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Fickle, Tara

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Serious Play:

Race, Game, Asian American Literature

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in English

by

Tara Fickle

2014

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2014

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Serious Play:

Race, Game, Asian American Literature

by

Tara Fickle

Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Los Angeles, 2014

Professor Rachel Lee, Co-Chair

Professor Mark McGurl, Co-Chair

“Serious Play: Race, Game, Asian American Literature,” argues that games are narrative fantasies of perfectly equal opportunity that can help us reconceive of what it means to be a minority in contemporary America. Race’s idiomatic evolution into a “race card” points not just to identity’s growing immateriality and “virtualization” but to its increasingly intimate relationship with the ludic. Asian American authors in particular have seized upon the possibilities of transforming identity into an object of play, in part because gameplay opens up a space to challenge stereotypes about the group’s “Tiger Mother”-esque obsession with work and apparent allergy to “frivolous” endeavors. Rereading Asian American literature through its literal and proverbial games, from the convivial mahjongg club at the center of Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* to the game-theoretical model of the “prisoner’s dilemma” captured in Japanese American internment novels, “Serious Play” reveals that it is not the Asian American ability to work but to *play* that offers the most cogent insight into identity formation as a simultaneously personal, political, and ludic pursuit.

The dissertation of Tara Fickle is approved.

Jinqi Ling

Shu-mei Shih

Rachel Lee, Committee Co-Chair

Mark McGurl, Committee Co-Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2014

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TARA FICKLE

EMPLOYMENT

Assistant Professor, University of Oregon, Department of English, 2014 –

EDUCATION

- M.A.** English, 2010
University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)
- B.A.** English and East Asian Studies, 2006, *summa cum laude*, *Phi Beta Kappa*
Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT

PUBLICATIONS

Refereed Journal Articles & Book Chapters

- “English before English: Asian American Poetry’s Unruly Tongue,” *Journal of Comparative Literature Studies* 51.1 (2014): 78–105.
- “Narrative and Gaming.” *Asian American Keywords*, ed. Rachel Lee (New York: Routledge, 2013, in press).
- “No-No Boy’s Dilemma: Game Theory and Japanese American Internment literature,” *Modern Fiction Studies* (forthcoming, Fall 2014).
- “American Rules, Chinese Faces: The Games of Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*,” *Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* (forthcoming, 2014).

Book Reviews

- Review of *Racial Asymmetries: Asian American Fictional Worlds* by Stephen Sohn, *Amerasia* (forthcoming).
- Review of *Managing Multicultural Lives: Asian American Professionals and the Challenge of Multiple Identities* by Pawan Dhingra, *Journal of Asian American Studies* 12 (2009): 226–29.

Other Publications

- “Inside the Japanese American Internment: a Gamebook,” *Text Adventures* (2013).
<http://bit.ly/1aCUKK4>.
- “Text Adventure Games and Interactive History: Educational Questing,” *Text Adventures Blog* (2013).
<http://bit.ly/1dYmXtD>.
- “A History of the Los Angeles City Market: 1930-1950,” *Gum Saan Journal* 32 (2009): 14–39.
- “Vanguards of Modernity: David Eng Considers the Queer Space of Stanley Kwan’s *Lan Yu*,” *UCLA Center for the Study of Women Newsletter* (2008): 11–13.

HONORS & AWARDS

- 2014 UCLA Ben & Alice Hirano Academic Prize for Most Outstanding Graduate Essay on Asian Pacific American history and/or experience

	UCLA Wei-lim Lee Memorial Prize for Most Outstanding Graduate Essay on Chinese Immigrants
2013	UC President's Society of Fellows Award (\$10,000; one of five recipients across all UCLA Humanities departments) UCLA Graduate Division Dissertation Year Fellowship (\$34,000) UCLA Friends of English Summer Research Support (\$2,000)
2012	Carolyn See Dissertation Fellowship, UCLA (\$20,000)
2009	UCLA Graduate Student Research Mentorship (\$18,000) UCLA Graduate Student Summer Research Mentorship (\$4,700)
2007	University Fellowship, UCLA (\$17,000)

SELECTED CONFERENCE & LECTURE ACTIVITY

Presenter/Invited Speaker

2014	“How (and Why) to Build an Academic Website,” Invited Guest Lecturer, <i>M/ELT & Center for the Digital Humanities</i> , UCLA, May. “Reading Algorithmic Translations Roundtable,” Participant, <i>Friends of English Conference</i> , UCLA, June.
2012	“The Rise of Game Theory and Japanese American internment literature,” <i>Americanist Research Colloquium</i> , UCLA, November. “The Game of Ethnic Literature,” <i>Modernist/Experimental Literature & Text Art Working Group</i> , UCLA, March.
2008	“Cyborg Identities: Mixed-Race Asian Americans and Progressive Modernity in Science Fiction,” <i>Association for Asian American Studies</i> , Chicago, April 16–20.
2006	“Jack, Jill and Benjamin Koo: Racial Identity and Korean Adoptee Children’s Literature,” <i>Association for Asian American Studies</i> , Atlanta, March 22–26.

Organizer

2010	“Afterlives: 21 st Annual English Graduate Student Southland Conference,” UCLA, June 4. Conference Organizer.
2008	“Containment, Hybridity and Expression: Mixed Race Asian Americans and the Popular Imagination,” <i>Association for Asian American Studies</i> , Chicago, April 16–20. Panel Organizer.

SERVICE

2013	Senior Moderator, Digital Humanities Graduate Lab, UCLA Invited Peer-Review Referee, <i>MELUS</i>
2012–Present	Webmaster, Americanist Research Colloquium (ARC), UCLA
2010	Graduate Student Liaison, Department of English Web Committee, UCLA
2009	Graduate Student Mentor, UCLA

INTRODUCTION

“What Good For?” The Games of Asian American Literature

“The difference between us and other pioneers, we did not come here for the gold streets. We came to play. And we’ll play again. Yes, John Chinaman means to enjoy himself all the while.”

—Maxine Hong Kingston, *Tripmaster Monkey*

“To define play is at the same time and in the same moment to define reality and to define culture. As each term is a way to apprehend the two others, they are each elaborated, constructed through and on the basis of the two others.”

—Jacques Ehrmann, “*Homo Ludens Revisited*”

Equal parts memoir and instruction manual, Amy Chua’s infamous *Battle Hymn of a Tiger Mother* (2011) opens with the observation that “a lot of people wonder how Chinese parents raise such stereotypically successful kids.” The self-professed Tiger Mother accordingly offers up some pointers for those American parents looking to produce their own versions of the model minority stereotype; the “secret,” evidently, is all about prohibition. “Here are some things my daughters, Sophia and Louisa, were never allowed to do,” Chua informs us, providing a bullet-point list that includes the following examples:

- Have a playdate
- Be in a school play
- Watch TV or play computer games
- Choose their own extracurricular activities (3)

Chua’s scorn for such “unproductive” activities as school plays and computer games is, for her, clearly inextricable from what it means to be an Asian parent as opposed to an American one: indeed, she complains throughout the book that her “Chinese” parenting model is constantly being undermined by her “American husband’s” belief “that childhood should be fun” (46). Her

linking of “Chineseness” to “anti-fun,” however, echoes a broader cultural assumption which is likely shared by Chua’s husband as well as herself: that Asian American success as a whole is predicated on a wholesale cultural rejection of “play.” Indeed, as critics like Sau-ling Cynthia Wong have noted, Asian American culture has in many ways been defined as a site where the “frivolity” of play is seen as “antithetical to self-justifyingly ‘serious’ activities, which, in the Asian American context, we have come to understand as the business of survival” (Wong 166). The “extravagance” of play, in short, poses not merely a distraction but a threat to the very identity of the Asian American community as a self-sufficient, economically-driven “model minority.”

Yet if *not* playing games is a significant part of what makes Amy Chua’s daughters into “stereotypically successful” Chinese children (and Chua herself into a stereotypical Chinese “Tiger Mother”), then might this imply that playing games would produce the opposite—that is, stereotypically “American” children? *Serious Play* is an attempt to demonstrate the inherent power of that reverse formulation: that the prospect of being American is in fact inherently tied to playing, and being able to play, a multitude of games both literal and abstract. Indeed, the American Dream which has captivated countless generations of Asian immigrants (and which is at the heart of the model minority myth) might be understood in precisely those terms: not as an invitation to *be* equal, but to *compete* equally in a capitalist society. As Erin Khue Ninh points out, “migrating to positions of global advantage is about the hope for upward mobility . . . about the hope of profiting in the Western capitalist economy . . . [such that] the immigrant nuclear family [becomes] a special form of capitalist enterprise: one invested, Gayatri Spivak might say, in obtaining ‘justice under capitalism’” (Ninh 2).

That Asian American success has traditionally been characterized in terms of

economically-productive capitalist labor practices rather than “purposeless” play is in some sense unsurprising, for historically, the group has often been defined exclusively in terms of its capacity for work.¹ But insofar as Asian Americans continue to be culturally cast as “good workers: industrious, focused, dependable, accommodating, serious-minded, eminently useful” (Wong 210, emphasis omitted), it is more important than ever to recognize how their identities as good *players* have been and can be used to either challenge or reinforce the domesticating and disciplining discourse of the model minority stereotype. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has observed that the seductive capacity of games lies in their ability to create an “imaginary universe of perfect competition or perfect equality of opportunity . . . without heredity or acquired properties . . . so that at each moment anyone can become anything” (241). The stereotypical immigrant fantasy that, as the main character in Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* puts it, “you could be anything you wanted to be in America,” is thus simultaneously the *game player’s* fantasy. And in the American cultural imagination, as Viet Nguyen and others have observed, Asian Americans have proven themselves to be some of the most accomplished game players out there: the stereotype of the model minority, after all, is of an individual who, unlike other non-white communities that “would demand changes from the system,” instead “strive[s] to succeed by [that system’s] rules.”²

Serious Play asks after the terms of this fundamental relationship between games and racial difference by exploring a host of mainly Asian American literary works which, across a multitude of genres, grapple with J.C. Friedrich von Schiller’s famous assertion that “man only

¹ After all, the first wave of Chinese immigrants in the late nineteenth century who journeyed to the “Gold Mountain” of California did so to seek their fortunes as sojourners and temporary laborers, not permanent residents. This decision was of course not entirely personal, but legally mandated through discriminatory immigration laws which made it virtually impossible for Asian immigrants to extend their stay or to start families in America and, eventually, barred entrance to the majority of Asian immigrants based solely on their occupational statuses.

² Ninh 8. See also Nguyen, especially Chapter 1.

plays when in the full meaning of the word he is a man, and he is only completely a man when he plays” (Letter XV). For those who have historically been treated as less than human—and especially in the case of Asian Americans and African Americans, for whom, as David Eng has pointed out, questions of ontology so often get cast as questions of masculinity³—playing, whether in the realm of aesthetics, athletics, or parlor games, is *always* something more serious than “mere” child’s play. *Serious Play* therefore considers gameplay not merely as a literary trope but as a formal and thematic vehicle that allows minority authors to articulate their relationship to the American nation-state, to history, to language, and to what it actually means, as a racialized subject, to be “in the game” at all.

The Formalization of Play

While Asian American Studies has historically defined its objects of study in terms of labor, the field has in recent years begun to apprehend the ways in which play, as the counterpart rather than the antithesis to work, might underwrite the Asian American experience in equally significant and complex ways. Sau-Ling Wong was one of the first to suggest, in 1993, that Asian American play (by which she meant mainly artistic innovation) might, in the Kantian tradition, be understood as a kind of aesthetic “purposiveness” that “may bear a suspicious resemblance to ‘art for art’s sake,’ but read in context it points to a ‘conscientious aestheticism’ or ‘interested disinterestedness’ . . . strategically deployed to counteract the diminishment of being that has historically been assigned the Asian American” (Wong 186). Revisiting several canonical twentieth century Asian American works through the dichotomy of “Necessity” and “Extravagance”—the former meant to capture the profit-maximizing, frivolity-minimizing

³ see Eng, especially Chapter 1.

perspective traditionally associated with the Asian immigrant parent and the latter its creativity-seeking, pleasure-driven counterpart—Wong concluded, in a compelling chapter entitled “The Asian American *Homo Ludens*,” that “play too is a need of survival—a Necessity, no less, only differently characterized and designated, and therefore customarily separated from work as if by an unbridgeable gulf” (189).

Wong’s provocative insights have arguably found a receptive audience in the recent work of Mark Chiang and Timothy Yu, who, while only tangentially invoking the term “play,” have attempted to rethink Asian American self-expression through the Bourdeauian concept of cultural capital and the innovative poetic techniques of the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* school, respectively. For Chiang, the very act of identifying as an Asian American is a fundamentally agonistic pursuit. As he points out,

disparate individuals and groups are held together under the Asian American designation only by an interest. This interest, however, is not a ‘common’ one insofar as that implies a unitary and homogeneous subject. Instead, it is a *competitive* interest signifying by acting *against* but also *with* others in the pursuit of some object or end, which in this instance is the specific capital of the Asian American field, or what I call the *political capital of representation*. (14, emphasis original)

Yu, in a slightly different vein, argues instead for a set of “common” interests shared by Asian American poets like John Yau and their Caucasian counterparts like Gary Snyder and Charles Bernstein. Both groups, Yu suggests, shared Bernstein’s faith in the potential of playing with, and hence disrupting, hegemonic cultural discourses by experimenting with language in order to manufacture what Steve McCaffery called “a crisis within the semantic economy” (205) through which “minority” and “mainstream” identities get defined.

But while all three of these critics make a compelling case for resituating play as a central

concept in Asian American literary studies, their insights have in some ways been obscured by, or reinterpreted within, what Colleen Lye has recently dubbed the field's "new formalist turn." This paradigmatic shift towards form is often explicitly framed as a rejoinder to the field's self-declared representational crisis, one which Susan Koshy famously articulated in 1996; namely, the fact that Asian American Studies could no longer adequately "represent" the vast internal diversity of its critical demographic in terms such as class, ethnicity, language, or country of origin.⁴ The initial responses to this state of emergency, throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, largely took the form of attempts at ever-greater inclusiveness: scholars like Lisa Lowe, Rachel Lee, David Eng and King-Kok Cheung called our attention to the discourses of gender, sexuality, transnationalism and hybridity as a means of expanding, while still maintaining, the strategic viability of the Asian American designation.

In the last decade or so, the disciplinary turn towards a more "subjectless discourse," *pace* Kandice Chuh's 2003 monograph *imagine otherwise*, has at times meant substituting a biologically-defined Asian American essentialism for an institutionally-defined one, oftentimes by asking, as the editors of a recent special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* did in their call for papers, "what other ways might Asian Americanists approach, categorize, and consider their objects of study . . . if existing rubrics of Asian American literature problematically collect texts under the eye of biology?" The editors clearly seek to transcend the limitations of defining race as a biological category, yet their method of widening that classification relies on an essentialism of a paradoxical nature: not a singular object of study, but a singular type of practitioner, the "Asian Americanist," is imagined to exist *before* the literary text does. Much Asian American criticism has found itself trapped in a version of this tautology, which, if it does not attempt to

⁴ See Koshy.

dismiss the author's biology in favor of their politics or aesthetics only to re-locate the Asian American body in the academic, it tends towards a disciplinary essentialism, which substitutes a biological body for an institutional one.

Concurrent with this attempted relocation of Asian American identity into the body of the minority academic has, as suggested earlier, been its transference into the body of the minority *text*. Colleen Lye's calls to treat race "as form rather than as formation" ("Racial Form" 98), like Jinqi Ling's efforts in *Narrating Nationalisms* and Stephen Sohn's in *Racial Asymmetries*, have accordingly sought to recast Asian American literature, and redefine racial identity, through a set of formal literary techniques (rather than biological "givens") which negotiate the historical and intertextual conditions of the genre's emergence in uniquely Asian American ways. As a result, play in the Asian American context has effectively become synonymous with, and often reduced to, aesthetic and political concepts of "negotiation" and "innovation," such that the *disciplining* of play, via "formalism," has become the newly preferred means of taking Asian American literature "seriously" as a distinct and historically-situated genre.

American Games

If critics in Asian American Studies have tended to treat the literary and the ludic as antagonistic if not mutually exclusive domains, their counterparts in North American and European literature departments have, for at least the last forty years, been almost *too* ready to embrace those intersections. Robert Rawdon Wilson, in reviewing for a 1985 special issue of the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* the wide net of influence that concepts of play and game had cast over critical discourses ranging from philosophy to mathematics, even suggested that these concepts had at the time become so beguiling that "once one has [them] firmly in hand it may

appear unnecessary to talk about anything else and, for that matter, anything else can be talked of in precisely those terms” (“In Palamedes’ Shadow” 181-82). According to Wilson, this was especially true for Anglophone literary criticism, which, in embracing the terms, had produced such an increasing amount of “loose talk” (“Three Prolusions” 79) in the field that anything even remotely resembling play in a novel was now considered fair game for making larger claims about literature as a whole’s inherent “gamefulness.” He sums up the seductive quality of this apparent affinity in a passage worth quoting at length:

the concepts of play and game have always appealed to writers and students of literature who see literary texts as both self-referential and self-contained, governed by their own distinctive rules. In this sense, works of literature may be considered as games since they follow from certain assumptions (which, with more or less precision, one may call “rules” or “axioms”) that are not necessarily those of the outside-the-text world. The axioms of a fictional, or “possible,” world may be said to correspond to those of a game (or: literary conventions “equal” the rules of a game) in that they restrict what may happen, delimit action, and make certain other things (characters, events or moves) possible with a disregard for what may be the case outside the fiction. (“In Palamedes’ Shadow” 184)

The self-castigation of Wilson and his counterparts like Bernard Suits and Jacques Ehrmann⁵ would, by the late 1990s, evolve into a full-fledged debate between “ludology” and “narratology,” the primary bone of contention being whether games ought to be interpreted as texts in the literary sense (with a focus on their narrative functions) or as an entirely different animal. While in some sense, the rapid technological outgrowth of the console and computer game industry effectively decided the question in favor of the ludologists, the concept of narrative has in many ways remained a cornerstone of contemporary game studies, as suggested by the enthusiastic praise that continues to surround Jesper Juul’s critical monograph *Half-real*, in which he makes an argument for games’ liminal existence “between real rules and fictional

⁵ See Suits, especially *The Grasshopper*, and Ehrmann.

worlds.”

While Sau-ling Wong argued that the Asian American “Homo Ludens” (a neologism coined by Johan Huizinga in his eponymous 1938 study of the “play-element” in culture) was fundamentally distinct from its Anglophone counterpart, such that the insights of Huizinga, Roger Caillois and Ehrmann were only partially relevant, my own impression is that their theories, and the work of contemporary video game and new media theorists like Juul, Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Henry Jenkins, are in fact enormously relevant to the Asian American context for three reasons. First, while I, like Wong, focus in this dissertation almost exclusively on literary texts rather than video games, critical approaches to the latter offer an extremely compelling framework for thinking about how racial difference might function as an algorithmic constraint that determines how characters develop their identities, navigate the world around them, and respond to obstacles and challenges while being confined to a rigid set of governing rules.

Second, game theory—whether in its contemporary “digital” form or in its earlier Cold War Era mathematic iterations—offers an opportunity to attend to play’s structural and formal components rather than reductively treat it as a diffuse or purely frivolous activity; the concept of “game,” in other words, captures the nuances of what Roger Caillois considered to be play’s distinctly structural qualities. Caillois famously distinguished between types of games by classifying them, first according to their elements of chance (*alea*), competition (*agon*), mimicry, and vertigo (*ilinx*), and secondly along the two poles of *ludus* and *paidea*, the former being defined as “arbitrary, imperative, and purposely tedious conventions” and the latter “a kind of uncontrolled fantasy . . . frolicsome and impulsive exuberance” (13). Treating rule-governed games and “freeplay” not as antithetical states but, following Caillois, as two poles along a

spectrum, *Serious Play* accordingly considers the concepts of “game” and “play” to index a complementary rather than concentric or interchangeable relationship. As Ludwig Wittgenstein reminds us, “there is probably no single characteristic which is common to all the things we call games. But it can't be said either that ‘game’ just has several independent meanings (rather like the word ‘bank’). What we call ‘games’ are procedures interrelated in various ways with many different transitions between one and another” (75).

Finally, Asian American writers, especially in the last decade or so, have undeniably been influenced by the increasingly intertwined relationship between gameplay and life that defines modern American culture. Not only are they often avid consumers of games like *World of Warcraft* or *The Sims*, but, as technological advances have elevated character customization to a near-science of on-screen human representation in the form of the avatar, the question of how race gets made “playable” is inextricable from the question of how it is made “readable” and “writable.” The ever-more sophisticated forms of interactivity, immersion, and simulation that we find in today’s role-playing games have, in other words, raised an entirely new and exciting set of questions about the potential for novel configurations of agency, identity, and even reality for literary practitioners. Contextualizing and recognizing the novel contributions of contemporary Asian American writers, then, especially those who are part of the rapidly expanding genre that Jinqi Ling and others have referred to as “Asian American speculative fiction,” *requires* that we think about identity, racial or otherwise, in increasingly ludic terms. Doing so, as I will be suggesting throughout this dissertation, is precisely what allows us to turn from the crisis of representation to the challenge of reconciling the persistent implications of race for a “post-racial” world wherein the “virtualization” of human beings has created entirely new ways of interacting not just with, but *as*, the proverbial “Other.”

Chapter Summaries

My choice of texts, and the order in which I have placed them, is meant to trace a broadly chronological evolution in terms of both ludic and literary phenomena. Chapter 1, “No-No Boy’s Dilemma: Game Theory and the Rise of Japanese American Internment Literature,” accordingly opens with three literary depictions of the internment alongside a series of game theoretical concepts developed by John von Neumann and the RAND corporation. A branch of applied mathematics that would eventually form the backbone of U.S. Cold War foreign policy as a means of predicting enemy behavior the way one would an opponent in poker, game theory has often been thought of as a defining American discourse of the 1950s. I argue, however, that a decade before it was being applied to a red menace, it was being used against a yellow one in the form of 100,000 Japanese Americans whose “inscrutable intentions” ostensibly presented a threat to Allied victory. Understanding the internment as part of a strategic game played not only the American government but by Japanese Americans themselves, this chapter juxtaposes the works of John Okada and Milton Murayama alongside one written by the often-overlooked Hiroshi Nakamura, whose remarkable “documentary novel” *Treadmill* remains the only known internment novel to have been written during, rather than after, the event.

Chapter 2, “Racial Role-Play: the Fantasy of Identity in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” considers one of the foundational moments in role-playing game (RPG) history—the release of *Dungeons & Dragons* in 1974—alongside two of the “founding mothers” of twentieth-century minority American fiction: Maxine Hong Kingston and Toni Morrison. The latter’s attempts to come to terms with the Asian American legacy of immigration and the African American legacy of slavery, respectively, demonstrate a

remarkable homology with the contemporaneous attempts of fantasy role-playing game designers and writers of the first role-playing books (colloquially known as “Choose your own adventure” books). For both groups, “realism” was, in more ways than one, an obstacle to be overcome through narrative imagination, turning “character development” into a literal process of self-authorship and offering access to radically innovative configurations of memory, identity, and agency.

Chapter 3, “American Rules, Chinese Faces: The Games of Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*,” propels us into the late 1980s and early 90s, an era which saw not only its share of “culture wars” but also a series of “canon wars” being waged in both institutional and popular domains. Rereading what has arguably remained simultaneously the most celebrated and most vilified Asian American novel to date—Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* (1989)—through the games of mahjong and chess which inform the text’s structural as well as thematic architecture, I argue that Tan’s complex reworking of ludic tropes allows her to posit entirely novel formations of inter- and intragenerational kinship. As a game which transforms four Chinese immigrant women into “sisters” and “Aunties” to one another’s children despite having no literal blood connection, mahjong emerges throughout the novel not only as a distinctly “Chinese” game but as an Asian American one, allowing both the Joy Luck Club players and their children to redefine the meaning of chance or luck as simultaneous constraint and opportunity. At the same time, chess becomes not so much the “Western” counterpart to mahjong as a means for the second generation to negotiate the expectations of their immigrant mothers and, as Chinese Americans, to discover that “fair play” connotes a form of justice which ultimately has more in common with ludic than legal definitions of equality.

Chapter 4, “English before English: Asian American Poetry’s Unruly Tongue,” turns

from the genre of the novel to that of poetry, registering at the same time the globalizing or “transnational turn” that has transformed contemporary critical accounts of America’s identity as a nation-state as well as a global superpower. Testing the limits of the genre that Timothy Yu has recently defined as Asian American experimental or avant-garde poetry, I use the poetry of John Yau, Brian Kim Stefans, Fred Wah and others to demonstrate how Wittgensteinian language-games provided a compelling semantic and semiotic framework for these poets’ experiments with “normative” forms of language as well as Asian American identity.

Chapter 5, “(e)Racing the Future: The Asian American *I Ching*,” focuses on David Wong Louie, Charles Yu, and Lily Hoang, three authors who have each been understood as part of the “speculative” turn in Asian American literature, drawing on elements of science fiction, conceptual art, and surrealism to redefine the ethnic subject along the lines of the video game avatar, as an interactive participant who is defined entirely by the choices he makes within the game. I use the *I Ching*, a Chinese oracular text dating back to the second century B.C.E., to discuss how the Jungian concept of “synchronicity,” as opposed to causality, offers a structural framework for the newest wave of Asian American writers to rethink the relationship between agency and determinism (biological and otherwise). Rather than replicating the formal structure that has historically provided the model for Asian American *Bildungsromans* from *Fifth Chinese Daughter* to *The Woman Warrior* and beyond - the teleological and linear shift from ignorance to knowledge, from alienation to assimilation—the *I Ching*, and the novels investigated in this chapter, attempt to rethink the future beyond the terms of causality and identity, likewise, beyond the limits of determinism.

CHAPTER ONE

No-No Boy's Dilemma: Game Theory of the Japanese American Internment

Asian Americans, the model minority myth tells us, are winners. They don't just work longer, study harder, and do math better than anyone else around; as the last few Olympic Games have demonstrated, their brethren can also swim faster, jump higher, and hit a shuttlecock farther than seems humanly possible. Indeed, as the recent doping scandal that erupted over Chinese swimmer Ye Shiwen and the American media's many exposés of China's draconian athletic training schools for young children collectively suggest, the Asian body's capacity for play, like its capacity for toil, *is* something more (or less) than human.

In this chapter, I attend to that racial ludic potential as it became an increasing source of national anxiety during one of the most “unplayful” moments in American history: the December 7, 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the subsequent evacuation and imprisonment of over 100,000 Japanese Americans. Through my readings of three internment-era Japanese American novels, I demonstrate that games, as both formal and thematic vehicles, fundamentally shaped representations of racial and national identity for both Asian American novelists and for State-sponsored discourses surrounding the nation's entrance into the Second World War. Drawing on a Cold War phenomenon that Steven Belletto has recently dubbed “the game theory narrative,” I suggest that the concepts of strategic play and gaming are crucial to understanding broader questions in Asian American literature about identity, authenticity and national belonging—and to recognizing, furthermore, the fundamentally game-like attributes which inhere in the internment as a site of historical memory.

In the wake of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the long-standing stereotype of the

“inscrutable Oriental,” which had been an extant source of national consternation,⁶ took on peculiarly ludic resonances in the American imagination. According to the Roosevelt Administration, the 120,000 Americans of Japanese descent who called the West Coast home were problematic essentially because they were as superhumanly good at playing games as they were at farming. Their “inscrutability,” in other words, was troubling precisely because it constituted the ultimate poker face, making it impossible, as Dillon S. Myer, Director of the War Relocation Authority, would complain, to tell whether they were thinking “what we think they are thinking” (55); which meant, after Pearl Harbor, that their outward declarations of loyalty to America might be nothing more than strategic bluffs to conceal their subversive intentions.

Thus, testifying before a House Committee in 1942, Earl Warren, then Attorney General of California, would rationalize the relocation and internment of Japanese Americans not by referring, as the military had, to the *physical* menace that their bodies supposedly presented to national security—nor, like the media, to the *economic* threat engendered by their extraordinary agricultural competence—but to the far more galling problem of their “hearts and minds”:

When we are dealing with the Caucasian race, we have methods that will test the loyalty of them, and we believe that we can, in dealing with the Germans and Italians, arrive at some fairly sound conclusions . . . But when we deal with the Japanese we are in an entirely different field and we can not form any opinion that we believe to be sound. (38-39)

Like Myer, Warren essentially defines whiteness as a “tell” which need only be “read” correctly in order to decode a person’s intentions; or at least, to make “some fairly sound conclusions” about where their allegiances lie. But, also like Myer, he is ultimately forced to

⁶ For a cogent account of the historical trajectory of this stereotype, see Robert Lee’s “Orientals,” which also traces the evolution of the model minority stereotype as a recognizable offshoot of the “inscrutable Oriental” image.

admit that the nation's investment in a particular set of racial assumptions had produced its own paradox—making race, for non-Caucasians in general and Asian Americans in particular, into a kind of “anti-tell.”⁷ (This is especially evident in the logical fallacy which underwrites his statement: if, as he claims, race *is* the determining factor in establishing loyalty—i.e. Caucasians can be tested because they are Caucasians—then it does not follow that the loyalty of Japanese Americans cannot be determined *because* of their race.) Such a contradiction reveals, in short, that the discursive strategies which denied the possibility of non-Caucasian interiority (and humanity) in the first place are the very ones which backfire when those bodies' intangible loyalties need to be ascertained. The dilemma facing the national security state after Pearl Harbor, then, was how to separate, as John L. Dewitt, Commanding General of the Western Defense Command and the man behind the relocation plan, would put it, “the sheep from the goats”⁸; to develop, in other words, a quasi-scientific method for “reading” the intentions of Japanese Americans.

Within a decade, such a method would in fact emerge: it was called game theory. In recent years, scholars working in Cold War Studies have begun to turn away from Alan Nadel's influential paradigm of “containment culture” and have increasingly attributed the peculiarities of the atomic age to mid-century America's brief but memorable flirtation with an applied branch of mathematics called game theory. This theory, which, according to Steven Belletto, claimed to be able “to prevent nuclear exchange by conceptualizing the cold war as a game, and by playing this game according to specific rational strategies” (333), would become the explicit

⁷ Also noteworthy of Warren's statement is its anachronism; this was, after all, the same man who would, thirteen years later, deal a crippling blow to segregation as Chief Justice in the landmark ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education*. This suggests that the internment can be understood as part of, and perhaps even partly responsible for, a broader shift in American racial politics towards (at least superficially) a more expansive definition of civil rights.

⁸ DeWitt, “Conference.”

basis of the Eisenhower Administration's foreign policy, most evident in its response to the U.S.-Soviet nuclear conflict.⁹ I argue, however, that several years before critics have identified its first atomic applications, game theory was being used against a yellow menace rather than a red one. America's obsession during the Cold War with the terrifying threat of "death from above" was, I suggest, both anticipated and shaped during the decidedly hot war which preceded it by the country's fear of destruction from *within*, its long-standing anti-Asian sentiment whipped into a frenzy by sensational media outlets which (fallaciously) reported on the growing strength of a "Fifth Column" of Japanese American saboteurs ready to blow up military bases, burn down the Golden Gate Bridge, and massacre whole cities of God-fearing American people along with their democratic ideals.¹⁰

Game theory was, in essence, a way of allaying those fears by reassuring the American public that "scientific redemption" was near at hand. Most often associated with mathematician John von Neumann, game theory emerged from von Neumann's conviction that there was something decidedly "untrivial" about games like poker, bridge, and even baseball; for him, such games were not metaphorical but literal models of real-life conflict in miniature, and he set about translating their logic to economic, and eventually military, applications. "Real life consists of bluffing, of little tactics of deception, of asking yourself what is the other man going to think I mean to do," he is reported to have said, "and that is what games are about in my theory" (Poundstone 6). And that, I will argue, is also what they were about during the internment years. While neither veteran military commanders like DeWitt nor Japanese American writers like John Okada would explicitly invoke the term "game theory," their Manichean approach to the

⁹ see Belletto.

¹⁰ see C.B. Munson, "Japanese on the West Coast," circulated on Nov 7, 1941, reproduced in Daniels.

internment and the explicitly self-reflexive language they used to describe the loyalty questionnaire—not to mention the novelists’ extensive uses of games like poker, bridge, boxing and craps to thematize that dilemma—provocatively anticipated von Neumann’s interest in defining international (and interpersonal) conflict as a high-stakes parlor game being played out in real-time.

Reading the internment’s game-theoretical dimensions is fruitful in part because the question of loyalty is, at its core, a question of self-reflexive observation—of, as Myer put it, figuring out whether someone is thinking what you think they are thinking. This is the same question which von Neumann asked when he wondered whether there was always a rational way to play a game; which is to say, a way of choosing an optimal strategy given an inherent amount of uncertainty about the other players’ intentions.¹¹ It is also the question which we find being asked, in a variety of ways, by Japanese American novels that revolve around World War II and the internment, especially John Okada’s *No-No Boy*, Milton Murayama’s *All I Asking For is my Body*, and Hiroshi Nakamura’s often-overlooked *Treadmill*. For Murayama, the choice between racial and national allegiance is neatly resolved through the main character’s discovery of “padrolling” (increasing the odds of a particular dice roll by picking the dice up in certain combinations), which allows him to win enough money at craps games to pay off the family’s debt and, at the same time, justifies his treasonous and “unfilial” decision to enlist in the U.S. Army.

But for Okada and Nakamura, who were themselves both ex-internees, the government’s infamous loyalty questionnaire produced a complex web of contingency and uncertainty in which characters find themselves insisting that their decisions to answer yes or no “count” even

¹¹ see von Neumann, “On the Theory of Games and Strategy.”

while recognizing the inherent contradictions and injustice of being asked, as one character in Okada's novel puts it, to "prove that [one] deserved to enjoy those rights which should rightfully have been his" (121). Officially known as the Leave Clearance Form, the loyalty questionnaire was a document distributed by the government to all internees older than 17, and has in fact become one of the most defining moments in the internment experience and in its critical appraisal. The controversy that subsequently erupted in the camps was over two specific questions:

27. Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty wherever ordered?

28. Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor, or any other foreign government, power, or organization?

What is perhaps most fascinating about Okada's and Nakamura's novels, then, is what they reveal about the "real" reasons behind individual responses to the loyalty questionnaire and the *strategy*, rather than merely the injustice, that characterized those decision-making processes. While political convictions, ideological stances and cultural values are all offered as possible motivations for answering in a particular way, most of the characters wind up answering the *reverse* of their desires, guided far more often by their attempts to respond, as in *Treadmill*, based on how they think the other internees will respond, or on what they think the government expects them to say.

