in San Francisco necessitates worker abuse in Shenzhen.

This is just a snapshot of the *China-inflected* techno-Orientalism that I will be describing in this dissertation. In contrast with its Japan-inflected forms, this techno-Orientalism converts reified particulars into totalities in an attempt to grapple with the realities of post-Fordist transnational labor flows, and the neoliberalism being forged and strengthened in the push and pull of the U.S.-China relationship. This is a significantly different, if not entirely inverted, cultural and formal logic from what we see in Japan-inflected techno-Orientalism. The latter has

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[16] On the "creative class," see Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life* (New York: Perseus Book Group, 2002).

[17] The literature on China's reform-era migrant workers is voluminous. Recent accounts include Leslie Chang, *Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2009); Ching Kwan Lee, *Against the Law: Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt* (Berkeley: U. California Press, 2007); Michelle Loyalka, *Eating Bitterness: Stories from the Front Lines of China's Great Urban Migration* (Berkeley: U. California Press, 2012); Pun Ngai, *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005); Hsaio-Hung Pai, *Scattered Sand: The Story of China's Rural Migrants* (London: Verso, 2012). The agenda for the "genre" of coverage I refer to was set in large part by the controversy surrounding the American solo-performer Mike Daisey and his 2010 play *The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs*, which accused Apple for condoning harsh working conditions in the factories it sources in China. Chapter 2 of this dissertation focuses on Daisey's play and the responses it provoked. Charles Duhigg and David Barboza of the *New York Times* investigated these allegations in their 2012 series for the paper, "The iEconomy: Apple and Technology Manufacturing," which was awarded a Pulitzer in 2013. Since then, mainstream coverage of China has consistently returned to the theme of technology production and labor conditions.

[18] See Paul du Gay, Stuart Hall, Linda Janes, Hugh Mackay, and Keith Negus, *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman* (London: Sage, 1997).

by no means disappeared—it is as rampant as ever[19]—but it remains indexed to a *domestically* waged contest between Toyotism and Fordism that is no longer the predominant concern of an American Orientalism bracing itself for the *geopolitical* consequences of China's continued rise.

What I want to do in this dissertation is re-orient techno-Orientalism to its more recent conditions of emergence. These conditions include not only the legacies of American Orientalist stereotypes—the "*re*-articulation and *re*-emergence of the yellow peril"—but, crucially, a neoliberal world system emerging out of a U.S.-China conjuncture. In short, techno-Orientalism needs to account for the rise of China and the interdependency of the U.S.-China relationship. It needs to describe a *China-inflected* techno-Orientalism. This Introduction will develop a formal description of China-inflected techno-Orientalism, and then demonstrate how it might qualify as a privileged optic for perceiving the dynamics of U.S.-China neoliberalism.

U.S.-China Neoliberalism

China's transition from socialism to capitalism began in 1978, with Deng Xiaoping's promulgation of what he called "socialism with Chinese characteristics"[20]: a series of "open door" and liberalization policies that included the creation of "special economic zones" (SEZs) in which market forces were given free reign.[21] Following an initial focus on rural privatization and de-collectivization, these policies turned in the mid-1980s to a focus on urban liberalization.[22] Along with this shift came an emphasis on globalization and the beginning of what would be a protracted process of application to the World Trade Organization (WTO). Even as the U.S. was busy obstructing China's WTO application by demanding ever more open free market policies, the economic relationship between the two countries deepened. Today, the U.S. is China's single largest trading partner, and China is the U.S.'s second-largest export market.[23] If the U.S. and Chinese economies became intertwined over the 1990s, after 2001, they became truly interdependent: Chinese overproduction became bonded to American

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[19] The 2012 remake of the classic Cold War film, *Red Dawn* is a notable (if ridiculous) recent example.

[20] See Giovanni Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineages of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Verso, 2007); Joel Andreas, *Rise of the Red Engineers: The Cultural Revolution and the Origins of China's New Class* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Yasheng Huang, *Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics: Entrepreneurship and the State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Andreas' response to Huang, "A Shanghai Model?: On Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics," *New Left Review* 65 (Sept.-Oct., 2010); Huang's response to Andreas in the same issue, "The Politics of China's Path"; Kelle Tsai, *Capitalism without Democracy: The Private Sector in Contemporary China* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007); Vukovich, *China and Orientalism*. Slavoj Žižek has critiqued "capitalism with Chinese characteristics" in a number of venues, pitting it against liberal democratic forms. See Hamid Dabashi's critique of Žižek's Orientalism in "Slavoj Žižek and Harum Scarum," *AlJazeera.com* 11 November, 2011, http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/11/2011111011283172950.html.

[21] The features of SEZs are: "Autonomy in all economic and administrative matters; exemptions from socialist central planning and regulation of investment and labor issues; market conditions determine wages and work conditions."

[22] For more on the consequences of this shift, see Huang, *Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics*.

[23] People's Republic of China, National Bureau of Statistics, "Statistical Communiqué of the People's Republic of China on the 2011 National Economic and Social Development," February 22, 2012, http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/newsandcomingevents/t20120222_402786587.htm; United States, International Trade Commission, "Year in Trade 2011: Operation of the Trade Agreements Program (63nd Report)," http://www.usitc.gov/publications/332/pub4336.pdf, xxiii.

overconsumption.[24] The economists Niall Ferguson and Moritz Schularick have christened this conjuncture "Chimerica"[25]: a "dual country" in which "The East Chimericans did the saving. The West Chimericans did the spending. Chinese imports kept down U.S. inflation. Chinese savings kept down U.S. interest rates. Chinese labour kept down U.S. wage costs."[26] The U.S.-China relationship, moreover, has been absolutely central to the *global* promulgation of neoliberal institutions and economic growth. From the late-1990s to the mid-2000s it was, Ferguson notes, responsible for more than half of global economic growth.[27] This, along with the oft-cited projection that China's economy will surpass the U.S.'s at some point in the next two decades, are the foundations of the view that the U.S.-China relationship will be the most important bilateral relationship of the 21st century.[28]

While "socialism with Chinese characteristics" was only intended to name the Chinese Communist Party's official economic policies, and thus a specifically Chinese set of circumstances, the prepositional phrase, "with Chinese characteristics," has been taken up by commentators to identify various ways in which Deng's policies, or more often its effects, have traveled both inside and outside of China's borders. As in recent discussions over "capitalism with Chinese characteristics," I adapt Deng's phrase to signal *conflicts* between the CCP's ostensible socialist ideology and its expansion of free market policies. Additionally, my use of the truncated phrase is intended to signal a particular set of anxieties experienced by non-Chinese—Americans in particular, although by no means exclusively—over China's increasing geopolitical influence. These anxieties are shaped in part by a post-Cold War Manicheism imagined as a contest over the future of global capitalism waged between liberal democracy and Chinese authoritarianism.

Although Ferguson and Schularick began casting doubt on the sustainability of Chimerica almost as soon as they named it, the feeling that China's rise will come at the expense of U.S. hegemony has been persistent and widespread since the opening years of the post-socialist period.[29] The 1990s saw mounting concerns over a growing "China threat," which provoked calls for containment from the right, as well as prognostications of a "new cold war."[30]

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[24] This is not to say, however, that neoliberalism is a uniform formation or policy movement, or that it has been uncritically accepted. In the U.S., the mere mention of Occupy Wall Street is sufficient to evidence this. Eli Friedman has recently noted, "More than thirty years into the Communist Party's project of market reform, China is undeniably the epicenter of global labor unrest. While there are no official statistics, it is certain that thousands, if not tens of thousands, of strikes take place each year. All of them are wildcat strikes—there is no such thing as a legal strike in China. So on a typical day anywhere from half a dozen to several dozen strikes are likely taking place," "China in Revolt," *Jacobin* 7–8 (Summer 2012), http://jacobinmag.com/2012/08/china-in-revolt/.

[25] The term was originally coined in Niall Ferguson and Moritz Schularick, "'Chimerica' and the Global Asset Market Boom," *International Finance* 10.3 (Winter 2007): 215-239. Ferguson later expands its historicization in "From Empire to Chimerica" in *The Ascent of Money* (New York: Penguin, 2008).

[26] *The Ascent of Money*, 335.

[27] Ibid.

[28] In 2010, this prediction was installed as official foreign policy. See Hilary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy* 189.1 (Nov., 2011): 56–63.

[29] Ferguson and Schularick, "The End of Chimerica," *International Finance* 14.1 (Spring, 2011): 1-26.

[30] On the "China threat," see Charles Krauthammer, "Why We Must Contain China," *Time* 146.5 (31 July, 1995); Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, *China Wakes* (New York: Times Books, 1994); and Richard Bernstein and Ross H. Munro, *The Coming Conflict with China* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997). Denny Roy provides a mid-1990s overview of the discourse in his article "The 'China Threat' Issue: Major Arguments," *Asian Survey* 36.8 (Aug., 1996). Quoting Deng Xiaoping, Samuel P. Huntington writes: "With the Cold War over, the underlying differences between China and the United States have reasserted themselves in areas such as human rights, trade and

These concerns, shaped variously by economic and military anxieties, have increased steadily over the years. The 2008 financial crisis produced new intensifications. Photographs of President Barack Obama bowing to China's then-Premier Wen Jiabao in 2009 were, for commentators on the left and right, too earnest of an admission of the U.S.'s status as "debtor nation" to China.[31] Political ads in the midterm and presidential elections of 2010 and 2012 played upon anti-Chinese xenophobia and exaggerated fears over a mounting "trade war" between the two countries.[32] The Obama administration's "pivot" to Asia, announced in 2010, installed China's containment as the centerpiece of its foreign policy.[33] While the U.S.-China relationship is expressed in mainstream discourse in primarily economic terms, concern over Chinese threats to U.S. national security, however exaggerated, are never completely absent.

From an American perspective, the U.S.-China relationship's structure of feeling might therefore be conceived as an outgrowth of two analogous tensions. The first between an ascendant "Asian model" of state capitalism and a "Washington Consensus" of anti-state, free market policies; and the second between authoritarianism and liberal democracy that is a legacy of the Cold War. In the post-socialist period, whenever one of these tensions is evoked, the other is close at hand. China-inflected techno-Orientalism tends to interrupt these tensions—though not necessarily to critique them. Rather, they are represented in order to be circumvented as part of a pragmatic strategy of survival in a transnational, neoliberal space.

Chapter One, "Techno-Orientalism with Chinese Characteristics: Maureen F. McHugh's *China Mountain Zhang*," examines one particularly rich near-future representation of the U.S.-China relationship that is exemplary in its refusal of a reified aesthetic in favor of an aesthetic of totality. It argues that speculative fiction has developed two approaches to representing the U.S.-China relationship: as a coherent, directly apprehensible object, and as a cultural logic or structure of feeling. The world that McHugh builds in her 1992 "postcyberpunk" novel, for instance, offers a critical realism of the early years of U.S.-China interdependency.

If Chapter One brings into view a U.S.-China neoliberal totality through representations of *marginalized* neoliberal subjects, Chapter Two, "The Dis/avowal of Sinological Realism: Mike Daisey's *The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs*," does the same vis-à-vis *privileged* neoliberal subjects: namely, members of the American "creative class" whose immaterial labor has in recent years been powerfully associated with the products and mythology of Apple, Inc. This chapter departs decisively from techno-Orientalism's science fiction-centered archive to examine the Daisey's monologue and the controversy that erupted after it was discovered that he had fabricated key characters and scenes. As a critique of Apple's condoning of abusive labor conditions in the factories it contracts in China, the monologue very intentionally frustrates a

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weapons proliferation. These differences are unlikely to moderate. A 'new cold war,' Deng Xiaoping reportedly asserted in 1991, is under way between China and America," in "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* (Summer, 1993).

[31] Since the mid-2000s, China has been the largest single foreign holder of American Debt. United States, Treasury, "Major foreign holders of treasury securities," Sept., 2012, http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/data-chart-center/tic/Documents/mfh.txt.

[32] The infamous "Chinese Professor" ad, funded by the Tea Party-aligned group Citizens Against Government Waste, comes immediately to mind. During the 2012 presidential campaign, both the Obama and Romney campaigns ran ads insulting the other candidate's inability to "stand up to China."

[33] Robert S. Ross writes: "in 2010, the Obama administration initiated what it called a 'pivot' to Asia, a shift in strategy aimed at bolstering the United States' defense ties with countries throughout the region and expanding the U.S. naval presence there," in "The Problem with the Pivot," *Foreign Affairs* (Nov./Dec., 2012).

mode of neoliberal subject formation apotheosized by the biography of Steve Jobs, and that has been installed at the heart of the New Economy's techno-Utopian ethos. I argue that the monologue thus reveals how a privileged sector of the creative class that draws its politics and self-esteem from these mythologies is constituted not only by the disavowal of Chinese labor, but also by a neatly imagined global division of labor captured by the inscription on the back of all recent Apple products: "Designed by Apple in California. Assembled in China." Conversely, the prerequisite for these subjects' self-recognition *as subjects of U.S.-China neoliberalism*—the goal of Daisey's polemic—is the avowal of Chinese techno-coolies. Chinese racial form, and a distinctly Chinese-American social consciousness, is thus produced in the subject formation and self-realization of the "creative class," and becomes the emblem not of absolute difference but interdependency. Techno-Orientalism in this context is inscribed upon, and produced by, the most personal investments of the American immaterial laborer.

Chapters Three and Four turn to speculative fiction written by Asian Americans, which, since the 1990s, has become one of the most vibrant areas of Asian American literary production. Chapter Three, "Model Minority *Ressentiment*: Two Cultures Fiction and Charles Yu's *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*," brings attention to a hitherto unnoticed feature of Asian American literary fiction: the almost complete absence of authentic depictions of model minority character. It argues that C. P. Snow's "two cultures" conflict between the arts and sciences aptly describes a profound shift in Asian American reality: away from a long history of immigration exclusion to a post-1965 history of immigration selection based on professional (mostly scientific and technical) training. It elaborates these claims through readings of Charles Yu's speculative fiction and its articulation the "two cultures" conflict as a model minority *ressentiment* that emerges in response to the New Economy's racialized division of labor and neoliberal mythologies of the frictionless movement of human capital. Rather than promote political resistance to these conditions, Yu's novel develops, at the level of style, a postracial "flexible strategy" for absorbing racial conflict. Its science fictional vocabulary of time travel doubles as a vocabulary of memory, regret, and estrangement that indexes the racialization of the model minority as a transnational "flexible citizen." Yu's style thus transvalues the depreciating value of Asian American political capital—that is, the titular "model minority *ressentiment*"—by converting it into cultural capital.

Chapter Four, "Melancholy Transcendence: Ted Chiang and Asian American Postracial Form," engages more deeply the dialectic of aesthetic freedom and Asian American racial form posed in the previous chapter. It focuses on the work of science fiction writer Ted Chiang, who has, since the 1990s, become one of the most prominent figures in Anglophone speculative fiction. Chiang's fiction studiously avoids racial and ethnic content in order to maximize the aesthetic and conceptual freedom necessary to carry out his rigorous thought experiments. I argue that Chiang's stories, in particular "Story of Your Life" (1998), nonetheless produce an Asian American racial form keyed to a specific history of Asian American citizenship and U.S.-Asia geopolitics. The performance of aesthetic freedom in Chiang's fiction allegorizes a post-1965 shift in Asian American racial identity, from one rooted cultural and ethnic difference to one rooted in professional difference. The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act's system of professional priorities set the stage for intra-familial conflicts between the "two cultures" of the arts and sciences: between children who want to pursue the arts, and parents who want them to pursue technical careers. Science fiction thus becomes a site of historical and interpersonal rapprochement as well as an aesthetic solution to the representational problems posed by a postracial ideology in which racial logic proceeds via a dispersion of non-essentialist categories.

Chapter 1:
Techno-Orientalism with Chinese Characteristics: Maureen F. McHugh's *China Mountain Zhang*

The cyberspace imagined in Maureen F. McHugh's 1992 novel *China Mountain Zhang*[1] offers rather less *jouissance* than the paradigmatic depiction of the trope in William Gibson's 1984 novel *Neuromancer*. When Gibson's protagonist Case "jacks in" to his portable, virtual reality "deck," he immediately visualizes a "gray disk, the color of Chiba sky" rotating and expanding, "flow[ing], flower[ing] for him." The sensory landscape that immerses him is described as a "fluid neon origami trick, the unfolding of his distanceless home, his country, transparent 3D chessboard extending to infinity." More than just a total visual environment, *Neuromancer*'s cyberspace is a synaesthetic experience of pleasure: "somewhere [Case] was laughing, in a white-painted loft, distant fingers caressing the deck, tears of release streaking his face."[2] In stark contrast, McHugh's protagonist, Zhang, has to haul himself over to the "systems department" to be "attuned" before he can even think about "jacking in"—and this is the most advanced cyberspace "system" in the novel's 22nd century, China-centric world (208). Back home in hardscrabble Brooklyn, in a U.S. still limping from a decades-past socialist revolution, if Zhang wants to "jack in" to the net, he has to make a trip down to the public library. "It's not a very good system," he complains, "too many users" (306). The users of McHugh's cyberspace bump up against infrastructure, bureaucracy, and other people. Over the course of her novel, we encounter a kind of technology that refuses to "flower" for its users. No matter how advanced, it depends upon the irreducible material relations of a social totality. It is as if McHugh anticipated James Patrick Kelly and John Kessel's slogan: "Cyberspace needs electricians!"[3]

What happens to cyberpunk aesthetics between 1984 and 1992? Lawrence Person notes that this period began to see the emergence of "post-cyberpunk" conventions, which reverse canonical cyberpunk's thematics by privileging the social over the technological. This reversal, Person argues, manifests primarily as a shift in character: "Far from being alienated loners, post-cyberpunk characters are frequently integral members of society (i.e., they have jobs). They live in futures that are not necessarily dystopic (indeed, they are often suffused with an optimism that ranges from cautious to exuberant), but their everyday lives are still impacted by rapid technological change and an omnipresent computerized infrastructure… their social landscape is often as detailed and nuanced as the technological one."[4] Although Person doesn't mention

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[1] Hereafter, *Zhang*. Maureen F. McHugh, *China Mountain Zhang* (New York: Orb, 1992).
[2] William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace Books, 1984/2000), 52.
[3] James Patrick Kelly and John Kessel, *Rewired: The Post-Cyberpunk Anthology* (San Francisco: Tachyon Publications, 2007), xi.
[4] Lawrence Person, "Notes toward a Post-Cyberpunk Manifesto," *Nova Express* 1998. Also found at http://news.slashdot.org/story/99/10/08/2123255/notes-toward-a-postcyberpunk-manifesto. Post-cyberpunk works that Person mentions include Bruce Sterling's *Islands in the Net* (which he considers paradigmatic) and *Holy Fire*, Neal Stephenson's *The Diamond Age*, Ken MacLeod's *The Star Fraction* and *The Stone Canal*, and Walter Jon Williams' *Aristoi*. To this list we can add add more recent examples like Linda Nagata's *The Bohr Maker*, Pat Cadigan's *Dervish Is Digital*, China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station*, Cory Doctorow's *For the Win*, as well as films like Kenji Kamiyama's *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex*, Neill Blomkamp's *Elysium*, and Christopher Nolan's *Inception*. Not incidentally, post-cyberpunk's thematics of interdependency tend to center upon female characters, which reveals the fraught gender politics of the genre (and cyberpunk before it). Karen Cadora has written a trenchant critique of cyberpunk's heterosexual "hypermasculinity" in her essay, "Feminist Cyberpunk,"

Zhang, the novel confirms his observations. Its "social landscape" emerges in the interactions between these shifts in character and the social relations that attend all of the novel's depictions of technology. However, regarding the question of what provokes post-cyberpunk's shift away from cyberpunk's contrastively reified conventions, Person stops short of providing a full answer.

A clue can be found in Greta Niu's observation that "By the mid-1990s, SF [science fiction] authors favored China over Japan as a setting for cyberpunk."[5] If, as Fredric Jameson, David Morley, and Kevin Robins have argued, cyberpunk articulates the U.S.-Japan rivalry of the 1970s and 1980s—by way of a cultural logic that Morley and Robins call "techno-Orientalism"—then post-cyberpunk, I would argue, articulates U.S. perceptions of China's post-socialist rise and the beginnings of the two countries' interdependency.[6] This interdependency and its emergent structures of feeling have required new modes of representation. The inconveniences Zhang encounters when accessing cyberspace bring more and more of his social world into view rather than less and less of it, because the waning of American exceptionalism demands the pragmatic acceptance of a world-system rebalanced by China.[7] What makes

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Science Fiction Studies 22.3 (Nov., 1995): 357–72. On cyberpunk's debt to feminist SF of the '70s, see Nicola Nixon, "Cyberpunk: Preparing the Ground for Revolution or Keeping the Boys Satisfied?" *Science Fiction Studies* 19.2 (July, 1992): 219–235. On the history of Anglophone SF, few better resources exist than Roger Luckhurst's "cultural history" of the genre, *Science Fiction* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2005).

[5] Greta Niu, "Techno-Orientalism, Nanotechnology, Posthumans, and Post-Posthumans in Neal Stephenson's and Linda Nagata's Science Fiction," *MELUS* 33.4 (Winter 2008): 76. An obvious counterexample to US-China interdependency would be the US-Japan economic relationship that preceded it. Both have been represented in terms of rivalry, antagonism, and invasion (yellow peril). Despite these superficial similarities, however, the cultural logics, aesthetics, and indeed economics of each relationship are quite different. The US and Japanese economies were never interdependent in the way that the US and China's currently are. Much of the difficulty in distinguishing an aesthetic of US-China interdependency without the aid of the kind of historical formalism that I am developing in this chapter is that there is considerable overlap between the techno-Orientalist forms that grew out of "Japan Panic" (e.g., cyberpunk) and those that have emerged during China's post-socialist rise (e.g., post-cyberpunk). This is partly due to the predictable operation of an Orientalism that conflates all Asians into one monolithic group. But it also has a great deal to do with technology's role in the expansion of global capitalism, and the role that China currently plays in the material production of that technology. The slogan on the back of all current Apple products—"Designed by Apple in California. Assembled in China."—offers an unusually apt description for dynamics of the US-China relationship, but the global division of labor and interdependency it conveys has no analogy in the history of the US-Japan relationship.

[6] In his book on postmodernism, Jameson's first footnote states, "This is the place to regret the absence from this book of a chapter on cyberpunk, henceforth, for many of us, the supreme *literary* expression if not of postmodernism, then of late capitalism itself," 419n1. Later in that essay, he describes cyberpunk as a "degraded attempt—through the figure of advanced technology—to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system," *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991), 38. For a fuller discussion of cyberpunk as keyed to Japan's economic miracle and postmodern space, see "The Constraints of Postmodernism," in *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). The "techno-Orientalism" that Morley and Robins describe is closely aligned with a historicization of Japan's post-World War II "economic miracle," and the "Japan Panic" experienced by Americans—especially those involved with the auto industry—in the 1970s and 1980s: "If the future is technological, and if technology has become 'Japanised,' then the syllogism would suggest that the future is now Japanese too. The postmodern era will be the Pacific era. Japan is the future, and it is a future that seems to be transcending and displacing Western modernity," *Spaces of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 168.

[7] If the key to techno-Orientalism's Japan-inflected forms (emblematized by *Neuromancer*) is the conversion of East Asian totalities into reified particulars (e.g., the reduction of Chiba's sky to the portable enclosure of a "deck"), then such a conversion seems aptly designed for managing anxieties over a perceived invasion of Japanese capitalism through an operation of absolute Othering. If its China-inflected forms, in contrast, tend to convert particulars into

McHugh's novel such a fully realized expression of what we might call post-cyberpunk's *aesthetic of interdependency* is that McHugh is aware of how China's rise limits cyberpunk's capacity for historical reference, and how interdependency demands renewed attention to form.

McHugh's vision of U.S.-China interdependency is expressed primarily through Zhang's narrative of development. Specifically, the conflicts that Zhang encounters analogize U.S. and Chinese neoliberal discourses of desire, race, and the ideological contest between authoritarianism and liberal democracy. Two aspects of McHugh's background motivate the novel's analogical form: her own personal crises as a precarious laborer in New York City during the 1980s, and the personal crises she witnessed among her students in China when she taught there from 1987–1988, crises provoked by the country's radical re-orientation from Maoist to market-directed aims. As McHugh explains, "Zhang's tentativeness reflects not only the people I met in China, but my own tentativeness, my own sense that I've gone way out here."[8] Through these analogies, the novel attempts to build a world and imagine characters that give expression to U.S.-China interdependency: a conjuncture that, for the better part of the last four decades, has sped the consolidation of neoliberalism as the predominant ideology of late capitalism.

The further distinction of McHugh's novel is that it mediates this conjuncture's subjective and objective dimensions, producing a "critical realism" of U.S.-China interdependency. As a representational mode that "thinks from totality's point of view (that is, to conceive ourselves as a vector in, and as subject and object of, the historical process)"[9], critical realism enables my reading of *Zhang* to offer a corrective to the antinomic Orientalism that structures much of the rapidly growing body of work on "techno-Orientalist" formations.[10] One

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totalities, then it is because the bright line between self and Other is either no longer so bright, or no longer useful to understanding interdependence.

[8] Maureen F. McHugh, interview by Christopher T. Fan, Los Angeles, CA, September 30, 2012.

[9] Georg Lukács, quoted in Yoon Sun Lee, "Type, Totality, and the Realism of Asian American Literature," *Modern Language Quarterly* 73.3 (Sept., 2012): 417. The definitive text on critical realism is Lukács' *The Historical Novel* (1937). For an evaluation of the use of critical realism in science fiction criticism, see Carl Freedman, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2000). For two recent efforts at recuperating Lukács for the 21st century, see Michael J. Thomson, ed., *Georg Lukács Reconsidered: Critical Essays in Politics, Philosophy and Aesthetics* (New York: Continuum, 2011), and Timothy Bewes and Timothy Hall, eds., *Georg Lukács: The Fundamental Dissonance of Existence* (New York: Continuum, 2011).

[10] Since Morley and Robins, a great deal of scholarship has developed their model of techno-Orientalism, including that of Wendy Chun, Lisa Nakamura and Toshiya Ueno, as well as the dozens of contributors to special issues of *MELUS*, *Camera Obscura* and *Amerasia*, and a forthcoming anthology edited by Betsy Huang, David Roh and Greta Niu. Most of these writers conduct their analyses through the lens of an antinomic Orientalism that takes as its premise the irreconcilability of East and West. In this regard, they are simply reproducing what Anne Cheng calls "the fundamental paradox at the heart of minority discourse," which is "how to proceed once we acknowledge, as we must, that 'identity' is the very ground upon which both progress and discrimination are made," in *The Melancholy of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 24. On techno-Orientalist topoi see Wendy Chun, *Control and Freedom* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006); Betsy Huang, *Contesting Genres in Contemporary Asian American Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2002) and *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet* (Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press, 2008); Toshiya Ueno, "Techno-Orientalism and Media Tribalism: On Japanese Animation and Rave Culture," *Third Text* 13.47 (1999): 95-106; R. John Williams, "*Technê*-Zen and the Spiritual Quality of Global Capitalism," *Critical Inquiry* 37 (Autumn 2011): 17–70; Stephen Hong Sohn, ed., "Alien/Asian," special issue, *MELUS* 33.4 (Winter 2008); Wendy Chun and Lynne Joyrich, eds., "Race and/as Technology," special issue, *Camera Obscura* 24.1 70 (2009); Lisa Nakamura and Victor Bascara, eds., "Asian American Cultural Politics Across Platforms," special issue, *Amerasia* (forthcoming, Summer, 2014); Betsy Huang, Greta Niu, and David Roh,

reason techno-Orientalist scholarship has focused so intently on what Stephen Hong Sohn calls the "*re*-articulation and *re*-emergence of the yellow peril"—as opposed to emergent, or at least historically variable, articulations—is because an antinomic Orientalism can be powerfully leveraged for a critique of U.S. neoliberal imperialism.[11] If critics of techno-Orientalism have ignored recent accounts of American Orientalism's non-antinomic formations, it is perhaps because these accounts focus primarily on early-20th century and Cold War formations.[12] U.S.-China interdependency, I argue, demands a critical realist reading methodology capable of discerning a techno-Orientalism *with Chinese characteristics*.

The main advantage of studying transformations in American Orientalism through contemporary science fiction is that in no other genre has Orientalism become such an aesthetic dominant. However, my hope is that an analysis of *Zhang*'s aesthetics of interdependency will help to shed light on the rapidly expanding archive of texts from any range of genres in which the U.S.-China relationship has a presence, including Chang-rae Lee's *On Such a Full Sea* (2014), Mike Daisey's monologue *The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs* (2010), television series like *Firefly* (2002–3) and *House of Cards* (2012–13), films like *Pacific Rim* (2013) and *Lucy* (2014), as well as recent science fiction from China[13] like Chan Koonchung's *The Fat Years* (2009) and Han Song's *2066: Red Star Over America* (2000). All of these texts are infused with worlds, characters, and dilemmas that are enriched and complicated by the presence of a U.S.-China conjuncture, but without a framework for interdependency they are at risk of being reduced to the "re-articulation and re-emergence of the yellow peril."

From Cyberpunk to Post-Cyberpunk

Historians of SF date the inauguration of cyberpunk—both as a genre of SF and as a "movement"—to the early 1980s. Its canonical works are Ridley Scott's film *Blade Runner* (1982), William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer* (1984), and Bruce Sterling's anthology *Mirrorshades* (1986).[14] In the landmark preface to this last volume, Sterling identifies the

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eds., *Techno-Orientalism: Science Fiction History, Literature, Media* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, forthcoming, 2014).

[11] Stephen Hong Sohn, "Introduction: Alien/Asian: Imagining the Racialized Future," special issue, "Alien/Asian," *MELUS* 33.4 (Winter 2008): 10, my italics.

[12] The persistence of antinomic Orientalism extends far beyond techno-Orientalist scholarship, and in many ways continues to structure fields like Asian American studies, in which scholars like Viet Nguyen and erin Khuê Ninh have been arguing for counter-Orientalist readings. See Viet Nguyen, *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), erin Khuê Ninh, *Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature* (New York: NYU Press, 2011). In regard to writers like Pearl S. Buck, Richard Jean So situates her work in a US-China intellectual formation as a corrective to "several recent studies [that] still situate Buck within the tradition of U.S. Orientalism, and thus as enabling a Euro-American vision of the Pacific, rather than generating a more complex vision of this region and how it operates," "Fictions of Natural Democracy: Pearl Buck, *The Good Earth*, and the Asian American Subject," *Representations* 112.1 (Fall 2010): 88. Recent counter-Orientalist studies include Lye, *America's Asia: Racial Form and American Literature, 1893–1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and US Interests in the Middle East, 1945–2000* (Berkeley: U. California Press, 2001); Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945–1961* (Berkeley: U. California Press, 2003).

[13] For a recent overview of Chinese science fiction, see Yan Wu and Veronica Hollinger, eds., special issue, *Science Fiction Studies* 119.40 (March, 2013).

[14] While the term was coined by Bruce Bethke in 1983 in his short story of the same name, the first expression of the genre's synonymous trope of cyberspace can be traced to John M. Ford's 1980 novel *Web of Angels*. Many

genre's central features: globalization, hybridity, and high technology. In his book on postmodernism, Jameson regrets the absence of a chapter on cyberpunk, then offers the following as a kind of consolation, calling the genre a "degraded attempt—through the figure of advanced technology—to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system."[15] Indeed, Sterling places this goal at the center of cyberpunk's ambitions: "The tools of global integration—the satellite media net, the multinational corporation—fascinate the cyberpunks and figure constantly in their work... Global awareness is more than an article of faith with cyberpunks; it is a deliberate pursuit."[16] In addition to the international array of settings typical to a cyberpunk narrative, the global is also embodied in the trope of the Japanese *zaibatsu*: family-owned vertical monopolies organized by pre-capitalist and advanced capitalist management principles. These are typically characterized as totalitarian, stateless organizations—the perfection of empire. Even when their deployments contain no explicit Asian content, or little of it—e.g., Skynet in the *Terminator* films, the incestuous Tessier-Ashpool family corporation in *Neuromancer*, Scott's Tyrell Corporation—their Orientalist resonances are undeniable.

As with contemporaneous theories of postcolonial and postmodern formations, "hybridity" becomes for cyberpunk writers a privileged mode through which to pursue "global awareness."[17] The hybridity of sub-cultural styles becomes a convenient way for literary form to index the global, and to imagine the subversion of authoritarian institutions. Cyberpunk in this respect is, in Sterling's words, an "unholy alliance of the technical world and the world of organized dissent," and for that reason finds its imagination paralleled "in rock video; in the hacker underground; in the jarring street tech of hip-hop and scratch music; in the synthesizer rock of London and Tokyo… Some find the results bizarre, even monstrous; for others [the synthesis of these realms that cyberpunk provides] is a powerful source of hope."[18] Despite the diversity of this array of cultural positions, one of cyberpunk's most enduring figures of hybridity and subversiveness is the hacker, or "console cowboy." In many ways, these characters—*Neuromancer*'s Case, *The Matrix*'s Neo—are paradigmatic neoliberal subjects: what Wendy Chun describes as highly individual "savvy navigators who can open closed spaces."[19] Their subversiveness reveals an entrepreneurial drive whose circumvention of state apparatuses is rewarded with ultimate freedom.[20] These characters are specifically designed to prevail upon

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historians, Sterling included, also credit Thomas Pynchon's integration of technology and postmodernism in *Gravity's Rainbow* as an important precursor (Sterling, "Preface," x).

[15] The book's first footnote states: "This is the place to regret the absence from this book of a chapter on cyberpunk, henceforth, for many of us, the supreme *literary* expression if not of postmodernism, then of late capitalism itself," Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991), 419n1; 38.

[16] Sterling, "Preface," xiv.

[17] On "hybridity," Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994) is the central text.

[18] Sterling, "Preface," xii, xiii.

[19] Wendy Chun, *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), 178n16.

[20] Many critics have posited the entrepreneurial subject as the ideal subject of neoliberalism. Quoting Colin Gordon, Ong writes: "The neoliberal subject is therefore not a citizen with claims on the state but a self-enterprising citizen-subject who is obligated to become an 'entrepreneur of himself or herself,'" quoted in *Neoliberalism as Exception*, 14. See also Wendy Brown, *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006). Michel Foucault's lectures on governmentality are of course central to any discussion of neoliberal subjectivity. See "Governmentality," in *Power*, vol. 3 of *The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, ed. James Faubion (New York: New Press, 2000), as well as anthology that contains Gordon's essay, *The Foucault Effect:*

the closure of public space and the evisceration of the welfare state. Cyberspace becomes for them the means of circumventing infrastructural obstacles when public resources are unavailable. Neo, for instance, must transcend the reality of the Matrix—one of our most powerful images of a total privatized space—in order to join a public at all: the anti-Matrix denizens of Zion and the crew of the Nebuchadnezzar.

The vague "hope" Sterling mentions gestures at a space outside an ascendant Reagan-Thatcher "New Right" of the 1980s, which cyberpunk writers critique and cast as a quasi-fascist ideology. Technology, for cyberpunk writers, is never an uncritical good; it is not "the bottled genie of remote Big Science boffins; it is pervasive, utterly intimate. Not outside us, but next to us. Under our skin; often, inside our minds."[21] If it offers any "hope" at all, it will be found in technology that "sticks to the skin, responds to the touch": technology that unlocks the posthuman potentials imagined by writers like Donna Haraway.[22] At the very least, it might offer a way out of what Gibson calls the fascist "Dream" that claimed high-profile SF writers like Robert Heinlein and Jerry Pournelle for the New Right's techno-scientific militarism.[23] Gibson's short story, "The Gernsback Continuum," which opens *Mirrorshades*, equates this technophilia with fascism. In it, a blond-haired, blue-eyed white couple lives in "a dream logic that knew nothing of pollution, the finite bounds of fossil fuel, of foreign wars it was possible to lose… in the Dream, it was *their* world."[24] As Roger Luckhurst argues, "cyberpunk makes no sense without the shadow of the New Right."

If cyberpunk paradoxically imagines escape from the closure of Reagan-Thatcher neoliberalism through the technological capabilities of ideal neoliberal subjects, post-cyberpunk is concerned with merely surviving in it. In his 1998 essay "Notes Towards a Postcyberpunk Manifesto," SF writer and editor Lawrence Person identifies a trend in cyberpunk fiction that departs strikingly from some of cyberpunk's highly conventionalized forms.[25] While still deploying familiar tropes like cyberspace, "jacking in," Japan-inflected techno-Orientalism, and near-future urban settings, it makes "fundamentally different assumptions about the future." This futurity, he argues, grows out of the web of relations its characters have to society and to each other: "Far from being alienated loners, postcyberpunk characters are frequently integral members of society (i.e., they have jobs). They live in futures that are not necessarily dystopic (indeed, they are often suffused with an optimism that ranges from cautious to exuberant), but their everyday lives are still impacted by rapid technological change and an omnipresent

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Studies in Governmentality, eds. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1991).

[21] Sterling, "Preface," xiii.

[22] Sterling, "Preface," xiii. Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

[23] As part of Reagan's "Star Wars" program, a slate of SF writers—including Heinlein, Pournelle, Larry Niven, Gregory Benford, and Greg Bear—was retained by the Citizens' Advisory Panel as advocates of techno-science and the militarization of space. See H. Bruce Franklin, *War Stars: The Superweapon and the American Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), and Roger Luckhurst, "The 1980s," in *Science Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 199–200. After September 11, 2001, a new generation of right-wing SF writers assembled a similar group—SIGMA—to advise the newly created Homeland Security department (see http://www.sigmaforum.org).

[24] William Gibson, "The Gernsback Continuum," *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology*, ed. Bruce Sterling (New York: Ace Books, 1986), 9. Italics in original.

[25] Lawrence Person, "Notes toward a Post-Cyberpunk Manifesto," *Nova Express* 1998. Also found at http://news.slashdot.org/story/99/10/08/2123255/notes-toward-a-postcyberpunk-manifesto.

computerized infrastructure… their social landscape is often as detailed and nuanced as the technological one." Their hybridity is thus constituted as much by their dependencies on social and institutional formations as their characterization as postmodern pastiches. In stark contrast to ideal neoliberal individuals like Case, Deckard and Neo, novels like Bruce Sterling's *Islands in the Net* (1988) contain protagonists like Laura, the mother of an infant who must worry about childcare arrangements in the midst of a dangerous, high-tech espionage mission.[26] Making a distinction between China- and Japan-inflected techno-Orientalism would help us to look past or complicate the vulgar, reified Orientalism of a post-cyberpunk novel like Neal Stephenson's *The Diamond Age: Or, A Young Lady's Illustrated Primer* (1996), which portrays Chinese as faceless masses, atavistic Confucians inadequate to the advanced technology of the 22nd century, and desperate for Western intervention.[27] This "Chinese" content, I would argue, is reified by a modality of Japan-inflected techno-Orientalism. A China-inflected reading would move beyond stereotype critique to reconstruct the totality evoked by the novel's coordination of its subjective and objective dimensions. The question, then, is where to locate these moments of coordination within the idiom of cyberpunk—which, again, post-cyberpunk continues to use, but for very different ends. Here, *Zhang* offers a great deal of help in its reworking of the cyberspace trope, as well as cyberpunk's highly conventionalized thematics of reified subjects and one-dimensional intersubjective relations.

Zhang, McHugh's first novel, was warmly received upon its publication in 1992. In addition to being nominated for both the Hugo and Nebula—Anglophone science fiction's most prestigious awards—it received *Locus Magazine*'s award for best new novel, the Lambda Literary Foundation's award for a novel exploring LGBT themes, and the James Tiptree, Jr., award for best science fiction/fantasy novel exploring issues of gender. McHugh's subsequent work has also incorporated counter-Orientalist deployments of Asian, especially Chinese, tropes and characters; in particular her novels *Half the Day Is Night* (1995), *Mission Child* (1998), and her novella "Protection" (1992).

What distinguishes *Zhang* from other novels about China or set in China, is that its world features a contiguous, interdependent U.S.-China space whose history—here we must distinguish the novel's historical speculations from its technological ones—contains a number of plausible elements. Zhang explains that in the opening decades of the 21st century, debt and deficits force the U.S. into a second depression. The shockwaves from the collapse have immediate ramifications in the global financial system, toppling the economies "of every first-world nation … except for Japan, which managed to keep from total bankruptcy but lost most of its markets." Also among the survivors were the Chinese, who had managed through protectionist currency policies "to get their economic shit together" (290–1). With the U.S. economy ground to a halt, its government finds itself unable to provide basic services. A radical but largely amateur Communist Party emerges to fill the gap, occupying portions of New York City. A civil war

[26] Bruce Sterling, *Islands in the Net* (1988). That the theme of dependency in post-cyberpunk necessitates female characters reveals the fraught gender politics of the genre—an agenda that, to be sure, Sterling himself helped to establish. Karen Cadora has written a trenchant critique of cyberpunk's heterosexual "hypermasculinity" in her essay, "Feminist Cyberpunk," *Science Fiction Studies* 22.3 (Nov., 1995): 357-72. On cyberpunk's debt to feminist SF of the '70s, see Nicola Nixon, "Cyberpunk: Preparing the Ground for Revolution or Keeping the Boys Satisfied?" *Science Fiction Studies* 19.2 (July, 1992): 219-235.

[27] For a full critique of Stephenson's novel, see Niu, "Techno-Orientalism, Nanotechnology, Posthumans, and Post-Posthumans in Neal Stephenson's and Linda Nagata's Science Fiction."

ensues, precipitating an American version of the Chinese Cultural Revolution sponsored by the Chinese called the "Great Cleansing Winds." By Zhang's time the U.S. has become the SUAS (Socialist Union of American States), and China has replaced the U.S. as global hegemon.

Much of this scenario rings with eerie prescience to our post-2008 ears. In it we find echoes of the global financial crisis, anxieties over U.S. vassalage to China, the gutting of the public sector, even the radical interventions of the Occupy movement. Rather than being purely estranging[28], the novel extrapolates from the geopolitics of the early-1990s, in which the U.S. economy was in recession and the economic miracle of China's "socialism with Chinese characteristics" was ascendant.[29] It is during this period, moreover, that the U.S. and China began laying the groundwork for interdependency: a conjuncture that economists Niall Ferguson and Moritz Schularick have christened "Chimerica," and describe as a "dual country" in which Chinese savings and overproduction underwrite U.S. debt and overconsumption.[30]

Because the novel makes the U.S.-China formation available as an object of realist representation, *Zhang* can be distinguished from other literary realist treatments of China in Anglophone fiction, which tend to take the form of? memoir (Anchee Min, Dai Sijie) or romantic representations of China and/or period detail (Pearl S. Buck, Amy Tan), rather than the geopolitics of the U.S.-China relationship. In fact, treatments of the U.S.-China relationship tend not to appear in literary realism, but in genres like alternate history (Arthur Vinton's *Looking*

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[28] Here, I refer to Darko Suvin's influential Brechtian definition of science fiction as a literature of "cognitive estrangement." Rather than distance its readers from reality, my argument is that *Zhang* enables its readers to understand themselves as subjects and objects of US-China history. See Darko Suvin, *The Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

[29] While "socialism with Chinese characteristics" was only intended to name the Chinese Communist Party's official economic policies, and thus a specifically Chinese set of circumstances, the prepositional phrase, "with Chinese characteristics," has been taken up by commentators to identify various ways in which Deng's policies, or more often its effects, have traveled both inside and outside of China's borders. [exact same words here used in main text of intro] As in recent discussions over "capitalism with Chinese characteristics," I adapt Deng's phrase to signal *conflicts* between the CCP's ostensible socialist ideology and its expansion of free market policies. Additionally, my use of the phrase is intended to signal a particular set of anxieties experienced by non-Chinese—Americans in particular, although by no means exclusively—over China's increasing geopolitical influence. These anxieties are shaped in part by a post-Cold War Manicheism imagined as a contest over the future of global capitalism waged between liberal democracy and Chinese authoritarianism. See Giovanni Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineages of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Verso, 2007); Joel Andreas, *Rise of the Red Engineers: The Cultural Revolution and the Origins of China's New Class* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Yasheng Huang, *Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics: Entrepreneurship and the State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Andreas' response to Huang, "A Shanghai Model?: On Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics," *New Left Review* 65 (Sept.-Oct., 2010); Huang's response to Andreas in the same issue, "The Politics of China's Path"; Kellee Tsai, *Capitalism without Democracy: The Private Sector in Contemporary China* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007); Daniel Vukovich, *China and Orientalism*. Slavoj Žižek has critiqued "capitalism with Chinese characteristics" in a number of venues, pitting it against liberal democratic forms. See Hamid Dabashi's critique of Žižek's Orientalism in "Slavoj Žižek and Harum Scarum," *AlJazeera.com* 11 November, 2011, http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/11/2011111011283172950.html.

