

Model Minority Masochism

*Performing the Cultural Politics of Asian
American Masculinity*

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Introduction

*What then may I do
but cleave to what cleaves me.
I kiss the blade and eat my meat
I thank the wielder and receive,
while terror spirits
my change, sorrow also.*

—Li-Young Lee, “The Cleaving” (excerpt)

Chun Hsien Michael Deng was not killed for being Asian American; rather, he became Asian American through being killed. In 2013, 18-year-old Deng, a college freshman at Baruch College, attended a hazing ritual in the Poconos as a pledge to Pi Delta Psi, an Asian American fraternity. Deng sought out a community of young Asian American men whose identity hinged upon an understanding of Asian American masculinity tied to “knowing one’s history”—founded in a fledgling period of post-Vincent Chin Asian American consciousness in the 1980s, Pi Delta Psi was a fraternity that took Asian American history seriously, utilizing the entire history of Asian exclusion in the United States as the source of its community and solidarity. Recounting the 1982 murder of Vincent Chin, the destruction of Korean American groceries during the 1992 Los Angeles riots, and other incidents of anti-Asian violence, Pi Delta Psi drew upon Asian American studies as its libidinal wellspring, ensuring its members were aware of the suffering of fellow Asians, even if the members themselves had not been subjected to such violence themselves before.

It was with this ethos that Pi Delta Psi structured its hazing rituals—its senior members inflicted racial suffering onto the pledges that would mirror these historical injustices. After a weekend of education and reflection on the plight of Asians in America, Deng was subjected to “the Glass Ceiling,” a hallowed test for the survival of Asian American manhood, named after the liberal metaphor for the limits to Asian upward mobility in organizational management. As Jay Caspian Kang describes in lurid detail,

First, a pledge is blindfolded and separated from his assigned “Big,” an older fraternity brother, by a line of brothers whose arms are linked together. For the most part, this line signifies the barrier between glumly accepting America’s vision of emasculated, toadying Asian men and the great promise of success and masculine fulfillment. As his Big calls out his name, a pledge, or “Little,” crosses his arms across his chest and walks toward his Big’s voice. He soon runs into the

line of brothers, who call him “chink,” “gook” and whatever other racial slurs they can muster. The verbal abuse lasts for 10 minutes or more. In the second stage, the pledge is instructed to push through the wall of brothers, who in turn shove him back toward his starting spot. The third stage isn’t much different from the second: The pledge is still wandering blindfolded toward his Big’s calls, but instead of being pushed, he is knocked to the ground or, in some chapters, even tackled.

[...]

While all this is happening, the pledge is supposed to be thinking about his parents and the sacrifices they made as immigrants, the humiliations they faced and the oppressive invisibility of Asian lives in America. The pushing, the tackling and the racial abuse are meant to be the physical expression of their struggle. That final walk, in which the pledge is shepherded to his Big by all of the fraternity’s members, is intended to teach him that solidarity with his fellow Asians is his only hope of making it in a white world. (2017, 10–11)

It is a scene of torture that imagines a telos of transcendence, dressed in a tragicomically absurd re-enactment of racial injury. The pledges, who themselves are presumed to not yet have achieved a prior state of Asian American politicization, are subjected to the vicarious, modeled abuse of white racism in order to emerge as new Asian men, and in grotesque irony, it is their elder guides who perform the role of white supremacist tormentor. However, for Michael Deng, there would be no transcendence. When it was his turn at the Glass Ceiling, Deng was slammed into the ground from a fraternity brother running at full speed, from which he did not get up. The fraternity brothers eventually brought Deng inside, deliberated for hours before finally deciding to drive him to Geisinger Wyoming Valley hospital. After slipping into a coma, Deng died from head injuries that, if treated hours earlier, may have been recoverable.

This transpired thirty-one years after Vincent Chin succumbed from head injuries beside his mother in June 1982, incurred from resentful white autoworkers, an event that was considered foundational for the Asian American narrative of Pi Delta Psi, and in turn, this book. Chin’s death was significant because he was Chinese American but taken for Japanese in a period of profound Japanophobia; his death consolidated signification of a panethnic, politicized sense of what it meant to be Asian American. I will detail the Vincent Chin case at much greater length in the first chapter, but suffice it to say that Chin’s death inadvertently helped define contemporary Asian American identity—he became Asian American through death. But in a sense, so did Deng, except his Asian American Bildungsroman was delivered by Asian hands rather than white ones. Meanwhile, the fraternity brothers who inflicted the violence themselves modeled white racist violence in order to establish the performative scenario to make the pedagogical point viable; they became white precisely to disabuse their pledges of the naiveté of model minority innocence. Under the schema of Pi Delta Psi, the entrance fee to Asian American masculinity is subjection, a bludgeoning as a claim to authenticity, to be undone and even destroyed by a history that becomes, coercively,

one's own. Put simply, for some, to become an Asian American man is through the theater of sadomasochism, sometimes with catastrophic results.

I am not suggesting that the case of Deng is somehow paradigmatic or representative of all Asian American subject formation. Nor do I suggest, as Jay Caspian Kang does in a rather ahistorical flourish, that the incident demonstrates that Asian America is “mostly meaningless.” In fact, Kang’s widely circulated essay on the topic ultimately points to the futility of the Asian American formulation in general, which is in direct opposition to my position here. Rather, the incident demonstrates quite the opposite: that it metonymically demonstrates the paradoxical, contradictory affective investments cathected onto Asian America, that Asian Americanness simultaneously contains an excess of meaning and a lack of clarity. It is tempting to declare, as Kandice Chuh does, that Asian America’s excess of itself demands a critical turn toward subjectlessness, since as she rightly points out, there exist “constraints on the liberatory potential of the achievement of subjectivity, [. . .] that a ‘subject’ only becomes recognizable and can act as such by conforming to certain regulatory matrices” (2003, 9). It is ironically because of my full agreement with Chuh’s assessment of the essentialist subject that I find its interrogation to be imperative; such a violent enactment of racialized Asian American masculinity in the Deng case demonstrates a yearning for *subjective* narrative, of a racial rather than a specifically ethnic marker, inaugurated by a decimation of self and other—or self-as-other—and made intelligible by panethnicity. Indeed, the liberatory potential of “the” “Asian American subject” is circumscribed by its very definition—and yet it possesses a fascinating, masochistic allure. That allure is at the crux of this project.

This incident, and this writing, occur at a crossroads for Asian American cultural politics, decades removed from the rise of radical Asian American panethnicity, in a period in which Asian Americanness is increasingly instrumentalized to consolidate racial neoliberal hegemony. As Wen Liu observes, “The shifting paradigm of race from violent exclusion to compartmentalized inclusion places Asian Americanness at a historical juncture—to either move forward toward postracial neoliberalism and turn into a profitable cultural commodity or recuperate the nostalgic formation of Asian American nationalism and profess allegiance to U.S. racial liberalism” (2018, 422). This division that Liu describes¹—postracial neoliberalism and nostalgic racial liberalism—adroitly captures the current angst of contemporary Asian American cultural politics more broadly. Yet, even as Asian America has transitioned away from “violent exclusion,” I would contend that both of these strands are nevertheless tethered to and draw meaning from the kinesthetics of self-violence we see in the Deng case, a form of race making through masochism.

This book, *Model Minority Masochism: Performing the Cultural Politics of Asian American Masculinity*, asks what it means for Asian Americanness to discover itself in the process of its own destruction. It explores where we affectively locate the presence of panethnic, racialized, gendered Asian America, through regimes of self-stereotype, self-punishment, and other modalities of subjectivation that, in a different age, the cudgel of normativity would label as “perverse.” We find it in Asian American

performance, literature, theater, and video games. The killing/becoming of Michael Deng is an extreme but poignant example of an Asian Americanness premised precisely through the performance of unraveling.

The Model Minority and Theories of Asian American Subjectivity

First and foremost, model minority masochism is a theory of Asian American subject formation that centers the psychic and affective effects of the model minority “myth,” based on the material positionality of Asian Americans of the past half-century. This theory presents a critique of model minority ideology itself but also serves as an analytic of its adherents and detractors alike. Whether as an antiblack “racial wedge” or as ideological fodder for the denial of Asian American racial suffering, the model minority has been a stubborn phantasm impeding the project of Asian American radical politics and has thus been the persistent specter of Asian Americanist critique. Indeed, the racialization of Asian Americans in the United States cannot be separated from model minority ideology (which I will henceforth abbreviate to “model minoritarianism”), which is in turn intertwined with the economic and affective dimensions of modernity. In Colleen Lye’s words, the Oriental in America demonstrates “a putatively unusual capacity for economic modernity, extend[ing] to moments when the affect of the racial discourse has been hostile (‘yellow peril’) as well as admiring (‘model minority’)” (2005, 3). The model minority is oft mentioned but rarely firmly defined; loosely, the model minority is the minoritized subject who, despite their ostensible marginalization, is able to prosper and successfully assimilate into the dominant society. Although not limited to Asian Americans (the label has, at times, been applied to upper-middle-class gay communities and African immigrants, for example), the model minority has been most persistently wedded to Asian Americans, and there are few racial demographics in North America for which the model minority is more constitutive. For the purposes of my argument here, the model minority is only secondarily “cultural,” although culturally essentialist underpinnings of the model minority run the gamut from assimilationist to orientalist, from a purported propensity for adaptation and assimilation to a maintenance of “Confucian values” that emphasize hard work and education.² This aspect of model minoritarianism is more obviously “myth,” and I will not belabor a refutation here. Rather, I emphasize primary focus on the political-ideological function of the model minority in the maintenance of U.S. racial formation. In the United States, the model minority has principally served two ideological purposes within racial discourse: first, to provide evidence for the prominence of meritocracy over the structural barriers faced by nonwhite peoples, and second, to implicitly blame less “successful” minoritized populations for their own subjugation (most notably, but not exclusively, those racialized as Black). Moreover, as Tara Fickle has recently and incisively observed, the model minority coagulated in the 1960s around Japanese

Americans not only as exceptional minorities, but as exceptional Americans in *general*, perceived as obedient capitalist subjects relative even to whites, prompting white Americans to catch up (2019, 90).