Taken as a whole, then, these works suggest that the internment was in many ways a game, one in which, as Nakamura puts it, "we cheated, we lied, we were honest, we were brave, we stood on the hot burning sands and made our decisions, each according to his own

conscience” (Preface, unpublished). The formal preference for parataxis that we see in all three novels, but particularly in those which deal directly with the loyalty questionnaire, reflects, too, their contention that racial, national and gender identities are not exactly static—though, with Okada’s Ichiro Yamada, his decision to answer “no-no” both defines and confines him for years to come—but neither are they entirely performative. Rather, they are peculiarly modern in the way that Niklas Luhmann defines modernity, in which “identities” essentially become “frames that we take for ourselves” (101).¹²

The world, it would seem, is no longer a stage upon which we play our roles; it resembles much more a giant poker table across which we silently scrutinize our opponents, observing, as Mark Seltzer puts it, “what and how the observed observer can’t observe—and whether he can observe that or not” (101). The question then becomes: how can games, with their rule-based contingencies and their forms of self-reflexive observation, change the ways in which we conceptualize an identity like “Japanese American,” particularly in a historic moment that makes race the limiting case for observation? If, in our current era, racial identity is increasingly characterized as a “race card,” what might closer attention to games tell us about the value of play-as-politics? And, finally, how might literature, which might be considered a “form game” in its own right, allow us to rethink the stakes of racial difference through the distinction between form and content, between game and world?¹³ These are the questions which guide not only this essay, but the novels themselves; my goal, then, is to ask not only *why* they are interested in

¹² The connections between “frames,” as Luhmann and Erving Goffman are using the term, and “avatar,” as it is used in video game theory, is a compelling one which unfortunately exceeds the purview of this chapter. See Goffman, especially *Encounters*.

¹³ The term “form game” derives from both Mark Seltzer and Dirk Baecker (see “The Form Game”), but I am also drawing on Colleen Lye’s brilliant essay “Racial Form,” in which she argues that “race construed as form rather than as formation may help us keep in focus how race is an active social relation rather than a transhistorical abstraction” (99). See, too, Lye’s analysis of another historical event involving Asian American loyalty and strategic representation, “The Literary Case of Wen Ho Lee.”

games, but to think about how that interest becomes a vehicle for their political and aesthetic representational aims more broadly.

I should make it clear from the outset that I am not interested in uncovering documentary evidence of a causal connection between game theory as it was used by the RAND corporation during the Cold War and its employment during the early years of World War II; I will be the first to admit that no military correspondence nor white paper suggests as much. Instead, I use game theory as a way to take games seriously, and to disengage with their vernacular definitions as temporary diversions or “win-lose” propositions. I consider game theory most useful for its insights into the structural similarities between strategic conflict and parlor games; its ability to translate the alien terrain of “modern, scientific warfare” (McDonald 126) into a far more familiar cultural analogy; and its novel expansion of the limited common usage of “game” to include a much wider variety of social interactions. The ability to understand social interaction as a literal rather than metaphoric game, one in which the issue of “choice” collides with multiple forms of constraint, is, I suggest, crucial to understanding the persistent preoccupation with individual and national interdependence that characterizes both official and literary narratives about the internment.

Since the 1950s, and especially over the last decade or so, critics in the humanities in particular have taken game theory to task for its ostensibly “dehumanizing” mechanisms, its ability to foreclose the “real life” complexity of decision-making—and the equally real and complex facets of race, gender and class—by overemphasizing conflict’s purely “rational” dimensions. These critics’ readings of influential postwar American works like Philip Dick’s *Solar Lottery*, Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*, and Stanley Kubrick’s Cold War classic film “Dr. Strangelove” thus tend to treat such cultural productions as categorical denunciations of game

theory as a “deterministic model of behavior that evacuates human agency” (Cagle v). Such readings have in turn served as the basis for larger arguments being made about Cold War America’s embrace of game theory within a broader framework of psychic and structural fragmentation that is understood to characterize an inherently “postmodern” sensibility.¹⁴

While there is no denying that authors like Dick, by their own admission, wanted to critique the nation’s over-reliance on game theory (and on “science” more generally), my response to those accusations, and those regarding the prudence of applying such a “dehumanizing” theory to an indisputably anthropocentric field like Ethnic Studies, would be to point to game theory’s inherent affinity with secular humanist discourses more broadly. Game theory was *not*, despite prevailing critical arguments to the contrary, primarily an attempt to use binary logic as a substitution for “real” human complexity; nor did its axiomatic assumptions about the rationality of its players preclude their inherent “humanity.” Far from it: being “rational,” for von Neumann, was part and parcel of being human. Rationality is what allows us to foresee the consequences of our decisions; it is also what lets us weigh the various “human” factors inherent in those choices—and hence allows us to make decisions (and play games) in the first place. As Oskar Morgenstern, who with von Neumann authored their seminal *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*, points out, “rational behavior is not an assumption of [game] theory; rather, its identification is one of its outcomes” (“Game Theory” 267).

Games thus represent a particularly “human” cultural innovation: as Roger Caillois has argued, they discipline the universal impulse to “play” found throughout the animal kingdom into a formal ludic framework particular to *homo sapiens*; they are, as J. Huizinga points out, a

¹⁴ see, for example, Booker; Grausam; and Piette.

“humane,” because no longer fatal, means of demonstrating one’s indisputable superiority.¹⁵ Recognizing, then, that game theory is not some anti-humanist bogeyman, but offers a nuanced account of what it *means* to be human in an era characterized by rapid technological development and the increasing globalization of conflict, is also to recognize the compelling affinities between games and certain post-human, rather than just post-modern, elements of contemporary American literature and society. In short, Asian American literature’s desire to foreground the “humanity” of its characters—and, especially, to use this humanity as a way of affirming the universality of those characters’ experiences despite the particularity of their racial difference—is facilitated, not impeded, by its simultaneous foregrounding of games.

What would you do?

William Poundstone’s critically-acclaimed *Prisoner’s Dilemma*, the *San Francisco Chronicle* notes, is simultaneously “a fascinating biography of von Neumann . . . and a brilliant social history of game theory.” Combining, in other words, the math with the man, Poundstone remains expressly invested in the entirely “human” foundations of game theory that I have just been discussing. He thus opens his book like this:

A man was crossing a river with his wife and mother. A giraffe appeared on the opposite bank. The man drew his gun on the beast, and the giraffe said, “If you shoot, your mother will die. If you don’t shoot, your wife will die.” What should the man do? (2)

This is not, the author readily admits, a story of his own invention; it is a traditional African “dilemma tale,” told by the Popo of Dahomey. But as the inaugural example in a book which is all about games and game theory, it tells us several things. First, that the concept of dilemmas

¹⁵ see both Caillois and Huizinga.

which require interdependent and often undesirable choices to be made are universal; second, that “realism” is of only partial importance (how the giraffe is able to talk, and how it might make good upon its sinister promises, are rather beside the point); third, that such dilemmas are often the result of our own initiative (after all, it was the man, not the giraffe, who first exposed his murderous intentions); and finally, that they reveal the most sacrosanct values of any given society; which, as in this example, most often revolve around the concept of family.

Compare Poundstone’s example to a scene drawn from Milton Murayama’s *All I Asking For Is My Body*, an internment-era *Bildungsroman* narrated by Kiyō Oyama, a young Japanese American boy growing up in a series of Hawaiian plantation towns:

[My teacher Mr. Takemoto said:] “Don’t bring any shame to the Japanese race. Don’t shame your family name and your parents . . .” In my eighth grade class he’d said, “If your mother and wife were drowning and you could save only one of them, which would you save?” . . . “There’s no doubt that the white man would save his wife. But what would you do? You have only one mother, you can have only one mother . . .” he’d rub his fingers. (65)

Here, the question “What would you do?” is entirely rhetorical, because race works to make independent thought both unnecessary and undesirable: if one is white, one saves one’s wife; if Japanese, one’s mother.¹⁶ Race, in other words, functions as what game theory defines as a pure strategy, “a complete description of a particular way to play a game, [one which] must prescribe actions so thoroughly that you never have to make a decision in following it” (Poundstone 48, emphasis omitted); as John McDonald, one of the journalists who introduced game theory to the popular imagination through publications like *Fortune* magazine, put it, “strategy is a policy devised to reduce and control . . . uncertainties” (81).

¹⁶ The fact that, as with the Popo example, the listener must adopt a male point of view, suggests an interesting correlation between gender and decision-making which are expanded further in the chapter-length version of this article.

Game theory, as rhetoric, is powerful precisely because it allows individuals to forego the uncertainties associated with emotion and thought in favor of swift and decisive action, reducing complex situations to binary decisions which can be made despite moral ambiguities. On the one hand, as we see in *All I Asking For*, this means that affect has no effect; national loyalty is not a *feeling*, it is a strategy. Such an assertion allows Mr. Takemoto to downplay the transformative effects of immigration and assimilation by aligning racial and national values, using the dilemma tale to draw a didactic line that yokes the nation-state to its diasporic communities. Dedicated “to the family,” Murayama’s novella is particularly interesting because it constructs, even while it critiques, a narratively coherent Japanese “transnation” by foregrounding the same rhetorical strategies that General DeWitt had himself deployed to justify the internment.¹⁷ “In the war in which we are now engaged racial affinities are not severed by migration,” DeWitt insisted. “To conclude otherwise is to expect that children born of white parents on Japanese soil sever all racial affinity and become loyal Japanese subjects, ready . . . if necessary, to die for Japan in a war against the nation of their parents.”¹⁸

That the parent-child relation would serve as a metonymy for the nation-subject relation is nothing new; but its formal, rather than affective, centrality to the novel is worth emphasizing. Like a number of other internment-era works, *All I Asking For* draws an explicit parallel between filial piety and national loyalty, suggesting that the same cultural values of obligation, obedience

¹⁷ For a compelling discussion of the internment’s transnational dimensions, see Kandice Chuh, especially *imagine otherwise*, wherein she notes that “Asiatic racialization may be understood as the technology of the production of an imagined transnationality ascribed to Asian-identified individuals and groups” (61), a mechanism which she connects to the concept of Derridean undecidability to trouble the stability of an identificatory term such as Asian American.

¹⁸ DeWitt, “Final Report” 34. Chuh’s discussion of internment undecidability (see previous note), in which “loyalty and disloyalty are possibilities in the determination of what race means” (*imagine otherwise* 70), further clarifies the ways in which game theory intersects with transnational discourse to construct Asiatic racialization vis-à-vis (extra)national forms of affiliation.

and reciprocity underwrite and mutually reinforce one another. The primary conflict in the novella, after all, is between Kiyō's parents and his older brother Tosh: as the eldest son in a family besieged with a \$6,000 debt accumulated by previous generations, Tosh is required to surrender not only his educational aspirations and then his wages, but, as the novel's title implies, his very body to the voracious demands of his familial and national obligations.

While Mr. Snook, another of Kiyō's eight-grade teachers, becomes the novel's official mouthpiece for lodging a Marxist critique against the plantation hierarchy, explicitly using Japanese "filiality" and other cultural values to explain the group's "passive" acceptance of their place at the bottom of the social structure (32), Tosh serves, in more ways than one, to translate that discourse into an impassioned rallying cry which, like the pidgin English of the title, seeks to unify the oppressed across racial and linguistic divides by literally taking back the means of production: the body. The plea for autonomy, for "my body," becomes, however, a simultaneous plea to allow that body to keep for itself not simply the fruits of its labor, but those derived from its sportive *play*. After getting his hands on a series of Jimmy DeForest's "How To Box" pamphlets, Tosh becomes obsessed with boxing, a pastime which disturbs his parents not only because it takes time away from his familial obligations, but because it threatens to turn his oratory skills—"you punch with words," Kiyō berates him—into threatening physical advantages. And indeed, it isn't long before the Oyama supper table becomes a boxing ring and, while Kiyō looks on, Tosh "thr[ows] a left hook to father's solar plexus, as Jimmy DeForest called it" (44).

Lest we read this "unthinkable" (45) martial confrontation between Tosh and Mr. Oyama as a blunt analogy for the struggle between youthful American "individuality" and patriarchal Japanese "group-think," however, Murayama sets this scene on the eve of Pearl Harbor, making

the difference between punches thrown to defeat a matched opponent in play, and those aimed in earnest at an unsuspecting victim, into a subtle distinction between war and surprise attack. For Kiyoo, war's similarity to a game—"everything, even wars, had certain basic rules" (84)—makes it, like Tosh's boxing, an inherently "noble" pursuit in spite of its casualties; whereas the Japanese military strike, like Tosh's attack upon his aged father, seems not only "criminal," but evidence of the Japanese nation's unsportsmanlike "cowardice."

Recognizing, suddenly, the pragmatism of Tosh's depiction of their father as "the guy that holds all the cards," Kiyoo rebels simultaneously against his parents' and the Japanese nation's refusal to "play fair" by deciding to volunteer for the American draft. I read this moment as an enabling rhetorical strategy which allows Murayama to critique the hypocrisies of American exceptionalism while remaining fully aware of its captivating appeal to the national subject who finds opportunities for self-determination within those elisions. Just as boxing allows Tosh to find a more acceptable physical outlet for his psychic and emotional aggression, enlisting allows Kiyoo to reclaim his body for himself—though he remains seemingly unaware of the irony that he can only do so by offering that body up as a sacrifice to an equally oppressive set of national ideals. Here we see the fantasy of escaping one's circumstances, a theme that runs through so many immigrant narratives, getting translated from labor, to sport, to war. Mr. and Mrs. Oyama's failed attempts to realize the American dream through immigration engender Tosh's alternative strategy to win fame and fortune through boxing; when he gets knocked out after just a few match-ups, Kiyoo trades fighting games for war games, believing, like Tosh, that "once you fought, you earned the right to complain and participate, you earned a right to a future" (98).

For a novel which is resolutely realist—which, as Jinqi Ling has noted, takes advantage

of that mode's transformative rather than homogenizing potential to capture the complexity of its subject matter¹⁹—the last four pages of *All I Asking For*, which detail Kiyō's actions after enlisting, seem almost to mock the book's painstaking portrayal of each character's inability to escape the entrenched institutional constraints placed upon him. While sporting games, as I have shown, provide Murayama with both metaphor and means to lodge a critique of Japanese American social and cultural conditions in early twentieth-century Hawaii, those games ultimately produce little more than moral victories for Tosh and Kiyō; as they, and the reader, are constantly reminded, boxing has done nothing to ameliorate the \$6,000 debt which plagues the family like a terminal illness. How, then, are we to read the novel's closing section, in which Kiyō enters the Army with \$25 in his pocket, starts joining craps games, discovers a way to “padroll,” and in less than forty-eight hours wins enough to mail a \$6,000 check back home with instructions to “pay up all the debt”?²⁰

Given the novel's explicit use of boxing as a means of cleaving together “war” and “game,” it seems reasonable to read Kiyō's actions within his own framework for understanding Tosh's attack on Mr. Oyama and Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor: which is to say, as cowardly perversions of the game's noble ideals. After his craps victory, Kiyō is haunted by the unspoken charge of “playing dirty,” of robbing his unsuspecting fellow soldiers—“Thank God they were strangers!” (101)—by feigning unfamiliarity with the game. But, he tells himself, “it wasn't

¹⁹ see Ling, *Narrating Nationalisms*, especially pp. 22-25.

²⁰ Whether the reader is meant to take this scene as an explicit invitation to seek his own fortune at craps, or whether Murayama simply wanted to draw a stronger connection between Kiyō's craps victory and the young man's ingenuity remains a source of critical debate. Stephen Sumida reads Kiyō's decision to send the money home as evidence of his ultimate reaffirmation of the Japanese familial institution and its cultural values, while others have argued that it serves as a *deus ex machina* which shores up Kiyō's faith, however misguided, in the transformative potential of America's democratic ideals (see Chang). Disagreeing, ultimately, only over which nation's values are eventually endorsed, neither approach takes much critical interest in Murayama's choice to dramatize that ideological conflict through a *game*.

really cheating . . . it was dog eat dog, every dog was after something for nothing, you never gave a dog an even break” (103). It is difficult as a reader to recognize amidst this newfound callousness the same young boy who decried the dehumanizing machinery of the plantation system a mere fifty pages earlier. Indeed, what is especially disturbing about his victory is that it becomes “too easy” for Kiyō to slip into the mindset of Mr. Nelson, the plantation boss: “it was their fault if they couldn’t spot it,” he declares of his now-impoverished fellow players. “Besides, if I didn’t take their money, another padroller would’ve.”

The point here is not that games allow one to entirely dismiss the question of moral responsibility or to wholly justify its abuses; rather, as I suggested at the beginning of this section, the goal of developing a strategy for play is to allow one to act *in spite of* the logical and ethical uncertainties that emerge. For most of the novel, the racial valence of “Japaneseness” proves to be a particularly effective strategy, mostly because it calibrates the individual’s transnational value system. But after Pearl Harbor, when the Japanese nation itself adopts an entirely different strategy—what Mr. Takemoto labels “pragmatism,” arguing that “nations act on a pragmatic basis, they do what they think is best for the moment” (82)—Kiyō, too, opts for a policy of self-interest. From this perspective, the craps game represents a particular form of capitalist accumulation, and Kiyō’s inherent faith in the opportunities, rather than limits, of that game—“believe in the odds. That’s the only way” becomes his mantra—suggests that his victory is also a victory for American capitalism and the structural inequalities upon which it relies.

Conscience v. Contrivance

Because the Japanese population of Hawaii was never interned—largely due, as Murayama’s novel suggests, to their crucial role in the plantation economy—we can read *All I Asking For* as a

way of affirming the centrality of games to mid-century Japanese American literature more generally, rather than seeing gameplay as the exclusive province of internment narratives. At the same time, however, *All I Asking For* shares with its mainland counterparts a preoccupation with the racial and national dimensions of those games, as well as an impulse to define “Japaneseness” as a set of behavioral and psychic strategies (rather than intangible cultural affects) whose contradictions are brought into sharp relief by the watershed event of Pearl Harbor. Here, I use Hiroshi Nakamura’s often-overlooked novel *Treadmill* to trace the rhetorical residues of that conflict as it intersects with what General DeWitt would call the “truly American” innovation of the internment, investigating the often unexpected ways in which the State’s reductive attempts to determine Japanese American loyalty were reproduced, rather than contested, by the internees’ own decision-making strategies; “inscrutability,” in other words, becomes a problem not only for the American government, but for the “inscrutable” Japanese Americans themselves.

The story of Hiroshi Nakamura, the author, is nearly as tragic as the one which he weaves about the internment in his remarkably ambitious novel. The third son of immigrants from Hiroshima, Nakamura was a brilliant individual whose life became a painful testament to the crushing limitations of racial difference. After graduating from UC Berkeley, Hiroshi’s attempts to publish a series of short stories were met with constant rejection, despite his strategic use of an American pseudonym. After the war, his efforts to publish *Treadmill*—an internment novel which is unique for having been written during the camp experience itself—under his own name met with similar resistance; as his widow Mary, who typed the manuscript during the couple’s imprisonment in Tule Lake, explains in the Foreword, “several publishers liked *Treadmill* but wrote to him that they could not publish it because they feared . . . it could damage their

reputation.” This seemed to be the final straw for Hiroshi: he gave up his dreams of becoming a professional writer, went into the coin-operated washer/dryer business and, twenty years later, died of stomach cancer at the age of fifty-eight.

The historical parallels between *Treadmill*'s subsequent rediscovery and the almost simultaneous rehabilitation of its contemporaneous counterpart, John Okada's *No-No Boy*, are, to say the least, uncanny. Like *No-No Boy*, *Treadmill* was discovered entirely by chance by an Asian American literary critic in the 1970s; Peter Suzuki, like Jeffrey Paul Chan four years before him, immediately sought out the author, only to be informed by his widow that the writer had died literally months before, believing, as Okada did, that “Asian America had rejected his work.” Vowing to remedy this tragic oversight, Suzuki, also like Chan, set about trying to find a publisher for the novel, eventually convincing Mosaic Press to release it in 1996.

Why, then, did *Treadmill* immediately lapse back into obscurity while *No-No Boy* has since become a canonical mainstay in Asian American literature? Both novels tell us much about the hostile literary market facing Asian American authors in the postwar years; but I think they tell us even more about Asian America's historical investment in a particular aesthetic response to its own institutional position, especially the largely bellicose and defiant stance associated with Frank Chin et al. which *No-No Boy* perfectly epitomized but which Nakamura's novel in many ways resisted. *Treadmill*'s meditations about the internment's divisive effect on cultural and national solidarity thus serve as a broader comment on the inherent contradictions underwriting various forms of literary and political representation. Such an investigation sheds light not only on the representational conflicts within the Japanese American community which were the historical consequence of the internment, but on the protracted afterlife of that conflict

as it continues to afflict Asian American Studies and its self-avowed representational crisis.²¹

Treadmill is on every level a narrative about interdependent, strategic decision-making. At times, it uses literal games to dramatize this process, and the novel is shot through with scenes of characters playing bridge, baseball, and *Go*.²² But just as often, it documents the far more nuanced games which the characters play, documenting the complex rhetorical strategies which they develop in order to combat the ever-present uncertainty and instability which define their daily existence. Peter Suzuki is entirely sensitive to such ludic elements:

[An] underlying theme [of the novel] is that, despite the seemingly clear-cut nature of many War Relocation Authority policies, there were always two sides to each of them . . . they required great thought and deliberation on the part of the people in deciding which to follow, and when, ultimately, choices were made . . . *there were no satisfying solutions as the choices themselves generated unanticipated situations and problems. As a consequence, the incarcerated were forever facing dilemmas.* (Introduction, emphasis mine)

We might read the novel's full title—*Treadmill: A Documentary Novel*—as an early example of Nakamura's grappling with that dilemma. The very term "documentary," with its factual and didactic connotations, belies an attempt at authorial transparency, a keen awareness of conflicting responsibilities to both an "objective" historical perspective which shows the internment "as it really was," and at the same time to a certain literary impulse to make that body of facts aesthetically meaningful. Nakamura's choice of narrator, too, reveals his negotiations between these two representational scales: the "big picture" of history and the "microcosm" of a Japanese family. Despite its autobiographical origins, *Treadmill* is narrated through neither a

²¹ This crisis, in the most basic sense, is one of too much difference; the "Asian American" designation now refers to such a massive range of ethnicities, classes, ages and birthplaces that the idea of being able to "represent" them all under a singular category has become increasingly impossible. See Koshy for an extended discussion.

²² Nakamura's use of bridge, in particular, as a site for his formal experiments with parataxis, set up the non-linear, and non-causal relationship between individual and choice which becomes the basis for his depiction of the loyalty questionnaire as a dilemma game.

first-person perspective nor even by a male protagonist: it unfolds through the third-person, and is mostly centered on Teru Noguchi, a young woman who, according to Nakamura's widow, shares both a name and a number of historical parallels with Hiroshi's younger sister.²³

True to its title, *Treadmill* essentially documents the absurdity of the internment, and particularly the loyalty questionnaire, as an exercise which becomes an end in itself. The physical exhaustion which epitomizes the inmates' constant struggle to survive in the camp—to scrounge up food, ward off the bitter cold, and run through blinding dust storms from one end of the compound to the other in search of basic human comforts like toilet paper or a broom—testifies also to the mental and emotional depletion which is most evident in characters like Teru's mother. Faced with the loss of her home and the FBI's seizure of her husband, Ayame Noguchi goes mad, her slipping grasp on reality explicitly and metonymically linked to the incomprehensibility of the American government's decision to imprison its own citizens. No longer able to care for her children or herself, Mrs. Noguchi responds to the Sisyphean (or more precisely, treadmillian) task of internment life by retreating into her own mind, reliving various childhood experiences aloud and failing, any longer, to see "the point" of performing chores like bathing, brushing her hair, or housecleaning because, as she points out, they will only need to be done again and again.

Exposing life itself as a kind of purposeless play, the internment also produces, especially for the younger generation of *Niseis* (American-born Japanese) like Teru, an increasing sense of paranoid skepticism about just what kind of game the American government is playing. The first

²³ Nakamura's decision to adopt a female perspective is particularly interesting given the gendered dimensions of the internment itself. As the term "no-no boy" implies, the loyalty questionnaire was explicitly concerned with second-generation Japanese American males of draft age. Female responses were thus seen by the community (and the government) as largely symbolic acts, reflecting a degree of filial or spousal fidelity rather than an explicitly political expression of national loyalty; as one character in *Treadmill* puts it, "women don't count so they may as well answer yes-yes" (153).

half of the novel, in particular, is largely dedicated to the conversations and debates within the camp community about whether, for instance, the State's repatriation offer "was simply a trick of the American government to secure what amounted to an outright expression of loyalty to Japan and thus lay open the road to prosecution" (61). Similarly, the first round of loyalty hearings (internees were later offered an opportunity to change their no's to yeses) leads to a widespread anxiety that the questionnaire is actually an elaborate attempt to ensnare traitors and thus justify the internment program; although, as Mr. Noguchi himself suggests, echoing almost verbatim General DeWitt's protests to the loyalty questionnaire, "What an asinine question. Who is going to put down in writing that he intends to break laws?" (154).²⁴ But after the second round of loyalty hearings commences, the American government, as well as Teru's voice, recedes into the background, replaced for an extended period by an unspecified omniscient narrator and a shift in the perspective of the game players, too, whose greatest desire becomes to predict what all of the other internees, not the State, are planning to do in response to the questionnaire.

Thus we encounter the following anecdote being offered by a *Nisei* woman whom Teru meets on the train to Tule Lake, the internment camp in which "no-no"s were segregated:

My husband, he's *Issei* [a first-generation Japanese immigrant], so we went on the same day to register and I went and answered no-no. Then I came home and find he's answered yes. It was funny because I'd expected him to answer no from the way he's been talking and he thought I'd answer yes because I always used to fight with him about it. (197)

Crucially lacking, here, is any reference to the moral or ideological factors guiding the wife's decision; rather, the operative phrases are "I'd expected him to answer no" and "he thought I'd answer yes." What is "funny" about this scene is precisely its absurd irony, in which each

²⁴ DeWitt was an extremely vocal opponent of the loyalty questionnaire, arguing that "of course [the saboteurs will] answer 'yes.' Those are the guys I trust the least" (qtd. in Krug and Myer).

spouse's attempts to answer as they expect the other to leads both to adopt positions which directly oppose their own convictions; moreover, their desire to use rational logic to arrive at the *same* answer is precisely what leads to their divergence.²⁵ If this sounds like the plot of a Shakespearean comedy—or, to cite the literary example von Neumann himself used to illustrate game logic, like a passage lifted from a Sherlock Holmes novel²⁶—a number of other vignettes reveal the equally reflexive but far more tragic consequences for those internees who were, similarly, trying to “take comfort in having done what the others had done” (138) by “doing what they were expected to do” (180). On the same train to Tule Lake, a scuffle breaks out in a nearby car between Kurisu, a former leader of the pro-Japanese camp riots, and Bob Santo, one of his most loyal followers. Teru's friend Ichiro explains the cause of the fight:

“Kurisu advised Bob and the rest of his group to answer no-no . . . Bob had a lot of faith in his judgment; and so, he did as he was advised, satisfied that *they were all in the same boat together*. However, at the last moment, Kurisu's son changed his answer and now Kurisu isn't coming to Tule lake [sic] with us. Bob feels that he's been double crossed and is quite upset as you can see.” (195, emphasis mine)

Bob's faith in one set of ideals—those of solidarity among the oppressed—has turned him into a martyr who has not only lost his rights as an American citizen but, just as importantly, has fallen victim to the shifty tactics of his treasonous mentor. “You with your fine talk about Japanese spirit,” he screams at Kurisu, “Well, I'll show you who's the true Japanese” (195). The irony, once again, is that Bob is in fact revealing precisely those “Japanese” characteristics that DeWitt and his office used to rationalize the internment, particularly the latter's assertion that the

²⁵ For a specifically game-theoretical version of this dilemma, see Schelling.

²⁶ *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*, as well as Morgenstern's “Perfect Foresight,” uses a scene from Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Adventure of the Final Problem* to illustrate the “endless chain of reciprocally conjectural reactions and counter-reactions” underlying dilemma games.

members of this “unassimilated, tightly knit racial group” (Dewitt, “Final Report” vii) were entirely incapable of independent thought and autonomous action.

What is especially disturbing about this scene is Ichiro’s, and indeed the novel’s, tendency to blame Bob for his own wretched fate, depicting him as a petulant child who throws a temper tantrum for being “double crossed”—“hitching up his pants truculently” as he advances upon Kurisu, fists raised—rather than sympathizing with his entirely admirable (and, as game theory would suggest, completely rational) decision to choose a cooperative course of action by throwing his lot in with a political movement that might lead to actual social change.²⁷ The final injustice in *Treadmill*, then, is not so much the indignity of being imprisoned by one’s own government, but rather the shame of being betrayed by the very people who are most intimately connected to one’s plight.

The game which the novel seems most interested in, then, is a social dilemma known colloquially as the Stag Hunt. Various called a “trust dilemma,” “coordination game,” “or assurance game” in game theory literature, the stag hunt—a term drawn from Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *A Discourse on Inequality*—has also been discussed as a peculiarity of atomic logic. Essentially, it is a group game in which each player’s desire to “catch a stag”—to cooperatively bring down a quarry which is impossible for a lone individual to subdue—is constantly threatened by his temptation to “defect,” as game theory calls it: to leave his post and pursue a single hare which has happened by, a prey which he can easily catch by himself. Despite the fact that bringing down a stag, rather than several individual hares, constitutes the most advantageous outcome for the group as a whole (as game theorist John Nash proved through the equilibrium

²⁷ One recognizes the true gravity of Bob’s situation upon realizing that by answering “No-No,” Bob will essentially become, like John Okada’s Ichiro Yamada, a post-war social pariah both within his own ethnic community and, in large part, to the rest of America for being a “draft dodger” and an ex-convict.

theorem which bears his name) the fact remains that mutual cooperation, like mutual defection in a prisoner's dilemma, remains as elusive as the noble stag. What *Treadmill* reveals, then, is not merely that self-interest trumps common interest during the internment, but that even the most admirable attempts at political solidarity and coalition-building are constantly threatened by their own internal contradictions; a reminder, one might say, that the distinction between the "irrationality" of the American government's decision to intern its citizens and the internees' own decision-making processes is not as clear-cut as we might want to assume.

Identifying Systems

In "Application of Game Theory to the Identification of Friend and Foe,"²⁸ a working paper published in July 1949, three RAND scientists embarked on an early quest to translate game theory's mathematical insights to the military context. "An important problem in warfare has always been the identification of friend and foe," it begins. "A current example of this problem is the 'loyalty oath': the purpose of which, as the paper's title suggests, "is to separate friend from foe." The oath which the authors are referring to is not, however, a binding document to which an individual signs his name or ceremoniously reads aloud; rather, they define the oath as "one of two signals: (F) or (E)," through which some given target, encountering an observer (O), represents itself as either friend (F) or enemy (E). This signal could refer to any number of oral, written, or even physical communications: a Morse code transmission, a sworn statement of fidelity, the raising of a particular flag. Game theory's ingenuity is in reducing those various expressions to a binary model, and in understanding the interaction between observer and target as a game in which four payoffs are possible, which the paper defines as "1) if O identifies F as

²⁸ See Bellman et al.

F; 2) if O identifies F as E; 3) if O identifies E as E; 4) if O identifies E as F” The question then becomes: how should the observer respond to the signal “friend”?

The authors’ grim conclusion is, in fact, the same one that the Roosevelt Administration arrived at regarding Japanese denizens after Pearl Harbor. In lieu of a code or password known only to the observer and his friends, the observer’s optimal course of action is to treat *every* signal as an enemy signal; one can’t, in other words, be too careful. But this is more than a mathematical justification for the trampling of civil rights; it tells us something rather more interesting about the way that games like the one above, and like those I have been discussing, are bound up with what Niklas Luhmann has called second-order observations. As Mark Seltzer puts it, these are complex games “in which we move against opponents whose intentions, or what look like them (bluffs), enter into the form of the game” (101). In other words, the way that O interacts with an incoming signal depends less on the actual content of the signal (whether F or E)—or, for that matter, on whether the signaler is “really” F or E—than on the fact that O treats it as a *signal*, which is to say, as the form of intentionality itself.

The RAND authors’ decision to name an *observer*—rather than an interpreter, a decoder, or a reader—makes sense precisely because O’s observations are not synonymous with identifications: the latter defines the target, as Luhmann considers first-order observations to do, “as that which is” (47), whereas the former incorporates the recognition that it could, in fact, be otherwise. The distinction between observation and identification, in other words, is like the distinction between the game’s payoffs and its moves; the payoffs, as the authors make clear, are not that O makes a “correct” identification, but correspond to the *contingent* outcomes of those identifications. The point, then, is not merely that modernity, as Luhmann points out, is defined by contingency – that which is “neither necessary nor impossible” (45)—but that such

contingency is what makes our choices, as modern subjects, look more like game moves and less like grocery shopping. As Luhmann expresses it, “second-order observations offer a *choice* . . . whether certain designations are to be attributed to the observed observer, thereby characterizing him, or seen as characteristics of what he observes” (48, emphasis mine).

This is, in many ways, the central issue of John Okada’s novel *No-No Boy*, where choice as a process of attribution/identification—and hence *identity*—rather than selection gets replicated in the formal arrangement of the physical manuscript itself. *No-No Boy* is a story about the rehabilitation of no-no boy Ichiro Yamada, who has just returned home from prison after the war’s close, bookended by two accounts of its own rehabilitation by Asian America’s own Gang of Four, the men who are perhaps best known for the widely-criticized brand of misogynistic cultural nationalism that they preached in their infamous Asian American literary anthology *Aiiieeee!*²⁹ Both literally and figuratively imprisoned by the conditions of its own rediscovery and subsequent critical reception, then, Okada’s novel has largely been read as a tragic reminder of the nation’s own elisions and contradictions—as Ichiro himself laments in the novel, “it was a terribly incomplete thing to be American if one’s face was not white” (54)—and of the enduring psychic trauma wrought by the internment.³⁰ Its content, in short, is what the *Aiiieeee!* editors would consider the stuff of a “real” Asian American novel. More compelling to me, however, is the syntactic and strategic *form* which that specifically racialized trauma takes, and how its self-

²⁹ That is: Jeffrey Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, Shawn Wong, and Frank Chin.

³⁰ Hence, critics too numerous to list here have attributed Ichiro’s fragmented psyche to an “identity crisis” produced by the “liminality” of his Japanese American subject-position or, even more explicitly, by his failed “attempt to claim an identity as an American” (Yogi 64). These are certainly not the only interpretations, of course; those which distinguish themselves in particular are Jinqi Ling’s reading of the novel as a site of authorial negotiation (“Race, Power, and Cultural Politics”), Kandice Chuh’s attention to its transnational resonances, and Joseph Entin’s ambitious framing of the book within the *noir* genre. See also Daniel Kim’s compelling account of the novel’s imbrication with dominant discourses of Cold War masculinity, which introduces a crucial discussion of the gendered implications of internment game theory that unfortunately exceeds the purview of this essay.

reflexive, contingent elements—in essence, its *gamefulness*—might be refigured as a novel rubric for understanding Asian American literature and the intersections between identification and identity.