[30] The term was coined by Ferguson and Schularick in their article "'Chimerica' and the Global Asset Market Boom," *International Finance* 10.3 (Winter 2007): 215-239. Ferguson later expands its historicization in "From Empire to Chimerica" in *The Ascent of Money* (New York: Penguin, 2008). Although Ferguson and Schularick began casting doubt on the sustainability of Chimerica almost as soon as they named it, the feeling that China's rise will come at the expense of US hegemony has been persistent and widespread since the opening years of the post-socialist period. See Ferguson and Schularick, "The End of Chimerica," *International Finance* 14.1 (Spring, 2011): 1-26.

Further Backward, John Hersey's *White Lotus*, Kim Stanley Robinson's *Years of Rice and Salt*), crime thrillers and mysteries (Qiu Xiaolong's Inspector Chen novels, Lisa See's Red Princess series), and science fiction (multiple works by Paolo Bacigalupi, John Brunner, Cory Doctorow, Ken Liu, Linda Nagata, Neal Stephenson, Joss Whedon). The melodramatic conventions of these genres, however, insofar as they subordinate social forces to the dramatization of subjective experience, limit realist, much less critical realist, representation. Even works that contain a cognitively plausible, even presentist, depiction of U.S.-China relations—e.g., Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl*, Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar*, Doctorow's *For the Win*, Nagata's *The Bohr Maker*—only feature that relation peripherally.

Zhang is exemplary of post-cyberpunk, both in regard to its diegesis and what we might call its methodology. Its aesthetic of interdependency is neither romantic nor melodramatic, but bounded by a naturalistic closure. This is captured aptly by the novel's epigraph, which is drawn from Albert Camus' novel *The Plague*: "A simple way to get to know about a town is to see how the people work, how they love and how they die." In Camus' novel, the totality of the town of Oran is made available through a multi-perspectival representations of typical subjects, whose interactions are mediated by the social institutions of work, love, and death. In the same way that *The Plague* offers a critical realism of the German occupation of France, *Zhang* offers a critical realism of post-socialist U.S.-China interdependency through a multi-perspectival "fix-up" narrative consisting of five interdependent first-person narratives. Moreover, as with Camus's focus on "the people," McHugh's use of the socialist realist device of typicality is a mediator of the novel's critical realism. According to Yoon Sun Lee, "The typical character, detail, or event stands for something larger and more real than its own particularity. The type is the opposite of a singular, isolated instance." As opposed to the false universality of the stereotype or the adventitious details of modernist aesthetics, the type *refuses* the universal, and is instead "achieved through a careful qualification, mediation, or placement that links it with other instances and gives it a social though not purely empirical generality."[31] Indeed, McHugh's analogy between emergent U.S. and Chinese neoliberalisms is predicated *not* on a facile universalism of subjective experience (they're just like us), but on an portrayal of objective, material interdependency (e.g., the "system") as well as structures of feeling that, as Lee says, are "not purely empirical."

I will demonstrate these claims by touching on the narratives of each main character (Zhang, Angel, Alexi, Martine, and San-Xiang), but my focus will ultimately land on Zhang's chapters, not only because they are the most fully realized, but also because they feature the novel's most highly developed aesthetics of interdependency. While the novel's concerns certainly range further than the three registers I will be tracking—desire, race, ideology—these are the central concerns of Zhang's narrative. They also reflect the different scales of social totality that the novel tries to account for: from the personal to the geopolitical. Zhang's narrative consists of two intertwined narratives: one about his professional development from a construction tech to a highly sought-after "organic engineer," and another personal narrative involving his racialization and sexual identity. Much of the analogical work that formalizes U.S.-China interdependency in the novel is performed by the interweaving of these two narratives.

[31] Lee, 420. On the modernist "detail" as a site for resistance to totalizing ideologies, see Erich Auerbach, "The Brown Stocking" in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953/1947).

Zhang's characters feel stifled in the wake of the massive geopolitical and economic upheavals of their recent past. In spite of their technologically advanced cyberpunk world—in which everyone has wrist-implants that allow direct interface with cyberspace, Mars is a new frontier, and it is possible to synch with the consciousness of another human being—they are overwhelmingly concerned with non-technological problems. In particular, each inhabits what Lauren Berlant calls an "aspirational normativity": a mode of neoliberal survival that attempts to make continual personal and social crisis "feel ordinary."[32] The inadequacy of SUAS state institutions, as well as the authoritarian proscriptions emanating from China's juridical and cultural hegemony, force Zhang and his cohorts into this stance, which is expressed several times in the novel in what we can take as its characters' slogan: "I don't believe in socialism but I don't believe in capitalism either. We are small, governments are large, we survive in the cracks" (6). This rejection of political ideology represents a pragmatism that cuts both ways. Surviving in the cracks means always being in danger of falling through them, and indeed not all of *Zhang*'s characters manage to survive.

Betsy Huang offers a markedly more optimistic reading of the novel. She argues that "It is within [the] cracks where Zhang learns to negotiate the state's reinforcement of the self-silencing of racially or sexually-different subjects and repairs his racial and queer 'melancholia.' […] Thus Zhang's engineering education … can be seen as an education in finding ways to 'speak' effectively and on one's own terms."[33] Similarly, Yupei Zhou argues that Zhang "transcends" ethnicity and gender by "[taking] over the means of negotiation and challenges government and ideology."[34] However, the emphasis on development and mastery in both of these readings appears to draw from cyberpunk's triumphal individualism, not post-cyberpunk's privileging of society over the individual, or its thematization of the typical. Moreover, a narrative of overcoming and "transcendence" posits the kind of binarism that McHugh goes to great lengths to undermine. McHugh describes the novel as one "where the hero couldn't change the inequalities of the system," and in which the "system [is] neither all bad nor all good."[35] As we will see, Zhang's narrative ends not with him being emboldened by a newly found ability to "speak," or a "transcendence" of any sort, but with the mortgaging of his identity to a social order that continues to threaten his survival. What he gains in return is the normativity of crisis-made-ordinary—not voice.

McHugh's characters are neoliberal subjects, but of a different sort than cyberpunk's freewheeling "console cowboys": the latter are ideal neoliberal entrepreneurial subjects who have mastered cyberspace, and whom Wendy Chun describes as "savvy navigators who can open closed spaces."[36] One aspect of neoliberal subjectivity that we see emphasized throughout the novel is that of inaction and non-movement, or, as Berlant puts it, "a life dedicated to moving

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[32] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 285.
[33] Huang reads *Zhang* as a conventional *Bildungsroman* in which its characters develop the ability to "speak out" against proscriptions on their sexual and racial identities in a bid for social integration. Betsy Pei Chih Huang, "The Language of Citizenship: The Future of the Minority Voice in Contemporary American Fiction" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Rochester, 2004), 233.
[34] Yupei Zhou, "Beyond Ethnicity and Gender: *China Mountain Zhang*'s Transcendent Techniques," *Extrapoloation* 42.4 (2001): 383.
[35] Maureen F. McHugh, "The Anti-SF Novel" (lecture, Philadelphia Science Fiction Society, Philadelphia, PA, September 12, 1997), http://my.en.com/~mcq/antisf.html.
[36] Chun, *Control and Freedom*, 178n16.

toward the good life's normative/utopian zone but actually stuck in what we might call survival time, the time of struggling, drowning, holding on to the ledge, treading water, *not-stopping*."[37]

The narrative of Angel, a professional kite racer, dramatizes the struggling stasis of aspirational normativity through the sheer danger of the sport of kite racing, as well as the precarious relationship between kite racers and the entertainment-industrial complex that rewards and exploits them. Rather than pilot a kite from the ground, kite racers are strapped into a cybernetic glider powered by their own metabolism. Kite racers are, moreover, totally commoditized. The primary pleasure of attending kite races is "synching" with the consciousness of a racer and experiencing their sensations from a first-person perspective. A racer's death or near-death increases his or her ratings: "people who watch us fly are waiting to see us die" (53). Sponsorships and compensation are determined by ratings: the number of people synched in to a particular racer's consciousness over a season. "If [my] numbers get high enough," Angel hopes to herself, "Citinet will sponsor me again" (49).

The minute details of the internal operations of the kite racing industry are not incidental features of Angel's narrative. They reflect McHugh's conviction that "everyday life is important" in fiction, which manifests in the novel as a bureaucratic trope that provides one of the registers in which the material dimension of the U.S.-China analogy operates.[38] This trope aligns with what Shannon Jackson calls an "infrastructural aesthetic," which, she explains, responds to the individuating and privatizing forces of neoliberalism that obscure lines of dependency between institutions, communities, and individuals.[39] The idea of an infrastructural aesthetic is helpful to the present analysis because it is very close (even orthographically) to what I mean by the objective dimension of *Zhang*'s aesthetic of interdependency. Insofar as the U.S.-China relationship has been one of the primary drivers of global neoliberalization, it is perhaps no surprise that infrastructural detail plays an important role in the world-building of novels like Chang-rae Lee's *On Such a Full Sea*, which projects a U.S.-China future in which healthcare regimes structure society.[40] In *Zhang*, the social relations that infrastructural aesthetics bring into view are formalized in its densely imbricated passages, such as McHugh's description of the three-dimensional spectacle of kite races:

> Then they are starting to form up; eighteen kites, two abreast, I am six back, on the outside. I drop into place, and we do a slow circle of the course… The course goes from Washington Square Park to Union Square and back, following The Swath… We come back over Washington Square Park for the second time and the kites begin to pick up speed. We glide past the floater marking the start and already I'm climbing, trying to

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[37] Berlant, 279.

[38] Pat Stansberry, "Interview: Maureen F. McHugh," *Strange Horizons*, September 9, 2002, http://www.strangehorizons.com/2002/20020909/mchugh.shtml.

[39] Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

[40] See my review of Lee's novel, "Future Islands," *The New Inquiry*, May 19, 2014, http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/future-islands/. Lee spends a significant amount of space in his novel on what have come to be called "healthcare narratives" about the difficult tradeoffs between cost and care. These narratives often explain in great detail the terms of healthcare policies, but also have the effect of demystifying the opacity of institutions by revealing how institutions operate via individual choices. The infrastructural trope therefore reveals institutions as horizontal nodes in two-way vectors of interdependency, rather than as vertical structures in which the vector of dependency is one-way. The infrastructural trope also plays an important role in the texts that Berlant uses to elaborate her description of "cruel optimism," such as Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne's films *La Promesse* (1996) and *Rosetta* (1999), and William Gibson's novel *Pattern Recognition* (2003).

> get altitude. Ten kites are in front of me and I sideslip slightly inside, cutting off Medicine, flying to my left. She's forced to go underneath me, ends up flying *xialou*, my shadow underneath except that my kite is black silk and hers is a Navajo pattern in red, black, white and blue… Everyone is diving through the dark, ahead of me I sense the rookie, she is in my arc… I feel her lose it for a second, brake, spill air, started and trying to avoid a collision that would have happened before she had time to react. The wind is so cold across my wings. I'm taking great gulps of air. My shoulder is aching. (48–50)

"The Swath" refers to "the undergrowth and debris of the 2059 riots," which adds an important historical dimension to an otherwise ahistorical spectacle. Angel and her fellow kite fliers thus depict something like Walter Benjamin's Angel of History, except that, rather than retreat in horror from the accumulating wreckage of history, they are forced to cycle back to it repeatedly.[41] This image conflates the cyclicality of Angel's "survival time" with the *cul-de-sac* of the "end of history" rhetoric that so often characterizes the post-socialist era. It might be more accurate then to call kite racing a four-dimensional spectacle. The play-by-play style of Angel's narration, moreover, bespeaks a consciousness—Angel's *and* McHugh's—that aspires to totality. Under threat of mortal injury and death, each flier must be constantly aware of all the others' movements, especially the cascading network of reactions instigated by each movement. In a word, they must be constantly aware of their positions as both subjects and objects in the totality of the race. Realism in a kite race is critical.

We learn a lot about the novel's world through how its characters die. Angel's story opens with the funeral of a legendary kite racer, Random Chavez. Among kite racers, the threat of death and its actual pervasiveness ("Fox, Malachite, Hot Rocks and Saffron were dead, and Watchmaker never flew again," 54) have a binding effect on the community. A less dialectical treatment might have exploited the danger of kite racing as mere spectacle (the cyberpunk film *Tron*[42], for instance, features deadly bike races in which human lives are treated like the disposable lives in a video game), but in *Zhang* it anchors the community to an ongoing historical process. This is underscored by the name of the racers' favorite bar, "Commemorative." Random's name, moreover, suggests that his legendary status has something to do not only with his mastery of kite racing, but his unique ability to subvert its conventions in unexpected—indeed, random—ways. We can thus imagine his movements in a kite race as what Jackson calls the "messy and inconsistent" "movement[s] between recognition and disavowal, foreground and background" distinctive to infrastructural aesthetics, and, I would add, that attend an aesthetics of interdependency.[43] He is the adventitious detail that briefly rises above the kite racing culture industry, but, in the fullness of time, is tragically drawn back into it. Thus, when Angel's narrative ends on the optimistic note of her newfound success, we know that tragedy will eventually come around for her as well.

Aspirational normativity infuses the narratives of the novel's other main characters. Martine, who manages a homestead on the Martian frontier, arranges a marriage of convenience with Alexi, a recent arrival from Earth who is forced into precarious employment and frequent relocation after the U.S.'s socialist revolution. While Martine gains no material benefit from the marriage, it allows Alexi to exempt himself from a compulsory work order that would relocate

[41] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), 257.
[42] Steven Lisberger, dir., *Tron*, 1982.
[43] Jackson, 6.

him to the south of the planet for a water reclamation project, and it affords Alexi's young daughter Theresa a stable home for the first time in her hitherto itinerant life. San-Xiang, the daughter of Zhang's construction foreman, suffers from a bone defect that disfigures her face. After an operation, she is normatively attractive for the first time in her life and immediately begins drawing attention from men. Soon thereafter, she is brutally raped. Rather than report the crime, she represses it for fear of offending her father's Confucian notions of propriety, and of jeopardizing her newly found normativity: "If nobody knows it's as if it didn't happen" (261). Her only respite from the trauma, the only way she can possibly make it "feel ordinary," is the mind-numbing regularity of a job she hates: "I keep meaning to look for a new job… On Friday, he calls. I am sitting there working… I cut him off. Then I shunt my calls to Celia. As an excuse I go to the bathroom. I sit there and feel sick but after awhile I feel okay…. So I go back to work" (260–1).

Meanwhile, Zhang's greatest ambition is to make next month's rent. When we first meet him, he is a listless twenty-something who is generally without purpose. He spends his off-hours drinking beer alone at home, hanging out with friends, frequenting bars, and attending kite races. His lack of desire and motivation, McHugh explains, is a reflection of her own at the time.[44] After he loses his job he lazily falls back onto the infrastructure of the SUAS welfare state:

> When one has no job one cannot afford the decadent luxury of paying one's landlord, and one must accept government housing or stay with friends or family. I have been staying with Peter for almost six months. Soon I'll have to apply for government housing, I can't keep living with Peter forever. Living in Virginia won't be so bad, it is only ninety minutes to Journal Square Station in New Jersey, lots of people do it every day. If one is unemployed, the train is free at off-peak hours.
>
> IDEX: 415-64-4557-zs816. Trade designation: Construction Tech. Job Index: Comex Constr., 65997. Comex Constr. wants administrative experience I don't have, but I have three years experience in construction. In school, I wanted to be an Engineering Tech and my math scores were good, but there were no openings that year. I have an Assoc. Certificate instead of the full Bach. Sci.
>
> I should study on the side, teach myself, take the exam. I should. Maybe when I get a job, have a place of my own again, I'll study in the evening after I get home from work, spend less time going out, waste less time and money. I've said it before, every time I was without a job. (62)

Cyberspace needs electricians, and, indeed, this employment database is likely where they find their jobs. This passage, aside from being paradigmatic of post-cyberpunk, offers a powerful depiction of the psychology of aspirational normativity. When trying to survive in the cracks and not fall completely through them, one must enter relations of dependency. One must also make demands upon those relations if there is to be any hope of creating infrastructure—a friend's couch, say—where it does not exist. But this mode of survival is also a constant state of dangling from a ledge. It gets tiring, and while one tries to imagine something better, the "should" that Zhang repeats to himself exerts both an upward and a downward force.

Zhang's lack of job opportunities in New York City eventually forces his migration to Nanjing, China, where he enrolls in a university to train in the lucrative field of "organic

[44] Interview with McHugh.

engineering." This plot point, McHugh explains, was inspired by her own quitting of New York City for China in order to escape a seemingly endless cycle of precarious employment[45], and the deep recession that hit the city in the late-1980s.[46] A recent graduate of New York University's master's program in English (the predecessor of its MFA program), McHugh was thrust into an uncertain and shrinking world of immaterial labor. When McHugh stumbled upon the prospect of spending a year teaching in China, it seemed like the perfect opportunity to think long and hard about what she desired from life.[47]

While teaching in the northern Chinese city of Shijiazhuang between 1987 and 1988, McHugh witnessed the early days of China's urban reform.[48] She aptly dubs Shijiazhuang "the Toledo of China," referring to its rapid modernization and expansion.[49] The city's explosive growth began at the turn of the 20th century, when it became a railroad hub key to the commerce of northern China. Although it was still somewhat of a backwater in the late-1980s, it was nonetheless in the midst of neoliberal upheavals, including the privatization of state-run enterprises and the absorption of an enormous migrant population arriving in search of jobs connected to reform-era industrialization. That influx would soon triple the city's population. Half of *Zhang* was written during McHugh's year there, and the other upon her return to the U.S..[50] As an English language teacher at Shijiazhuang Teacher's College, McHugh's professional role was emblematic of China's reform-era ethos.[51] Even if Shijiazhuang would not be designated an official development zone until 1991, the economic, emotional, and political implications of reform were a central concern of her students.[52]

The crisis of desire that besets McHugh and her students registers the subjective experience and material circumstances of U.S. neoliberalism on one hand, and Chinese neoliberalism on the other. McHugh explains that her students, mostly migrants from rural areas, "were desperate to make the transition to urban." This desperation, however, was met with uncertainty over abandoning political for economic citizenship:

> They were uncomfortable with landlords, they were uncomfortable with capitalists, they were uncomfortable with factories, they were uncomfortable with rich [sic], but they were all fascinated by it… I don't think they knew how to decide what they wanted, because they had no clue what was going to be available.[53]

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[45] Interview with McHugh.
[46] David Brauer and Mark Flaherty, "The New York City Recession," *Federal Reserve Bank of New York Quarterly Review* (Spring 1992): 66–71.
[47] Interview with McHugh.
[48] Ibid.
[49] McHugh, "China," personal website, http://my.en.com/~mcq/china.html.
[50] Interview with McHugh.
[51] For an early assessment on the connection between English language training and China's open door policies, see Wang Keqiang, "Teaching English as a Foreign Language in China," *Teaching English as a Second Language Canada Journal* 1 (Nov., 1986): 153–60. Wang writes: "Owing to the change in the fundamental policies, English has never been so important as it is today. The government's 'Four modernizations program' and 'open-door policy' have made the Chinese people, of all ages and occupations, cognizant of the importance of learning English. Currently, the desire to learn English is at a fever-pitch throughout China," 155. A more recent assessment is offered by Evan Osnos' profile of celebrity teacher Li Yang and his "Crazy English" lessons, which are given to sold-out stadiums full of students: "Crazy English," *The New Yorker*, April 28, 2008.
[52] Interview with McHugh.
[53] Ibid.

McHugh's idiosyncratic use of the word "rich" hearkens back to the slogan often attributed to Deng Xiaoping: "Let some get rich first." Neoliberal survival for McHugh's students was a matter of translating radical uncertainty over "what they wanted" into clear expressions of desires and life plans. Anthropological studies of China's reform era have been similarly concerned with the production of new desires: a discourse Lisa Rofel calls "Desiring China." Rofel explains that the 1990s saw the emergence of a "wide range of desires" among Chinese that were part and parcel of the national project of re-orienting citizenship to global capitalism.[54] This required the transformation of political desire that, under Mao Zedong, was the *sine qua non* of citizenship: "in post-Mao China," Rofel writes, "to become a 'desiring subject' means a rejection of those passions and the political interpretation of moving history forward that subtended them. Other material, sexual, and affective longings have replaced those sentiments, not necessarily as something Chinese people have felt for the first time but as that which is seen at the heart of creating a new kind of world..."[55] Similarly, Pun Ngai's study of *dagongmei*—female migrant laborers from rural China whose labor in manufacturing centers like Shenzhen has been one of the primary motors of China's economic success, and indeed of U.S.-China interdependency—leads her to observe: "The desire to be dagongmei, shown by the great flux of mobility to the urban industrial zones, traces the politics of capitalist production in manipulating social lack and generating the desire of Chinese rural workers to fill the void."[56] This is the process that McHugh's students find themselves swept up in, and that led them to McHugh for training in English as well as a kind of cosmopolitanism.

This re-orientation, moreover, has proceeded via a concerted program of ethnicization and racialization. Rofel observes that in reform-era China's "official, intellectual, and popular discourses, [the] desiring subject is portrayed as a new human being who will help to usher in a new era in China."[57] This discourse of universal human being is, in fact, a contemporary adaptation of China's historical self-understanding as the "Middle Kingdom," refracted through the post-Mao revival of Confucian humanism's distinction between Chinese humans and nomadic, barbarian non-humans.[58] The resultant Han-centrism has produced juridical and cultural regimes of race and ethnic discipline that code certain groups (e.g., minorities like

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[54] Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), 118.

[55] Ibid, 22. Rofel's model of desire is inspired by two influential frameworks: Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's model that conflates "flows" of desire with capital "flows," and Michel Foucault's reading of desire as a formation of power/knowledge. While her model retains much from Deleuze and Guattari's "desiring-machines"—subjects through which desire operates via its own essential properties and is unleashed by the "capitalist machine"—she argues that an examination of the Chinese Communist Party's "historically and culturally specific *assignment*" of desire to create "a new cosmopolitan human nature" requires Foucault's anti-essentialist, genealogical methodology, 198, 212–14n43.

[56] Pun Ngai, *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005), 14.

[57] As David Eng, Teemu Ruskola, and Shuang Shen are quick to remind us in the introduction to their *Social Text* special issue on "China and the Human," "Neither the human nor China is as self-evident a concept as it might initially seem… In the project of universalizing European liberal humanism—whether in the form of political rights and citizenship, capitalism and the free market, or individual reason and subjectivity—China constitutes one important limit," "Introduction: China and the Human," special issue, "China and the Human, part 1," *Social Text* 29.4 (Winter 2012): 4. The essays in "China and the Human's" two special issues explore the connections and conflicts between Chinese and Enlightenment doctrines and enforcements of humanism over a broad range of history. See also Eric Hayot, *The Hypothetical Mandarin: Sympathy, Modernity, and Chinese Pain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[58] Maoism violently overturned Confucian humanism in favor of the communist category of "the people."

Uighurs and Tibetans) as "exceptions to neoliberalism," to use Aihwa Ong's phrase—that is, "Citizens who are deemed too complacent or lacking in neoliberal potential [and therefore] treated as less-worthy subjects. Low-skilled citizens and migrants become exceptions to neoliberal mechanisms and are constructed as excludable populations in transit, shuttled in and out of zones of growth."[59] At the same time, "exceptions to neoliberalism" also include some of the greatest beneficiaries of neoliberalism: "flexible," "adaptable" citizens who profit from transnational and intra-national mobility and thereby transcend the constraints of state and local sovereignty.[60]

Accordingly, Zhang's status as an exception in both senses is secured by processes of racialization that are both material and personal. In the novel, class and ethnic distinctions are literalized as racialized distinctions between Chinese citizens and non-Chinese citizens, which include peripherally Chinese characters like Zhang (who is half-Chinese), as well as *huaqiao* ("overseas Chinese"). Zhang's construction supervisor, Qian, is a Chinese citizen who has been exiled to the SUAS most likely for political reasons: "He is a Chinese citizen," Zhang observes, "and if the best he can do is a job as a construction foreman, he's in disgrace" (4). Qian's daughter, San-Xiang, is born with a bone abnormality that Zhang cruelly describes in terms reminiscent of 19th century phrenology: "She is a flat-faced southern-looking Chinese girl of twenty or twenty-two. She has a little square face like a monkey and small eyes even by Chinese standards" (12). San-Xiang later notes that her appearance could have been "fixed … if my father hadn't spent my face money trying to make *quanxi*[61], connections, so that we could get back to China" (236). Blue-collar *huaqiao*, who are inevitably political exiles, thus appear doomed to a kind of racial degeneracy. As we know, San-Xiang eventually does pay to have her face "fixed," and so rescues herself from racial abjection with the help of the market economy and biotechnology. Similarly, Zhang's racial status is a matter of economic calculation. His Chinese father and Latina mother had his genes modified *in utero* so he can pass as "Chinese standard," and thus enjoy eligibility for the privileges of dominant racial identity in an uncertain, post-revolutionary future.[62]

These narratives demonstrate the novel's concern with a transnational process of what Michael Omi and Howard Winant call "racial formation," which they define as "the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed."[63] In *Zhang*, race is determined by the rapidly shifting dynamics of interpersonal relations and macroeconomics. To paraphrase Ong, being racially Chinese in this novel is not finally a matter of biology, but to always be in danger of falling on the wrong side of the neoliberal exception.

Zhang's narrative of professional development—his listless path from construction tech, to unemployed couch-surfer, to organic engineer—proceeds via a number of analogies between U.S. and Chinese neoliberalism, and thus depicts McHugh's vision of what subject formation

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[59] Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006), 16.
[60] For a full account of "flexible" citizenship and neoliberalism in the Chinese context, see Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999).
[61] McHugh here means *guanxi*, which translates literally to "relationship," but in common usage means something closer to "influence," implying *quid pro quo*.
[62] Ibid, 2.
[63] Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 55.

within the socioeconomic space of U.S.-China interdependency might look like: namely, as a racialized mode of "aspirational normativity." A conflict between Zhang's personal and professional narratives runs throughout his chapters in the novel, but it is eventually resolved in a scene on Hainan Island, which, Zhang explains, "was one of [China's] original special economic zones" (231).[64] Here Zhang refers to the first group of coastal "Special Economic Zones" defined by the Communist Party in 1980 as spaces of globalization. These zones are the main interfaces between Western capitalism and China's control economy, and have thus become the main drivers of China's economic rise.[65] The premise of the Hainan scene is that Zhang has been assigned the design of a beach house on the island for his final project at Wuxi Engineering in Nanjing, where he has taken up an internship after completing his degree in organic engineering. The scene, which takes place in the virtual reality of a "system," not only stages his mastery of organic engineering, it is also the scene in which he comes to terms with a number of hitherto limiting contexts in his personal life. They include his crisis of desire, vexed racial identity, and constrained sexuality, as well as an authoritarianism that permeates all of them. Each of these contexts creates blocks and limits to the development of Zhang's consciousness as both a subject and object of the historical process.[66] The novel demonstrates that these blocks and limits—the forces that are constantly dragging him back into the "cracks"—are not simply naturalized features of society, but extensions of the authoritarianism projected by China and, indeed, condoned by the survival strategies of aspirational normativity. Upon completing the Hainan assignment, these blocks and limits seem to disappear, but the transcendence they offer is illusory.

The denouement of Zhang's conflicting narratives plays an important role in the novel's analogizing of U.S. and Chinese neoliberalisms, as well as its depiction of U.S.-China interdependency. At the point in the novel when this denouement occurs, Zhang's professional development centers on his training in organic engineering systems, and his personal life centers on his romantic relationship with his tutor, Haitao. While the "system" is for the most part never much more than a passive interface between one's wrist-implants and basic tools like power drills, payphones, and building security systems, it is also the conduit for various degrees of authoritarian control and surveillance. We have already seen some of this in the scene where Zhang marches down to the "systems department" to be "attuned." A more *1984*-like resonance

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[64] To be sure, neither Hong Kong nor Taiwan was ever designated as a SEZ.

[65] Introducing the function of SEZs in China's reforms, Premier Zhao Ziyang wrote in 1981: "by linking our country with the world market, expanding foreign trade, importing advanced technology, utilizing capital, and entering into different forms of international economic and technological cooperation, we can enhance our capacity for self-reliant action," *Beijing Review* (21 December, 1981): 23. Ong theorizes SEZs as paradigmatic spaces of neoliberal governmentality because their openness to global market forces necessitates a "graduated sovereignty" in which market forces determine features of institutions like citizenship and the law, which are typically the sole domain of the state. In the case of US-China relations within SEZs like Hainan, this happens not so much between the two states as between US multinational corporations and Chinese state institutions. Ong writes: "I thus use the term graduated sovereignty to refer to the effects of a flexible management of sovereignty, as governments adjust political space to the dictates of global capital, giving corporations an indirect power over the political conditions of citizens in zones that are differently articulated to global production and financial circuits," *Neoliberalism as Exception*, 78.

[66] The phrase "blocks and limits" is used by Fredric Jameson in a defense of Lukács' notion of totality: "The conception of 'conditions of possibility' then has the advantage of stressing, not the content of scientific thought, but its prerequisites, its preparatory requirements, that without which it cannot properly develop. It is a conception which includes the diagnosis of blocks and limits to knowledge (reification as what suppresses the ability to grasp totalities) as well as the enumeration of positive new features (the capacity to think in terms of process)," "History and Class Consciousness as an Unfinished Project" in *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2009), 213.

is felt when Zhang's "mood" is adjusted by the "system" during a visit to the hospital (132). The thematics of authoritarianism extend beyond Zhang's professional utilization of the system to his personal life. He and his gay friends live under the constant threat of a hegemonic Chinese moral regime that punishes homosexuality with "Reform Through Labor" or "a bullet in the back of the head" (157, 17). The thematization of these variously "soft" and "hard" authoritarianisms[67] appears at one level to register the contradictory promulgation of China's "market socialism," as well as the neoconservative moralism motivating anti-welfare neoliberal projects during the Regan and Bush administrations, and culminating in Clinton's "workfare" programs. It also registers two post-socialist ideological contests: one between authoritarianism and liberal democracy, and the other between an ascendant "Asian model" of state capitalism and a "Washington Consensus" of anti-state, free market policies. In the post-socialist period, whenever one of these contests alights on American ears, the other sounds as well. It is thus in the thematization of authoritarianism that the U.S.-China relationship is most concentrated in the novel. Importantly, the novel's evocation of these two contests does not seem intended to produce a winner or loser. Rather, just as Zhang's "attunement" is primarily a practical matter, the thematization of authoritarianism indicates a note of pragmatism. The "system," far from being a mere caricature of the Chinese Communist Party's authoritarianism, is an infrastructural synecdoche for the U.S.-China conjuncture.

The *novum*[68] of organic engineering brings these thematics to bear through the aspiration towards totality expressed in the novel's epigraph.[69] Organic engineers are highly trained and remunerated specialists who practice a mental and technical discipline in which a virtual reality "system" augments its user's visualization and memory capabilities. The style of architectural design made possible by this interface seeks to coordinate the minute aspects of subjective experience with the total design of a building:

> Normally because of air-flow, room size, room adjacency, exposure and window size, different rooms have different temperatures. The system for Wuxi Complex monitors temperature and humidity. But for an organic system, temperature is relative. My hands and feet are cooler than my head and chest. If I am sitting, I will find the room colder than if I am up and moving around… Many buildings adjust room temperatures. The Wuxi Complex system also monitors the people jacked into it… People, in fact, become nerve endings for the system. And the rooms are ingeniously structured so as to transfer heat from windows to darker areas, to increase the amount of outside light that comes in. It is part of the reason that the place is such a maze. (217)

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[67] Francis Fukuyama offers the most influential recent consideration of "soft" authoritarianism as an alternative to Western liberal democracy in "Asia's Soft-Authoritarian Alternative," *New Perspectives Quarterly* 9.2 (Spring, 1992): 60-61. In recent political science discourse, the paradigmatic example of "soft" authoritarianism is Singapore. Moisés Naím writes: "Under [former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's] leadership, an ever watchful state also regimented almost every aspect of Singaporean life and snuffed out sparks of political dissent, making Singapore the poster child for 'soft' authoritarianism. The rewards: a per capita gross domestic product (GDP) and living standards with few rivals in Asia, let alone the rest of the world, and a shimmering reputation for efficiency, enterprise, and economic openness." Naím, "The FP Interview: Singapore's Big Gamble," *Foreign Policy* 130 (May–June, 2002): 32.

[68] Darko Suvin uses this term to refer to the element of the new distinctive to science fiction. Suvin, 61.

[69] "[T]he plenitude of the totality," Lukács writes, "does not need to be consciously integrated into the motives and objects of action. What is crucial is that there be an aspiration towards totality," in "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Boston: MIT Press, 1972/1923), 198.

This is a kind of design in which "everything depends on everything else."[70] A crucial feature of organic engineering is that even the largest and most intricate buildings are produced by individuals. "Wuxi Engineering Complex wasn't detailed by a team," Zhang's trainer explains to him, "it was detailed by one woman, using, of course, feedback from the departments that would be using the building… A team would not have constructed the building as a unit, but as a series of connected, but compromised and adjusted, ideas" (218). The total reach of authoritarianism is evidenced by an uncompromised form. Read as a metaphor for writing fiction and world-building, organic engineering not only suggests continuities between authorship, authority, and authoritarianism, it also suggests a theory of characterization. As "nerve endings for the system," characters are both subjects and objects of the organically engineered (or authored) totality. The Hainan scene, as we will see in a moment, suggests that a character is fully realized once s/he becomes conscious of his/her function in the system; accordingly, the scene offers a representation of this elevation of consciousness. The ending of the novel, however, leaves open the question of whether this consciousness in Zhang is permanent, or whether it ever happened at all.

Along these lines, organic engineering is depicted as a quasi-spiritual endeavor that requires capitulation to the system's all-pervasive authority. At one point, Zhang's supervisor chides him: "You aren't using the system," she says, meaning that Zhang's mistakes are the result of his refusal to abandon himself to the system. "[Y]ou're staying in your own head. Words don't really explain what you should be doing, you just have to do it, then you'll know. *Dao kedao, feichang dao*… The way that can be spoken is not the way" (220). When Zhang finally learns to cooperate with the system, he does so by reconciling his egoic "Western mindset" with an anti-egoic Daoist mindset. While the novel certainly draws from Orientalist stereotypes of the East as a space of spiritual transcendence, these tropes also resonate strongly with the thematics of "soft" authoritarianism.[71] Daoism can thus be read as a figure for indifferent authoritarianism that represents the softest possible version of Chinese hegemony.

There is something rather misleading, then, about Zhang's feeling of "wholeness" after he has finally managed to work with the organic engineering system:

> I tap in … I do not think of anything for a moment, I have to think of something to scribble. The beach house is as good as anything else… It's not very Chinese, more like the glass and steel tradition of New York. Something long and low, and I know how it should flow. A great room, a kitchen divided by very little wall, slightly higher than the long great room with its window looking over the ocean—

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[70] Jameson, "The Case for Georg Lukács," in *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 188. Martin Jay offers an indispensible intellectual history of the concept of totality in Western Marxism in *Marxism and Totality: the Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley: U. California Press, 1984).

[71] For a critique of McHugh's Orientalist deployment of Daoist tropes, see Betsy Huang, "Premodern Orientalist Science Fictions," *MELUS* 33.4 (Winter, 2008). While Huang's point that "McHugh instrumentalizes Daoist thought as a means of spiritual readjustment or revitalization for the West" is certainly fair, it does assume a far more stable East-West binary than actually appears in the novel. Thinking the East-West relation as one of interdependency rather than rivalry, as I am proposing in this chapter, allows us to read McHugh's treatment of Daoism here as an attempt at using Daoism as a mode rather than object of analysis. Mei Zhang argues that an overconcern with Daoism's reification has the effect of reproducing "precisely [Daoism's] exclusion from European intellectual genealogy that has turned Daoist thinking into an object of analysis rather than analysis in its own right," "Worlding Oneness: Daoism, Heidegger, and Possibilities for Treating the Human," in special issue, "China and the Human, part 1," *Social Text* 29.4 (Winter 2012): 110.

> And I reach… I let myself be swallowed by the emptiness and instead I expand, the system becomes my own memory… I am myself, myself, but able to think and have the thing I think in my mind without holding it, without concentrating, because I am using the system to concentrate for me… To modify the house I only have to think it and it is so, it hangs there. I am outside it, seeing the long portion of the house that is the kitchen and great room, off the kitchen the steps down to the beach... The bedrooms are beyond the kitchen, higher to take advantage of the uneven terrain (also in memory) and I think that this Western building needs a tile roof. Blue Chinese tile. Soften the variation in the roof height and the roof becomes a wave.
>
> I stop, and look around the room… And even sitting there, the shell of my beach house just hanging there, I can feel that I am crying. Because I have done it, I have done it.
>
> I feel whole, and now it is time to go home. (234–5)

Zhang's urgent desire to surmount the blocks and limits to his self-realization is sublimated into an aesthetic integration of the landscape surrounding the beach house ("the uneven terrain") with the design's interior open floor-plan, which features yet another integration of the private, domestic space of the kitchen and the public space of the great room, the two "divided by very little wall." In this scene, Zhang finally constructs an organic totality through an active passivity, and in the same gesture appears to fulfill the principle of characterization entailed by the aesthetics of interdependency: consciousness of himself within the broader totality of U.S.-China space, for which Hainan serves as a metonymy.

Zhang's capitulation to the cognitive demands of the organic engineering system is at the same time a capitulation to the authoritarian directives guiding his identity. It is thus the culmination of a process of what we might call "attunement" that began with his romantic relationship with his tutor Haitao. The two meet shortly after Zhang begins classes at Nanjing University, and their mutual attraction is immediate. During their first tutoring session, their coded interactions indicate a symmetrical continuity between Chinese and American gay identities. After Haitao offers Zhang "a little left-handed help," Zhang's "heart starts to hammer. It is all code… Or perhaps it's an accident, he just used the phrase, unaware that it can have any other meaning. Back home [in Brooklyn], straights are right-handed, we are left. Not really, of course, just slang" (141). In addition to being physically attracted to Haitao, Zhang is also impressed by the general ease with which he comports himself, an ease indicated primarily through Haitao's attire: "He is polished, his clothes casual and, to my eye, expensive. I think to myself I will remember that open shirt, the brushed gray tights, the calf-high boots. Look for something like that. I wonder what he thinks of me in my American clothes, looking *huaqiao*…" (137). Immediately after this first meeting, Zhang goes out to purchase a stack of men's fashion magazines. When he flirts with Haitao, he is strikingly materialistic: "Go shopping with me. Show this poor confused foreigner what clothes to buy that will make him look less like he comes from a second-rate country" (162). While they are dating, Zhang's grades improve and Haitao introduces him to a cosmopolitan set of friends and a vibrant underground gay scene.

Zhang's nervousness over appearing parochial—"looking *huaqiao*"—reveals how his attraction to Haitao is overdetermined by the forces of authoritarianism that compel him to camouflage himself in the first place, as well as the consumerist desires that have begun emerging because of his gainful employment. If Haitao enables Zhang to imagine, for the first

time, a future beyond normativity, then this ideation is facilitated by an embrace of consumerism promulgated by discourses of "Desiring China." Zhang's strategy of transcending his class and racial identity as *huaqiao* by purchasing new clothes reflects McHugh's view of the role that consumerist fashion and sexuality played in her students' turn away from Maoism:

> I was there the day that Chinese girls started wearing lipstick. Things would sweep and I would never get the memo… When I first got there [to China], middle-aged people and older wore Mao suits. By the time I left, it was very rare. I was there a year. Like I say, one day, girls wore lipstick. In the year I was there, I saw so much change that it must have been like the sixties... I don't think they knew how far they were going to go.[72]

For McHugh, the suddenness of her students' adoption of Western fashions was an indication of their uncertainty as well as their excitement over newly available and condoned commodities like lipstick. Moreover, the connection between sexual desire and neoliberal desire is found in the sexual connotations of the phrase "how far they were going to go." If a romantic future with Haitao is a both a sexual and neoliberal fulfillment, then Haitao in fact enables what Berlant calls a "cruel optimism": "A relation [that] exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing."[73] The way out of the cracks sometimes leads one deeper into them.

Haitao himself confirms the cruelty of this illusory future. After escaping a police raid on an underground gay club, Zhang and Haitao spend a night cowering on the catwalk of an abandoned factory. The experience proves so traumatic for Haitao, who earlier discovers that he is under official investigation for homosexuality, that he jumps from his high-rise apartment the next day. Despite the relative racial and social safety that Haitao enjoys, his homosexuality means that he is never exempt from aspirational normativity. His literal fall through the cracks suggests a conflation of gay and neoliberal subjectivity that Zhang never directly confronts. Instead, Zhang represses Haitao's death and, indeed, his own sexuality. For a year after Haitao's death, Zhang is completely celibate and chooses to immerse himself in his studies. As a result, he becomes "this amazing creature, the envy of my classmates," but his feelings, indeed love, for Haitao have disappeared entirely (275). Zhang's only mention of Haitao after his suicide suggests the impersonal form of traumatic detachment: "Once I had a tutor, and that helped my grades. Then my tutor died and, oddly enough, that helped my grades. I worked very hard" (220).

In the Hainan scene, Zhang's capitulation to the system forces him to come to terms not only with Haitao's death, but also what Haitao's life meant to him: that is, the overdetermined array of desires constituting his mounting normativity. Giving in to the system, allowing it to "become" his mental space, initiates a process that resolves Zhang's "aspirational normativity" as an actual normativity, grounded in his professional/economic status as an organic engineer. As the site of the denouement of the conflict between Zhang's personal and professional narratives, this scene also stages the analogy of the novel's aesthetics of interdependency and McHugh's vision of U.S.-China interdependency. All of this is made even more resonant by setting this scene in a Special Economic Zone. The scene's analogical tangle, and its function of coordinating subject and object, is reflected in Hainan's characterization as a kind of subduction zone of various modes of production. Hainan, Zhang explains, "is still a free-market zone, a place of virulent capitalism, meant to fuel the socialist system. The beach house is for one of the

[72] Interview with McHugh.
[73] Berlant, 1.

old mercantile families of Hainandao, built by the clan corporation" (231). This is a *cul-de-sac* of history in which feudalism swirls about with neoliberal globalization. And yet what we feel in Zhang's capitulation to the system is a sign of his American-ness. The degree to which his capitulation is actually an accommodation—"I *let* myself be swallowed by the emptiness"—takes the measure of his self-conception as a liberal democratic citizen who is free to make such a choice. He relinquishes these rights so that he might have a new subjectivity returned to him, this time as a "whole" person whose wholeness is depicted by an aesthetic fusion. Zhang combines the "glass and steel tradition of New York" with the blue Chinese roof tile, thus forging a Chinese-American form that is the emblem of his new subjectivity. Haitao, whose name (海濤) translates to "ocean wave," is resurrected as the "wave" of the roof. If Zhang cannot be with Haitao in life, then they can be together in form—a gesture that, while perhaps romantic, still suffers from abstraction. This is underscored by the fact that this scene is not in fact set on Hainan, but a *virtual* Hainan projected by Zhang in conjunction with the organic engineering system. Moreover, Zhang's wholeness is registered as a "feeling" that descends after an outpouring of tears. If his elevated consciousness emerges at the intersection of "attunement" and an act of will, it is never clear which vector has prevailed.