For much of its life as a field, Asian American studies has tended to actively disprove or discredit the model minority as a myth, either insisting that (1) Asian Americans have been and continue to be subject to considerable racism and structural barriers, and (2) the model minority does not adequately reflect the socioeconomic diversity of Asian Americans, which can correlate loosely according to disaggregated identity. Thus, anti-model minority critique locates the model minority as a harmful stereotype produced by a white racial order, one that can cause harm to both Asian Americans (such as the increased pressure to “succeed,” via stereotype threat) and to non-Asian people of color. Consequently, since its radical beginnings with the Third World Liberation Front strikes at San Francisco State and UC Berkeley in 1968, and continuing through a wide range of demographic and ideological shifts, Asian American studies has often sought to idealize what Christopher Lee has termed “the ideal critical subject,”³ that is to say, an Asian American subject position that has achieved a kind of Lukácsian racial “consciousness” against white racism. Asian American cultural critique has often accordingly read Asian American literature and theater in terms of its “resistant” potential, seeking out characters and thematics that adequately demonstrate a rejection of whiteness and an assertion of Asian American identity, whether in the vein of so-called “cultural nationalism” of Frank Chin, of feminist empowerment in Maxine Hong Kingston, or of a resistance against logocentric intelligibility in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. Tellingly, the first major scholarly study of Asian American literature, Elaine Kim’s *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (1982), values Asian American works primarily by their resistant potential rather than their aesthetic attributes, a tendency that persists in the field to varying degrees to this day. This premise possesses a range of problematics, most notably that “Asian America” is itself what Susan Koshy provocatively called “a fiction,” an imagined community insofar as it is overwhelmingly diverse in terms of its diasporic cultural origins, but also in imagining its politically “resistant” position against white racism when, as David Palumbo-Liu has written, the position of Asian America has certainly structurally fluctuated between “of color” and honorary whiteness. Moreover, a persistent problem is that judgment of the resistant potential of anti-model minority Asian American literature is not persistent in what precisely it is resisting, whether that be “assimilation” (understood variably as cultural, such as through ethnic marking, or political, understood as allegiance to racially reactionary political positions), racist policy, or economic adherence to (racial) capitalism. To take the internment of Japanese Americans as an example, those Issei (immigrants) who chose to accept incarceration (with the saying “shigata ga nai,” or, “it can’t be helped”) but who remained anti-assimilationist with regard to their cultural practices, exercised a different form of resistance than Nisei “No No Boys,” who primarily spoke English and willingly adopted mainstream “American” cultural mores but refused to serve in the U.S. armed forces. Who is more of a “model

minority” in this contrast depends entirely upon the lens through which we judge complicity—cultural, sociopolitical, economic, et cetera.

One component of this problematic is that we principally take the “model” of “model minority” in its adjectival, rather than in its verb, or even noun, form. *What, precisely, does the model minority model?* And then, conversely, what model of minority does the model minority produce? I suggest conceptualizing the model minority (or perhaps, minority *modeling*) as a scenario, which is, according to Diana Taylor, “a meaning-making paradigm that structure[s] social environments, behaviors, and potential outcomes” (2013, 28). The scenario includes narrative “but also demands that we also pay attention to milieu and corporeal behaviors such as gestures, attitudes, and tones not reducible to language” (Taylor 2013, 28)—that is, the scenario is as constructed by affect and performance as it is by the familiar story it signifies. The model minority is phantasmal yet instantly recognizable because of its performatic, scenario quality; it can be simultaneously exemplar and sellout, but its modeling tends toward the gravitational pull of social domination along variable axes.

Yet, the modeling may also pull in its opposite direction, as well—there is also the *model anti-model minority*, the “ideal critical subject” of Asian American consciousness referenced earlier. To nod to Homi Bhabha, to “model” is almost, but not quite, to mimic. Bhabha’s mimic is a postcolonial figure who positionally resembles the model minority, the assimilated, educated native who threatens the colonial-racial order with their uncanny resemblance. Not unlike the model minority and the perpetual foreigner, “The ambivalence of colonial authority repeatedly turns from *mimicry*—a difference that is almost nothing but not quite—to *menace*—a difference that is almost total but not quite” (Bhabha 1994, 131). However, unlike the mimic, the model minority is marked less by uncanny resemblance to whiteness than by an aspiration to white ideals; resistance to this accordingly supplants those ideals with other ones. Within cultural productions associated with Asian American panethnicity, and certainly within literary representation, “resistance” tends to be legible more through affect than through actual political position, and it very frequently takes on masculine characteristics. Frank Chin’s work is particularly emblematic of this trend, misogynistically configuring performative masculine “authenticity” as the route to *resisting* the pull of whiteness, the will to servility to white institutions, cultures, and bodies. In Chin’s mode, it is an affective disposition to favor whiteness, more than any materialist imperative, that forms the meat of resistance. As Việt Thanh Nguyễn has noted, many artists and scholars who have committed to an Asian American politic would go so far as to limit Asian Americanness to those who perform the required “resistant” identity, dismissive of those Asian Americans who are satisfied with the status quo of capitalist white racism.⁴ Frank Chin, after all, derided Asian Americans with model minority inclinations as “Uncle Tom minorities.” Nguyễn writes, “critics tend to evaluate resistance as positive and accommodation as negative, without questioning the reductiveness of such evaluations” and suggests instead an Asian Americanist scholarship accounts for the flexible strategies of Asian Americans who “pick and choose their tactics of struggle, survival, and possible assimilation” (2002, 7).

Thus, with Foucauldian irony, the principal mode of resistance to the model minority reproduces its transitive structure, modeling what it means *to model*. Anti-model minority resistance becomes modeling by other means.

I assert that it necessarily follows that the signifier “Asian American,” as problematic as it is, must also incorporate the politically less savory presence of those subjects who are an anathema to Asian American cultural resistance, that is, the dreaded “good subjects,” model minorities, the “hard-working, successful” nonwhites discursively positioned in an antiblack racial paradigm to invalidate the structural oppression against other subjects of color. Queer of color critics may note that my configuration bears some similarity to José Esteban Muñoz’s formulation of disidentification, that is,

like a melancholic subject holding on to a lost object, a disidentifying subject works to hold on to this object and invest it with new life. [...] it is the reworking of those energies that do not elide the ‘harmful’ or contradictory components of any identity” (1999, 12)

There is certainly a disidentificatory element to this theoretical project, although I believe it would be accurate to say that my project here is more accurately an exposure and undoing of, and meditation on, prior disavowal. As historical monographs by Ellen D. Wu and Madeline Y. Hsu have detailed,⁵ the production of the Asian American model minority throughout the twentieth century is not entirely the result of a white racial hegemony but is partly the result of the strategic racial positioning by Asian Americans themselves, especially by Chinese and Japanese Americans. Strategic self-stereotyping as ideal conformists to the U.S. social order, while simultaneously self-orientalizing to associate “Asian values” as congruent with both U.S. capitalist culture and heteronormative sexual and kinship relations, allowed Chinese and Japanese Americans to adapt to the changing political circumstances between the United States, Japan, and China, particularly in response to Japanese American internment and anticommunist anxiety toward China.

Thus, to put it obtusely, the “model minority” is not merely a “myth”; or, rather, it is not a historical untruth, socioeconomically speaking. Certainly, in addition to being a scenario, the model minority is a myth in the Barthesian sense, a semiological system of signification that “points out and . . . notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes on us” (Barthes 1972, 87). Yet, it is a scenario actively embraced by some, if not many, Asian American subjects. So when Frank Chin provocatively decries Asian Americans as “racial Uncle Toms,” he refers to both the Asian American positionality of accommodation *and* the presence of Asian American actors who comply with and further such racial ideologies (although again, this production is more consistently affective than ideological). The masculinist “cultural nationalist” project of which Frank Chin is emblematic does not deny the presence of the model minority (which is often coded in femininized, homophobic language), but it abjects the model minority as “false” Asianness. And although generations of

Asian Americanist critique have long since consigned the casual misogyny of Chin's work to the dustbin of history, the specter of the accommodationist racial Uncle Tom remains, haunting the Asian Americanist project as a constitutive Other, a supposed falsehood that lures Asian Americans into white supremacist and/or bourgeois accommodation. My point here is that from the perspective of Asian American subject formation, we must take seriously the model minority not as an object of immediate disavowal to support the reigning primacy of exclusion as the ontological condition of Asian Americanness, but rather as a foundation for the psychic and affective condition of being racialized as Asian in the United States; that is, as a fabric inextricably woven into Asian American subjectivity itself.