The curious figure of Ichiro’s mother is arguably the character that best captures *No-No Boy*’s acute interest in these feedback loops of observation and contingency described by the RAND authors: Ichiro endlessly struggles with the question, “how is one to talk to a woman, a mother who is also a stranger because the son does not know who or what she is?” (104) In the end, Ichiro’s attempts to determine whether his mother is friend or foe are frustrated, primarily, by her own interest in that distinction. Mrs. Yamada believes—and not entirely without reason—that the American media is a vast propaganda machine, dedicated solely to broadcasting false news, writing fake letters, and staging fake photographs as part of a massive self-affirming conspiracy to deny that the country has, in fact, lost the war to Japan. And while Ichiro initially attributes her behavior to mental instability, he cannot help but regard it as a certain kind of rational irrationality: “Was it she who was wrong and crazy not to have found in herself the capacity to accept a country which repeatedly refused to accept her or her sons unquestioningly, or was it the others who were being deluded, the ones, like Kenji [a *nisei* veteran], who fought and gave their lives to protect this country where they could still not rate as first-class citizens because of the unseen walls?” (104)

The slippery distinction between rationality and insanity in turn raises a much more fundamental question about the difference between seeing and knowing, one which is particularly fraught in the post-Pearl Harbor collisions between racial and national identity. For example, Mrs. Yamada’s friend and fellow believer in Japan’s victory, Mrs. Ashida, recounts with a snicker her encounter with a recently returned *nisei* veteran who shows her photographs of

Hiroshima and Nagasaki after the devastation of the atomic bomb:

I asked him if he was ever in Japan before and could he prove that he was actually there and he said again to look at the pictures and I told him that what must really have happened was that the army only told him he was in Japan when he was someplace else . . . he got so mad his face went white and he said: “*How do you know you’re you? Tell me how you know you’re you!*” (22, emphasis mine)

The point is, of course, that you can’t *know*. Mrs. Ashida’s dismissal of the photographs is not a privileging of first-hand human experience over second-hand media representations; rather, it seems to suggest that there is essentially no difference between the two, in part because the same uncertainty is inherent in both. Knowing thus begins to look like doing; the epistemological dilemma that Mrs. Ashida scoffs at is essentially the same one which we saw Mr. Takemoto raising in *All I Asking For* between one’s wife and one’s mother. “What should you do?” and “How do you know you’re you?” are, in neither case, an appeal to feeling or reason; “Japaneseness” always provides the answer, just as it does for Mrs. Ashida, who, like Ichiro’s mother, “conduct[s] herself as a Japanese” (40). The fact that such logic is tautological – “Japan did not lose the war because Japan could not possibly lose” (Okada 24) – says less about these women’s rationality and more, as Mark Seltzer points out, about the affinities between the modern world and the game world, in which we witness an increasing “nullification . . . of extrinsic determinations” (107). Like Kiyō’s “too easy” craps victories, Mrs. Yamada’s assertion leaves Ichiro gaping in disbelief: “the overwhelming simplicity of the explanation threatened to evoke silly giggles which, if permitted to escape, might lead to hysterics” (9).

Like Luhmann’s second-order observer, Ichiro stands in his own blind spot—hence the novel’s provocative Oedipal resonances, which this essay lacks the space to do justice—but his tendency to blame his mother for his decision to answer no-no reflects the novel’s larger

preoccupation with mediated vision. The morning after their visit with Mrs. Ashida, Ichiro's desire to communicate with his mother turns, once again, into a game of (mis)identification: when he calls her crazy—"softly and deliberately, for he wanted her to know that he meant it" (42)—she responds, "Ah, Ichiro. I thought for a moment that you meant it." Intention, in other words, can no more be "proven" through language than photography can secure the reality of its representations; and this, it would appear, is the final straw for Ichiro—he decides to use language in the only way that seems to have any effect: "'Balls! Balls!' he shrieked" (43). Just as unexpected is Mrs. Yamada's response: she doesn't cover her ears, but her eyes. Faced with her refusal to "see," in more ways than one, Ichiro leaps up from the table, wrenches her wrists away from her face and drags her to the bathroom while screaming "Look at me! . . . I'm as crazy as you are. See in the mirror the madness of the mother which is the madness of the son. See. See!" (43)

The strangeness of this scene is in part due to its contradictory impulse—not to mention the fact that it takes the reader a long, awkward moment to realize that the reason Ichiro is dragging his mother to the bathroom is because it (presumably) contains a mirror. The son's attempt, in this curious inversion of the traditional mirror stage, to bring his mother's broken mind back to reality paradoxically involves engaging her in a *fantasy* of coherence; but at the same time, the mirror itself is utterly redundant because he considers his own face mirror enough. Indeed, his choice to answer no-no, "in a frightening moment of insanity" (134), rehearses this same refusal to look: he "turn[ed] his back on the army and the country and the world and his own self" (40). Such repetitive syntax, which in fact becomes the novel's most enduring stylistic hallmark, is in essence the form which internment logic takes: for internees, certainly, there *was* no difference between the army and the country, because one could only

secure his American citizenship if he agreed to enlist. There was, in other words, no *maybe*, just a “life-giving yes” (241), an “and” which coordinates the individual with the nation and with reality; or, for Ichiro, an “empty no,” a “total rejection” (242) of one and hence all of those terms.

There is, in other words, a reflexive relation being established between one’s own body and the bodies of others, whether human, textual, or national, one which we see rehearsed even in the novel’s opening pages, when Ichiro encounters a former classmate and newly returned war veteran. Like some real-life T.J. Eckleburg, Eto Minato’s “round eyes peer[ing] at [Ichiro] through silver-rimmed spectacles” (2) are simultaneously screen and mirror: “the eyes confronted Ichiro with indecision which changed slowly to enlightenment and then to suspicion. He remembered. He knew” (3). Eto’s “knowing” eyes, however, reflect not only Ichiro’s shame, but the shame of his having been nothing more than a reflection; it is Ichiro’s inability to “think *for himself*” (19, emphasis mine) that, as a no-no boy, makes his body strangely continuous with his mother’s: “it was she who opened my mouth and made my lips move to sound the words” (12).

But despite Ichiro’s discomfiting vacillation between these two extremes—Eto, on the one hand, described as “God in a pair of green fatigues, U.S. Army style” (4), Mrs. Yamada as “a Japanese who breathed the air of America and yet had never lifted a foot from the land that was Japan” (11)—the novel on the whole makes it quite clear that there is in fact no difference between any of these three positions, mostly because they are all equal in the eyes of white America. As Okada rather blithely puts it in the Preface, once Pearl Harbor is attacked, “the Japanese who were born Americans . . . no longer worried about whether they were Japanese-Americans or American-Japanese. They were Japanese . . . the radio had said as much” (viii-

ix).³¹ Even those like Eto, who answered yes-yes to the loyalty questionnaire, are not exempt from this category; Kenji himself suggests as much: “they think just because they went and packed a rifle they’re different but they aren’t and they know it. They’re still Japs” (163). Are we, then, meant to read this disheartening verdict—delivered, in fact, just after Kenji’s own realization that he is about to die from his gangrenous war wound (his response to Ichiro’s question, “Did the doctors say so?”: “Not in so many words, but they know it and I know it and they know that I do” [162])—as Okada’s implicit endorsement of the statement which General DeWitt had become famous for: “a Jap’s a Jap whether he’s an American citizen or not” (qtd. in Papanikolas)?

Well, in a sense, yes; it would be both naive and just plain wrong to suggest that the vast majority of the American public thought any differently. Far more troubling, certainly, is that its echo comes from a Japanese American character who has sacrificed his life to defend such an ideal. What Okada is pointing to, however, is not a problem specific to the internment, but one which afflicts Asian American Studies more broadly; the fact that, to paraphrase Frank Chin, the only thing that “holds Asian America together” is a shared history of exclusion. The self-avowed representational crisis which has characterized the field for the last twenty-five years is just another version of this problem: now that “Asian American” refers to a heterogeneous population that is internally dissimilar not only in ethnicity but in class, language, birthplace, religion and political preference, is there any site of coherence besides the fact that they “all look the same”?

What *No-No Boy*, like *All I Asking For* and *Treadmill*, seems to suggest is that the

³¹ Certainly, this sentence should be read as more than a little tongue-in-cheek. However, its sarcasm serves to underscore, even while it critiques, the hegemonic authority of State-sponsored discourses and their ability to (mis)identify its subjects, even simply by making semantic distinctions.

dilemmas staged by the internment were due to a *lack* of distinction between the government's and many internees' assumptions about the meaning of racial and national identities.

“Japaneseness,” in other words, is what allows the game to continue: it provides, in all three novels, the “too easy” answer to the question “What should I do?” It is simultaneously a way of acting, knowing, and observing: a way of *playing*. Whether it is tied spatially to a nation or genetically to a race remains irrelevant to characters like Mr. Takemoto and Mrs. Yamada; in its very oscillation between the two, it becomes the unity of the distinction between race and place. What we have to consider, then, is whether the term “Asian American” is doing something quite similar, even while it purports to reject an essentialist definition of identity as such. The turn to games, in other words, should not be mistaken for an optimistic endorsement of the spontaneity and freedom of play. Quite the opposite: the same “rules of irrelevance” (Goffman 18) which allow us to play games look, in the end, an awful lot like those which allow race to function as a fictional constraint with real consequences.

CHAPTER TWO

Racial Role-Play: Fantasies of Identity in *The Woman Warrior* and *Beloved*

In August 1976, *New York Magazine* featured as its cover story an essay penned by Tom Wolfe entitled “The ‘Me’ Decade and the Third Great Awakening.” In it, the journalist-*cum*-author painted a sardonic portrait of the 1970s as an embarrassingly self-centered moment in American history wherein “the old alchemical dream [of] changing base metals into gold” had given way before “the new alchemical dream [of] changing one’s personality—remaking, remodeling, elevating, and polishing one’s very *self* . . . and observing, studying, and doting on it” (13). Yet for all his interest in providing an exhaustive catalog of the “righteous” fictions which “ordinary folks” were beginning to use to “alter the circumstances of their lives and create new roles for themselves,” Wolfe curiously omits one of the decade’s most enduring engines of dramatic self-(re)invention for “ordinary folks”: the tabletop role-playing game.

In 1974, Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson released *Dungeons & Dragons (DnD)*, a game that required little in the way of equipment—a thin rulebook and some polyhedral dice—but much in the way of imagination and storytelling. That year, while millions of “ordinary” Americans spent their evenings in front of the television, watching the Watergate Scandal play out in real-time, hundreds and soon thousands of their fellows were gathering around kitchen tables to become something more than ordinary. Indeed, despite drawing heavily on the fantasy world that J.R.R. Tolkien’s fiction had brought to life several decades earlier, *DnD* was very much a product of its times, epitomizing the “Me” decade’s romance with “character development” as a play-at-home version of self-authorship.

Dungeons & Dragons has the dubious honor of being not only the very first Tabletop Fantasy Role-Playing game (TFRPG) but probably still, at least in the popular imagination, the most effective means of sealing a young male's reputation as a social pariah among the majority of his peers. Yet the reputation of TFRPGs themselves—as the primitive, “lo-fi” predecessors of today's sophisticated (albeit equally “nerdy”) Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games (MMORPGs) like *World of Warcraft*—is not only undeserved but greatly obscures the radical novelty of this marginalized genre. Incorporating both the turn-based aspect of parlor games like chess and bridge while simultaneously presaging the interactive fantasy element of their modern-day console and computer counterparts, TFRPGs not only bridge two ludic genres but, as critics quite persuasively argued during the brief spurt of scholarly attention which such games garnered around the mid-1980s,³² they also engage with their literary contemporaries in remarkably innovative ways.

Sandwiched between the counter-cultural energies of earlier decades and the “culture wars” that would mark ensuing ones, the role-playing games of what Tom Wolfe would famously dub “The ‘Me’ Decade” emerged alongside another novel literary genre, a decidedly mainstream phenomenon called “gamebooks” or, informally, “Choose your own adventure books,” based on a concept initially developed by Edward Packard that rapidly expanded into several full-fledged series published by Bantam Books, selling more than 250 million copies between 1979 and 1998.³³ As their name suggests, gamebooks distinguished themselves from their traditional prose-based counterparts in children's literature by combining structural elements of the ludic with the literary; like *Dungeons & Dragons* (*DnD*), they offered opportunities to *choose* your own adventure rather than simply receive it.

³² See Williams et al.

³³ See Kraft.

In analogous fashion, TFRPGs like *Dungeons & Dragons*, intended for a slightly older demographic, promised an almost infinite number of adventures by turning its players into authors rather than mere dice-rollers; as Michelle Nephew points out, the novelty of both genres lay largely in the opportunities they created for collaborative authorship and interactive narration. By expanding “the function of the author from a single creative entity to an empowered storytelling among groups” (127) (or at least between reader and author), TFRPGs and gamebooks essentially encouraged the “disenfranchised” demographics of shy (usually male) teenagers and young children, respectively, to experience games, and books, as opportunities to experience the empowerment of self-authorship.

The liberating potential of narrative empowerment was, of course, also behind the postwar era’s call to empower oneself as a minority writer, the phrase “find your voice” having since the 1950s, as Mark McGurl reminds us, become an enduring mantra of creative writing institutions throughout the country.³⁴ Equally important to realize, however, is that African American and Asian American authors in particular responded to this call for “voice” in much the way that their Caucasian counterparts in game design and gamebooks did; to those like Ishmael Reed, as important as documenting the “facts” of minority experience became the impetus to demonstrate the power of the minority *imagination*. My aim in this chapter, accordingly, is to suggest that we think of these two enterprises—fantasy role-playing games/gamebooks on the one hand and 1970s-80s ethnic American literary production on the other—as essentially parallel developments that, first, grappled with analogous questions of how to collectively author and maintain a fantastic world which is entirely different from our own present reality, and, further, emerged out of two subcultures which were not only invested in but

³⁴ See McGurl, especially Part Two.

defined almost entirely by their relationship to postwar American assumptions about race, gender, class, and social (dis)ability.

What critics have noted about the “empowering” capacity of collaborative authorship that defined *Dungeons & Dragons* thus rings equally true for minority authors like Maxine Hong Kingston and Toni Morrison. For these two women, who in a span of twelve years produced what arguably remain two of the most canonical works of twentieth century minority American fiction to date,³⁵ narrating the Asian American and African American experience required not only that the minority author find, as Caroline Rody put it, “a voice that sounds like ‘we’” (97), but that she utilize the same anti-realist elements and formal structures found in TFRPGs and gamebooks as a means of asserting her sense that, as McGurl has argued, “the very idea of realism implie[d] a submission, if not an ‘enslavement,’ to the actual as officially defined” (264). Fantasy becomes, in short, an opportunity for the minority author to demonstrate “the unbound power of the [non-white] imagination to reorder reality at will” (McGurl 264)—creating an opportunity for historically disenfranchised ethnic groups, in particular, to choose their own adventures.

Race has, in recent years, already begun to emerge as a central topic of conversation in contemporary game studies.³⁶ These conversations tend to revolve around how game

³⁵ Morrison’s *Beloved*, which captured the 1988 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction was, in a recent [New York Times](#) survey, voted “the single best work of American fiction published in the last 25 years”; Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, winner of the 1976 National Book Critics Circle Award was, as of 1997, the most widely-taught novel in undergraduate literature courses (*MLA*).

³⁶ The flourishing field of contemporary video game studies -- which, while often invested in similar questions of player/persona identity, immersion, realism and game design elements, has focused almost exclusively on console or computer games. As a result, discussions of such games have tended to treat their “mechanical” aspects – their software code, the hardware console or peripherals used to play, the screen display through which the player interacts – as synonymous with their ludic ones. That is, “game,” in the current moment, has become so intertwined with the concept of digital media that tabletop RPGs like DnD are treated as equivalent to *Pong* or *Space Invaders*: as cruder and more rudimentary, but essentially homologous, predecessors of today’s *Angry Birds*. For more on how race is understood within these “online” forms, see Juul and Wardrip-Fruin.

representations might reinforce cultural stereotypes and hierarchies³⁷—or, to put it slightly differently, how a lack of diversity, when it constricts the range of avatars and characters a person can choose to play as, can prevent minority and female players in particular from “identifying” with their chosen personas.³⁸ The reason this limitation has proven especially objectionable to critics of FRPGs both present and past, of course, is because the whole point of such games *is* identity development. As Dennis Waskul points out,

[the fantasy role-playing game] is not competitive, has no time limits, has no score-keeping, and, aside from the death of a player's persona, has no finite definitions of winning or losing. Unlike card games, board games, games of chance, or organized sports, *the point of fantasy role-playing games is not merely for players to play well nor to “win.” Instead, the goals are survival and character development: participants create and play fantasy personas that, if kept “alive,” increase and advance skills and abilities over the course of many, often lengthy, gaming sessions.* (20, emphasis mine).

In short, “winning” in an FRPG is an index of *authorial* ability—and if a player is forced to choose a “fantasy persona” that bears no resemblance to how she wishes to be seen *as* an author, then the likelihood of her becoming invested in “character development” as a goal in and of itself, and hence her desire to contribute to that developmental fantasy, is accordingly diminished.

While W.E.B. DuBois certainly didn’t use the term “fantasy personas,” one might say that such acts of “character development” were similar to what he had in mind when he laid out what he considered to be a fundamental dilemma facing the African American population in the post-bellum years and the need to “merge [the African American] double self into a better and

³⁷ See Nephew and Williams.

³⁸ See Williams.

truer self” (Du Bois 11). His influential concept of double-consciousness, after all, revolved around the issue of Blacks seeing themselves reflected on the social “screen” in a form that simply could not be “merged” with their own images of themselves. For DuBois, of course, such a pathological condition was not analogous to an ocular malady—of “seeing double” in the sense of viewing an externally-defined image of reality superimposed onto one’s own—but a psychic one. Like the minority female player who is forced to role-play as a burly white male hero, the African American in DuBois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* is unable to fully immerse himself in his world, forever reminded of its “fantastic” aspects. In the case of the racialized subject, of course, the implications of this failure are far graver; while the former might simply choose to stop playing, for the latter, there *is* no other game. If, as J.C. Friedrich von Schiller famously remarked in his *Letters Upon the Aesthetic Education of Man*, “Man only plays when in the full meaning of the word he is a man, and he is only completely a man when he plays” (Letter XV), then for the minority American afflicted with double-consciousness, asserting one’s autonomy as a human being *requires* that one play—just as to play, in turn, requires that one be able to find “on screen” a persona which conforms to one’s image of oneself *as* a human being.

For Toni Morrison, writing about slavery as an African American in the twentieth century requires that one find analogous forms of “virtual” representation that adequately reflect the reality of the “six million and more” slaves to whom her novel *Beloved* is dedicated—a task which requires that the author, like her characters, immerse herself in her own form of role-play. Like *Beloved*’s Denver, whom her ex-slave mother Sethe constantly warns about the possibility of encountering other peoples’ memories, Morrison occupies the liminal position of being both “you who never was there” (*Beloved* 43-44) and yet in thrall to the past: not only was she writing some one hundred and twenty years after the events in *Beloved* take place, but, as she told a

Cambridge audience in 1988, “there is no place here where I can go . . . and think about, or not think about, or summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of - slaves . . . no memorial-plaque, or wreath, or wall . . . and because such a place doesn’t exist that *I* know of, the book had to” (“Lecture”). In the absence of a literal monument, then, the novel itself functions as a kind of virtual memorial, utilizing the engrossing capacity of the minority imagination to “go there” and have the sense of experiencing that historical past as *reality*.

Like Morrison, Maxine Hong Kingston was constantly reminded of the fact that she was “never there” to experience either China or America in the form that her immigrant parents and grandparents did. And like her literary counterpart, Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* functions as a double memorial: a tribute to the “absent presence” of family members she will never know, as well as a reminder of the fact that absence itself has historically been the defining characteristic of Asian immigrant culture. Not only, as the narrator puts it, do “even the good things remain unspeakable” in Chinese culture, such that “a son does not [even] know his own father’s name” (Kingston 177), but the *modus operandi* of the Chinese immigrant, as her parents have instilled in her, is “don’t tell”: “Tell [Americans] your birth certificate and your parents were burned up in the [1906 San Francisco earthquake] fire. Don’t report crimes; tell them we have no crimes and no poverty. Give a new name every time you get arrested” (184).

In short, Kingston’s efforts to “go there,” both as an author and as a daughter, are consistently met with tight-lipped resistance, an experience which she depicts as one of the defining aspects of the Asian American second-generation, who are “always trying to get things straight, always trying to name the unspeakable” (5). Her only solution, then, is to rely on imagination and fantasy to fashion her own version of that historical reality, combining the Chinese myth of Fa Mulan with that of Yue Fei (a Song Dynasty general whose mother allegedly

inscribed the characters for “serve the country with the utmost loyalty” upon his back³⁹) to develop fantasy personas like the eponymous “woman warrior” and the “No Name Woman” which she uses to project herself into a foreign place and time.

For both authors, then, fantasy role-playing becomes an opportunity for the minority subject to imagine and hence vicariously inhabit a subject-position, and a world, which is otherwise unavailable to her. But while in TFRPGs like *DnD*, that fantasy world might be populated by gnomes, dragons, trolls or elves, in *Beloved* and *The Woman Warrior*, non-human occupants consistently take the form of ghosts. In Kingston’s novel—whose subtitle is, appropriately, “memoir of a girlhood among ghosts”—not only are all of the non-Chinese characters described *as* ghosts by the narrator and her mother, but even the narrator herself, like all Asian Americans, “had been born among ghosts, were taught by ghosts, and were ourselves ghost-like. [Our parents] called us a kind of ghost” (183), while in *Beloved*, “not a house in the country ain’t packed to its rafters with some dead Negro’s grief” (6).

Like DuBois, who cast the African American as “the swarthy spectre” who sits, Banquo-like, “in its accustomed seat at the Nation’s feast” (SBF), Kingston and Morrison define their characters as ghost-like to the extent that they haunt the social as well as metaphysical margins of a world divided by the color line. Capturing the “reality” of minority American experience, accordingly, becomes a literal act of communal storytelling, in which the ghosts of the past are not exorcised but rather incorporated as players. Sethe, for instance, upon reuniting with the apparent reincarnation of the beloved infant whom she murdered two decades earlier in a desperate attempt to prevent its return to slavery, soon finds herself immersed with *Beloved* “in games [she] loved so well” that she not only loses her job but becomes “ghost-like” in turn, such

³⁹ See Qian.

that “it was difficult for Denver to tell who was who” anymore (282-83).

Approaching this pair of ethnic novels through the lens of fantasy role-playing games is not to imply, of course, that either author was herself a secret devotee of literal TFRPGs like *DnD* (although Kingston, in particular, would certainly make a fantastic dungeonmaster). Rather, it is to recognize that, at the specific historical moment during which these novels and games emerged, the potential of turning identity into a ludic element was being grasped across multiple mediums in ways that fundamentally differed from their dramaturgical predecessors. They presage, in short, the conduits through which racial identity in particular would by the early 1990s be put “into play,” both metaphorically as the proverbial “race card” and literally through computer games like *The Sims* or *Second Life*. At a moment in which “playing in the dark”—the title of Morrison’s 1993 book of essays about the “Africanist” presence in late nineteenth and early twentieth century American fiction—began to mean not only playing with but *as* symbolic figurations of ethnic alterity, the 1970s-90s might best be understood as a crucial transition period for minority American writers (and commercial game designers) who were just beginning to grasp the potential of play as one means—and sometimes the *only* means—of interfacing with worlds from which they were otherwise denied access.

Non-Playing Characters

A movie star who plays at being a doctor is not in the role of doctor but in the role of actor; and this latter role, we are told, he is likely to take quite seriously. The work of his role is to portray a doctor, but the work is only incidental; his actual role is no more make-believe than that of a real doctor - merely better paid. . . . These desperate performers are caught exactly between illusion and reality, and must lead one audience to accept the role portrait as real, even while assuring another audience that the actor in no way is convincing himself.

—Erving Goffman, *Encounters*

One hundred and sixty years after Schiller defined humanity purely in terms of its capacity to play, Erving Goffman, ruminating upon Roger Caillois' oft-cited definition of gameplay as a pleasurable activity freely engaged in by choice,⁴⁰ admitted that "of course, those who are tactful, ambitious, or lonely participate in recreation that is not fun for them . . . similarly, children, mental patients, and prisoners may not have an effective option when officials declare game-time, but *it is precisely in being thus constrained that these unfortunates seem something less than persons*" (Goffman 18, emphasis mine). From the standpoint of the sociologist and the philosopher alike, then, play not only becomes the place where what makes us human is most clearly defined, but, by extension, where what constitutes the *non*-human can be most readily deduced.

For African Americans who, like the "unfortunates" that Goffman describes, were until comparatively recently considered non-persons even in the eyes of the law, these remarks remind us that what defined such groups in the antebellum years was not merely their inability to work for themselves, but to *play* for themselves. After all, what distinguished a freedman from a slave was not only the "privilege" of keeping one's wages but, as Yoram Barzel, in his well-known "Economic Analysis of Slavery," points out, the ability to "take into account nonpecuniary dimensions of his work and of his leisure time" (87). And as a slave, being unable to play, accordingly, meant being played *with*: not only were "men and women [] moved around like checkers" (*Beloved* 27) as a matter of course, but as Baby Suggs, a former slave in *Beloved*, soon comes to realize, "the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children" (28).

In this disturbing image of life as a massive checkers game played between slaveholders,

⁴⁰ See Caillois.

the perpetuation of slavery as an institution relies not simply on the continued subjugation of the game pieces, but, as Goffman argued about social encounters more generally, upon a superficial consensus among all involved about what “counts” as a player or a piece in the first place. Goffman refers to these tacit guidelines as the “rules of irrelevance” that allow the “same” game of checkers, in his example, to be played regardless of whether the pieces are bottlecaps, gold figurines or people. These implicit rules of irrelevance—which exist alongside the “official” game rules that define, for instance, what constitutes a legitimate move or victory—essentially inform participants as “to what shall be attended and disattended, and through this, to what shall be accepted as the definition of the situation” (Goffman 19). In the case of slavery, of course, these rules of irrelevance were themselves made official through legislation, such that slaves were defined by the fact that they were *disattended* to as people, being literally counted, after 1787, as 3/5 of a person.⁴¹

For the offspring of Asian immigrants who themselves, generally speaking, historically failed to “count” as citizens until 1952,⁴² the question of what constitutes “Asianness” and “Americanness,” as Maxine Hong Kingston reveals, is similarly contingent on such rules of irrelevance. While Kingston, like so many other American-born Asians who came of age during the 1960s, at times experiences her racial difference as a legal or economic constraint which affects her employment or educational opportunities, what is infinitely more frustrating are the limits which it imposes on her ability to *play*. In *The Woman Warrior*, not only is the quasi-autobiographical narrator, along with all the other Chinese girls, unable to participate in the

⁴¹ The Three-Fifths Compromise was reached during the Philadelphia Convention of 1787 between Southern and Northern States. See Elliott 237.

⁴² The McCarran-Walter Act of 1952 repealed the “free white persons” restriction put in place by the Naturalization of 1790, but it was not until the Immigration and Nationality Act Amendments of 1965 that Asian immigration quotas were effectively altered. However, as the Supreme Court case of *The United States v. Wong Kim Ark* (1898) declared, American-born Asians qualified as citizens under the Fourteenth Amendment.

musicals or plays her elementary school puts on—“our voices were too soft or nonexistent, and our parents never signed the permission slips anyway” (167) - but when she encounters one of her few real-life playmates, another muted Chinese girl, the narrator not only follows a very peculiar set of rules but finds that she literally *can't* stop playing, mutating from hide-and-seek player to playground bully in a matter of minutes (173).

While there will be more to say shortly about how racial difference can augur a pathological relationship to play, here I simply want to suggest that for those like Kingston's narrator, who fail to “count” as legitimate persons within their social milieux, the idea of legitimacy and authenticity often becomes itself a pathological obsession which is specifically ludic in nature. One could argue that *The Woman Warrior* is, in fact, essentially a protracted attempt to decide what “counts” as Chinese, or American, or Chinese American in the far more nebulous game of identity politics. While checkers, as Goffman demonstrated, depends not on the materials with or medium upon which it is played, the games that trouble Kingston are defined by nothing *but* those material distinctions. Not only does she find it impossible to “separate what is peculiar to . . . one family . . . from what is Chinese . . . what is Chinese tradition and what is the movies” (6), but “Chineseness” itself becomes a game—“That's what Chinese say. We like to say the opposite” (203), her mother informs her—one which she is unable to win, or really even play, precisely because she does not understand its unspoken rules of irrelevance. And like any child who loses a game, her response is often to throw a tantrum: “You won't tell me a story and then say, ‘This is a true story,’ or, ‘This is just a story,’” she screams at her mother. “I can't tell what's real and what you make up” (202).

Culture, in other words, becomes in *The Woman Warrior* not so much a matter of internalized knowledge, as it is commonly thought of—the *Oxford English Dictionary* succinctly

defines culture as “the distinctive ideas, customs, social behaviour, products, or way of life of a particular nation, society, people, or period”—but resembles a proscribed set of reactions that function like moves in a game, in which misinformation or “bluffing” is a form of deception which is not an expression of cheating but a means of increasing the game’s complexity. That is, the black box of “Chinese tradition” which baffles Kingston’s narrator and tests the limits of her deductive abilities—“you figure[d] out what you got hit for and [didn’t] do it again if you figured correctly” (185)—is a function of that culture’s deliberate self-complication, what Mark Seltzer refers to as a game’s “sandbox elements,” the “gratuitous difficulties” which exist mainly to prolong the play (73). In *The Woman Warrior*, self-complication as a means of self-perpetuation thus becomes the primary way to maintain “tradition” and guarantee the continued existence of Chinese culture itself.

While for Kingston, such self-perpetuation relies on a distinctly “Asian American” inability to know whether a story is real or make-believe, Morrison takes up the issue through the analogous conundrum of not knowing whether a story is one’s own or someone else’s. While, as Caroline Rody has pointed out, the goal of many twentieth century African American authors, Morrison included, has been not just to “find a voice that sounds like ‘we’” but to use that voice to tell “a story known in the bones and yet not at all” (Rody 97)—the story of slavery—the curious neologism which *Beloved*’s Sethe coins to describe this kind of collective historical memory, “rememory,” gestures just as often to the *danger* of inhabiting stories which are “not to be passed on” and of which “remembering seemed unwise” (*Beloved* 324). Critics have often interpreted that interdiction as a reminder that the haunting legacy of slavery, like the character of Beloved herself, *must* be reincarnated, if only through narrative imagination, before it can be collectively exorcised from the national psyche. Thus Sethe, who has lived with her daughter in

isolation from the rest of the black community after the fateful day of her committed infanticide, initially attempts to close herself off and warn Denver away from the “place” inhabited by those communal memories of the past:

“Places, places are still there . . . someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on . . . and *you think it’s you thinking it up . . . but no. It’s when you bump into a rememory that belongs to someone else.* Where I was before I came here, that place is real . . . and what’s more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again . . . So, Denver, you can’t never go there. Never. Because even though it’s all over . . . it’s going to always be there waiting for you. That’s how come I had to get all my children out.” (43, emphasis mine)

By the end of the novel, of course, Sethe comes to realize, with the help of the community she once scorned, that rememory is in fact the *only* recourse for those who “got more yesterdays than anybody” and are thus, as her erstwhile lover Paul D. puts it, in need of “some kind of tomorrow.” Allowing Paul D. to “put his story next to hers” (322), in fact, becomes the cathartic epiphany which permits Sethe to literally stop from falling apart “in sections”: her final line in the book is a timid, but optimistic “remembering” of herself: “Me? Me?”

For a former slave, being able to “count” as a person requires more than just being legally free; Sethe herself realizes that “freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another” (111-12). In order to be a person, one must, to reinvoké Schiller and Goffman, be able to *play*; and more specifically, be able to play a *role*. As Sethe’s mother-in-law proclaims, “a man ain’t nothing but a man . . . but a son? Well now, that’s *somebody*” (27, emphasis original). Just as Sethe’s decision to do what “no *real* mother could”—murder her own children—exiles her from the black community in the first place, when her peers arrive at 124 Bluestone Road to exorcise Beloved near the end of the novel, her “rebirth” as a member of that

community, during which their chanting “broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash” (308), allows her to contemplate the possibility of once again “counting.” “Count my feet?” she implores Paul D. when he arrives to symbolically “gather her” back together; and so he does.

Person vs. Persona

While the “disease” of game addiction certainly predates modern computer and video games, arguably reaching as far back as the concept of games themselves, the pathological compulsion to play, and especially to role-play, that the minority characters in Morrison and Kingston’s novels demonstrate seems to reveal something unique about the compounding effects of “engrossment” or role-immersion on the process of racial identity formation. In the previous section, I suggested that the ability to play constituted, for the minority subject, an opportunity to assert oneself, however tentatively, as a *player*, and hence a person. My focus in this section will largely be on how engaging in role-play constitutes a form of what anthropologists and psychologists have called “double knowledge” or “genre-switching,” cognitive processes which are required in games but, when manifested in daily life, are often considered symptomatic of mental illness not unlike how DuBois characterized the malady of “double-consciousness.”⁴³ The attraction of fantasy role-playing games to the racialized subject, in short, might be understood as a creative means of confronting, and perhaps even resolving, one’s multiplicity as a minority, especially given that racial difference, even in the contemporary moment, continues to signify as a mediated state of vision. (For the law commands us not to see race—hence the paradox of color-blindness, which must recognize racial difference in order to deny it—but as a phenotypic

⁴³ See McCune-Nicolich, Leslie, & Goldman.

expression, race inevitably remains a focal point in everyday encounters; and as a result, the racial minority is made socially hypervisible yet politically invisible.)