Despite his overwhelming aesthetic achievement, the material outcome of this scene is markedly underwhelming. Even as a certified "organic engineer," Zhang's material circumstances back home in Brooklyn are barely an improvement over his previous life there as a slacker. The lucrative positions, it seems, are all in far-flung locations. The only jobs available to him locally are project-based, so he takes up precarious labor as a freelancer. On top of all this, he still has to conceal his sexuality from authorities. His newly achieved normativity therefore appears to be what Berlant describes as a "normativity where there is no foundation for the expectation of it beyond a lasting fantasy [and that can] be read as a form of bargaining with what is overwhelming about the present, a bargaining against the fall between the cracks, the living death of repetition that's just one step above the fall into death."[74]

A crucial difference from his pervious life, however, is that Zhang actively chooses this holding pattern. When his friend Peter pesters him for not taking one of several attractive job offers, Zhang responds by articulating his desires clearly for the first time: "I'm sick of starting over again, even in this country… I want friends, I want some sort of community!" (309). Zhang's choice of the stability of community over the riskiness of individual remuneration should not, however, strike us as a pat ending in which Zhang somehow realizes what's really important in life. The novel's final sentence—"The sun comes back every morning"—possesses all the right content for a happy ending, but lands flat on the ear (311). As opposed to a more optimistic verb like "rises," the phrase "comes back" colors the word "every" with a "living death of repetition." The novel ends where it began.

In Zhang's embrace of normativity, we encounter the pragmatism of McHugh's vision of U.S.-China interdependency. Indeed, why McHugh offers this ending rather than something more uplifting, or at least in line with a satisfying ending to Zhang's story of neoliberal subject formation, may only be adequately explained if we accept that the novel's predominant interest is, indeed, the imagining of U.S.-China interdependency. Rather than allow ourselves to be

[74] Berlant, 180.

depressed by Zhang's stasis, it would be more instructive to read the novel as a robust model of the present, and its aesthetics of interdependency as offering a model of fictional character adequate to post-socialist neoliberalism.

Zhang's revisions of key cyberpunk tropes (cyberspace, console cowboys, globalization, etc.) are emblematic of post-cyberpunk's central focus on what Raymond Williams calls technology's "already existing social relations": its "particular social uses" rather than its reified features.[75] As a critical realism of the post-socialist world-system's most important bilateral relationship, *Zhang* necessarily makes recourse to a broader range of aesthetic and representational tools than are made available by the "re-articulation and re-emergence of the yellow peril." Its post-cyberpunk techno-Orientalism with Chinese characteristics thus offers a form that might help us to describe a 21st world system anchored by the U.S.-China relationship.

[75] Williams writes: "[V]irtually all technical study and experiment are undertaken within already existing social relations and cultural forms, typically for purposes that are already in general foreseen. Moreover, a technical invention as such has comparatively little social significance. It is only when it is selected for investment towards production, and when it is consciously developed for particular social uses—that is when it moves from being a technical invention to what can properly be called an available *technology*—that the general significance begins. These processes of selection, investment and development are obviously of a general social and economic kind, within existing social and economic relations, and in a specific social order are designed for particular uses and advantages." Raymond Williams, "Culture and Technology," in *Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* (New York: Verso, 2007), 120.

Chapter 2:
The Dis/avowal of Sinological Realism: Mike Daisey's *The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs*

> "Designed by Apple in California. Assembled in China."
>
> —Inscription on back of all recent Apple products

In the previous chapter, I argued that *China Mountain Zhang* constructs Chinese-American racial form as a strategy for survival in a speculative, near-future U.S.-China landscape designed to analogize an emerging U.S.-China neoliberalism of the early-1990s. The mutual dependencies of neoliberalism and Chinese racial form, I argued, bespeak a China-inflected techno-Orientalism. *Zhang* thus offers an optic for perceiving some aporias in theories of neoliberalism—namely, the implicit Euro-American universalism of subjective accounts like Lauren Berlant's, and the elided subject-sensitivity of robust objective accounts like Aihwa Ong's, which emphasize the historical and material specificity of U.S.-Asia neoliberalism and, indeed, its fundamental incompatibility with universalisms of any sort.

If the previous chapter demonstrated the dynamics of China-inflected techno-Orientalism through an analysis of *marginal* subjects that Ong deems "exceptions to neoliberalism"—subjects whose juridical status and citizenship hinges less on ideological than market criteria—this chapter examines these dependencies from the standpoint of a *privileged* group of neoliberal American subjects. In recent years, these subjects have been described as the "creative class," which Richard Florida defines as "people in design, education, arts, music and entertainment, whose economic function is to create new ideas, new technology and/or creative content."[1] This class has come to emblematize the immaterial labor of the service economy, as well as the post-Fordist economic landscape that many scholars have come to associate with neoliberalism. The protagonist of this chapter will in fact be a specific segment of this class: a group whose existence is more a matter of symbolism than anthropological or sociological description. Defined more by their emotional investments and aesthetic sympathies than their demographics, these immaterial laborers[2] are made conspicuous by their attachments to the products and mythology of Apple, Inc., and often its co-founder, Steve Jobs.[3] While Leander Kahney, author of the book *Cult of Mac* (and editor of a blog of the same name), could in 2004 still describe the 25 million users that Apple claimed at the time as a "subculture" that fiercely identified with Apple's image of "nonconformity, liberty, and creativity," in the nearly ten years since then the company's market cap (then at $22.5 billion) has grown eighteen-fold (to $413.6 billion), and its customer base has grown nearly tenfold (to 200 million).[4] Even if these new users might not express feelings for their Apple products quite as enthusiastically as Kahney and his cohorts,

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[1] Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life* (New York: Perseus Book Group, 2002), 8.

[2] Who are, to be sure, certainly not confined to American borders in terms of demographics, but whose American-ness, as we will see, is a *sine qua non* of their identity in Daisey's eyes.

[3] In the following, I will be variously referring to this group of subjects as "American neoliberal subjects" and the "creative class." Please note the more restrictive, unempirical sense in which I use these terms.

[4] Leander Kahney, *Cult of Mac* (San Francisco: No Starch Press, 2004), 5.

there is every reason to believe that Apple nonetheless enjoys a powerful "mindshare" over even its most aloof new customers.[5]

In his immensely popular monologue, *The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs*[6], the American solo-performer Mike Daisey happily announces himself as an acolyte in the Cult of Mac while at the same time targeting Apple for trenchant critique. It was in part because of this critique that *Agony/Ecstasy* began drawing national attention in the opening months of 2012, but the intense, widespread controversy that it provoked was due to its allegations over Apple's condoning of adverse working conditions in the factories it contracts in China. Half a narrative about Daisey's quasi-journalistic attempt to trace his beloved Apple products to the origins of their production[7], and half a humorous jaunt through Apple co-founder Steve Jobs' biography[8], the monologue centers on a first-person account of Daisey's trip to the Foxconn factory in Shenzhen, China to see for himself where the majority of Apple products are assembled, and to interview workers there. The two narratives are kept strictly separate in alternating movements, demarcated by sections in the transcript, and clearly signaled in performance through changes in tone, characters, settings, and themes. Daisey's interactions in Shenzhen are facilitated by a translator named Cathy whose cosmopolitanism provides a contrast to the techno-coolies that Daisey expects to find there, and indeed does, albeit with a great deal of self-reflection over how such stereotypes shape his knowledge and experiences. The tone of these scenes is somber, with occasional lapses into humor. The Apple/Jobs narrative, on the other hand, is predominantly humorous, and loud in volume. The imbricated biographies of Jobs and Apple provide a through-line from which Daisey frequently digresses to meditate on his love for electronics, and, more broadly, our deepening affective dependencies on personal electronics like mobile phones. If we have become cyborgs of our electronic devices, then Daisey wants to show us that, rather than merely intensify our individuation or transform us into "console cowboys" destined for escape from neoliberal alienation, what our devices in fact reveal is how we constitute, and are constituted by, a U.S.-China supply chain. The monologue thus culminates in a polemic over Apple's transgressions in this regard, bringing Daisey into supposedly direct encounters with workers working shifts stretching to twelve, sixteen, even thirty-six hours, and who are routinely subjected to forced overtime and withholding of pay, are sometimes underage, who live in dormitories with reprehensible living conditions, and suffer from chemical poisoning, stress-induced deaths, suicide, and mental breakdowns. Daisey's polemic—intensified by his gothic imagery and portrayals of Chinese techno-coolies—is specifically designed to weaponize the sympathies of his audiences. The playbills distributed to audience members contained contact information and websites for labor activist organizations and relevant parties at Apple—

[5] For instance, Walter Isaacson's 2011 biography of Steve Jobs, *Steve Jobs* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), broke all international sales records for a biography. Even after the intense period of beatification in the months after Jobs' death in October, 2011, interest in Jobs, even outside the Anglophone world, has held steady. After skyrocketing sales in China in 2011, it continues to be widely read there. A biographical film starring Ashton Kutcher called *Jobs* was released in August, 2013.

[6] Hereafter, *Agony/Ecstasy*. Mike Daisey, *The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs*, 2010. All quotations from the monologue are drawn from version "1.0" of a composite text that Daisey made available on his website, mikedaisey.com, as a PDF on February 21, 2012. A second version, "2.0," was released on September 21, 2012.

[7] Hereafter, the "China narrative."

[8] Hereafter, the "Apple/Jobs narrative."

hallmarks of what is often pejoratively called "slacktivism." Crucially, those playbills also initially included the following text: "This is a work of nonfiction."[9]

Although the monologue was first conceived and performed in 2010, the controversy with which it has since become synonymous was sparked in January of 2012, when the popular radio program *This American Life* featured an extended excerpt from one of Daisey's performances. The episode, "Mr. Daisey and the Apple Factory" (hereafter "Apple Factory"), quickly became the most downloaded and streamed in the program's history. In March, however, it was discovered that many of the monologue's most moving characters and scenes were fabricated. *This American Life* aired a special episode in response, aptly titled "Retraction," in which producers admitted they had made a mistake in airing "Apple Factory," and Daisey was called in to confess. In that episode, host Ira Glass makes a crucial distinction: "in factchecking, our main concern was whether the things Mike says about Apple and about its supplier Foxconn. which [sic] makes this stuff, were true [i.e., facts about labor conditions]. That stuff is true. It's been corroborated by independent investigations by other journalists, studies by advocacy groups, and much of it has been corroborated by Apple itself in its own audit reports." What is not true, Glass explains, "is what Mike said about his own trip to China. […] the most powerful and memorable moments in the story all seem to be fabricated."[10] Glass acknowledges, in other words, that Daisey did not fabricate the facts, but *his encounter* with the facts.

If "Apple Factory" produced a flood of discourse, "Retraction" triggered a deluge in the weeks and months that followed its airing. Daisey's detractors argued that the monologue's fabrications undermined his allegations about labor conditions in China and the complicity of Apple and Apple customers in perpetuating them, as well as efforts on the part of advocacy and auditing groups to improve conditions and promote corporate responsibility. His defenders dismissed these charges, arguing that the falsity of Daisey's dramatizations had no bearing on his allegations, and, moreover, that even the controversy had helped to bring media attention to a hitherto buried story.

Two aspects of this discourse are notably strange. First is the sheer volume and intensity of the discourse. I will quantify this in detail below, but suffice it to say for now that these quantities and intensities are significant enough to warrant a reading of this controversy as an unusually coherent expression of an especially raw structure of feeling. The question then is whence this structure of feeling emerges. The second strange thing is the ease with which commentators conflate the two sets of facts that Glass identifies—allegations against Apple and Foxconn on one hand, and Daisey's dramatizations on the other—only to dismiss them *both*. Despite Glass's demonstrable ability to acknowledge this distinction, he does this himself at the very top of "Retraction" (note the categorical tone): "Two months ago," he says, "we broadcast a story that we've come to believe is not true."[11] The *South China Morning Post* reported that many of its Chinese readers "suddenly … believed that all previous allegations about Foxconn were false."[12] Some of this certainly has to do with incomplete information, but even among

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[9] Program, *The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs*. The Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company, Fall, 2010.
[10] "Retraction," Episode #460, *This American Life*, WBEZ Chicago Public Radio (Chicago: WBEZ, March 16, 2012). All quotes from the episode are drawn from a transcript, available here: http://podcast.thisamericanlife.org/special/TAL_460_Retraction_Transcript.pdf.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Sally Wang, "Some truth amid the fiction about Shenzhen's Apple factory," *South China Morning Post*, 8/15/2012, http://www.scmp.com/article/998211/some-truth-amid-fiction-about-shenzhens-apple-factory.

informed observers, the facts pertaining to Daisey's allegations are easily brushed aside. The Minneapolis-based group The Hacktor's Collective, for instance, performed a staged reading of the full controversy in order to interrogate the irony that "Daisey is asking us to think about where our devices come from and now we, as audience and producers and fans, are being asked to think about where our theatrical pieces are coming from."[13]

So why the hue and cry? Why the disavowal? In solving this puzzle, we can draw two hypotheses from the controversy. The first is that Daisey simply angered the wrong people by making them feel bad about their fetishizing of Apple and other electronic devices—that is, precisely the people most capable of broadcasting their grievances. But if we accept this explanation as sufficient, then we must also accept that the facts about "China" and the Chinese subjects at the heart of the controversy make no effective difference. The same reaction would have been provoked regardless of who the workers were or where the factories were located. I would therefore argue that this hypothesis performs precisely the elision that Daisey's monologue is intended to forestall. This leads us to the core of a second, more adequate hypothesis, which is that the hue and cry over Daisey's fabrications were not solely provoked by fierce devotion to the Cult of Mac, but at least as much by anxieties over the unevenness—economic, political, cultural, ethical—of the contemporary U.S.-China relationship and how that unevenness determines, and is determined by, the neoliberal forms captured in Apple's mythology.

The goal of this chapter will be to demonstrate the difference that "China" makes. To do this, I will focus on how a specific discourse on "China," Chinese racial form, and the U.S.-China relationship is *elided, avowed, and disavowed* in the process of self-reflection over neoliberal subject formation that Daisey's monologue initiates in its audiences. I call this discourse "Sinological realism," and define it as an empirical and non-empirical category of knowledge about China and the U.S.-China relationship guided less by research and fact-finding than a pragmatic effort *to be realistic about China's rise and its implications*. It is one of the qualitative differences that distinguishes our period of U.S.-China relations from previous periods. Because "China" currently stands as the most potent sign of the twilight of the American Century and the waning of American exceptionalism, its evocation forces American subjects to account for their positions in a newly rebalanced world-system. Sinological realism names only one possible version of this accounting—or, more accurately, a genre of possible versions. In the Daisey controversy, the predominant form of this realism is subjective; captured, for instance, by Glass's reduction of the controversy to a single question: "Should I feel bad?"[14] However, rather than simply reconfirm Eric Hayot's contention that "China has been a privileged object of European and American discourse on cruelty," what I want to show in this chapter is that the upsetting feature of Daisey's monologue is how it makes its audiences aware of their status as both subject and object of U.S.-China neoliberalism.[15] To cast this claim in terms of the broader concerns of the dissertation, techno-Orientalism in this context becomes a kind of idiom or sense-organ through which creative class subjects become conscious of themselves as actors in a

[13] Courtney MacLean, quoted by Rachel Kramer Bussel, "*The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs*: Minneapolis Theater Group to Perform Mike Daisey Play, Incorporating *This American Life* Controversy," *The Huffington Post*, March 20, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rachel-kramer-bussel/agony-ecstasy-steve-jobs_b_1366053.html.
[14] "Retraction," 24.
[15] Eric Hayot, *The Hypothetical Mandarin: Sympathy, Modernity, and Chinese Pain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 14.

global supply-chain. Insofar as this class's self-esteem and "self-appreciation"—to use Michel Feher's term for a predominant mode of neoliberal subjectivity—hinge upon the *disavowal* of techno-Orientalism, we might restate Daisey's aim as an attempt to frustrate the neat, global distribution of labor captured by the description on the back of all recent Apple products—"Designed by Apple in California. Assembled in China."—and to replace this distinction with a *critical* Sinological realism of U.S.-China neoliberalism.

To demonstrate this I will have to attend closely to the "powerful and memorable" forms that Daisey employs—and invents—and that circulate in the controversy. In the following, I will first reconstruct the controversy and attempt at key moments to clarify the difference that Sinological realism makes. At first, this difference will emerge negatively—that is, at moments in the controversy when participants *elide* Sinological realism. Instead of positive content, what we find is a "structure of feeling," Raymond Williams' term for an emergent knowledge in which history is first registered as feeling and only belatedly as an object of analysis. I will then turn to a close reading of *Agony/Ecstasy* that shows how Sinological realism is avowed in the construction and correction of various Chinese racial forms. The final section of this chapter will take seriously the problematic of fetishism very much at the center of the controversy by using the psychoanalytic description of its structure to describe how neoliberal subject formation proceeds by a process of disavowal. I should note that my reliance on this structure is heuristic rather than diagnostic. It will help to align otherwise disparate elements of the discourse to reveal how Sinological realism and neoliberal subject formation operate together.

Before I begin, it is important to mention the effect that *Agony/Ecstasy* has had on the institutions, media culture, and China coverage that it critiques, despite efforts to discredit it. For all of its failings, *Agony/Ecstasy* has nonetheless enabled Daisey's audiences to cognitively map their positions in a global supply-chain.[16] Since January of 2012, no fewer than one hundred English language news stories on Foxconn, Apple and/or labor are published per month; whereas before there were only a handful published every year. Indeed, since "Apple Factory" aired, media attention to labor conditions in China has become a staple of coverage—*Agony/Ecstasy* set that agenda. Moreover, "Apple" and "Foxconn" have become metonyms for U.S. complicity in those conditions, the unevenness of U.S.-China interdependency, and the human costs of the information economy. To an extent, then, what I have to say in this chapter can be applied to a great deal of the mainstream discourse on China that has appeared since "Apple Factory" aired. The question I therefore want to loft over the following discussion—and will return to in the conclusion—is whether or not *Agony/Ecstasy*, and the activism it demands, presents a viable methodology for resisting neoliberalism's various ill effects and alienations.

Mr. Daisey and the Apple Controversy

Agony/Ecstasy was "birthed" in workshops at Washington DC's Woolly Mammoth Theatre in the summer of 2010 and debuted at Portland's TBA Festival that September. It is the

[16] The US-China human rights discourse that Daisey activates, Rey Chow reminds us, is inextricable from a discourse of power: "From the days of England's gunboat diplomacy to the present day, the question of human rights, when it is raised in China in relation to the West, has never been separable from the privileged of extraterritoriality demanded by the Western diplomat, trader, or missionary," "Violence in the Other Country: China as Crisis, Spectacle, and Woman," in Chandra Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, eds., *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 85.

seventeenth of Daisey's monologues. Daisey has performed dozens more since *Agony/Ecstasy*, including one about his soul-searching in the wake of the scandal, entitled *The Orient Express (Or, the Value of Failure)* (2012). Recently, he has been performing monologues whose immense durations—including an uninterrupted 24-hour-long piece titled *All the Hours in the Day* (2011), and a 29-night cycle titled *All the Faces of the Moon* (2013)—are meant to reassert the importance of theatrical presence and challenge the commodifiability of works of conventional duration. He implies in the opening monologue of *All the Faces of the Moon* that the *Agony/Ecstasy* controversy led him to attempt suicide. All of Daisey's performances have been directed by Jean-Michele Gregory, his long-time collaborator and wife. The two met in the late-1990s in Seattle's garage theater scene.[17] Gregory has gone on to direct numerous other monologists, and Daisey, meanwhile, has become one of the most decorated and lauded performers in the American theater, with nominations and awards from the Outer Critics Circle, the Drama League, the Bay Area Critics Circle, the Seattle Times and the Sloan Foundation. In his bio, Daisey alleges that the *New York Times* has described him as "one of the finest solo performers of his generation."[18] While the subject matter of Daisey's monologues varies widely, it would still be accurate to describe his work as an ongoing, politically progressive critique of the cultures and contradictions of late-capitalism, with a special focus on the New Economy.

When Daisey performs, he is typically seated behind a desk on a bare set with minimal design. On the desk sits a glass of water and an outline. Influenced by the spread of autobiographical performance and monologue in the 1980s, Daisey is frequently compared to Spalding Gray, whose highly personal and neurotic narratives, like Daisey's, delve in and out of stream of consciousness, fantasy and reality, and draw their audiences in with what reviewers (of both) often call a "mesmerizing" combination of loud and quiet moments, expressiveness, and sheer charisma.[19] The content of Daisey's monologues changes from night to night, sometimes drastically. "I perform orally," he says. "I don't write. I write books, and I write things, but I don't write anything that I perform in front of a crowd. My monologues are forged in the moment that I am speaking with the audience… They never become the script, and they never turn themselves into texts."[20] One way to understand Daisey's current experiments with non-commodifiable duration is as an attempt to master the trauma of what is perhaps the greatest punishment Daisey has had to endure in the wake of the scandal. Namely, the removal of the audio of "Apple Factory" from *This American Life*'s website—which, though a commodity itself, nonetheless offers something of the fullness of Daisey's voice and presence. In its place is now a mere transcript of the episode: a kind of textual solitary confinement.

When Steve Jobs—the iconoclastic co-founder and CEO of Apple—died not even a week before New York previews were scheduled to open at the Public Theater in October, 2011, the full apparatus of the national media turned its bright lights on Daisey's and his monologue. Even though that attention abruptly shifted back to the strange and intense beatification of Jobs that

[17] Nelson Pressley, "An Onion of a Guy vs. Apple, Part 2," *Washington Post*, July 15, 2012.

[18] It is an ironic testament to the esteem to which he is held that, even now, no one has ever contested this finessing of the truth. The actual quote appears in a round-up listing of theater festivals across the country, in which Times critic Jason Zinoman groups Daisey together with Danny Hoch to describe the two as "the finest solo artists of their generation." Jason Zinoman, "Really Far Off Broadway," *New York Times*, May 14, 2006.

[19] *Steve Jobs* is often compared to Gray's "Swimming to Cambodia"—a topic for another essay.

[20] Quoted in Eugenia Williamson, "Interview: The Passion of Mike Daisey," *The Phoenix* (Boston), February 14, 2013. The transcripts for *Agony/Ecstasy* were compiled from recordings from multiple performances. "[I]t doesn't exist as a text for me," Daisey says.

engulfed the media for months, Daisey had been given a glimpse into the kind of world he would be swept up in come January. After "Apple Factory" aired, Daisey became a *de facto* expert on labor conditions at Foxconn, and was invited to appear in dozens of venues, including CNN, MSNBC, C-SPAN and *Real Time with Bill Maher*. Within a week of the broadcast, Apple joined the Fair Labor Association (FLA), an independent organization that conducts audits of labor conditions.[21] Coverage of Foxconn intensified when, shortly thereafter, the *New York Times* published the first in a series of articles that confirmed the allegations Daisey laid out in his monologue. Meanwhile, a listener was inspired by the broadcast to start an online petition demanding, among other things, that Apple "release a worker protection strategy for new product releases," a full list of its vendors, and FLA's findings.[22] The petition very quickly amassed over 250,000 signatures. On Februrary 9th, activists simultaneously delivered it to Apple stores in Washington, DC, San Francisco, London, Sydney, and Bangalore. Daisey himself delivered a copy to the store at Grand Central Terminal in New York City, a throng of protestors in tow.[23] In the midst of all this, Daisey made the radical decision to release the transcript of *Agony/Ecstasy* on his website with an open source license, inviting downloaders to "amend or change as you see fit."[24] According to Daisey, at the time of its release, "over 500 different groups and individuals in more than eleven countries" had asked for permission to stage their own performances of the monologue.[25] As Daisey would later argue in his defense, what fueled his passion to be heard—by any means necessary—was a fear that, without his efforts, the story would die and nothing would change. By the time March rolled around, however, it became clear that the story would not only live on, but that it would also impact Apple in a way that far exceeded Daisey's expectations. This was remarkable for a number of reasons. Daisey had taken on not just any company, but the largest company in history. A company, moreover, that was caving to the demands of a theater artist and his supporters.

This American Life producers were first alerted to Daisey's fabrications by Rob Schmitz, a China correspondent for the radio program *Marketplace*, who doubted some of its basic claims. After tracking down Cathy, the translator/fixer Daisey used while in Shenzhen, Schmitz discovered that her account of what Daisey saw, and who Daisey talked to, directly contradicted scenes in *Agony/Ecstasy*. "Retraction" aired soon after. Like *Agony/Ecstasy*, "Retraction" is notable for the powerful emotions it evokes. Commentators describe it as "excruciating," "painful," and "awkward." "Riveting" in the words of one listener.[26] Its centerpiece is a lengthy interview in which Glass repeatedly corners Daisey with pointed questions and false choices, provoking convoluted qualifications and awkward silences of exquisite duration. As Daisey oscillates between self-flagellation and self-defense, dizzyingly, Glass forces him to admit to lying about details large and small (e.g., his initial attempt to forestall fact-checking by claiming that Cathy's name was not Cathy, and that he had lost her phone number). In a typical exchange,

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[21] Critics regard the FLA as a largely ineffectual, "fig leaf" organization. Apple rejects the suggestion that Daisey's play had anything to do with its decision.

[22] Mark Shields, "Apple: Protect Workers Making iPhones in Chinese Factories," *Change.org*, January, 2012, http://www.change.org/petitions/apple-protect-workers-making-iphones-in-chinese-factories-3.

[23] "Petition campaign demands that Apple make iPhone 5 'ethical,'" Change.org press release, February 8, 2012, quoted at http://mikedaisey.blogspot.com/2012/02/for-immediate-release-february-8-2012.html.

[24] Mike Daisey, introduction to *The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs*, Version 1.0, February 21, 2012, 2.

[25] Ibid.

[26] James Fallows, "The Sad and Infuriating Mike Daisey Case," *TheAtlantic.com*, March 17, 2012. http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-sad-and-infuriating-mike-daisey-case/254661/.

Glass asks Daisey to explain why he persisted in lying about meeting a group of ex-Foxconn employees:

> Ira Glass: […] you could have come back to us and said "oh no no no I didn't meet these workers, you know, this is just something I inserted in the monologue based on things I had read and things I had heard in Hong Kong" um, but instead you lied further and [insisted that you had met these workers.]
>
> Why not just tell us what really happened at that point?
>
> [long pause]
>
> Mike Daisey: I think I was terrified. [breathing]
>
> Ira Glass: Of what?
>
> [long pause]
>
> Mike Daisey: -- That---
>
> [long pause]
>
> Mike Daisey: I think I was terrified that if I untied these things, that the work, that I know is really good, and tells a story, that does these really great things for making people care, that it would come apart in a way where, where it would ruin everything.[27]

Glass eventually demands that Daisey label his monologue "fiction." Daisey refuses: "I don't think that label covers the totality of what it is."[28] Although this response comes off as weak and equivocal, Daisey's use of the word "totality" helps to make better sense of how exactly he wants his audiences to "care." By "totality," he seems to be referring to the material and affective relations between otherwise isolated facts whose potential for internationalism is compromised not so much by the generic expectations of fiction, but by its reified opposition to non-fiction.[29] While Daisey capitulates to nearly all of Glass's demands, it is for this reason that

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[27] "Retraction," 14–15.

[28] Ira Glass, "Retraction: Transcript," 19.

[29] The account of totality and its relation to the aesthetic that seems most relevant here is Lukács': "Only in this context, which sees the isolated facts of social life as aspects of the historical process and integrates them in a *totality*, can knowledge of the facts hope to become knowledge of *reality*. This knowledge starts from the simple and (to the capitalist world) pure, immediate, natural determinants described above. It progresses from them to the knowledge of the concrete totality, i.e., to the conceptual reproduction of reality," *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1971), 8.

he is inflexible on the issue of labelling and genre. In fact, he later returns to Glass's studio to strengthen his position: "I'm not going to say that I didn't take a few shortcuts in my passion to be heard. But I stand behind the work. My mistake, the mistake that I truly regret is that I had it on your show as journalism and it's not journalism. It's theater. I use the tools of theater and memoir to achieve its dramatic arc and of that arc and of that work I am very proud because I think it made you care, Ira, and I think it made you want to delve. And my hope is that it makes—has made—other people delve."[30] Not only would "totality" be compromised by a reified dichotomy of fiction/non-fiction, so would an array of "passions" and feelings, including "caring." Daisey connects these to "delving," which appears to mean *emotionally driven* research into technological supply-chains, as well as self-reflection over the ethical dilemmas arising from the relations that comprise those supply-chains. Daisey thus draws a quasi-Lukácsian connection between "totality" and "delving," in which he performs the vanguardist role of "imputing" class consciousness through the guidance of "delving."

The contrast we should note here is between Glass's reified category of feelings, tidily encapsulated in the fiction/non-fiction dichotomy, and Daisey's attempt to coordinate this subjective dimension with objective content in the form of a "totality." Indeed, as "Retraction" wears on, it becomes apparent that its primary function is less about separating fact from fiction than *fine-tuning the feelings* that Glass and his audience are *supposed* to hold towards Sinological realism. While "Apple Factory" ends with Glass encouraging listeners to "delve" and take action, "Retraction" ends with Glass wondering whether or not he should feel bad about how his electronics are produced.[31] As opposed to Glass's inward concerns, Daisey's caring/delving is explicitly connected to a global network of relations—technological, ethical, economic, political, etc.—that Chinese techno-coolies bring into view, whether or not the ones he portrays actually exist.

That said, one might fairly read *Agony/Ecstasy* as an instance of what Bruce Robbins calls "the sweatshop sublime": a trope that features the sudden consciousness that one's everyday experience is underwritten by the "unpleasant and underremunerated" labor of "an unimaginably vast and complex social whole," followed by a "sinking back into ourselves" in which potential action fizzles out.[32] The activism that the monologue produced certainly answers Robbins' ultimate question strongly in the affirmative: "Can national pride be turned into an ally of internationalism?"[33] At the same time, that activism also marks a key difference between the "sweatshop sublime" and what *Agony/Ecstasy* offers. No matter how one might critique the action that Daisey advocates as "slacktivism," or neocolonial, its insistence on translating the consciousness of a "vast and complex social whole" into activism prevents its audiences from "sinking back into [them]selves." This is not to say, however, that this sinking does not eventually take place—perhaps as soon as the audience disengages by leaving the theatre. I am by no means interested in uncritically celebrating Daisey or *Agony/Ecstasy*. What I am primarily interested in is how the *literary forms* that the monologue and the controversy call upon run counter to the template of the "sweatshop sublime." As I will explain in more detail below, one way it does this is by refusing to resolve the tension between Sinological realism (rooted in the

[30] "Retraction," 18.
[31] "Retraction," 24.
[32] Bruce Robbins, "The Sweatshop Sublime," *PMLA* 117.1 (January, 2002): 84.
[33] Ibid, 91.

monologue's China narrative) and the fiction of American exceptionalism (rooted in the Apple/Jobs narrative).

What Daisey does not mention in his defense is that *Agony/Ecstasy* was, precisely for its failings, the paradigmatic *This American Life* narrative. I want to take a moment to expand on this point before returning to the history of the controversy, because it brings into focus the class identifications of the controversy's participants, which has everything to do with how Sinological realism provokes a contradiction in the exceptionalist trajectory of American neoliberal subject formation. It will also help me to clarify what I mean by the difference that "China" makes in the controversy. This difference, I will argue, can be seen in contrast to Eugenia Williamson's assessment of the controversy's relation to *This American Life*'s aesthetics. As much as I agree with Williamson's account, it nonetheless elides "China" in favor of the subjective.

Theater critic Alisa Solomon explains that expectations of rigorous journalistic truth from *This American Life* are misplaced. The fuzziness between fact and fiction is very much at the heart of its aesthetic and ideological effects, which is why "Daisey's *Agony* mapped perfectly":

> *This American Life*—which bills itself as proffering "mostly true stories of everyday people, though not always"—typically bends events to a three-act structure with narration that announces, and sometimes hammers, a theme. There's usually a quirky, even weird, aspect to the plot or a character and often a quest to get to the bottom of a conundrum. Conflict, something at stake, specificity of place, captivating characters with distinctive voices: every episode contains the stuff of good drama.[34]

Something is necessarily lost, however, in the show's efforts to fit its almost two decades'-worth of stories into this template. Williamson shows in her trenchant critique of "Retraction" and *This American Life* how *Agony/Ecstasy* both perfects and undermines this formula. After briefly summarizing Daisey's allegations about working conditions in China, she quickly moves on to the heart of her critique. She writes: "A self-aware, middle-aged, middle-class everyman who travels to an exotic locale and meets a bunch of people who aren't too different from *This American Life*'s listeners is the show's perfect story."[35] We might add to this the show's reluctance to allow its stories to be mediated by subjects who do not conform to this profile: giving an episode to Daisey rather than a Foxconn employee, for example.[36] Williamson argues that Daisey's injection of what she vaguely terms "politics" into this formula has a disruptive effect that in fact makes audiences "care" about those "politics." Rather than give specificity to this term—under whose cover, I would argue, Sinological realism can be found—Williamson launches into a historical formalist critique of *This American Life*. "Daisey exposed the fact," Williamson continues, "that the aesthetics and conventions of the kind of narrative journey Glass

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[34] Alisa Solomon, "Mike Check," *The Nation*, April 16, 2012, 6. *This American Life*'s "About" page describes the show like this: "There's a theme to each episode, and a variety of stories on that theme. It's mostly true stories of everyday people, though not always. There's lots more to the show, but it's sort of hard to describe," http://www.thisamericanlife.org/about, accessed 8/9/2013.

[35] Eugenia Williamson, "Oh, the Pathos!" *The Baffler* 20 (2012).

[36] The program's June 22, 2012 episode on American expats in China, even given its explicit focus, is notably uninterested in Chinese voices. The point of the present discussion, however, is not necessarily to cast aspersions on *This American Life*, but to demonstrate how an interest in Chinese voices—and those of poor people, as Williamson charges—would fall outside of the show's representational parameters and cultural function. See "Americans in China," Episode #467, *This American Life*, WBEZ Chicago Public Radio (Chicago: WBEZ, June 22, 2012)

has patented—one born of nineties boom-time decadence—were never designed to accommodate harsh economic truths, much less to promote any kind of critical art or intelligence." Indeed, that "boom-time decadence" was the primal scene that gave birth to both Daisey's art and his critical consciousness. Since its debut in 1995, *This American Life* has, in large part, devoted itself to reproducing its conditions of emergence, which Williamson describes as "the balmy ascendancy of the Clintonite middle class, and the first wave of Internet-age capitalism." The way Daisey characterizes this period's relation to facts helps to shed light on the kinds of narratives that were privileged among *This American Life*'s target audiences, as well as his own relation to facts vis-à-vis the New Economy.

Daisey's first monologue, *21 Dog Years*—later expanded and published as a book—recounts his time working at Amazon.com during the dot-com boom of the late-1990s and early 2000s. After producing a report that earns him a coveted internal transfer, he admits in a faux letter to Amazon founder and CEO Jeff Bezos, "Well, it's fake—the whole thing is fake. The data, the studies, the people I claimed to have interviewed. I didn't do any of it, I was way too busy. The opportunity came, and in a flash I faked it all—thirty pages of graphs, charts and PowerPoint presentations that boil away into ethereal bullshit, perfect sentences about absolutely nothing."[37] Later, on the eve of his precipitous exit from the company, he reflects on the report and realizes that his colleagues "had never cared whether the report was real or not—it had never entered their minds to check. Why would they have checked? No one can check facts in the New Economy. Instead they examined the words I had chosen, the fine paper I had used to print out the report, the binder's fake leather texture, and the sharp laser printing in suave 13-point Lucida Grande. They looked all this over and thought, *This guy knows how to spin, how to twist things into shape. This guy can do very well here.* And the worst part was that they were right."[38]

There is a strong resemblance here between the "bending" of narratives that Solomon mentions, and Daisey and his Amazon colleagues' preference for narrative shape over narrative truth. As Williamson suggests, the reason for *This American Life*'s enduring popularity is its foreshortening—or bending—of class difference to establish the comforting universality of bourgeois experience. Rather than snap back into shape, these narratives are stabilized by what Williamson identifies as the program's "preference for pathos over tragedy"—its ability to establish, through strong emotion, surprising connections between unlikely subjects. Raymond Williams confirms Williamson's argument that pathos forecloses "critical art or intelligence," arguing that pathos emerges only "between private persons" and thus "excludes any positive conception of society, and thence any clear view of order or justice."[39] Tragedy, on the other hand, is a "loss of connection" between men, the result of "a particular social and historical fact: a measurable distance between [a man's] desire and his endurance, and between both and the purposes and meanings which the general life offered him."[40] In response to this, Williams champions Bertolt Brecht's "tragic consciousness": the consciousness "of all those who, appalled by the present, are for this reason firmly committed to a different future: to the struggle against suffering learned in suffering: a *total exposure* which is also a total involvement."[41] Even though, as we will see, Daisey most certainly commits crimes of pathos, his vigilant separation of the

[37] Mike Daisey, *21 Dog Years: Doing Time @ Amazon.com* (New York: Free Press, 2002), 189.
[38] Ibid, original italics.
[39] Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1966), 92.
[40] Williams, 13.
[41] Williams, 203, my italics.

China and Jobs/Apple narratives prevents that pathos from dissolving into "private experience" and thus obscuring a view of "justice." If Glass sent Daisey "to the gallows for minor falsehoods," then the reason that Williamson offers is that Daisey exposed a "painful reality"—a "total exposure"—that the *This American Life* formula, so perfectly executed by *Agony/Ecstasy*, could not finally "massage" into "puddles of personal experience."

My account of the controversy contrasts with Williamson's precisely on this issue of the personal. For Williamson, the controversy erupted because Glass was the wrong person to anger, but in his response to Daisey he hoists himself with his own petard, so to speak, unwittingly revealing the ideological assumptions behind his reaction and *This American Life*'s aesthetics more broadly. It is Glass who chooses, according to predictable criteria, which stories can be bent, and by how much. Williamson thus spends much of her time castigating him for "the forensic care … expended on making the seamy side of working-class life palatable," and for personally "branding" the kind of entertainment his show provides. His "distinct enunciation and large plastic spectacles," she writes, "have become synonymous with arch knowingness, worthy entertainment, and a certain kind of whimsy." Her essay ends by relishing in a backhanded compliment paid to Glass by another journalist: "That show ['Retraction'] was just as riveting as the original Mike Daisey ['Apple Factory']," this journalist says. "The befuddled Glass thanked her, and laughed."

So even as Williamson's critique of *This American Life* provides a historical sense to the controversy's overdetermined intensities, its elision of "politics"—that is, "China"—reduces the critical potential of the controversy, as well as her critique, to the very same, individuating forms of neoliberal affect that she targets. The absence of "China" in her essay thus turns what could be a potentially totalizing analysis *inwards* in order to argue that the controversy had more to do with Glass's character faults than Daisey's. The reason Williamson only mentions China in passing is in part because of the difficulty of analogizing race with class in this context, and perhaps especially because there are too few Cathys available to ease such analogizing. Like the producers of *This American Life*, Williamson fails to perceive the Chinese middle class subjects who might have been swept up in "Internet-age capitalism," or Chinese readers of Steve Jobs' biography. "China" and the Chinese are thus racialized *negatively*—that is, by virtue of being spared from Williamson's class critique.

That said, in turning back now to the history of the controversy, among the many things we should retain from Williamson's critique is its implicit equation of *This American Life* with neoliberal aesthetics, as such, insofar as we understand neoliberalism as a collapse of the spheres of production and reproduction.[42] Rather than translate the personal into the realm of calculation/production, which is the vector that critiques of neoliberalism typically focus on, it translates the realm of calculation/production into the personal. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the personal—specifically, taking things personally—is also a central feature of the

[42] Michel Feher writes: "American neoliberals … devoted themselves to challenging the confinement of the market to the sphere of production and thus to allowing market relations to conquer the space of the politics of society, which Ordoliberal economists had understood as necessary for the (re)production of the market but as obeying a different rationality. In other words, what was at stake for Schultz, Becker, and their associates was to challenge the alleged heterogeneity between the aspirations of the authentic self and the kind of optimizing calculations required by the business world (a heterogeneity that, until then, liberalism had understood as indispensable to the proper functioning of the business world)," in "Self-Appreciation; or, The Aspirations of Human Capital," *Public Culture* 21.1 (2009): 33.

controversy's voluminous discourse. In the weeks and months following "Retraction," both Apple and Foxconn were gifted a reprieve as Daisey became the story. By far, the strongest responses came out of two communities: journalists (especially China correspondents) and theater artists (especially those working within "documentary" and activist modes). Among journalists, the predominant feelings were of professional insult and trespass. In response to Daisey's accusation that foreign correspondents have been too lazy or cynical to talk to workers directly, the *New Yorker*'s China correspondent Evan Osnos quipped: "That was a howler. Going to the factory gates is exactly what reporters do in China."[43] In an interview, Schmitz says, "Everything that I try to do—be honest, be accurate, be a good reporter—he undoes a lot of that."[44] Ellen Killoran of the *International Business Times* writes: "there are *serious* journalists who have *devoted their careers* to reporting on conditions in China."[45] In "Retraction," Glass says: "All of us in public radio stand together, and I have friends and colleagues on lots of other shows who—like us here at This American Life—work hard to do accurate, independent reporting week in, week out."[46] This language of devotion arises again and again, and appears to serve two purposes. First, to distinguish between those authorized to produce knowledge about China (journalists), and those who are not (theater artists). Second, to reconstitute, through the mobilization of pathos, the professional identities damaged by Daisey's trespass and the journalistic community's initial, naïve acceptance of that trespass.

The theater community's response was equally swift and emotional. Daisey's defenders, like Paul Lazar, argued that "One need not convey only literal facts in order to tell the truth," and compared *Agony/Ecstasy* to muckraking works like Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*.[47] Detractors like Arian Moayed were generally impatient with anything less than unequivocal condemnation: "Whatever you want to call it, he lied. And he deceived audiences… He then deceived media outlets. And, unfortunately, he deceived the voiceless Chinese workers more than anyone, and that really breaks my heart."[48] Steve Cosson, founder of the documentary theater group The Civilians, bemoaned the loss of reformist credibility that would inevitably follow the controversy: "it does really piss me off that artists are going to be discredited as a whole for some period of time. I think we're doubted."[49] Alli Houseworth, a former marketing director at Woolly Mammoth, passionately urged theaters to boycott *Agony/Ecstasy* until Daisey issued an

[43] Evan Osnos, "Apple, China, and the Truth," Letter from China, *NewYorker.com*, March 17, 2002, http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/evanosnos/2012/03/mike-daiseys-mistakes-in-china.html

[44] Quoted by Carl Franzen and David Taintor, "'This American Life' Episode on Apple Retracted Due to 'Significant Fabrications,'" *Talking Points Memo*, March 16, 2012, http://idealab.talkingpointsmemo.com/2012/03/this-american-life-on-apple-episode-retracted-due-to-significant-fabrications.php.

[45] Ellen Killoran, "Mike Daisey Let Journalists 'Treat Him Like A Journalist,' Says Whistleblower," *International Business Times*, March 21, 2012, http://www.ibtimes.com/mike-daisey-let-journalists-treat-him-journalist-says-whistleblower-428208#.

[46] "Retraction," 2.