Nevertheless, there remains a degree of peril in addressing the very notion of Asian American subjectivity, particularly when, as I have stated earlier, Asian America is itself a socially constructed political affinity rather than a clearly defined diasporic ethnic community. I would even argue that "Asian America" is no less "mythological" than the model minority itself (except that Asian America, of course, serves as the model minority's ideological camera obscura). Given the diversity of ethnicities, nationalities, genders, and sexualities within "Asian America," it becomes particularly difficult to produce generalized studies of Asian American subjectivity per se. Lisa Lowe's influential 1991 essay "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Asian American Differences" called for the broadening of Asian Americanist scholarship beyond "master narratives of generational conflict and filial relation" (1996, 63) as dominated within Chinese and Japanese American writings, and it also gestured toward a transnationalization of Asian American studies at large. In a similar vein, as mentioned earlier, Kandace Chuh's 2003 monograph *Imagine Otherwise*, following Derrida, calls for "subjectless discourse" within Asian Americanist thought. Such indispensable texts push Asian American studies against an all-encompassing essentialism, and the momentous effects these texts have had on the field are undeniably warranted. Yet, as invaluable as they are, I would argue that neither Lowe nor Chuh's project evades the Asian American subject altogether, but, rather, they diversify, deconstruct, and problematize who and what that subject is. And moreover, even as we recognize the impossibility of a singular Asian American subject, it is necessary to understand the attachments it engenders. Although I fully sympathize with the caution against "master narratives" within the study of Asian American subjectivity, such critiques can obfuscate the fact that Asian America is inescapably a kind of "master narrative" itself, constructed with both political and aesthetic intentionality, with and against the figure of the model minority.

This is not to say that there is an "essential" Asian America, or that it has any "inherent" attributes but, rather, that it is performative: it manifests itself through its own utterance. Insofar as model minoritarianism becomes problematically equated with Asian Americanness, "Asian American" becomes as much a structural position as a demographic category. Although I embrace the problematic Asian American subject as an analytic, I do so rejecting the liberal identitarianism that privileges individual identity as an a priori attribute of difference. After all, it is a Foucauldian truism that

subject formation cannot be analyzed without an analytic of power and the gaze that consigns it. The word “subject” invokes both *subjectivity* and *subjection*; one can only become a *subject* by being *subjected*, whether through ideological interpellation or discursive subjectivation.⁶ In the case of racialized subjects such as Asian Americans, subject formation and racialization bleed into one another even (or especially) in the formation of an identity politically oppositional to racialization.⁷ Thus, although racialization does not necessarily mean destiny, it remains constitutive of racial subject formation; in other words, minoritized racial subject formation does not solely occur “against” or “in spite of” racialization but also *with* it. Concerning Asians in North America, racialization in its multiple and well-tread aspects—orientalism, yellow peril, model minoritarianism, and so on—has produced a range of psychic quandaries for those ensnared in its interpellating optic. In other words, theorization of “the” Asian American subject is, at best, a metonymic diagnosis of the historical, material, and ideological forces that carve the social position that produces the subject in the first place.

Consequently, in the early 2000s, paralleling a similar trajectory in queer and Black studies, there arose a psychoanalytic turn to analyze the interiority of Asian American subjectivity as a consequence of this relationship to racial power, inaugurated first by David Eng’s 2001 *Racial Castration*, and followed by Anne Cheng’s 2002 *The Melancholy of Race* and Karen Shimakawa’s 2002 *National Abjection*. Across these psychoanalytic writings, Asian American subjectivity is modeled after various iterations of lack brought upon by racial injury, such as the absence of the (normative white) phallus in Eng’s case. Cheng’s *Melancholy of Race* is particularly paradigmatic in this sense. Interpreting Freud, Cheng explains how melancholia, contrasted with mourning, is a pathological state of being “psychically stuck” (2000, 8) on the lost object, and that, furthermore, “The melancholic eats the lost object—feeds on it, as it were” (2000, 8) so that “the melancholic subject fortifies him- or herself and grows rich from the empowerment” (2000, 8) even as the melancholic subject denies the persistence of the mourned object. The initial subject of Cheng’s racial melancholia is the white subject, as she explains that “[d]ominant white identity in America operates melancholically—as an elaborate identificatory system based on psychical and social consumption-and-denial” (2000, 11). Then Cheng asks, “What is the subjectivity of the melancholic object? Is it also melancholic, and what will we uncover when we resuscitate it?” (2000, 14), suggesting then that the (racialized) object of melancholy becomes a melancholic subject herself. The racialized melancholic pathologically feeds upon the lack, requiring the absence of the object in order to stabilize meaning.⁸

As invaluable as these studies are, these texts do not centrally examine the role of the model minority itself in Asian American subjectification. Melancholic lack powerfully accounts for the psychic exclusion of Asian Americans from the broader U.S. body politic and sociality; exclusion is central to these analytics, sidestepping the history of Asian Americans’ conditional *inclusion*. Although one can make the historical argument for an Asian American exceptionalism regarding exclusion (e.g., via the notion that the 1882 Chinese Restriction Act was the first race-based form

of legislated immigration exclusion in the United States), even within these measures of exclusion, there was the production of an ideal assimilated Asian American subject. To reference Madeline Hsu again, the 1882 Restriction Act was as much a process of curation as it was one of xenophobic exclusion, establishing “gateways that permitted admission to peoples deemed assimilable but also strategic” (2015, 8), such as students and professionals. According to Ellen Wu, even the Japanese American internment camps contained key elements to coerce the cultural assimilation of incarcerated Nisei, such as the encouragement of baseball play and, of course, armed services enlistment into the 442nd Regiment and the 100th Infantry Battalion. As a consequence, model minoritarianism even haunts many of the paradigmatic events of Asian American exclusion upon which theories of exclusion-based Asian American subjectivity are based.⁹

To be clear, I am not arguing that model minoritarianism is necessarily an ontological component of Asian American subjecthood. Rather, I posit that the model minority has been underestimated as a historically constitutive (rather than merely antithetical) component, something that must be “overcome” or rejected rather than a despised ingredient of Asiatic racial form, and that it must be considered *alongside* the conditions of lack (i.e., melancholia, castration) or exclusion (abjection). Consequently, I belabor that the model minority is not only a racial position, but a class position. This is not solely because the model minority’s “success” is measured in capitalist metrics, although this is certainly an essential component. Bearing in mind Cedric Robinson’s forceful argument that early bourgeois capitalism drew its ideological formations from racism, that the laboring and ruling classes even within early modern Europe were understood to be separated by origin, bloodline, and later, culture, racial formation is a defining feature of capitalist modernity, and all capitalism is already racial capitalism. To say that the model minority is antiblack ideology is an understatement—the ideological ambition of the model minority is nothing short of the preservation and expansion of racial capitalism itself. Model minority masochism is the affective tissue that coheres this formation, but, as I will explain, it also paradoxically congeals around the Asian American efforts to oppose it.

Given the particular positioning of Asian Americans as model minorities, I posit that masochism provides a more comprehensive analytic for Asian American subjecthood. This masochism maps onto both the subject formation and the cultural politics of the conditionally accepted model minority.

Masochism Theory

By “model minority masochism,” I mean an affective response to model minority racialization that blurs the boundaries between subjugation, pleasure, and moral authority. Model minority masochism is simultaneously an affective process and a cultural politics,¹⁰ a model of subjectivity that often embraces rather than eschews its status of otherness and subordination.

It is first important to clarify: What is masochism? Like the model minority, masochism remains a moving signifier. Colloquially, masochism implies pleasure from pain, although it would be more accurate to say that masochism represents the surrendering of control to achieve sensation, to feel and become through unbecoming. Although much of contemporary literary analysis of masochism owes much of its foundation to the psychiatry of Richard von Krafft-Ebing, the psychoanalytic frameworks developed by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan,¹¹ as well as relational psychoanalysts such as Melanie Klein,¹² I draw principally from the post-psychoanalytic theories articulated by Gilles Deleuze and Amber Jamilla Musser. Deleuze, in his influential *Coldness and Cruelty*, theorizes masochism from its literary origins, the writings of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, from whom the word “masochism” is derived. Departing from Freud, Deleuze’s post-psychoanalytic description of masochism locates it as a phenomenon that manifests primarily as aesthetic form. In contrasting sadism and masochism, Deleuze writes,

We are no longer in the presence of a torturer seizing upon a victim and enjoying her all the more because she is unconsenting and unpersuaded. We are dealing instead with a victim in search of a torturer and who needs to educate, persuade, and conclude an alliance with the torturer in order to realize the strangest of schemes. This is why advertisements are part of the language of masochism while they have no place in true sadism, and why the masochist draws up contracts while the sadist abominates and destroys them. (1989, 20)

Key to Deleuze’s notion of masochism is the pursuit of external torture, and the formation of an alliance with that torturer. But also within the masochistic paradigm exists a reliance on contracts and agreements, cathecting erotic energy onto the social contractarianism of liberal modernity.