Richard Schechner, in *Between Theater and Anthropology*, notes that role-playing involves "behaving `as if I am someone else' or as if I am `beside myself,' or `not myself,' as when in a trance. But this `someone else' may also be `me in another state of feeling/being,' as if there were multiple 'me's in each person" (23). Michelle Nephew, who, like Kurt Lancaster before her, found in Schechner's theories of performance studies a number of useful applications to role-playing games like *DnD* or *Babylon 5*, remarks that "this state has been interpreted as identity confusion or self-delusion by opponents of role-playing games, but as a normal function of game play by others who perceive games as 'absorbing'" (Nephew 178). Although neither of these critics make explicit reference to the DuBoisian concept of double-consciousness (despite the obvious parallels), synthesizing the two approaches suggests that the experiential status quo for FRPG players might also be the status quo for racial minorities. That is, the relationship that James Paul Gee, in his classic *What Video Games have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*, referred to as the "person to persona empathy loop" (54) which exists between the human player and the avatar or persona she plays as, indexes a process of "projective identity" (50) which bifurcates the self, and the meaning of the personal pronoun "I," into two simultaneous entities; thus one can say, in *DnD*, "I fought the dragon," without having ever literally picked up a sword.⁴⁴

But while being able to "personally" battle a dragon is generally assumed to be a pleasurable endeavor, for Kingston's narrator, who claims to have done just that in her role as the eponymous woman warrior, the self-bifurcation which such a feat requires is in fact experienced

⁴⁴ Also see Juul.

as a kind of *self-obliteration*. Like Sethe, who loves playing games with Beloved so much that her own identity, first as mother and then as human being, is blurred, Kingston's narrator's penchant for developing "adventurous people inside my head to whom I talked" and with whom "I was frivolous and violent, orphaned" (Kingston 189)—becomes yet another instance of the role-confusion that she experiences in real life as an Asian American. Citing a string of embarrassing episodes in which Brave Orchid, the narrator's non-English speaking immigrant mother, essentially ventriloquizes her daughter in order to communicate with Americans, the narrator warns us that "you can't entrust your voice to the Chinese . . . they want to capture your voice for their own use" (169).

This pessimistic vision of communal voice as co-optation, a "we" that, by giving voice to the silenced immigrant generation, exists at the *expense* of the Asian American "I" rather than alongside it, reveals the dilemma of the minority author whose goal is not just a voice that "sounds like we" but one that "sounds like me." Despite McGurl's assertion that "finding your voice" takes on additional meaning when the writer is female or a minority, such that "it might not be good enough to simply search so as to find one's voice; that voice . . . might have to be 'claimed' in defiance of the silencing forces of social oppression and cultural standardization" (236), for Kingston's narrator, autopoiesis is not so much a matter of *claiming* a voice, or even of reclaiming it from the "cultural standardization" of minority rather than majority demands. Rather, "finding voice" here means fabricating one: "we American-Chinese girls . . . invented an American-feminine speaking personality" (172). Despite Brave Orchid's slicing of her daughter's frenulum - "so that you would be able to pronounce anything, in any language" (164 check) - Kingston here suggests that bilingualism guarantees not excess volubility but its opposite, causing the very concept of the Chinese American "self" to become a site of

incomprehensible fixation:

I could not understand “I.” The Chinese “I” has seven strokes, intricacies. How could the American “I,” assuredly wearing a hat like the Chinese, have only three strokes, the middle so straight? . . . I stared at that middle line and waited so long for its black center to resolve itself into tight strokes that I forgot to pronounce it. (167)

L.R. Goldman, in his anthropological treatise on Huli children’s play, has argued that the doubling of roles through play is part and parcel of cultural transmission as such. His observational study of role-playing games, in which children acted out the roles of various quasi-historical figures from Huli origin stories and thus developed familiarity with those legends, reveals that such play can also be a fundamental means of gaining narrative autonomy. Dubbing these games acts of “double play” or “genre-switching,” Goldman suggests that such activities allow the child to become “simultaneously both myth creator and redactor” (101) and to understand history as a process of self-perpetuating fictionalization which is itself an act of negotiation between fact and fantasy. Both Kingston and Morrison, then, appear to reveal their investments in this process of cultural inculcation as a similar form of “double knowledge” (McCulich-Nichols), in which the intertwining of, rather than the comparison between, potentially contradictory roles function as an analog for the contemporary minority experience as a negotiation between self-authored and externally-imposed versions of history and subjectivity.

Multi-Player Games

As I suggested at the outset, what makes fantasy RPGs like *DnD*, or more recent iterations like *Final Fantasy* and *World of Warcraft*, unique as a ludic genre is that the game’s endpoint is not synonymous with an individual player’s victory. Rather, the goal is to keep the game going -- to,

as Waskul put it, keep one's character "alive" as long as possible so that it can be developed into a persona as complex as the person inhabiting it. Maintaining this lifeline, of course, requires that each player on some level accept the fantasy world of the game as "real"—although not in the sense that Tom Hanks did in his first leading role in the 1982 *Mazes and Monsters*, a film about a schizophrenic TFRPG player who believes that he actually *is* his game character and that the game world *is* the real one. Rather, being "immersed" in these games requires, somewhat paradoxically, that one be able to *distinguish* between "as if" and "actual" states of reality rather than confuse or merge them.

If this sounds like an intensely complicated cognitive feat, it is only because we have all, since childhood, performed it so frequently that it has become second nature. As Gregory Bateson has demonstrated, play relies on "metacommunication"—communication about communication—involving what he called a "mood-sign" being transmitted between the players, as seen in young dogs who are able to distinguish between a playful nip and an aggressive bite.⁴⁵ The distinction "this is play" does not mean, however, that "this is not real"; rather, it implies, as Dirk Baecker has suggested, an imposition of contingent meaning that makes certain signs "doubly contingent" within play. A nip does not signal the bite's intention to cause pain, but makes "bite" into a contingent expression that can be simulated without replicating its implications. This is the "paradox of play," Baecker notes, echoing Bateson; "one can perform actions in play that do not mean what they mean" (Baecker 105).

As any child who has played Telephone (the game wherein a phrase invented by one person is whispered down a line of individuals and the final version compared to the original) know, this pleasure of "double contingency" can become a self-sufficient game form all on its

⁴⁵ see Bateson, "Mind and Nature."

own. As a game of communication predicated on the ways in which communication will inevitably fail - not to the disappointment, but to the delight of its players—Telephone requires each player to treat the phrase they receive from their predecessor as a signifier of meaning, and as such they attempt to preserve the phrase as meaningful even if it loses its original meaning. But the player does not respond to the phrase *as* signified meaning. For example, even if a player hears the given phrase as “Don’t tell the next player what I’m telling you,” that phrase will still be repeated, rather than acknowledged as a literal prohibition to repeat.

Resolving the paradoxes inherent in novels like *Beloved* or *Woman Warrior* -- where the stories which we as readers encounter are by definition those which are not to be “passed on,” repeated or even remembered—thus requires that we approach them not just in terms of their representational but *metarepresentational* goals. Because in both works, stories “signify”—in the sense of Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s famous formulation⁴⁶—as further opportunities for narrative experimentation rather than as a specific version of “authentic” signified meaning. Even when the injunction to remember, to continue to bear witness, remains of primary importance (as *Beloved*’s dedication to the “Sixty Million and more,” and the novel’s attempts to account by way of recounting, make clear) Morrison and Kingston force us to consider the ways in which the narrative echoes produced by forgetting, inventing and distorting —produced, in other words, by treating narrative as a Telephone game—are inherent, not inimical, to narrative transmission.

In *Beloved*, Denver is forced to play just this sort of game when Beloved, whose voracious appetite for sweetmeats and games is matched only by her insatiable hunger for stories, demands to hear the tale of the younger girl’s birth. In response to Beloved’s command—“Tell me how Sethe made you in the boat”—Denver replies, “She never told me all

⁴⁶ See Gates.

of it.” “Tell me,” insists Beloved. The story which Denver subsequently spins of her own birth, delivered by her namesake, “the raggediest-looking trash you ever saw” (38) who goes by the name of Amy Denver, is a ghost story in two senses. Not only does Beloved become a ghostly co-creator of the story, so that Denver’s “monologue became, in fact, a duet” (92), but the older girl acts as a kind of medium between the real world and the narrative past, so that the emerging story seems to be the result of a *séance* as much as a flight of fancy. Denver’s attempt to “create what really happened, how it really was, something that only Sethe knew” is possible only because “Denver was seeing it now and feeling it—through Beloved” (91).

Ghosts, then, become the means of experiencing other people’s stories, which experience, the novel suggests, is not only distinct from, but more valuable than, merely hearing, knowing or describing. Retelling another’s story requires more than just imagination or narrative flair: it requires a medium, a ghostly presence which creates a gap for the storyteller to inhabit, and which we, as readers, receive as we do a ghost story, suspending an interest in fidelity to Sethe’s version in favor of a reverence for Denver’s and Beloved’s invented one. And the game is only fully played when the story becomes a collaborative process: not just between the two sisters, but between teller and listener, the latter providing the suspension of disbelief that is necessary to keep the story floating in the interstice between fact and fiction. The story, which Denver sees as a way “to construct of the strings she had heard all her life a net to hold Beloved” (90), becomes, even more, a web which ensnares another ghostly presence: the reader.

In *The Woman Warrior*, we likewise find that prohibitions against telling, remembering and repeating stories paradoxically take the form of *telling* stories; thus the novel begins, “‘You must not tell anyone,’ my mother said, ‘what I am about to tell you’” (3). Anne Cheng reads this moment as an example of the Derridean paradox of the sign “Do not read this,” suggesting that

the narrator is unwillingly forced into a contract which she cannot help but break (Cheng 85). But if we consider this moment as a testament to the ways in which talk-story, an aesthetic formation central to cultural transmission in so many minority novels, requires a kind of double knowledge normally attributed to gameplay, then we can consider the status of an injunction to silence that takes the form of speech on the order of a game rule. Because we witness the “don’t tell” only after it is already told, we are forced to treat the sentence as if we were a player in the Telephone game: as a phrase that *must* be passed on, as the story has been, in order for the game to complete its narrative cycle.

By making us read what we are not supposed to have read, by forcing us to participate in the narrator’s defiance of the prohibition to speak by treating signs merely as signifiers of further narrative transmission, the double knowledge of meta-representation relocates the reader herself in relation to the game, blurring the distinction between author and audience. Placing the reader in a double-bind that mimics the narrator’s own sense of being caught between two competing versions of history and culture, Kingston, like Morrison, in effect redefines the reader as game player. Just as *Brave Orchid* uses the story of the adulterous No Name Woman to “test[] our strength to establish realities . . . to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhood fits in solid America” (5), so too does the novel test the reader’s capacity to navigate the concentric relationship between “as if” representations and reality.

Authenticating Reality

In the forty-odd years since the publications of their genre-defining novels, both Kingston and Morrison have, time and again, found themselves at the center of a larger debate over the role of authenticity—defined, at times, as a kind of authorial fidelity to the historical “facts,” and, at

others, in terms of capturing, via narrative, a more subjective, communal experience of history⁴⁷. In the case of *The Woman Warrior*, this debate took on an especially acrimonious tone, with Frank Chin famously spearheading what essentially amounted to a smear campaign against Kingston through both personal correspondences and highly publicized essays whose very titles reverberated with barely restrained contempt. (“Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake” is perhaps the most memorable of these vitriolic attacks, in which Chin, with the apparent endorsement of his equally notorious editorial counterparts, directs his wrath at Kingston, David Henry Hwang, and Amy Tan, accusing them of “faking” Asian American history and deriding their works as “white racist fantas[ies] . . . born of . . . racial self-contempt”).

In the ensuing years, however, the debate over *The Woman Warrior*’s “authenticity” remains a cornerstone of Asian American literary studies less for what it tells us about the book’s “facticity” and much more for what it reveals about the crucial role that the very concept of authenticity continues to play in the minority American experience and its narrative potential -- making Chin’s tongue-lashing, as Anne Cheng has rightly pointed out, an almost parodic reworking of Kingston’s own preoccupations, ultimately lodging a critical debate “over the place of the text in Asian American letters [which] duplicat[ed] the narrator’s own struggle over the question of her place within an Asian American culture” (83-84). And while compared to the excoriation that Kingston received for being a “fake,” Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* has (with a few notable exceptions⁴⁸) had a somewhat less divisive effect on the literary community, critics, and the author herself, have remained just as keenly aware of the ways in which “authenticity”

⁴⁷ Also see Love and Rushdy.

⁴⁸ Stanley Crouch’s *New Republic* review is often cited as the notable exception. See Crouch.

circulates both within the novel's textual economy and without. Not only, in *Beloved*, can we never be sure whether the young woman who shows up on the steps of 124 Bluestone Road is “really” the reincarnation of the beloved infant murdered there twenty years earlier, but that potential for misidentification becomes yet another reminder of the larger dilemma of how to inhabit the subject-position of “you who never was there” (43-44).

That question takes on additional resonance in the context of the institutional moment that Mark McGurl has dubbed “High Cultural Pluralism,” a shift in the twentieth century American literary economy that has made racial or ethnic difference in particular a privileged source of authorial authenticity and authority. Not only are we, as readers who occupy the perspective of having “never been there” ourselves, often encouraged to play what essentially amounts to a game of “spot the difference” as a means of “discovering” how culture produces subtle (or not-so-subtle) deviations among its subjects, but the writers of these texts, too, are often judged based on the degree to which they satisfy (or subvert) our expectations for the game. Like the *DnD* player who, reflecting on the behaviors of his in-game persona, commented that “You're used to saying, ‘well if this were me, I would do X action, but my character is going to do Y action,’ and I understand the reasoning behind that,”⁴⁹ the “difference” of ethnically-marked texts is increasingly being marketed, and experienced, as a contemporary form of the “person to persona empathic loop” first made widely available by TFRPGs of the 1970s. Reading these novels and games alongside one another, accordingly, suggests that the “spot the difference” game which the formers’ audiences are often engaged in may in fact provide a useful model for understanding how racial difference allows one access *to* games as much as the other way around.

⁴⁹ Personal interview quoted in Mello 190.

Clearly, the pleasure which both of these genres give us is at least in part the vicarious or voyeuristic pleasure of inhabiting the perspective of some exoticized “Other,” whether that means a troll, a Chinese immigrant, an ex-slave, or simply another player in a Telephone game. But this is more than just saying that there is a perverse pleasure in temporary abjection from the perspective of the non-minority subject. Rather, the pleasure we obtain depends on our embrace of a particular kind of paradox, what has been referred to as double knowledge or double play: the fun of communicating in such a way as to make meaning fail, to read (or play) in such a way as to frustrate our own ability to distinguish real from illusory. This is something other than a simplistic valorization of games as subversive modes of defying cultural conventions, however: playing games becomes for the racially-differentiated subject a crucial site of redefinition for the relationship between self and other in terms which are not, as we have seen, always about the *pleasure* that games afford us, but about the *pain* which they permit us access to.

CHAPTER THREE

American Rules, Chinese Faces: Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*

The sensational commercial success and subsequent cultural ubiquity of Amy Tan's debut novel *The Joy Luck Club* led Karl Taro Greenfeld of *The Paris Review* to comment recently that "if Oprah Winfrey had had a book club in 1989 she surely would have selected it" (Greenfeld 24). Yet it is perhaps precisely *because* that powerful arbiter of middlebrow taste did not yet exist that *The Joy Luck Club* became as much of a sensation as it did, for in many ways the two fulfill similar functions. Just as Oprah's Book Club has been lauded for its remarkable ability to transform obscure novels into overnight bestsellers and expose its largely white, middle- to upper-class female demographic to a plethora of "minority" works, *The Joy Luck Club* has been praised in both the popular and critical milieux for its ability to foster a "sister-centered" (Welsch 29) sense of community both within and beyond the text itself.

Yet it is this very same talent that has earned both Tan and Winfrey the derision of numerous literary critics; Scott Stossel, an editor at *The Atlantic*, complained that "there is something so relentlessly *therapeutic*, so consciously *self-improving* about [Winfrey's] book club that it seems antithetical to discussions of serious literature. Literature should disturb the mind and derange the senses; it can be palliative, but it is not meant to be the easy, soothing one that Oprah would make it" (qtd. in Minzesheimer, emphasis original). In similar fashion, Asian American literary critics have, on the whole, taken umbrage at Amy Tan's penchant for constructing a "bridge" to and among her "predominantly white and female readership," resulting in a loyal following that Sau-ling Wong has derisively dubbed a "sugar sisterhood"

(“Sugar” 187). Like Stossel, Wong and many like-minded Asian American critics have argued that Tan’s novels are far too “soothing” to be “serious”: their “exotifying” depictions of China and traditional Chinese culture, in particular, “enable Orientalism to emerge in a form palatable to middle-class American readers” (“Sugar” 181).⁵⁰

The aim of this essay is neither to endorse nor refute Wong et. al’s perspectives, however. What strikes me as especially interesting about the extremely polarized response to *The Joy Luck Club* is rather its persistent preoccupation with the “serious” and the “playful”—whether defined as the popular, the “easy,” the “palatable,” or the saccharine—as dialectical oppositions. This binary scheme is, as the critics above make clear, not simply a matter of literary taste or genre but of literary politics; and, by extension, of identity politics. The large-scale dismissal of Tan’s debut novel by Asian American critics suggests that “non-serious” Asian American literature is synonymous with “bad” Asian American literature, in that it caters to, rather than challenges, stereotypical assumptions about the racial group as a whole.⁵¹ But that appraisal seems paradoxical, if not downright counter-productive, when one recognizes that it discursively replicates one of the most basic stereotypes about Asian Americans: that their achievements as a “model minority” are the product of a near-ascetic eschewal of all things “fun” and an almost fanatical dedication to the “serious” pursuits of economic and scholastic success. From this perspective, Tan’s novel has been derided for accomplishing precisely what Asian American Studies as a whole has historically considered its political imperative.

What is additionally ironic about this critical dismissal is that *The Joy Luck Club*, as the

⁵⁰ In addition to Wong’s treatment, see especially Frank Chin’s vitriolic attack on Tan, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Jade Snow Wong (“Come”).

⁵¹ For a cogent discussion of this “good”/“bad” model minority schematic, see Nguyen.

eponymous mahjong⁵² group from which it draws its title suggests, is itself a book deeply invested in games and play as “serious” enterprises. In fact, Wong’s critique of the “sugar sisterhood” that exists among the novel’s readers essentially reproduces Tan’s own observation that games like mahjong fundamentally license as well as occlude kinship formations both within and across racial or genetic borders. Indeed, there exists a central yet critically overlooked element of verisimilitude between novel and game, on the one hand, and between Tan’s readers and her mahjong-playing characters on the other. After all, a significant part of what makes the Club, and the mahjong game which is its *raison d’être*, into a source of pleasure for the book’s four “Aunties” (and Tan’s readers) and likewise into a source of shame for their daughters (and Tan’s critics) is that it legitimizes a performance of Chinese identity that is so unmoored from historical and geographic contexts as to resemble a fantasy role-playing game. As June Woo, the daughter of the Club’s original founder, recalls about the mahjong get-togethers which punctuated her American childhood,

She [June’s mother Suyuan] and Auntie An-mei were dressed up in funny Chinese dresses with stiff stand-up collars . . . these clothes were too fancy for real Chinese people, I thought, and too strange for American parties. In those days . . . I imagined Joy Luck was a shameful Chinese custom, like the secret gathering of the Ku Klux Klan or the tom-tom dances of TV Indians preparing for war. (28)

That the weekly mahjong games of four Chinese immigrant women could have anything in common with two of the most sensational reminders of America’s long history of racial violence—the extermination of Native Americans (and the added injustice of their reincarnation as redface caricatures on the television screen) on the one hand, and the Ku Klux Klan’s supremacist reign of postbellum terror on the other—testifies not simply to the performative

⁵² While Tan uses the term “mah jong,” I have used the more common romanization “mahjong” throughout.

aspects of ethnic identity but to the game's ability to alter kinship relations through play. Mahjong makes June's mother appear "strange" and even embarrassing to her own daughter, while simultaneously transforming An-mei Hsu, a stranger with no blood or marriage connection to the Woos, into June's "Auntie" and hence Suyuan's "sister"—just as the book itself established an honorary "sugar sisterhood" between Tan and white readers, while remaining as shameful and "fake" to Asian Americanist critics as its eponymous club appeared to Suyuan's Asian American daughter.

In the twenty-four years since *The Joy Luck Club*'s publication and the release of its well-received filmic adaption, that mahjong's formal and thematic centrality as a game has also escaped notice in part because of a persistent critical myopia among both Tan's supporters and her critics that has historically restricted discussion to the novel's "dialogic" elements. The focus, in most cases, remains on how "the device of storytelling transforms structurally isolated monologues into meaningful dialogues between mother and daughter" (Shen 17)—and hence on how minority narrative functions (or fails) as an inter-cultural and inter-generational bridge between Asian American and immigrant communities. What has remained overlooked, for that reason, is that it is the game of mahjong, *not* the narrative device of "talk-story," which is formally and figuratively responsible for the transformation of those "isolated monologues" into "meaningful dialogues." From the outset, in fact, *The Joy Luck Club*'s structure very explicitly invites a reading of the novel *as* a game of mahjong. Split into sixteen sections, with eight women in turn telling a story, and grouped into four larger chapters, the book's structural parallels to the game are unmistakable⁵³—even bearing chapter titles like "Rules of the Game"

⁵³ A basic explanation of the setup of the mahjong game: four players sit around a square table, each one named by a wind and distinguished by a cardinal direction: East, South, West, and North. A complete game is made up of sixteen rounds; every four rounds the "prevailing wind" (always beginning with East) rotates. The player who

and “Four Directions.” Organized into sections according to generation rather than matrilineal blood connection, the novel is further divided into two distinct “family groups” composed of the four “Aunties,” on the one hand, and their four “nieces” on the other.⁵⁴ (This is a distinction which Tan makes even more explicit by listing, after the Table of Contents, the *dramatic personae* by dividing them into two columns entitled “The Mothers” and “The Daughters”).

Given that mahjong informs issues of kinship and identity formation even at the most fundamental level of formal structure, it is unsurprising—though as yet critically unacknowledged—that within the novel, too, mahjong and other ludic pursuits consistently function to discipline diegetic movement as well as character development. Mahjong, after all, is the only thing that Suyuan Woo attributes to her survival during the mid-century Japanese invasion of Guilin; but it is also what transforms An-mei Hsu’s mother from honored widow to despised concubine and third wife literally overnight. Mahjong is the reason that Suyuan’s daughter June, an only child, discovers that the sisters she has always dreamed of not only exist but are waiting for her in China; it is also why she feels more utterly alone upon taking her mother’s place at the mahjong table than at any other moment since Suyuan’s death. So too with the game that Lindo Jong’s daughter masters at the tender age of seven: chess is the only thing that differentiates Waverly from the two brothers that normally outrank her (in response to her sons’ complaints that Waverly gets excused from dishwashing chores in order to practice chess, Lindo crisply informs the boys that “Meimei [Waverly] play, squeeze all her brains out for win chess. You play, worth squeeze towel” [98]). Chess is the one thing that earns Waverly the respect and love she so desperately seeks to win from a cold and distant mother—but it is also

begins the first round (with a dice roll) remains East Wind until she loses, at which point the player to her left becomes East Wind (and the loser becomes North Wind).

⁵⁴ The only exception is June, who literally takes her deceased mother’s place at the mahjong table and in the novel’s structure, and is included in all four “rounds” of the book’s sub-sections.

why, even as an adult, she remains unable to see herself as anything but a “defenseless pawn” to Lindo’s “ruthless queen.”

This vacillation between pleasure and pathos, between affinity and disavowal, which defines the nature of both games and life in *The Joy Luck Club* opens up a space to consider how games like mahjong and chess might serve as crucial extra-legal forms of social management and sites where Asian Americans negotiate their relationships to both domestic and national discourses of individuality, identity, and affiliation. Ben Xu, one of a handful of critics to consider the ludic aspect of *The Joy Luck Club*, expressed in 1994 an opinion that has, for better or worse, essentially become the *de facto* critical assumption about the novel’s use of mahjong: that the eponymous Club was meant to create, “symbolically at least, a game with no losers” (Emerick 10). Assuming, in other words, that mahjong functions akin to what many critics have interpreted as Tan’s idealized depiction of an “enlightened, rational, secular” (“Sugar” 186) America that has none of China’s social and cultural failings, Xu and others have neglected to consider that it is *competition*, not cooperation, which motivates and defines the Aunties and their daughters as Asian Americans and as mahjong players, just as it is the “equality” of perfect competition that underwrites the democratic ideal of the American Dream. Indeed, the prevailing critical conviction that the novel’s resolution of matrilineal conflict and identity crises hinges on the characters’ (and readers’) ability to perceive cross-cultural and intergenerational “similarities rather than differences” (Emerick 59) through an empathetic reconsideration of the past—to stop playing games, in other words, and say what one “really” means—ignores entirely the fact that it is *only* through games and game terminology, as I will demonstrate, that the Aunties and their daughters can even begin to articulate their own ideas about identity and filiality.

The salience of *The Joy Luck Club*’s use of games like mahjong and chess lies in how it

indirectly broaches the concept of “the race card” and Asian American identity by suggesting that what it means to be Asian or Asian American is inextricable from what it means to be a game player. It is no coincidence, in other words, that the terms Lindo Jong uses to distinguish “Chinese” mahjong from its “Jewish” counterpart—the former requiring that “you must play using your head, very tricky,” (33) while in the latter, players “watch only for their own tile, play only with their eyes”—are the same ones she uses when instructing her daughter Waverly in the essential elements of what she calls “Chinese character”: “how not to show your own thoughts, to put your feelings behind your face so you can take advantage of hidden opportunities” (254). And it is also no coincidence that those same Chinese “character” traits become, as Waverly soon realizes, “a strategy for winning arguments, respect from others, and eventually, though neither of us knew it at the time, chess games” (89).

Waverly’s apparently “Chinese” proclivity for chess presciently anticipates, of course, the modern stereotype of the Asian math genius and computer whiz whose racial inheritance consists of not only a near superhuman capacity for the tedious labor of calculation but also an analogously inhuman appetite for play. But while Tan may indeed be playing with various aspects of the model minority stereotype—just as the four “Aunties” she constructs are quite clearly some of the original literary manifestations of the Tiger Mother archetype recently made infamous by Amy Chua—it is her staging of those stereotypes as simultaneously racial *and* ludic tropes which makes *The Joy Luck Club* additionally relevant as an Asian American text.

Consider, for example, Lindo’s remark that being Asian American is to have a “double face,” both a “true Chinese face” and an “American face . . . the face Americans think is Chinese, the one they cannot understand” (255), by which she means something quite similar to W.E.B. DuBois’s famous discussion of “double consciousness.” While for DuBois, the African

American ability to perceive oneself through the eyes of white society constituted not only a burden but a clash between “two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (Du Bois 11), for Lindo and the other women in *The Joy Luck Club*, this “double consciousness” becomes synonymous with seeing what one’s opponent sees—and hence constitutes a form of additional knowledge that can be turned to one’s advantage, particularly as a way of subverting expectations. As Waverly tells her mother, “we’re two-faced. It means we’re looking one way, while following another. We’re for one side and also the other. We mean what we say, but our intentions are different” (Tan 266). And having twice the faces can, in turn, mean twice the number of possible advantages.

In what follows I consider the implications of this Asian American “game face” through several interrelated frameworks which are broadly concerned with how games discipline spaces, and how they discipline people. Approaching *The Joy Luck Club* through both the “big” games of mahjong, chess, and the stock market, as well as the series of “little” interpersonal games which dictate how the women relate to one another and to the world at large, I explore how the characters respond to the forces of war and immigration, on the one hand, and of assimilation and filiality, on the other, both through and as games. Recognizing that games both literal and metaphorical are, in many cases, the one thing that that allows each of the eight women to emerge as victors rather than victims, this essay juxtaposes the apparently trivial pursuits and casual deceptions which populate Tan’s novel alongside its “serious” themes of identity formation and matrilineal conflict to suggest, ultimately, that we reconsider both as crucial forms of serious play.

The Necessity of Extravagance

While the majority of *The Joy Luck Club*'s critics have dismissed mahjong as at best a metaphor for mother-daughter conflict⁵⁵ and at worst what Sau-ling Wong has dubbed a "marker of authenticity" meant to satisfy a mainstream readership's appetite for "quasi-ethnographic, Orientalist" ("Sugar" 201) accounts of Asian American life, the Chinese party-state has certainly had no such reservations about the game's pervasive influence on everything from the mundane to the militaristic. A mere fifty years ago, mahjong was derided as a "capitalist vice" and outlawed by the Chinese government. Yet over the last two decades, the game has emerged as a potent symbol of national pride. Indeed, the Party-State has begun to dedicate significant resources to rescuing mahjong from its Cultural Revolution-era disgrace and repackaging it as a kind of social panacea. In a fascinating document entitled *Majiangxue* (The Art of Mahjong⁵⁶) commissioned by the State Physical Education Commission in 1999, the author, Qi Sheng, goes so far as to opine that mahjong, once freed from its distasteful association with gambling and made into "a competitive national sport and a symbol of China's distinctive cultural legacy," will not only bolster the national economy but will "develop the people's mental powers, strengthen their will, mould their sentiments, benefit future generations, rectify social trends, and eliminate familial tragedies" (Sheng 66-67). Quite a lot to expect from a humble pile of one hundred and forty-four tiles!

This recent drive to promote and nationalize "healthy mahjong" is, as Paul Festa has noted, an archetypal example of the newly evolving role of leisure culture in contemporary

⁵⁵ Ronald Emerick is one of the very few to consider mahjong as "more than just a convenient starting point for *The Joy Luck Club*" that "influences structure, theme, imagery, and characterization in the novel. It informs the novel at every level." Emerick's interest in the game, however, is mostly as a controlling metaphor that functions at the symbolic level; he suggests that it "symbolizes a link between mothers and daughters, a cultural bridge between the past and the present" (60).

⁵⁶ This translation, and all others from *Majiangxue*, are derived from Paul Festa's superb article "Mahjong politics." I am greatly indebted to Professor Festa for so generously providing translations.

China. Drawing on Jing Wang's argument that this national discourse on leisure "reorganizes recreational spaces, constructs the meaning of the new citizen-consumer, disciplines production and consumption simultaneously, and reinvents the notion of the 'the public (sphere)'" (J. Wang 40-41), Festa offers a compelling account of "mahjong politics" which considers how the game has become "a key point of articulation between technologies of the self and political technologies" (Festa 21), the former being roughly synonymous with the concept of individual self-cultivation and the latter with state self-regulation. Hailed as the vanguard of a newly modern and economically formidable China rather than a nostalgic vestige of its "primitive" past as a non-competitor on the international scene, mahjong, at least as the party-state sees it, is now touted as a "purely Chinese thing" (Sheng 17-18) that calibrates individual and national forms of consumption and places both under government control. This is in large part because, like many games, it has the peculiar ability to bring together people regardless of class, age, gender or prestige; in his own study, "The Politics of Private Time: Changing Leisure Patterns in Urban China," Wang Shaoguang notes with equal parts chagrin and admiration that "not only do retirees, housewives, private business people and workers play mahjong, but government officials, university professors, college students, and even high school students also indulge in the game" (S. Wang 160-61).

Amy Tan, it would appear, presciently anticipated the Chinese party-state's newfound awareness of and enthusiasm for mahjong's untapped potential as an instrument of social unification—though, admittedly, on a slightly more modest scale. Imposing a sense of order, affiliation and teleological progress upon what appears as an otherwise meaningless jumble of eight different sets of stories and memories, Tan's use of mahjong as a unifying structural element is by no means her only foray into the counter-intuitive possibilities of making the real

world comprehensible by turning it into a game. That apparent paradox is, in fact, precisely what Suyuan Woo takes advantage of when, crouched in a cave in Guilin during yet another Japanese air raid, she decides to start the novel's eponymous Joy Luck Club by gathering three other young Chinese women together to play a weekly game of mahjong:

I thought up Joy Luck on a summer night that was so hot even the moths fainted to the ground . . . [e]very place was so crowded there was no room for fresh air. Unbearable smells from the sewers rose up . . . At all hours of the night and day, I heard screaming sounds. I didn't know if it was a peasant slitting the throat of a runaway pig or an officer beating a half-dead peasant . . . I didn't go to the window to find out. What use would it have been? And that's when I thought I needed something to do to help me move. (23)

The world which Suyuan evokes is one of sensorial stimulation, overwhelming to the point of paralysis. This overstimulation comes in the form of pressure, of an ever-smaller space in which she finds herself being smothered by heat and other bodies, with smells and sounds that are “useless” to identify. Trapped in this vision of hell, Suyuan seeks not shelter, but mobility; not escape, but *progress*. In other words, we can make sense of her peculiar phrase, “I needed something to do to help me *move*”—for how can playing mahjong produce *movement*?—only if we visualize the war-torn city as a negative space on a gameboard, a delineated square of unluckiness like “Luxury Tax” on the Monopoly board. Suyuan does not say that she wishes to move “forward” or “beyond,” for, as in Monopoly and many other board games, what we call moving forward has nothing to do with cardinal directions: the game itself dictates its own definition of forward and backward, and takes an endless square as its frame of reference. As Jean Baudrillard has suggested, “one does not escape meaning by dissociation, disconnection or deterritorialization. One escapes meaning by replacing it with a more radical simulacrum, a still more conventional order—like . . . the rules of a game, or the innumerable rituals of everyday life

which frustrate both the . . . order of meaning and the disorder . . . one would impose on them” (138).

Suyuan’s ability to dissociate herself from the nightmarish fantasy that has become her daily reality relies, accordingly, on mahjong’s ability to function as a “more radical simulacrum” of that reality; and more specifically, on the *restrictions* of the mahjong game, and the complex rituals which Suyuan uses to discipline gameplay. Thus she creates a rigid set of rules that makes the very act of playing mahjong into a social ritual: “Each week one of us would host a party to raise money and to raise our spirits. The hostess had to serve special *dyansin* [“dim sum”] foods to bring good fortune”; then comes the behavior that must be observed during game play: “Once we started to play, nobody could speak, except to say ‘*Pung!*’ or ‘*Chr*’ when taking a tile”; and finally, strictures regarding internal behavior: “We had to play with seriousness and think of nothing else but adding to our happiness through winning . . . we weren’t allowed to think a bad thought” (23-25).

Mahjong, then, becomes its own reality, a refuge not only from the war’s physical violence but from its epistemological violence—for in this “city of leftovers,” there *are* no longer any meaningful social or even ontological distinctions that remain stable: officers sound like peasants, peasants sound like pigs, and all three are packed cheek to jowl with the faceless hordes of refugees made up of both “rich and poor, Shanghainese, Cantonese, northerners, and not just Chinese, but foreigners and missionaries of every religion” (Tan 22). Crucial to understanding the power of mahjong, then, is to recognize that the game is not a means of avoiding or resolving conflict, be it based on class, nation, race, or even species distinctions. Rather, the game’s transportive efficacy relies on its ability to maintain and even *perpetuate* conflict by restricting it to a private space and redefining it as competition; mahjong is, after all,

a zero-sum game.