[47] Paul Lazar, quoted in Lizzie Simon, "With 'Agony' Fabrications Exposed, Theater Artists React," *Wall Street Journal*, March 19, 2012.

[48] Quoted in Simon.

[49] Cosson was speaking at a panel hastily organized by the Public Theater's artistic director Oskar Eustis just days after the airing of "Retraction." "Truth in Theater," The Public Theater, March 22, 2012.

apology, and called for works of non-fiction in the theater to be subjected to the standards of journalism.[50]

In contrast to these individuals, prominent theater organizations like Woolly Mammoth and the Public Theatre had a more difficult time fine-tuning their feelings and settling on a response. While initially unambiguous in its support, Woolly Mammoth quickly revised its defense, apologizing for allowing the monologue to be described as "non-fiction" in its playbills, and then parsing its support with several qualifications: including support for the "essential truth of Mike's storytelling," "the power and impact of Mike's work as a theatrical piece," and for the "difference between art and journalism."[51] In that statement, the theater also announced that it would hold a public forum for audience members to voice their concerns about the controversy. Similar forums would be held all over the country in the coming days and weeks. It was impossible to avoid acknowledging that emotions were running high and required some kind of outlet.[52] Immediately after "Retraction" aired, Oskar Eustis, the artistic director of the Public Theatre, where Daisey was then performing *Agony/Ecstasy*, released a statement of support. In it, he endorses the monologue's "human truths in story form," and makes the point that "Mike is an artist, not a journalist."[53] Just days later, however, Eustis also revised his statement in opening remarks to a forum of theater artists and critics convened at the Public to discuss the controversy and the topic of "Truth in Theater." In that revised statement, he frames the relationship between performance and audience in a language of contracts that places specific disciplinary (professional and aesthetic) pressures on texts like *Agony/Ecstasy*, and is symptomatic of neoliberal subject relations more generally: "Every performance creates a contract," Eustis argues, "Our job as a theater is to create that contract anew with every performance, and then to fulfill it."[54] While the ostensible purpose of such a contract would be to codify a set of truth standards for the theater distinct from those of journalism, the figure of the "contract" suggests that theatrical experience can be reified as a deliverable, to use the language of modern management theory. It moreover imposes a vulgar empiricism on the theater that, hypothetically, could be referenced if a performer or play failed to honor the terms of such a contract. In one forum on the controversy, Steve Cosson (with some skepticism, to be sure) suggested that "the norm should be that [theaters] should be fact-checking the work, as if the theaters were like

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[50] Alli Houseworth, "This Is a Work of Non-Fiction," guest post on *ArtsJournal.com*, March 19, 2012, http://www.artsjournal.com/newbeans/2012/03/this-is-a-work-of-non-fiction.html.

[51] Woolly Mammoth Theatre, "Further Thoughts on the Mike Daisey Episode," March 21, 2012, http://woollymammothblog.com/2012/03/21/further-thoughts-on-the-mike-daisey-episode. The theater's initial response states that the organization is "proud to have hosted the birth performance and a highly successful run," "Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company Responds to This American Life Retraction," March 16, 2012, http://woollymammothblog.com/2012/03/16/woolly-mammoth-theatre-company-responds-to-this-american-life-retraction/.

[52] The Theatre Communications Group convened a similar panel at its annual convention on June 23, 2012, which included Daisey as well as other activist, solo and documentary artists: Ping Chong, Steve Cosson, KJ Sanchez, Nilaja Sun. "Theatre's Role in Activism" (panel, Theatre Communications Group 2012 National Conference, Boston, Mass., June 23, 2012). Video of the panel is available at http://vimeo.com/45717214.

[53] Oskar Eustis, "Statement by the Public Theater," The Public Theater press release, March 17, 2012.

[54] Oskar Eustis, "A Statement from Artistic Director Oskar Eustis," The Public Theater press release, March 22, 2012.

publishers… I don't think that's the answer. I can't imagine how that would work. But it's something the field has to talk about."[55]

Compared to proximal cases of fraudulent first-person narrative and journalism—Greg Mortenson and David Relin's *Three Cups of Tea*[56], James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*[57], Jayson Blair's reporting for the *New York Times*[58], Stephen Glass's for *The New Republic*—the response generated by "Retraction" stands apart, both qualitatively and quantitatively. *This American Life* has in fact featured and retracted fabricated first-person stories before. It has happened at least three times with stories written by Stephen Glass, David Sedaris and Malcolm Gladwell.[59] Each case was handled quite differently than Daisey's. Stephen Glass's episodes

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[55] "Theatre's Role in Activism."

[56] Mortenson fabricated fundamental facts about his time in Afghanistan. Relin later committed suicide. Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin, *Three Cups of Tea* (New York: Penguin, 2007).

[57] Frey fabricated facts about his criminal record and other key aspects of his biography, which Oprah Winfrey had included in her highly influential and lucrative Book Club. When revelations about his fabrications came to light, Winfrey invited him on her show and confronted him harshly. James Frey, *A Million Little Pieces* (New York: Random House, 2003).

[58] Blair almost completely fabricated an array of stories for the *Times* between 2002 and 2003. Dan Barry, David Barstow, Jonathan D. Glater, Adam Liptak, Jacques Steinberg, "Correcting the Record; Times Reporter Who Resigned Leaves Long Trail of Deception," *New York Times*, May 11, 2003.

[59] In 1997, the program ran three stories produced by Stephen Glass (no relation to Ira). According to Howard Kurtz, two-thirds of the 41 stories Stephen Glass wrote for *The New Republic* (between 1996 and 1997) were fabricated. He was later portrayed by Hayden Christensen in a film adaptation of the affair, *Shattered Glass*, dir. Billy Ray (2003). See Howard Kurtz, "Stranger Than Fiction: The Cautionary Tale of Magazine Writer Stephen Glass," *Washington Post*, May 13, 1998.

Another incident, or possible set of incidents, involved celebrated humorist David Sedaris, who was one of the first writers featured on the program when it began airing in the mid-1990s. His monologues and readings have since been featured over fifty times. In 2007, Alex Heard of *The New Republic* subjected *Naked*, one of Sedaris' best-selling memoirs, to rigorous fact-checking and discovered numerous fabrications; the article extends this accusation to all of Sedaris's memoir-based work, which encompasses many of his *This American Life* contributions. See Alex Heard, "This American Lie," *The New Republic*, March 19, 2007. When pressed by Paul Farhi, Ira Glass said, "the best course [going forward] is to check Sedaris's facts to the extent that stories involving memories and long-ago conversations can be checked." Paul Farhi, "As Sedaris walks line between real and 'realish,' NPR is left in the middle," *Washington Post* May 13, 2012. Daisey himself felt compelled to respond to what he saw as Farhi's attempt in that interview at comparing Sedaris to Daisey, demanding that he "Leave David Sedaris the fuck alone." Ridiculing Glass's expanded fact-checking policy, Daisey continues: "No one cares what is factually accurate in the details of what [Sedaris'] aunt said to him in his childhood, except maybe his family members, and they should be fucking used to it by now." Mike Daisey, personal blog, *mikedaisey.blogspot.com*, May 15, 2012, http://mikedaisey.blogspot.com/2012/05/so-this-weekend-worm-turned-and-now-its.html.

The third incident occurred in 2008, when This American Life aired a monologue by the writer Malcolm Gladwell—known for his anecdote-based social theories in books like *Blink* and *The Tipping Point*—at the storytelling venue, *The Moth*. In the monologue, Gladwell delivers a humorous account of his "first real job" as a beat reporter at the *Washington Post*, where he mastered his professional anxieties by inserting invented facts in stories and challenging fellow journalists to frivolous contests over how many times they could work phrases like "perverse and often baffling" into their stories over the course of a week. Not everyone who listened to the segment found Gladwell's story humorous. *Slate* columnist Jack Shafer wrote, "If [the monologue is] an elaborate joke, no writer appears to get it." Numerous national publications and prominent bloggers took Gladwell's anecdotes for truth, even though at the end of the *This American Life* segment, Glass issued the following disclaimer: "Malcolm Gladwell, on stage at the Moth, where people come to tell both true stories and occasional tall tales. […] By the way, if there's any ambiguity in here at all, young journalists please note, putting false information into the

were quietly removed from *This American Life*'s website. When asked about the Gladwell case, Ira Glass was forgiving: "It seemed best for the story if this were kept a little vague. I thought it would be lousy and undermining and killjoyish if—at the end of a story—a radio host came on and said 'that wasn't true.' Seemed nicer and more artful to simply raise the possibility that it might or might not be true. I figured: the audience is smart. A little goes a long way."[60]

Even if we concede that these cases are not strictly comparable to Daisey's, the sheer volume and intensity of the reaction to Daisey should give us pause.[61] The decision alone to devote an entire episode to discrediting Daisey—an unprecedented move in *This American Life*'s history—is enough to indicate this, but the disproportionality can also be quantified. A Google search for simultaneous occurrences of "Mike Daisey" and "This American Life" after "Retraction" aired on March 16, 2012, turns up nearly 8,000 results; a NewsBank search of American newspapers and magazines produces 281 and a LexisNexis search produces 450. The same searches for David Sedaris and Malcolm Gladwell turn up, respectively, 40, 13 and 0; and 55, 13 and 1.

Granted, these quantities and intensities cannot only be attributed an unacceptable vision of U.S.-China relationality offered by *Agony/Ecstasy*. Much of it can be attributed to the power of the Apple lobby and the vexed role of facts in the journalism and theater communities, as well as those communities' own institutional histories: for instance, the way that "an ever growing (though hardly new) genre of documentary theater is blurring the boundary [between fact and fiction] from one side, and the ever growing (though hardly new) theatricalization of news is eroding it from the other. Fox, for example, beats every playhouse in town at invoking spectators' willing suspension of disbelief…"[62] However, the extremity of the disproportion suggests that something else is at stake here. Another way to frame the question very much at the center of the present chapter's inquiry is what, if any, content about the U.S.-China relationship is produced in the act of turning away from Chinese facts—here, to focus on professional anxieties? During the question and answer period at the Public's forum, Eustis quips: "This discussion isn't about changing labor conditions in China. This discussion is about a group of theater artists." What do we learn from the act of eliding labor conditions in China?

Eustis's quip is almost certainly made in ignorance of the increasingly visible theatre work by Chinese migrant workers—for example, Mok Chiu-Yu's Asian People's Theatre and Asian Migrants Theatre Company (Hong Kong), Assignment Theatre (Taiwan), Thai Women's Association, Indonesian Migrant Women Workers' Union, the Theatre with Migrants Project (Philippines), Philippine Education Theater Association, Black Tent Theater of Tokyo—in which there is no distinction between theater work and labor conditions. If he, like Williamson, elides Sinological realism, it is because American discourse on China lacks the deep identifications and analogies necessary for China to matter in our thinking about American problems. If all this seems like an extremely roundabout of saying that Orientalism is alive and well, then I would draw our attention back to the second hypothesis I posed, and indeed to the varying logics of

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newspaper is wrong." See Malcolm Gladwell, "Tough News Room," in "Tough Room," Episode #348, *This American Life*, WBEZ Chicago Public Radio (Chicago: WBEZ, February 8, 2008); Jack Shafer, "The Fibbing Point: Separating Bunk from Fact in Malcolm Gladwell's Performance at a New York Storytelling Forum," *Slate.com*, March 19, 2008, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/press_box/2008/03/the_fibbing_point.html.

[60] Shafer, "The Fibbing Point."

[61] Searches conducted on February 28, 2012.

[62] Solomon, "Mike Check," 6.

Orientalism that I outlined in the previous chapter. "China" makes a difference here. While the disavowals of these subjective accounts produce no *positive* content for Sinological realism, what their quantities and intensities delineate upon closer examination is a space for that content to emerge. That is, even though much of the content of the controversy involves the airing of hurt personal feelings, the shape that cumulatively forms is of what Raymond Williams calls a "structure of feeling." It is not simply that Eustis and Williamson disavow Sinological realism to focus on local problems. Those problems—the "balmy ascendancy of the Clintonite middle class" and the aesthetic crisis in the theater provoked by corporatization and privatization—have their origins in the neoliberalism forged in the U.S.-China relationship. Which is to say that the feelings Eustis and Williamson struggle to manage emanate from a structure of feeling that emerges because they are not yet conscious of themselves as *objects* of U.S.-China neoliberalism. It is this structure of feeling that we perceive in the process of eliding Sinological realism. What we are left with is thus a far more complex historiographical problem than what a binary Orientalism would allow us to perceive.

In the following sections, my readings of *Agony/Ecstasy* will show how the monologue itself attempts, albeit clumsily and sometimes unsuccessfully, to account for the difference that China makes. Its avowal of Sinological realism is most powerfully registered at the level of form. As I have already suggested, the dialectical suspension in which the China and Apple/Jobs narratives are held allows this realism to emerge, and for the most part protects it—at least within the formal system of the monologue—from the reifications that Glass and Williamson perform. In other words, it is this suspension that produces the "total exposure"—the "politics"—that refuses to be massaged into "puddles of personal experience."

Characterization and Racial Form

The striking imagery that many reviewers credit for the monologue's rhetorical force is generated in large part through Daisey's techno-Orientalist descriptions of characters and scenes in China. As I argued in the previous chapter, one of the distinctions of China-inflected techno-Orientalist racialization in the postsocialist era is that it can inscribe its forms by activating an authoritarian/democratic binary. This binary is one of the conduits of the specifically *Chinese* content bestowed upon techno-Orientalist racial form beginning in the 1990s, and it is strikingly activated by Daisey's gothic imagery. Foxconn's Shenzhen compound is described as a fortress designed to prevent escape in all forms, including suicide: "I look up past the gates and the guards [who are carrying guns, Daisey alleges], I look up at the buildings, these immense buildings, they are so enormous, and along the edges of each enormous building are the nets. Because right at the time that I am making this visit, there's been an epidemic of suicides at the Foxconn plant."[63] Descriptions of the dormitories evoke images of dungeons, prisons, concentration camps, and "hard" authoritarianism:

> …cement cubes, ten foot by twelve foot—and in that space, there are thirteen beds. Fourteen beds. I count fifteen beds. They're stacked up like Jenga puzzle pieces all the way up to the ceiling. The space between them is so narrow none of us would actually fit

[63] *Agony/Ecstasy*, 31.

> in them—they have to slide into them like coffins. There are cameras in the rooms, there are cameras in the hallways, there are cameras everywhere.[64]

Damsels are provided in the form of underage female workers, whom Daisey alleges are as young as twelve years-old.[65] Foxconn's immense factory floor, despite being occupied by "twenty, twenty-five, thirty thousand workers," is nonetheless eerily "silent" because "you're demerited if you ever speak on the line."[66] At the end of the monologue, Daisey tells his audiences that the next time they sit at their computers, they "will see the blood welling up between the keys."[67] The wager of my argument about China-inflected techno-Orientalism is that even without obvious Chinese referents like place-names, this mix of authoritarian and technological tropes, played upon 21st century American ears, nonetheless evokes "China." And when brought to bear upon a human figure, it produces Chinese racial form.

A more straightforward techno-Orientalist racialization takes place in what is frequently described as one of the monologue's most "moving," "emotional" and "affecting" scenes. Daisey meets a worker whose right hand is "twisted up into a claw" from being crushed in metal press at Foxconn.[68] "[Y]ou know what you do with a defective part in a machine that makes machines," Daisey comments—"You throw it away."[69] After interviewing him, Daisey presents him with an iPad, which is one of the products he helped to assemble:

> He's never actually seen one on. This thing that took his hand.
>
> I turn it on, unlock the screen, pass it to him. He takes it. The icons flare into view. And he strokes the screen with his ruined hand, and the icons slide back and forth, and he says something to Cathy, and Cathy says, "He says it's a kind of magic."
>
> *<<silence>>*[70]

The power of this scene might be accounted for by its condensation of a number of imaginary relations. In addition to its dramatization of the alienation of the worker from his product, this scene offers a melancholic portrayal of the unevenness of global modernity. When the "claw man" touches the iPad, the "not yet" looming over the developing world collapses for the briefest of moments. The intimacy of this digital (in both senses of the word) contact brings to mind a neocolonial reading of Michelangelo's "Creation of Adam," in which the moment of contact is also the moment of humanization through the conferral of a techno-Utopian democratic spirit. Read against the backdrop of the monologue's quasi-Christian *topoi*—its titular "agony" and "ecstasy," ironic deification of Jobs, confessional, and economy of sin and redemption—it is

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[64] Ibid, 44–45.
[65] Ibid, 31.
[66] Ibid, 43.
[67] Ibid, 60.
[68] Ibid, 56. Among the many articles that specifically mention the power of this scene are David Zax, "Mike Daisey, Storyteller," *MIT Technology Review*, March 20, 2012, http://www.technologyreview.com/view/427284/mike-daisey-storyteller/; Eric Alterman, "Steve Jobs: An American 'Disgrace,'" *The Nation*, November 28, 2011, 9; Rebecca J. Rosen, "'This American Life' Retracts Its Apple Story," *TheAtlantic.com*, March 16, 2012, http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/03/this-american-life-retracts-its-apple-story/254636/; Adrian Chen, "How I Was Duped by Mike Daisey's Lies," *Gawker.com*, March 19, 2012, http://gawker.com/5894216/how-i-was-duped-by-mike-daiseys-lies.
[69] *Agony/Ecstasy*, 55.
[70] Ibid, 56.

unsurprising that this scene has proven to be so powerful among audiences. The iPad promises the unleashing of democratic desire followed by the *de facto* conversion of the entire world into an unbroken democratic space. We perceive the melancholia structuring this moment in our inkling that this is *not* actually a scene of contact. The glass between the "claw man's" finger and the iPad's screen symbolizes the invisible yet concrete reality of the economic and social structures that prevent him from possessing an iPad in the first place—that moreover secure the iPad as Daisey's property, and make the iPad "magic" as opposed to a mere appliance.

We can also see in this scene how Sinological realism is produced by the troubling of Orientalist racial form. The racialization of the "claw man" as a techno-coolie stands in contrast to Cathy's deracinated cosmopolitanism and her mediation of his voice. Indeed, throughout the monologue, Cathy plays the role not only of native informant, but also as a surrogate for Daisey and his American audiences. Even as Daisey exaggerates his conspicuousness as an "ugly American"—"At the end of the day, I am large, I am American, and I am wearing a fucking Hawaiian shirt"—Cathy smoothly facilitates interactions between Daisey and his Chinese subjects.[71] The difference between Cathy's professional Chinese-American-ness and the "claw man's" subaltern status produces an impression of the diversity of the Chinese people that registers as real or accurate. Moreover, Daisey's use of Cathy to facilitate his various improvisations—posing as a journalist and businessman in order to gain access to various aspects of the electronics supply-chain in Shenzhen—provides instructions for how to engage pragmatically with Chinese difference, and how that engagement might produce a critical realism that can be then acted upon.

When Daisey performs the "claw man" scene, he waves his hand in front of his face, miming the "claw man's" gesture. The "magic" of the iPad is of the same order of reality as the Sinological realism created in this scene—it exists at the level of form and belief rather than empirical fact. The "claw man" becomes real not because of Daisey's virtuosic miming or mimetic abilities, but because an economy of sin and redemption makes the American neoliberal subject believe in his/her responsibility for him, and to him. The imperatives emanating from this feeling of responsibility take on a reality. The global supply-chain—"Designed by Apple in California. Assembled in China."—that the "claw man's" body registers, albeit abstractly, also takes on a reality. This chain of associations not only bestows reality to a specific narrative of the U.S.-China relationship, it also makes the American neoliberal subject legible to him/herself. S/he becomes keenly aware in scenes like these of the difference between his/her immaterial labor (symbolized by Apple) and the "claw man's" very different kind of labor. This is a point Daisey drives home when, in the midst of complaining about watching PowerPoint presentations being the "Worst job in the fucking world," he abruptly corrects himself as he is led to the floor of an electronics factory: "I retract my previous assertion because this is the worst job in the fucking world."[72] The mirroring here is enacted in the two sentences' parallel structure.

One of Daisey's key rhetorical strategies is to place his characters on a frustrated trajectory of democratic subject formation: "[Y]ou need to know," he implores, invoking a distinctly post-Tiananmen narrative, "that these people are among the best and brightest of their generation. … These are exactly the people who could have the spirit to think about

[71] Ibid, 27.
[72] Ibid, 43.

democracy."[73] Paradoxically, both authoritarianism *and* a desire for democracy become postsocialist indexes of Chinese racial form. Indeed, the resonance he is striking here is drawn from universalist human rights discourses that have the potential to racialize non-democratic subjects in terms of lack and desire.

This racialization based on lack occurs in another key scene. The idea for *Agony/Ecstasy* came to Daisey while he was browsing Apple fan forums. He stumbled upon a post in which a user had uploaded four photos that s/he had found already loaded into a newly purchased iPhone. The last was of a woman—and it was this one that arrested Daisey.[74] "She doesn't know her picture's being taken. She's looking off in another direction, she's wearing a clean suit, she has no expression on her face."[75] These were test photos taken by line workers inside Foxconn. As Daisey explains in the monologue:

> I downloaded [this picture] to my desktop and I put [it] in a folder on my desktop, and in the weeks and months that followed I found myself returning to [it] again and again, almost compulsively. … Who are these people? … until I saw [that picture], it was only then that I realized that I had never thought, ever, in a dedicated way, about how they were made. … I think what I thought is they were made by robots.[76]

The evacuation of the woman's interiority and her pliability conform to a familiar menu of Asian racial forms. Her juxtaposition to technology and robots, moreover, along with the instant reproducibility and repetition of her image make her a paradigmatic example of Japanese-inflected techno-Orientalism. In different hands, the Chinese techno-coolies Daisey portrays might have been called upon to activate fears of the "yellow peril" and China as a "sleeping giant." But in *Agony/Ecstasy* they provoke sympathy and identification. Consequently, even as they attest to the continuing relevance of Colleen Lye's insight that the Chinese coolie signals the "appearance of the otherness of Western modernity to itself," the sympathy provoked by Daisey interrupts the techno-Orientalist *telos* of this narrative of otherness.[77] Crucially, Daisey's monologue is not *only* a critique of Apple's sourcing practices, or the "mechanical abstraction" of the coolie from his humanity as a catalyst and consequence of industrialization[78]—it is also a trenchant critique of the blindness of the creative classes of workers for whom Apple's products have become a potent fetish. This is the subject matter of the Apple/Jobs narrative, which I will look at more closely in the next section. If the racial form of the techno-coolie is the mirror in which the American neoliberal subject becomes visible to him/herself, then it is worth pointing out the perhaps obvious fact that this mirroring does not occur in the visual. Instead, it occurs in

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[73] Ibid, 45.

[74] Though it is rare that these test photos survive the quality assurance process, Apple forums are replete with them. Photos of the workers themselves, however, are extremely rare.

[75] *Agony/Ecstasy*, 16.

[76] *Agony/Ecstasy*, 17.

[77] Lye is writing about labor discourses and literary works of "California naturalism" at the turn of the 20th century, to be sure. The Daisey controversy demonstrates the persistence of this analogy. Colleen Lye, "Meat versus Rice: Frank Norris, Jack London, and the Critique of Monopoly Capitalism," *America's Asia: Racial Form and American Literature, 1893–1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 56. On the symbolic relation between coolies and the development of global capitalism, see Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane*; and Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

[78] Lye, 56.

the techno-coolie's mediation of what Bruce Robbins calls "feeling global."[79] Better, then, would be to say the American neoliberal subject *feels* him/herself, as well as a U.S.-China totality, through the techno-coolie.

With the photo of the "iPhone girl,"[80] Daisey draws from a tradition of photo-journalism in which a striking, often violent photograph receives wide circulation and eventually provokes international intervention: what John Berger calls "atrocity photos."[81] The differences between how these photos are typically read, and how Daisey reads his, reveal important features of Sinological realism. An example from a different context might help to illustrate this point. Reflecting on the influence of the famous photo of Ferida Osmanovic—a Serbian Muslim who hung herself from a tree out of despair after shepherding her two small children to the alleged "safe zone" in Srebrenica—Lorna Martin writes:

> The photograph of Ferida Osmanovic was published on front pages across the world soon after the fall of Srebrenica on 11 July, 1995. It prompted a series of questions in the U.S. Senate by those concerned about Bosnia's war. What was her name, where was she from, what humiliations and depravations did she suffer, had she been raped, did she witness loved ones being killed?[82]

The photo produced an outcry that led to NATO's intervention a month later. But not a single commentator in the entirety of the Daisey controversy mentions the "iPhone girl" photo. The fact that audiences are never shown the photo during Daisey's performances seems beside the point compared to some of the more significant differences between how Daisey reads his photo and how Martin reads hers. Both Daisey and Martin are intrigued by the totality indexed by their photos, but in their initial moves toward unpacking that totality, they part ways drastically. Martin inquires after the figure's individual biography; Daisey pluralizes the woman he sees: "Who are *these* people?" Martin establishes a "type" in the Lukácsian sense: not a reified stereotype, but an average figure whose averageness is the product of objective forces brought into crisis by the repeatability of that figure across a social totality. In contrast, the repeatability that Daisey evokes by seeing in the "iPhone girl" a metonym for Chinese masses, and that he engages in when he returns to the "iPhone girl's" photo "compulsively"—this repeatability suggests a Japan-inflected aesthetics of the reified particular. The charge is worsened by what he says just a few lines later about the origin of his assumption about robots manufacturing his electronics: "I had an image in my mind that I now realize I just stole from a *60 Minutes* story about Japanese automotive plants. I just copy-and-pasted that and I was like, *PWOP*, command-V…it looks like that."

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[79] The tensions between internationalism and nationalism that Robbins explores in *Feeling Global* will emerge when I turn to the function that Sinological realism plays in 21st century American exceptionalism. "My premise," Robbins writes, "is that the forms of global feeling are continuous with forms of national feeling. This implies that, though the potential for a conflict of loyalties is always present, cosmopolitanism or internationalism does not take its primary meaning or desirability from an absolute and intrinsic opposition to nationalism. Rather, it is an extension outward of the same sorts of potent and dangerous solidarity," *Feeling Global: Internationalism in Distress* (New York: NYU Press, 1999), 6.

[80] Which is what the Chinese media and Apple fan forums have come to call the young female workers who sometimes appear in these test photos.

[81] John Berger, *About Looking* (London: Writers & Readers, 1980).

[82] Lorna Martin, "Truth Behind the Picture that Shocked the World," *The Guardian* (UK), April 16, 2005.

One might argue that the kind of "totality" *Agony/Ecstasy* manages to represent with tropes like these is limited by its characterization of China and the Chinese in the vocabularies of vulgar Orientalism and techno-Orientalism. This limitation is most keenly felt, for instance, when these tropes entangle Daisey in a network of stereotypes and pop-cultural references, preventing his perspective from rising to the vantage point of totality. He describes the Chungking Mansions—an enormous building-cum-slum in Hong Kong—as "a wretched hive of scum and villainy": a line taken from *Star Wars*.[83] Shenzhen is "a city without history" that looks "like *Blade Runner* threw up on itself."[84] The migrant workers Daisey meets are bumpkins without interiority: "such innocents that they'd never considered what they would change about the factories until Daisey asked them," writes Evan Osnos.[85]

However, even as Daisey deploys these vulgar Orientalist forms, he does two things with them that produce Sinological realism. First, the quickness with which he self-diagnoses his penchant for stereotyping and relying on reified particulars emphasizes that these Japan-inflected figures are emanations of his own neuroses.[86] As I will show in the next section, Daisey tries to represent these neuroses as emerging from an encounter between his revelations about U.S.-China supply chains and his erotic and quasi-religious attachments to Apple products and what is often called "The Cult of Mac." By baring the device of his own stereotyping process, and locating the origin of that stereotype in a media ecology (indexed by *60 Minutes*), Daisey contributes to the realism of Sinological realism, which is here the pragmatic refusal of binary Orientalism. Moreover, he demonstrates to his audience that one cannot wait until one has finally dereified all of one's frameworks for the world before pursuing an aspiration to totality. While earnestness on this score still cannot protect him from committing the abuses of reification, the second thing Daisey does with these forms—place them dialectical relation to Jobs and himself—staves off the disavowal of Sinological realism (if only within the confines of *Agony/Ecstasy*).

In the opening scene of the monologue, Daisey ventures into the Chungking Mansions to see a man who will "jailbreak" his iPhone for a fee: that is, hack his iPhone to enable it to do all the things that Apple's notoriously closed operating system prohibits. His description of this man as a textbook "console cowboy" from the cyberpunk canon has an added 21st century resonance with images of Chinese technological piracy and luxury brand knock-offs: "He's a hacker, a jailbreaker, an unlocker, a person you go to fiddle with the baseband of your phone, a person who writes tailored viruses to crack your phone open and give it back to you again, because—you may not know this—but there's a war going on right now over all those devices in your pockets. A war over who owns them."[87] The "war" Daisey refers to is a legal debate over ownership between cell phone subscribers and providers.[88] In short, the heavily subsidized prices

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[83] *Agony/Ecstasy*, 8.

[84] Ibid, 24.

[85] Evan Osnos, "Apple, China, and the Truth," Letter from China, *NewYorker.com*, March 17, 2012. http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/evanosnos/2012/03/mike-daiseys-mistakes-in-china.html

[86] Later, when puzzling through the paradox he allegedly encounters at the gates of Foxconn between the workers' ostensible cheeriness and the adverse conditions that Daisey expects to find, he admits to the audience: "I have only a passing familiarity with Chinese culture and to call what I have a passing familiarity is an insult to Chinese culture—I don't know fuck-all about Chinese culture," *Agony/Ecstasy*, 31.

[87] *Agony/Ecstasy*, 10.

[88] Which was ultimately resolved by the *Unlocking Consumer Choice and Wireless Competition Act*, H.R. 1123, 113th Congress (2013–2014).

of cell phones are offered by providers with the understanding that a subscriber will remain with that phone and provider for the duration of that subscriber's contract. "Locking" a cell phone—preventing it from being used on another provider's network—ensures that the provider will eventually recover the cost of the subsidy. Prior to legislation passed in 2013, it was illegal for subscribers to unlock their phones, making it unclear who ultimately owned a subsidized cell phone. However, people like the pirate Daisey visits can easily use illegal software to "unlock" a phone—and therefore provide the means of undermining one of the world's largest and fastest-growing industries, and the one that is currently the emblem and imaginative heart of the New Economy.[89] American legalistic quibbles over ownership seem atavistic when the pirate says (ventriloquized through Daisey), "It's me against Apple. Who do you think is going to win?" With this question, a number of discourses on the contest between "Western" and "Asian" capitalism shuffle into view, as well as insinuations of resistance to the Western imperium.[90]

This binarism gets displaced when Daisey places the pirate and Jobs on equal footing. His characterizations of Jobs are aimed at knocking him off the pedestal upon which the enthusiasts of the New Economy have come to worship him. The parts of Jobs' biography Daisey luxuriates in, for example, are of Jobs brazenly stealing the ideas of subordinates and bullying Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak. Apple is Orientalized, moreover, when Daisey describes its extension of the "locked" phone model into the depths of its operating system (PCs, in contrast, have "open" hardware and software standards) using the tropes of "soft" authoritarianism. Here he ventriloquizes Apple, but at this point in the monologue Daisey has already established that the voice of Apple and the voice of Jobs are indistinguishable:

> WE ARE APPLE. Have we not always given you the very finest devices? Have we not given you the best user experience?
>
> We did that because *we* have exquisite taste.
>
> *We* have exquisite taste.
>
> And you…do not.
>
> We are going to protect you from your taste.
>
> We are going to lock this shit down once and for all. And let's be clear—you're going love [sic] what's coming next, but this is the end of the garage, this is the end of hacking your own shit […]—this is the rise of the consumer.
>
> And that will be your role. You will consume.
>
> […]
>
> But you will not mind…because you will never leave. Why would you leave? They're the very best devices in the world, are they not?

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[89] In the US, nearly 1/3rd of all cell phone subscribers have "unlocked" their phones illegally. Daryl Deino, "Third of Americans will still unlock cell phones illegally despite court ruling," *Examiner.com*, February 10, 2013, http://www.examiner.com/article/third-of-americans-will-still-unlock-cell-phones-illegally-despite-court-ruling.

[90] *Agony/Ecstasy*, 11. As Kavita Philip writes, "Anti-piracy discourses now frequently intersect with anti-terrorist security discourses, where both pirates and terrorists function as threats to free markets and civilized nations… The very technologies that appear to embody post-Enlightenment modernity and progress seem to facilitate the destruction of western civilization by those who 'hate our values and freedoms,'" in "What Is a Technological Author? The Pirate Function and Intellectual Property," *Postcolonial Studies* 8.2 (2005): 201.

> You will use them, and you will love them.
>
> You will love them, and they will own you.[91]

The distinction between the monologue's portrayals of U.S. and Chinese capitalism blurs in moments like these: both are authoritarian. Daisey never ventures an answer to the question of who will win this contest, but by placing its two possible answers in dialectical relation, he suggests that rather than a winner and a loser, the situation produces two winners. He thus defuses the binary Orientalism implicit in the global division of labor that relegates design to California and assembly to China. In that binary, Sinological realism can only ever be seen as tossing about in the turbulent wake of a narrative of technological American capitalism. What Daisey manages to do in *Agony/Ecstasy* is use the hollow binarism of Asian racial form to buoy Sinological realism, and thus makes it possible for us to conceptualize a genuinely U.S.-China aesthetic and subject form.

I know very well, but nevertheless…

To the extent that Sinological realism gives rise to a cognitive map or critical realism, it is, by itself, at best a deficient mode: akin to the paranoid conspiracy theories that Fredric Jameson calls a "degraded attempt … to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system."[92] What redeems its critical potential are the contradictions that it produces when brought into the context of a waning American hegemony. A dirty wide-angle lens will still bring in more light than a pancake lens. A final issue that now needs to be resolved concerns not the construction and avowal, but the disavowal of Sinological realism. As I have already suggested, this disavowal bespeaks a logic of fetishism that provides answers to the puzzle of the controversy's hue and cry. What I want to do in this section is examine how fetishism operates in Daisey's monologue and the discourse more broadly. Again, my heuristic interest in this structure is in how it elucidates features of U.S.-China neoliberal subject formation—specifically, as a mode of what Michel Feher calls "self-appreciation"—as it interacts with Sinological realism and exceptionalist feeling. We will need to begin with the more straightforward scenes of fetishism in the monologue, then work outward to its more complex structuring of the debate over facts and knowledge production at the center of the controversy.

Daisey makes it very clear that the fetishization of Apple products, at least in its conventional sense as "an extravagant irrational devotion," is one of his primary targets of critique.[93] In a confession that opens the Apple/Jobs section, he tells us:

> My only hobby is technology.
>
> I love technology, I love everything about it. I love looking at technology, I love comparing one piece of technology with another, I love reading rumors about technology that doesn't exist yet, I love browsing technology, I love buying technology, I love opening technology—even when it's in that bubble packaging—I love it. I love the smell of a new piece of technology—that sort of burnt PVC smell when you run electricity through it the first time?—

[91] Daisey, *Steve Jobs* [v1.0], 52.
[92] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 38.
[93] *Merriam-Webster*, s.v., "Fetishism."

I love that.

And of all the kinds of technology that I love in the world, I love the technology that comes from Apple the most.

Because I am an Apple aficionado, I am an Apple partisan, I am an Apple fanboy, I am a worshipper in the cult of Mac. I have been to the House of Jobs, I have walked through the stations of his cross, I have knelt before his throne.[94]

The connection between this rather erotic scene and neoliberal subject formation is not, of course, immediately apparent, but we can see its outline in the metaphorical collapse of the calculating functions of the computer with the deepest intimacies of the personal. For Daisey, Apple's industrial design and product cycle generate and intensify these erotics: "Like I never knew that I *needed* a laptop so thin I could slice a sandwich with it. I didn't know that. But then I saw it. And I *wanted* it."[95] On Apple's penchant for the "forced upgrade," Daisey says: "Just when you think everything is finally working out, just when you think all of your systems are in alignment—not only in their capabilities but also aesthetically—just when you think everything you own can actually speak to one another—he [Jobs] fucks you."[96] To varying degrees, the same things could be said of number of electronics manufacturers (the craze over Motorola's RAZR phone in 2004 comes to mind). What distinguishes Apple, however—what has transformed it into such a potent symbol of neoliberal immaterial labor and the "creative class"—is its ideological resonance with neoliberalism, captured in Daisey's description of Jobs as "someone who believed passionately in the power of technology to transform all our lives, and believed that transformation could be welded to humanist values."[97]

At issue specifically is how members of this class envision the uncomplicated convergence of, on the one hand, their aspirations to transcend the alienations of neoliberal capitalism through "creative" labor, and, on the other, Apple's driving philosophy of *design*, which famously claims to resolve the antinomy of what C. P. Snow has called the "two cultures" by marrying the "humanities with sciences." Indeed, Daisey is well aware of the resonances of this philosophy with some of the central features of the New Economy. Simon Sadler explains this connection by aligning Apple's philosophy of "design" with a historiography of California's symbolic power in the global economy: "design—particularly Californian design—often wants to *do good*, it seems; it wants to *reform*, to *progress*… To study Californian design, I find, is to study formations of liberalism, which puts it in the eye of the storm of contemporary globalization."[98] This is echoed by R. John Williams, who sees nothing unique in Apple's fetishization of "design" aside from its being the most profitable instance of a predominant trend in contemporary capitalism. The fusion of the aesthetic and the technical, the human and the rational, the spiritual and the economic, has, he writes, "come to occupy an especially privileged space in the technologically saturated realms of network capitalism and particularly the corporate management theories that currently dominate international business practice."[99] These

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[94] *Agony/Ecstasy*, 12.

[95] Ibid, 13.

[96] Ibid, 13.

[97] Ibid, 19.

[98] Simon Sadler, "A Culture of Connection: How Design Makes Us All Californian," *Boom: A Journal of California* 2.1 (Spring 2012): 3.

[99] Indeed, Williams' relentlessly fascinating article "Technê-Zen and the Spiritual Quality of Late Capitalism" demonstrates that Japanese Zen Buddhist principles can be found at the very core of post-World War II global

descriptions of a techno-Utopian global capitalism, and the affects that sustain it, have become quite a familiar refrain in the career of American exceptionalism over the last fifteen or twenty years. What distinguishes Daisey's monologue is its central claim that such fusions are only possible via the disavowal of Chinese techno-coolies and their exploitation by American multinationals. If Apple looms large over an era in which "technological innovation (computational, organizational, pharmacological, and so on) is offered by multinational corporations as yet another path toward enlightenment," then we can begin to perceive one sense in which Daisey's fetishism feeds into neoliberal doctrines of self-investment, which, as Feher explains, are made homologous with doctrines of self-esteem.[100]

What distinguishes the "neoliberal condition" from liberal capitalism, Feher argues, is that its subjects are interpellated not as *consumers*, but as *producers*: "as entrepreneurs of themselves, or, more precisely, as investors in themselves, as human capital that wishes to appreciate and to value itself and thus allocate its skills accordingly."[101] As opposed to the "possessive" relationship that the liberal, Fordist subject has with itself (the possessor of wages, rights, labor, etc.), neoliberal subjects have a "speculative" relationship with their identities and life plans.[102] A central aspiration of neoliberal subject-formation, then, is "not so much to profit from [one's] accumulated potential as to constantly value or appreciate [oneself]."[103] "Self-appreciation" therefore involves "a contest between different ways of appreciating and valuing oneself, a competition over the conditions and modalities of the valorizing of human capital, over what behaviors deserve to be included in my portfolio because they allow me to appreciate and to value myself."[104]

Apple's facilitation of self-appreciation takes place not just in theory, but in practice as well. Daisey even goes so far as to suggest that his erotic attachment to Apple products is indistinguishable from his aesthetic production and his own deepest ego-identifications—they all emerge from the same stream of cathexis. In a wistful recollection of his childhood in Maine, Daisey talks about his first computer, an Apple IIc and the reverence it was afforded as an exotic and exorbitantly expensive appliance in a blue-collar household: "[I]t was given its own room—the Computer Room—where it sat in its own desk, and we had to ask permission to go and speak

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capitalism. Not only has Pirsig's novel—and, more often, the formula it inaugurated, "Zen and the Art of"—been cited in the most influential management theory books of the last forty years, but the sublimation of man and machine that is his novel's central conceit ("a new 'Zen' effort to live with (rather than rage against) machines," as Williams puts it) has become inextricable from the Silicon Valley culture that has become a model for a certain practice of flexible, "network" capitalism (19). Williams offers as a paradigmatic example the now iconic counter-cultural biography of Steve Jobs, who embarked upon a mystical questi in India in the early-'70s and later spent a great deal of time at the Los Altos Zen Center. "It is not irrelevant," he argues, "that the iPod, iMac, and iPad hearken back, in both aesthetic and homonymic approximation, to the iChing, or that the iPod stole its layout from Creative Worldwide, Inc.'s Zen mp3 player" (49). He goes on to cite one of the first spreadsheet programs for the personal computer, Lotus 1-2-3, and the origins of its name in its creator's transcendental meditation retreat; and then Larry Ellison's company Oracle, whose corporate culture attempts to "replicate" Japanese Zen culture (ibid). R. John Williams, "Technê-Zen and the Spiritual Quality of Late Capitalism," *Critical Inquiry* 38.1 (Autumn, 2011): 17-70.

[100] Williams, "Technê-Zen," 20.

[101] Feher, 30-31.

[102] Ibid, 34.

[103] Ibid, 31.

[104] Ibid, 31.

with the computer."[105] This is one in a series of superegoic substitutions (father, computer; God, Steve Jobs) that structures Daisey's erotics. When Daisey realizes that he "became a writer on that machine," we not only imagine a young man attempting to make good on his father's investment in his future, we also see the conflation of the act of writing with the act of desiring technology. Not only does Daisey use an Apple to write, *he writes in order to use an Apple*. In this regard, Daisey, one might say, is Apple's ideal customer—as well as an ideal user: the evidence here being the voluminous body of artistic work he has produced with his various Apple computers. His employment at Amazon, and the beginning of his career as a theater artist in the wake of his departure from the New Economy, might both be said to be overdetermined by these fetishistic connections.[106]

Freud does not in fact say very much about fetishism.[107] The only essay he dedicates to the topic appears in 1927, and there he is not altogether clear on the topic. What he says is that, upon realizing that the female body lacks a penis, the boy retains the belief that it does, but also gives up that belief: "In the conflict between the weight of the unwelcome perception and the force of his counter-wish, a compromise has been reached." That compromise, he says, is the fetish, which is therefore a "token of triumph over the threat of castration and a protection against it."[108] Freud does not adequately elaborate on the ramifications of maintaining the two incompatible realities—"The attitude which fitted in with the wish and the attitude which fitted in with reality existed side by side"—but his insight here directs him away from fetishism to a metapsychological interest in "ego-splitting," which he will not take up until the end of his life.[109]

The best explication of the logic of fetishism is offered by Octave Mannoni, who emphasizes the role of disavowal (*Verleugnung*) and identifies it in the formula: "Je sais bien,

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[105] *Agony/Ecstasy*, 21.

[106] Something that must be noted here is that, with *Agony/Ecstasy*, China became a "career" for Daisey (to use Benjamin Disraeli's word for the "East"). "Apple Factory" was soon knocked out of its spot as the number one most downloaded and streamed episode of *This American Life*—by "Retraction." As of this writing, both episodes have retained their positions. After "Retraction" aired, *Agony/Ecstasy* was promoted as "the most notorious and controversial play of the decade" and "more powerful, funny and engaging than the earlier production," Charles Isherwood, "'The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs,' Take 2," *New York Times*, July 26, 2012. During a time in the American theatre in which the disconnect between writers and institutions are created and exacerbated by funding cuts and neoliberal management principles—a situation that Daisey critiques in his monologue *How Theater Failed America* (2008)—Daisey and his wife Jean-Michele Gregory have somehow learned to flourish. (For more on the recent controversy over the disconnect between theater administrators and artists, see Todd London, Ben Pesner, and Zannie Giraud Voss, *Outrageous Fortune: The Life and Times of the New American Play* [New York: Theatre Development Fund, 2009]). According to Howard Shalwitz, the artistic director of Woolly Mammoth, "Mike and Jean-Michele are like a mini-theater company. I can't think of a more productive company. He's got a drive that is just astounding. He just doesn't stop," quoted in Pressley, "An Onion of a Guy vs. Apple, Part 2." Paradoxically, Daisey's critique of neoliberalism has entailed his transformation into an ideal, self-appreciating neoliberal subject.