Moreover, according to Deleuze, suspension and disavowal primarily drive the masochistic apparatus, which aims to replace the father’s moral authority with that of the mother’s. Consequently, although still male centric like Freud’s and Lacan’s models, Deleuze’s masochism attempts to recuperate the feminine, although ultimately in the service of a male ego, attempting to birth “a new sexless man” who is no longer dependent on masculine control. Deleuze argues that this is achieved through masochistic coldness:

The coldness of the masochistic ideal ... is not the negation of feeling but rather the disavowal of sensuality. It is as if sentimentality assumed in this instance the superior role of the impersonal element, while sensuality held us prisoner of the particularities and imperfections of secondary nature. The function of the masochistic ideal is to ensure the triumph of ice-cold sentimentality by dint of coldness; the coldness is used here, as it were, to suppress pagan sensuality and keep sadistic sensuality at bay. Sensuality is disavowed, and no longer exists in its own right; thus Masoch can announce the birth of the new man “devoid of sexual love.” (1989, 52)

Thus, Deleuze's masochism possesses an affective and aesthetic character rather than just a psychic one, premised upon the disavowal of sensuality.¹³

While Deleuze enables the literary critique of masochism, contemporary queer theory has considered its utopian potentials, equally within the critical project of queer negativity (including Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman) as well as its often-opposed queer of color critique (e.g., Nguyen Tan Hoang, Darieck Scott, Juana María Rodríguez, Leticia Alvarado, Elizabeth Freeman, and Ariane Cruz). The former, owing largely to Michel Foucault's early theorizations of S/M,¹⁴ is characterized by Kadji Amin as possessing a "liberationist negativity" (2017, 95), finding self-annihilation as a form of idealized liberatory practice.¹⁵ The latter queer of color critics tend toward theorizing penetrability and bottoming (which are certainly not identical to masochism but offer a similar heuristic premise) as a form of reappropriation for the raced subject, allowing the trauma of history to reorganize and detach from prescribed affects of terror and instead resignify through the jouissance of sexual pleasure. Both species of optimistic valuations place hope in masochism's ability to reorganize social relations, and to point to the particularly disruptive possibilities of bottoming against a heteropatriarchal racist order.

A compelling example of optimistic masochism can be found in Nguyen Tan Hoang's *A View from the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Representation* (2014). Nguyen's project lays out a project of bottomhood "not as a fixed role, an identity, or a physical act, but as a position—sexual, social, affective, political, aesthetic—[that] facilitates a more expansive horizon for forging political alliances" (2014, 3). Nguyen's queer examination of Asian American masculinity configures bottomhood not as a position of immediate subordination, but one of sexual agency and power within Asian American cultural production. Asian American gay bottomhood, for Nguyen, becomes "a hermeneutic, a tactic of information . . . a tactic of joy" (2104, 24) deployed by "subjects that do not seek to overcome injury but those that have learned to live with past and present damage, in particular, everyday injuries marked by gender, race, and sexuality, that cannot find relief or make amends through legitimate social or political means" (2014, 25). Nguyen's assessment of bottomhood is ultimately quite optimistic, reading bottomhood—roughly the "masochistic" position—as a recuperative strategy to reconfigure past trauma. However, although Nguyen's queering of the relationship between power and pleasure within the site of Asian American masochism remains essential to my own argument, Nguyen's theoretical optimism leads to a potential utopianism to bottoming that does not fully encompass the multiple trajectories of power relations enacted upon Asian American subjectivity. Its model of Asian American subjectivity also remains attached to the prior Asian Americanist premise of exclusion and lack, as opposed to incorporating the heterogeneous vectors of power associated with the model minority.

Ultimately, I remain skeptical of both pessimistic and optimistic readings of masochism; I mean to deploy masochism in its descriptive rather than prescriptive capacities. Accordingly, I draw from the work of Amber Jamilla Musser, who boasts neither an optimistic nor pessimistic reading of masochism; instead, Musser is most

interested in how masochism offers a theory of the subject at large. In the opening of *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism*, Musser writes,

Usually understood as the power to abdicate control in exchange for sensation—pleasure, pain, or a combination thereof—[masochism] is a site where bodies, power, and society come together in multiple ways. . . . As such, masochism allows us to probe different ways of experiencing power. (2014, 1)

Although Musser herself complicates this definition throughout her book, what is crucial in this working definition is the often-counterintuitive intersection of pleasure and power that transcends its origins. “What begins as a literarily influenced sexual practice,” continues Musser, “morphs into a universal aspect of subjectivity, a way to describe a type of relationship between self and other, a subversive mode of desubjectification or resistance to dominant forms of power, and finally a privileged mode of personhood” (2014, 2). I follow Musser’s conceptualization of masochism as not only a sex act, but also an analytic. And the stakes of this analytic rise dramatically when hailed into a minoritized, “oppressed” position that critically engages the paradox of what it means to take pleasure from one’s own oppression, or at least, from some relationship to it. Importantly, Musser indicates that masochism is a mode of desubjectification, a form of actively undoing the subject. Yet, even as it desubjectivizes, it also simultaneously remains a “universal aspect of subjectivity,” meaning that the undoing of the subject does not mean its dissolution. Masochism captures the subjectivity that coheres around self-inflicted incoherence, which is descriptive of the model minority that haunts Asian American panethnicity.¹⁶

To crystalize my previous points, and to gesture to my next ones, I posit here five theses of model minority masochism:

1. First, Asian Americans, insofar as Asian Americans have been historically constructed as a panethnic identity formation, have had a masochistic relationship to the model minority scenario.
2. Second, the model minority is constructed equally in economic terms as it is in racial ones. The metric upon which the minority is successfully “modeling” is according to bourgeois ideologies of attainment and uplift.
3. Third, the model minority is itself a masochistic social relation. Modeling, similar to mimicry, follows a perverse pattern, projecting an idealization to which the subject should submit.
4. Fourth, model minority masochism follows either a primary or secondary configuration. In the primary configuration, model minoritarianism is undifferentiated and direct, entailing submission and obedience to the economic-racial ideal—capitalist whiteness. In this configuration, model minoritarianism takes on techno-orientalist traits. In the secondary configuration, model minoritarianism operates as disavowal, resisting the temptation of capitalist whiteness to aspire to transcendence, which often takes the form of an idealized Blackness.

5. Fifth, model minority masochism is a gendered affect, often (but not necessarily) drawing upon phallogentric anxieties or pleasures of feminization to produce its heterogeneous masculinities.

My argument here is that Asian American subjectivity is best understood precisely through this desubjectification, and equally, self-objectification. Asian American subjectivity becomes itself through its own undoing. This is in part due to the impossibility of the singular Asian American subject—in other words, its very construct-ness—but also the affective investments with and against model minoritarianism that produce the Asian American as a legible subject of power, existing liminally between strategic inclusion and radical otherness. Pulled doubly by the diametrically opposed moral authorities of assimilation and “good” subjecthood and the resistant anti-model minority imperative of “bad” subjecthood, masochism manifests in Asian American subjectivity in both directions: the pleasure of being stereotyped, or additionally, assimilated, as well as the pleasure of self-punishment from enjoying being stereotyped or assimilated.¹⁷

Model minority masochism must account not only for exclusion, but also inclusion, as flawed and contingent model minority inclusion may be. Masochism’s function as *both* a technology of subjectification *and* a moral economy maps onto the model minority paradigm, since masochism possesses an internal logic of accommodation and subversion at once. I wish to consider how such formulations affect the affective fabric of Asian Americanness itself; thus, I consider model minority masochism to be, among other things, *a cultural politics*—or, perhaps, what Ariane Cruz has termed a “politics of perversion” (2016, 10)—one that shapes the Asian American self as much as it does the moral logic of a liminally interpellated panethnic community.

Masculinity, Techno-Orientalism, and the Machinations of Gender

Amber Jamila Musser, reading both Simone de Beauvoir’s and Jean-Paul Sartre’s unflattering descriptions of masochism, points to objecthood as central to masochism. “Masochism is an obsession with the state of being an object” (2014, 65), writes Musser, primarily referring to Beauvoir’s argument that the female masochist is preoccupied with being the object of desire for the male. Continuing to a reading of Sartre, Musser adds that “[i]n masochism, the subject imagines him- or herself as relying entirely on the Other for existence, thereby attempting to more fully become an object for the other and to annihilate his or her own subjectivity and transcendence” (2014, 79). Read alongside Judith Butler’s argument that the subject “is dependent on power for one’s very formation” (1997, 9), masochism structurally thwarts itself; it is at once necessary for the minoritized subject for their own legibility and simultaneously signals a desire for annihilation of that very legibility.

Due to masochism's preoccupation with objecthood, the ostensible surrender of agentic subjectivity, I suggest that for Asian Americans, masochism often manifests in a peculiar form specific to the historical substance of Asiatic racial form. Since Colleen Lye suggests that "the Asiatic [is] a figure for the unrepresentable" (2005, 7), she asks, "how is the unrepresentable to be visualized? Does it have a human body? If not, what shape, as a whole or in part, does it take?" (2005, 7). Regarding the white U.S. literary consciousness, Lye suggests that we should not assume that Asiatic racial form has unmediated access to the human. But this ambivalence around Asiatic humanity does not only exist in the white American naturalist literature of Lye's study, but also within the double consciousness of Asian American cultural production itself; across multiple Asian American works, we see this instability of the human, a "thinglikeness" within Asianness. To invoke Mel Chen's groundbreaking theory of animacies, we could say that Asianness indexes an affective difference of animacy away from a "humanity" whose paragon is inescapably white, male, and normative.