It is here, in the distinction between games of collaboration and those of competition, that mahjong's status as a "purely Chinese thing" speaks to more than just a national or racial association. For it is telling that in *Majiangxue*, Qi Sheng's attempt to reclaim mahjong as a specifically Chinese game—and to ensure that it does not suffer the same fate of *Go*, a game which he laments that "the Chinese invented more than 3000 years ago; however Japan is currently the *Go* capital and powerhouse of the world" (Sheng 28-29)—proceeds not by providing proprietary evidence of mahjong's presence in Chinese history. Rather, mahjong is Chinese because, as Paul Festa notes, it

. . . opens a window on the Chinese notion of individuality. Westerners invented bridge, which, explains Sheng, requires a considerable degree of coordination among partners that is fixed and determined by the rules . . . In mahjong, on the other hand, any form of cooperation among players is prohibited and speaks poorly of a person's "game character" (*paipin*). Indeed, one important measure of skill and talent in mahjong, Sheng tells us, is precisely *the degree to which one player is able to impair the game of another -- and "the victim will then turn around and praise the victor"* (Festa 20-21, emphasis mine)

In stark contrast to Ben Xu's depiction of mahjong in *The Joy Luck Club* as "a game with no losers," we have here a game which *requires* that three people lose so that one may win. In other words, cooperation, whether defined as active assistance or as a passive failure to reduce another's chance of success, does not make a multiplayer game more "equitable" or pleasurable than its competitive counterpart; far from it. A game with no losers is also a game with no winners: because everyone, and hence no one, wins. A game like mahjong, however, allows for the possibility of winning; and, for the first Joy Luck Club women, winning is not meaningful as a fiscal term but an epistemological one. As Sheng remarks above about the game's potential to

“rectify social trends” and “eliminate familial tragedies,” in the novel, mahjong serves, in a very real sense, as a form of survival and social warfare that encourages its players to “re-author,” if only for a few hours, their roles as disenfranchised victims. Winning the game thus not only means making victims of others, but, as is clear from this scene, of temporarily escaping one’s *own* helplessness as a victim of historical forces beyond one’s control.

Allowing these four women to pretend that “each week had become the new year” (25) rather than another day in an endless reign of terror, the mahjong game opens up a fantasy space of self-renewing temporality which is cyclical rather than tautological, in which one week’s loser is just as likely to be the next’s big winner. This is particularly important given that Tan’s critics have consistently taken her to task for her ostensibly “ahistorical” depictions of a “static, ritual-permeated mythical Time of a China past” (“Sugar” 186). But my reconsideration of mahjong reveals that such “temporal distancing,” as Wong calls it, can in fact function as a *precondition* of autonomy, and in particular narrative autonomy: the symbolic freedom that Suyuan first achieves through playing mahjong later becomes one which she will exert in a more literal (and literary) sense, raising her daughter June on stories about China whose “endings always change” (25) and which, therefore, consistently perform the possibility of authorial revision on both a personal and a historical scale.

American Rules

Clearly, Suyuan’s “game character” is the driving force behind her ability to “move” out of the incomprehensible situations she faces as a Chinese national. But as we realize upon encountering Lindo Jong, another consummate mahjong-playing Auntie, that same ludic element is just as crucial to the Chinese immigrant’s ability to move *into* the equally incomprehensible milieu of

American society and, through that movement, redefine herself not just as victor or victim but as Chinese or American.

Qi Sheng reminds us that mahjong differs from a number of other parlor games in pitting “one against three,” such that one cannot rest one’s hope for victory on a teammate’s ingenuity or a single opponent’s mistake. Playing well, as Lindo tells June, requires that “you must watch what everybody else throws away and keep that in your head as well” (33), echoing Sheng’s observation that “each competitor [must] be sharp and clever and meticulously observant, so as to remember discarded tiles and recognize subtle changes in other players’ moods.” At the same time, he remarks, “each player must evaluate the general game situation, coolly calculate probabilities and alternative strategies, and factor in the playing style of each opponent, all of which must be flexibly reconsidered with each tile drawn and discarded” (Sheng 16).

If, for Sheng, the distinction between Eastern and Western notions of individuality hinges on the dichotomy between competitive and cooperative play, the distinction between Chineseness and Americanness, according to *The Joy Luck Club* Aunties, boils down to the difference between interdependent and independent strategies of play. When June, upon taking her deceased mother’s place at the mahjong table, informs her Aunties that she already knows how to play the game, having been taught by “some Jewish friends” in college, she earns a vicious scolding from Lindo for conflating the two kinds of play, revealing not simply Lindo’s own ethnic jingoism – which is clearly present throughout the novel, as in her response to a young Waverly’s question about the definition of “Chinese torture”: “Chinese people not lazy like American people,” Lindo scoffs. “We do torture. Best torture” (91) – but the way in which, to the Aunties, racial and national distinctions are often only articulatable as *game* differences. Lindo’s memorable rant, delivered without a hint of self-deprecation, thus defines “Chinese” and

“Jewish” mahjong as

“Entirely different kind of playing,” [Lindo] said in her English explanation voice. “Jewish mah jong, they watch only for their own tile, play only with their own eyes.”

Then she switched to Chinese: “Chinese mah jong, you must play using your head, very tricky. You must watch what everybody else throws away and keep that in your head as well. And if nobody plays well, then the game becomes like Jewish mah jong. Why play? There’s no strategy.” (33)

By treating Chinese mahjong as “real” (or at least more perfectly realized) mahjong and its Jewish counterpart as a bastardization—and even switching to her “native” language to describe the former while relying on her imperfect command of English to describe the latter—Lindo from the beginning reveals that ludic strategies are inextricable from cultural ones. In drawing a connection between “game character” and “Chinese character,” she suggests that Chineseness is not, in other words, a static or even genetic “thing,” but a specific, strategic way of playing a game using rational choice, self-reflexive observation, and secrecy.

While critics like Wong have considered the “self-Orientalism”⁵⁷ of *The Joy Luck Club* to rest in part on Tan’s rendering of Chineseness as a “thing”—often citing June’s comment, when she travels to China to meet her sisters, that “now I also see what part of me is Chinese” (287)—such reductivism might instead be read as Tan’s caricaturing of a distinctly American tendency towards oversimplification, what An-mei’s daughter Rose defines as a stereotypically “baby boomer” mentality. After all, each of the four Asian American daughters are notorious for their need to define things in black-and-white terms. Lena is the most obvious example: her obsession with matrimonial “equality” has culminated in her and her husband’s meticulous documentation of each and every household expense based on its intended consumer. While the original

⁵⁷ See Wong, “Sugar.”

motivation for the exercise was “to keep the money thing separate, [so] we’ll always be sure of our love for each other” (157), it ends up intertwining the two even more intimately than usual, leading to constant arguments over “things that have gray borders, like my birth control pills . . . or food magazines that I subscribe to but he reads only because he’s bored” (161).

As Lindo’s comments about mahjong suggest, however, what distinguishes a “Chinese” approach both to games and to life is an acute awareness of how intricate and interdependent is the relationship among all players. Playing well—playing “Chinese mahjong”—requires that one builds one’s hand based not only on the value of the tiles one picks up but on the potential value that the tiles one discards might hold for one’s opponents: “you must watch what everybody else throws away and keep that in your head as well.” What defines Jewishness (which we can safely assume is synonymous with “Americanness” in Lindo’s mind), on the other hand, is a singular obsession with building one’s own winning hand rather than impeding everyone else’s ability to do so: “they watch only for their own tile, play only with their own eyes.” The latter, according to Lindo, not only demonstrates a remarkably selfish and small-minded ignorance of how one’s own decisions affect everyone else’s, but actually denudes mahjong of the very elements which make it pleasurable, for “you’re just watching people make mistakes” (33). Lindo’s valorization of constant observation and awareness of interdependence thus by no means reaffirms “Asian” group harmony and communal success as a “game with no losers.” Observation in fact becomes a strategic prerequisite for *destroying* equality among players by allowing one of them to trump the other three—which requires perceiving one’s fellow players as competitors rather than compatriots.

It is through mahjong, then, that the nuanced question of what it means to be Chinese, and to be American, first gets articulated in the novel’s opening pages. But in terms of the book’s

temporal chronology, the Aunties' first encounter with the implications of their Chineseness occurs, as one might expect, upon their coming face-to-face with an entire nation of non-Chinese people. Lindo, in particular, remains attuned to the similarities between these two scenographies—between immigration and game playing—and is, in fact, the character who most shrewdly captures the sense in which Asian American identity finds expression in the domain of ludic as much as legal jurisdiction.

Numerous critics and historians have demonstrated that the laws governing Asian immigration to America were, especially before 1965, baldly discriminatory, aimed at discouraging long-term settlement, citizenship, and political participation.⁵⁸ But as *The Joy Luck Club* reminds us, immigrating requires not only legal evidence but a ludic combination of luck and perspicacity. Like being a good mahjong player, the process of responding correctly to immigration officials' probing questions and being allowed into America has, for Asians, historically meant observing "tells" and knowing when and how much to reveal about oneself—and when to keep one's cards hidden. And nowhere is this crucial mixture of legal and ludic strategy more apparent than in the person of Lindo Jong, who has already demonstrated an Iago-esque capacity for subtle deceit and infinite patience by manipulating her way out of a loveless arranged marriage whilst a mere teenager in rural China: an early gambit for which the reward is not just freedom, but, more importantly, "enough money to go to America" (66).

Being American, however, requires more than merely having enough money for a ticket; it requires learning an entirely new game and a new set of rules. Realizing this, Lindo, forever shrewd, puts off immigrating until she first pays a Chinese girl who grew up in America to teach her that game. The key to becoming a "convincing" American, as the girl tells her, is "to hide

⁵⁸ A plethora of critical histories exist on this topic. For a useful overview, see Takaki.

[her] Chinese face, [her] true self”: which means, in the first place, disguising her true intentions. Beginning with the art of flattery—“‘In America,’ [the girl] said, you cannot say you want to live there forever. If you are Chinese, you must say you admire their schools, their ways of thinking” (259)—the girl goes on to instruct Lindo in more sophisticated forms of deception. “‘Be careful, though,’ [the girl] said. ‘The authorities will ask you if you have children now or if you are thinking of having some. You must say no. You should look sincere and say you are not married, you are religious, you know it is wrong to have a baby’” (258). The stakes of this performance of sincerity, of course, are far greater than the issuance of a short-term visa; the Fourteenth Amendment, which bestows American citizenship upon anyone born on American soil, becomes the single most important “loophole” which the girl urges Lindo to exploit: “See here, you should have a baby . . . Once it has arrived, it is an American citizen and can do anything it wants. It can ask its mother to stay” (260).

The valuable lesson Lindo learns about the difference between appearance and intention, and the potential of using a nation’s own laws against it, culminates in her most crucial revelation: that “‘Citizen’ does not mean Caucasian” (259). In divorcing the ideals of citizenship from those of whiteness, Lindo fashions a picture of America which is quite distinct from the archetypal fantasy of the American Dream; to Lindo, achieving that dream involves neither hard work nor bootstrap-pulling but *playing*. Indeed, in the age of affirmative action in which Lindo’s children are raised, being a poverty-stricken Chinese immigrant or Asian American becomes, in Lindo’s mind, not an obstacle but an advantage, something like a race card hidden up one’s sleeve: “if you are born poor here [in America], it’s no lasting shame. You are first in line for a scholarship” (254), she opines. Just as Suyuan recognized that mahjong was the only thing that could help her “move” beyond the oppressive circumstances in which she found herself, Lindo,

too, realizes that playing the game of American Life the way that one plays “Chinese mahjong” is the key to changing one’s fortunes; after all, “in America, nobody says you have to keep the circumstances somebody else gave you” (254). The distinction between “Chinese” and “American” is not, in short, primarily associated with a spatial, national or racial framework; instead, the former reifies specific forms of strategic decision-making, rational choice, and self-reflexive observation, while the latter becomes representative of the kinds of rules and events which one faces during play.

For Lindo’s daughter Waverly, whose talents lie not towards mahjong but the equally complicated game of chess, it is thus precisely her ability to play in a “Chinese” way that is behind her newfound fame as “Chinatown’s own chess champion.” Attributing her success at this “game of secrets in which one must show and never tell” not to any inherent ability on her own part but to her internalization of her mother’s lessons on “Chinese character”—the need to “have foresight, a mathematical understanding of all possible moves, and patience” (94)—both Waverly and Lindo define chess as something of an object lesson in interracial and cross-cultural conflict, and more specifically, as an antagonistic encounter with an America whose outward appearance of democratic benevolence and open-armed equality belies far more exclusionary intentions. The chess game, in other words, becomes a crucial site where “Chinese character” and “American circumstances” collide in the body of the Asian American chess prodigy; indeed, the novel seems to suggest that that term (Asian American chess prodigy) is itself a redundancy, for to be Asian American *is* to be a consummate game player.

Chess, then, becomes a symbolic opportunity to reconsider Asian American assimilation as a form of gameplay. This idea comes to the fore, unsurprisingly, when Waverly is first learning to play. The fact that the Jong’s chess set is secondhand and missing pieces removes

none of the enchantment which her brothers find in its grid of possibilities, and Waverly, herself soon charmed by the game, begs to be allowed to play. It is at first incomprehensible to her, and she gets herself ejected from the game by essentially playing at playing chess—moving the pieces in whatever configurations she wishes. Even when she finally agrees to learn the rules in order to be allowed to play, she questions her brother’s every explanation: “But why do [pawns] go crossways to take other men. Why aren’t there any women and children?” In his frustration, he tosses the instruction manual at her, growling, “This is a game. These are the rules. I didn’t make them up. See. Here. In the book.” What ensues is a remarkable comment delivered by Lindo:

My mother patted the flour off her hands. “Let me see book,” she said quietly. She scanned the pages quickly, not reading the foreign English symbols, seeming to search deliberately for nothing in particular.

“This American rules,” she concluded at last. “Every time people come out from foreign country, must know rules. You not know, judge say, Too bad, go back. They not telling you why so you can use their way go forward. They say, Don’t know why, you find out yourself. But they knowing all the time. Better you take it, find out why yourself.” She tossed her head back with a satisfied smile.
(94)

Lindo’s illiteracy—the hallmark of her lack of cultural capital, what embarrasses her children and causes them to dismiss her explanation—is also what lets her see “symbols” rather than words, recognizing the lack of any inherent connection between signifier and signified, and ultimately allows her to see legalized immigration for what it is: an institutionalized game. By playing at reading, rather than actually reading, Lindo’s act creates a powerful metaphor for assimilation as game. What she keenly grasps is that knowledge of the legal system’s rules is a form of cultural capital that holds especial significance for immigrants and racial minorities, but at the same time, one does not achieve any sort of autonomy by acquiring that capital; instead, it is simply part of the process of becoming-citizen, and in fact Lindo recognizes as purely symbolic the apparently

magnanimous invitation to “go forward” in pursuit of supposedly limitless success. Immigrating, in this sense, can be understood as stepping onto a game board (the limits of the nation being coterminous with the boundaries of the game) and being faced with two unsatisfactory choices: playing *at* playing the game, i.e. not knowing the rules, or playing the game, which is to say accepting the fiction of the American dream and using “American rules” to one’s advantage as much as possible.

Critics have tended to regard Lindo’s statement about American opportunity – like Suyuan’s belief that “you could be anything you wanted to be in America” (143)–as evidence of Tan’s binaristic depiction of China as a country “where individuals’ lives are deprived of choice, shaped by tradition and buffeted by inexorable ‘natural’ circumstances” and America as, instead, the site “where one can exercise decision making and control over one’s life” (“Sugar” 186). Yet the novel itself makes it quite clear that having too many choices is quite as oppressive as having too few, and that the distinction between “Asianness” and “Americanness” is not so much about what freedom of choice permits one to do as about what it prevents one *from* doing. Facing an imminent divorce from her Caucasian husband, Rose Hsu, An-mei’s daughter, remarks that growing up, she believed that “Chinese people had Chinese opinions. American people had American opinions. And in almost every case, the American version was much better. It was only later that I discovered that there was a serious flaw with the American version. *There were too many choices, so it was easy to get confused and pick the wrong thing . . . Each decision meant a turn in another direction*” (191, emphasis mine). The *burden* of choice which becomes synonymous with American democracy, in other words, seems to contradict the apparent freedom associated with the US, while the seemingly oppressive *lack* of choice in China instead becomes a strategic advantage that frees one from being distracted by the hundreds of tiny

decisions encountered in everyday life.

The hard-and-fast distinction between “being American” and “being Chinese” that Tan has been criticized for drawing in this novel should thus be considered not so much as a reductive or essentializing move meant to espouse American superiority or exotify Chinese “backwardness.” Indeed, the value of that distinction is primarily in that it speaks instead to how one’s identity as an Asian American hinges on how one grapples with the notion of strategic choice and the extent to which one embraces the opportunity for agonism, even while remaining aware of the obvious structural inequalities which underlie it. Recognizing American Life *as a game* means, in other words, recognizing that what “fairness” and “justice” means is entirely contingent on the rules of the game.

Dangerous Games

As mentioned earlier, the overriding critical assumption that *The Joy Luck Club* is mainly interested in “games with no losers,” which function to symbolically mitigate the various losses which haunt and define the Aunties, fails to account for the fact that the novel’s games thematize oppressive institutional mechanisms as often as liberatory ones. While the original Club allowed Suyuan and her friends to escape certain kinds of historical constraints and develop new social configurations based on empathy rather than blood, the establishment of the second Club reminds us that playing games is not without its costs: it can require a false belief in the universal accessibility of the social world, or an acceptance of the dehumanizing consequences of making quantitative and qualitative losses equivalent. In other words, games and rules allow for certain kinds of freedom even while making other kinds inaccessible: one can easily be “played” even while playing.

I wish to explore these “dangerous” elements through the second Joy Luck Club’s playing of the stock market, an activity which initially appears to be a form of quasi-political participation that allows the Aunties’ immigrant generation to interface with contemporary American social and economic institutions from which they are otherwise barred. Indeed, at the opening of the novel, mahjong has become something of a secondary element of the Joy Luck Club gatherings; when June arrives at Auntie An-mei’s house two months after her mother’s death by cerebral aneurysm and approximately forty years after the first Club was disbanded when Suyuan fled Guilin, it becomes immediately apparent that the exportation of the mahjong game has led to significant alterations of its original form. The house is filled not just with the four women players, but their husbands, brothers, and daughters. And there is yet another game that must be played before mahjong can even begin:

We are all seated around the dining room table under a lamp that looks like a Spanish candelabra. Uncle George puts on his bifocals and starts the meeting by reading the minutes:

“Our capital account is \$24, 825, or about \$6,206 a couple, \$3,103 per person. We sold Subaru for a loss at six and three-quarters. We bought a hundred shares of Sith International at seven. Our thanks to Lindo and Tin Jong for the goodies . . . We were sorry to have to bid a fond farewell to our dear friend Suyuan and extend our sympathy to the Canning Woo family. Respectfully submitted, George Hsu, president and secretary.” (29)

Here Tan demonstrates her own proclivity for ludic deception: the reader, who from the opening sentence is anticipating that the mahjong game is about to begin, is startled by this account of an investor’s meeting. Even more striking than this subversion of expectation is the formality with which the scene unfolds: the rigid rules of the first Joy Luck Club, which allowed only thoughts of “adding to our happiness through winning,” are now supplanted by the structural formalism of an office meeting, with numerical gains and losses well-documented: Suyuan’s death is rendered

formally, and thus epistemologically, equivalent to the loss of stock shares. This dehumanization is a reified version of what the first Joy Luck Club attempted to challenge: here, humans are not slaughtered pigs, but have become abstracted into economic terms, very much as Lena has been through her neurotic expense tracking. The seeming callousness of this reduction is not lost on June, who “keep[s] thinking that the others will start talking about my mother, the wonderful friendship they shared, and why I am here in her spirit, to be the fourth corner and carry on the idea my mother came up with on a hot day in Kweilin. But everybody just nods to approve the minutes. . . and it seems my mother’s life has been shelved for new business” (29).

This “new business,” however, is nothing other than further game play. As the Aunties and Uncles retire to their mahjong and poker games, June seeks an explanation for this change of affairs. An-mei’s response to the young woman’s inquiry about the Club’s recent investment ventures, which can also be read as a veiled query as to the inclusion of men into a formally hallowed female space, alludes to the degradation of the game:

“We used to play mah jong, winner take all. But the same people were always winning, the same people always losing. . . You can’t have luck when someone else has skill. So long time ago, we decided to invest in the stock market. There’s no skill in that. Even your mother agreed . . . We got smart. Now we can all win and lose equally. We can have stock market luck. And we can play mah jong for fun, just for a few dollars, winner take all.” (30)

The irony, of course, is that the stock market is imagined by the Aunties to be a game of pure luck, a claim which the existence of an entire occupation dedicated to stock brokerage would seem to contradict. An-mei’s statement thus enacts yet another moment of fantasy, one which seeks to downplay the power of the Western financial institution while still seeking inclusion into and authority over it. The stock market game’s reinjection of chance and equality—economic in nature, but symbolically more than that—is also contingent on a changed definition of what

constitutes a game player. The previously autonomous unit of the female mahjong player has now been conglomerated into a true “club,” with its largest element being a group of eight, subdivided into the smallest divisible unit: the couple. The individual is economically meaningless beyond a passing referent (“\$3,103 per person”). Now the idea of the “team” supplants the individual, so that even the playing of mahjong requires not four women, but four men as well. This new architecture tests the limits of gender equality that the Joy Luck Club initially established, even while the stock market seems to produce class equality in its place.

The addition of the stock market game, while An-mei views it as a triumph—now “we can play mah jong for fun”—is also a blow to the transportive possibilities of the original game. An-mei’s comment reveals, on the one hand, the truth that mahjong used to be *more* than just a game—that it had a serious purpose beyond “having fun.” On the other hand, it is based on the false premise that the seriousness of that game was a function of the large sums of money that were involved, a burden that has now been relieved by its reallocation into the capitalist market and the stakes reduced to “just a few dollars.” This is, of course, not the case at all. In fact, the wartime poverty of Suyuan’s initial Joy Luck Club players meant that their meager antes had to be made hypervisible in order to create the illusion of a large jackpot: “[w]e would . . . fill a bowl with money and put it where everyone could see” (24).

The other Aunties have forgotten, or perhaps never knew, that the peculiar role which money played in the original Joy Luck Club was not monetary but symbolic. The “money bowl” was as much a game piece as the mahjong tiles, and in so inhabiting the game world, it did not carry fiscal meaning. After all, June ends Suyuan’s story in the first round with her mother’s so-called bragging that “I won tens of thousands of *yuan*. But I wasn’t rich. No. By then paper money had become worthless. Even toilet paper was worth more. And that made us laugh harder,

to think a thousand-*yuan* note wasn't even good enough to rub on our bottoms" (25).⁵⁹ Clearly, multiple subsidiary fantasies were being created through the ritual of the early Joy Luck Club games; not only the illusion of social stability, but economic stability—and with it, the possibility of wealth and progress—had to be provided by an alternate act of make-believe. Hence, the greatest stakes for which mahjong was played were those of maintaining such stability. Once the game is played on foreign soil and beyond the historical exigencies of war, it begins to resemble the stock market game, and as such these games are dangerous in that they furnish the illusion of political participation through economic play, the vicariousness of which smoothes over the social and legal asymmetries of their players' positions and obscures the game's larger stakes.⁶⁰ As a game at which everyone "wins and loses equally," the stock market becomes a crucial reminder that in games which appear to have "no losers," everyone, in fact, loses something.

Archives of Possibility

To conclude, I want to suggest that, by criticizing Tan's "engrossing" works for allowing readers "to recognize the genre [of Asian American matrilineal fiction] and respond accordingly, with enthusiastic purchases as well as a pleasurable mixture of respect and voyeurism, admiration and condescension, humility and self-congratulation" ("Sugar" 180, 184-5), what Sau-ling Wong and many like-minded Asian American critics ultimately object to is that novels like *The Joy Luck Club* are in fact games in the formal sense: they proceed by way of established rules for narrative development, use familiar archetypes (or even stereotypes) for their characters, and allow the reader to relish, as Alice Walker (who reviewed *The Joy Luck Club* favorably in a cover blurb)

⁵⁹ The Sino-Japanese war caused such great inflation that the value of the *yuan* fell from 3.41/US\$1 in 1937 to 1,222/US\$1 in 1945 to 36.7 billion/US\$1 by 1948 (Ebeling).

⁶⁰ For a cogent historical account of Asian American social participation via economic means, see So.

called it, “the *mystery* of the mother-daughter bond” (emphasis mine). The problem, however, is that these critics treat that game of genre not as an opportunity for alternative configurations of Asian American literary identity and interpretation, but only as a foreclosure of such contingent reading practices.

In other words, such critiques of Tan’s ludic potential ultimately reveal the limitations of what Colleen Lye has called Asian American Studies’ “formal naïveté.” Jinqi Ling’s *Narrating Nationalisms* is perhaps the most sustained exploration of this disciplinary shortcoming, offering a cogent critique of the field’s long-standing skepticism of literary realism. Demonstrating that the institutional embrace of so-called “postmodern” works like Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* and Theresa Cha’s *Dictee* is in fact predicated on a “negative understanding of realism as an aesthetic principle that only privileges positivist reflections of immediate reality” (19), Ling cautions us against installing yet another false dichotomy—between “realist” and “nonrealist” literary representations—in order to supplement, or even supplant, the distinction between “backwards” Orientalist and “progressive” Asian Americanist depictions.

We can read critical suspicion of Tan’s “games,” then, not as proof that games are inherently apolitical or dehumanizing, but as evidence of what Ling, speaking of an analogous resistance to realism, considers an act of misidentification: “[Asian American critics] identify an obsolete form of realist *claim* and then argue almost effortlessly about specific Asian American literary works’ generic and epistemological breakthroughs and about others’ aesthetic and ideological defects” (19, emphasis original). Thinking about the vernacular limitations of the game form—its rule-based constraints, in particular—not as a homogenizing defect but as an opportunity to rearticulate one’s own structural position and to find socially-legible means for navigating and even discovering freedom within those systemic limitations, I thus want to follow

Ling's lead and treat games as what Douglas Guerra has referred to as "archives of possibility," social structures whose rules are in fact instrumental in propagating, rather than preventing, potential forms of alternative identity construction.

CHAPTER FOUR

English Before English: Asian American Poetry's Unruly Tongue

In Hisaye Yamamoto's acclaimed 1949 short story, "Seventeen Syllables," a young Japanese farmwife who spends her days slaving away in a northern California tomato field decides to try her hand at *haiku*. At first a casual hobby, poetry soon becomes Mrs. Hayashi's all-consuming passion, leading her to abandon the family's nightly game of flower cards for evenings spent scribbling on scratch paper; her husband, bored and wounded, resorts to playing solitaire. Upon learning that she has won first prize in a national *haiku* competition, however, Mr. Hayashi's irritation at his wife's neglect of the ripening tomato crop explodes into a violence directed not at her, but at the fruits of her aesthetic labor. Snatching up the painting which commemorates her victory, he smashes the artwork to smithereens, douses it with kerosene, and watches it burn—until, "having made sure his act of cremation was irrevocable" (Yamamoto 18) he calmly returns to the tomato fields to complete the day's work, leaving his wife and daughter to look on in horrified silence.

Mr. Hayashi's intolerance for what he perceives as his wife's "selfish" decision to prize wordplay over manual labor—and, later, for his daughter's similarly "childish" plots to eschew farmwork for kissing games—is a theme that one finds everywhere in Asian American literature. Whether in the form of Pa Eng's terse dismissal of his son's aspirations to become a novelist in Frank Chin's *Year of the Dragon*, or Suyuan Woo's never-voiced but always-felt disappointment over her daughter June's decision to become a lowly copywriter rather than a scientist or lawyer in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, the muted, reproachful repudiation of literature as frivolous

play has become as much a defining feature of Asian American culture as its stereotypically superhuman propensity for labor.

It is especially surprising, however, that this same suspicion of wordplay has historically characterized Asian American literary studies, an institutional site whose very *raison d'être* is to “give voice” to minority aesthetic expression: as recently as 2007, in fact, a special panel of the Modern Language Association was convened to investigate the neglect of poetry in Asian American Studies as a whole. Such self-reflexive gestures have had a largely salutary effect on the field, making the last six years something of a critical renaissance for “experimental” Asian American poets like Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, John Yau, and Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge, a sea change registered simultaneously in the exceedingly warm reception afforded an emergent generation of “avant-garde” poets such as Myung Mi Kim, Linh Dinh, and Tan Lin. The question remains, however: what is it about poetry, especially “playful” experimental or avant-garde poetry, that makes it seem not only tangential but indeed opposed to other “serious” forms of Asian American literature?

Timothy Yu, whose recent monograph *Race and the Avant-Garde* has become something of a definitive account of twentieth century Asian American poetry’s avant-gardist inclinations, offers a surprising answer, arguing that the majority of Asian American poetry is not nearly playful *enough* to be politically progressive. For Yu, the “conventional” and “identity-based” writing of David Mura or Li-Young Lee, which dominated the 1980s and 90s Asian American poetry scene, emerges as lamentably “flat,” its “familiar, sentimental” images of Asian food and culture offering an unimaginative and consumable representation of Asian American identity as

“modular, capable of being inserted into predetermined slots.”⁶¹ In contrast, John Yau’s “playful emptying out” of such markers, like Theresa Cha’s “taxonomy of the language-games in which ‘home’ plays a part” (128), transforms such concepts into “a field for the play of the speaker’s imagination”; the valuable outcome of such “freeplay” being, for Yu, a far more “powerful” definition of an Asian American identity that is “constantly in revision . . . not scripted but improvised . . . both spontaneous and artificial” (150, 56).

Yet rescuing the formal aesthetic complexity of ethnic difference from the “flattening” identitarianism to which it always threatens to be reduced is a crucial critical project which is, in my opinion, often hindered rather than helped by the reintroduction of binary oppositions of work/play or modular/improvisational. That is, reading Mr. Hayashi’s laconic, labor-obsessed nature in “Seventeen Syllables” as diametrically opposed to his wife’s love of poetry, as numerous critics have,⁶² is to forget that the same efficiency and economy of words defines *both* characters. In fact, the former’s neurotic fixation with harvesting tomatoes only at the very peak of their ripeness is formally identical to the passion that drives his wife to spend countless hours tirelessly selecting only the “most perfect” words for her *haiku*. After all, as Mrs. Hayashi explains to her daughter, what makes writing *haiku* so pleasurable, and simultaneously so difficult, is precisely its laborious, “modular” nature: one “must pack [all of one’s] meaning into seventeen syllables only” (8), such that the poem becomes not a choice between “script” and “spontaneity” but exists at their intersection. Insofar as “Seventeen Syllables” functions as a

⁶¹ See Yu 143. Charles Altieri echoes this common sentiment when he laments that “most poetry devoted to the content of immigrant experience and its aftermath tends to be written in a generic style, very close to dominant American modes of lyric feeling, so that it neither adequately represents specific cultural forces nor sufficiently posits challenges to that mainstream style.” See Altieri 73.

⁶² Anticipating Yu’s construction of a binary between predetermination and play, Sau-ling Cynthia Wong has read Yamamoto’s short story, and the conflict between Mr. Hayashi and his wife, as emblematic of the clash between “Necessity” and “Extravagance” which many critics consider characteristic of Asian American literature and culture as a whole. See also King-Kok Cheung’s reading in the introduction to *Seventeen Syllables*.

scale model for the complex constellation of freedoms and constraints facing Asian American culture as a whole, then, it encourages us to reconceive of poetry as an engagement with, not an escape from or substitute for, the material gaps as well as excesses which continue to define the group as a “model minority.”

What Yu has lauded as Asian American poetic “freeplay” is thus, in the end, not nearly as free—or as playful—as it might initially appear. Yet it is precisely this lack of freedom, when seen as a productive aesthetic constraint or “rule,” that can help us to understand avant-garde Asian American writers’ shared investment in understanding language as and through games. Indeed, for Yu, what distinguishes “experimental” poets like Cha and Yau from their “conventional” counterparts are their explicitly “Wittgensteinian insight[s]” (Yu 131). The famous concept of the Wittgensteinian language-game—a concept, as Marjorie Perloff dryly notes, which remains “as central to the [*Philosophical Investigations*] as it is ultimately undefinable” (20)—is often understood by way of a classic example which Wittgenstein himself provides early on in the *Investigations*, where words serve as literal building-blocks—the “slabs” and “pillars”—of socially-constructed meaning.⁶³ But this universalistic metaphor in fact elides the Austrian philosopher’s broader interest in language-games as emblematic of the *particularities* of diverse linguistic communities: communities which, for him, register their distinct autonomy in much the way that nation-states assert their sovereignty. Consider, for example, the analogy he uses to describe language acquisition “as if [a] child came into a strange country and did not understand the language of the country; that is, as if it already had a language, only not this one”

(*Investigations* #32).

⁶³ “Let us imagine a language for which the description given by Augustine is right. The language is meant to serve for communication between a builder A and an assistant B. A is building with building-stones: there are blocks, pillars, slabs and beams. B has to pass the stones, and that in the order in which A needs them. For this purpose they use a language consisting of the words “block”, “pillar”, “slab”, “beam”. A calls them out;—B brings the stone which he has learnt to bring at such-and-such a call.” (*Investigations (hereafter PI)* #2)

This curious metaphor arrives on the heels of his comment that “someone coming into a strange country will sometimes learn the language of the inhabitants from ostensive definitions that they give him; and he will often have to *guess* the meaning of these definitions; and will guess sometimes right, sometimes wrong” (*PI* #32, emphasis original). Taken together, these two statements scaffold an ostensive definition of nativity which is based on an understanding of language as something which is inhabited, as a country, rather than acquired, as an object. Language-games, in other words, not only serve as the “means [by] which children learn their native language” (*PI* #7), but participate in the crucial process of assimilating and domesticating non-native elements; they define the “native speaker” not as one who is born into a particular language or nation, but who, by learning to play by its rules, achieves a sense of being “at home” in it.

That the figure of the “native speaker” would emerge as a defining tropological mainstay of Asian American literature in particular is thus ultimately unsurprising, for it captures the crucial ways in which the minority subject experiences his or her social difference *as* linguistic difference: it is no coincidence that displacement and exclusion from the body politic is most often articulated specifically as a displacement and exclusion from language as such. Chang-Rae Lee’s canonical novel *Native Speaker* is a ready example: it’s essentially the parable of a Korean American, Henry Park, who transmutes his chimerical racial identity into a profitable espionage venture, taking advantage of the stereotype of his non-native “inscrutability” to both disguise and license his numerous occupational betrayals. As in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, racial difference functions thematically in Lee’s novel as a speech impediment or racial “accent” that occludes the possibility of the American-born Asian being seen (or heard) as a “native” speaker—hence the book’s moral apotheosis culminates in Park’s cathartic decision to

reunite with his estranged wife (who is, not coincidentally, a speech therapist), while in *The Woman Warrior*, the main character's traumatic encounter with the reflection of her own Chinese "otherness" sets her throat to bleeding, leaving her literally unable to speak above a strangled whisper.