[107] According to the editors of the Standard Edition, the earliest discussion of the topic appears in *Three Essays on Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1905/1975), and is expanded in footnotes to the 1910 and 1915 editions. Some passages also appear in his study of Gradiva (1907), and in his study of the "Rat Man" (1909). Additionally, he delivered two papers on the topic, in 1909 and 1914, to the Vienna Psycho-Analytical Society.

[108] Freud, 154.

[109] Namely, in his 1938 essay, "Splitting of the Ego in the Process of Defense."

mais quand-même" (I know very well, but nevertheless).[110] He continues: "there is only a fetish because the fetishist *knows very well* that women have no phallus."[111] The disavowed content, in other words, is never repressed, never under negation: it sits there in the open, like the proverbial 300 lbs. gorilla in the room. In his explication of totalitarian psychology, Slavoj Žižek usefully intensifies Mannoni's formula by identifying a mode of fetishism in which one's attitude towards the disavowed material is not passive—e.g., one simply ignores the gorilla—but active:

> The totalitarian… in his version of the emperor's clothes … knows very well that the emperor is naked (in the case of the communist totalitarian, that the system is actually corrupt, that talk about socialist democracy is just empty verbiage, etc.). Yet in contrast to traditional authority, what he adds is not "but nevertheless" but "just because": *just because* the emperor is naked we must stick together all the more, work for its Good, our Cause is all the more necessary.[112]

It is this redoubling of effort—the "just because"—that explains how Sinological realism actually serves to *intensify* a feeling of American exceptionalism that it is ostensibly supposed to correct. Just because the U.S. has lost geopolitical ground to China, the cause of exceptionalism is "all the more necessary." In the monologue and discourse more broadly, these formations—Sinological realism, exceptionalist feeling, neoliberal self-appreciation—interact in tropes of knowledge production. Reading these tropes through the logic of fetishism will enable us to see this interaction.

The trope of *a priori* knowledge, for instance, is frequently deployed (an instance of which we have already seen in Daisey's assumption about robots assembling his electronics). Glass explains in his opening remarks to "Apple Factory" that what he found so moving as an audience member in a New York performance of *Agony/Ecstasy* was how "[Daisey] took *this fact that we all already know*, this fact that our stuff is made overseas in maybe not the greatest working conditions, and he made the audience actually feel something about that fact. Which is really quite a trick. You really have to know how to tell a story to be able to pull something like that off."[113] The sign of disavowal here—and thus of fetishism—is the *temporal* displacement of knowledge (we "already" know). According to Mannoni, this is the kind of disavowal performed by ethnographers who dismiss superstition as something Western culture has already surmounted, "as if one could attribute it to a sort of progressive enlightenment."[114] Safely relegated to the past, this knowledge has already been assimilated into our reality. It only comes into view when one focuses on a fetish object: here, "our stuff." What Glass's disavowal makes possible is the fiction that "our stuff" is completely ours; that the transaction that brought that stuff into our possession exhausted the lines of responsibility extending from the totality of forces that brought that stuff into being. Williamson would say that the "trick" Daisey performs to make his audiences "care" about such knowledge—avow the already disavowed, so to speak—is to bring this knowledge and these lines of responsibility into the orbit of the American neoliberal subject's trajectory of self-appreciation. What I would add is that this self-appreciation

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[110] Octave Mannoni, "Je sais bien, quand même," in *Clefs pour l'imaginaire ou l'Autre Scène* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1969), 86.
[111] Ibid, 87.
[112] Slavoj Žižek, "The Totalitarian Invitation to Enjoyment," *Qui Parle* 5.1 (Fall/Winter, 1991): 95.
[113] "Mr. Daisey and the Apple Factory," my emphasis.
[114] Mannoni, 85.

necessarily produces Chinese racial form in order to generate the contrast through which appreciation might proceed.

The vagueness of this knowledge that we "already" have cannot be ignored. It coincides with the discursive space of Sinological realism, though it is not homologous with it. This *a priori* knowledge is analogous with the stereotypical material (e.g., robots) whose correction (e.g., it's not robots, it's the "iPhone girl") produces the reality-effects of Sinological realism. This process of correction is a process of self-appreciation: it contributes to a portfolio of positive behaviors *and* the self-esteem one gains from fetishizing Apple. Moreover, it allows the neoliberal subject to reconstitute him/herself upon the traumatic realization that the fetishization of Apple products has split his/her ego (i.e., I know very well about labor conditions in China, but nevertheless I fetishize Apple products). Put another way, upon hearing Glass's claim that we "already" know where our products are made and how, one realizes that one does *not* in fact have that knowledge. This provokes an urgent need for the referent, which *Agony/Ecstasy* satisfies by proxy (we/Daisey travel to Shenzhen).[115] The revelation of Daisey's fabrications, then, provokes such a massive hue and cry because it returns its target audience back to its default position of ignorance, but with the added feeling that they exchanged their exceptionalist certainty for fool's gold. The distinction between facts about labor conditions in China and Daisey's encounter with those facts is so easily conflated and dismissed because those facts were not, ultimately, what Daisey's audiences were after. If Feher's neoliberal subjects are trained to fetishize their own self-appreciation, then the intensity and volume of the Daisey controversy is akin to the reaction one has not when one's fetish is revealed as a fetish—Mannoni shows that would only lead to a "just because"—but when it is taken away. This is what Freud seems to mean when he writes, "In later life a grown man may perhaps experience a … panic when the cry goes up that Throne and Altar are in danger, and … illogical consequences will ensue."[116]

The possibility that *Agony/Ecstasy* opens up, and that the controversy, in my view, largely confirms, is that the fetishization of Apple products is, at some level, a cover for something deeper: a fetishization of a neat, global, post-Fordist division of labor ("Designed by Apple in California. Assembled in China."). As long as that fetish holds steady, then the self-

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[115] In an essay about a rather different set of issues, Jonathan Franzen demonstrates how much more convoluted this trope can be. An active birder, after receiving a golf club head cover fashioned as a puffin, his thoughts turn to the effects of climate change and overfishing on puffin populations, and then to a series of news articles he had recently read on the ecological toll of China's rapid industrialization. These associations provoke an awareness that his

> …domestic appetites were part of the same beast that was devouring the natural world in China and elsewhere in Asia; and yet… I loved the worried eyes and soft fur of my golf accessory. I didn't want to know what I knew. And yet: I couldn't stand not knowing, either. One afternoon, with a kind of grim foreboding, I went to the bedroom and grabbed the puffin by its wings and stuck it underneath a bright lamp and turned it inside out, and there, sure enough, was the label: "HANDMADE IN CHINA."
>
> I decided to visit the part of the world where the puffin came from. The industrial system that had created the fake bird was destroying real birds, and I wanted to be in a place where this connection couldn't be concealed. Basically, I wanted to know how bad things were.

As with Daisey, a sudden consciousness of one's complicity as an American consumerist subject in the dystopic totality of Chinese modernity is followed by an imperative to see things for oneself. The disavowal that Franzen describes here—"I didn't want to know what I knew"—appears straightforward enough (he wants to repress the a priori knowledge that Glass and Daisey posit). But his following statement—"I couldn't stand not knowing"—suggests a difference between the disavowed a priori knowledge, and the knowledge that he does not yet possess. "The Way of the Puffin," *New Yorker* 84.10 (April 21, 2008): 91, my italics.

[116] Freud, 153.

appreciating trajectory of the American neoliberal subject can continue apace. We can know very well that the lines of ethical responsibility—even to invented characters—extending from our electronics bespeaks a U.S.-China interdependency that perhaps undermines U.S. hegemony. And just because of that knowledge, we can also believe Daisey when he tells us that all we have to do to improve the lot of Foxconn's trammeled techno-coolies, is "care."[117]

If the avowal of Sinological realism demands the disavowal of Asian racial forms, so does the reconstitution of American neoliberal subject whose ego has been split on account of the contradictions effected by Sinological realism. We might therefore read ego-splitting in this context as the evocation of two mutually exclusive narratives: one of which, if we follow Williamson, takes the form of pathos, and the other, tragedy. The unacceptable story that Daisey tells, then, which throws the American neoliberal subject into a state of "total exposure," is the story of a form that is at once pathetically American, and tragically Chinese.

The moments in *Agony/Ecstasy* that offer the most critical potential are the ones in which Daisey troubles the kinds of facts that his audiences are expecting (reified, fact-checkable facts easily assimilable to an epistemology of investment), and instead offers a more complex model of facts based on their objective and subjective relations:

> [H]ow often do we talk about how we wish more things were handmade?
>
> Oh, we talk about that all the time, don't we?
>
> "I wish it was like the old days, I wish things had that human touch."
>
> But that's not true. There are more handmade things now than there have ever been in the history of the world. Everything is handmade. I know. I have been there. I have seen the workers laying in parts thinner than human hair, one, after another, after another.
>
> Everything is handmade.[118]

One way to measure the discursive space of Sinological realism is to consider what stands between Daisey's claim here—"There are more handmade things now…"—and facts about Chinese suffering. What makes Chinese labor conditions a fact worth checking, but the systemic horror of so many things being handmade *not* worth checking? What kind of social practice or activism would this kind of fact-checking entail?

Feher's interest in self-appreciation is not, ultimately, part of an attempt at describing the neoliberal condition. Rather, in nominating it as the fundamental modality of neoliberal subject formation, he wants to see in it a potential for resisting neoliberalism as such. Thus he advocates an *embrace* of self-appreciation that amounts to "challenging the neoliberal condition from within, that is, embracing the idea that we are all investors in our human capital, in order to contest the alleged conditions under which we appreciate ourselves." This might help to resolve the impasse on the Left between a "modern" faction "in desperate search of an appealing light version of neoliberalism," and an "authentic" Left waiting for "its putative constituents to wake up and understand where their real interests are." And so, "Instead of denouncing and lamenting

[117] *Agony/Ecstasy*, 55.
[118] Ibid, 45.

the personalization of politics as the strategy through which neoliberalism causes people to lose sight of their collective interests, playing the human capital card could thus be a way of relaunching the politicization of the personal."[119]

Agony/Ecstasy, in its politicization of Daisey's personal experiences and fantasies, might have been initially limited by its anemic activist imagination, channeling as it did the immense energy of its audiences into slacktivism. But, as should be quite clear by now, Daisey was never at any point in full control over his monologue or its reception. If, as I argued in the previous section, Daisey's "trick" was to bring an urgency for the referent (fact-checking, etc.) into the orbit of his audiences' self-appreciation, then perhaps *Agony/Ecstasy* does in fact offer, in the relationalities it produces (between handmade objects, American neoliberal subjects, Chinese techno-coolies and cosmopolitans), a different kind of referent: an international map for self-appreciation that proceeds via an aspiration to totality. That is, via an aspiration to know not just isolatable facts (whether the "claw man" exists), but their conditions of emergence and the lines of responsibility extending from them ("There are more handmade things now…").

Another possibility—a more dangerous one, certainly—is that exceptionalism, as a mode of self-appreciation on a national scale, should be encouraged rather than surmounted. We must be prepared, in other words, to answer in the affirmative Robbins' question, "can national pride be turned into an ally of internationalism?" As Feher seems to be arguing, rather than see this capitulation to an ostensibly anti-progressive ideology as a tragedy in the conventional sense (to paraphrase Williams) of uninterpreted "death and suffering" (in this case the death and suffering of a "modern" or "authentic" Left)[120], it would behoove us to see its potential in provoking "tragic consciousness"—that is, consciousness of the national limits of our self-appreciating exceptionalism. Williams' definition of this deserves repeating, here with fuller context:

> We have to see not only that suffering is avoidable, but that it is not avoided. And not only that suffering breaks us, but that it need not break us. Brecht's own words are the precise expression of this new sense of tragedy:
>
> *The sufferings of this man appal [sic] me, because they are unnecessary.*
>
> This feeling extends into a general position: the new tragic consciousness of all those who, appalled by the present, are *for this reason* firmly committed to a different future: to the struggle against suffering learned in suffering: a total exposure which is also a total involvement … not the recognition but the acceptance of a contradiction.[121]

What is this but a form of disavowal? It seems we must be prepared not only for the dangerous, but fetishism as well. *Just because* "national pride" is distasteful and threatens to foreclose internationalism, we must, *for this reason*, redouble our investments in it. By forging a connection between self-appreciation and exceptionalism, it is possible to arrive at a point where it can only proceed via internationalism. If Apple furnishes *Agony/Ecstasy* with this connection, then Sinological realism—even when it is only registered as a structure of feeling—makes possible its internationalism.

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[119] Feher, 38.
[120] Williams, 14.
[121] Ibid, 203.

Chapter 3:
Model Minority *Ressentiment*: Two Cultures Fiction and Charles Yu's *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*

> "Is it hunger or superabundance that has here become creative?"
>
> —Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

Despite the genre announced by the title of Charles Yu's 2010 novel *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*, the novel's generic status is never certain.[1] Yu uses the vocabularies and conventions of science fiction—specifically, those pertaining to time travel and alternate universes—to tell a story about a Taiwanese immigrant family and the unhappiness of their lives in Silicon Valley. But when the narrator, also named Charles Yu (Charles, from here on; I'll refer to the author as Yu), describes his father's habit of "regularly drifting five minutes into the past" (192), it's unclear whether this description is of actual time travel, or, say, emotional distance. Both are equally plausible. Rather than thinly superimpose SF vocabularies on top of a more solid core of literary fiction—for example, using SF merely as a quirky vocabulary for describing familiar characters and experiences—Yu's stylistic twist is to allow the psychological realism of the novel's immigrant narrative to reshape the SF conventions themselves. So when the novel turns to that *sine qua non* of time travel narratives, the info-dump explaining its particular laws of time travel, here is how the question of whether one can change the past is handled:

> …no matter how hard you try, you can't change the past.
>
> The universe just doesn't put up with that. We aren't important enough. No one is. Even in our own lives. We're not strong enough, willful enough, skilled enough in chronodiegetic manipulation to be able to just accidentally change the entire course of anything, even ourselves. […] Time is an ocean of inertia, drowning out the small vibrations, absorbing the slosh and churn … and we're up here, flapping and slapping and just generally spazzing out … but that doesn't even register in the depths, in the powerful undercurrents miles below us, taking us wherever they are taking us. (14)

By the end of this passage, which is a moment in which the novel appears to self-reflexively theorize its own form, it's unclear if the reason we can't change the past is because of physical or personal limitations. The SF law defined here—you *can't* change the past—spills over its generic boundaries into a space in which SF and literary fiction[2] "slosh" together. The question that emerges from this observation, as suggested by this passage's existential hand-wringing, is

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[1] Charles Yu, *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* (New York: Vintage, 2010).

[2] Debates over the definition of "literary fiction" have been waged for millennia, and I do not wish to intervene in them. Rather than attempt to define Asian American literary fiction, I instead use the term as a shorthand to mark off a body of fiction that, aesthetically, is not strongly defined by paraliterary genres like SF, fantasy, detective fiction, thriller, etc., even though it might incorporate or reference these genres; and that is not written with specific genre-defined reading communities in mind but a mainstream. Asian American literary fiction, in other words, is the kind of fiction that is awarded by organizations that aren't associated with a paraliterary genre (e.g., Hugo, Nebula), and that are most likely to be canonized by professional literary scholars. On the mainstreaming of Asian American fiction since the 1990s, see Min Hyoung Song, *The Children of 1965: On Writing, and Not Writing, as an Asian American* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

whether Yu's genre mixing actually *does* anything—does it make any difference? I want to argue that this genre mixing—which we can call more precisely a *metafictionalization of SF*—is in fact only the most striking aspect of Yu's broader project of developing a literary form adequate to a content that neither SF nor literary fiction can express alone. Yu's metafiction amounts to more than mere "flapping and slapping" about; it does indeed "register in the depths" something new.

While the novel is ostensibly about a father-son team of inventors who develop a theory of time travel called "chronodiegetics," and then invent the world's first functioning time machine, it is not really *about* time travel in the way we might expect such a conceit to fulfill wishes about righting wrongs in the past, running alongside dinosaurs, or envisioning Utopia. It departs, in other words, from the *Ur*-convention of time travel as a narrative device, established by H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895) and endlessly elaborated thereafter. In Yu's hands, time travel is more a device for characterization than narration—in particular, for exploring the relationship between Charles and his unnamed father. The novel's main storyline involves Charles' search for his father, who absconds to an unknown point in space-time, abandoning his wife and son after failing to sell his time machine to a venture capitalist. Readers are thus invited to read the novel as if they are witnessing Yu working through a psychological impasse—for instance, as Yu's metaphorical search for his own father. As the novel wears on, the generic mediations on display in the passage above ramify to the point that the line dividing the literal and the figurative blurs completely. In fact, Yu gives us some precise numbers for this: "Reality represents 13 percent of the total surface area and 17 percent of the total volume of Minor Universe 31," which is the artificially created, city-sized universe where Charles resides in the novelistic present; its number refers to Yu's age when he wrote the novel. "The remainder consists of a standard composite base SF substrate" (28).

Yu's enormous cross-over popularity among SF readers and readers of literary fiction has been due in no small part to his talents at metafictionalizing SF: a stylistic signature that hearkens back to New Wave SF writers like J. G. Ballard, James Tiptree, Jr. (Alice Bradley Sheldon), and Ursula LeGuin, as well as the formal experimentation of writers like John Barth, Joan Didion, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Kurt Vonnegut. His work also feels very close to novels like Douglas Coupland's existential, quasi-SF Silicon Valley novels *Microserfs* (1995) and *JPod* (2006), and metafictionalizations of pop culture like Austin Grossman's *Soon I Will Be Invincible* (2008). Yu's development of his signature style is part and parcel of a project that he has pursued across his work, which, in addition to *How to Live Safely* (his first novel), includes two collections of short stories, *Third Class Superhero* (2006) and *Sorry Please Thank You* (2011). This is a project in which Yu attempts to "register in the depths" a realism pertaining to characters like Charles and his father: Asian American model minorities who present as math and science nerds. I want to argue that this project entails developing a genre adequate to their experience, as well as what Yu claims was "a conscious decision to scrub away place names and particularities," with race and ethnicity being perhaps the most conspicuous of these "particularities."[3] Charles' surname is the only marker of Chinese identity in the novel; even though it is apparent that his parents emigrated from Taiwan, Taiwan is never explicitly named. What this "scrub[bing] away" of ethnic, racial, and national content signals is, at best, an uneasiness with Asian American literary fiction; at worst, a rejection.[4]

[3] Christopher T. Fan, Personal interview with Charles Yu, Los Angeles, Calif., April 22, 2014.

[4] Two expansive studies on the problematic of racial identity and genre are Min Hyoung Song's *The Children of 1965: On Writing, and Not Writing, As an Asian American* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), and

Why does giving expression to Asian American model minority experiences require an avoidance of Asian American literary fiction? While Ramón Saldivar has aligned Yu's avoidance with a generational tendency in American fiction to adopt what he calls a "postracial aesthetics" that radically deform received correspondences between racial signifiers and signifieds, I see Yu's use of these aesthetics as of a piece with his metafictionalization of SF. In this chapter, I will be making a case for the overdetermination of SF rather than Asian American literary fiction as an apt genre for depicting the experiences of Asian American STEM[5] nerds, which are characterized by a peculiar combination of powerlessness and power that I call model minority *ressentiment*.[6] Charles and his father, like the rest of us, are perhaps not "important" enough to be able to change the past—but their STEM talents make them very nearly capable of "registering in the depths." That is: They are simultaneously empowered and abjected character types that conjure forth a racial form whose origins, as I will show, can be traced to the 1965 Hart-Celler Immigration and Nationality Act's replacement of exclusion for selection as the basis for immigration policy towards Asia.[7]

Along these lines, my argument in this chapter is very much in dialogue with David Palumbo-Liu's description of "model minority discourse," and Susan Koshy's updating of Palumbo-Liu in her reading of post-1965 south Asian American model minority fiction.[8] While Palumbo-Liu, writing in 1999, argues that a crisis in Asian American identity is underway vis-à-vis tensions between wealth Asian immigrants to the U.S. and a more established Asian American bourgeoisie, Koshy shows how the post-1965 professionalization of Asian America has facilitated an imagined convergence of these groups into something like a global model minority, and that the drama of this convergence can be perceived through contemporary narratives of the immigrant family romance. Where I differ from Koshy and David Palumbo-Liu is in their characterization of a tendency in model minority discourse to "displace" the political and historical as *only* a political calculation—rather than political *and* aesthetic. I don't believe that displacements of the political in fiction—the political ambiguity that leads some critics to critique writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, whom Koshy focuses on, for embracing honorary whiteness—should compel us to automatically direct our readings towards a recovery of a resistant, anti-racist subject, which is what Koshy and Palumbo-Liu do. Instead, we should take displacement or ambiguity as a sign of any number of more interesting things than either complicity or resistance. For instance, as I argued in the previous chapter, Ted Chiang's avoidance of Asian American topoi indicates a dissatisfaction with Asian American aesthetics rather than disinterest in politics. Yu's fiction (and Lahiri's, I would argue) should be read not as displacing or avoiding politics, but instead as symptomatic of a genuine confusion over the scale

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Stephen Hong Sohn's *Racial Asymmetries: Asian American Fictional Worlds* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

[5] "STEM" refers to science, technology, engineering, and math. It is a designation coined by the National Science Foundation in the 1990s to facilitate discussion about national educational priorities.

[6] Ramón Saldivar, "The Second Elevation of the Novel: Race, Form, and the Postrace Aesthetic in Contemporary Narrative," *Narrative* 21.1 (January, 2013): 3.

[7] On immigration selection in Chinese American history, see Madeline Hsu, *The Good Immigrants: How the Yellow Peril Became the Model Minority* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015). Also see Ellen Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

[8] See the chapter "Model Minority Discourse" in David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Susan Koshy, "Neoliberal Family Matters," *American Literary History* 25.2 (2013).

of the political: national, global, transnational, diasporic, etc.[9] The constantly felt generic bifurcations and tensions in Yu's work testify, I want to argue, to his attempt at situating his fiction in a historical and, indeed, *political* context for which "Asian America" and "Asia" are inadequate categories.

Charles' father's sublimation of defeat into invention brings into relief a history of *ressentiment* that belongs to the post-1965 Asian immigrant: a history tells the story of how techno-Orientalism mediates Asian American sociology and literary form. Charles' father arrived in the U.S. as a young man with just a few dollars in his pocket, having emigrated from Taiwan in pursuit of a career as an engineer. While the stereotype of the Asian American model minority and strategies of what Claire Jean Kim calls "racial triangulation" most certainly predate the 1965 Act, it is only after 1965 that the stereotype begins to express itself primarily through *academic* achievement.[10] Moreover, in light of the 1965 Act's priorities, it is no surprise then that the stereotype strongly tends to be articulated as achievement in STEM fields. We might therefore say that the 1965 Act gave birth to the racial form of the STEM model minority, better known as the Asian math and science nerd.

At the end of this chapter, I will show how SF written by Asian Americans—currently one of the most vibrant areas of Asian American cultural production—has offered these writers a privileged generic language for enabling model minority characters and experiences to "register in the depths." I will also show how these works of SF reveal in Asian American fiction more broadly a tropology of what C. P. Snow famously called the "two cultures" conflict between the arts and sciences: a conflict whose terms sometimes correspond very closely to intrafamilial and/or intergenerational conflicts between parents in STEM professions and children who might want to side instead with the arts. In this regard, I am expanding Jay Clayton's useful development of Snow's "two cultures" as a framework for understanding generic convergence in contemporary Anglophone fiction.[11] SF resonates with many post-1965 Asian immigrants—for example, Yu's engineer father, and Yu himself, who majored in pre-med at U.C. Berkeley—not only because the genre gives imaginative flight to their STEM training as well as the positivist and pragmatic worldview stereotypically attributed to first-generation Asian immigrants. It also resolves at the level of form the very conflict many of these writers (whether they write SF or literary fiction or anything in between) are forced to resolve in order to begin writing at all. I focus on Yu's fiction, and *How to Live Safely* in particular, because its mediation of stereotypical Asian American aesthetic content (immigrant narrative, intergenerational conflict, racial dilemma, etc.) through a stereotypical Asian American sociological formation (the two cultures conflict) brings these variegated factors into sharp relief. If there is indeed such a thing as a post-1965 "model minority discourse"[12] that is instantiated and perpetuated by texts like *How to Live Safely*, as well as by the demographic and professional realities of post-1965 Asian immigration, then an opposition between the arts and sciences is, I would argue, a structuring trope.

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[9] Indeed, many post-1965 immigrant communities—Indian and Taiwanese, for instance—have been chastised for their lack of involvement in domestic U.S. politics, even as they are extremely active in diasporic politics.

[10] On "racial triangulation," see Claire Jean Kim, "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans," *Politics & Society* 27.1 (March, 1999): 105–38.

[11] Jay Clayton, "Convergence of the Two Cultures: A Geek's Guide to Contemporary Literature," *American Literature* 74.4 (2002).

[12] David Palumbo-Liu defines model minority discourse as "a blueprint for the deliverance of minority subjects from collective history to a reified individualism," *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 415.

In two cultures fiction written by Asian Americans—which can be found in SF *as well as* literary fiction, including canonical works like Chang-Rae Lee's *Native Speaker* and Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*—depictions of the two cultures tend to disclose non-ironic depictions of the model minority. One of the provocations for writing this chapter was my realization of just how exceedingly rare such depictions are in Asian American cultural production. This is due in large part to the general dismissal and disavowal of model minority experience within the discipline of Asian American studies, which has played no small role in defining the parameters of recent Asian American literature as well as set the terms of its institutionalization. The mission of Asian American literary hermeneutics has been to produce accounts of what Christopher Lee has called the "idealized critical subject," a figure "characterized precisely by its ability to integrate the production of critical knowledge with an effective political praxis": that is, the *opposite* of the model minority, which generations of Asian American scholars have equated with silence, conformity, and deception.[13] As Elaine H. Kim argues, Asian American fiction writers are aligned with this general mood, and have been primarily motivated by "claiming an American, as opposed to Asian, identity," thus giving Asian American fiction its "oppositional quality."[14] The result of this overemphasis on the idealized critical subject, which ultimately stems from a narrative of immigration exclusion, has been an almost total absence of authentic depictions of model minority characters in Asian American fiction, much less the STEM nerds that, in the era of China's rise, have provided the dominant trope through which model minority subjectivity is expressed.[15] As I will explain in more detail below, what I mean by "authentic" here draws from Frederic Jameson's description of what he calls "authentic *ressentiment*": a *ressentiment* that has escaped reified forms of subjectivity and literary character, and does not suspect itself of being mediated by reified desires.

I join critics like Viet Nguyen, Tina Chen, erin Khuê Ninh, Mark Chiang, Mimi Thi Nguyen, and Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu in their insistence on an approach to Asian American experience that accounts not only for the idealized critical subject, but also for the "flexible strategies" of resistance and accommodation that are necessary strategies for survival under xenophobic white supremacy. If the idealized critical subject is a subject constituted by *ressentiment* that has nonetheless found a way to externalize its anger, what *How to Live Safely* dramatizes so powerfully is how model minority subjectivity is also constituted by *ressentiment*—but a mode that is closer, though not entirely identical to, the description of *ressentiment* in Nietzsche's classic account and Max Scheler's influential elaboration of that account, in which externalization is not possible and anger is instead routed through imaginative acts and bad faith.[16] Reorienting Asian American literary studies towards producing accounts of

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[13] Christopher Lee, *The Semblance of Identity: Aesthetic Mediation in Asian American Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 9. On the model minority as a figure of silence, see King-Kok Cheung, *Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); of conformity, see *Roots: An Asian American Reader*, Eds. Amy Tachiki, Eddie Wong and Franklin Odo (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1971); of deception, impersonation, and imposture, see Tina Chen, *Double Agency: Acts of Impersonation in Asian American Literature and Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

[14] Elaine H. Kim, "Defining Asian American Realities through Literature," *Cultural Critique* 6 (Spring, 1987): 88.

[15] Some prominent exceptions include Gish Jen's fiction, and especially the fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri, which I address below.

[16] *Ressentiment* is elaborated across several of Nietzsche's texts, but its fullest and most systematic elaboration is found in *The Genealogy of Morals* (1887). Max Scheler's *Ressentiment*, Trans. Lewis B. Coser and William W. Holdheim (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1994).

ressentiment rather than the idealized critical subject would build upon the goals I share with Nguyen, Chen, and Ninh, and also provide ground for a richer theoretical and political engagement with the deterritorialized, global context of 21st century Asian America. To paraphrase Ninh, as Asian American studies scholars and departments continue to struggle for their institutional existence and reproduction, it will only become more and more pressing to deal directly with how institutional reproduction is in many ways best facilitated by model minorities.[17]

What happens when the history of immigration exclusion that has defined Asian American experience and institutions begins to be eclipsed by a history of immigration selection? What happens to Asian American character? Literary aesthetics? How does this shift transform Asian American fiction and the way that writers engage with Asian American fiction? These are the central questions that this chapter seeks to answer.

Ressentiment vs. Resentment: "Frustrations with this country"

Trained as a structural engineer and steadily (though unsatisfyingly) employed in Silicon Valley[18] where his colleagues and superiors recognize him as "a very good scientist," Charles' father has managed to build an ostensibly successful life in the U.S. free of the poverty he fled when he emigrated from Taiwan (35, 71). And yet, he is not a happy man. An emotional gulf separates him from his wife and son. Charles recollects:

> I noticed him on most nights, his jaw clenched at dinner, the way he closed his eyes slowly when my mother asked him about work, watched him stifle his own ambition, seeming to physically shrink with each professional defeat, watched him choke it down. (35)

Over dinner, he is confronted with a literal, bodily hunger that is unsatisfied by the "defeat" that he metaphorically ingests. The more he ingests, the smaller he becomes; the more he closes his eyes to defeat, the more closely his son watches him, the more he notices. This is the topsy-turvy world of a "silent" man whose verbal silence is a reaction to what are only ever referred to as "frustrations with this country," and an indication not so much of an absence of words, but a struggle to keep words from overflowing (49).[19] Charles' father is wracked with an inability to

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[17] See "Afterword: The Ending" in Ninh, *Ingratitude*, 159–164. The fullest account of the problematics inherent in Asian American studies' institutional reproduction is Mark Chiang, *The Cultural Capital of Asian American Studies: Autonomy and Representation in the University* (New York: NYU Press, 2009). On the trope of reproductive futurity and how it shapes institutions and theory, see Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). Min Hyoung Song offers a reading of post-1965 Asian American fiction—in particular, Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* (2003)—as a post-postmodern fiction that frustrates nationalist and ethnic nationalist ideologies of reproductive futurity: "The Children of 1965: Allegory, Postmodernism, and *The Namesake*," *Twentieth-Century Literature* 53.3 (Fall, 2007).

[18] To be sure, "Silicon Valley" is never mentioned; nor, as I quote Yu saying above, are any other placenames mentioned. Silicon Valley is strongly suggested by "Spanish tile roofs," investment bankers, and references to a "peninsula" (193). Yu also confirms in an interview that he had some amalgam of Silicon Valley and Los Angeles in mind, Personal interview with Charles Yu.

[19] Insofar as forms of silence—psychological and literary—provoke or produce the kinds of literary experimentation I am describing, *How to Live Safely* shares a great deal in common with Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and its metafictional "talk-story." King-Kok Cheung argues that Maxine's attempts at bridging the lacunae in the stories her mother tells her lead her to "emphatically resist the opposition of fact and imagination in the face of received falsehood and historical silence. She achieves feminist dialogic by integrating biography and poetics,

externalize his anger, and by externalize I mean, minimally, to direct it at an object, but optimally to sublimate it through the kind of expression (verbal, performative, etc.) crucial to working through psychic impasses. Instead, the defeat he chokes down is metabolized into the creative acts of inventing chronodiegetics and time travel, which don't lead him out of his impasse but even deeper into it—indeed to an unknown point in space-time.

Although silent, he is anything but idle or passive. Charles describes his father as "quiet, but not meek, soft-spoken but not unsure … Quiet speaking … was a survival strategy for a recent immigrant…" (71). One way to read Charles' father's would be to stop here and valorize it as what King-Kok Cheung calls a "provocative silence" that "enables the creative writer to dispense with time-honored authority and invent a braver world."[20] But these resistant potentialities, first of all, do not exhaust the imaginative potentialities of the writer's creative acts, and, secondly, they are not without side-effects. Nietzsche writes, "Silence is an objection; swallowing things leads of necessity to a bad character—it even upsets the stomach. All who remain silent are dyspeptic."[21] Charles' father's survival strategy might, when viewed from one angle, put him on a developmental trajectory towards idealized critical subjecthood. But that doesn't change the fact that he has abandoned his wife and son. He can thus be read simultaneously as the valorized "bad subject" of anti-racist critique whose sense of social injustice might bolster an Asian American nationalist narrative, and as a "bad character" who Charles, with every justification, eventually stops missing, and whose domestic crimes are unassimilable into the nationalist narrative (54). Either way, he is still what Nietzsche calls a "man of *ressentiment*."

Charles and his father occupy the fullest ontology of *ressentiment* and thus disclose its specific post-1965 Asian American form. My point here isn't just that Asian Americans are a class of *ressentiment*—as Wendy Brown points out, the same could be said of the modern liberal subject in general.[22] Rather my point is that *ressentiment* intensifies, concentrates, and predominates Asian American subject formation. As we will see in a moment, Nietzsche's doctrine of *ressentiment* routes through an Asiatic racial form, which offers an unexpected and alternate genealogy of the model minority as a triangulated racial form. My argument is that this applies not only to the idealized critical subject but to the model minority as well, and that this fundamental equivalence should allow Asian American scholars and culture producers to engage more directly and authentically with model minority figures—in other words, engage the model minority on its own terms rather than always-already in relation to an idealized critical subject.

In this section, I will first specify the unique proportion of power and powerlessness that defines the post-1965 Asian American STEM model minority as well as the challenges to literary reference and authenticity that it poses. I will then turn to Nietzsche to unpack resonances between the racial and reproductive dimensions of his theory of *ressentiment* and characterological features of the model minority.

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and by re-visioning Chinese myths and mythologizing American history. … And by amalgamating fact and fable she is able to reproduce her struggle for cognition as well as to re-place the 'history' of her people," 77.

[20] Cheung, 75.

[21] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, Trans. and Ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 1908/1992), 685.

[22] Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 69.

At one point, early in the development of chronodiegetics, Charles and his father find themselves in the car together after his father has worked out an especially vexing problem. Hunger and silence have metabolized into superabundance and loghorrhea. Charles narrates: "here he was, voice raw, talking fast, excited in a way that made me uncomfortable, hopeful in a way that worried me" (71). Charles then blindsides him with a question: "Dad … are we poor?" (74, original ellipses). It's a question that Charles admits is completely unmotivated: "To this day, I don't know why I said it, where it came from … Maybe I'd learned it from the kids at school…" (74). Nonetheless, his father falls silent and is "crushed" (75). Charles never receives a response; perhaps his father choked it down. However, there is no evidence in the novel that Charles' parents are, indeed, "poor." All indications point to a solid middle-class existence and his father's stable, albeit spiritually stifling, employment, and that they have "just enough" (146).

What injures his father so much, I would argue, is not that Charles has discovered his family is poor as if he had discovered a closely guarded secret, but that his family is precisely *not* poor and that Charles nonetheless perceives them as poor. What is so hurtful to Charles' father is that his son perceives the middle-class life that he has secured, by mortgaging his own ambitions, as poverty. What Charles' father perceives as material superabundance in relation to the poverty he experienced in his home country—martial law-era Taiwan—his son perceives instead as material hunger and lack. Charles' father perceives the superabundance he has produced as evidence of his own willingness to go hungry, spiritually speaking. The defeat Charles' father chokes down over dinner is part and parcel of a certain kind of socioeconomic privilege, in which existential deficits and deficits in citizenship are registered not as *not enough*, but instead as *not good enough*: as requiring more than "just enough." There is no one and nothing to blame for the injury Charles has inadvertently dealt by interpreting his father's achieved class status as "poor." There is no direct line between an original injustice or failure and the question whose origin even Charles can't locate—a question that possessed and spoke through him. Charles' father is left to chalk the question up to the "frustrations with this country" that he endures in pursuit of superabundance. Charles, meanwhile, receives his father's non-response as a bequest, "embarrassed for how little I had lived, how little my father had lived, wondering if [these frustrations are] something I would pass on to my own son" (185). For Charles, the pursuit of superabundance feels an awful lot like learning to accept hunger as a fundamental aspect of his identity.

This constantly churning transformation of hunger into superabundance back into hunger is, for Nietzsche, inherent to the very structure of *ressentiment*. The question of poverty is a red herring, and the real difficulty being experienced by Charles and his father, though unexpressed, is the difficulty of rooting one's identity in the space between hunger and superabundance, between not enough and enough. Charles' question and his confusion over where his question came from, both emerge from what we might call a crisis of literary representation—a crisis that is constitutive of contradictions in the dialectic of Asian American studies and Asian American literary fiction. Charles wants to narrate something that he perceives as wrong with his family's situation but fails to find the proper word. The narrative telegraphed by the word "poor" just doesn't fit any framework received in advance. The conundrum Charles and his father face is analogous to a problem that, according to erin Khuê Ninh, faces many young Asian American women: "how is it that young women … come to madness or suicide without being able to point

to any legitimating personal histories of abuse or trauma in the home?"[23] This problem of reference is at the same time a problem of legitimacy. As a result, Asian American model minority *ressentiment*, as Ninh suggests, is often characterized as a peculiar form of self-injury—as an unnecessary anger that embitters an otherwise privileged life.[24] Admittedly, the analogy I am drawing with Ninh's argument is not seamless—the gendered and sexualized "abuse" and "trauma" Ninh refers to apply differently to cisgender, heterosexual men like Charles and his father—but Charles and his father most certainly experience cognate feelings of abandonment and illegitimacy when, instead of being able to refer positively to a history of "abuse" or "trauma," they can only cite the vague, somewhat self-pitying emotion of "frustration." And indeed Charles and his father each fall into "madness" and commit something like "suicide." In the first sentence of the novel, Charles tells us this: "When it happens, this is what happens: I shoot myself" (n.p.). What Ninh and Yu help us to see is how the "inward adjustment" that David Palumbo-Liu argues is imposed upon model minority subjects to conform to honorary whiteness—or, I would add, to conform to the idealized critical subject—can result in an inward aggression that, when pushed to an extreme, may entail an adjustment of the self out of existence. *How to Live Safely*'s metafictionalization of SF, and the generic confusion it produces, not only resonates with these psychological dimensions, it also provides a conduit for a specifically Asian American history of *ressentiment* to be articulated.

Nietzsche's theorization of *ressentiment* is perhaps most recognizable in the parable of slave morality and its transvaluation found in *The Genealogy of Morals*: a parable that is thoroughly racialized in its depictions of the Jewish people as the "priestly race of *ressentiment par excellence*," and the "Roman, Arabian, Germanic, Japanese nobility, the Homeric heroes, the Scandinavian Vikings" as the "blond beasts" whose strength is the wellspring of the "good" that slave morality must transvalue into "evil."[25] According to this parable, the origins of the dominant Christian virtues of pity and "neighbor-love" (*agape*) are found in the Jewish people's history of persecution and enslavement, and the "impotence" and "passivity" imposed by that history. Rather than being authentically pitying and loving, acolytes of these "priestly" virtues are in fact acting upon "hatred" grown to "monstrous and uncanny proportions": a desire for "the *most spiritual revenge*."[26] The occasion for Nietzsche's writing is his sense that an extreme version of these virtues, an "ascetic ideal,"[27] is on the rise in Europe, signaling the final, historical triumph of the "slave revolt in morality."[28] He describes these "unegoistic" virtues as:

> …the entire antisensualistic metaphysic of the priests that makes men indolent and overrefined, their autohypnosis in the manner of fakirs and Brahmins—Brahma used in the shape of a glass knob and a fixed idea—and finally the only-too-comprehensible satiety with all this, together with the radical cure for it, *nothingness* (or God—the desire

[23] erin Khuê Ninh, *Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature* (New York: NYU Press, 2011), 2.
[24] A cognate concept would be what Anne Cheng has called "racial melancholia," referring to the Freudian structure in which the ego "introjects" a lost object that it's unable to comprehend. While not mutually exclusive with racial melancholia, model minority *ressentiment* differs in that it is mediated not by a racial ego ideal but by a professional ideal.
[25] Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 489, 469–72.
[26] Ibid, 469–70.
[27] Ibid, 468.
[28] Ibid, 470.

> for a *unio mystica* with God is the desire of the Buddhist for nothingness, Nirvana—and no more!).[29]

Opposed to this thoroughly Orientalized "ascetic ideal" are the animal instincts of the "blond beasts," which are experienced as "freedom from all social constraints … prowling about avidly in search of spoil and victory…"[30] Over the course of time, these "barbarian" instincts are sublimated into "knightly-aristocratic" values that develop unencumbered by *ressentiment*'s "sublime self-deception that interprets weakness as freedom."[31]

A great deal of Nietzsche's theorization of *ressentiment* seems to anticipate or carve out a space for the model minority—indeed, a racially Asian version of the model minority characterized by intellectualism. While Nazi misappropriations of Nietzsche's views on race have been well documented, his references to Asian races have received less attention.[32] My aim here is not to call for a wholesale rereading of Nietzsche, but instead to point out how a structural position strongly resembling a global, Asiatic model minority is immanent to the theory of *ressentiment*, which is bounded on one end by the figure of the Japanese people, upon whom Nietzsche bestows an honorary whiteness (the "blond beast") that reveals a precursor to the structural power made available to the model minority within Eurocentric social formations. On the other end, one finds the over-refined, overly intellectual Chinese, whose adherence to ascetic ideals Nietzsche compares to Christian *ressentiment*: "We can see nothing today that wants to grow greater, we suspect that things will continue to go down, down, to become thinner, more good-natured, more prudent, more comfortable, more mediocre, more indifferent, more Chinese, more Christian…"[33]

Members of strong, noble races are spared of the intellectual burden of self-deception and can live "in trust and openness with himself."[34] The "man of *ressentiment*," however,

> is neither upright nor naïve nor honest and straightforward with himself. His soul *squints*; his spirit loves hiding places, secret paths and back doors, everything covert entices him as *his* world, *his* security, *his* refreshment; he understands how to keep silent, how not to forget, how to wait, how to be provisionally self-deprecating and humble. A race of such men of *ressentiment* is bound to become eventually *cleverer* than any noble race.[35]

Along these lines, we can read Charles' search for his father as an expedition into these "hiding places, secret paths and back doors"—or, as Charles puts it, "boxes in boxes, inside of more":

> We drew on boxes, in boxes, we graphed on graph paper with the world subdivided into little boxes. We made metal boxes and put smaller boxes inside, and onto those boxes

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[29] Ibid, 462, 468.
[30] Ibid, 476.
[31] Ibid, 482.
[32] For Nietzsche's views on "the master race," see Chapter 10 of Walter Kaufmann's *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974/1950), 284–306. While Nietzsche most certainly believed in race as a set of biologically inherited characteristics, Kaufmann explains in detail how "Nietzsche's views are quite unequivocally opposed to those of the Nazis—more so than those of almost any other prominent German of his own time or before him—and that these views are not temperamental antitheses but corollaries of his philosophy," 303–4.
[33] Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 480.
[34] Ibid, 474.
[35] Ibid.

were etched little two-dimensional boxes, circuits and loops and schematics, the grammar of time travel. We made boxes out of language, logic, rules of syntax. (22–3)

As in Nietzsche's description, Charles' father's pursuit of hiding places requires a flexing of intellectual muscles, and egoism, that is at once self-serving and inventive: it ultimately results in chronodiegetics and a time machine. What I want to point out here is not that *ressentiment* somehow made Charles' father "cleverer" (Nietzsche is referring to a multigenerational process), but that intelligence—the kind that rationalizes and ramifies into ever more minute forms—can be a symptom of racialized self-deception.