Thus far, I have discussed masochism and the model minority in fairly ungendered terms. The discussion of objecthood so central to the study of masochism has a long history, particularly in the construction of ideal femininity, but has been most rigorously and recently theorized in Asian Americanist scholarship by Anne Anlin Cheng in *Ornamentalism* (2018). Cheng argues that the femininity of Asian women in the "West"—whom she provocatively labels "yellow women"—occupies a perihuman position between object/thing and person. She then deploys "ornamentalism" as a term, which "names the perihumanity of Asiatic femininity, a peculiar state of being produced out of the fusion between 'thingliness' and 'personness'" (2018, 18). Cheng powerfully argues that the discursive production of the "ornament" and the "orient" bear some mutually constitutive overlap, especially in terms of the yellow woman's synthetic qualities, and that "racial personhood can be assembled not through organic flesh but instead through synthetic inventions and designs, not through corporeal embodiment but rather through attachments that are metonymic and hence superficial, detachable, and migratory" (2018, 19).

In a sense, my elaboration of model minority masochism provides a complementary theorization. Cheng's description of the "ornamental" construction of Asiatic femininity encompasses more than "yellow women"—the ornamental, objectlike, feminized status of the Orient as something to be possessed and beheld is a key epistemological component of orientalism at large, regardless of the gender of those caught in the gaze. But where Cheng considers the perihuman femininity of Asian women from the 19th through 21st centuries, I focus principally on Asian American masculinity from the late 20th century to the contemporary moment. This masochistic Asian American masculinity is both reactive to and commingled with this Asiatic ornamental feminization, against which we can consider much of the Asian American Movement to be a reaction. Through masochism, contemporary Asian American masculinity is also caught within the ornamental thingliness that Cheng ascribes to Asiatic femininity, but it finds its relationship to the synthetic through other gendered means: the machinic and the digital.

I reference here a body of literature that concerns itself with the relationship of Asian racial form with technological production, an affinity that has been termed “techno-orientalism,” which I would argue is also a key instantiation of model minority masochism. David Morley and Kevin Robins were the first to elucidate this new iteration of orientalism, describing how the Japanese have been variously configured in Western discourse as “little yellow men” or “ants” (1995, 147) who, through forms of mimesis, were attempting to “steal America’s soul” (1995, 149–151). Morley and Robins configure Japan as being simultaneously a future and a past, a temporal dystopia where robots and samurai simultaneously represent the loss of selfhood and personhood so arduously won through the development of liberal modernity in white society. Techno-orientalist critique emphasizes how Asian subjects and Asian bodies take on traits of not only the synthetic, as in ornamentalism, but the machinic. Associations of Asians with the machinic are not exceptional in their racialization; as Louis Chude-Sokei has convincingly argued, Karel Čapek drew heavily upon the figure of the enslaved African as inspiration for the original robot. But the techno-oriental remix of this racial formation presents a curious cocktail when mixed with Yellow Perilist anxieties, which often map conveniently upon ones surrounding post-modernity. Indeed, as Sau-Ling Wong and Rachel C. Lee write, “Asians have been contradictorily imagined as, on the one hand, machine-like workers, accomplishing ‘inhuman’ feats of ‘coolie’ manual labor, and on the other, as brainiac competitors whose technological adeptness ranges from inventing gunpowder to being good with engineering and math” (2003, xiv). Wendy Chun writes that such orientalism “seeks to orient the reader to a technology-overloaded present/future . . . through the premise of readable difference, and through a conflation of information networks with an exotic urban landscape” (2006, 177). Techno-orientalism also takes on aspects of mass reproducibility and an absence of originality,¹⁸ a consequence of the machine-like incapacity to originate. Echoing Morley and Robins, Adrian Johns describes the binary of 1980’s American Japanophobia: “Almost routinely, now, one side was identified as ‘American’ and ‘creative,’ the other as Japanese and, implicitly, imitative” (2010, 454). Indeed, Asian subjects and Asian bodies take on traits of the synthetic altogether; as Sianne Ngai elaborates, Asianness is racially coded as not only “silent, inexpressive, and . . . emotionally inscrutable” (2005, 93), but consequently less “animate,” on the spectrum “between the organic-vitalistic and the technological-mechanical, and between the technological-mechanical and the emotional” (2005, 95).

While critique of techno-orientalism has recently flourished within Asian American cultural studies—evidenced, for example, by Stephen Hong Sohn’s “Alien/Asian” special issue in *MELUS* (2008) and the field-consolidating anthology *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media* co-edited by David Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta Niu (2015)—much of the critique of techno-orientalism has largely focused on representation. Yet, the discussion of techno-orientalism can be expanded considerably further beyond stereotypical representation; techno-orientalism is itself a *technology* of subjectification, woven not only into the interpellating hail of white supremacist racial formation, but also within the optics of

self-actualization among the racialized. Moreover, I suggest that undergirding Asian American techno-orientalism is model minority masochism, more specifically, that techno-orientalism as practiced by Asian Americans is one of the key instantiations of model minority masochism.

Already, it should be apparent that there are parallels between techno-orientalism and the model minority, both in terms of the attributes they index—relentlessly hard-working, eminently useful, enmeshed success in science and technology—and how they are similarly disavowed within Asian American cultural politics. I would go so far as to argue that the techno-oriental is the grotesque personification of the model minority itself, providing the figure with an optic vocabulary, replete with both the promises and perils of an increasingly technologized society. Insofar as Asianness becomes associated with a laboring body—once the coolie, now the Asian tech worker—Asiatic racial form shifts according to the status of material labor conditions. And as contemporary neoliberal society becomes increasingly enmeshed in high technology and new media, the boundary between human and machine in general grows increasingly blurry. Techno-orientalism, then, provides an essential imaginary and visual vocabulary for masochistic self-objectification. Concurring with Musser’s assessment that “masochism is a mobile entity whose meanings shift depending on context” but nevertheless “hovers around . . . discussions of pleasure and racialization” (2014, 167), I argue that masochism becomes a fruitful yet amorphous analytic for techno-orientalism and its discontents. My assertion, then, is that techno-orientalist racialization, as it pertains to masculine Asian American subjects, can best be analyzed through masochistic self-objectification.

Furthermore, techno-orientalism illuminates the means by which this Asian American model minority masochism is, in fact, gendered. As a tradition of feminist modernist scholarship has convincingly argued, the fear of becoming-machine has been associated with a terror of castration.¹⁹ Mechanization becomes associated not only with the endlessly reproducible Taylorist embodiment within capitalist industrialism, but also with a panic of feminization, the removal of self-determinist agency at the core of modern Western masculinity. The female, then, is consigned to the machine position, instrumentalized like the feminized labor with which she is associated.²⁰ To become the machine, in other words, is to assume the position of the patriarchally consigned feminine, the *used* as opposed to the *user*.

Although the position of the female machine has been thoroughly reappropriated—most emblematically, of course, by Donna Haraway’s iconic “A Manifesto for Cyborgs”—the becoming-machine becomes something of a threat, in particular, to hegemonic masculinity. The techno-orientalization of the Asian American *masculine* subject, then, engenders not only a masochistic relationship, but also a valence of feminization, of ornamentation. Similarly, it is worth noting that the very dialectic between the “resistance” of the bad subject and the “accommodation” of the model minority good subject maps onto a problematic, heteronormatively masculine/feminine binary. Just as the anxiety over techno-orientalism is an often-misogynist anxiety over feminization, so might the anxiety over being or becoming a model minority.

We should pause to consider these implications in conversation with preexisting studies on Asian American masculinity. As David Eng, Celine Parreñas Shimizu, and Nguyen Tan Hoang have each already illuminated at length, Asian American masculinity finds itself variously “castrated” or “straitjacketed,” cast in incomplete, feminized manhood relative to hegemonic white heteromascularity. These prior studies of Asian American masculinity rightfully argue that this disruption of masculinity may possess a productive element, queering and potentially dismantling an allegiance to the patriarchal logic of white supremacy itself.

Moreover, this manuscript offers, in many respects, a critique of the most hegemonic dimensions of contemporary Asian American subjectivity, and these most hegemonic dimensions have tended toward the most privileged sectors of Asian American identity formation—the cis heteromasculine, the East Asian, and largely upper-middle class. Overwhelmingly, the cultural productions in this text largely (although not exclusively) fit this demographic profile, precisely because of their hegemonic status within Asian American subjectivity. The vital importance of scholars such as Lowe and Chuh is to imagine beyond this hegemonic construction, or beyond subjectivity altogether, since such subjectivity has been moored to these dominant figurations for so long—I share the same objective but through opposite means, turning *to* these masculine logics in order to understand and disassemble their operations. It is, I believe, an appropriately masochistic move.