Language-games, as Marjorie Perloff has persuasively demonstrated, are thus concerned not merely with the multiple and even contradictory identities of words, but of human beings as well. In a compelling comparative analysis of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*, Perloff argues that the latter's trademark "queering" of syntax, like the former's assertion that grammar "does not tell us how language must be constructed in order to fulfill its purpose . . . it only describes and in no way explains the use of signs" (*PI* #496), should both be seen as acts of symbolic resistance against the domesticating and exclusionary functions of a *cultural* grammar which functions as the "set of prescriptions that all 'acceptable' sentences must follow" (Perloff 84). For Stein in particular, then, poetry offered a vehicle through which to critique the "rules" wherein, like nonsense words, queer bodies which do not fit into the prescriptions of a heteronormative syntax are considered analogously "unacceptable."

That "unacceptable" bodies would produce "ungrammatical" language practices is, for Perloff, a validation of the transgressive potential of Stein's poetry. But from another perspective, that assumption is precisely what has reified the persistent subjugation of other "unacceptable" bodies: consider, for example, the ways in which Ebonics as a "deviant" linguistic practice has often served to reify and marginalize the category of "blackness," just as "Engrish" transforms a specifically Asian inability to speak or write "proper" English into a source of racist humor. In short, while Stein's identity as a gay poet, a woman poet, or an

expatriate poet does not diminish her achievements as a formally innovative writer—indeed, for Perloff, those identities should in fact be seen as what enables aesthetic experiment in the first place—in the analogously “unacceptable” case of race, social difference is exactly what is assumed to *preclude* formal innovation. As Harryette Mullen has observed about African American poetry, “the assumption remains, however unexamined, that ‘avant-garde’ poetry is not ‘black’ and that ‘black’ poetry, however singular its ‘voice,’ is not ‘formally innovative’”; thus “‘formally innovative minority poets,’ when visible at all, are not likely to be perceived either as typical of a racial/ethnic group or as representative of an aesthetic movement” (30).⁶⁴

Racial difference, in other words, produces its own “very special relationship to language” which is not only distinct from, but in some senses incompatible with, those produced by national and sexual difference. And as a brief example drawn from Japanese Canadian poet Roy Miki illustrates, this “special relationship” has, for Asian North Americans in particular, been not only a source of aesthetic inspiration but simultaneously instrumental in their continued social and political disenfranchisement. In his poem “this pair of dice,” Miki rails against the government-sanctioned World War 2 internment of supposedly disloyal Japanese North Americans by describing his experience of “standing before an elevator, counting down the number of floors, [when] the letters struck me in the face, NME, ‘enemy’ woven into the mandates of english — no luck to be borne under that alphabet” (64) That the English language itself would provide the means for classifying the Japanese as a literal “enemy within” is, for Miki, exemplary of how arbitrary linguistic forms get imbued with sociopolitical meaning: like an inauspicious star sign, “Japaneseness” indexes one especially “unlucky” combination of

⁶⁴ Harryette Mullen, “Poetry and Identity,” 30, in *Artifice & Indeterminacy: an anthology of new poetics*, ed. Christopher Beach (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama press, 1998). Rae Armantrout, too, has pointed out that “it is still a widely held opinion that formal experimentation is the province of a ruling elite” (see Armantrout 287).

arbitrary signs which, like intercepted enemy transpondences, were presumed, during the War, to communicate the bearer's encoded malevolent intent.

Wittgenstein reminds us that “when a sentence is called senseless, it is not as it were its sense that is senseless. But a combination of words is being excluded from the language, withdrawn from circulation . . . and thereby bounds the domain of language” (*PI* #499-500). In what follows, I wish to consider the centrality of this insight, and what Perloff dubs a “Wittgensteinian poetics,” to the formal innovations of four contemporary Asian North American poets—Jonathan Stalling, John Yau, Brian Kim Stefans, and Mark Nakada—whose variously “playful” uses of language constitute a broader attempt to critique the linguistic and cultural economies in which “unacceptable” racialized bodies, and their aesthetic expressions, are often withdrawn from circulation.

My interest in these specific poets lies not simply in their demonstrably avant-garde proclivities and interest in language-games, but additionally in the asymmetrical relationship that exists between their own ethnic identities and the “ethnic content” of their work. Stalling is a Caucasian American poet who composes mostly in Classical Chinese; Yau, a protégé of John Ashbery, spent the first half of his career writing poetry that, according to Perloff, gave “no indication that [he was] in fact Chinese-American” (Perloff 39); and Stefans, a mixed-race Korean American, has remained virtually unknown in Asian American literary studies despite being a pioneer of digital poetics, while Nakada, a half-Okinawan, half-Danish Canadian, has, like his mentor Fred Wah, been read almost exclusively through the lens of “ethnic life writing.” For all four poets, however, especially Yau and Nakada, the question of how racial identity might function as a simultaneously social and aesthetic constraint remains paramount. To read them alongside one another is thus to recognize that what makes a poem experimental is in many

ways inextricable from what makes it Asian American, for refusing to fulfill normative assumptions about “ethnic” writing simultaneously becomes a way to refute stereotypes of representative “ethnic” behavior. As Stalling himself points out in a sophisticated reading of *Dictée*, Cha’s strategic use of French privileges “the act of mouthing, mimicking, enunciating without understanding [which] allows the reader to experience language as an addressee, without recourse to the power to reposition oneself as the addressor” (*Poetics* 186). The Asian American thrust of the poems explored here should thus be understood primarily in how they seek to confound our critical and cultural expectations and our ability to reposition ourselves as “addressors,” and hence aggressors, of meaning.

From English to Yingelishi

你会说中文吗？

do you speak Chinese

dǔ yǒu sī bì kě chái nì sǐ

赌友私币

渴豺溺死

Fellow gamblers, counterfeit money

thirsty jackals, drown to death

你会说中文吗？

do you speak Chinese

dú yǒu sì bì kè chái nì sǐ

独有四壁

客侪溺死

To possess four walls allows

companions to drown

—Jonathan Stalling, *Yingelishi*

Jonathan Stalling’s *Yingelishi* opens with a statistic that most Americans will likely find hard to believe: there are more English-speakers in China than anywhere else in the world; more,

in fact, than there are Americans alive.⁶⁵ If this fact is discomfiting (albeit entirely logical), it yet precisely captures the heightened stakes of linguistic and national belonging that characterize the current moment: while the proliferation of English as a “world language” might put to rest, if only temporarily, our growing trepidation over the decline of America as a global superpower in the lengthening shadow of China’s economic and political clout—for it implies that Americans can be “at home” anywhere in the world—it raises an equally troubling set of anxieties about how so-called Standard English is, like American hegemony itself, fast becoming a precious commodity in the face of Asian “outsourcing.”

This “recolonization” of English by Asian speakers has also inspired a Western reclamation movement of its own, with Americans translating Asian grammatical and semantic “failures” into a source of national comic relief so well-liked as to have inspired its own viral website, www.english.com, which, like its numerous offshoots, seeks to document the Asian world’s “more amusing misuses of the English language”: one of the site’s most popular images is of a sign posted by a pond in Nanjing which requests in Chinese that patrons “Watch your child [so that] he does not fall into the water” and in English that they “Take the child, fall into water carefully.”⁶⁶

Asian uses—or misuses—of the English language are, however, more than just a source of American entertainment: they have become instrumental sites for the contemporary articulation of a national sovereignty which is increasingly being defined as, and through, linguistic sovereignty. This is a discursive process which is quite clearly bound up with the language of race; “Engrish” not only brackets and marginalizes grammatical and syntactic

⁶⁵ This statistic is based on data provided in Lewis, M. Paul, Gary F. Simons, and Charles D. Fennig (eds.), 2013. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World, Seventeenth edition*. Dallas, Texas: SIL International. Online version: <http://www.ethnologue.com>. (Accessed March 1, 2013)

⁶⁶ <http://www.english.com/2007/12/then-say-someone-made-you-do-it/>. (Accessed March 1, 2013)

differences but does so by racializing those differences, such that the Asian speaker's ostensible difficulty in pronouncing the "l" sound often serves as a derisive comment on the Asian body's failure to live up to not only an American linguistic standard but a racial one. At stake in the persistent valorization of grammatically Standard or "proper" English and the denigration of its "bastardized" English counterparts, then, is nothing less than the reification of whiteness as the socially-correct native "standard" of American national identity.

That the relationship between English and English might, however, be something more than one of failed mimesis—that the latter, in other words, might counterintuitively connote a meaningful *excess* and the former, by comparison, a lack—forms the premise of Stalling's 2011 book of poems, *Yinglishi: Sinophonic English Poetry and Poetics*. Self-consciously working "in direct opposition to popular ideas of 'Chinglish,' the popular shorthand term for 'bad' English spoken with a strong Chinese accent" (*Yinglishi* 3), Stalling takes seriously, and indeed literally, the potential of what Timothy Yu lauded, in John Yau's work, as a playfully "revisionist" definition of Asian American identity "not as a given but as a product of the poem's own formal strategies—an identity that is thus provisional, shifting from poem to poem and even from line to line" (Yu 159).

As Stalling explains in the introduction, each of *Yinglishi*'s fifty-seven untitled poems (two of which are reproduced above) opens with a series of "Everyday English" phrases taken from a common Chinese phrasebook that teaches English through transliteration. The initial "couplet"—which depicts, first in Chinese and then in English, phrases ranging in complexity from "good morning" and "thank you" to "excuse me, where should I board flight number 667?"—is followed by five subsequent lines whose relationship to their antecedents is, to say the least, ambiguous. One can piece together from the prefatory material that the third line, which is

still nominally “in English,” i.e. written using the Roman alphabet, is a transliteration of the preceding phrase, and lifted directly from the original phrasebook. Thus, as in the examples in the epigraph above, the phrase “Do you speak Chinese” is phonetically rendered as “du you si bi ke chai ni si,” which to a Chinese speaker familiar with the *pinyin* Romanization system would be pronounced something like “Doo Yo Suh-bee-kuh Chai-nee-suh.”

The novelty of Stalling’s conceptual experiment becomes apparent in the final few lines of each poem, where he transcribes each instance of *pinyin* back into Chinese characters and then translates that couplet back into English. Thus in the right-most example, the poet selects for the first line of his couplet the character du (賭) which means “gamble,” you (友) meaning “friend” or “friendly,” si (私), “secret, illicit,” and bi (币), “currency,” producing an English translation—“Fellow gamblers, counterfeit money”—which, as per Stalling’s self-professed desire, “resonat[es] with Confucian meanings.”

The poet’s penchant for these “Buddhist-leaning” syntactical configurations, with their undeniable resemblance to the ever-popular “Confucius say” meme (“Confucius say, ‘man who eat cracker in bed have crummy time’”), might seem to suggest that Stalling’s self-professed affinity for a progressively political “anti-Chinglish” aesthetic in fact conceals a taste for Poundian Orientalism which is at best contradictory and at worst duplicitous. And indeed, many of *Yinglishi*’s champions have spent as much time refuting such accusations as actually discussing the poems themselves. Hank Lazer, for example, is quick to assert that the book is “no gimmick,” where “gimmickry” connotes a charge not of too much novelty but rather of too little; thus he argues that the book is more than simply a “display case for Chinglish or [the] Charlie Chan-like pseudo-pidgin that gets mocked in popular cinematic culture and elsewhere” (Lazer).

In some sense, though, the relationship between Chinglish and Charlie Chan captures

precisely what is at stake in Stalling's poetic play—and, I would suggest, in Asian American aesthetic experiment more broadly. By analogizing Western linguistic jingoism to its racial counterpart, deriding the long-standing tradition of what he dubs the “yellowface minstrelsy” that a figure like Charlie Chan embodies, and criticizing the tendency to define “ungrammatical” English as “bad” English, Stalling's cleavage of the grammatical order with the cultural one quite clearly mirrors the Asian American critical consensus that pidginized or “bad” Sinophonic representations of English, from “Confucius say” to Charlie Chan, are continuous with “bad” cultural representations of Asian Americans that reify and legitimate racist assumptions about the “yellow peril.”

Indeed, in Stalling's 2006 dissertation, where he first began to sketch out the ideological and algorithmic framework that would later inform *Yingelishi*, the poet makes explicit reference to Yunte Huang's tongue-in-cheek rendering of an imagined conversation between Charlie Chan and Ezra Pound in *Transpacific Displacement*, citing Huang's conclusion that “Imagism's linguistic mimicry should . . . be understood in the context of American pop culture's pidginization of Chinese” (Huang 114). Quite clearly anticipating his later efforts in *Yingelishi*, Stalling readily admits that “my translations will come dangerously close to this [mimicking] language in a sense, but I would argue that they will (or can) help undermine the very Anglo-centric hierarchies at the root of minstrel mimicry by taking mimicry out of its demeaning role and placing it at the service of a radical de-centering of English prosody and aesthetic expectations” (173-74).

Thus, as Lucas Klein rightly notes, the Chinese lines that emerge in *Yingelishi* could themselves be considered “bad” translations: not only are they “often very obscure,” such that “Chinese-readers will probably find themselves lost in the semantic meaning,” but neither are the

combinations of characters Stalling chooses “necessarily proper representations of how Chinese-speakers would understand these phrases.” But as Klein compellingly argues through the apt comparison he draws between *Yingelishi* and Objectivist poet Louis Zukofsky’s *Catullus* (1969), a similarly “homophonic” English translation which sought to reproduce the poems’ original Latin sound and rhythm patterns over their meaning, the point was “not whether readers of Latin would have understood it that way, but to create poetry out of the misreadings inherent in translation that could displace Latin from its position of superiority over English and English from its position of superiority in the ears of a non-native speaker such as Zukofsky.”

It is precisely in recognizing Stalling’s analogous attempt to challenge hegemonic assumptions about the superiority of either English or Chinese, and of “correct” translations, that *Yingelishi*’s playful potential can be best apprehended. For instance, in the pair of poems reproduced above, his translation of “si bi” (私币) as “counterfeit money” is not only awkward but archaic (the term is usually translated as “jia bi” (假币) ; “si bi” literally means “private currency,” which in idiomatic usage historically referred to money minted by wealthy lords rather than the emperor⁶⁷). Yet this choice of words makes perfect sense in light of Klein’s above contentions: language, for Stalling, is a type of *currency* whose standard, publicly-accepted forms circulate alongside “privately” minted ones. The Chinese language thus emerges not just as a form of cultural capital but, more specifically, as a form of sociolinguistic currency which allows the speaker to position himself as a “fellow” or “companion” to the listener.

Yet *Yingelishi* also complicates this potential camaraderie in complex and fascinating ways. The question “Do you speak Chinese?” paradoxically uses a “public” language (English) in a “gamble” to ascertain the listener’s ability to speak a “private” one (Chinese). In

⁶⁷ This classical translation and explanation was graciously provided by Marina Suing.

transforming that query not into a signifier of semantic comprehension but an opportunity for further translation on the basis of sound rather than meaning, Stalling additionally explores the *aesthetic* economy of linguistic expression. In the first poem, language, and perhaps specifically the Chinese language, becomes a kind of “black market” in which “thirsty jackals” trade in and gamble with counterfeit or “private” forms of currency. In the second poem, language becomes a structural bulwark or prison, trapping the poet in its “four walls” while simultaneously dooming his “companions” to death. In both cases, the sea of words and meanings which make up Chinese index not simply an expansive system of multiple signification, but an overwhelming circulation system in which one can just as easily “drown.”

In order to frustrate normative assumptions about the singularity or even possibility of creating “correct” or “good” translations on the basis of semantic fidelity or grammatical accuracy, then, Stalling struggles to keep meaning “in play”—not only for English readers but for Chinese ones as well. “One can consider any Sinophonic English line (or poem) in this book to be like a combination lock,” he writes in the preface to *Yingelishi*; “I kept turning the characters around again and again within a given phonetic pattern dictated by the English words I am trying to recreate in Chinese . . . generating many new contextual possibilities” (5). His play is, in other words, neither frivolous or random; on the contrary, it describes a highly constrained and ordered form of aesthetic expression which carries strongly Wittgensteinian undertones. The poet’s similarly Wittgensteinian assertion that “language does not come to meaning by constellations of the denotative potentialities of words alone, but within syntax and the constantly shifting contingencies of cultural(*sic*) conditioned interpretive networks” (*Poetics* 189), too, offers insight into how the Asian American subject comes to meaning vis-à-vis the language of the global marketplace—what we might call, *pace* Stalling, the language of

“Sinophonic English.”

Like the American brand Coca Cola, which in China is translated into the Sinophonic phrase “可口可乐” (pronounced “kuh ko kuh luh”), meaning “allow the mouth to rejoice,” Stalling’s choice of the title “Yingelishi” is based on an analogous play on sonic assonance and semantic association: the four Chinese characters which he chooses to represent it mean, in his translation, “chanted/sung songs, beautiful poetry.” His critical use of the “Sinophone” is thus largely in agreement with Shu-mei Shih’s well-known innovation of the term, which she defines as “a network of places of cultural production outside China and on the margins of China and Chineseness,” with special attention paid to transpacific sites like Taiwan and Hong Kong (Shih 4).

For Shih, these Sinophonic communities function as “significant sites of cultural production in a complex set of relations with such constructs as ‘China,’ ‘Chinese,’ and ‘Chineseness’” (4); they are, in other words, not only language-games through which “Asianness” acquires its contingent meaning but can also be considered sociolinguistic economies wherein the semantic values of such constructed contingencies are established. Stalling’s focus on translation’s generative sonic possibilities over and above its predetermined semantic constraints thus become part his overarching goal of keeping language in a state of playful indeterminacy. His enthusiastic embrace of language’s polysemic possibilities accordingly offers an intriguing model for recharacterizing what Warren Liu has called the “epistemological uncertainty” (Liu 121) of the Asian American designation as an analogously polysemic source of semantic excess.

From A to Z

In her oft-cited review of John Yau's *Forbidden Entries* (1996), Marjorie Perloff postulated that the collection's dubious overall quality was largely the result of Yau's growing inability to keep his Chinese-Americanness "to himself," as he had for the first twenty years of his career: his newfound decision to let his ethnicity "play out . . . as legible content" (Liu 116), for Perloff, accordingly constituted a specifically aesthetic failure. Proclaiming that Yau has always been "at his best when his satiric scorn has a personal edge" and, in the very next breath, disparaging as his "least successful" those poems in *Forbidden Entries* which document the "nasty prejudices about Asian-Americans [Yau] grew up with in the sixties" (40), Perloff argued that these "overt representations of racial oppression" amounted to little more than so many "clever puns and specific images," mere wordplay which drained the poems of both their "semantic resonance" and their literary value (40-41).

My primary concern here is not whether Perloff, by boiling the dense complexity of images in Yau's work down to what she calls their "silk-and-pagoda" essence, is championing a reductive paradigm for reading minority poetry—though it seems important to recall that this is precisely the charge that a number of Asian Americanists have laid at her door.⁶⁸ Of greater interest to me is the related question of how Yau's ludic experiments (and even Perloff readily characterizes both his pre- and post-"ethnic" phases as marked by the same "playful" use of language) intersect with the "epiphany" of his identity in ways that both suggest and destabilize the possibility of a uniquely Asian American aesthetic form whose agency neither relies on nor wholly omits such "silk-and-pagoda" images.

In particular, I want to explore how Yau's interest in the inherently rule-based yet

⁶⁸ For an eloquent discussion of this critical backlash, see Liu, "Object of Experiment," especially his chapter on Yau.

arbitrary nature of language, and especially in the sequence of the Roman alphabet, is, like Roy Miki's, mutually constitutive of his preoccupation with the "accidental" or chance-driven aspects of racial identity: as Yau himself put it, "who you are is simply an accident of birth . . . it becomes to me an interesting dilemma: how do I deal with it? How do I write about it?" (qtd in Yu 49) Reading Yau's poetry alongside the work of Brian Kim Stefans, a contemporary Asian American poet who is similarly invested in the "accidental" as well as procedural aspects of linguistic and social identity, my goal here is to understand why experimental Asian American poetry's affinity for a process that Timothy Yu describes as "refiguring words," and hence identities, into "objects of play and building" (154), so often relies on a unit even smaller than the word—the individual letter—to playfully erect, as well as tear down, certain essential "pagodas" of cultural meaning.

While the most recent wave of Asian American literary critics has tended, quite understandably, to focus on what might be called the more self-consciously or at least self-evidently "ethnic" of Yau's poems—the series of "Genghis Chan" poems which Perloff considered his "least successful" continues to be a particular favorite—the elements of the poet's *oeuvre* which I find even more interesting are those in which the ethnic, as both thematic and formal element, must strenuously compete for visibility and legitimacy. This antagonism is especially visible in "Nasty Orders," a poem that appeared alongside "Genghis Chan" in *Forbidden Entries* but about which next to nothing has been said by critics, reviewers, or even Yau himself.

Antonia greases limp braids
Billy humps mezzanine contraband
Criticism interrupts nozzle deadline
Depression jargon opens evening
Event kickoff parade forecast
Flounder Lord quashes goblet
Gashes Merlin's reflective ham
Horace neutralizes serious incident

Itinerant orators trounce jinx
Juvenile peccadillos urbane kennel
Kiosk quip vapors legible
Livid research wanderer masticates
Meteor shower xenophobes nullify
Neckline tempo yearning ossification
Office undergoes zephyr plague
Punitive vexations anchor quill
Querulous woodwind buccaneer recital
Renounce xeroxing cheery swigs
Salami yams dill tuna
Turtle zebra eagle unicorn
Uhlan admonishes fulminating veil
Vertiginous blue gladiator wall
Windward caravel hinders xebec
Xylophone duress initiates yank
Yurt eskimo joss ziggurat
Zeppelin flames kindle Antonia (58)

An irreverent example of Oulipian constraint brought to life through the quasi-nonsense of a tongue twister and clothed in the false innocence of a nursery rhyme, Yau’s “alphabet poem” is unlikely to garner the approval of many a kindergarten teacher or capture the fancy of any but the most precocious of schoolchildren: as a mnemonic for learning one’s alphabet, it is worse than useless. Yet that’s precisely the point: “Nasty Orders” is all about how the alphabet functions to discipline, rather than simply allow access to, forms of “acceptable” knowledge production.⁶⁹

The poem accordingly opens with a pair of lines that, while not likely to be found in any elementary school primer, mimics the familiar format of the classic “Dick and Jane” books: Antonia greases her limp braids, while Billy applies his prepubescent energies towards somewhat less savory ends. The ensuing trials of Colin, Denise, Esmeralda and Fred, however, are clearly not what interests Yau (although such “juvenile peccadilloes” do make a later appearance). In shifting from proper nouns to abstract ones and eventually abandoning

⁶⁹ For an incisive analysis of the relationship between alphabetic sequence and such cultural “grammar,” and additional insight into Stein’s seminal contributions, see Ardam.

grammatical conventions altogether, the poet instead treats us to a dizzying parade of images, eschewing the logic of standard English syntax or narrative development for the “natural” pattern of alphabetic progression. “Nasty Orders” is, in fact, just that: an almost punitive lashing together of words according to a prescribed alphabetic sequence which appears not only vertically down the left margin of each line but within each of the four sinuous “columns” formed by the first letter of each subsequent word in all twenty-six lines. Forcibly drawing the eye down each of these “columns,” the poem makes the conventional method of reading English-language poetry (from left to right) into a labor-intensive act of literal resistance, one which feels additionally unsatisfying for Yau’s refusal to resolve the majority of the (horizontal) lines’ meanings into comprehensible semantic formulations.

For Yau, the alphabet thus emerges as its own “nasty order,” one which pacifies the linguistic “monarchy” to which we, as English speakers, are unwitting (but not unwilling) subjects. By revealing this ostensibly “natural” system to be as strange and arbitrary as the jumbled patterns of images which it licenses, Yau demonstrates his Asian American investments here not through “silk-and-pagoda” images, but as a form of *structural* negotiation with standardized linguistic and poetic assumptions. In “Between the Forest and the Trees,” an essay published in both *The New England Review* and *Amerasia Journal*, Yau encourages Asian American poets to refuse to conform to generic conventions of “ethnic” writing:

Why say yes the poem must be written in a way that others would understand, that the words and feelings must be delivered in acceptably packaged boxes so that others will know you are capable of human emotions? Why accept their standards? Why prove your sensitivity? Why be satisfied with writing predictable variations of their stories? Why be a dutiful child or an obedient student? (39)

Yau recognizes that, as is true of ethnic literature as a whole, minority poetry has

historically been used by both authors and critics to superficially assert the “equality” of marginalized groups on the basis of their ability to reproduce or mimic traditional literary genres—hence the crucial role that early slave narratives played in the abolitionist movement. Like the laboratory-grown clones in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*, whose artistic endeavors are presented as evidence that they possess “souls,” the quality of minority literature is, as Yau points out, continues to be judged largely in terms of its resemblance to its canonical counterparts. The poet’s refusal to be “a dutiful child or an obedient student,” then, challenges conventional assumptions about Asian American writing which are essentially reprisals of the model minority stereotype, translating “filiality” into a simultaneously cultural and aesthetic obligation. Refusing to write “predictable variations” of either conventional Asian American poetry—a la David Mura—or traditional lyric or narrative-based Anglophone poems, Yau accordingly utilizes the very concept of predictable variation, in the form of alphabetic sequence, to register his discontent with these normative discourses. The common assumption that the alphabet is nothing more than an innocuous pile of building blocks to be stacked according to the author’s fancy is, for him, merely a means of disguising its mutual embeddedness in structures of hegemonic power, what Myung Mi Kim calls “the totalizing power of language that serves the prevailing systems and demands of coherence” (Kim 110).

At times, then, Yau’s tactics are metafictional ones: he “renounces Xeroxing” and the “punitive vexations” which “anchor [his] quill” or force it towards facile reproduction of hegemonic forms, refusing (unlike Horace) to use his poetry to “neutralize serious incident[s].” At other times, however, these critiques are far more oblique. The poet teases us with snippets of historical intolerance—of “xenophones” dismissing the reality of astrological phenomena and Uhlan (Polish light cavalry) regiments crushing dissenters—and tantalizing references to the

conflicting discourses of discovery and domination in the form of caravels (fifteenth-century Portuguese ships built for exploration) and xebecs (naval ships). He mocks the alphabet's function as an arbitrary taxonomic system which disregards the differences between turtles, zebras, eagles and unicorns just as it does with salami, yams, dill and tuna—and by extension, one might assume, with the various sub-genres of minority writing. And of course, there is his final jab at the insularity and self-legitimation of the alphabet and the cultural systems that it represents: the poem's return to Antonia. By giving her both the first and the final word, Yau turns "Nasty Orders" into a circular, self-perpetuating system much like the one it lambasts—implying that knowing one's ABCs does not open one up to more expansive forms of knowledge, but simply brings one back to the beginning by constricting knowledge to what falls within the recognizable sequence of A to Z.

Like Stalling's *Yingelishi*, "Nasty Orders" reminds us that notions of originality and authenticity are especially freighted ones in the context of Asian American writing. While one might use play as a means of challenging the circulation of words and bodies within linguistic as well as cultural economies, the "raw materials" which one uses in one's experiments are always by definition predetermined ones: Yau no more attempts to create a "new" alphabet for Asian American than Stalling seeks to author its dictionary. Originality, in short, gets defined not as the invention of new forms but as the establishment of new forms of *kinship*: thus for Stalling, sonic similarities supersede semantic ones, while for Yau, authorial estrangement in the form of grammatical disobedience aligns his writing far more closely with the "juvenile peccadilloes" of Antonia and Billy than with the "serious incidents" of Horace (and, we can assume, with the "filial" autoethnographic poetry of David Mura et al.).

The work of Brian Kim Stefans offers a somewhat different perspective on how such tropes of kinship and originality can generate “identity crises” for the Asian American poet. A bi-racial Korean American writer and critic steeped in the New York poetry scene of the 1990s, Stefans is perhaps best known for *The Dreamlife of Letters*, a startlingly beautiful eleven-minute online Flash poem that emerged out of his participation in “an online ‘roundtable’ on sexuality and literature . . . centered around a brief essay by the San Francisco novelist Dodie Bellamy.”⁷⁰ My interest in *Dreamlife*, however, is not so much what it tells us about the relationship between sexuality and literature, but what it reveals about how the terms of this “roundtable” discussion place Stefans in a curious form of intellectual kinship with his colleagues, one which is exemplary of the position of the Asian American poet who often finds himself caught between what Yau referred to as “the forest and the trees.”



Figure 1. Screenshot from *Dreamlife of Letters*

⁷⁰ All citations and screenshots are taken from http://www.arras.net/RNG/flash/dreamlife/the_dream_life_cleaned.html (Accessed March 1, 2013. Reprinted with permission)

Like Yau, Stefans employs the Roman alphabet as a self-conscious aesthetic response to the constraints of his authorial position. In the introduction to *Dreamlife*, Stefans explains that “all of the [roundtable] participants were divided into groups, each individual having a position in that group. As I was the second in position, I was assigned to respond to the person in the first position (Rachel Blau DuPlessis).” Faced with DuPlessis’s “very texturally detailed, nearly opaque, response,” Stefans initially constructed a series of short “concrete” poems in which he alphabetizes the entirety of DuPlessis’s text; his dissatisfaction with the “antique” aesthetic of these poems, however, leads to the creation of *Dreamlife*, which is in some sense an animated version of that initial series.

For Stefans, the various exclusions which define minority experience limn a linguistic process of meaning-making that has less in common with the act of deletion—the obliteration/removal of some previously present element—and more to do with the imposition of additional constraints on the circulation of that element. Thus *Dreamlife* literally animates DuPlessis’s comments about the exclusion of non-heteronormative forms of sexuality from the realm of social legitimacy by treating the first letter of each word as a constraint which limits how and where it can circulate in the textual economy. In other words, it translates her own interest in gender’s translation and transposition into “Standard” or normative English (a critique which, as Marjorie Perloff points out, “constitutes [DuPlessis’s] own commentary on the gender issues with which Bellamy deals” [“Screening” 144]) by transposing her words according to their relative position in the alphabetic sequence.

Despite its explicit interest in Western discourses of gender and sexuality, then, the procedural logistics that inspire both the roundtable discussion and the later *Dreamlife* in fact

reveal a clear “Eastern” aesthetic influence, specifically the long-standing East Asian cultural practice of poetry contests. This poetic practice has recently found an enthusiastic audience among Western poets, and especially Asian American ones, in the guise of *renshi*, a Japanese genre of collaborative linked poetry in which each individual takes the final line of her predecessor’s poem as the initial line of her own poem, striving to maintain an overall sense of continuity and convention while making her own distinctive contribution to the poetic sequence as a whole.⁷¹ Perhaps the two most famous recent examples of this practice are *What the Kite Thinks*, a 1994 collaboration at the University of Hawai’i Manoa between a Japanese national, two Asian Americans and a Caucasian; and the aptly-titled *No Choice But To Follow*, a 48-link series written by four Japanese American women in 2008 to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the Hawaiian literary journal *Bamboo Ridge Press*.

For all of these eight poets, the *renshi* form emerges as its own best contradiction, an aesthetic exercise which is at once antagonistic and entirely cooperative, constraining yet liberating. It is, in other words, poetry at its most ludic: it often has, as Makoto Ooka admits, “the character of a kind of competition, even of confrontation,” where, says Joseph Stanton, “the rules of the game . . . are aids to composition as well as limitations”—the most difficult of those being, according to Wing Tek Lum, “the limitation on ego” (3, 49, 50). In similar fashion, Stefans’s self-description of being “second in position” at the online roundtable clearly involves just such an exercise in ego sublimation. The apparent absence of legibly “ethnic” content in *Dreamlife* does not, in other words, preclude its potential as an Asian Americanist aesthetic gesture, any more than its literal contents—DuPlessis’s words—prevent Stefans from attaching his own name

⁷¹ For examples and discussions of this long-standing practice and its significant social functions in various East and South Asian cultures, see especially Huizinga, and Park, *Apparitions*.

to it. Indeed, the two are clearly connected. “One decides on the condition of an already decided field of language,” Judith Butler writes in *Excitable Speech*, “but this repetition does not constitute the decision of the speaking subject as a redundancy. The gap between redundancy and repetition is the space of agency” (129). It is also the space of *renshi*, and, by extension, an Asian American space which is predicated on a procedural relation between (constrained) individual autonomy and (liberatory) collective agency.

Linguistic Miscegenation

While the irreverent alphabetic experiments of Yau and Stefans suggest novel configurations of agency for the Asian American poet, Mark Nakada’s *Dreaming Okinawa* allows us to consider the analogous question of how aesthetic play in turn alters the experience of the reader or “addressee.” Like a number of Myung Mi Kim’s poems—in which, as Sarah Dowling and Jeannie Chiu point out, “linguistic combinations point crosswise and backward” and function something like a “choose your own adventure” book⁷²—*Dreaming Okinawa* does more than permit its readers a degree of interpretive freedom: it effectively overwhelms them with such a barrage of possibilities that freedom itself begins to resemble an oppressive constraint.

Little has been written about Nakada, a mixed-race Japanese Canadian of Okinawan and Danish descent, or the remarkable collection of poems which he produced in 1997 as a Master’s Thesis at The University of Calgary. Considerably more, however, has been said about his thesis advisor and mentor: Fred Wah, the co-founder of *TISH: A Poetry Newsletter* and the current Canadian Parliamentary Poet Laureate, is arguably one of the most influential Asian North

⁷² see Dowling, and Chiu 84.

American poets to date. Wah's stamp on *Dreaming Okinawa* is, like Myung Mi Kim's on Jonathan Stalling's own dissertation, unmistakable even apart from the numerous citational references Nakada makes to his mentor; before approaching *Dreaming Okinawa*, then, it seems prudent to paint in broad strokes the ideological and aesthetic perspectives which have come to be associated with Wah.

While clearly influenced by his early associations with Robert Duncan and, later, Charles Olson, Wah's particular brand of oppositional aesthetics—what he calls “faking it”—began to take shape in the 1980s and 90s, culminating in the 2000 collection *Faking It: Poetics and Hybridity*. For Wah, the offspring of a half-Chinese father and Swedish mother, the concept of “faking it” resonated on both a poetic and a personal level; while, as Carrie Dawson notes, Wah has been “very explicit about his interest in ensuring that his writing is not ‘hijacked’ by the ‘ready made expectations’ that tend to (over-)determine readings of [ethnic] autobiography and life writing” (2), the poet's relationship with ethnic writing, and with his own ethnicity, has, by his own admission, always had something of the duplicitous in it. Being one-quarter Chinese, and hence often mistaken in person for a Caucasian and on paper for an “English”-speaking Chinese immigrant, both ethnic identity and poetry are, for Wah, largely a matter of playfully frustrating others' expectations as much as satisfying them.