There are good reasons why *ressentiment* is an unattractive template for theorizing ethnic and racial identity. As Rebecca Stringer explains, *ressentiment* is seen as nontransformative and mimetic.[36] Brown argues that "identity structured by *ressentiment* … becomes invested in its own subjection … deeply invested in its own impotence."[37] As a consequence of the victim narrative, *ressentiment* appears to offer only a narrow range of subject positions, each more undesirable than the next. These range from what Charles aptly calls "meek" and "unsure," to "bad character" rooted in what Nietzsche calls "the sublime self-deception that interprets weakness as freedom."[38] But the question Nietzsche asks in the epigraph to this chapter—"Is it hunger or superabundance that has here become creative?"—reveals dimensions to *ressentiment* that, I argue, should compel us to reevaluate its apparent limitations, at least in regard to Asian American identity. In addition to its negative psychology, *ressentiment* is also "the womb of all ideal and imaginative phenomena [… that brings] to light an abundance of strange new beauty and affirmation, and perhaps beauty itself."[39] Imagination and creativity, Nietzsche theorizes, are products of the "internalization" of "instincts that do not discharge themselves outwardly" that results from the trauma of entering society and mortgaging one's ability to "discharge" all instincts "outwardly."[40] The creative acts of "articulate" and/or "provocative" silence, in other words, can range into any number of social, psychological, or cultural phenomena—not just Utopianism and resisting authority.

Addressing the problematic of victimology in American identity politics, Brown elaborates Nietzsche's point: "in [*ressentiment*'s] economy of perpetrator and victim, [it] seeks not power or emancipation for the injured or the subordinated, but the revenge of punishment, making the perpetrator hurt as the sufferer does."[41] The injured—the "man of *ressentiment*,"[42] to

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[36] Rebecca Stringer, "'A Nietzschean Breed': Feminism, Victimology, *Ressentiment*," in *Why Nietzsche Still?: Reflections on Drama, Culture, and Politics*, ed. Alan D. SChrift (Berkeley: U. California Press, 2000), 263–64.
[37] Brown, 70.
[38] Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 482.
[39] Ibid, 524. Accounts of *ressentiment* differ on the question of the externalizability of negative affect. In Max Scheler's famous account, *ressentiment* is defined by its unexternalizability. Brown writes: "Ressentiment in this context is a triple achievement: it produces an affect (rage, righteousness) that overwhelms the hurt; it produces a culprit responsible for the hurt; and it produces a site of revenge to displace the hurt (a place to inflict hurt as the sufferer has been hurt). Together these operations both ameliorate (in Nietzsche's term, 'anaesthetize') and externalize what is otherwise 'unendurable,'" 68.
[40] Ibid, 520. Brown echoes Nietzsche's ontological description of *ressentiment*: "Starkly accountable yet dramatically impotent, the late modern liberal subject quite literally seethes with *ressentiment*," 69. While this appears to open *ressentiment* to the critique that, as a description of everything, *ressentiment* ultimately describes nothing, I still believe that *ressentiment*'s usefulness lies in its particular intensities and concentrations, especially as it inheres in identity politics. All matter is comprised of stardust, and as true as the absolute equivalence of all ontologies might ultimately be—that truth is not for us.
[41] Brown, 27.

use Nietzsche's phrase—is fixated on the past, the moment of injury, and lives life wishing things could have been different, that roles might have been reversed. This is why Brown asks, "Are we [feminists, and partisans of identity politics] fabricating something like a plastic cage that reproduces and further regulates the injured subjects it would protect?"[43] Indeed, the "plastic cage" of *ressentiment* extends far beyond individual character to guide the development of movements, institutions, and academic disciplines. In pursuit of an authentic depiction of the post-1965 model minority, Yu doesn't attempt to imagine a way *out* of the "plastic cage." Instead, he struggles to transvalue the negative aspects of living *in* the "plastic cage." At the outset of his search for his father, Charles tells us that, as a time machine repairman, he uses his TM-31 time machine to "sleep alone, in a quiet, nameless, dateless day that I found, tucked into a hidden cul-de-sac of space-time…. Total silence. Absolutely nothing. That's why I chose it. I know for a fact that nothing bad can happen to me in here" (15). When he eventually does find his father, he exchanges the "plastic cage" of his TM-31—in which he strives for what Nietzsche calls in his Orientalist description, "*nothingness*"—for something he calls the "plastic present": a scene in the breakfast room of his family house, reunited with his mother and father, in a time out of time (233).

STEM Nerds

There is perhaps no more emblematic figure for American techno-Orientalism than the Asian American STEM nerd. Preternaturally—perhaps genetically—gifted at math and science, they are also aesthetically *outré*, socially awkward, physically meek, and sexually frustrated. On one hand, their intellectual predilections are the basis for their successful, even celebrated, assimilation into the American economy. On the other, their behavioral faults and physical stigmata preclude their full assimilation into American society. The nerd thus embodies, in concentrated form, the structuring antinomy of Asian American subjecthood: the model minority and the perpetual foreigner.

The epithet "nerd" initially registered the social reorientations demanded by two postwar forces: the Cold War emphasis on technoscience in research and education, and the post-Fordist shift to an economy based on numerical abstraction and what Robert Reich calls "symbol manipulation." The taxonomic category "nerd" helped to stabilize perceptions of a group of highly intellectual social outcasts whose interest in STEM fields distinguished them from groups like "eggheads" (emblems of what Snow calls "traditional" culture [especially literary culture]; Ron Eglash offers the example of Charles Van Doren[44]) and "squares" (defined by excessive decorum and adherence to rules, such as character Bernard in Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman* [1949]). While the epithet was not created in response to the new wave of Asian immigration, it was birthed from the same national policies and priorities that gave birth to post-1965 Asian America.

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[42] I retain Nietzsche's gendered pronoun here because, as I explain more thoroughly below, Nietzsche's theory of *ressentiment* is grounded in an economy of masculinity that feminizes the slave, and masculinizes the master.
[43] Brown, 27, 28. Brown's more pointed, and more widely cited, formulation of this question is: "could we develop a feminist politics without *ressentiment*?" 47. See also: Judith Butler, "Circuits of Bad Conscience: Nietzsche and Freud," The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1997), 64; Marc Ferro, *Resentment in History*, trans. Steven Rendell (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2010/2007).
[44] Ron Eglash, "Race, Sex, and Nerds: From Black Geeks to Asian American Hipsters," *Social Text* 20.2 (Summer, 2002): 51.

In this section, my aim is to show how the STEM nerd is a fundamental character type in post-1965 Asian American identity. The reproduction of the STEM nerd in turn produces and proliferates model minority *ressentiment*, which poses some serious challenges to the assumptions undergirding Asian American literary studies.

Both Charles and his father fit the mold of the STEM nerd, and, in a way, perfect a character type that Yu pursues throughout his work. Charles describes his father has having "very black hair" that he parts "to the right and combs the sides back..." (170). His glasses are "nearly square-framed (sort of a top-heavy trapezoid shape popular with engineers), gray and metallic … I wonder why his glasses are fitted so tight, why he wouldn't have gotten a better pair, and I remember that he picked those … because they were the cheapest frames and fully covered by insurance" (171). Though Charles is quick to point out "he doesn't have a pocket protector," he is still the kind of man who wears his shirts "buttoned up" and "tucked into brown slacks one-eighth of an inch too short for his five-foot, four-inch frame…" (172). Taken together, Charles' father "looks neat and competent and like a *perfect engineer*" (ibid, my emphasis). When we first meet Charles, he is a 31-year-old time machine repair man who has followed closely in his father's footsteps. Short and overweight, and possessing "low-self-esteem," Charles' childhood is spent ignoring his parents' shouting matches by teaching himself to code in BASIC on his Apple II-E (6, 67, 147). Many years have elapsed since he and his father invented their time machine. Now, when Charles looks in the mirror, he's met with a familiar visage: "what I see is my father's face, my face turning into his" (5). But in contrast with his father's physical fitness and springiness, Charles is "brooding, sulky" (170). He has "a nontrivial thinning situation going on with the hair … about five nine, 185. Plus or minus. Mostly plus" (6). As for "companionship from sentient beings," he can only count TAMMY, his artificial intelligence operating system. Charles freely admits that he has a "thing" for TAMMY, which amounts to the same thing as accepting (7).

Charles is an amalgam of the protagonists found across Yu's fiction, who generally fit the same STEM nerd mold. Yu's style of characterization involves the heavy mediation of intimate interpersonal experience by quasi-technical language. For instance, we are introduced to the character "A" in "Problems for Self-Study" through prose organized like a math problem-set, which depicts the way that "A," who has completed a thesis on "nonlinear dynamic equations," cognizes and processes experience (Image 2).[45] The story carries us through his relationship with "B" from their meet-cute beginning to their drifting apart and eventual dissolution. In "32.05864991%," the narrator analyzes a budding romance through the disciplinary lens of "emotional statistics," and quantifies the probability of the word "maybe," as used by Ivan G. and Janine K. in their awkward interactions, as the titular percentage.[46] "Troubleshooting" features a step-by-step progression through an unnamed man's use of a "device" that supposedly translates "the contents of your mind into words … [and then] into effects in the physical world," but instead produces unintended effects: namely, the non-realization of the unnamed man's better self.[47] "Standard Loneliness Package" riffs on the developed world's reliance on outsourced call centers in South Asia by elaborating the *novum* of a technology that enables users to pay someone else to experience negative emotions for them. The unnamed narrator

[45] Charles Yu, "Problems for Self-Study," in *Third Class Superhero* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2006), 58.
[46] "32.05864991%," in *Third Class Superhero*, 144.
[47] "Troubleshooting," in *Sorry Please Thank You* (New York: Pantheon, 2012), 42.

struggles to initiate and maintain a relationship while he is employed in an industry that literally commodifies emotion.[48]

For many who affirmatively claim an Asian American identity, Charles and his father represent a stereotype to be avoided at all costs. In his book *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White* (2003), Frank H. Wu gives powerful expression to this aversion in a chapter on the model minority appropriately titled "Revenge of the Nerds":

> Before I can talk about Asian American experiences at all, I have to kill off the model minority myth because the stereotype obscures many realities. I am an Asian American, but I am not good with computers. I cannot balance my checkbook, much less perform calculus in my head. I would like to fail in school, for no reason other than to cast off my freakish alter ego of geek and nerd… I yearn to be an artist, an athlete, a rebel, and, above all, an ordinary person.[49]

Wu yearns for an Asian American identity that is the negative image of the "geek and nerd": an Asian American who is a failure at school rather than a success, an "artist" rather than an expert at "computers" and "calculus," a physically robust "athlete" rather than a meek pushover, a "rebel" rather than a conformist, and an "ordinary person" rather than a social outcast or "freak." That is, someone ostensibly taller than "five-foot, four-inch[es]" and able to maintain a relationship with a human being rather than a captive operating system. This passage reflects Asian American critiques of the model minority stereotype, insofar as these critiques almost uniformly take on a strategy of disavowal and debunking. Dismissed as an obstruction to social justice and authenticity, the model minority stereotype is thus conventionally judged by its misrepresentations and obfuscations rather than what it might represent.

Two major components of the "model minority" narrative have shifted since the term was first used in a 1966 *U.S. News and World Report* article titled, "Success Story of One Minority Group in the U.S.," which appeared in the immediate wake of the release of the McCone Commission's reports on the Watts riots in Los Angeles.[50] The first is its referent, which has shifted from a moral narrative to a narrative of human capital in response to the rise of neoliberal humanism; and the second is the logic of its reproduction.

Initially, the stereotype imagined a moral dimension to Asian labor. In the *U.S. News* article (which specifically addresses Chinese Americans) and several others like it that appeared at the same time, Asian American success is attributed primarily to what we might call a moral conception of work ethic and cultural transfer of Confucian values: e.g., "strict discipline," "clan loyalties," self-reliance, lawfulness. While assimilation into white American norms is not particularly emphasized or celebrated in these articles, the implied conformity of this moral narrative becomes central to early theorizations of Asian American nationalist identity. In the UCLA Asian American Studies Center's seminal 1971 anthology, *Roots*, the model minority is situated front and center as the primary figure against which authentic Asian American is to be defined. In the opening paragraph of her introduction, Amy Tachiki argues that Asian America's

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[48] "Standard Loneliness Package," in *Sorry Please Thank You*.

[49] Frank H. Wu, *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 40. Miranda Oshige McGowan and James Lindgren also conflate the model minority with "math and science geeks," "Testing the 'Model Minority Myth,'" *Northwestern University Law Review* 100.1 (2006): 335.

[50] William Peterson's 1966 article in the *New York Times*, "Success Story: Japanese American Style" is also widely cited as one of the origins of the model minority myth.

central task is to reject the "distorted" stereotype of Asian Americans as America's "most 'successful' minority," and "redefine and articulate Asian American identity on [its] own terms."[51] Indeed, following the introduction, the very first entry in *Roots* is a reprint of the *U.S. News and World Report* article. If it is difficult today to imagine Asian American studies centrally focused on rejecting the model minority stereotype, then a great deal of that difficulty is due to the predominance of poststructuralist approaches to theorizing Asian American identity.[52] Beginning in the 1990s, the catachrestic, strategic essentialism of the category Asian America itself took the place of the model minority as Asian American theory's main focus. As the "Children of 1965" [Song] began to come of age, the problem of Asian America's multiplicity shifted from a focus on conformity and resistance, to a sociological multiplicity defined by demographic diversity. In many ways, the poststructuralist turn has been an end-run around the model minority as Asian America's unassimilable constituency. However, as Charles and his father demonstrate, despite the efforts of Asian American studies to theorize the model minority out of existence, and of Asian American literary fiction to imagine it out of existence, the model minority nonetheless continues to exist.

In the 21st century, the dominant referent of the model minority is an *academically* successful subject that follows a rote work ethic unmotivated by humanistic Confucian values, but instead by pragmatic devotion to economic security and gain.[53] This brand of pragmatism is partially reflected in Charles' change of major from structural engineer to applied science fiction, which is the result of a financial rather than personal calculus: he needs to support his mother after his father leaves (5). As China's rise globalizes Asiatic racial form via a template of techno-Orientalist cultural and aesthetic forms, the model minority and the yellow peril combine into the single figure of the Asian American STEM nerd. While mainstream discourse currently perceives this, dimly, as a structure of feeling, the passage of this cultural logic from emergent to dominant can be seen in two apparently disconnected trends: the explosive popularity of Chinese culture in the United States (e.g., Mandarin language programs and U.S.-China university partnerships), and neoliberal education. The most prominent recent moment in which these two trends have been combined was the publication and (continued) controversy over Amy Chua's *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (2011). Not only did Chua's book provoke a number of anti-model minority responses from Asian American commentators, it also stoked racist fears over the anti-humanism that would result from Asianization of white American children.[54] I would argue that much of the motivation behind Asian American rejections of Chua has to do with the claim that Chua lays upon Asian motherhood: that is, the specter of the model minority's reproduction, not only as biological threat, but also as persistent theoretical problem.

Indeed, a theory of reproduction has always been a crucial dimension of model minority stereotypes and subject formation. As Charles puts it, his father's invention of the time machine was an attempt at making "the perfect box," a desire that Charles *inherits*: "All that got encoded in my box, too" (22). In regard to the post-1965 history of professionally selected Asian immigrants, the reproductive dimension of model minority *ressentiment* manifests in a few different ways. First, as the reproduction of professional class among Asian Americans: a

[51] Amy Tachiki, "Introduction," in *Roots*, 1.
[52] See Colleen Lye, "Racial Form," *Representations* 104 (Fall 2008).
[53] Concrete evidence for the stereotype's current academic inflection can be found in how the overwhelming majority of studies on the model minority focus on students, rather than, say, professionals.
[54] See Koshy's analysis of Chua's book, vis-à-vis Asian American model minoritization and neoliberal financialization of the family unit, "Neoliberal Family Matters."

process that economists and social scientists call "occupational segregation." According to a 2013 Pew Research Center study, since 1965, Asian Americans have entered science and engineering fields at nearly three times the rate of the general population.[55] Second, as an intergenerational transfer of professional class in which parents—whether STEM professionals or not—push their children into STEM fields. Both of these logics of reproduction produce and intensify *ressentiment*, which, as I will be demonstrating below, often manifests in Asian American fiction as a two cultures conflict. Where the success of the pre-1965 model minority was attributed to the successful reproduction of cultural values (such as Confucian values), after 1965 that success has been additionally attributed to the reproduction of professional skills and worldview. In other words, one major reason why racialized Asian subjects have become such predominant figures for global capitalism is because the model minority stereotype, since its inception, has been an ideal form for the conflation of the economic and reproductive realms. As Michel Feher argues, one of the defining features of the neoliberal shift away from free labor is the rise of "human capital" as the ideology of capitalist humanism. Whereas under free labor, the economic and reproductive realms were split, neoliberal human capital "does not presuppose a separation of the spheres of production and reproduction."[56] Thus, the Asian American model minority has always signaled the futurity of capitalist subjectivity.

In the struggle to live in the "plastic present" of model minority *ressentiment* depicted in *How to Live Safely*, Yu sentimentalizes, rather than imagines an alternative to, a domestic romance of human capital. The novel offers tender scenes that we can read as parables of intergenerational professional transfer *as* emotional bonding between father and son:

> The earliest memory I have of my own dad is the two of us, sitting on my bed as he reads me a book we have checked out from the local library. I am three... What I do remember is the way I fit between his right arm and his body, and … the soft yellow light of my lamp, which has a cloth lamp shade, light blue, covered by an alternating pattern of robots and spaceships.
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> This is what I remember: (i) the little pocket of space he creates for me, (ii) how it is enough, (iii) the sound of his voice, (iv) the way those spaceships look, shot through from behind with light, so that every stitch in the fabric of the surface is a hole and a source, a point and an absence, a coordinate in the ship's celestial navigation, (v) how the bed feels like a little spaceship itself. (16)

The genre of the technical document appears in the small Roman numerals which, for the reader, would resonate strongly with the highly technical plot diagrams that appear throughout the novel. In this passage, Yu's artful integration of the technical document into what is clearly meant to be literary fiction reflects the gentle manner in which Charles' father eases his young son into a scientific worldview. My guess is that the book they're reading also has something to do with robots and spaceships. The sentimentality of this scene naturalizes the intergenerational reproduction of profession. Charles's job as a time machine repairman can thus be read as a depiction of the real-world reproduction of professional class that has resulted in "occupational segregation." Even though Frank Wu self-consciously describes his "alter ego" as "the geek and the nerd," there are many Asian Americans who see themselves quite unironically as "the geek and the nerd," and who, especially in enclaves of the New Economy like Silicon Valley, have

[55] "The Rise of Asian Americans" (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, April 4, 2013).
[56] Michel Feher, "Self-Appreciation; or, The Aspirations of Human Capital," *Public Culture* 21:1 (2009): 30.

come to enjoy a great deal of cultural, economic, and political capital. Koshy makes a similar point, arguing that the model minority myth "has been taken up in the self-representations of many Asians and Asian Americans, who see it as an economic confirmation of the veracity of their cultural values and have invested it with their class aspirations, plural national attachments, gender norms, and heterosexual arrangements."[57]

If Asian American studies has failed to account for these various capital accumulations of Asian and Asian American STEM nerds—their "revenge," as it were—then it is not only because of the affective aversion that Wu demonstrates, but also because the Asian American STEM nerd poses a threat to Asian American identity itself. Writing in 1999, Viet Nguyen argues that "The sudden appearance of wealthy Asians displaces this assumption that traditional whiteness is associated with wealth and that both whiteness and wealth are to be earned over the passage of time. By putting traditional whiteness into crisis, the new Asian capital also puts Asian America as a whole—not just the model minority—into crisis in its efforts to claim a domestic authenticity that does not threaten whites."[58] While Asian American STEM nerds and "wealthy Asians" are not identical categories, both contribute in the same way to the "crisis" of whiteness and of "domestic authenticity" within the Asian American community that Nguyen mentions here, and both hold tremendous amounts of cultural and economic capital. These "wealthy Asians" have been most visible in recent decades as Chinese "flexible" citizens: enrollments of Chinese foreign students have skyrocketed at American universities, wealthy Chinese have been snapping up depressed American assets (especially real estate), attention has been brought to Chinese "birth tourists," and Chinese soft power (i.e., language learning, partnerships in Hollywood) has enjoyed so much success. As Aihwa Ong argues, these are privileged subjects who move seamlessly back and forth across national borders, taking advantage of the business, residential, educational, and lifestyle benefits in different countries.[59] They are model minorities in a global sense, ideal neoliberal subjects for whom nationality is a matter of personal arbitrage.[60] When Charles' father tells a young Charles, "The only free man … is one who doesn't work for anyone else," he gives us reason to believe that "flexible citizenship" is something to which he aspires (35). A great deal of the visibility of Asian capital and the threat that these "flexible" citizens project must be credited not only to "wealthy Asians," but especially to the success of the Asian American STEM nerd. It is in the era of China's rise that the transnational "flexible" Asian becomes the privileged subject of neoliberal capitalism, displacing the totalizing hegemony of white supremacy as the dominant point of comparison for Asian American identity. The Asian American STEM nerd has contributed immensely to this process of displacement within the cultural and economic realms.

I would argue further that accounting for the STEM nerd in Asian American theory demands the overturning of a fundamental assumption in Asian American studies: namely, that,

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[57] Susan Koshy, "Neoliberal Family Matters," *American Literary History* 25.2 (2013): 348

[58] Viet Nguyen, *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 22.

[59] Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

[60] Cheryl Naruse develops this idea along the lines of what she calls the "coming-of-career narrative." See Cheryl Naruse, "Diasporic Singaporeans, Coming-of-Career Narratives, and the Corporate Nation," *biography: an Interdisciplinary Quarterly* (Winter 2014): 143–67; "Hwee Hwee Tan's *Mammon Inc.* as Bildungsroman, or the Coming-of-Career Narrative," *Genre* 49.1 (March, 2016); and "Singapore, State Nationalism, and the Production of Diaspora," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 15.2 (June, 2013).

throughout its history, Asian America has been defined primarily by exclusion. While there is no doubt that exclusion has played this primary role for most of Asian American history, since 1965, Asian Americans have been defined increasingly by selection. Two genealogies of the Asian American STEM nerd can thus be delineated. In regard to exclusion, its genealogy coincides with specific depictions of the "yellow peril" stereotype: the longstanding racial form that associates Asian racial essence with number. That is, Asian masses, but also the idea that individual Asians, lacking in emotions and normal human bodily needs, are able to multitask.[61] Images and cultural production promoting these racial forms proliferated especially during the period of Chinese exclusion, the Spanish-American War in the Philippines, and then again during World War II to provide justification for Japanese internment and U.S. military actions in Asia.

The second genealogy, while not mutually exclusive with the first, can be traced back to the principles of professional selection promulgated by various federal immigration policies beginning at the turn of the 20th century. Madeline Hsu's study of the racial formation of the Asian American model minority viz. selective rather than restrictive U.S. immigration policies shows how "Chinese and Asian immigration in general has not only increased but attained 'model minority' standing largely through the preferences imbedded in the 1965 Act."[62] While limited preferential treatment had been extended to Asian students, scientists, and technical professionals since the late-19th century—that is, even during the period, up to 1943, of official Chinese exclusion—Hsu shows how the Asian American model minority was produced by similar preferences codified by the 1965 Act. The federal educational and geopolitical emphasis on technoscientific research and development after World War II created an opportunity for immigrants from East Asia to come to the U.S. for technical and scientific jobs and training. Many of these students, like the architect I. M. Pei, were indeed retained in the U.S. despite their desire to return to their home countries, because of incentives and citizenship offered to them as part of a broader Cold War strategy of fostering "brain drain"—the flow of knowledge workers from strategic countries to the U.S.—in order to secure competitive advantage over the Communist Bloc. Hsu writes, "The strategic value of this class of Chinese, particularly scientists and engineers during the throes of the Space Race, helped to press the cause of immigration reform and abolishing of the discriminatory national origins system."[63] Under the auspices of this strategy, Taiwan's top universities often sent entire graduating classes to the U.S. for advanced degrees. Yu's father was one of these students when he emigrated to the U.S. in 1965, three years after the 1965 Act went into effect.

In 1964, Asian immigrants comprised only 14 percent of technical and scientific students and professionals arriving in the U.S.. In 1970, that percentage rose to 62. Subsequent modifications of the 1965 Act and its policies have only increased the proportion of new Asian immigrants in technical professions. The Act also established the H1-B visa program for highly specialized, predominantly technical, workers. Revisions to the program, notably in 1990, skewed preferences even more in favor of those with technical backgrounds. In 2012, 76.5% of H-1B visa were granted for computer-related professions, and roughly that percentage of

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[61] See Colleen Lye, *America's Asia: Racial Form and American Literature, 1893–1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005) on the rhetorical uses of the idea that Asians can be fueled on rations of rice alone in 19th century labor disputes. This can also be seen in cartoons published during run-up to the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act.

[62] Hsu, *The Good Immigrants*, 217.

[63] Hsu, 235.

workers were drawn from India and East Asia. If the Asian STEM nerd has naturalized the connection between Asian racial essence and technoscientific predelictions, then it is no coincidence that the early-1970s saw the simultaneous emergence of "Asian American" as an identity and of the epithet "nerd" as a term that stabilized the identities emerging in response to the national priorities of post-Sputnik technoscience.

The Asian American student movements of the 1960s and 1970s that gave birth to ethnic and Asian American studies were, crucially, not constituted by post-1965 immigrants, but instead by students whose experience as Orientalized subjects was primarily defined by policies of exclusion. If Asian American studies continues to be theorized under a rubric of exclusion even now, a half-century on under a rubric of selection, then a great deal of the reason for that is the continued influence of Lisa Lowe's influential 1996 study *Immigrant Acts*, in which Lowe reasserts of the history of Asian immigration to the U.S. as a history of exclusion and exploitation: a history that has, in our era of immigration selection, has stood in for what Ninh calls "legitimating personal histories of abuse or trauma." What falls out of view from Lowe's framework is precisely the dimension of selection. In making her case for an unbroken history of exclusion and exploitation, Lowe argues that, following the 1965 Act, "the profile of Asian immigration has consisted of low-wage, service-sector workers"—a characterization that, as we have seen, is at best only partially true.

Despite encountering overt and probable racism in their careers, many post-1965 immigrants have made foundational contributions to the fields of science, technology, engineering, and medicine. Charles' father's turn to entrepreneurship and invention symbolically recapitulates the turn to entrepreneurship that many post-1965 Asian Americans in Silicon Valley made as a result of actual or perceived racism. Indeed, when he begins work on chronodiegetics he heads into the family garage: the mythical symbol of Silicon Valley innovation. As AnnaLee Saxenian has documented, even when these "New Argonauts" did find their career advancement limited by various "glass" ceilings—"bamboo" ceilings, as Jane Hyun has called it—many left their employers to become entrepreneurs and establish trans-Pacific ethnic professional networks that have laid the infrastructural and supply-chain foundations for the subsequent success of the U.S. technological sector, most especially Silicon Valley.[64] Even though these entrepreneurs and their companies are less visible than marquee giants like Google and Apple, Inc., Lowe's description of these immigrants as a "white collar proletariat" might obscure more than it clarifies.[65] While the label accurately describes many of the recipients of H-1B visas—especially those funneled through offshore "body" shops, as depicted in Hari Kunzru's novel *Transmission* (2004)—it does not fit subjects like Charles' father: subjects who cannot be described as "proletarianized" much less "excluded" or "exploited." Lowe's strategic

[64] AnnaLee Saxenian has theorized this transnational space as a "brain circulation"—as opposed to the more commonly narrated post-war "brain drain" of human capital from the developing to the developed world—that has given rise to economic and cultural spaces like the "Hsinchu [Taiwan]-Silicon Valley Connection." This reverse immigration, Saxenian observes, often has less to do with the pursuit of capital or opportunities as a response to racial and ethnic barriers like the "bamboo ceiling," as well as cultural and social isolation. In addition to transnational business and material flows, these "New Argonauts," as Saxenian dubs them, also respond to such barriers by establishing their own ethnic institutions and cultural networks in the US. AnnaLee Saxenian, *The New Argonauts: Regional Advantage in a Global Economy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006). See also Aihwa Ong, "Labor Arbitrage: Displacements and Betrayals in Silicon Valley," in *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

[65] Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 189n42.

interest in characterizing the 1965 Act as yet another engine of Asian exclusion and exploitation is to draw focus on Asian America as an "alternative formation that produces cultural expressions materially and aesthetically at odds with … the [U.S.] nation."[66] But, again, the characterization of Asian American subjects and their cultural expressions as necessarily oppositional is simply inaccurate.

This conundrum of characterization reveals the difficulty that *ressentiment* poses to literary study, namely that it is simultaneously a narrative and characterological structure. As Stringer clarifies, "*Ressentiment* is an *economy* of negative affect rather than an affect in itself … it is a configuration of emotions wherein pain is constantly remembered and revisited, and in which hatred and the desire for revenge are constantly renewed."[67] Depicting *ressentiment*, in other words, isn't just a matter of depicting a particular affect—a task that could be satisfied through characterization alone. It requires a historical totality in addition to a psyche. The challenge is then to depict an *authentic* STEM model minority that isn't bound by a relation to the idealized critical subject.

Authentic *Ressentiment*

It's perhaps because the "plastic cage" of *ressentiment* is a cage of time, in which the present and the future are doomed to always loop back to the past, that few novels rival the depiction of the transvaluation of slave morality in H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine*—a novel that achieves its dramatic effects by fast-forwarding us through the historical time lag of transvaluation. *How to Live Safely*'s depiction of the technology of time travel as in fact a language of memory and regret thus resonates with the temporality of *ressentiment*, especially it is depicted in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*:

> Willing liberates; but what is it that puts even the liberator himself in fetters? "It was"—that is the name of the will's gnashing of teeth and most secret melancholy. Powerless against what has been done, he is an angry spectator of all that is past. The will cannot will backwards; and that he cannot break time and time's covetousness, that is the will's loneliest melancholy.[68]

In *How to Live Safely*, not even the liberating technology of time travel can enable the will to "will backwards"; at best, it only allows one to be an "angry spectator" of the scene of the original injury, like Charles' distraught clients, who rent time machines in order to revisit the unhappiest day of their lives (46). For Nietzsche, and indeed for Yu, the only way out of the time-loop of ressentiment is to turn away from the past. This is why Zarathustra characterizes himself as "A seer, a willer, a creator, a future himself and a bridge to the future—and alas, also, as it were, a cripple at this bridge."[69] By leaving himself behind, crippled but not dead, Zarathustra has in effect sublated his former state. Brown echoes this solution in her gloss on these passages, a gloss that resembles a time-loop: "This past cannot be redeemed unless the

[66] Lowe, 6.
[67] Stringer, 264.
[68] Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 251.
[69] Ibid.

identity ceases to be invested in it, and it cannot cease to be invested in it without giving up its identity as such."[70]

To use Brown's phrase, "giving up" one's identity is, at the most basic level, a kind of self-crippling. This scene in *Zarathustra* plays out in *How to Live Safely* in the pivotal though perplexing scene of Charles shooting his future self. Returning to his time machine, hitched to the space-dock of his home city in Minor Universe 31, Charles watches himself—his future self—opening the hatch of the time machine and stepping out, waving a book and yelling at him (present-Charles). Present-Charles grabs the book from the wounded future-Charles and dives into his time machine, ordering TAMMY to make a speedy getaway. Future-Charles is thus left crippled at the space dock's bridge, gripping his "self"-inflicted wound: a bullet in his appendix. Present-Charles, confused, panicked, and beating a quick retreat into interstitial space, has not so much given up his identity as attempted to murder a simulacrum of it—which is essentially what Yu is doing to the genre of Asian American literary fiction by turning away from it and instead to a genre of model minority *ressentiment*.

The reason this scene at the space dock is so perplexing is that it's never clear why Charles shoots himself rather than just runs away or hides. There is an excess to this plot decision that, perhaps, betrays the hand of the author. However, this wrinkle in narrative logic disappears when we're reminded that time travel in the novel is primarily a mode of characterization. Moreover, if we read the novel in light of Yu's other fiction, which is centrally concerned with authenticity, then this scene makes more sense. Authenticity, after all, is a narrative concept that depends on a process of elimination: a *reductio ad finem* in which all subsequent possibilities from an original—alternate selves, in Charles' case—are eliminated. The characters we encounter in Yu's fiction are typically trapped in self-reflexive loops, detached from their feelings, histories, thoughts, and motivations in the manner, as it were, of a person sitting in the control booth of one's own life. In "The Man Who Became Himself," the protagonist David Howe (whose name suggests the kind of self-reflexive, existential question—i.e., David How?—that bears down on many of Yu's characters) realizes one day that "he was in the first person and David Howe was in the third person and between them was an immense chasm of silence."[71] In "Inventory," which reads as if it was edited out of *How to Live Safely*, the narrator complains, "I'm not real. I am some sort of alternate version of an actual person living somewhere in the actual world. I have a Self. I'm his hypothetical."[72] These characters all struggle under the long shadow of ascribed identity, and might be read as paradigmatic examples of what Tina Chen calls "impersonators" who live under "the assumption of a public identity that does not necessarily belong to 'someone else' but that has been assigned to and subsequently adopted by the performer in question in order to articulate an identity comprehensible to the public."[73]

What I think distinguishes these thought-loops from the self-reflexive irony of postmodern fiction more generally is their overintellectualism, which is found in Yu's almost excessive extrapolation and extension of metaphors. A thumbnail example of this is represented visually in pages from Yu's short story "Problems for Self-Study," which takes the form of a math problem set. It is also seen in the sometimes pages-long concatenations of dependent

[70] Brown, 73.
[71] Yu, "The Man Who Became Himself," in *Third Class Superhero*, 48–9.
[72] Yu, "Inventory," *in Sorry Please Thank You*, 96.
[73] Chen, 14.

clauses in *How to Live Safely*.[74] In addition to the metafictional, postmodern literary experiments that they most certainly are, these extrapolations and extensions also bear a strong resemblance to the "boxes in boxes" that Charles and his father pursue, and the "hiding places" of self-deception that Nietzsche associates with *ressentiment*. What *How to Live Safely* helps us to understand about the psychological structure of *ressentiment* is that self-deceptive hyper-rationalism can be a pursuit of authenticity in character—as well as a pursuit of authenticity in genre.

In Asian American literary fiction there is a marked absence of model minority characters. Much of the reason for this, I am arguing, is that authentic Asian American self-expression and representation has been cornered into a narrative of exclusion by the interplay between Asian American studies and Asian American literary fiction, which has resulted also in the generic codification of Asian American fiction. As a result, unironic depictions of the model minority have been relegated to the non-literary genre of self-help. As Colleen Lye has shown, the archive in which Asian racialization and economic hypermodernity is most explicitly connected is business self-help and the entrepreneurial memoir, which put an Asian spin on the kinds of books that line Charles' father's shelves: "*Turn Three Thousand into Half a Million*," "*Conquer Your Weaknesses*," "*Inventory of Your Soul*," "books with bright red titles, titles dripping with superlatives, with promises of actualization, realization, books that diagrammed the self as a fixable lemon … Self as a kind of problem to be solved" (37–8).[75] Something crucial to note about books like Robert Kiyosaki's best-selling *Rich Dad, Poor Dad* (2000) financial self-help book, and Jane Hyun's corporate success memoir/self-help manual *Breaking the Bamboo Ceiling* (2006), which is aimed at Asian Americans, is that they are far and away the best-selling books written by Asian Americans. Meanwhile, in American popular cultural production since 1965, an almost endless supply of nerdy Asian characters has appeared: e.g., Long Duk Dong in *Sixteen Candles* (1984), Takashi Toshiro in *Revenge of the Nerds* (1984), and Data in *The Goonies* (1985). More recent examples include Raj Koothrappali on the TV series *Big Bang Theory* (2007–) and Dinesh Chugtai in HBO's *Silicon Valley* (2014–). There are two things we should note here. First, these characters were all invented by non-Asian Americans.[76] And second, they are characters in film and television rather than literary fiction.

When model minority characters do appear in fiction by Asian Americans they are never presented unironically or avowed as subjects with full interiority. They appear as side characters like the "fresh of the boat" alter-ego character Chin-kee in Gene Leung Yang's graphic novel *American Born Chinese* (2006), or as targets of deconstruction and critique like the miserable and mediocre mathematician Lee in Susan Choi's novel *A Person of Interest* (2008) and the academically excellent but secretly criminal characters in Justin Lin's film *Better Luck Tomorrow* (2003). Insofar as *ressentiment* is a psychology in which one always thinks relationally, the model minority character cannot appear without always-already being critiqued or undermined. Even characters who are markedly neither model minorities, nor idealized critical subjects are developed in agonistic relation to idealized critical subjects. Adrian Tomine's character Ben in his graphic novel *Shortcomings* (2007), for instance, rejects his filmmaker

[74] See the graph paper passage below.
[75] Lye, "Unmarked Character."
[76] *Sixteen Candles* was written and directed by John Hughes; *Revenge of the Nerds* was written and directed by Steve Zacharias and Jeff Buhai; *The Goonies* was written by Chris Columbus; *Big Bang Theory* was created by Chuck Lorre and Bill Prady, who are also the showrunners; and *Silicon Valley* was created by Mike Judge, with Alec Berg as the showrunner.

girlfriend's identity-driven films, which precipitates their breakup and his subsequent, unsuccessful soul-searching.[77] Post-1965 Asian American literary fiction might thus be thought of as a collective effort not only to "debunk" the model minority myth, or at least dilute its power by generating a multiplicity of counter-types and alternatives, but also to preserve the aesthetic agonism produced by the idealized critical subject.

Insofar as *How to Live Safely* is committed to authentic representation of the model minority, the novel's metafictional conceit is, in my view, overdetermined. If theories of Asian American identity consistently fall back on the figure of what Mark Chiang has called "nonrepresentational representation" (e.g., Kandace Chuh's "subjectless discourse," etc.), then it is because of the immense theoretical strain that the model minority places on the project of strategic essentialism. The model minority, in other words, is anything but a figure for straightforward representation and, by extension, straightforward dismissal. It is a poststructuralist figure *par excellence* whose representation requires a departure from the genres of literary fiction and realism—the genres of choice for ethnic self-representation and projects of authenticity—and engagement with genres like metafiction and SF.

What is allegorized in Charles' pursuit of his father is a pursuit of what Jameson calls "authentic *ressentiment*": which, as I have mentioned, is a *ressentiment* that has escaped reified forms of subjectivity and literary character. While both Charles and his father are without a doubt "men of *ressentiment*," what drives Charles into depression and his father into unknown reaches of space-time is a toxic uncertainty over the authenticity of their feelings. The language of *ressentiment* available to them is too binaristic: one is either faced with enough or not enough, superabundance or hunger, being poor or not being poor. As I have already suggested, this binaristic impasse reflects a predicament at the heart of Asian American studies. I would add that it also explains in part the strong methodological tendency among friends and enemies of Asian American movements to constantly analogize Asian Americans with other ethnic and racial groups.[78] Without an authentic core of *ressentiment*, Asian American identity is always at risk of "weakness."[79]

In *How to Live Safely*, this predicament of *ressentiment* is symbolically articulated and resolved via conflicts in genre. Fredric Jameson offers one of the most cogent analyses of the interaction between *ressentiment* and genre in his readings of George Gissing.[80] Gissing might not seem the most obvious point of comparison to clarify the *ressentiment* in *How to Live Safely*, but there are a few important resonances between the literary marketplaces in which Gissing and Yu are each writing, and to which their generic manipulations are responding. As Roger Luckhurst notes, the recent turn in Anglophone SF, beginning in the 1990s, to the hybridization

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[77] Adrian Tomine, *Shortcomings* (Montréal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2007).

[78] Here, I am referencing Lye's argument in her essay "The Afro-Asian Analogy," *PMLA* 123.5 (October 2008): 1732–36; and Koshy's argument in her essay "Morphing Race into Ethnicity: Asian Americans and Critical Transformations of Whiteness," *boundary 2* 28.1 (Spring 2001): 153–94.

[79] On Asian American as a "weak ethnicity," see Frederick Buell, *National Culture and the New Global System* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

[80] The argument I am constructing in this chapter is similar to the one that Jameson makes in regard to literary realism, which he refers to as the "Dickensian paradigm" that Gissing struggles under: "the earlier Dickensian 'solutions' [i.e., symbolic resolutions to social conflicts] turn out to produce fresh problems and contradictions in their turn, for which a new and distinctive solution … must be invented," 186. Replace "Dickensian 'solutions'" with what I have been calling "Asian American literary fiction," and this largely represents the approach I have been taking to Yu's fiction.

of genre—SF combining with fantasy, horror, realism, lower-middle-class social satire, so-called "slipstream" hybridization, the increasing interest in these genres among writers of literary fiction, etc.—stages an "uncanny return … to the conditions of writing that dominated the emergence of SF in the late nineteenth century."[81] These conditions include the emergence of mass culture at the end of the 19th c., which resulted in large part from an explosion in communications technologies and readerships—an explosion that finds parallels in the 1990s with the radical expansion of print fiction and the globalization and consumerization of the Internet.[82] The sudden visibility of new social classes amidst these information explosions puts pressure on fiction writers, insofar as they are committed to some kind of social realism, to develop new formal strategies that both participate in and resist what Jameson calls "containment" strategies that simultaneously naturalize middle-class fantasies and tell lower classes to stay in their place. In Gissing's novel *The Nether World*, for example, the generic paradigms of melodrama and sentimentality—signaled by the actress Clara and the modest Jane, respectively—represent "the carrot and the stick of nineteenth-century middle-class moralizing about the lower classes."[83] But as material realities shift, the aptness of these generic containment strategies also shifts, losing power in some respects, but also continuing to emit ideological signals. Gissing holds fast to literary realism, Jameson argues, while the Utopian impulse to imagine something like authentic *ressentiment* is, at this point in British literary history, ill-served by the conventions of literary realism: "the modalities of the Imaginary and of wishfulfillment or desire find new institutionalization in the subgenres produced by emergent mass culture: gothics, adventure and myth, science fiction, and detective stories."[84] Jameson uses Gissing to show how generic boundaries stabilize in response not only to information explosion, but the broader material conditions of mass culture, "in which the universal commodification of desire stamps any *achieved* desire or wish as inauthentic."[85] The critical realist aspiration to totality is channeled into a pursuit of authenticity, which loosens constraints on genre. Indeed, in Yu's fiction, genre is a means to an end that could easily be mistaken as purely interested in producing affects, but that is, to my mind, best understood as expressing a critical realist desire.