Method, Theory, and the Suspenseful Reveal

It should be apparent from the preceding pages that the humanistic theoretical traditions I draw from are exceedingly diverse: psychoanalysis, queer Marxism, Foucauldian poststructuralism, technocultural theory, and phenomenology, among others. Ultimately, from a methodological standpoint, this book resides most definitively in performance studies and queer of color critique, fields whose methodological hybridity reflects my own refusal of theoretical “allegiance.” Queer theory has, by and large, committed to an ethico-politics of disrupting normativity; Judith Butler, for example, has argued forcefully for the reconcilability between Althusserian/Foucauldian models of the subject and psychoanalytic ones in *The Psychic Life of Power*. Similarly, within performance studies, the intellectual threads vary vastly in order to account for the performance (or performing object), the audience, and the *mise-en-scène* that encompasses them.

Because of the scope of model minority masochism within Asian American masculinity, I have chosen an eclectic range of objects across multiple media, including more rarefied objects such as avant-garde theater and alternative literature, as well as new media objects from popular culture such as comic books and video games. Doing so allows me to center panethnic masculine Asian American subjectivity itself, rather than any particular literary or aesthetic form, as the primary object of study. Nevertheless, I treat each medium differently, relative to its particular relationship

to content and form, and consider how each object in each medium builds upon that which precedes it. Moreover, the objects chosen are overwhelmingly male and East Asian American—as stated earlier, I make this choice intentionally, precisely because male East Asian Americans have historically had the easiest, least ambiguous claims to Asian American panethnicity more broadly, in both its model minority and resistant valences. I certainly risk reifying East Asian masculine hegemony by doing so, but model minority masochism is principally a critique of these most dominant, visible iterations of Asian American masculine subjectivity. It is my hope that, by both provincializing and interrogating this segment of relative privilege within Asian American panethnicity, I can contribute toward the dislodging of its hegemony, while at the same time illuminating the scope of its influence. I should also explicitly clarify that by no means is this book a critique of Asian American “emasulation”; not only is this topic already quite well trodden, but analytically, this text has no political investments in any “restoration” or “redemption” of masculinity, heteromascularity especially (if anything, quite the opposite).

Moreover, this book is not a historical treatise. Nevertheless, I would like to offer a humble historiographic framing to explain why the focus of this text is from 1982 to the present. Loosely speaking, contemporary panethnic Asian American subject formation can be traced to three key periods. The early period, from 1968 to 1982, can best be described as a radical period—“Asian America” was in a nascent activist phase (particularly in California) alongside the Black Power and Chicano Movements that variously contended with diverse anti-imperialist, internationalist, and also cultural nationalist articulations, conceptualizing “Asian American” as principally a coalitional, resistant identity. In this period, dominated by Asian Americans who were descendants of pre-1965 immigration waves, the model minority was acknowledged as “real” but forcefully excluded from the Asian American political project. Then, from 1982 to 1992, is what I consider the liberal period; as the first chapter seeks to establish, the murder of Vincent Chin in Detroit in 1982 and the activist aftermath Americanized Asian American discourse, paradoxically attempting to dispel the model minority as “myth” while incorporating the model minority’s aspirational logics. This period saw a vast expansion of “Asian American” identity as a mainstream panethnic identifier and successfully incorporated a broader, non-activist population into its fold. The current period, from 1992 to the present, is what I consider the period of Asian American neoliberalism, marked by the 1992 Los Angeles riots and the corresponding spectacle of “roof Koreans,” characterized by explicit antiblackness, the erosion of Third World coalition, and an active, celebratory incorporation of Asian Americans into technocratic neoliberalism. This book covers subjects principally from the second and third periods—liberal and neoliberal formulations of Asian American subjectivity—but some texts yearn nostalgically for the first radical period, with many authors having emerged from that time themselves.

The first two chapters serve as a temporal/historical launching point for the narrative of the larger project, reading the event of Vincent Chin’s murder as a crucial moment that binds together contemporary Asian American subjectification,

techno-orientalism, and masochism. In Chapter 1, I read the racially motivated murder of Vincent Chin in 1982 not only as a profound event of domestic 1980s Japanophobia, but also as a pivotal social drama that enacted the techno-orientalist interpellation of today's contemporary Asian American subject. The landmark 1988 film *Who Killed Vincent Chin* presents a documented sequence of a large, carnival-esque gathering in which a crowd of predominantly white American adults bludgeon Japanese cars using sledgehammers with intense, vengeful abandon. While Frank Eaman, the defense attorney for Vincent Chin's murderer, claims that "it's a quantum leap . . . to say you're angry at, uh, Japanese imports and then hate Oriental people," the embodied public practice of violence produces a vital discursive, affective link between violence against a technological threat—the Japanese automobile—and the slaying of Vincent Chin at the hands of disgruntled white autoworkers Ronald Ebens and Michael Nitz. Using this scene as a foundation, I assert that through the Japanophobic 1980's white American imaginary, the Asian body became conflated with that of the automobile itself, and that conversely Vincent Chin underwent a Deleuzian "becoming-car," setting a precedent for the techno-orientalist subject position that Asian Americans continue to occupy in the North American logic of late capitalism. Examining the murder of Chin and its aftermath, I explore the death of Vincent Chin on two levels: (1) the murder by Ebens and Nitz as a performative choreography that transmuted Chin from human to machine, and (2) a gesture toward examining the discursive aftershocks of Chin by way of persisting techno-orientalism that informs contemporary Asian American subject formation and identity performance, particularly in the consolidation of Asian American liberalism. Furthermore, through archival research of the documents of the American Citizens for Justice (ACJ), the organization that mobilized the Asian American community to protest the light sentences given to Ebens and Nitz, I argue that the discourse surrounding the Asian American protest was configured primarily to counter techno-oriental racialization and the affective "coldness" associated with the orientalized, but countering this racialization also necessarily entailed a politics of respectability that performed Asian American assimilation into liberal democracy. Chin was, after all, slain after emerging from a strip club on the eve of his wedding, but only the wedding would be mentioned by ACJ publicity (with the strip club referred to generally as a "bar"). The sexual/masculine aspects of Chin's murder were understandably downplayed, but by casting Chin posthumously as both moral paragon and "normative" in his Americanness (in other words, model minority), the ACJ inadvertently reinforced the very logics of techno-orientalism that had impelled Chin's demise. Doing so furthermore established a masochistic relationship between the death/becoming-car of Chin and Asian American subject formation.

The second chapter is an immediate sequel to the first, examining two staged performances contending with the murder of Vincent Chin that transpired in the decades that followed his death: Ping Chong's 1995 play *Chinoiserie* and Philip Kan Gotanda and Frank Wu's trial re-enactment at UC Hastings in 2013. Each of these is considered a performance in the larger social drama of the Chin murder, each

reconfiguring model minority masochism. I argue that *Chinoiserie* continues the liberal cultural politics laid by the ACJ while imbuing the Chin event with libidinal force through a masochistic aesthetic of suspenseful reveal. *Chinoiserie* teases the Chin murder throughout its narrative, offering it as a final climactic *jouissance* of a China/America dialectic, concluding a rhythm that lurches the audience ever closer to its end. In contrast, the UC Hastings re-enactment imagines masochism otherwise, subjecting the Chin narrative itself to masochistic scrutiny in order to reveal the systemic inadequacy of a liberal legal system to provide redress.

Chapter 3 then presents a psychoanalytic examination of “resistant” Asian American masochism premised upon the disavowal of the model minority through an idealization of Blackness. I frame this chapter with a masochistic question by Vijay Prashad, who, invoking W. E. B. DuBois, famously and provocatively asked the South Asian American community, “How does it feel to be the solution?” It is a question, applied across Asian Americans generally, that is painstakingly negotiated in the work of acclaimed Japanese American playwright Philip Kan Gotanda, whose work bears exceptional relevance in contemporary Asian American cultural politics as it contends with model minority discourse and the relationship of Asian Americanness to Blackness in the U.S. racial system. Through a comparative reading of two of Gotanda’s plays, *After the War* (2007) and *I Dream of Chang and Eng* (2011), this chapter analyzes the role of Black characters in signifying longing for a politically redemptive Asian American subject position while simultaneously demonstrating the limits of Asian American radicality within an antiblack hegemony. This chapter argues that Gotanda positions Blackness as a moral center of unambiguous oppression, conjuring what I call the “Afro-Asian superego,” and considers the Asian American political choice of either solidarity or complicity, ambivalent about agency as the Asian American subject is positioned as both victim and perpetrator of epistemic violence. Thus, I consider how Blackness operates as a racial superego for the Asian American masculine political imagination, subjecting Asian American identity to masochistic punishment by an ideal of Black resistance. Ultimately, this chapter ends gesturing toward the pleasure of failure, of the morally masochistic punishment for failing political responsibility.