Wah's goal in his writing, then, has been to replicate this “duplicitous voice” of ethnicity, to achieve a balance of performative subterfuge that he calls “synchronous foreignicity . . . the ability to remain within an ambivalence without succumbing to the pull of any single culture . . . source, origin, containment” (53, 83). For Wah, as for his student Nakada, “faking it” is less about disguising one's racial “accent” than about overemphasizing it in a passing show of ethnic authenticity. Race, in other words, provides for both poets, as it did for Mrs. Hayashi in

“Seventeen Syllables,” a social and an aesthetic design which formally structures but does not wholly determine its minority content; as Louis Cabri says of Wah’s work, “the design [of the poem] itself is part of an ongoing improvisational process that changes the design as it goes (but there is always, of course, a design—the improvisational moment does not occur freely, out of nowhere)” (Cabri xiv).

Following what Cabri characterizes as Robert Olson’s “proprioceptive” call to “imitate nature by way of writing from the built-in space-time specifics of one’s given body” (xiii), Wah’s interest in the “natural” world has often been articulated as an interest in the physiological aspects of speech and language; he has described poetry as a metaphorical “pictogram” or “cardiogram” of so-called living language. And it is this call to combine the linguistic and the biomedical into a “proprioceptive” Asian American poetic form which Mark Nakada has, in his own work, most earnestly attempted to respond to.

For Jonathan Stalling, the Asian American poet is a master safe-cracker, listening carefully to each click of the combination lock; for John Yau, he is a court jester, irreverently mixing nonsense with truth; while for Brian Kim Stefans, he is a choreographer, making each word dance in just the right order. For Nakada, though, the Asian American poet is a white-coated scientist seated before a microscope, a dispassionate observer of language at the cellular level. Indeed, *Dreaming Okinawa* is “experimental” in a literal, biological sense: each poem is essentially a Petri dish in which meaning is “grown” under rigidly controlled conditions. The organic evolution of poetic language, in which letters combine to form words and words combine to form sentences, thus becomes an act of biological reproduction akin to mitosis, an instinctual act of self-replication performed in the interest of survival.

Little surprise, then, that language in Nakada’s poems often functions as data, and

specifically as genetic data: the “alphabet” of DNA becomes, for him, an extended metaphor for the social code of race. *Dreaming Okinawa* in fact presciently anticipates a number of contemporary debates about race and genetics which have, as Evelyn Hammonds and others point out, begun to challenge the assumption that race is a social rather than a biological construct.⁷³ While Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s famous formulation of race as a “social formation” continues to hold water as a schema for understanding racialization’s cultural determinants and effects, technological advances, and the mapping of the human genome, have increasingly demonstrated that genetic differences among modern human populations are “real” enough to warrant more “racially-specific” approaches to diagnosis and treatment, especially in the medical field. Accordingly, in *Dreaming Okinawa*, we find Nakada reproducing a newspaper clipping from the Winnipeg-based *Nikkei Voice* in which a mixed-race leukemia sufferer appeals to the *Voice*’s readership as potential blood marrow donors and saviors:

“I am half Japanese and half Caucasian which makes finding a genetic match more difficult. There is a greater chance of finding a donor if they share either ethnic background. Please attend one of the Red Cross information sessions and find out how you can save my life. . .” (Nakada 27).

Racial profiling, here, begins to appear not only scientifically justified but indeed crucial to Asian American survival—validating, rather ironically, the prevalent cultural tendency to treat race as symptomatic judgment of an individual’s “internal” qualities.

In an untitled poem in *Dreaming Okinawa* dedicated to Roy Miki (reproduced below), Nakada extends this consideration of the aesthetic and political implications of racial profiling by exploring it as a *visual* form. In his “DNA poem,” columns of letters stream down the page in a

⁷³ See Chun; Gannett; and Hammonds.

visual imitation of gel electrophoresis (a procedure which feeds genetic material through an electric field and separates it into long vertical bands which can be used to identify its origin), so that each letter resembles a nucleotide in a long strand of DNA.

o	s	s	w	e	y	n	e	e	m	
c	p	o	o	v	o	e	m	x	y	
e	e	m	r	e	u	g	i	p	o	o
a	l	e	d	n	r	o	g	r	r	w
n	i	b	s	y	i	i	a	t	t	n
i	n	o	f	o	n	a	t	e		
n	g	d	i	u	e	t	i	d	p	
g	g	y	n	r	l	e	n		r	
s	n	m	d	d	c	m	g	g	i	
k	a	u	s	e	t	i	d	e	v	
y	m	s	h	s	t	s	o	n	a	
t	i	i	a	t	i	c	m	e	t	
o	g	c	p	i	b	e	i	p	e	
		e	e	n	e	g	n	o	s	
p	d	v	v	y		e	a	o	a	
u	e	o	f		p	n	n	l	n	
s	v	i	z		r	a	t	s	s	
h	i	c			o	t	s		e	
	e	e	v		g	i	r		i	
o		a	i		e	n	e			
w	s	n	s		y	n	r			
a	p	a	u				c			<i>f</i>
r	e	a	a				e			<i>o</i>
r	l	m	l				s			<i>r</i>
i	l	e					s			
o	d		l				i			<i>R</i>
r			i				v			<i>o</i>
			s				e			<i>y</i>
i	a		t				i			
n	c		e				m			
t	r		n				m			<i>M</i>
h	o		i				i			<i>i</i>
e	s		g				g			<i>k</i>
							r			
f	o		t				a			<i>i</i>
i	c		h				n			
e	e		r				t			
l	a		u				s			
d	n									
s	s									

In human DNA, the near-infinite number of potential permutations and combinations of Adenine, Thymine, Guanine and Cytosine produces a near-infinite number of phenotypic

(visually-expressed) differences; in the poem, words formed by the letters of the alphabet both visually and semantically “find shape,” and their “destiny,” in analogous fashion.

The extended metaphor that Nakada develops here between racial and genetic identities—in particular, his comparison of the transpacific immigration of Asians “across oceans” to a stream of biological material exchanged across “gene pools”—presents an image of racial miscegenation which draws on its paradoxical history as both social ill and genetic advantage. Yet the interaction between “recessive immigrants” and “emigrating dominants,” which plays on the scientific vocabulary of recessive and dominant genes, produces neither the alluring multicultural future of “hybrid vigor” that TIME magazine famously featured in 1993 as “The New Face of America,”⁷⁴ nor the dystopic threat prophesied by generations of anti-miscegenation advocates of a “degraded” American population contaminated by “inferior” racial strains. Indeed, in Nakada’s poem, miscegenation is not so much a means of creating new forms of difference but is itself a form of social “negotiation” between “recessive” and “dominant” expressions, not unlike the biological “compromise” of phenotypic expression that results when a (recessive) blue-eyed gene encounters a (dominant) brown-eyed one.

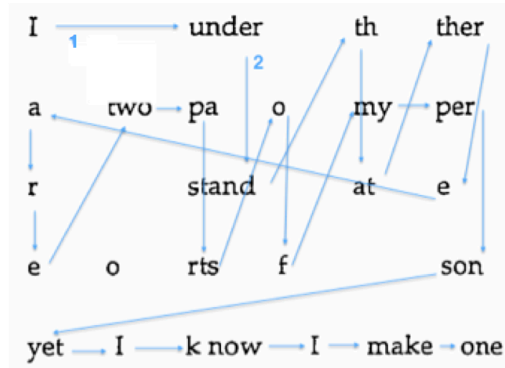
Nakada’s interest in the phenotypic or visual expression of genetic and cultural inheritances, which takes literal shape in the above poem and, even more, in “see skin,” a calligram whose words form the image of a human face, is simultaneously an interest in understanding identity, and specifically Asian identity, as that which exceeds what can be visually apprehended at first glance. In a poem which appears near the end of *Dreaming Okinawa*, Nakada forces the reader to encounter a kind of linguistic miscegenation, a seemingly random admixture of words, letters and blank spaces organized into a “square” in the center of

⁷⁴ TIME Magazine, Nov. 18, 1993. <http://www.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19931118,00.html> (Accessed March 1, 2013).

the page.

I under th ther
a two pa o my per
r stand at e
e o rts f son
yet I k now I make one

Here, poetic language presents a literal puzzle: Nakada forces us not only, as Yau and Stefans did, to “see” the ostensibly natural progression of words differently, but to decode the “hidden” sequence that the poet has created. Clearly, reading in an “Asian” fashion—vertically rather than horizontally, beginning from the right—produces no more or less “sense” than a laterally-oriented “Western” reading does (though the former practice seems to yield the word “are” in the first column and the latter the last line, “yet I know I make one”). Indeed, it will likely take the reader a minute or two to realize that there is no consistent rationale to the poem’s organization: it resembles nothing if not an especially tedious game of connect-the-dots (although, for me, the ensuing picture formed by the order which I thought most likely fails to evoke any passingly familiar image).



The sequence which I ultimately settled on—“I understand that there are two parts of my person yet I know I make one”—thus strikes me as still incomplete: despite numerous recombinations, I could find no place for the rogue “o” in the second column. Of course, the absence of a “solution” to this puzzle seems to be Nakada’s point: the gap between comprehension and apprehension, the subjective sense of singular wholeness which overwrites the fragmented “two-part” logic of the poet’s hybrid multiplicity, is precisely the space where identity intervenes.

This gap of identity is, as the poem itself makes visually apparent, a contested, if not flatly contradictory, space: Nakada’s habitual practice of “self-identifying as a person of ‘mixed race,’ or as a ‘person of colour’” (2) seems at odds with his admission that “in communities of colour, I sometimes get the (paranoid?) sense that I am out of place” (3). That conflict takes on especial relevance in light of both Eve Sedgwick’s observation about paranoia’s tendency “to construct symmetrical relations . . . [and] symmetrical epistemologies” (Sedgwick 126) and Anne Cheng’s recent insights into racial melancholia and the intimate relationship between hypochondria and Asian American identity.⁷⁵ The visual symmetry of Nakada’s “connect-the-dots” and “see skin” poems does, after all, offer a compelling representation of the poet’s “paranoid?” fear of being “out of place”—and hence, like the leukemia patient quoted earlier,

⁷⁵ See A. Cheng.

literally pathological—as a mixed-race Asian Canadian.

But like Sedgwick and Cheng, Nakada also realizes that this bi-directional racial “phobia” is, like homophobia, partially a paranoid response to difference which, as Sedgwick rightly points out, functions largely by “blotting out any sense of the possibility of alternative ways of understanding or things to understand” (131). That this paranoia would be both a defining characteristic of Nakada’s racial identity and yet, simultaneously, anathema to his ludic experiments—which are all about riddling the reader with alternative ways to read—suggests that aesthetic play, broadly defined, might be one means of developing what Sedgwick has dubbed “reparative knowledge practices.” By encouraging paranoid reading practices (one is always left feeling anxiously suspicious as to whether one has read his poems the “right” way), Nakada seems to be asking us, in the same moment, to rethink our social reading habits more broadly. That is, by assuming that there is a “right”—which is to say, singularly meaningful—way to read Asian North American poetry *as* Asian North American, we are perhaps guilty of partaking in a paranoid feedback loop which ensures, as Nakada puts it, that “everything (colonization, genocide, erasure, migration, racial discrimination, miscegenation, assimilation) *has been done, re-done, and does*” (1, emphasis mine).

If the point of the preceding poets’ aesthetic play has been that what has been done should in fact be re-done, rather than undone, in novel and unexpected ways, it would seem that the ludic impulse of “formally innovative” Asian American poetry as such is not, despite critical assumptions to the contrary, primarily an embrace of “freeplay,” an attempt to use postmodern pastiche to tell a story of fragmented or hybridized ethnic identity. Nakada argues that “the story is that there is no story, or (no) missing story. A mis-story” (1). And that is, once again, the (Wittgensteinian) point. Playing games with and through language is not about mystery (mis-

story), about what is missing—whether it be freedom, narrative progression, grammatical accuracy, alphabetic order or “silk-and-pagoda” ethnic signifiers. Jean-Francois Lyotard says as much with greater eloquence:

In games of perfect information, the best performativity cannot consist in obtaining additional information . . . it comes rather from arranging the data in a new way, which is what constitutes a ‘move’ properly speaking. This new arrangement is usually achieved by connecting together series of data that were previously held to be independent. (51-52)

That the very invocation of the term “Asian American” constitutes just such a move—a recombinatory yoking of two identities, Asian and American, assumed to be not just independent but antagonistic—reminds us that language-games are not something particular to “experimental” Asian American poetry, but fundamental to the concept of Asian American writing as such. In other words, what we have been wont to call the “playful” or “formally innovative” aspects of the genre are, in large part, merely those aesthetic moves which are disorienting or unexpected enough to reveal themselves *as* moves. And the most advantageous critical move that we, in turn, can make is to realize that one does not always play to win; rather, to invoke Lyotard once more, language-games pit the poet against “at least one adversary, and a formidable one: the accepted language, or connotation” (10). The contemporary Asian American poets I have discussed eloquently urge us to disregard what such struggles yield beyond ensuring that the fight will go on, a legacy which is itself a victory. And isn’t that precisely the point of playing games—and pursuing justice—in the first place?

CHAPTER FIVE

(e) **Racing the Future: The Asian American *I Ching***

“It is a curious fact that such a gifted and intelligent people as the Chinese has never developed what we call science,” mused Carl Gustav Jung in 1949.⁷⁶ And while this might sound like the opening line of any number of pseudo-scientific treatises expostulating on the comparative inferiority of the “primitive” Oriental mind found throughout the history of Western anthropology, it turns out, quite remarkably, to be just the opposite. For what “we” Westerners have traditionally called science, Jung points out, “is based on the principle of causality, [which] is considered to be an axiomatic truth”— and yet by the mid-twentieth century, with that scientific community’s growing awareness that in fact “every process is partially or totally interfered with by chance,” those axioms had begun to be “shaken to their foundations . . . so much so that under natural circumstances a course of events absolutely conforming to specific laws is almost an exception.” Thus what initially appeared to be an intellectual anomaly in Chinese culture becomes a sign of prescience and sagacity; and for Jung, nowhere is this wisdom more evident than in the “monument of Chinese thought” in which his own words appear as the preface: these lines are taken from his introduction to the third edition of Richard Wilhelm’s definitive 1923 translation of the *I Ching*, or Book of Changes, an oracular Chinese text dating back to the second century BC which uses a questioner’s “chance” throw of coins (or, originally, yarrow stalks) to offer advice about his future.

Jung was one of very few Western intellectuals of the early twentieth century to take the *I*

⁷⁶ See Jung’s “Foreword” in Wilhelm.

Ching seriously as more than “a collection of ‘magic spells’,” eventually evolving the concept of “synchronicity” which he coined to describe the kind of anti-causal “non-science” the *I Ching* embodied into a full-fledged psychoanalytic method for “exploring the unconscious” in much the same way that the text was historically used to explore the unknown world of the future. Yet what is perhaps even more interesting than the psychological uses to which Jung put the *I Ching* are the literary uses he made of it. In a perverse twist of authorial license, Jung reveals several pages into the Preface that this very essay is in fact being written *by* the *I Ching*, for, purely in the name of “unbiased” scientific experiment, he had earlier “ask[ed] its judgment about its present situation, i.e., my intention to present it to the Western mind,” thrown three coins into the air, and transcribed the commentary that corresponded to the particular hexagram (pattern of lines) representing the combination of heads and tails he threw. By turning the writing of his Preface into an event requiring the oracle’s guidance, Jung in essence becomes the *I Ching*’s biographer - or perhaps, more accurately, its psychoanalyst: for “why not venture a dialogue with an ancient book that purports to be animated?”

Jung was, however, by no means the last Westerner to treat the *I Ching*’s capacity for soothsaying as a capacity for storytelling. From Philip Dick, who famously admitted to using the Book of Changes to plot the entirety of his 1962 science fiction classic *The Man in the High Castle*, to John Cage and Jackson Mac Low, who used it extensively in composing and choreographing their musical and dramaturgical collaborations, a growing contingent of mid-century American writers, artists, and musicians, many of whom came to be associated with a distinctly “countercultural” moment that was marked by an embrace of any number of “Asian” cultural practices, became extremely avid users and advocates of this alternative Chinese “bible” that Bob Dylan called “the only absolute truth” (qtd. in Smith 123). For each of these men, the *I*

Ching functioned as a strategic guide on how to “conduct [oneself] in a certain situation,” as Dick put it, a guide which he pointed out was based on an essentially “schizophrenic” conception of the universe as one filled with a synchronicity of “meaningful coincidences.”⁷⁷ The science fiction pioneer was quick to warn readers, however, that “if you use the *I Ching* long enough and continually enough, it will begin to change and shape you as a person. It will make you into a Taoist, whether or not you have ever heard the word, whether or not you want to be” (“Vertex”) and, in later years, he would come to regard the text with not only suspicion but antipathy – as a “malicious spirit” that “tends to hand you an answer which brings tragedy into your life” (“An Interview”).

In the decades that followed this 1960s surge in “Asian-inspired” American art, the popularity of the *I Ching* for the “exotic” purposes of bibliomancy and divination has continued to grow steadily throughout the Western world; yet it is Asian Americans, by and large, who have begun to express a renewed interest in the *I Ching*’s aesthetic and structural possibilities for *literary* production. And it is this apparent anachronism that I wish to explore in more detail; namely, the fact that an ethnic group whose members, as part of their own “countercultural” energies, have historically emphasized their identities as Americans rather than unassimilated foreigners and aggressively disavowed any exotifying or “Orientalist” representations that emerged from either within or beyond the community, would in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century find within the “mystique” of an ancient Chinese text a diegetic vehicle ideal for articulating the nuances of contemporary Asian *American* identity.⁷⁸

The last five years or so have seen a marked critical and popular shift towards what Jinqi

⁷⁷ See “Schizophrenia and the Book of Changes,” in Dick, *Shifting*.

⁷⁸ see also Josephine Nock-Hee Park’s discussion of Asian American poets avoiding *haiku* form for its potentially “Orientalist” implications in *Apparitions*.

Ling and others have referred to as Asian American speculative fiction (“Speculative”); an emergent group of young, mostly second-generation writers like Charles Yu, Ken Liu, Lily Hoang, Ted Chiang, E. Lily Yu and others have swelled the ranks of “weird” fiction previously occupied by precious few Asian American authors (with the notable exceptions of pioneers like David Wong Louie and Karen Tei Yamashita). And as one might expect, many have viewed this trend as a decidedly contemporary and “progressive” movement towards what one critic refers to as “the kind of intersectionist worldview that shifts conventionalized perceptions, encouraging us to think across traditional social and literary categories” (Chiang, “Interview”) – and hence beyond stereotypical ethnic categories and the canonical genre of identity-based minority narratives.

And yet while the technologically-infused moment in which these authors are writing would indeed seem to suggest that their work is drawing on wholly contemporary events and tropes for inspiration, it seems to me that their approaches to such developments are, in fact, making greater use of a far older “intersectionist worldview” -- a concept of the universe, and of the “synchronous” relationship between past, present, and future, which is precisely the one embodied in the four thousand year old *I Ching*. From Ken Liu’s “The Oracle” to Ted Chiang’s “Story of Your Life,” what comes to the fore time and again, as Chiang himself noted in a recent interview, are these Asian American authors’ “attempts to depict a scenario where knowing your own future is *not* a tragedy,” and to grapple, as Betsy Huang said of Chiang’s work, with the paradox inherent in the possibility that “there is agency on [one’s] part to create the future” and yet a sense in which “the future has been set and theoretically there is nothing [one] could change” (Chiang, “Interview”). In effect, these works attempt to enact, or even look for recourse in, the *I Ching*’s reassurance that, as R.G.H. Siu put it in his extremely popular *Portable Dragon*:

The Western Man's Guide to the I Ching (the translation which was largely responsible for making the *I Ching* a household name in 1970s America), “fate is not an awesome fixedness” and that “considerable latitude exists for personal accommodation and interstitial flexibility” (5).

This classic struggle between agency and determinism is, of course, especially relevant in the Asian American context, for the conflict between free will and cultural expectations, so often staged as a conflict between American “autonomy” and Asian “filiality” or duty, has long been at the heart of the vast majority of Asian American literature and literary criticism.⁷⁹ Too, the idea that one’s ethnic identity as an Asian American constitutes a form of genetic as well as cultural determinism which is nearly impossible to escape, either in one’s own mind or in society’s at large, is clearly central here. The point may be, then, that these “speculative” Asian American authors, many of whom are self-consciously working within the generic conventions of American science fiction, are not making use of a more “futuristic” worldview or a more “technologically advanced” present in order to grapple with these extant issues. Rather, and somewhat counterintuitively, they are, like C.G. Jung, Philip Dick and John Cage before them, finding within a far more “conventional” and “Eastern” worldview the opportunity to experiment with and challenge established “Western” notions of authenticity, creativity, agency and identity.

In this essay, I want to take a closer look at David Wong Louie, Lily Hoang, and Charles Yu, three authors whose experiments, which collectively stretch across three decades and three very different literary genres, involve just such a challenge. The short stories of Louie (who is by far the oldest of the three) have recently been “rediscovered” by critics in the context of Asian American speculative fiction, while Yu has been heralded as “the computer century’s heir of Philip Dick and Ray Bradbury” and Hoang’s “conceptual” writing has found a warm reception

⁷⁹ See, for example, Wong, *Between Necessity and Extravagance*, and, more recently, Ninh.

among a growing number of small-press publishers and “underground” anthologists. Here, I consider three of their works: Louie’s 1987 “In a World Small Enough,” a Pynchon-esque short story about the (eroticized) dangers of meaningful coincidences, initially published in *Chicago Review* and anthologized in Frank Chin et. al’s *The Big Aiiieeeee!*, but which quickly fell into obscurity; Hoang’s 2009 PEN Award-winning *Changing*, a conceptual text which formally reproduces the structure of the Book of Changes to tell the story of her Vietnamese parents’ immigration to America and her own coming-of-age in a largely white community; and Yu’s 2011 *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*, a science fiction adventure story which, like the *I Ching* itself, purports to be a kind of user’s guide to life and centers around a young Taiwanese American man living in an parallel universe.

While Hoang is the only one to make explicit reference to the *I Ching* through both content and structure, both Louie and Yu are, like Ted Chiang and Ken Liu, very clearly invested in how the unique configuration of reader-text interaction which the *I Ching* permits, and the “synchronous” relationship between past, present and future moments that it posits, captures the intergenerational and intercultural disjunctions and aporias which have come to define the Asian American experience and its conflicts. For Yu and Hoang, in particular, having parents who originate from not only a different country but “really, a different time” (C. Yu 70) means that understanding one’s ancestry requires, for Yu, a literal act of time travel (hence his choice of genre), and, for Hoang, learning an entirely new set of reading practices and rules that, as does the *I Ching*, forces one to “start at the bottom & move upwards just like the American Dream . . . we're here in the land of possibilities & so we must start at the bottom & work our way up just like these hexagrams do” (Hoang 3).

For me, the radical significance of these texts lies largely in how they are redefining

contemporary Asian American identity vis-à-vis the concept of synchronicity and interactivity as a predetermined, interdependent, but ultimately personal form of interactive decision-making; as, in other words, a form of *strategic gameplay*. Ted Chiang has argued that “there is actually very little player agency in video games. They try and give you the illusion of agency but for the most part there is very little that you can do to change the story” (interview). Yet by treating the Asian American subject as “a character at the beginning of a fully rendered, immersive environment video game, the world laid out before you a series of challenges, an endless scrolling realm full of periodically oscillating dangers” (Yu 63), as Yu does, these authors strive to “make[] those [illusory] decisions feel consequential” (Chiang, “Interview”) by depicting the ethnic experience as a constellation of synchronous or even random moments rather than a causal string of chronological events. In their hands, the ethnic memoir or autobiography no longer charts the classic Bildungsroman’s linear progression from ignorance to knowledge or alienation to assimilation, but is staged as a series of “challenges” and “dangers” which require that one *make* choices rather than simply learn from, or inherit, the choices of one’s predecessors. In short, these works fundamentally recast the terms in which we think about both Asian American identity *and* forms of contemporary ludic interaction.

Just as the *I Ching*, by permitting the user to *interpret* the future, counterintuitively provides him with the opportunity to *intervene* in it, these texts allow both their authors and readers to do what Yu calls “live outside the time loop,” Louie refers to as “being reclassified,” and Hoang thinks of as accessing an “alternate table of contents”; in all cases, their experiences can be considered “half-real,” a neologism coined by ludologist Jesper Juul to describe the ways in which video games straddle the line between material and immaterial forms of reality. For Juul, such games are places where people, and situations, “are not what they seem” (19), being

both real *and* fictional,⁸⁰ for the authors I consider here, the ludic becomes, by extension, a site where the racialized individual is transformed into one who is able to *do* things, even if only as a virtual avatar, instead of being at the mercy of a genetic and diegetic determinism that Yu calls “the story line of the world propelling me forward” (100). In light of both Asian American Studies’ present push to “discover for the ethnic text more transformative forms of agency” (“Racial Form” 94), as Colleen Lye put it, and game studies’ analogous attempts to understand how interactive media creates “intermediate” or alternative configurations of agency not accessible to its players in real life,⁸¹ an examination of how a new generation of minority American writers are transforming our conventional notions of agency by giving the ethnic text a “half-real” life of its own will hopefully prove to be a timely contribution to both of those efforts.

Changing the Book of Changes

For Philip Dick, who candidly confessed to using the *I Ching* to plot out every aspect of *The Man in the High Castle* -- “in each case when [a character] asked a question, I threw the coins and wrote the hexagram lines they got. That governed the direction of the book” (“Vertex”) -- the *I Ching*’s resultant “voice” clearly retains its Asian heritage. Nearly all of the characters in *High Castle* speak in what Timothy Evans calls “Japanized pidgin English” (369) and Christopher Palmer refers to as “telegraphese” (123), such that their speech appears, as Evans puts it, to have “a kind of zen quality . . . giv[ing] the impression that a character is speaking in aphorisms” (377). For Lily Hoang, on the other hand, who has similarly attempted to personify

⁸⁰ “Video games are *real* in that they consist of real rules with which players actually interact, and in that winning or losing a game is a real event. However, when winning a game by slaying a dragon, the dragon is not a real dragon but a fictional one. To play a video game is therefore to interact with real rules while imagining a fictional world, and a video game is a set of rules as well as a fictional world” (*half-real* 1).

⁸¹ See Wardrip-Fruin.

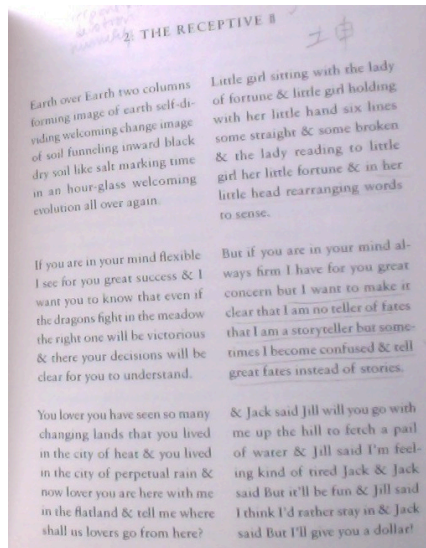
the *I Ching* in order to tell “[her] own story,” the resulting “voice” might be described as that of a slightly manic, intensely self-conscious, highly emotional woman in her early twenties - which is, of course, exactly how Hoang describes herself.

While for Dick, the relation between the *I Ching*’s “voice” and his own authorial one is more interpretive than mimetic (though, as I’ve just said, much of the novel’s dialogue seems to masquerade as direct transcription), for Hoang, there *is* no boundary between the two. The sixty-four sections which make up *Changing* oscillate between numerous plotlines, variously tracking the story of Hoang’s adolescence and experiences as a social pariah in elementary school; her romantic relationship with a Caucasian in young adulthood; her father’s stroke and her mother’s ovarian cancer; her older brother’s closeted homosexuality, and a slew of others, all interspersed with “commentaries” on the specific *I Ching* hexagram to which each section pertains. In short, the *I Ching* speaks in Hoang’s voice and vice versa; both use the pronoun “I” and share the same stylistic idiosyncrasies, such as the use of run-on sentences and the substitution of ampersands for the word “and,” and both, importantly, seem prone to fits of temper; at one point, the text snarls, “You reading this & wanting to know what it means & looking for answers & I am sick of offering you answers so easy & I want you to look at this I mean really look at this & from these stories find your own future” (42).

What earns Hoang’s disdain, here and at many other moments, is neither the desire to know one’s future nor the act of looking for it in a book. Rather, what she objects to is making the game too easy, for “I’m afraid this is a complex text, that this requires instructions, that this requires a history lesson” (133). And despite her use of the word “text,” Hoang most certainly means game: in the back of the book are two pages of “handouts” – a foldable paper “cup” and a numbered grid from 1 to 64, which is meant to be cut out of the book, sliced into tiny squares,

and placed inside the “cup,” such that one can literally pull one’s “fortune” out of a hat. In other words, *Changing* enacts the concept of fortunetelling as a choose-your-own-adventure enterprise that just barely satisfies what Jesper Juul, whose schematic combines several of the most influential classic game theorists’, considers to be the most basic definition of a game: “a rule-based formal system with variable and quantifiable outcomes, where different outcomes are assigned different values, where the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable” (*half-real* 7). And although Hoang provides all the tools necessary for the user to play this game, she yet admits that “I know you will read this however you want” (6); meaning, in other words, that the reader is quite capable of *refusing* to play the intended game.

Even if, however, one does play by Hoang’s rules, one finds it impossible to “read” *Changing* in any traditional sense of the word, for not only is the player, like any *I Ching* user, intended to choose just *one* slip of paper and consider the corresponding hexagram to be what Jung calls “a first and single answer” to any given question, but within each of the book’s sixty-four “hexagrams,” one is also instructed to read “from bottom to top” - although that instruction, interestingly, is mentioned only in a few of the sections and occurs, always, in the bottom-most part of the text, as seen below (accompanied by Wilhelm’s translation of the same hexagram for reference).



坤

2. K'un / The **Receptive**

☷☷☷ above K'UN THE **RECEPTIVE**, EARTH
 ☷☷☷ below K'UN THE **RECEPTIVE**, EARTH

This hexagram is made up of broken lines only. The broken line represents the dark, yielding, **receptive** primal power of yin. The attribute of the hexagram is devotion; its image is the earth. It is the perfect complement of THE CREATIVE—the complement, not the opposite,¹ for the **Receptive** does not combat the Creative but completes it. It represents nature in contrast to spirit, earth in contrast to heaven, space as against time, the female-maternal as against the male-paternal. However, as applied to human affairs, the principle of this complementary relationship is found not only in the relation between man and woman, but also in that between prince and

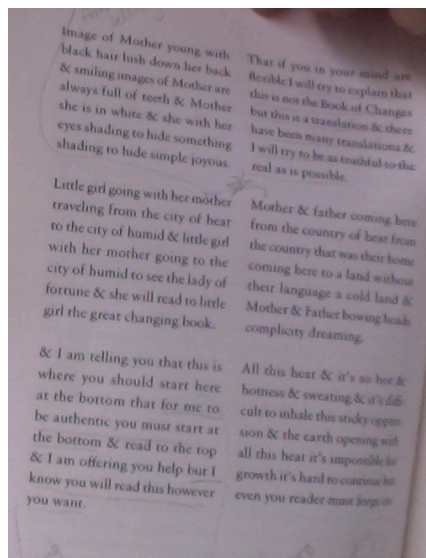


Figure 1: “The Receptive [Kun]” Hexagram, in Hoang’s (Left) and Wilhelm’s (Right) translations.

Changing is, as is apparent from the image above, not only a conceptual but a visual representation of the original Book of Changes. In Wilhelm’s version (which Hoang quotes throughout), as in the majority of other *I Ching* translations, each of the sixty-four hexagrams, meant to be “inclusive of all human situations in which a person might find himself” (Wilhelm 3), are followed by a translation of the original Chinese thematic/explanatory text written by King Wen of the Shang Dynasty and his offspring, interspersed with either the translator’s

interpretation of those explanations or with other well-known commentaries by people such as Confucius.

Hoang's version, in that sense, is both a more "authentic" reproduction (in that she replicates, using blocks of text, the precise pattern of lines that make up each hexagram) and a far less faithful one, for the relationship between the content of each text-block and the meaning of the hexagram, as reflected in the example above, often seems tenuous at best. And yet, by claiming that "this is simply a new translation of the *I Ching*, or Book of Changes" (133) and that "I am not the originator of this the ever-changing Book of Changes . . . I am just another translator to offer you a new story" (4)", Hoang is in fact offering just that – a new story -- by redefining translation as a form of confession. That is, the foreign text that is being rendered intelligible to the reader is not just the Asian *I Ching* but Hoang herself, the "stereotypical Asian-American girl" (*Parabola*, 58) — making her earlier disgust and impatience with her potential readers less about their desire to get "too easy answers" about their own fortunes and much more about their desire to get easy answers about *her*.

In short, the element of the *I Ching* that Hoang makes greatest use of is its ability to function as what Espen Aarseth defined as a "cybertext." Aarseth, a Norwegian ludologist, is most well known for his 1997 theory of "ergodic literature," a neologism which he coined to differentiate between "ergodic" literary works (of which cybertexts were a form), in which "nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text," and "nonergodic" works, in which "no extranoematic responsibilities [are] placed on the reader except (for example) eye movement and the periodic or arbitrary turning of pages" (1). The point of such a differentiation was, largely, to attend to those texts which "the various concepts of 'reading' do not account for"; namely, those in which the consumer of the text functions "as a more integrated figure than

even reader-response theorists would claim” (1). Ultimately, Aarseth’s claim was that by forcing the reader to do “work,” (the term “ergodic” is a combination of the Greek words for “work” and “path”), cybertexts fundamentally alter the relationship between, as well as the definition of, both reader and text. “The cybertext reader IS a player,” Aarseth insisted, “The cybertext IS a game-world; it IS possible to explore, get lost . . . not metaphorically, but through the topological structures of the textual machinery” (4).

What transforming the reader into a player does is to “raise the stakes of interpretation”; for “the cybertext reader . . . is not safe, and therefore, it can be argued, she is not a reader” (4). In other words, interacting with a cybertext carries the same risks as human interaction, and especially interaction with human difference: “trying to know a cybertext . . . can result in either intimacy or failure . . . put[ting] its would-be reader at risk: the risk of rejection” (4). Cybertexts can thus be distinguished in part by the kinds of struggles and desires which they inspire in the reader, “not merely for interpretive insight but also for narrative control” (4). For the cybertext reader is motivated by her desire to, in some sense, influence the text itself: ““I want this text to tell my story; the story that could not be without me”” (4).