In *How to Live Safely*, Charles' universe of residence, "Minor Universe 31," is a city-sized universe owned and operated by Time Warner Time, a division of Google (66); Charles' very reality is commodified, down to the physics that govern it (and that have been only "93 percent installed," 11). Jameson's point is that, under conditions of universal commodification, the subject of *ressentiment* doubts the authenticity of its own *ressentiment*—its "legitimating personal histories," as Ninh puts it—and this subject also knows that others doubt its authenticity. So, while one of the defining features of the universes in *How to Live Safely* is that they are all under some sort of corporate control, or otherwise privatized, Yu is less interested in a predictable critique of commodification than depicting a historical totality in which the macro process of commodification guides and is guided by micro processes of *ressentiment* and racialization for which there are no clear referents. Along these lines, Charles' recollection of his family's tense dinners—during which his father chokes down racialized "frustrations with this

[81] Roger Luckhurst, *Science Fiction* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2005), 243.
[82] On the emergence of mass culture and communications technologies in the long-19th century, see Stephen Kern; on the sociology of culture as a result of global Internet connectivity, see Manuel Castells, and Zygmunt Bauman.
[83] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 186.
[84] Ibid, 183.
[85] Ibid, 204.

country"—are offered as a prehistory of chronodiegetics and the subsequent world- and indeed universe-making industries that spin off from it as the imaginative products of unexternalizable *ressentiment*. But it is also a prehistory of Charles' father's failure to lay claim to this new world/universe.

One might respond that the conditions of universal commodification are hardly unique to Gissing's and Yu's milieus. But the point is that in Gissing and Yu it is explicitly offered as the dystopian context, a kind of downward pull, against which characterization struggles. Both Yu and Gissing struggle against the limitations of received forms, but Yu *also* struggles against the reified genre of Asian American literary fiction. One lesson we can draw here is that commodification and racialization are the same process, and what *How to Live Safely* demonstrates is how this lesson, in order for it to be expressed in fiction at all, must be routed through formal paradigms that might diminish its range of meaning. In the next section, I will make the case for SF—which I'll subsume under the heading "two cultures fiction"—as privileged a genre for the expression of model minority *ressentiment*.

Failure, according to Jameson, is the only remaining narrative of authenticity in a situation of total reification. In fact, Jameson's intuition here might offer a partial explanation for the current explosion of interest in the illusory abjections of neoliberal subject formation: failures, microfailures, and "cruel optimisms" whose narratives reveal desires so abject that they have yet to escape necessity fully enough to be engulfed by reification. These narratives are, at bottom, narratives of *ressentiment*, and critical engagement with them strongly pursues modes of authenticity. Narratives of failure, in other words, reveal how, under certain circumstances, narratives in which success is pursued—that of the model minority, for instance—are not necessarily narratives of superabundance, but of hunger and survival. This is in fact the point that Mark Chiang makes in his critical reassessment of Asian American studies, which, as he argues, is a "project [that] had to acquire institutional legitimacy in order to survive," whose struggle for institutionalization, he goes on to argue, is best understood as a struggle for cultural capital, thus risking reification (especially theoretical), and that in many crucial respects now stands in contrast to its radical origins.[86] Like Charles' father, the discipline has shifted to a narrative in which survival and the pursuit of success have become one in the same.

"Two Cultures" Fiction and Asian American SF

One of the most prevalent tropes in *How to Live Safely* is the posing and sublation of the two cultures conflict, which gets routed through characterization, narrative, and metafictional reflections on form. It comes to analogize not only art on one hand and science on the other, but also intergenerational cultural conflict, and the cultural conflict between an immigrant's adopted and home countries.

Charles recollects at one point one of his father's first attempts at explaining chronodiegetics to him, when he was still an adolescent. A memory of his father tearing the cellophane off of a new pack of graph paper prompts a series of reflections:

> "Choose a world, any world" … I loved the way he … would write notes in the corner, or label the axes, or create a symbol key in the lower left-hand corner … Lettering so uniform, letters so straight and consistent in size and well lined they looked like words

[86] Mark Chiang, 2.

> in comic book dialogue bubbles. I loved how my father set down the letters, mindful of the spacing, not fitting one to each box, which would have looked too structured … The words were right in there, close to the curve, close to the y-axis, just floating in the plane along with the graph… a democracy of conceptual inhabitants, no one class privileged over any other… The words an actual part of it … the whole, unbroken space a place where anything could be written, anything could be thought, or solved, or puzzled over, anything could be connected, plotted, analyzed, fixed, converted, where anything could be equalized, divided, isolated, understood. (49-52)

The invitation to "Choose a world, any world" evokes the immigrant optimism that accompanied Charles' father when he arrived in America. We get a hint of his "frustrations with this country" in the mentions of "democracy" and "class" and "equalization"—frustrations that are only intensified by the scientific worldview in the last sentence and its promises of freedom. But what is perhaps most striking about this passage, which extends over four pages, much of it in long, concatenated sentences like the last one, is that Charles' reactions to the graph paper's rational, scientific features are conveyed in the language of aesthetic evaluation. It's clear that much of the pleasure Charles takes from his father's writing comes from how it blithely transgresses the lines of the graph paper. The sentence describing his father's "lettering" as "uniform" and "straight" emphasizes them as "*so* uniform," "*so* straight," and "*well lined*." The sentence then veers into a comparison with "comic book dialogue bubbles"—bubbles whose contents are indeed strikingly uniform, even mechanical, but have traditionally been hand-inked by professional letterists. The last sentence's depiction of freedom as a "place where anything could be written, anything could be thought" appears to project more from the arts side of Snow's two cultures divide than the sciences—although the ultimate undecidability between the two seems very much the point.

The connection between the two cultures conflict and model minority character can be observed in the fact that the topoi Frank H. Wu finds closest to hand when describing the model minority have to do with math and science, *and* that his "debunking" of the model minority myth routes through the figure of the "artist." Of the many contexts contributing to the naturalization and stability of the Asian American STEM nerd stereotype, one of them is the antinomy of the "two cultures" of the arts and sciences that C. P. Snow famously articulated in the 1950s, and that, I would argue, offers an effective framework for understanding the complex interactions between immigration selection, Asian American subject formation, and Asian American cultural production.[87] In his 1956 essay, "The Two Cultures," and then again in his 1959 Rede Lecture at Cambridge University of the same name, Snow, a scientist-cum-novelist, argued that the "traditional culture … mainly literary" and "scientific culture" represent two nearly essentially different modes of thought and temperament, and that communication and understanding between the two was mostly non-existent, and that when encounters did occur, they were contentious. Using his personal experience as a gauge, he writes that the members of these two cultures are "comparable in intelligence, identical in race, not grossly different in social origin, earning about the same incomes, who had almost ceased to communicate at all, who in intellectual, moral and psychological climate had so little in common that instead of going from Burlington House or South Kensington to Chelsea, one might have crossed an ocean."[88] In the

[87] See C. P. Snow, "The Two Cultures," *The New Statesman*, October, 1959; and C. P. Snow, "The Two Cultures," *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1959).
[88] Snow, 2.

cross-Atlantic debate that followed—made famous by F. R. Leavis's 1962 *ad hominem* response, "The Two Cultures? The Significance of C. P. Snow"—Snow's distinction between "traditional" and "scientific" cultures shifted to one between the "arts" and the "sciences"—and it is this latter distinction that has come to be the most common referent of the "two cultures."

Built into Snow's account of the two cultures conflict is a racially triangulated figure of the Asian—specifically, Chinese—model minority.[89] For Snow, China offers a symbolic resolution to the Cold War ideological conflict between American democracy and Soviet communism that the two cultures allegorize. To his mind, the postwar, pre-Great Leap Forward example of China provides a crucial proof of concept for his argument. His lecture ultimately advocates for a "scientific revolution" that could bridge the Cold War divide between the U.S. and U.S.SR, bringing them together to solve social problems such as poverty and technological deficit. In this Manichean worldview, "China is betwixt and between, not yet over the industrial hump, but probably getting there." Snow is nonetheless impressed with China and offers it as a model for other "poor" countries "all over Asia and Africa."[90] Snow argues: "an educational program as complete as the Chinese, who appear in ten years to have transformed their universities and built so many new ones that they are now nearly independent of scientists and engineers from outside. Ten years. With scientific teachers from this country and the U.S., and what is also necessary, with teachers of English, other poor countries could do the same in twenty."[91] China becomes a mediating term between the rich and poor worlds: a "model minority" that offers a familiar justification for post-war neocolonial projects; what Victor Bascara calls "model minority imperialism."[92] Moreover, its status as a transitional economy has given legitimacy to the Politburo's authoritarian, economically driven policies in the era of "socialism/capitalism with Chinese characteristics." Far from being universal categories, "art" and "science" depend on racial forms for their coherence.

Clayton argues that the "convergence of [Snow's] two cultures" in the techno-material expansions of the New Economy and post-socialist global capitalism is reflected in the rising cultural capital of SF, as well as the spread of certain literary forms that he groups under the heading "two cultures fiction." On the economic context producing these conditions of emergence, he writes:

> The convergence occurring today consists of people who live and work in an information economy forced to confront diverse kinds of knowledge from unrelated fields in their everyday occupations. Dislocation is as much a part of this new order as integration. Downsizing and outsourcing follow in the train of this convergence as frequently as technological innovation and new digital forms of creativity… Knowledge workers, including scientists and engineers as well as people with the interpretive skills and artistic backgrounds associated with the humanities, increasingly find themselves drawing on sources of expertise from both of the two cultures.[93]

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[89] See Kim, "Racial Triangulation." To be sure, the frame of reference for Kim's model is the US. Here, I am using it in regard to a racial logic superimposed onto Cold War geopolitics.
[90] Snow, 51.
[91] Snow, 51.
[92] Victor Bascara, *Model Minority Imperialism* (Minneapolis: U. Minneapolis Press, 2006).
[93] Clayton, 811. Wai Chee Dimock has made a similar connection between genre and the fluid modernity of the information economy: "Stackability, switchability, and scalability are the key attributes of genres when they are seen as virtual. These terms, inspired by the spatial fluidity of the digital medium, bring to mind a comparable fluidity in

It's no surprise, then, that the subtitle of Clayton's article, "A Geek's Guide to Contemporary Literature," uses the "geek" character type to refer efficiently to this economic landscape. One point of clarification I should offer here is that while Clayton intends "geek" to refer also to what Richard Florida has famously dubbed the "creative class"—that is, the sociological manifestation of the convergence of the two cultures—Asian American model minorities and STEM nerds, whose numbers constitute a large proportion of the "creative class," are nonetheless racially marked in variously explicit and coded ways. Mimi Thi Nguyen and Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu write:

> [The] Asian American creative class [that came of age in the 1980s and 1990s; Yu among them] was helped along in those years by the development of a global/multicultural market that valued Asian goods and aesthetics insofar as they could improve American lives and styles and that embraced Asian communities insofar as they could be reconstituted into a unified "Asian market."[94]

The perpetual foreignness of Asians and Asian Americans, as potentially transnational "flexible citizens," has been converted into both an ego-ideal and a reified token of diversity.[95] Thus, even though the long-standing racial form of Asians as eminently assimilable yet perpetually foreign is reiterated here, the economic preeminence of Asian American STEM nerds sets them apart from the rest of the creative class in a way that—as I am arguing in *American Techno-Orientalism*—disrupts the traditional Orientalist hierarchy of East as imaginative object of the West's always-already overbrimming subjectivity.

It's this racial dimension that I want to add to Clayton's argument that two cultures fiction frequently makes use of a "two-generational plot structure" to allow "a dialectical element to become visible in historical patterns that might otherwise seem simply to mirror one another."[96] Clayton makes a case for an archive that includes novels like Thomas McMahon's *Principles of American Nuclear Chemistry* (1970), Tom Stoppard's two cultures play, *Arcadia* (1993), Richard Powers' *The Gold Bug Variations*, Andrea Barrett's *Ship Fever* (1996), and Neal Stephenson's *Cryptonomicon* (1999). In these novels, the two cultures are mediated by a two-generational plot structure in order to imagine "the missing heritage for their own kind of hybrid interests. They take up the challenge of constructing a lineage for the information age."[97]

The two-generational plot structure in *How to Live Safely* is divided between the primary plot of in the diegetic, SF present—the world of full-blown SF: "Minor Universe 31," artificially created realities, alternate selves—and the secondary plot in Charles' reminiscences of his childhood experiences before his father's disappearance, in the Silicon Valley of the 1980s and 1990s. To be sure, this two-plot structure is not a literal mapping of the two cultures, with one

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genres," "Introduction: Genres as Fields of Knowledge," *PMLA* 122.5 (2007): 1379. She offers the term "regenreing" to describe this way of thinking about genre. While Dimock's technological metaphor suggests a natural affinity between regenreing and Yu's SF, I am wary of equating genres to information, which flattens difference. Indeed, the argument I have been constructing in this chapter is an attempt to restore the historicity of genres like SF and literary fiction, and to show how historical formalisms exert pressure on writers that is registered both politically and aesthetically.

[94] Mimi Thi Nguyen, *Alien Encounters: Popular Culture in Asian America* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), 13.

[95] For instance, in Silicon Valley's reformist rhetoric. See Christopher T. Fan, "Not All Nerds," *The New Inquiry* November 6, 2014, http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/not-all-nerds/.

[96] Clayton, 813.

[97] Ibid, 812.

plot expressing the arts and the other, the sciences; instead, it registers a *narrative desire*, in excess of the author's consciousness, to resolve, suspend, or sublate the two cultures. This narrative desire registers the structure of feeling that perceives the Asian American model minority's shift from domestic to global figure, in which their balance of power and powerlessness is beginning to tip in favor of the former, and that also perceives the problematics that Charles clumsily gestured at with the epithet "poor." It registers, in other words, an inflection point in which one historical mode transitions into another. Reading *How to Live Safely* through Clayton's rubric of the two-plot structure encourages us to think of the SF present plot not just as a primary plot, but as simultaneously historically distinct from, *and* continuous with, the secondary plot's reminiscences.[98] Coded into the two plot structure is a historical period bounded on one end by the postwar "global restructuring" that premised Charles' father's immigration, and on the other by the full-blown neoliberalism that Charles's nihilistic individuation so powerfully depicts. The "lineage" of the technological present imagined in *How to Live Safely* belongs to a globalized information age with which Charles and his father are racially equated via a techno-Orientalist logic, and that has transformed the demographic realities that Asian American literary fiction has hitherto been constructed to depict.

Many works of Asian American literary fiction deploy the two cultures trope. Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, for instance, centers on a characterological conflict between "Necessity" (survival, pragmatism) and "Extravagance" (adultery, talk-story, myth-making). At one particularly significant moment in the chapter "At the Western Palace," this conflict is mediated by the two cultures. In this chapter, Brave Orchid counsels her sister Moon Orchid on how to reunite with her husband, who left her in China thirty years before. At the end of the chapter, Brave Orchid beseeches her daughters on how to keep their husbands from straying. Accordingly, "Brave Orchid's daughters decided fiercely that they would never let men be unfaithful to them. All her children made up their minds to major in science or mathematics."[99] Sau-ling Wong describes this moment as a "non-sequitur" that reveals an intergenerational tension between Brave Orchid's adherence to necessity and her daughters' extravagance, as well as a narrative desire to "reconcile Necessity and Extravagance."[100] On one hand, this moment only just happens to route through Snow's "arts" and "sciences" conflict; the scene has more to do with the transfer of cultural values that, as I mention above, is distinctive of the pre-1965 model minority. On the other, when read in relation to the chapter's opening scene, which is a scene of immigration at San Francisco International Airport[101], this apparent non-sequitur appears to perceive "Necessity" as a floating signifier tossing about sea-changes in American and Asian American demographics, as well as U.S.-Asian geopolitics—for instance, among the arrivals Brave Orchid and her family see are Vietnam vets. In this chapter, which takes place in the early-1970s, the demographic transformations of immigration selection have been going on for a few years, but the wholesale transformation of Asian America—its eventual "occupational segregation"—is still only perceived as a structure of feeling. And so, for Brave Orchid's

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[98] In the chapter titled "The Historical Novel Today, or, Is It Still Possible?" in *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013), Fredric Jameson makes a case for contemporary SF as the heir to the Lukácsian historical novel, crediting the generic mechanisms unique to SF that make possible the travel between multiple historical contexts.
[99] Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior* (New York: Vintage, 1975), 160.
[100] Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong, "Necessity and Extravagance in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*: Art and the Ethnic Experience," *MELUS* 15.1 (Spring, 1988): 17, 18.
[101] Brave Orchid compares her experience of immigration with the new arrivals, who "have it easy": "On Ellis Island the people were thin after forty days at sea and had no fancy luggage," Kingston, 115.

daughters, "Necessity" refers not to their mother's pragmatism—planting "vegetable gardens rather than lawns"—but instead to the same Cold War-era techno-scientific priorities that gave birth to the Asian STEM nerd. The feeling that overcomes Brave Orchid's daughters at the end of the chapter—a feeling that, expressed in language, presents as a non-sequitur in the same manner as Charles' question to his father, "are we poor?", and that is powerful enough to determine their college majors—is a feeling that perceives the contours of a model minority *ressentiment* that is only beginning to emerge.

Koshy's reading of Jhumpa Lahiri's short story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) identifies in its depictions of second-generation south Asian model minorities and STEM nerds a "swerve away from parental desires for economic security and techno-scientific knowledge toward humanistic and creative work."[102] Indeed, Lahiri's work in general offers a counter-example to two of my central claims: that Asian American literary fiction generally ignores unironic depictions of the model minority, and that generic experimentation enables authentic depictions of post-1965 model minorities. Min Hyoung Song has observed, for instance, that Lahiri's fiction is "noteworthy for its lack of interest in the formal innovation associated with postmodern storytelling even as it maintains a strong interest in the narrative doubling of thought back onto itself."[103] However, as I hope I have demonstrated in this section, I am not claiming that *only* two cultures fiction and SF offer the possibility of authentic depictions of the model minority, even though I do believe that they offer a privileged vocabulary for these depictions. What I am arguing is that a writer's choice of *any* genre instead of Asian American literary fiction allows for the depiction *and reception* of certain modes of Asian American experience that are otherwise limited or even foreclosed. Even though Lahiri's depictions of model minorities are authentic, because they are written explicitly in the idiom of Asian American literary fiction, they open themselves to critiques of complicity with whiteness.[104] It is precisely this sort of ethical critique, and the rigid reception template assigned to Asian American literary fiction that it is a part of, that Yu wants to avoid.[105]

Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* offers another strong instance of two cultures fiction, and thus shares a great deal with *How to Live Safely*, despite the obvious generic differences between the two novels. In fact, rereading *Native Speaker* through the frameworks of the two cultures and model minority *ressentiment* generates a powerful response to Walter Benn Michaels' critique of the novel as a paradigmatic example of a novel that promotes neoliberal ideology by focusing our resentment on issues of identity rather than economic inequality. Michaels writes: "we might say that the [novel's] focus on identity functions not just to distract people from the increase in equality but to legitimate it."[106] The reason Michaels' singles out the Asian American novel is because the model minority status of Asian Americans endows their literature with a maximum of depictions of identity and a minimum of depictions of economic inequality. So, to the extent that the Asian American novel is defined by its concern with identity, it conspires with neoliberalism's individuating forces.

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[102] Koshy, 375.
[103] Song, 349.
[104] For instance, Gita Rajan accuses Lahiri of "a taming and domesticating of South Asianness," quoted in Koshy, 354.
[105] Fan, Interview with Yu.
[106] Walter Benn Michaels, "Model Minorities and the Minority Model—the Neoliberal Novel," *The Cambridge History of the American Novel*, Eds. Leonard Cassuto, Clare Virginia Eby, and Benjamin Reiss (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1023.

How to Live Safely demonstrates how a novel might be authentically Asian American and yet unconcerned with what Michaels is calling "identity": a term that in his usage seems to refer solely to idealized critical subjecthood and its institutionalization. Its focus on Asian American model minority subject formation as mediated by professional values also reveals the faulty assumption at the heart of Michaels' argument, which is that the middle-class values transfer in the process of immigration even if middle-class status is itself lost. *Ressentiment*, in other words, is born from the process of immigration—somewhere over the Pacific, supposedly—rather than here on American soil. This is why Michaels argues that Henry Park, the 1.5 generation Korean American protagonist of *Native Speaker*, is wealthy here in the U.S. because his father was wealthy in Korea. However, in addition to relying on a misreading of the text—Henry's father was poor in Korea, not rich[107]—Michaels' more fundamental error is ignoring the role of professional class. He ignores this dimension perhaps because it opens onto the material circumstances of immigration and racialization: that entire complex of forces that overdetermines Asian American occupational segregation, and that undermines his anti-materialist conception of race. Henry's father immigrates to the U.S. because his poverty bars him from entry into what he calls the "big network" of Korean business.[108]

In fact, what shapes Henry's psychology more so than putative economic class are the professional values—*which are mediated by the two cultures conflict*—that his father attempts to bestow upon him. Henry's father was trained in Korea as an industrial engineer. Unable to find suitable employment in the States, he quite resentfully becomes a grocer, and then encourages Henry to "learn some Shakespeare words" so that he might avoid what Charles calls "frustrations with this country.[109] Indeed, it's Henry's virtuosic facility with the English language that mediates the novel's anxieties over the authenticity of Henry's status as the titular *Native Speaker*. His supreme literariness, in other words, is a direct consequence of his father's overspecialization in the sciences rather than the arts, as well as his father's subsequent immigration under the 1965 Act.

The publication history of SF written by Asian Americans has roughly tracked this generational split. Before 1990, there were scant few Asian Americans publishing SF. The earliest was Laurence Yep, whose short story "The Selchey Kids" appeared in the February, 1968 number of Frederik Pohl's *If* magazine. In 1983, William F. Wu became the first Asian American to be nominated for a major SF award, the Nebula, for his short story, "Wong's Lost and Found Emporium."[110] Other Asian American SF writers in the 1980s include Laotian-American Brenda Wang Clough, who published her first novel *The Crystal Crown* in 1984, and Eric Kotani (penname of Yoji Kondo) whose novel *Act of God* appeared in 1985. In 1990, Ted Chiang became the first Asian American to win a major science fiction award, the Nebula, for his short story, "Tower of Babylon." Beginning the 1990s, but especially over the last decade, the number of Asian Americans writing SF has exploded. There are currently over 125 Asian Americans writing SF and/or fantasy, making it one of the most vibrant areas of early-21st century Asian American literary production. Like SF in general, SF by Asian Americans has

[107] Chang-rae Lee, *Native Speaker* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), 52.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Ibid, 49.
[110] Wu earned a Ph.D. in American Culture from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, where he was classmates with poet Garrett Hongo, and wrote a dissertation that would later be published as the widely read monograph *The Yellow Peril: Chinese Americans in American Fiction, 1850–1940* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1982).

mostly taken the form of short stories. Consequently, this writing exhibits an extremely diverse array of styles and themes, and writers often defy description as solely SF or fantasy writers.

If, as I have been arguing, the rubric of "two cultures fiction" helps to illuminate moments in Asian American literary fiction in which model minority character is allowed to express itself non-ironically, and without reference to an idealized critical subject, then SF offers writers an especially privileged social and aesthetic form. The term "science fiction" immediately evokes the two cultures, and suggests an aesthetic form—a sublation—in which each term balances the other. In regard to Asian American SF writers, I would argue that SF is attractive because it conveniently makes use of their academic/professional training, and/or because it offers the possibility of personal sublation: of reconciling STEM training and interest with a desire for literary expression that is often agonistic, as Koshy points out in her reference to the "swerve away" from parental wishes that this desire often entails.

Asian American SF writers' status as model minorities, as opposed to an explicitly "minor" (and thus political, according to Deleuze and Guattari) critical subject, is refracted in the absence in their work not of identity, but identity politics—what Koshy calls a "displacement" of the political—that distinguishes their writing from Asian American literary fiction. This is evidenced in part by the fact that SF by Asian Americans strongly tends to be "racially asymmetric," to use Stephen Hong Sohn's term for texts in which there is a perceived or actual mismatch between the racial identity of author and fictional narrator.[111] In Yu, as we have seen, this is seen in his "scrubbing" of racial and ethnic markers as well as place names. This "scrubbing" is also widely, though not universally, found in the work of Ted Chiang, whose work I engage in the next chapter.

Much of the reason for this avoidance of politics generally and identity politics in particular is because of a widely held perception that in the literary marketplace, identity politics don't sell. As Chiang explains, "I think it's hard enough to write about issues of race and get published, even when you're working in respectable literary fiction. If you try to do it in genre, it'd be an even steeper uphill battle because there would be, I think, two axes of disenfranchisement to deal with."[112] Tess Gerritsen explicitly connects perceived market demands and the racial asymmetry of her medical thrillers with her own mixed-race identity: "I have tried to stay 'under the radar' as an Asian, because I worried that it might get in the way of my success as a popular novelist. Most of my characters have been white. However, with my recent success, I'm now using more Asian characters."[113] However, despite the fact that many Asian American SF writers avoid identity politics—and are thus disciplined by the marketplace into model minority-hood—their casts of characters are hardly ever racially unmarked. E. Lily Yu's fiction ranges from allegorical fables about wasps, bees, and sea urchins, to generation ship space travel, and features characters who just happen to be racially marked as non-white. This is also seen widely in Ken Liu's extremely prolific oeuvre, as well as stories by Jeremy Sim, Kenneth Kao, Malinda Lo, Jessica Lee, and many others. While race is almost never depicted as a social formation in this fiction, or as a site of critique, it is widely used to signal diversity.

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[111] Sohn, *Racial Asymmetries*.
[112] Ted Chiang, interview with Betsy Huang, "Interview: Ted Chiang," *The Asian American Literary Review*, May 24, 2013.
[113] Christopher T. Fan, Email correspondence with Tess Gerritsen, January 26, 2014.

My intention here is not to make a rearguard case for the ethnographic imperative, but instead to highlight the fact that racially asymmetrical fiction by Asian Americans is found far more readily in SF than in literary fiction. Two notable exceptions to this description of Asian American SF are the politically rich works of Karen Tei Yamashita, whose SF novels include *In the Arc of the Rainforest* (1990), *Tropic of Orange* (1997), and Claire Light, whose SF short stories are collected in the volume *Slightly Behind and to the Left* (2009). I would argue that it is because their fiction centers on idealized critical subjects that they have found serious reception by Asian American literary critics.[114]

The Plastic Present

Breaking out of the time-loop of *ressentiment* promises to suture into a single lineage the two histories that Charles and his father represent. Yu quite literally brackets this possibility, however. While most of the novel is concerned with the question of whether or not it is possible to live within the "plastic cage" of *ressentiment* and still find authenticity, the novel's last section, the "Appendix," moves towards the possibility of breaking out of the "plastic cage" by imagining something that Yu calls "the plastic present":

> Go get your dad. When you get there, he will say, hey. You can say hey… His time machine broke down, and he got trapped in the past. Tell him you understand… Step out into the world of time and risk and loss again. Move forward, into the empty plane. Find the book you wrote, and read it until the end, but don't turn the last page yet, keep stalling, see how long you can keep expanding the infinitely expandable moment. Enjoy the plastic present, which can accommodate as little or as much as you want to put in there. Stretch it out, live inside of it. (232–3)

The present tense of this scene implies a rejection of both *ressentiment*'s fixation with the past and the beyond of Brown's futurity. There is an attempt, however small, at imagining a space within *ressentiment* in which one can live out one's life in a box or prison house conceptualized as security rather than incarceration—a space in which the inward adjustments made by individual family members have been harmonized. Yu does not pursue this any further, however. Not only is this scene distanced by being relegated to paratext, it is also mediated by metafictional devices like second person address and, despite the title of the novel, a somewhat unexpected shift in conventions to that of a how-to manual. There is also the irony that Charles has shot himself in his (anatomical) appendix, which would suggest a rejection of the solution offered in the (textual) Appendix, but also opens the possibility of reading the Appendix as a literalization of sublation—of living with one's pain.

Asian Americans—idealized critical subjects and model minorities alike—struggle through model minority *ressentiment* towards something like a "plastic present." We are reminded of "the little pocket of space" that Charles' father makes for him, and "how it is enough." But that scene's oceanic feeling is different from the "plastic present." The "plastic present" is a moment stalled at the point just before any sort of ideal might be realized—critical,

[114] See Jinqi Ling, *Across Meridians: History and Figuration in Karen Tei Yamashita's Transnational Novels* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), and Stephen Hong Sohn's extended analysis of Light's collection in "Impossible Narration: Racial Analogies and Asian American Speculative Fictions," in *Racial Asymmetries*. We can hold the same expectation of serious reception for Chang-rae Lee's *On Such a Full Sea* (New York: Riverhead, 2014).

average, or otherwise. If this moment is a repetition of Charles and his father's earlier scene of what we might call "enough-ness," then it is a repetition with a difference. Perhaps the "plastic present" is a moment when model minorities and ideal critical subjects alike are finally relieved of their wounded attachments and reconciled with their wounds, so that they might stop asking "What do I want?" and instead look to the future and ask, "What do I want for us?"

Chapter 4:
Melancholy Transcendence: Ted Chiang and Asian American Postracial Form

Beginning with the publication of his first story, "Tower of Babylon," in 1990, the American science fiction (SF) writer Ted Chiang has produced one of the most impressive bodies of work of any SF writer of his generation. One of the most notable features of Chiang's career is the extremely high award-to-publication ratio he has achieved. As a member of a genre community whose most successful writers are maniacally prolific, Chiang has published a mere thirteen works, all short fiction, most of which are included in his 2002 collection *Stories of Your Life and Others*. Along the way, Chiang has been awarded three of science fiction's most prestigious prizes—the Hugo, Nebula, and Locus—four times each.[115] In light of the enormous cultural capital that he has accrued, it is no wonder that teachers of Asian American literature have been so eager to include Chiang in their studies and syllabi.

But the categorization of Chiang's fiction as Asian American raises a number of difficult questions. With only minor exceptions, Chiang's work passes over in silence Asian and Asian American content alike. This qualifies him as one of the few writers whose work falls neatly into Yoonmee Chang's definition of "postracial" Asian American fiction as "literature written by Asian American writers that does not contain Asian American characters or address Asian American experiences."[116] From the standpoint of a normative Asian American framework that interpellates writers via their biological and/or filiative backgrounds and literary texts via their explicit engagement with Asian and/or Asian American content, Chiang's fiction is Asian American only insofar as Chiang himself is biologically Asian.

The exclusion of ethnic and racial content in Chiang's work thus raises a rather different set of questions than those posed by novels like Chang-rae Lee's *Aloft* (2004), which, while bereft of Asian or Asian American protagonists and narrated from the standpoint of white American characters, cannot *not* be read in light of its author's critical and market identity as a successful Asian American writer whose previous novels have been installed in the Asian American literary canon.[117] Aside from these questions of what Stephen Hong Sohn calls "racial asymmetry"[118]—referring to the perceived mismatch between an author's racial identity and the racial content of his/her fiction—the questions Chiang raises are different still from the ones posed by the intraethnic *ressentiment* expressed by writers like Tao Lin and Frank Chin.[119]

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[115] Not incidentally, a bidding war at the 2014 Cannes Film Festival ended with Paramount Pictures signing a $20 million contract for the rights to a film version of Chiang's "Story of Your Life." Mike Fleming, Jr., "University PressDATE: Cannes: Paramount Confirms 'Story Of Your Life' Acquisition; $20 Million Is Fest Record Deal," *Deadline Hollywood*, May 14, 2014, http://deadline.com/2014/05/cannes-wild-auction-on-story-of-your-life-should-lead-to-record-deal-729990/.

[116] Yoonmee Chang, *Writing the Ghetto: Class, Authorship, and the Asian American Ethnic Enclave* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 201.

[117] For a reading of *Aloft* through the optic of racial form, see Mark Jerng, "Nowhere in Particular: Perceiving Race, Chang-rae Lee's *Aloft*, and the Question of Asian American Fiction," *Modern Fiction Studies* 56.1 (Spring 2010).

[118] Stephen Hong Sohn, *Racial Asymmetries: Asian American Fictional Worlds* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

[119] Lin's novel *Taipei* (New York: Vintage Contemporaries Original, 2013) includes a scene at the Asian American Writers Workshop, in which his protagonist, a semi-autobiographical Taiwanese American writer named Paul, looks around and mutters to his companion, "I feel like I hate everyone," 133. Frank Chin's patrolling of the divide

Instead, Chiang's work represents what Viet Nguyen has called a "flexible strategy" of either resisting or accommodating modes of identification; a strategy that does not fall into the normative, oppositional framework of Asian American literary studies in which a politics of resistance has become the predominant hermeneutic and criteria for canonization.[120]

This chapter will focus on a reading of *Story of Your Life and Others*' eponymous story, "Story of Your Life" (1998). Despite its almost total exclusion of racial and ethnic content (not to mention Asian or Asian American content), I argue that "Story of Your Life" is nonetheless systematically structured by ongoing processes of Asian American racialization. To argue this claim, I make recourse to Colleen Lye's concept of Asian American "racial form": a form that is keyed to the transactions between language and social relations rather than to essentialist mythologies of racial biology, and that, in fact, often eschews direct reference to race.[121] Unlike Lee and Choi, who sometimes write as Asian Americans and sometimes don't, Chiang indicates and conceals his Asian American identity in the same gesture.[122] What, then, are the features and circumstances of Chiang's writing that produce Asian American racial form in the very same postracial move of *not* writing as an Asian American? This question corresponds to a crucial aspect of the postracial that deserves more emphasis: namely, that it is impossible to think or write about race without reference to a specific manifestation of it. The Asian American and postracial dimensions of Chiang's fiction do not operate independently from each other. Every enunciation of the postracial is an enunciation of a specific racial relation.[123]

The Two Cultures after 1965

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between "real" and "fake" Asian American literature (Chinese American in particular) has offered one of the foundational antinomies of Asian American literary studies. See Frank Chin, Jeffrey Paul Chan, Shawn Wong, Lawson Fusao Inada, eds., "Preface," *Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Asian American Writers* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1974), and Frank Chin, "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake," *The Big Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature*, eds. Frank Chin, Jeffrey Paul Chan, Shawn Wong, Lawson Fusao Inada (New York: Meridian, 1991).

[120] Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[121] See Colleen Lye, "Racial Form," *Representations* 104 (Fall 2008): 92–101.

[122] I borrow the temporal conflation of the "indicated" and "concealed" from Chiang's story, "Tower of Babylon." There, the protagonist Hillalum is the first of a team of miners to break through the cosmic firmament, up to which the mythical tower has been built. After climbing through the breach, he is shocked to discover that he has emerged back on Earth, not far from the base of the tower. He thus realizes that the universe is in fact unrolled like a print made by a seal cylinder:

> When rolled upon a tablet of soft clay, the carved cylinder left an imprint that formed a picture. Two figures might appear at opposite ends of the tablet, though they stood side by side on the surface of the cylinder. (28)

This becomes a description of the empirical closure and spiritual foreclosure of the universe, and one of the most efficient moments of melancholy transcendence in Chiang's *oeuvre*: "By this construction, Yahweh's work was indicated, and Yahweh's work was concealed. Thus would men know their place." "Tower of Babylon," *Stories of Your Life and Others* (Easthampton, MA: Small Beer Press, 2010/2002).

[123] In a sense, this chapter seeks to answer a question that Lye has posed about the relation between race, literature, and globalization in her consideration of racially and ethnically "unmarked character" in contemporary Asian American fiction. In examining "whether and how race continues to provide a vocabulary to describe post-1960s institutionalizations of social inequality," she asks: "Does contemporary ethnic literature have something to tell us about the specificity of social relations in the historical life of capitalism?" Lye, "Unmarked Character and the 'Rise of Asia': Ed Park's *Personal Days*," *Verge* 1.1 (Spring 2015): 332, 333.

Sherryl Vint sees in Chiang's work the pursuit of a "relentlessly logical extrapolation."[124] Indeed, "meticulous," "methodical," and "precise" are among the most common adjectives that commentators use to describe Chiang's style. China Miéville sees in Chiang's attention to two of SF's central concerns—ideas and wonder—a "traditional" approach that somehow "never feels dated." He explains: "Partly this is because the 'wonder' of these stories is a modern, melancholy transcendence, not the naïve 50s dreams of the genre's golden age."[125] According to Chiang, his narratives are often structured by the trope of "conceptual breakthrough," a term coined by John Clute and Peter Nicholls that describes the epistemic shifts produced by scientific revolutions.[126] These narratives interest him "because they're a way of dramatizing the process of scientific discovery *without being limited by history*."[127] The unadorned, unaesthetic style that allegedly enables Chiang to focus "relentlessly" on "dramatizing" conceptual breakthrough is, in other words, underwritten by a principle of selection that, like Ernest Hemingway's "theory of omission," is in fact deeply aesthetic. In Chiang's fiction, race and ethnicity—specifically, Asian and Asian American modalities of these—are two of the major limiting factors that "history" names.

The effect that Miéville calls "melancholy transcendence" is a transcendence that, in the words of one of Chiang's characters, is "not spiritual but rational."[128] Even when science fictional and fantastic elements are introduced—e.g., towers, angels, super-geniuses—they are treated with all the coldness of empiricism. In "Tower of Babylon," the mythical tower reaches the seemingly impenetrable firmament, but workers nonetheless breach it using the mining techniques of dynastic Egypt. "Hell Is the Absence of God" (2001) treats divine visitations with all the ordinariness of weather patterns. In "Understand" (1991), super-intelligence collapses under the infinite loops of self-reflexivity. Attempts to transcend the brute facts of the empirical world inevitably return Chiang's characters to those brute facts. In similar fashion, one seeking to recruit Chiang to any model of Asian American literature must therefore contend with the brute facts of a particularly intractable case.

It is surprising that it is nowhere mentioned that the Nebula awarded to "Tower of Babylon" made Chiang the first Asian American ever to win a major SF award. In one sense, this evidences a deracination that has no doubt been constructed by, and contributed to, his reputation for "precise" attention to his thought experiments, which presumably proceed untrammeled by

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[124] Sherryl Vint, "Notes and Correspondence: Suggested Further Readings in the Slipstream," *Science Fiction Studies* 38.1 (March 2011), http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/notes/notes113/notes113.html.
[125] China Miéville, "Wonder Boy," *The Guardian* (UK), April 23, 2004, http://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/apr/24/featuresreviews.guardianreview23.
[126] John Clute and Peter Nicholls, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (New York: Doubleday, 1979).
[127] Ted Chiang, interview with Vandana Singh, "The Occasional Writer: An Interview with Science Fiction Author Ted Chiang," *The Margins*, *The Asian American Writers Workshop*, October 3, 2012, http://aaww.org/the-occasional-writer-an-interview-with-science-fiction-author-ted-chiang/.
[128] Ted Chiang, "Understand," *Stories of Your Life and Others*, 55. Miéville appears to mean "melancholy" in the colloquial sense of pervasive sadness, as opposed to the pathological depression Freud contrasts with the healthier process of mourning. There is nonetheless a structural similarity between the two. A transcendence is implied when Freud narrates the process of melancholia: "Thus the shadow of the object fell across the ego, and the latter could henceforth be judged by a special agency, as though it were the object, the forsaken object," "Mourning and Melancholia," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953/1917), 249. Melancholia, like melancholy transcendence, is what happens when an outside becomes an inside. This is Anne Cheng's point of departure in her reconfiguration of racialized subjectivity as a mode of melancholia in which the subject's otherness to itself is mediated by racism, in *The Melancholy of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

externalities like race, ethnicity, or politics—"history," to use Chiang's word. This view of his work has also played no small role in his ascension to the apex of Anglophone literary SF, which names not only a genre of fiction, but also a community in which, Chiang himself points out, "Asian Americans are underrepresented … as are most people of color."[129]

In another sense, the [racial?] silence surrounding Chiang's landmark achievement in literary history is the predictable consequence of his own reluctance to address issues of race and ethnicity. When asked by Betsy Huang if "being Asian American had any influence or impact" on his writing, he is at a loss: "I can't point to any specific examples of how it has influenced me."[130] And when another interviewer asks about one of the few moments in his *oeuvre* when he explicitly addresses race, Chiang explains his view that race is not reducible to biology: "While I agree that race blindness is an interesting idea, I didn't think there was any way to make it even remotely plausible in neurological terms. Because there are just too many things that go into racism. It seems to me that to eliminate the perception of race at a neurological level, you'd have to rewrite the underpinnings of our social behavior."[131] As to the question of why he avoids race in his work, he offers two explanations. The first concerns control over the play of meaning in his texts: "I may address the topic of race at some point," he says, "but until I do, I'm hesitant about making my protagonists Asian Americans because I'm wary of readers trying to interpret my stories as being about race when they aren't."[132] The second has to do with the politics of publishing: "I think it's hard enough to write about issues of race and get published, even when you're working in respectable literary fiction. If you try to do it in genre, it'd be an even steeper uphill battle because there would be, I think, two axes of disenfranchisement to deal with."[133] It would be unfair to accuse Chiang of eliding race in order to get published, given his view that race and racism might not even qualify as valid topics for science fictional extrapolation. But more importantly, such an accusation—premised as it is on a mimetic concept of race that only knows race in its evident rather than structural or systemic forms—would fail to clarify anything about his fiction. All we can say is that race, for Chiang, is an impediment to the process of writing and publishing. What is of particular interest is how he conceives and goes about surmounting this impediment.

The rejection of a teleological, mimetic concept of race upon which Chiang's work is premised joins him to a cohort of writers whose relation to issues of identity and social justice ranges outside the orbit of an ethnographic imperative to give authentic and realistic expression to one's identity. Critics like Yoonmee Chang, Sohn, Ramón Saldívar, Elena Machado Saez, Raphael Dalleo, Min Hyoung Song, and Ken Warren have attempted to theorize this cohort in relation to what has come to be called the "postracial."[134] Rather than refer to an after of race or

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[129] Ted Chiang, interview with Betsy Huang, "Interview: Ted Chiang," *The Asian American Literary Review*, May 24, 2013, http://aalrmag.org/specfictioninterviewchiang/.

[130] Ibid.

[131] Ted Chiang, interview with Jeremy Smith, "The Absence of God, an Interview with Ted Chiang," *Interzone* 182 (September 2002). A character in Chiang's story "Liking What You See: A Documentary" (2002) appears to ventriloquize this position: "There's no neural pathway that specifically handles resentment toward immigrants, any more than there's one for Marxist doctrine or foot fetishism. If we ever get true mind programming, we'll be able to create 'race blindness,' but until then, education is our best hope," "Liking What You See: A Documentary," *Stories of Your Life and Others*, 258.

[132] Chiang interview with Vandana Singh.

[133] Chiang interview with Betsy Huang.

[134] See Ramón Saldívar, "Historical Fantasy, Speculative Realism, and Postrace Aesthetics in Contemporary American Fiction," *American Literary History* 23.3 (Fall 2011), and "The Second Elevation of the Novel: Race,

racism, whatever that would mean, "postracial" refers to a set of representational and social problems that have arisen as a result of the discursive silence that has settled around race in what is frequently called the "post-Civil Rights" or "post-segregation" era.[135] As legal scholar Michelle Alexander argues, "What has changed since the collapse of Jim Crow has less to do with the basic structure of our society than with the *language* we use to justify it."[136] The mass incarceration of predominantly young, black men, she argues, perpetuates a "racial caste system" that "permanently locks a huge percentage of the African American community out of the mainstream society and economy." This system operates without any of the visible racial mechanisms of Jim Crow, and primarily under the institutional and social aegis of the (allegedly) colorblind "War on Drugs."[137] Under such a regime of racialization, race takes on the status of

> …an optical illusion—one in which the embedded image is impossible to see until its outline is identified—the new caste system lurks invisibly within the maze of rationalizations we have developed for persistent racial inequality. It is possible—quite easy, in fact—never to see the embedded reality.[138]

What I hope to show is how Chiang's fiction is concerned with the "outline" of race, and that his apparent lack of concern over race in his fiction is not simply a refusal of some general concept of race, but part and parcel of his exclusion of specifically Asian and Asian American racial contents. His postracial aesthetics are nevertheless imprinted by the processes of Asian American racial formation. It is therefore more useful to think in degrees of Asian American-ness, which can be found in variously concentrated or dispersed forms in specific stories. Not all of Chiang's stories are Asian American, and not all writing by Asian Americans is necessarily Asian American.[139] Postracial form produces an infinite spectrum of illusions.