Building upon the exploration of a coalitional, self-punishing Asian American anti-model minority masochism, Chapter 4 turns to the 2006–2007 run of Marvel Comics’ *Incredible Hulk*, penned by Korean American writer and filmmaker Greg Pak. Also an acclaimed independent filmmaker of such Asian American works as *Robot Stories* and *Asian Pride Porn*, Pak authored a now-celebrated run of *The Incredible Hulk* from 2006 to 2007 entitled *Planet Hulk* and *World War Hulk*. In these two sequential storylines of superhero comics, Pak reinterprets the Hulk—a Jekyll-and-Hyde-inspired beast whose strength grows proportional to his anger and sense of hurt—as a racialized tragic hero/messiah who becomes a utopian revolutionary leader of other fellow abjected monsters, only for his own rage to be the hamartia that ironically brings everything to ruin. Whereas Chapter 3 dwells upon the psychic landscape of idealized Blackness, Chapter 4 interrogates the logics of cultural

politics that allow such idealizations to occur in the first place: that is, a politics of resentment. I argue that Pak reinterprets the iconic superhero as a loose allegory of racial resentment, deftly utilizing the graphic novel as a form to stage the limits of racial resentment itself. As a creature who literally feeds on resentment, the Hulk requires more pain (both emotional and physical) to actualize and become legible to himself. I read Pak's run with *Hulk* as an Asian Americanist and techno-orientalist reclamation of a classic superhero figure as the boundless rage embodied within the body of a meek scientist (and doubly emphasized by Pak's introduction of Asian American sidekick Amadeus Cho, as well as his own tacit acknowledgment of the fact in the Asian American superhero anthology *Secret Identities*). Yet, in Pak's 2006–2007 run, the Hulk opens greater political possibilities not through the moral economy of resentment, but through the embrace of his penetrability and pleasurable desubjectification, that is to say, masochism. Pak's *Hulk* demonstrates the crucial differences between resentment's "politics of woundedness" and the pleasures of masochism, ultimately offering a contentiously optimistic vision of masochism as a potential dialectical corrective to contemporary Asian American cultural politics.

The final two chapters return to the techno-orientalization, becoming-machine, and model minority embrace of the opening Vincent Chin chapters. In Chapter 5, I ask: How does one *feel* when becoming-machine? Chapter 5 follows the encounter between techno-orientalism and masochism initiated with Vincent Chin into the realm of literature, focusing on the becoming-car and other becoming-objects and tying this techno-orientalist move to affective coldness, one of the two primary affective facets of Deleuzian masochism. As Stephen Sohn writes regarding techno-orientalism, "Alien/Asians conduct themselves with superb technological efficiency and capitalist expertise, their *affectual absence* resonates as undeveloped or, worse still, a retrograde humanism" (2008, 8, emphasis mine). Such an observation is striking alongside Fredric Jameson's (in)famous declaration that, in late capitalism,

The end of the bourgeois ego, or monad, no doubt brings with it the end of the psychopathologies of that ego—what I have been calling *the waning of affect*. But it means the end of much more—the end, for example, of style, in the sense of the unique and the personal, *the end of the distinctive individual brush stroke* (as symbolized by the emergent primacy of mechanical reproduction). (1991, 15, emphasis mine)

Within techno-orientalist cultural production, the "waning of affect" is perhaps best embodied by the racialized Asian figure; affectively, the techno-oriental is the post-modern subject par excellence whose hordelike presence also signifies "the end of the distinctive individual brush stroke." Furthermore, affective flatness seems to signify the absence of an interiority, an "interior milieu" in Bernard Stiegler's terms, as the techno-orientalized figure is affectively rendered as only exterior, as only tool.

Thus, I turn to works of contemporary alternative literature written by Asian American men. I analyze Tao Lin's semiautobiographical novel *Taipei* (2013) and

Tan Lin's fictional memoir *Insomnia and the Aunt* (2011) as texts that conceptualize Asianness itself as affective flatness accessible through technological mediation. In the ostensibly postracial *Taipei*, Tan Lin produces an aesthetic of flatness to demonstrate the Asian male protagonist's interface with high technology and new media, although close examination of the text reveals a considerable preoccupation with racialization, a means of accessing Asianness precisely through becoming-machine. As the protagonist Paul moves through the mundane minutiae of his digitized life, his phenomenological experience with the world becomes indistinguishable from technological interface, which also, in turn, is the central means by which he accesses a sense of race, all while the text attempts to performatively position itself as having achieved model minority inclusion. Meanwhile, Tan Lin's *Insomnia*, described as an "ambient" text, situates its narrator reflecting on his childhood with his Chinese aunt, with whom he watches television late into the night. *Insomnia* effectively demonstrates explicitly what *Taipei* does implicitly: a relationship between affective flatness, becoming-machine, and Asian American subjectification. Together, these texts express a racial phenomenology inherited by the techno-orientalization elaborated in the previous chapter, suggesting that Asian American masculinity retains masochistic attachment to machineness.

Finally, all threads of inquiry converge in Chapter 6, which concludes with a critical playing of the 2011 cyberpunk video game *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (*DX:HR*) by Eidos Montreal. This chapter delves into new media analysis of an explicitly techno-orientalist video game in order to provocatively explore masochistic self-annihilation. As a medium, the video game particularly emphasizes the presence of the gamer—who is part reader, writer, and actor—and places them directly into a masochistic relationship with the game itself. The potential for technologization of Asian bodies explodes exponentially in the medium of video gaming, in which the player immerses and empathizes with the environment and procedural logics of the gameworld. *DX:HR* deploys an interplay of cyberpunk content and an immersive first-person gaming interface to generate a cyber-racial erotics of violence. The 2011 video game, widely touted for its agentic gameplay, "cyberrenaissance" aesthetics, and posthumanist themes, stars a white male "supercrip" cyborg detective named Adam Jensen as he unravels a transnational corporate conspiracy to control the world through cybernetic augmentation. As the player assumes the body of Jensen to explore the near-future world of *DX:HR*, they encounter classic, sexually mediated orientalist tropes in the Chinese dystopia Hengsha, such as China doll prostitutes, dragon ladies, dirty streets, and (cybernetic) Asians who "all look the same," all of which serve as signifiers of a cyberpunk, techno-orientalist ethos.

As a game, a medium governed predominantly by active and direct interactivity, *DX:HR* satisfies the desire for masochistic self-annihilation, providing an opportunity for the Asian American gamer to experience not only their own body-as-stereotype, but also their own body-as-other. I argue that this is precisely how *DX:HR* presents generative potential for the Asian subject who plays it and engages its deeply problematic gameworld. I thus suggest that by playing and performing within the

techno-orientalist gameworld of *DX:HR*, the Asian American subject may exercise a mode of what Elizabeth Freeman terms “erotohistoriography,” a deployment of violent erotics to contend with one’s own subject formation. Through a reading of *DX:HR*, this concluding chapter gestures to an Asian American cultural politics that locates itself in slippages, role reversals, and unintuitive affects. *DX:HR* is a private theater for the racially depressed, presenting a virtual world of self-annihilation for the Asian American gamer to reflectively interrogate their own racialization.

Thus, across multiple media, *Model Minority Masochism* aims to provoke, flirt, and lacerate in the manner of its objects of study. Through these instantiations of self-objectification and self-annihilation, *Model Minority Masochism* subjects Asian Americanist critique to the masochistic operations that have long lurked beneath as a dominant cultural logic. It aims to capture a portrait of contemporary panethnic Asian American masculinity: bound up, haptically pliable, endlessly reproducible, a conduit of racial power relations whose future remains uncertain.

Notes

Introduction

1. Drawing from Jodi Melamed's critique of neoliberal multiculturalism (2006).
2. The model minority is fundamentally assimilationist, although it can easily draw from the orientalist perpetual foreigner imagination—take, for example, *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof's comment in his 2015 op-ed "The Asian Advantage" that "I'm pretty sure that one factor is East Asia's long Confucian emphasis on education."
3. Lee's terminology is particularly precise, although it is nearly the same concept as the "bad subject," first applied to Asian American literary studies by Việt Thanh Nguyễn in *Race and Resistance*, who in turn is indebted to its first articulation by Michel Pêcheux, whose "bad subject" is the one who resists the Althusserian hail of interpellation.
4. For example, Daryl Maeda's history of the rise of Asian American identity can, in fact, validate this position given the historical roots of the very term "Asian American" as an intentionally revolutionary identity, not unlike the rise of "Chicano/a" for Mexicans in the United States.
5. Ellen Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (2014), and Madeline Hsu, *The Good Immigrants: How the Yellow Peril Became the Model Minority* (2015). As Ellen Wu writes, the development of "Asian Americans as the model minority—a racial group distinct from the white majority, but lauded as well assimilated, upwardly mobile, politically nonthreatening, and *definitively not-black*" (2014, 2, emphasis in original)—is partly the result of Chinese and Japanese American responses to shifting national and transnational circumstances in the prewar, internment, and postwar periods.
6. Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault agree on this basic point, even if their conceptual frameworks architecturally differ. Judith Butler writes, "Whether by interpellation, in Althusser's sense, or by discursive productivity, in Foucault's, the subject is initiated through a primary submission of power" (1997b, 2). While Althusser describes the hail of interpellation, that responding to the call of "hey you" (his metaphor for ideology) converts one into a subject because the person hailed "has recognized the hail was 'really' addressed to him, and that 'it was *really him who was hailed*'" (2001, 174, emphasis in original), Foucault meanwhile models power as a circuitous force that constitutes society and subjects themselves, insisting "We should not . . . be asking subjects how, why, and by what right they can agree to being subjugated, but showing how actual relations of subjugation manufacture subjects" (2003, 45).
7. After all, to cite a Foucauldian truism, "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (1978, 95).
8. In a similar maneuver, Shimakawa's *National Abjection* explores the performance of an Asian American body that has been historically abjected through legal means—exclusion acts, internment, and so on—and attempts to forge a form of subjecthood despite having been consigned the status as abject refuse. With legal exclusion established as a definitive

paradigm for Asian American racialization, Shimakawa turns to Kristeva's articulation of abjection to characterize the psychic condition of Asians in the United States.