According to Aarseth, “the best-known example of cybertext in antiquity” (10) is none other than the *I Ching*. Thus, while we might consider the whole purpose of using the Book of Changes to be receiving and interpreting knowledge about the future, Aarseth’s insights suggests that narrative *control* is also of primary importance. That is, what the *I Ching* reader, like any cybertext reader, desires above all is not to have her future told, but to feel that she is instrumental in *creating* that potential future -- that what the book is giving her is not just one of sixty-four predetermined narratives or horoscopes, but “*my* story; the story that could not be without me.” Accordingly, the *I Ching* allows its users, as Philip Dick said in an essay on the

subject, to escape the feeling that, in daily life, “instead of doing things, [the user] is done to. Reality happens to him” (*Shifting*).⁸²

Given that for the female or minority writer, “my story” never really just means “my story,” but is inevitably read, and often written, as a kind of representative “insider’s look” into whatever group(s) the writer is perceived to be a part of,⁸³ the cybertextual implications of the *I Ching*, and of Hoang’s *Changing*, become especially interesting. For unlike a nonergodic Asian American text - even one as formally “innovative” as Maxine Hong Kingston’s canonical *The Woman Warrior* - which essentially rewards the reader with the parting gift of “insight” into the world of Asian America just for playing, *Changing* takes advantage of the *I Ching*’s ergodic demands for extraonematic labor on the part of the reader by actively refusing to “offer [the reader] answers so easy.” In short, the ergodic element is what here relieves the minority subject of her representational burden, allowing not only the reader, but Hoang herself, to feel that *Changing* is indeed *her* story: which is to say a story about an Asian American individual, certainly, but not necessarily an “Asian American story” in the generic sense. Crucially, this shift towards the “personal” permits Hoang to avoid the anxiety of proving her “authenticity” as an Asian American; in fact, it allows her to reject the need for authenticity at all, *Changing* being “nothing new & nothing I have created” but simply a “new translation.”⁸⁴

For all of Hoang’s apparent resistance to authorial originality, however, *Changing* clearly

⁸² See also “Schizophrenia and the Video Game player” in Wardrip-Fruin, *First Person*.

⁸³ This is what Caroline Rody, in her reading of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, describes as “the mythopoetic enterprise of identification with [the author’s] ancestors” that requires the author to “aspir[e] to a voice that sounds like ‘we’” (Rody 95, 97).

⁸⁴ For a helpful synopsis of the issues surrounding Asian American literary authenticity, refer to the infamous debate between Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston, nicely summarized and discussed in King-Kok Cheung’s “The Woman Warrior versus The Chinaman Pacific: *Must a Chinese American Critic Choose between Feminism and Heroism?*”

remains a testament to its author's attempt to "creatively" reinterpret the foundational assumptions of the original Book of Changes. Rather than thinking about each hexagram as a stand-alone response to a player's single question, Hoang treats the *I Ching* as a collective, reified set of cultural norms which, being predicated on the fundamental concepts of *yin* and *yang* -- the former being historically associated with the "female" domain of "responsiveness, flexibility, devotion, and humility" (39) and the latter with its "male" counterpart of "unyielding" strength⁸⁵ -- forces its users to position themselves within a specific set of *gendered* expectations as a prerequisite to making predictions about their futures. Criticizing, for example, Wilhelm's commentary on hexagram 37, "The Family," in which he asserts that "this hexagram represents the laws obtaining within the family . . . the tie that holds the family together lies in the loyalty and perseverance of the wife," Hoang writes: "Translator translating that the perseverance of the woman furthers the family but I'm the translator here & I say this isn't right it's not right at all & I insist that only perseverance from the whole family furthers the family" (75). Divorcing the concept of "culture" from that of the "feminine" -- a pairing which is, we should note, a familiar trope in much Asian American literature as well (as an oft-quoted line in *The Woman Warrior* that "heavy, deep-rooted women were to maintain the past against the flood, safe for returning" [8] attests to) -- Hoang seizes the opportunity to author an alternative future for both the "feminine" and the "Asian" as such. "In Eastern cultures where this the great changing book comes from that Fire is seen as feminine because Fire needs something else to survive," she writes, but "we are in the West & we don't see Fire this way & that maybe here Fire is power . . .

⁸⁵ See A. Huang.

& maybe here it can still be female beauty" (100).⁸⁶

Living in the Present-Indefinite

Hoang's *Changing* suggests that what separates an "ergodic" Asian American text from its "nonergodic" counterparts and predecessors is not a question of generation, but rather one of narrative interactivity and experience. Her "new translation" of the *I Ching*, accordingly, actively works to author alternative futures for the Asian American subject by rethinking the relationship between the (personal) particular and the (representative) universal—in large part, as I've suggested, by upsetting assumptions about how the category of gender creates its own "universalizing" assumptions.

Charles Yu takes this project one step further, considering the distinction between ergodic and nonergodic Asian American texts through the frame of temporal experience and what we might call the distinction between synchronicity and causality. Broadly speaking in terms of the latter, the works of Kingston and Amy Tan, like their scholarly counterparts, from Elaine Kim's groundbreaking *Asian American Literature* to Sau-ling Cynthia Wong's *Reading Asian American literature: from Necessity to Extravagance*, have tended to depict the Asian American experience through a fundamentally teleological framework, establishing a developmental narrative that seeks answers about the present by turning to the past: works like *The Woman Warrior* and *The Joy Luck Club*, while both employing novel formal structures that disrupt a singular narrative perspective or historical moment, both use the immigrant generation's transition from "old China" to "new America" as a way of tracking, not only

⁸⁶ It seems noteworthy that Hoang's interpretation is factually incorrect; traditionally, *yang* (the masculine element) is associated with fire and *yin* with water; furthermore, in Wilhelm's commentary on this same hexagram, he points out that "revolution means removal of that which is antiquated."

spatially but temporally and psychologically, the kinds of cultural “vestiges” which seem not only outdated but often incomprehensible and unjust to that generation’s Asian American offspring.

In other words, by using the narrator’s insight into her immigrants parents’ pasts as a means of resolving the current intergenerational and intercultural conflicts which they face, a significant number of Asian American novels tend to treat the past as that which, like one’s racial identity, is inherited in the present and dictates the possibilities of one’s future -- just as Asian American historians and sociologists tend to refer back to nineteenth and twentieth century America’s anti-Asian legislation both to understand contemporary forms of anti-Asian social discrimination and as an attempt to prevent such anti-democratic “backwardness” from becoming the status quo of the future.

Asian American works of the nonergodic type can thus be thought of as being interested primarily in a historical narrative of *causality*, where past, present, and future are understood as three sequential points in time, and where what we might call “identity formation” becomes the line running through them. Texts like Hoang’s and Yu’s, however, are, like the *I Ching* itself, characterized instead by a narrative of *synchronicity*, what C.G. Jung defined as an “acausal connecting principle”⁸⁷ in which past, present, and future events exist not on a continuum but as a constellation or web of interdependent, meaningful, but not necessarily *causally*-related events.

Like Jung, for whom the *I Ching* represented the workings of “the ancient Chinese mind” in contrast to a Western one, Charles Yu’s interest in the tension between what he refers to as “tensed” or “tenseless” narratives (clearly an oblique reference to the A- and B-theories of

⁸⁷ See Jung, *Synchronicity*.

J.M.E. McTaggart⁸⁸), and his coining of the term “chronodiegetics,” evolves specifically out of his attempt to make sense of how one’s sense of *temporality*, rather than one’s racial difference, inflects one’s identity as an Asian/Asian American. Broadly speaking, Asian American authors have tended to use concepts of space and distance to emphasize the differences between Asia and America (as, in Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*, two countries separated by “an ocean many thousands of *li* wide”), employing especially the tropes’ metaphorical valences to capture the Asian immigrant parent’s characteristically stoic and tight-lipped demeanor and the *emotional* distance which it creates between parent and child: for as the narrator of *The Woman Warrior* famously put it, in Chinese culture, “even the good things are unspeakable” (185).

Yu’s novel, however, is set in some alternative future world in which geographical distance, at least, is no longer of any consequence (technological advancements are such that people can now travel essentially at the speed of light in their own personal time machines). As in so many science fiction novels, however, *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* is as much a depiction of an as-yet unrealized future as it is a nostalgic homage to a “simpler” time when people were in some sense more respectful of the universe’s “natural” rhythms and timescale. For Yu, though, that “simpler” existence is not an image of 1950s domestic Americana, as it so often is for Western writers, but rather of an apparently pre-modern Asia:

My father had originally come from a faraway country, a part of reality, a tiny island in the ocean . . . really, a different time, where people still farmed with water buffalo . . . where there was enough magic left in the world . . . that *time travel devices were not only unnecessary, but would have diminished the world, would have changed its mechanic, its web of invisible dynamics. The technology of the day was enough, the technology of the sunrise and sunset, the week of work and rest in cycles, in rhythm, sixteen hours of hard rice-farming labor . . . The years passing by, each one a perfect machine.* (Yu 70, emphasis mine).

⁸⁸ see McTaggart; Ricoeur; and Currie.

In short, the distinction the novel makes between the West - in which instantaneous time travel has become the norm - and the Orient - where existence itself *was* a form of time travel - essentially turns cultural difference into a technology of temporal experience. Yu marvels at the fact that his Taiwanese immigrant mother, from whom he learned his English grammar, is able to speak the language of the West at all; and “who could blame her? The tenses are so complicated, had never quite made sense to her, as they didn't work the same way in her language, one based largely on the infinitive” (82). Even at the most fundamental level of language, Chinese cultural “mechanics” immerse one in a kind of tenseless infinity, a “rhythmic” metaphysical cycle which is placed literally in tension with English, whose “complicated tenses” emphasize instead a linear, causal mode of living and of narrating that life.

What Yu is making light of by “ethnicizing” these two opposing forms of temporal experience or what he calls “chronodiegesis” is, essentially, what Jesper Juul and other game studies theorists, drawing on examples from narratology (especially Gerard Genette’s work on “timelessness”) have referred to as the distinction between “event time” (or fictional time) and “discourse time” (or play time).⁸⁹ Differentiating between the duration of fictional events that a game narrates (for example, a period of fifty years) and the duration of player experiences (on the order of minutes or hours), such critics have pointed out that the disjunction between these two kinds of time is often an intentional and necessary element of video game design, for it allows the game, on the one hand, to possess a semblance of “historicity” and hence additional complexity,⁹⁰ and it allows the player, on the other, to become immersed and “forget” herself in

⁸⁹ See Wei.

⁹⁰ See Ryan.

the game's decades-spanning narrative regardless of how few "real-time" moments she actually devotes to play.⁹¹

The apparent disjunction between "Asian" and "Western" experience that Charles Yu considers to be the domain of the Asian immigrant is, in other words, the same disjunction which is the status quo for the video game player, who experiences what David Herman calls "fuzzy temporality" or "polychrony" as a matter of course. Indeed, this connection is made even more explicit in *How to Live* when Yu draws further parallels between the immigrant, and the obstacles to successful assimilation that he or she experiences, and the experience of the video game player. Amidst a discussion of the recent "gentrification" of Minor Universe 31 (the novel's alternate Earth), which is composed largely of "stable, middle-class regions, i.e., the subdivided science fictional zones" surrounded by several ghettoized "unincorporated areas of 'reality'," Yu tells us that "despite improvement in recent years, successful transition into the SF [science fictional] zone remains difficult to achieve for many immigrant families . . . even after decades of an earnest and often desperate striving for acceptance and assimilation, many remain . . . along the border between SF and 'reality'" (78). The "overall quality of experience" for residents in these literal margins or interstitial regions, is, accordingly, "thinner, poorer, and less substantial than of those in the middle and upper regions, while at the same time, due to its mixed and random and unthemed nature, less satisfying than that of reality."

In some sense, the pastoral scene that Yu paints of his Taiwanese rice-farming ancestors, and the "less satisfying" experience of reality and of "discourse time" that they experience upon immigrating, seems an all-too-familiar reminder of the stereotypical trope of the mystical Orient's "static" time - what Sau-ling Wong refers to as the Western fantasy of a "ritual-

⁹¹ See Juul, "Games."

permeated, mythical Time of a China past, where individuals' lives are deprived of choice, shaped by tradition and buffeted by inexorable 'natural' circumstances" ("Sugar" 186) - and Asian cultural "backwardness." Yet by taking literally the metaphor of his immigrant father coming from "a different time" and yet being, "as he often was . . . ahead of his time without even realizing it" (C. Yu 19), Yu employs this image not as a contrast to the fantasy of Western "progress" and freedom, but as a way of transforming the fundamental terms through which we understand what "Asia" means in the context of the *Asian American* imagination. Because for Yu, who presents himself, like Hoang, as a near-caricature of the stereotypical Chinese American male - a whiz at math and science, terrified of approaching girls, ashamed at his parents' "backward" ways and yet overcome with guilt at being unable to rise to their scholastic expectations - being Asian American means interacting with "Asia" in specifically temporal terms.

Tellingly, Yu considers his own attitude towards his heritage to be primarily "nostalgic," which he defines not in the sense of a longing for something that was or could have been, but "manifests itself . . . as a feeling of missing a place one has never been, a place very much like one's home universe" (47). This place is, of course, none other than that "tiny island in the ocean" from which his parents immigrated and which he has never seen. In short, being Asian American here involves something of a communalization or projection of affect, such that one vicariously inhabits one's parent's memories as if they were one's own. The novel implication of such "mind-sharing" is not, however, that it allows Yu to proclaim his "authenticity" as an Asian American; far from it. Like Philip Dick, who a number of critics have considered to be Yu's literary progenitor - one called the young Taiwanese American "the computer century's heir to Philip Dick and Ray Bradbury," while another insisted that he "must be the love child of Dick

and Kurt Vonnegut” (Axlotl) - Yu considers “originality,” which in this context also means “identity,” to come *from* inhabiting an already-written Asian text, whether written by a centuries-dead Chinese philosopher or a sixty-something year old Taiwanese immigrant.⁹²

This notion is carried to its extreme in Yu’s debut novel; “How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe” is not only the title of the book we are reading, but also of the book which has been written by Yu’s “future self” and which he discovers, essentially by accident, in the console of his time machine after escaping a near-fatal encounter with that future self in an alternate reality plane. The book which we have in our hands, then, is essentially a transcription of one which has not, technically, yet been written; thus, “I’m reading this book and somehow in the act of reading it, I am . . . creating a copy of it, in a very real sense I’m generating a new version . . . I am making the book my own” (104).

In producing “a copy of a copy of a copy of a copy, and so on, forever” (111), Yu comes to realize, of course, that he is himself essentially nothing more than a copy of his father, and his father before him, and so on, and that the book, which is ostensibly his autobiography, is thus not only his but theirs, one which he is both encountering “for the first time . . . while also seeing it from direct experience exactly as it is” (112). Equal parts spiritual medium, translator, and novelist, Yu finds in this Asian “user’s manual” the potential to transform reading and transcribing into a personal “creative act”; not in the traditional sense of reader-response criticism, but in the sense of writing, for him, what constitutes a truly “representative” Asian American narrative, a way of putting “the contents of [our] fathers’ lives . . . Into a story, into a life, into a life story . . . Which is what sons do for their time-traveling fathers” (112).

For Yu, then, writing the ethnic novel is an act of ritualized play and dramatization which

⁹² For a discussion about the distinction between “Eastern” and “Western” conceptions of interdependence and originality, see Jen.

involves “representing” his Asian American experience in much the way that Johan Huizinga, in his famous tract on the play-element in culture, *Homo Ludens*, understood representation to function in the sacred contests and seasonal feasts of ancient Greece and China. “The rite, or ‘ritual act’ represents a cosmic happening,” Huizinga argued. “The word ‘represents,’ however, does not cover the exact meaning of the fact . . . for here ‘representation’ is really . . . the mystic repetition or *re-presentation* of the event . . . as the Greeks would say, ‘it is *methectic* rather than *mimetic*’” (15, emphasis original). Methexis is, in this sense, not opposed to mimesis; the latter defines imitation as a formal relation between two things while the former refers, in dramaturgy, to an Ancient Greek style of theater where the audience participated and improvised (and, in philosophy, to the relationship between a particular and Platonic form⁹³). In short, Yu imagines his novel as a *methectic* text: “there is a sense in which I am the author of this book, and a sense in which I am merely its first reader” (111). Blurring the relationship between author and reader, performer and audience, present and past, Yu thus ultimately becomes “a character in my own adventure story” (217).

Like the video game avatar which he earlier described himself as, Yu finds within the rules of this “fully immersive” code-based world (which also determine, in a biological sense, the “repetitive” or “unoriginal” aspects of his ethnic identity) not a *loss* of intimacy or possibility, but a proliferation of it: after all, the closest thing he has to a romantic relationship is with his time machine’s operating system, TAMMY, whose “soul is code, a fixed set of instructions, and although you might think having a relationship with someone like that would get boring after a while, it doesn't” (9). In speaking of TAMMY, though, Yu might in fact be describing himself; and, sure enough, when he attempts to confess his love to “her” at the end of

⁹³ See Anagnostopoulos.

the book, she tactfully reminds him that “I do have a user-input-based dynamic feedback loop personality generation system” -- meaning, as he realizes after an awkward pause, that “I’ve been having a relationship with myself” (220). Thus, unlike in real life, where “it’s just the story line of the world propelling me forward” (100), the “fixed-instruction” novel *How to Live*, like the “user-input-based dynamic feedback loop” of a video game, allows Yu to occupy, “in the space between free will and determinism, these imperceptible gaps, these lacunae, the volitional interstices” (217-18) where he can finally locate some sense of agency. Reading/Writing – or rather, “playing” – what is essentially his own Book of Changes, Yu, the quintessential gamer, finally comes to realize that “I can allow the events of my life to happen to me. Or I can take those very same actions and make them my own” (115).

Losing one’s place

Like Charles Yu, who before he (re)discovered his own personal *I Ching*, used to park his time machine in “the most uneventful piece of time I could find” (15) every single night, Anthony Ma is literally going nowhere fast; not only because, also like Yu in his unenlightened days, he is a perennial underachiever and all-around nobody, but because in David Wong Louie’s “In a World Small Enough,” nowhere is, in fact, a place.

That this 1987 short story has remained as disregarded as its main character is a tragic reminder of how significant remains Asian American literary studies’ critical blindspots; despite being published first in *Chicago Review* and later anthologized in Frank Chin et. al’s infamous collection of Asian American writing, 1991’s *The Big Aiiieeeee!*, “In a World Small Enough” has, as far as I can tell, inspired only a single piece of published critical commentary in its

twenty-six years of existence.⁹⁴ This is due in large part, I suspect, to the marked absence of any of the motifs and tropes that we have come to associate with Asian American literature at the level of either character or plot. Antonio Ma is not only the antithesis of the stereotypically industrious, effeminate Chinese male – which perhaps explains why “In a World” was included in *The Big Aiiieeeee!* in the first place⁹⁵ - but his family immigrated so many generations back that he is, by his own declaration, essentially Chinese (and Hispanic?) in name only. He has no family to speak of besides a despised younger brother whom he calls on “only as a last resort,” no childhood which he can recall beyond “incidents of his childhood when bicycles were fun,” no political affiliations, no occupation and no real possessions to speak of outside of what fits in the back seat of his gas guzzler. In short, Antonio Ma lacks all ties to the institutions of history, labor, family and nation through which Asian American characters are traditionally defined; which is, given his nickname, The-Man-Who-Loses-Things, perhaps the whole point.

The paucity of information which we can gather about Antonio Ma is matched only by that which defines the world in which he lives. Like Dick’s *The Man in the High Castle*, “In a World Small Enough” depicts what is apparently a post World War 2 world in which America is under the thumb of some unspecified Asian dictatorship; but while in Dick’s dystopic novel, the fall of the Allies was the result of a definitive Japanese naval attack, in Louie’s version, it is apparently the hydrogen bomb—in Asian hands rather than American ones—which ushers in the West’s demise. This “irradiated” new world is, accordingly, filled with reminders of its wartime defeat: Antonio visits a local zoo to witness a procession of sickly animals, each the product of

⁹⁴ See Gomez-Vega.

⁹⁵ At least, Chin et. al considered the story to be of a piece with their own oftentimes misogynistic goal of rescuing and revitalizing Asian American masculinity; in the few lines of introduction which precede Louie’s story in the anthology, the editors applaud him for “making rubble” of stereotypes by introducing Antonio Ma, “a bad driver with overactive hormones” (580); seemingly overlooking the fact that “bad driving,” and even “overactive hormones,” have been racial stereotypes associated with Asian Americans both present and past.

“artificial insemination that employed inexpensive irradiated sperm” (94); falls in love with a woman who has been rendered infertile and whose “lovespot,” she warns, will make him “go hunting . . . for water and a bar of that anti-radiation soap” (93); and is constantly reminded of the fact that his own “erectile tissues ha[ve] malfunctioned” (94) as an apparent result of radiation poisoning.

What is perhaps most disturbing about this grim alternate future, though, is that Antonio himself, in an unmistakable homage to *Gravity's Rainbow's* Tyrone Slothrop, seems in fact to have *caused* it, making “the perpetrator of the crime [] also its victim” (92). “In a World” vacillates between two plotlines - the first playing out, in the story’s present tense, what Antonio refers to as the “Endless Losses” of his adult life, in which he briefly acquires and then loses everything from a bicycle to a fiancée, and the second being a series of hypothetical discussions set in New York around 1911, between Niels Bohr, Enrico Fermi and Albert Einstein, about quantum mechanics and the possibilities of harnessing nuclear energy. Yet despite the second plotline preceding the first by some thirty years at least, what occupies Bohr et. al’s conversations is in fact the supposedly not-yet-born Antonio, whom they dub “The-Man-Who-Loses-Things” or simply “Herr Z,” and who Fermi calls “the personification and incarnation of radioactivity” (98). Like a radioactive element, Antonio/Herr Z “gives off emanations; in the case of Radium these are particles and rays; for Herr Z they are his possessions” (98). And indeed, Antonio simply cannot seem to control these “emanations,” which, as he tells his wife-to-be, started as “insignificances (buttons, coins)” before becoming “causes for concern (hair, molars)” and eventually cost him his livelihood as a “ladler” at Max Gross Chemicals and his apartment tenancy in a shabby, but safe, part of town.

“Herr Z’s” material losses, however, turn out to be Bohrs’ and Fermi’s intellectual gains.

“All that is left for us to do,” they realize, “is to apply the lesson of Herr Z to the principle of nuclear fission and . . . “ (101). Before the two young scientists can complete their thought process, however - and “discover” the scientific formula behind the atomic bomb – a grinning, avuncular Einstein interrupts and lures them away with the promise of more innocuous entertainment. “Don’t we agree that one Herr Z is enough for this world?” he admonishes them; “Come, you men of science, enough talk of weapons . . . a new Greta Garbo show is playing in town” (101). The implication, of course, is that Einstein’s well-meaning intervention is what forestalls the Allies’ creation of nuclear weaponry - and allows the Axis forces, in turn, to make deadly use of it.

As with Yu’s novel, then, “In a World” blurs the boundary between past and future events, positing instead, like the *I Ching*, a kind of simultaneous or synchronous temporal relation rather than a chronological one. But while in both *Changing* and *How to Live Safely*, this synchronicity is precisely what allows the Asian American to rethink his or her relationship to both her Asian ancestry and herself, in the world Louie constructs, ethnic ancestry truly *is* a thing of the past. Antonio, as mentioned earlier, has lost his identity *as* a Chinese along with everything else; attempting to reassure his (Caucasian) fiancée’s anxiety about “the cuts in [her] benefits if [she] doesn’t marry Anglo,” he brags that “my family’s been in this country so many generations, the Chinese so bred out of me, I’ve been reclassified” (93).

Such “reclassification,” however, cuts both ways. Antonio’s nameless Anglo fiancée in fact becomes the story’s chosen mouthpiece for espousing an alternative “Eastern” worldview. As a kind of “*I Ching* for Dummies” (which Antonio doubtless needs), the woman not only literally guides our anti-hero’s actions, causing him to pull an abrupt U-turn on the street when he first glimpses her in his rear view mirror, but becomes a kind of spiritual guru as well. “I

believe in reincarnation,” she says, in an apparent *non sequitur* that follows Antonio’s confession of sexual impotency; “There’s nothing new in this world. Everything’s been recycled from whatever was here on Day One . . . It’s all in the atoms” (94).

As an uncanny echo of C.G. Jung’s belief that “the ancient Chinese mind,” as reflected in the *I Ching*, “contemplates the cosmos in a way comparable to that of the modern physicist,” such that a multiplicity of individuals or events are “of the same quality . . . because all are the exponents of one and the same momentary situation” (Wilhelm xi), Antonio’s fiancée comes to precisely the same conclusion that Bohrs and Fermi did forty years earlier (or later?). “Think of yourself as a big-deal missile, she says. All the metal and plutonium and kilotons are you . . . You blow up over some city. The kaboom is you, the dying is you . . . A few years later down the road, a baby’s born and she can’t have babies. She’s you, too, but in a slightly reorganized form” (94). Not only convinced but aroused by this explanation in a way that he had thought himself incapable of, Antonio responds, “Yeah, I feel it. I feel like I could explode . . . you are a sweet talking lady” (94). In this “small” world, then, identity, especially ethnic identity, is no longer a form of individuality or personality in the sense that we currently think of it; indeed, in the world of the story, there *is* no such thing as personality. “I’m not sore you can’t doodle,” Antonio’s fiancée consoles him. “Makes me feel like I have a personality.” “A what?” he asks. “Something from before the War. It’s not important” (94). Instead, the identity categories of “Chinese” and “Anglo” become, as suggested earlier, primarily socioeconomic categories – algorithmic formulas which somehow determine an individual’s social welfare “benefits.”

Yet it is difficult, given this “erasure” of racial difference, to make sense of the few decidedly “Asian” tropes and motifs that crop up in Louie’s story, which seem to gesture towards the “ethnicization” of this postwar world and yet seem to have no specific function in terms of

either plot or characterization. This is particularly noticeable in the story's recurrent references to BIMS (bombed irradiated mutants) who, while not described in specifically racial terms, are all Cantonese-speaking and clearly occupy some denigrated social stratum, not being allowed to marry, use cars or bicycles, or even smile. In fact, upon (inexplicably) losing his car and his fiancée after returning from a quick trip to a local "mil-mall" (military mall) to purchase a "prenuptial dog-on-a-stick" (97), Antonio becomes paranoid that he will in fact be mistaken for a BIM, since "only BIMS don't go on wheels." "You're worried someone might mistake you for a BIM?" his brother Bing asks upon hearing that Antonio wants to borrow his bike. "Bing, I'm worried about that this means the state can do to me next," Antonio confesses.

And well he should be; for what happens "next" - not in the literal arrangement of the text, for "In a World" is made up of at least fifteen separate vignettes which are jumbled together out of chronological (and hence causal) order - is that Antonio does, literally, get reclassified. He finds Bing's bike tied to a tree in a zebra exhibit, and, upon discovering a "peculiar label" on its handlebars that resembles a UPC bar code, makes his way to the nearest Lost & Found. There, he encounters two BIMS who inform him (in Cantonese, with no accompanying translation, but which Ma apparently understands) that he needs a "un i ver sal pro duct code in ter face," and they proceed to affix a UPC sticker to his forehead. After being "scanned," Antonio is led down into a room that he first mistakes for a "Paleolithic exhibit" but soon recognizes as containing items "of a slightly more recent vintage": first, his wallet, shoes, and other items that he has lost in the last several days, finally, his fiancée's stockings, which he saw her wearing literally hours before. Upon attempting to break the glass to reach the hosiery, Antonio is immediately restrained by the BIMS; "your belongings are safe, they tell him. You have nothing left to lose. We keep inventory here for you" (102).

In attempting to recover his “lost” identity, Antonio Ma, himself now bearing on his forehead the UPC identifier that, it turns out, all BIMS are required to wear, is reduced to nothing more than the final piece of catalogued “inventory” that represents everything that he ever owned or was. Having, as the BIMS tell him, “nothing left to lose,” Ma becomes an artifact of his own “classified” reality in a final testament to his “radioactive” existence. Just as Enrico Fermi predicted (or recollected), Ma’s “atoms, those of his corporeal self and those of his accoutrements, will be [have been] dispersed throughout the universe” (101), such that, as his “universal” product code suggests, he becomes “one with the universe” in the Taoist sense that his *I Ching*-esque fiancée once described. What gets “dissipated,” in other words, as Louie uses several mathematical functions to depict (see Figure 2), is not merely Ma’s physical possessions, but the anxiety and “nervous energy” that are associated with his “Western” need to define himself as a consumer and a collector.

Summary diagrams of Antonio Ma’s predicament:

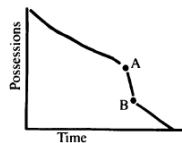


Fig. 1.

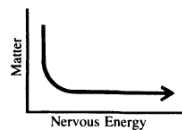


Fig. 2.

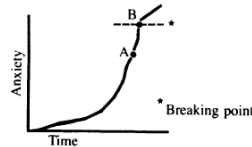


Fig. 3.

Fig. 1. Escalation of Dissipation

Fig. 2. Conversation of Matter to (Nervous) Energy

Fig. 3. Anxiety Index

Fig. 1. describes the Escalation of Dissipation in relationship to time elapsed. Note the precipitous drop between point A (loss of auto) and point B (loss of bicycle). Fig. 2. represents Einstein’s Energy/Matter relationship, $E = mc^2$, here adapted and slightly modified, but the basic elements of the equation remain intact: each gram of matter (i.e. his possessions) lost is converted into measurable energy (i.e. nervous tension). Therefore, an extraordinary amount of energy, albeit negative, is gained. Lastly, Fig. 3. illustrates the Anxiety Index: as time passes his feelings of anxiety increase in inverse proportion to the quantity of things he has yet to lose. Consider once more Fig. 1. specifically line AB.

Figure 2. Louie's "scientific" diagrams in "In a World Small Enough"

Louie's troping of "Western" science -- through diagrams like those above; through the insertion, at the beginning of several of the story's vignettes, of "pop" translations of various scientific theorems (including the second law of thermodynamics - "a hotdog chewed cannot be unchewed" - Lavoisier's law of conservation of matter, and Newton's first and third laws of motion); and through the conversations of Bohr et. al -- would seem to stand in direct opposition to C. G. Jung's belief that the "accident" of nature trumps the power of Western science to predict the outcome of events using universal laws and axioms. Indeed, not only are Bohrs and Fermi able to precisely "predict" Ma's eventual dissipation in much the same way that they can the behavior of radioactive atomic particles, but in retrospect, none of Antonio's decisions - to turn his car around to pick up his fiancée, to borrow Bing's bicycle, to visit the mil-mall and zoo - can really said to have been "his"; rather, they all seem to have inexorably moved him towards the "destiny" of classification towards which he seemed intended.

Yet from this perspective, the "accident" of Antonio's identity as a Chinese American - however "bred out" of him his ethnic heritage may be - should also be seen as no mere coincidence, but rather as part of the "axioms" that underwrite the physics of Louie's own fictional universe. That is, while the category of race might, on the surface, seem to have little effective "force" in the story, Antonio's fate suggests that there *is* in fact something inherently "unstable," in the atomic sense, about being Asian American. After all, it is Antonio, rather than his Anglo fiancée or a Cantonese BIM, who is able to somehow straddle two temporal realms and hence essentially *determine* the scientific rules regarding radioactive phenomena -- rules which Bohrs, Fermi and Einstein would, in our world, go on to utilize in creating the atomic

bomb that would, some thirty years later, turn more than 150,000 Asian bodies across the Pacific equally “radioactive.”

Changing the Odds

Like his predecessor Johan Huizinga, Roger Caillois, in his influential tract *Man, Play, Games*, considered mankind’s obsession with oracles, horoscopes, superstition and omens to be a direct outgrowth - and more specifically, a corruption - of earlier games of pure luck that required “full and total abandon to the whims of chance” as a means of assuring “perfect equilibrium and absolute equity among the competitors” (73, 77). Caillois postulated in 1961 that this “perversion” of ludic symmetry might be considered a distinctly modern phenomenon: “as for the avarice today observed in the pursuit of good fortune, it probably compensates for the continuous tension involved in modern competition. Whoever despairs of his own resources is led to trust in destiny” (48). His theory, essentially, was that “excessively rigorous competition,” especially of the sort found in capitalist, laissez-faire societies, “discourages the timid and tempts them to rely on external powers. By studying and utilizing heavenly powers or chance, *they try to get the reward they doubt can be won by their own qualities, by hard work and steady application*. Rather than persist in thankless labor, they ask the cards or the stars to warn them of the propitious moment for the success of their enterprises” (48, emphasis mine).

Surely the image of Asian immigrants and their offspring possessing a timid revulsion for “thankless labor” clashes with both the historical record and popular imagination. And yet, Caillois’s idea that games of chance would be particularly appealing to those individuals for whom success is a reward that “they doubt can be won by their own qualities” seems particularly resonant in the accounts that I have investigated here. For what each of the

characters or narrators come to realize is that “hard work and steady application” bears, for the Asian American subject, no *causal* or deterministic relationship to social acceptance or recognition. As Hoang, in *Changing*, recalls, "Father saying to me that it isn't enough to be good . . . that I must be great that I must excel beyond all others that I look different & the people from our country our country of heat a country I can hardly call my own . . . it's my duty to exceed expectations that I must prove to others that I am worthy" (58).

The distinction between the “country of heat” (Vietnam) or the “tiny island in the ocean” (Taiwan) and America is, as I suggested earlier with Yu, in part a distinction of temporal experience. And sure enough, when Yu attempts to understand why his father — the inventor of the novel’s first time machine but, due to a malfunction during a crucial demonstration, having never been recognized as such — seems unable to succeed given the enormity of the man’s innate talent and intelligence, he realizes that the rhythm of “hard work and steady application” might in fact constitute its own liability. Because “the world has always felt just out of [Yu’s father’s] reach. The world of commerce, of men taking advantage of situations, of competition, of sharp words and elbows and practice and speed, a world that was too fast for him” (175). The Caucasian executive for whom Yu and his father demonstrate their time travelling invention, by contrast, is, like Neils Bohr and Enrico Fermi, “someone for whom the world isn’t a mystery . . . it has levers and he knows when and where and how to apply just the right amount of force, and it moves for him” (174).

Certainly, uncovering the false promise of the American Dream – the Dream which declares, as Yu’s immigrant father believes, that “success must be in direct proportion to effort exerted” (174) - has long been a central target of both Asian American literary and scholarly efforts. And yet what the authors explored herein have demonstrated is that this false promise is

perhaps best thought of not so much as a deliberate ruse or deception but rather as a “Western” belief, in the Jungian or Fermian sense, that the world *does* function like a laboratory experiment, that events and entities *always* follow specific and universal rules and laws of causality. Introducing, instead, a synchronous or “half-real” ludic view of the world in which events occur simultaneously (as they do in *How to Live Safely*), in reverse (as with “In a World”), or by random association (as in *Changing*), Yu, Louie, and Hoang use the lessons of the “ancient Chinese mind” to lodge a distinctly progressive and Asian American critique against the obstacles that prevent minority subjects from being allowed to play that social game in the first place.

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