A number of recent studies have attempted to understand postracial aesthetics in Asian American fiction. Sohn and Song, in addition to Chang, have offered useful postracial frameworks for reading work by Susan Choi, Sesshu Foster, Jhumpa Lahiri, Nam Le, Claire Light, Ed Park, and Charles Yu, among others. Sohn theorizes postracial literature via his aforementioned figure of "racial asymmetry." Song sees in the postracial fiction of Asian American writers an aesthetic "restlessness" instigated by the multiple forces of expectation—especially by the burgeoning market for Asian American fiction—leveled upon their careers as well as their fiction. These readings are tremendously helpful in charting the proliferation of a postracial aesthetic, but they also conceive of this aesthetic superficially, as a mere screen covering over a more predictable economy of mimetic racial representation. Accordingly, each sees postracial Asian American fiction as ultimately conforming, or at least aspiring, to an anti-

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Form, and the Postrace Aesthetic in Contemporary Narrative," *Narrative* 21.1 (January 2013); Elena Machado Saez and Raphael Dalleo, *The Latino/a Canon and the Emergence of Post-Sixties Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Min Hyoung Song, *The Children of 1965: On Writing, and Not Writing, As an Asian American* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); Kenneth Warren, *What Was African American Literature?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); Touré, *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness?: What It Means to Be Black Now* (New York: Free Press, 2011).

[135] Eduardo Bonilla-Silva offers one of the paradigmatic theorizations of postrace in his book *Racism without Racists* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

[136] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 2.

[137] Ibid., 13.

[138] Ibid., 12.

[139] Lye and Warren make similar claims in regard to Asian and African American literature, respectively. Lye where.

racist, anti-imperialist identity politics. Sohn sees in Chiang's writing an attempt "to relay a strongly political [message] concerning issues related to social inequality and oppression."[140] Song treats postrace as a horizon to be surpassed on the way to a deracinated, metaphysical consideration of difference: "Chiang's works," he argues, "when read as Asian American literature, are able to contribute to an imagining of difference as such."[141] What I hope to add to these accounts is an engagement with the very postracial aesthetic they propose.[142]

My argument in this chapter is that the postracial indeed offers an appropriate framework for understanding the racial dimensions of Chiang's fiction, because it forces us to think about race as *inevident*. Not absent, as Yoonmee Chang's definition of postracial Asian American fiction entails, but operating beneath the surface of our language and institutions, structuring them. The challenge, again, is to identify the specifically Asian American racial relation undergirding Chiang's postracial aesthetics.

To develop a framework for identifying this specificity, I would begin with a fact frequently noted by postracial critics: that most postracial writers were born after 1965, a date significant for the Hart-Celler Immigration and Nationality Act passed that year, and that they are by and large first, 1.5, or second generation immigrants. Crucially, since the passage of the Act, which ended the decades-long legal exclusion of Asians, the U.S. racial and ethnic landscape has transformed into an expanse of what Lisa Lowe has influentially called "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, [and] Multiplicity."[143] Coming of age as they did after the radical movements that birthed literary categories like ethnic and Asian American literature, this cohort inhabits a significantly different relation to identity and social justice than the agonistic one held by their predecessors, a relation Saldívar describes as "post-postmodern, post-Civil Rights."[144]

In the case of Asian American "Children of 1965" (to use Song's apt designation), I would argue that the circumstances of post-1965 immigration have inserted many of these writers into a freighted relation to what C. P. Snow has termed the "two cultures" of the arts and sciences.[145] While Jay Clayton also makes a connection between the technoscientific concerns of contemporary novels and the convergence of the "two cultures" in the economy, my aim is to demonstrate how this convergence cannot take place without recourse to racialization, and how it relies on post-1965 Asian American racialization in particular.[146] Edna Bonacich and others have shown that the system of professional preferences at the heart of the 1965 Act and subsequently expanded through the H-1B visa program it established, was originally intended to address a

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[140] Sohn, 207.
[141] Song, 101.
[142] Saldívar shares this view but then proceeds to develop the most sophisticated formal analysis that we yet have of postracial aesthetics. In fact, to some extent his formal attention comes at the cost of a fuller analysis of "the goal of [postracial] ethnic writers to imagine a state of achieved social justice [through their] protest stories," "Historical Fantasy," 593.
[143] Lisa Lowe, "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Asian American Differences," *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).
[144] Saldívar, "Second Elevation of the Novel," 3. See also Jeff Chang's cultural history of the post-Civil Rights era and the postracial, *Who We Be: The Colorization of America* (New York: Grove/Atlantic, 2014). My review of Chang's book elaborates on some of the historiographical problems posed by the postracial, "Jeff Chang's History of Multiculturalism," *Hyphen*, October 21, 2014, http://www.hyphenmagazine.com/blog/archive/2014/10/books-jeff-changs-history-multiculturalism.
[145] C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1959).
[146] Jay Clayton, "Convergence of the Two Cultures: A Geek's Guide to Contemporary Literature," *American Literature* 74.4 (2002).

shortage of technical and scientific labor, and to ready the U.S. for a postwar global restructuring that has seen the cheapening of labor costs, the rise of developing economies (especially Asian "economic miracles"), and a post-Fordist shift from a production to a service economy. In the Asian American community, the consequence of these policies has been what sociologists call "occupational segregation," or the over-representation of certain groups in certain professions.[147] Recent statistics indicate that among U.S. minority groups, Asian Americans have the highest level of occupational segregation, and are concentrated in "highly paid occupations linked to scientific, medical, and computer engineering jobs."[148]

The other side of the two cultures token is an antinomy expressed by one of Chiang's characters in what can be read as a slogan of post-1965 Asian American experience: "pragmatism avails a savior far more than aestheticism."[149] Indeed, the widespread decision of these "Children of 1965" to eschew aesthetic pursuits—like writing fiction—in favor of more pragmatic and professionally secure technical training reveals a link between post-1965 immigration priorities and specific modes of the "model minority" stereotype that, as the present essay is attempting to demonstrate, correspond to specific literary forms.

Up to 1965, the Asian American model minority was predominantly a figure of "economic efficiency"[150]—a view reinforced by the 1966 *U.S. News and World Report* article, "Success Story of One Minority Group in the U.S.," which coined the phrase "model minority." There, Chinese American middle-class attainment, in contrast to the socioeconomic lagging of "Negroes and other minorities," was attributed to the community's industrious values of "self-respect," "discipline," "hard work," and family cohesion.[151] After the Act, the model minority became more strongly associated with academic success in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields.[152] While success in these fields can certainly correspond to economic efficiency, its inflection of the model minority stereotype is crucial to tracking a specific, post-

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[147] Post-1965 occupational segregation occurred swiftly and decisively. Paul Ong and John M. Liu observe that "In 1964, out of 5,762 immigrant scientists and engineers, only 14 percent came from Asia… By 1970, the absolute number had increased to 13,337, with Asians comprising 62 percent of the total… A similar change occurred in medicine. Of the 2,012 foreign medical graduates (FMGs) entering as permanent residents in 1965, 10 percent came from Asia… by 1972… Asians [accounted] for 70 percent of the total FMG population," "U.S. Immigration Policies and Asian Migration," in *The New Asian Immigration in Los Angeles and Global Restructuring*, eds. Paul Ong, Edna Bonacich, and Lucie Cheng (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 58. According to the 2013 Pew Research Center's survey of Asian Americans, Asians receive roughly three-quarters of H-1B temporary worker visas, which are overwhelmingly awarded to workers in technical fields. Moreover, Asian Americans enter science and engineering fields at nearly three times the rate of the general population. "The Rise of Asian Americans," ed. Paul Taylor (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 19 June 2012), 27, 65.

[148] Olga Alonso-Villar, Coral Del Rio, Carlos Gradin, "The Extent of Occupational Segregation in the United States: Differences by Race, Ethnicity, and Gender," *Industrial Relations* 51.2 (April 2012): 189, 191. Importantly, these professions represent only one pole around which Asian American occupational segregation accumulates. The other, according to Alonso-Villar, et al, consists of "low-paid occupations (such as "miscellaneous personal appearance workers," "tailors, dressmakers, and sewers," and "sewing machine operators")," 11.

[149] Chiang, "Understand," 70.

[150] Colleen Lye, *America's Asia: Racial Form and American Literature, 1893–1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 5.

[151] "Success Story of One Minority Group in the U.S.," *U.S. News and World Report*, December 26, 1966.

[152] To be sure, a similar article appeared in the *New York Times*—also in 1966—that credited education ("almost never in the liberal arts") for the post-internment rebound of the Japanese American community. Along with the *U.S. News* article, these articles might be said to represent the pre- and post-1965 model minority stereotypes, with the *Times* article, as I have been arguing, becoming our current paradigm. William Peterson, "Success Story, Japanese-American Style," *The New York Times*, January 9, 1966.

1965 Asian American racial form. SF written by Asian Americans did not exist prior to this period, but since the 1990s has seen explosive growth as the children of 1965 began publishing.[153] This is not to propose via some vulgar sociological determinism that the children of 1965 are necessarily or even disproportionately compelled to write SF. The reasons for the explosive growth have as much to do with a burgeoning market for Asian American writers and topics, and the proliferation of venues for SF publication (especially online), as they do with the forces of occupational segregation. What I am arguing is that Asian American SF can be read as an archive of Asian American literature defined by a historical formalism, rather than biology or some other essentialist criterion.

Chiang's father Fu-Pen completed his Ph.D. in engineering at the University of Florida and subsequently joined the engineering faculty at SUNY-Stony Brook. Chiang himself majored in computer science at Brown, but always harbored a love for writing, which led him to technical writing.[154] It was in his first year out of college that he took the step to apply to the Clarion Writer's Workshop—the prestigious, multi-week bootcamp for aspiring SF writers. Given these factors, I would argue that Chiang's work should be read as motivated by a struggle that responds to a specifically post-1965 Asian American immigrant tradition that privileges pragmatism—that is, STEM-related and other lucrative professions (i.e., healthcare, law, business)—over aestheticism.[155] In Chiang's work this struggle manifests formally as a struggle for aesthetic freedom. What makes this struggle specifically *Asian American* is the degree to which the two cultures antinomy limits aesthetic freedom.

Indeed, insofar as Chiang's style is a reaction against such limits, my readings identify overlaps between "melancholy transcendence" and what Anne Cheng calls "racial melancholia," which she defines as "a sign of rejection and as a psychic strategy in response to that rejection."[156] The resulting act of "exclusion," to use another of Cheng's terms, corresponds to Chiang's exclusions of race and ethnicity as subjects of his fiction. Importantly, Cheng's theorization of racial melancholia registers the crucial tension between performance and performativity in the processes of racial formation—the tension, in other words, between agency and the "reiteration of a norm or a set of norms."[157] In our ongoing study of race, Cheng argues,

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[153] Laurence Yep's "The Selchey Kids," *If* 18, no. 2, issue 123 (February 1968), in which San Francisco falls into the ocean after an earthquake, was the first SF short story published by an Asian American. The first novel published by an Asian American was Yep's *Sweetwater* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), a young adult, off-planet SF story in which human-alien racial conflict metaphorizes Yep's feelings of alienation as a Chinese American growing up in a black neighborhood in San Francisco. Prior to Ted Chiang's 1990 Nebula, the only Asian American ever nominated for a major SF award was William F. Wu. After 1990, Asian Americans have either won or been nominated for more than 80 of these awards. The ratio of Asian American SF publications (mostly short fiction) before and after 1990 registers a similar explosion.

[154] Ted Chiang, interview with Adam Israel, "Interview: Ted Chiang," *The Clarion Foundation Blog*, February 7, 2012, http://clarionfoundation.wordpress.com/2012/02/07/interview-ted-chiang/.

[155] There is a great deal of overlap between what I have been describing as the two cultures of Asian American SF and the "technomodernism" that Mark McGurl describes as the generic form extending from the overlap of scientific and artistic priorities as complimentary modes of "creativity" in the postwar American university. To be clear, what gives Asian American SF its specificity is the degree to which post-1965 immigration's racial/national/professional priorities have shaped its internalized tension between aesthetic freedom and the ethnographic imperative. Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

[156] Cheng, xi, 20.

[157] Judith Butler, quoted in Cheng, 51. See Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 12–13.

"We need to imagine a form of agency that recognizes *competition* between performance and performativity; between historicity and reenactment. Only then can we understand the coexistence of coercion and agency in any act of cultural performance. Only then can we see the performances of citizenship and nationalism as a continuous navigation between a scripting history and individual response."[158] It is precisely this kind of agency that Chiang attempts to fashion through a postracial aesthetic that mediates the competition between Asian American interpellation (performative) and the aesthetic freedom of melancholy transcendence (performance).

If the effect of melancholy transcendence is produced by a "methodical" focus on relentless extrapolation and conceptual breakthrough, and if Chiang is presumably freed to pursue this focus—freed from the threat of at least one of the "axes of disenfranchisement"—by excluding race and ethnicity, then the material bases of Chiang's postracial aesthetics can be located in the forces of post-1965 "occupational segregation." "Melancholy transcendence" is thus the perfection of an unadorned style that asserts aesthetic freedom through a performance of excluding race and ethnicity.

Heptapod B: Language of Gestalts

"Story of Your Life" proceeds contrapuntally, alternating between two storylines from the life of Louise Banks, a linguistics professor. Its characters are all racially unmarked. The first storyline recounts, in no particular chronological order, episodes from Louise's sometimes rocky relationship with her daughter, who we soon learn has died at age twenty-five in a rock-climbing accident. The second focuses on Louise and her partner Gary, a physicist and eventually the father of her daughter, both of whom are commissioned by the U.S. military to learn the language of a race of aliens, which Gary calls "heptapods" on account of their seven limbs.

The two cultures suffuse both storylines. In regard to Louise's daughter's choice of profession, it becomes an intergenerational *agon*:

> …after graduation, you'll be heading for a job as a financial analyst. I won't understand what you do there, I won't even understand your fascination with money … I would prefer it if you'd pursue something without regard for its monetary rewards, but I'll have no complaints. My own mother could never understand why I couldn't just be a high school English teacher. You'll do what makes you happy, and that'll be all I ask for. (112–3)

Even as Louise offers the opposite of the pragmatic emphasis that leads to Asian American occupational segregation, the juxtaposition of "financial analyst" to "English teacher" creates a contrast drawn in no small part from a post-1965 modality of the two cultures conflict.

The second storyline engages the rigorous scientific description and extrapolation of "hard" SF, focusing occasionally on principles from physics, but mainly on techniques in linguistics for "monolingual discovery," or the learning of a language between subjects who do not share a mediating language. The story thus thematizes the two cultures as an opposition between the "soft" and "hard" sciences. Along these lines, despite Louise's practice of scientific linguistics, she is coded as being on the other side of a cultural divide from the "hard" science of

[158] Cheng, 59.

physics. At one point, Gary confesses to her that he had given up trying to learn Heptapod: "I'm just no good at languages." To which she replies, "I suppose that's fair; I have to admit, I've given up on trying to learn the mathematics" (124). In regard to genre, Chiang's choice of linguistics as the focus of a "hard" SF story is an unusual one, since the field is, both within and outside of SF circles, stereotyped as a "soft" science. "Hard" SF is concerned with "the form of imaginative literature that uses either established or carefully extrapolated science as its backbone."[159] What makes Chiang's treatment of linguistics align with "hard" SF is the rigor and intricacy with which he develops Heptapod B, as well as the laws of physics he uses to analogize certain aspects of it.[160] Chiang's generic revision of the "soft" SF of linguistics as a "hard" SF extrapolation is one indication of his overarching concern with achieving a formal resolution to the two cultures conflict.[161] Indeed, the very title of the story—"Story of Your Life"—casts everything that follows in this light by gesturing at the essence of the liberal arts.

The heptapod storyline becomes a vehicle for two thought experiments. The first posits a time-symmetrical language whose users possess a "simultaneous," as opposed to "sequential," consciousness that perceives all points in time at once, past, present, and future: a mode of consciousness appropriate to what philosophers of science call "block time" or the "block universe theory." A version of this theory is presented by the Time Traveller in H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*: "Really this is what is meant by the Fourth Dimension, though some people who talk about the Fourth Dimension do not know they mean it. It is only another way of looking at Time. *There is no difference between time and any of the three dimensions of Space except that our consciousness moves along it*."[162] As we will see, this theory is crucial to the story's postracial aesthetics.

The second thought experiment considers how this language might affect a sequential human consciousness vis-à-vis the theory of linguistic relativity. Also known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, this theory speculates that "The structure and lexicon of one's language influences how one perceives and conceptualizes the world, and they do so in a systematic way."[163] "Story of Your Life" thus develops one of the prevailing interests in Chiang's work, the linguistic mediation of scientific reason and reality. In "The Evolution of Human Science," human scientists must decide how to interpret the impenetrable scientific research produced by super-intelligent "metahumans," so they begin developing techniques of "textual hermeneutics." "Seventy-Two Letters" poses the theory that "there [is] a lexical universe as well as a physical one, and bringing an object together with a compatible name [causes] the latent potentialities of both to be realized."[164] The narrator of "The Truth of Fact, The Truth of Feeling" observes, "We don't normally think of it as such, but writing is a technology, which means that a literate person

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[159] Allen Steele, "Hard Again," *The New York Review of Science Fiction* 4.46 (June 1992).
[160] For example, the story never explicitly mentions the theory of "block time," but instead explains the simultaneity experienced by the heptapods through an analogy to Fermat's principle of least time, which posits that "the route that [a] light ray takes is always the fastest possible one" (118).
[161] Betsy Huang also notes this feature of Chiang's work: its "integration of two distinctive types of SF—the academic exercise of 'hard' SF with the human interests of the 'soft' variety," *Contesting Genres in Contemporary Asian American Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 108.
[162] H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (New York: Norton, 2009). Philosophers of metaphysics trace the origin of the "block universe" theory to J. E. McTaggart's temporal concepts of the "A-," "B-," and "C-series," from his seminal article, "The Unreality of Time," *Mind* 17 (1908).
[163] Chris Swoyer, "The Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2003), http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/relativism/supplement2.html.
[164] Chiang, "Seventy-Two Letters," in *Stories of Your Life and Others*, 149–50.

is someone whose thought processes are technologically mediated. We became cognitive cyborgs as soon as we became fluent readers, and the consequences of that were profound."[165] As we will see below, "Understand" centers on the *novum* of a language of gestalts and is in many ways an apprentice work to "Story of Your Life." For Chiang, the technologization of language is often a conduit for considerations of difference: intergenerational, racial, professional, etc.[166]

Upon arrival, the heptapods themselves remain in orbit, but they deploy one hundred and twelve wall-sized "looking glasses" to various sites on Earth to serve as two-way videoconferencing screens. Louise and Gary begin holding virtual meetings with the heptapods, who are patient and cooperative in teaching them their spoken and written languages, which Louise designates Heptapod A and B, respectively. These languages, Louise soon comes to realize, are completely separate: B is not "glottographic" like human writing, because it "conveys meaning without reference to speech" (108). Faced with the problem of how to categorize Heptapod B, Louise rejects the categories of logograms and ideograms, which appear to be obvious analogues. She disqualifies "logogram" because it implies a corresponding spoken word, and "ideogram" for the somewhat cryptic reason of "how it had been used in the past" (111). She settles on "semagrams," since the sentences of Heptapod B operate according to their own grammar and syntax. They look "almost like mandalas," she explains: the large, intricate, circular images representing the totality of the universe in Buddhist cosmology:

> When a Heptapod B sentence grew fairly sizable, its visual impact was remarkable. If I wasn't trying to decipher it, the writing looked like fanciful praying mantids drawn in a cursive style, all clinging to each other to form an Escheresque lattice, each slightly different in its stance. And the biggest sentences had an effect similar to that of psychedelic posters: sometimes eye-watering, sometimes hypnotic. (112)

Louise describes this use of space as a "two dimensional grammar," and then stumbles upon a crucial realization after asking a heptapod to demonstrate the stroke-order of a sentence. Its design is so intricate that "the heptapod had to know how the entire sentence would be laid out before it could write the very first stroke" (123). She finds an analogy in Arabic calligraphy, which in some forms features strokes "so interconnected that none could be removed without redesigning the entire sentence … But those designs had required careful planning by expert calligraphers. No one could lay out such an intricate design at the speed needed for holding a conversation. At least, no human could" (ibid).

Only a simultaneous consciousness—a consciousness that perceives "block time"—could construct a sentence in Heptapod B. This realization leads Louise to existential questions about determinism and agency, freedom, and coercion. "Within the context of simultaneous consciousness," she observes, "freedom is not meaningful, but neither is coercion; it's simply a different context, no more or less valid than the other" (137). This nihilistic approach to the freedom-coercion antinomy might symbolically resolve the tension between aesthetic freedom and the ethnographic imperative, but it does not appear that Chiang finds this to be a particularly

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[165] Ted Chiang, "The Truth of Fact, The Truth of Feeling," *Subterranean Press* (Fall 2013), http://subterraneanpress.com/magazine/fall_2013/the_truth_of_fact_the_truth_of_feeling_by_ted_chiang.

[166] This is Song's reading of Chiang: "It may be more productive to wonder what Chiang's works, when read as Asian American literature, are able to contribute to an imagining of difference as such" (101). While I agree this is an interesting and productive approach to Chiang's work, I would emphasize that my approach moves in a diametrically opposite direction: towards the specific, rather than the general (even metaphysical).

satisfying solution. Given the relativity of agency within simultaneous consciousness, Louise wonders why the heptapods bother with communication at all. Her solution is that "For the heptapods, all language was performative. Instead of using language to inform, they used language to actualize. Sure, heptapods already knew what would be said in any conversation; but in order for their knowledge to be *true*, the conversation would have to take place" (138, my emphasis). For a simultaneous mode of consciousness, the only difference between Louise's daughter being dead and alive is the linguistic *performance* of one state of being or the other. An event is "true" when its linguistic representation rises above the merely constative and achieves a union of content (the facticity of an event) and form (the linguistic performance of an event).

As Louise builds fluency in Heptapod B, she discovers that it is transforming her own consciousness. Her thoughts become "graphically coded," and she begins experiencing "trance-like moments" in which she experiences "past and future all at once." Via the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, she undergoes a racial transformation from human to human-heptapod hybrid that proceeds by language learning, not biology: in other words, a postracial racialization. We now understand that what we have thus far been reading as Louise's prosopopoeic address to her daughter has in fact been taking place in the tenseless, performative address of Heptapod B. The story's narration becomes, from the standpoint of this realization, a representation of Heptapod B, and thus of Louise's racial difference. This racialized mode of narration correlates to postrace aesthetics in its movement away from a mimetic economy of racial representation to a narrative one.

Interdependent Narration

"Story of Your Life" not only aestheticizes but performs Asian American postracial form. Louise's narration of her daughter's life, which proceeds through a fraught economy of the evident and inevident, can be read as a metaphor for the postracial. Because her daughter is never named, and because we meet her at so many disparate ages, she never completely resolves as a character; everything we know about her is mediated by her mother. Along the same lines as Chiang's and Alexander's concepts of race, she is an effect of language, and is no less real because of it. Shortly after she is born, Louise tells her:

> I feel elated at this evidence of a unique mother-child bond, this certitude that you're the one I carried. Even if I had never laid eyes on you before, I'd be able to pick you out from a sea of babies: Not that one. No, not her either. Wait, that one over there.
>
> Yes, that's her. She's mine. (144)

Louise's "certitude" is independent from visual evidence. By this time, Louise's consciousness has already been transformed by Heptapod B, and we know that her utterance here—"She's mine"—is a performative that initiates the parent-child relationship in language rather than through biology and birth. It is precisely this utterance, however, that makes her daughter truly dead:

> An orderly will pull the sheet back to reveal your face. Your face will look wrong somehow, but I'll know it's you.
>
> "Yes, that's her," I'll say. "She's mine." (95)

Even though her daughter's face looks "wrong," the inevident—her "certitude"—prevails again. In simultaneous consciousness, Louise's daughter is always-already alive and dead, being born and dying. Heptapod B is thus not only a language adequate to a simultaneous consciousness, it is also adequate to the complicated ontology of Louise's daughter. Just as Louise's daughter is never named, Heptapod B is never shown; Chiang offers no illustrations. The progressive displacement of Heptapod B's representation from the visual to *ekphrases* and narrative is thus homologous with the postracial.

The contrapuntal narratives in "Story of Your Life" are, moreover, structured in the same way as the semagrams of Heptapod B sentences. For instance, it is never made explicit that Gary is the father of Louise's daughter until quite late in the story, yet clues are offered in what we might call interdependent narrations. Gary's impatience will reappear in his daughter in a subsequent section. At one point early on in their process of learning Heptapod B, Gary asks Louise, "So are we ready to start asking about their mathematics?" To which she responds, "We need a better grasp on this writing system before we begin anything else … Patience, good sir" (110). In the next section, their daughter cannot wait to go to Hawaii. "I wanna be in Hawaii now," she whines, and Louise tells her, "Sometimes it's good to wait … the anticipation makes it more fun when you get there" (111). At another moment in the story, after Louise realizes that Heptapod language is performative, we are given a scene from her daughter's childhood that illustrates her realization. Tired of reciting the story of "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" for the umpteenth time, Louise decides to make a few changes. These her daughter rejects, insisting, "That's not how the story goes." Flabbergasted, Louise asks her why she wants to hear the story if she already knows it goes. She replies: "Cause [sic] I wanna hear it!" (138).

Scenes in one narrative illustrate aspects of the other in a manner clearly meant to mimic simultaneous consciousness rather than, say, the interconnectedness of *leitmotif*'s progressive accrual of meaning and cohesive effect across a narrative space. Just as a story's quantum of pleasure is, for a child, undiminished by endless repetition, so for the heptapods—and possibly Chiang's readers—does the performance of an already scripted future actually infuse that future with value: it makes that future "true."

Chiang stages the interdependency of the story's two narratives visually as well. In one scene, Louise's fourteen-year-old daughter is pestering her for an answer to a homework question: "Mom, what do you call it when both sides can win?" In a subsequent scene, set chronologically before her daughter has been conceived, Gary groans sarcastically in response to something a U.S. diplomat says:

> "If we handle ourselves correctly, both we and the heptapods can come out winners."
>
> "You mean it's a non-zero-sum game?" Gary said in mock incredulity. "Oh my gosh."
>
> "A non-zero-sum game."
>
> "What?" You'll reverse course, heading back from your bedroom.
> "When both sides can win: I just remembered, it's called a non-zero-sum game." (128)

Louise's daughter's statement: "A non-zero sum game" returns us to the homework scene from before, so it is as if Gary had answered her question more than fourteen years before she had asked it—or, as if the time elapsed makes no meaningful difference.

These interdependent narrations, which become more apparent as the story proceeds, approximate the simultaneity of Heptapod B in narrative form, as well as Louise's hybrid racial consciousness. Indeed, Heptapod B's time-symmetry makes possible an infinite range of interdependent possibilities, over against the linear causality of sequential temporality.[167]

Asian American Postracial Form

The trope of the language of gestalts in Chiang's earlier story, "Understand," prefigures Heptapod B and thus provides a kind of control case for the Asian American racial forms that, in "Story of Your Life," are displaced onto narrative. As these forms appear in "Understand," they possess the convenient virtue of remaining entirely within the orbit of the post-1965 dynamic. Picking up the well-worn SF trope of the super-genius, "Understand" considers what a confrontation would be like between two individuals whose intelligence is increased by orders of magnitude after an experimental hormone therapy. Its protagonist, Leon, eventually finds that his intellectual development is being hindered by the limits of his language, so he begins inventing a new one (51). Like Heptapod B, Leon's new language is analogized with "ideograms," and, elsewhere, "mandalas." It is, moreover, "gestalt oriented," designed to convey totalities rather than—to use terms offered by Gary in "Story of Your Life"—"linear," "one-channel" communications.

The story's plot tracks the growth of Leon's intelligence, and culminates in his confrontation with Reynolds, another super-intelligence who has undergone the same treatment. Both Leon's development and his confrontation with Reynolds are driven by the thematics of the two cultures antinomy, which is posed as an opposition between scientific and poetic reasoning. In Leon's attempt to maximize the cognizing capacities of extant human languages, he begins experimenting with poetic form:

> I'm writing part of an extended poem, as an experiment; after I've finished one canto, I'll be able to choose an approach for integrating the patterns within all the arts. I'm employing six modern and four ancient languages… Each line of the poem contains neologisms, born by extruding words through the declensions of another language. If I were to complete the entire piece, it could be thought of as *Finnegans Wake* multiplied by Pound's *Cantos*. (48)

The idea of "multiplying" one form by another echoes the virtues of Heptapod B's "two channel," "two dimensional" grammar. Joyce's and Pound's *magnum opuses* are suggested as analogies presumably because of their intensely heteroglossic and multilingual form, as well as their formal experimentations that aspire to maximal representation approaching totality. *Finnegans Wake* moreover introduces a resonance with Giambattista Vico's *La Scienza Nuova* and its narrative of human progress that, as in "Understand," is charted against a narrative of

[167] We might say here that Chiang's narrative representation of simultaneous consciousness reflects the postsocialist transformation of the stereotype of Asian futurity—a transformation that collapses its temporality into an inescapable present.

linguistic progress.[168] With the *Cantos*, Leon's language is analogized not only with Pound's innovations in poetic form[169], but also with Pound's project of developing a hybrid poetic language adequate to a transcendent Sino-American culture.[170] Here we find a structure of racial form that is consistent in much of Chiang's work: the routing of Asian content through a mediating context. Indeed, it is not so much that Chiang's work is devoid of Asian content; it is, rather, devoid of *direct references* to Asian content. This content is rendered "inevident" not because it is absent, but because it operates in a different mode than a mimetic concept of race. When Asian or Asian American content appears, it is systematically mediated: here, through Pound; in both "Understand" and "Story of Your Life," through the thematics of the two cultures; and in regard to Heptapod B, through discarded references to ideograms, and technical (rather than cultural) analogies with mandalas.

Leon's pursuit of "ultimate self-awareness" eventually sets its sights on creating mind-computer links that would transform all of humanity into a giant "artificial brain" that would be capable of perceiving the most complex "gestalts," thus incarcerating individuals in the service of a collective consciousness.[171] Reynolds is diametrically opposed to Leon. His focus is on the external world—on the lives of "normals," and how he might use his intelligence "for establishing a global network of influence, to create world prosperity."[172] Where Leon sees himself as "a lover of beauty," Reynolds loves "humanity" in the manner of a technocratic dictator who sees science and technology as the answer to humanity's ills.

When Leon finally meets Reynolds, who has been pursuing him through various guises (e.g., manipulating specific stocks in Leon's portfolio whose ticker codes spell out his name), they honor each other through a brief, intense exchange of knowledge. This exchange occurs verbally, through an extemporaneous performance of the hyper-condensed poetic language Leon has described:

> Reynolds says, quickly and quietly, five words. They are more pregnant with meaning than any stanza of poetry: each word provides a logical toehold I can mount after extracting everything implicit in the preceding ones…
>
> We continue. We are like two bards, each cueing the other to extemporize another stanza, jointly composing an epic poem of knowledge. (64)

This, apparently, is a description of Joyce "multiplied" by Pound. The "epic poem" Leon and Reynolds create is a sublation of the two cultures at the level of form and content, and thus a symbolic resolution to a typically Asian American mode of occupational segregation. Leon's experience of this "epic poem" is aesthetic—he speaks of the "beauty" of his and Reynolds' intelligences. His aestheticism is the result of a *mise-en-abyme* of self-reflexive thought: a kind

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[168] See Samuel Beckett, "Dante… Bruno. Vico… Joyce," *Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress* (Paris: Shakespeare & Co., 1929).
[169] Preceded, of course, by his creative translations of Chinese poetry in *Cathay* (1915).
[170] According to Josephine Park, "Ezra Pound fashioned an American Orient which believed in a singular consonance across the Pacific; and the East provided him with a voice and a landscape which ultimately resonated with generations of American poets who echoed the precision of his longing, cultivated in the light of a Chinese sun," in *Apparitions of Asia: Modernist Form and Asian American Poetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 25. See also Steven Yao, *Foreign Accents: Chinese American Verse from Exclusion to Postethnicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
[171] Chiang, "Understand," 58, 59.
[172] Ibid., 64.

of existential enclosure that aims for melancholy transcendence. Neither he nor Reynolds is able to convince the other to join his side, and each has plans that are mutually exclusive with the other's—thus their confrontation. Reynolds eventually defeats Leon with a trigger word, "Understand," a kind of super-speech act that instigates a rush of mental associations that Reynolds has programmed to kill Leon. It is at this point that Leon concedes that "pragmatism avails a savior far more than aestheticism."[173] His only response to Reynolds' attack is to try to quickly "metaprogram" himself to resist the trigger word, but he does this to no avail. His final narration both indicates and conceals the trigger word: "I comprehend the Word, and the means by which it operates, and so I dissolve."[174] It is not so much the "Word" that kills here as its operation. Like the postracial, it simultaneously stands at a remove from, and yet constitutes reality. It indicates and conceals itself in the same gesture.

Melancholy Transcendence as Permanent Parabasis

Because of how race moves between the evident and inevident in Chiang's fiction, and because of its shifting status as an explicit or excluded criteria for the aesthetic valuation of his fiction, we are reminded of what Karen Shimakawa calls, in her study of Asian American performance, the "abject" body of the performer whose "Asian Americanness … comes into visibility in … its constantly shifting relation to Americanness, a movement between visibility and invisibility, foreignness and domestication/assimilation; it is that *movement between* enacted by and on Asian Americans … that marks the boundaries of Asian American cultural (and sometimes legal) citizenship."[175] We are reminded of this concept, but Chiang enacts its negative: rather than produce his Asian American identity in the act of abjecting himself, he abjects his Asian American identity in order to produce himself. That is, he produces a racially unmarked authorial persona whose exclusion of race and ethnicity at once elevates his methodical production of melancholy transcendence to a stylistic signature, and moves toward a kind of agency that, in Cheng's words, "recognizes *competition* between performance and performativity." Crucially, it is a *competition* that this agency recognizes. Not merely performance on one hand and performativity on the other, visibility and invisibility, evident and inevident, but the dialectic between the two.

If we read Chiang's exclusion of Asian and Asian American content as symptoms of racial melancholia, then we can identify instances of this agency: moments of melancholic compulsive repetition that reproduce the lost or excluded object. In one scene in "Story of Your Life," Louise and Gary have dinner at a Chinese restaurant, "one of the local places we had taken to patronizing to get away from the encampment. We sat eating the appetizers: potstickers, redolent of pork and sesame oil" (123). This is a completely unmotivated detail that makes itself conspicuous by its unprecedented announcement not just of ethnic content, but of an ethnic content that is somehow expected, that we have been waiting for all along. It is a stereotypical performance that produces what Josephine Lee calls a "supersaturation of significance."[176] Min Hyoung Song seizes upon this detail as one possible way to read the story as Asian American

[173] Ibid., 70.
[174] Ibid., 70.
[175] Karen Shimakawa, *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 3.
[176] Josephine Lee, *Performing Asian America: Race and Ethnicity on the Contemporary Stage* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 90.

literature.[177] Similarly, Betsy Huang finds in the story's mentions of mandalas and ideograms as reason to bemoan Chiang's "guarded adherence to the conservative techniques of the genre, perhaps at the cost of its radical political potentials."[178]

As I have been arguing, however, endorsing the evident as the register in which the Asian American-ness of a text is to be adjudicated not only risks reproducing essentialist notions of race, it also ignores Chiang's own richly developed postracial aesthetics. Along these lines, Chiang's "exclusions" are best understood as attempts at performing aesthetic freedom over against the performativity of the ethnographic imperative. These exclusions also resonate with the generic principles of science fiction (and, indeed, genre writing more generally), in which the conservative and the transgressive are put in tension. John Huntington writes, "The SF addict wants to feel the tension of the paradox of freedom within a structured imperative."[179] This is crucial: in order for aesthetic freedom to be legibly performed, there must be a limiting context, a "structured imperative" that works against it. The Chinese restaurant might thus be read as a deliberate performance of stereotypical Asian American content—indeed, as "redolent" of Asian American content. The restaurant is an ethnic detail that, in its very conspicuousness, announces aesthetic freedom by referencing a context that (as Chiang would appear to have it) at no moment governs the text. It thus announces itself, and itself alone, as the sole Asian American feature of the text, thus implying that the rest of the text is definitively *not* Asian American. The Chinese restaurant is thus not the stigmata of an Asian American text, but a trope that in the total context of "Story of Your Life" participates in the production of Asian American postracial form. It is not evidence of race, but the "doings" of race, to paraphrase the postracial critics Hazel Rose Markus and Paula M. L. Moya.[180]

Such a detail is reminiscent of the adventitious modernist detail championed by Erich Auerbach that, by virtue of its randomness, is the sign of that aspect of the human that is unassimilable by totalitarianism. What is thus projected by such a detail is the totalitarian system itself—here, normative Asian American frameworks. When Louise rejects the term "ideogram," she does so "because of how it had been used in the past." This vaguely stated reason might in fact reference a debate in the history of scientific linguistics, but that is neither here nor there given the modernist aesthetics (Joyce and Pound) that we know inform the trope of the language of gestalts in Chiang's fiction. It appears more likely that this reason references Orientalist appropriations of ideogrammatic writing that were so central to the modernist aesthetics of figures like Pound and Gary Snyder.[181]

Projecting this context and immediately putting it aside is part and parcel of the rigorous procedure that produces the "precise," "methodical" style that culminates in "melancholy transcendence." This strategy could thus be said to clear the way for a counter-Orientalist, predominantly technical analogy between Heptapod B and mandalas. These assertions of

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[177] Song, 101.
[178] Huang, *Contesting Genres*, 113.
[179] Quoted in Huang, *Contesting Genres*, 105. See John Huntington, "Science Fiction and the Future," in *Science Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Mark Rose (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1976), 161. The best recent formal account of SF is Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr.'s *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (Middletown, CN: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), which should not be read without equal attention to Darko Suvin's foundational *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).
[180] Hazel Rose Markus and Paula M. L. Moya, eds., *Doing Race: 21 Essays for the 21st Century* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 2010).
[181] See Park.

freedom viz. racial and ethnic politics and genre conventions allow the aesthetic autonomy of thought experiments to prevail over pragmatic concerns, scientific speculation to rise above humanism. Where "Understand" ends in self-defeat, "Story of Your Life" aspires to something different.

Chiang seems aware, however, that these assertions of freedom might not be enough; that no matter how much he insists, through innovations of form, or exclusions of content, his work is still governed by the ethnographic imperative, or will at least be read through that lens:

> When you're three [Louise tells her daughter] and we're climbing a steep, spiral flight of stairs, I'll hold your hand extra tightly. You'll pull your hand away from me. "I can do it by myself," you'll insist, and then move away from me to prove it … We'll repeat that scene countless times during your childhood. I can almost believe that, given your contrary nature, my attempts to protect you will be what create your love of climbing: first the jungle gym … and ultimately cliff faces in national parks. (135)

Even as Louise's daughter asserts her independence, she is never fully independent of her mother's protection. Even in death, her life is guarded by her mother's mediating narration. There is in the various exclusions and forms of "Story of Your Life" a hand-in-hand relationship with a mode of Asian American-ness that is frequently refused and displaced, but never completely excluded or abandoned. Indeed, just as Louise's protection ultimately produces its opposite (i.e., her daughter's love for dangerous climbing, which will claim her life), Chiang's exclusions, in the manner of the melancholic, ultimately reproduce the very object of exclusion. The crucial difference is that Chiang reproduces the object via narration rather than mimetically—that is, as an Asian American postracial form, rather than a racial form.

Louise's daughter's turning away from her mother on the staircase symbolically enacts Chiang's turning away from the ethnographic imperative in his paradoxical assertion of aesthetic freedom and generic conservativeness (or "traditional" SF, to use Miéville's term). An important component of the Asian American-ness of Chiang's postracial aesthetics, then, is the two-step process of projecting a system (the ethnographic imperative) and turning away from it. This turn is a moment of extradiegetic self-consciousness that recalls the trope of *parabasis* from Greek drama, in which the dramatic illusion is broken or suspended and the chorus addresses the audience directly on a topic unrelated to the dramatic action or diegesis. Saldívar argues that postracial American fiction is "riven by the trope of *parabasis*" and that it aims to "[transport] us beyond the historical contingencies of magical realisms and postmodern metafiction into the realms of twenty-first-century structures of fantasy" in which "neither literary realism, nor modernist estrangement, nor postmodern play, nor magical realist wonder can suffice as *formal* stand-ins for the concrete *content* of justice."[182] Chiang's fiction differs, however, from the somewhat teleological model Saldívar offers here. The "content of justice" and the autoethnographic reading methods required to recover it, are indexed by references to Chinese restaurants and whatnot, but Chiang is not interested in the teleology of social justice here. While Saldívar suggests that the parabasis of postracial fiction *looks forward* to the cessation of its turns and revolutions—thus enacting, in his phrase, a "speculative realism"—Chiang's fiction begins and ends with the premise that the postracial is a melancholy transcendence. The melancholic reproduction of the excluded object obviates the very possibility of speculation,

[182] Saldívar, "Historical Fantasy," 581, 593–4, original emphases.

insofar as it returns us to a certain reality. Parabasis in Chiang's fiction is thus as permanent as the present of simultaneous consciousness.[183]

In "Understand," Leon pursues the *mise-en-abyme* of self-reflexive thought as an aesthetic project that threatens to colonize humanity and homogenize it as a race of cyborgs conscripted into the production of "the ultimate gestalts … the [merging] of subject and object: the zero experience."[184] This is an apt description of melancholy transcendence: the conflation of the "ultimate gestalts" and the "zero experience," of subject and object, of everything and nothing, that results from turning from one of these positions to the other. This also describes a postracial theory that posits race as everything and nothing, subject and object, as well as the constant, cognitive vacillation from one of these positions to the other. "Understand" pushes parabasis to the extremes of self-absorption, and thus implodes in an anti-mimetic agency signaled by the paradox of Leon's statement, "I dissolve": Does he dissolve as he is saying or thinking this, or just after? Is this a performative or constative statement? Saldívar's theorization of postracial fiction would have it that this is, somehow, a performative statement that is homologous, or even identical, to a "content of justice." "Story of Your Life," in contrast, moves beyond the mere description of a paradox in order to perform an agency that at once realizes itself amidst the competition between performance and performativity, subject and object, sequential and simultaneous consciousness, but also realizes that transcending this competition will only return one to it.

When Louise claims her daughter on the day of her birth, she initiates the paradox of parenthood: The knowledge that one is at every moment losing one's child. That the security one provides as a guardian is mortgaged by a tormenting, permanent risk of loss. That "She's mine," which is the fundamental claim of a parent is, like all performatives, only true under very specific conditions, and is ultimately false. One's child is always-already charting an independent trajectory to an inevitable death. Language brings Louise's daughter into a kind of ontological being, but the brute fact is that it can never bring her back to life. Between the story's two focal points—from "'She's mine'" to "She's mine"—in the midst of its rotation from the quoted to the unquoted, from human to human-heptapod hybrid, from the two cultures antinomy to its sublation, we perceive the permanent parabasis of an Asian American postracial aesthetics. Louise's daughter's name, which we never learn, transcends the story's narration in Heptapod B, hovering over it as the antecedent to the title's pronoun. But her life and death are in thrall to her mother's facility in an impossible language.

[183] While Saldívar also draws from Friedrich Schlegel's definition of irony as a "permanent parabasis [*eine permanente Parekbase*]," "Historical Fantasy," 581, to characterize postracial fiction, the teleological commitment to the "content of social justice" he attributes to that fiction undermines the permanence of its parabasis, and thus its irony. My argument is that Chiang's fiction is committed, for lack of a better word, to the postracial itself, rather than the possibility of moving beyond it.

[184] Chiang, "Understand," 58.

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