9. These more recent historical studies revise Robert G. Lee's influential historical framework, in which the racialization of Asians in the United States follows six stages according to the economic conditions of the United States: "the pollutant, the coolie, the deviant, the yellow peril, the model minority, and the gook" (1999, 8). Although Lee's typology remains quite valuable as an analytic, Hsu's and Wu's accounts problematize, for example, the notion that the model minority's origins arose cleanly in the Cold War—and that, in fact, its origins can be traced to the beginning of the century.
10. As Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd write in their introduction to *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*, "culture obtains a 'political' force when a cultural formation comes into contradiction with economic or political logics that try to refunction it for exploitation or domination" (1997, 1). Similarly, I conceptualize cultural politics as a domain of racial and ethnic strategy in order to confront, subvert, or submit to modes of exploitation and violence. It is within the domain of cultural politics that cultural production gains political force, cohering or exploding various formulations of identities and collectivities.
11. Sigmund Freud's highly influential descriptions of masochism ultimately form the foundation for much of masochism theory for the twentieth century. The early Freud of "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality" (1905) considered masochism to be a secondary psychic function, one that stemmed from an inwardly turned sadism: "masochism is nothing more than an extension of sadism turned round upon the subject's own self, which thus, to begin with, takes the place of the sexual object" (1989, 252). However, as Freud began to pursue study of *thanatos*, the death drive, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud revised his model of masochism to be "possibly" primary rather than secondary, arguing that masochism reflects the instinctual drive of the subject to return to a state of inactive death.

Jacques Lacan takes this latter Freudian notion of masochism and situates masochism as being the primary function, with sadism as its secondary. In fact, Lacan states, "sadism is merely disavowal of masochism" (1998, 186), in which the sadist exists primarily for the masochist's fantasy. Crucially, both sadism and masochism, argues Lacan, are founded upon self-objectification: "the subject assuming this role of object is precisely what sustains the reality of the situation of what is called the sado-masochistic drive, and which is only a single point, in the masochistic situation itself. It is in so far as the subject makes himself the object of another will that the sado-masochistic drive not only closes up, but constitutes itself" (1998, 185). Under the Lacanian paradigm, masochism is principally a perversion of becoming the object of the drive, and the other's *jouissance* beyond the pleasure principle, that is, toward death.

12. Within relational psychoanalysis, masochism is something of a different order altogether, being not primarily invested in sexual pleasure at all but, rather, a narcissistic moral economy of suffering and recompense. According to Victorian literary scholar John Kucich, who draws from the tradition of relational psychoanalysis, masochism should be understood primarily as a fantasy structure, rather than limited to (though not excluding) the scene of chains and whips of the popular imagination. In fact, notes Kucich, the contemporary consensus among psychoanalytic clinicians is that "masochism should be understood within a narcissistic technology, not a sexual one" (2007, 22), with the extension of the self as the primary preoccupation of masochism. Kucich's pre-Oedipal relational

- model of masochism furthermore argues that various fantasies of omnipotence are the “primary narcissistic compensation that masochism provides” (2007, 22), including the omnipotence of others: “By exaggerating his or her suffering, the masochist can provoke fantasies, too, that an unknown, infinitely sympathetic rescuer will someday appear. The projection of omnipotence onto others serves the masochist in a more general way by producing a morally simplified and thereby controllable world in which judgments about others are always absolute and always the masochist’s narcissistic needs” (2007, 24–25). The pre-Oedipal masochism of relational psychoanalysis that Kucich describes is not tethered to sexual pleasure but, rather, to fantasy, the pleasure of imagining, itself.
13. Moreover, Deleuze disagrees with Freud and Lacan on masochism’s relationship to sadism, arguing that masochism is completely separate from sadism, since sadism relies upon a process of “negation,” opposed to the “suspense” of masochism. Furthermore, argues Deleuze, masochism is temporal, requiring long durations of suspense between painful strikes.
 14. In his June 1982 interview with the *Advocate*, “Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity,” Foucault gleefully celebrates S/M as “inventing new possibilities of pleasure with creative parts of their bodies,” declaring it “a creative enterprise, which has as one of its main features what I call the desexualization of pleasure” (1994b, 165). Foucault dissociates pleasures from sex, noting the fascinating dimension of how S/M derives pleasure from parts of the body that are not the sex organs.
 15. Leo Bersani builds upon Foucault to explore how the masochist does not technically enjoy pain itself, but “rather a passion for pleasure so intense that extreme pain is momentarily tolerated (rather than loved for its own sake) as necessary to bring the masochist to that biochemical threshold where painful stimuli begin to produce pleasurable internal substances” (1995, 94). The thrill of masochism then becomes a thrill of “self-shattering” in which “the ego renounces its power over the world... Through pain, S/M dramatizes (melodramatizes) the potential ecstasy in both a hyperbolic sense of the self and the self’s renunciation of its claims on the world” (Bersani 1995, 95).
 16. This is echoed in Judith Butler’s *Psychic Life of Power*: “To desire the conditions of one’s own subordination is thus required to persist as oneself.” Butler continues, “What does it mean to embrace the very form of power—regulation, prohibition, suppression—that threatens one with dissolution in an effort, precisely, to persist in one’s own existence? It is not simply that one requires the recognition of the other and that a form of recognition is conferred through subordination, but rather that *one is dependent on power for one’s very formation*, that that formation is impossible without dependency, and that the posture of the adult subject consists precisely in *the denial and reenactment of this dependency*” (1997b, 9, emphasis mine). This “denial and reenactment” of the dependence on power sets the conditions for a masochistic encounter with racialization, for the racialized subject depends on racialization in order to achieve legibility. Here, Butler uses the word “desire,” but masochism gestures not just to desire; masochistic critique asks whether not just desire but *pleasure* exists in that nexus of power and subjectification, asking if subjugation lays the groundwork of what Celine Parreñas Shimizu has titled “productive perversity” (2007, 6). In his first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault pronounced that “Pleasure and power do not cancel or turn back against one another; they seek out, overlap, and reinforce one another. They are linked together by complex mechanisms and devices of excitation and incitement” (1978, 48).

17. This text aspires to be the first full-length study deploying masochism to map model minority subjectivity and Asian American cultural politics, but this is far from the first to discuss masochism within Asian American cultural production. Josephine Lee, for example, locates masochistic pleasure in Song's occupying of a stereotype in *M Butterfly*: "It is easy to argue that what gives pleasure is the subversion of the stereotype. . . . But this position is complicated by Song's pleasure in his own performance: he is thrilled not only by his duping of Gallimard but also, the play suggests, by the fantasy of being loved as a butterfly" (1997, 118–119). Additionally, masochism itself is of particular prominence within Asian American scholarship already: Daniel Y. Kim describes Asian American masculinity as characterized by "self-loathing, masochism, and melancholy" (2005, 143), while erin Khuê Ninh suggests that the debt-bound daughter of Asian American literature is disciplined into a self-immolating masochism as a consequence of the micropolitics of capitalism manifest in the Asian immigrant family. This text builds upon these works by bringing masochism to the fore, with attachment to model minoritarianism.
18. It is curious to contrast this imaginary of mass reproducibility to that described by Christopher Bush in his 2007 essay "The Ethnicity of Things in America's Lacquered Age." Bush, in describing Gilded Age *japonisme* in the United States, describes a fetishism of Japanese objects that conceptualizes them as *not* mass-produced; rather, the Japanese people *themselves* all universally possessed an inclination toward aesthetic craftsmanship. This imagination of Japan would shift as Japan rose to become an industrial power, and East Asia on the whole became conceptualized as being fundamentally imitative. This could be one of the primary distinctions between more "generic" East Asian orientalism and more contemporary techno-orientalism.
19. As Andreas Huyssen writes in "The Vamp and the Machine," his reading of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, "The fears and perpetual anxieties emanating from ever more powerful machines are recast and reconstructed in terms of the male fear of female sexuality, reflecting, in the Freudian account, the male's castration anxiety. . . . Woman, nature, machine had become a mesh of significations which all had one thing in common: otherness; by their very existence they raised fears and threatened male authority and control" (1986, 70).
20. Similarly, in her examination of gendered cyborg imagery from the 18th to 20th centuries, Jennifer González argues that the advent of modern technology produced "a situation in which the relation—and the distinction—between the machine and the human became a question of gender and class. Those who had access to certain machines were privileged, and those who were expected to behave like certain machines were subjugated. The same is true today" (1999, 60).

Chapter 1

1. This is partially, though not entirely, true, for according to most accounts, Chin threw the first punch. However, this does discount the escalation that happened prior to the first act of physical violence.
2. Many of which are covered in this chapter, but the Chin case is prominent in such legal scholars' texts as Frank Wu's *Yellow* and Robert S. Chang's *Disoriented*, and Helen Zia's *Asian American Dreams*.