“In the United States, violence and heroism have been made synonymous except when it comes to blacks.” — James Baldwin (1955 [1998, p. 320])

The lone figure of the cowboy, romantically roaming the mythical West, is perhaps the single most identifiable figure in the American imagination; capturing the American spirit of rugged individualism, the cowboy, alongside other archetypal figures as the hunter and the frontiersman, is the “founding father” in the American mythogenesis who “tore violently a nation from implacable and opulent wilderness.” As such, these mythic founding fathers have continued to resurface throughout American history, conveying the “myth of regeneration through violence,” which has become the “structuring metaphor of the American experience” (Slotkin, 1973, p. 5).

Although the mythic frontier of the Wild West now has become a thing of the past, a nation-state, observes eminent historian Richard Slotkin, constantly “invent[s] new forms of adversary [since] without an adversarial other, it begins to atrophy” (Christensen, 2008, p. 312). The urban riot wars and the attendant racial violence in the latter half of the twentieth century can thus be read as a “modernized and somewhat distorted version of the ‘frontier myth’” (Slotkin, 1973, p. 125). Recast as Asian within the context of the 1992 L.A. Riots,
arguably the worst urban civil unrest in American history, the Korean American cowboy, not unlike his predecessor who set out to tame indigenous enemies and the unruly wilderness in the struggle for nationhood, rode roughshod into the cataclysmic racial mayhem to reinstate law and order into the American megalopolis plummeting into a vortex of anarchy. Leonard Chang’s *The Fruit ’N Food* (1996), which indubitably recalls the Riots, features Thomas Pak as the latest Korean American incarnation of the cowboy, waging war against the “renegade” minorities of the urban ghetto engaged in an illegitimate inner-city turf war. Serving as a reminder of the incorrigible racial strife which connotes the violence embedded in the American landscape, Chang’s novel elaborates on how violence becomes a Catch-22 for the ghettoized men of color as neither the Korean American cowboy nor his Black adversaries are able to tap into the regenerative quality of violence. In other words, Thomas Pak’s association with a distinctly American icon like the cowboy bears little fruit as he is unable to achieve true selfhood, which remains the prestige of hegemonic men. As such, *The Fruit ’N Food*’s portrayal of violence as unfailingly degenerative for all men of color begs a consideration of the inextricable nexus between race, masculinity, and violence, as well as how Asian American (male) subjects in particular are reified time and again as victims even as they become agents of violence. Ultimately, I contend that Chang’s novel, although praiseworthy in its attempt to re-conceive conventional archetypes in order to disassociate Asian American men from the dominant discourse which reinforces their emasculation and victimhood, envisions a rather grim and defeatist ending for Tom in that he seeks to embrace something ostensibly intangible to American men of color—masculinity—by means that further delegitimize their existence—violence.

Though the coupling may initially appear tenuous, the iconic image of the cowboy was evoked more so than any other in the media coverage of the Korean American storeowners during the Riots. David Palumbo-Liu traces its emergence in the color photograph of a gun-toting Korean vigilante, which appeared in the May 1992 issue of *Newsweek* (p. 188). The photo depicts a young

1 Leonard Chang is a second-generation Korean American novelist. He has also written numerous short stories published in a variety of literary journals. His debut, *The Fruit ’N Food* (1996) received the Black Heron Press Award for Social Fiction in 1996. His next novel, *Dispatches from the Cold* (1998) won a “Goldie,” awarded by the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* to outstanding local writers.

2 As is discussed elsewhere in this essay, Chang’s novel assumes a teleological structure leading to Tom’s demise through an interspersion of his nightmares, in which he is engulfed by searing Whiteness which blinds and paralyzes him (p. 41).

3 Palumbo-Liu notes how Elaine Kim, distinguished scholar of Asian American studies, was solicited by *Newsweek* to play up the violent faceoff between the “Korean American cowboy” and his Black adversary in her op-ed piece about the L.A. Riots. He also criticizes mainstream media’s investment in perpetuating this image by recirculating simply in order to exploit its “excitement” factor (p. 190).
Korean American man “holding a semiautomatic handgun upright [and] wearing a Malcolm X t-shirt, with the image of a black man in a suit and tie holding an automatic rifle accompanied by the caption, ‘By any means necessary’” (“Siege,” 1992, p. 38). Palumbo-Liu discerns that the photograph illustrates the paradoxical positionality of the Asian American: on the one hand, he is situated as a stand-in for the legitimate (read: White) enforcers of law and order, upholders of the dominant ideology, the “frontline forces of the White bourgeoisie” whose counterviolence against the non-White “malefactors” is sanctioned, even prescribed by the state (p. 186). Along these lines, the Korean American cowboy, by “appropriating and inverting Malcolm X’s maxim, ‘By any means necessary,’” becomes the receptacle of the “pristine violent strain that America would euphemize in itself but exploit in others” (p. 185). On the other hand, the image of Malcolm X emblazoned on his chest aligns this Korean American cowboy with Black Power’s war against the “intrusive violence of the state” perpetrated against racial minorities and the socially disenfranchised (p. 185). Palumbo-Liu’s observation is paramount for two reasons: first, not only does it deconstruct the Black-White dichotomy in U.S. race relations by identifying Asian Americans as the “interstitial element” but it also installs Asian Americans’ in-betweenness with respect to violence’s vigilante/legitimate and violator/violated dualities (p. 183). Furthermore, Palumbo-Liu’s reading of the Korean American cowboy allows us to see that the cowboy ethos was not necessarily crafted and then strategically deployed by the Korean American male subject but was yet another stereotype forced upon him by the mainstream’s mediations. In the end, the designation of cowboy allows the Korean American male subject to align himself pro tempore to an American icon of power and masculinity but this, as Chang’s novel demonstrates, relegates him to yet another metaphor which divests him of any agency.

Asian Americans’ antipodal position as both the agent and victim of hegemony prompts an interrogation of the convoluted correlation between violence and inclusion into mainstream America and more specifically, how violence functions in the construction of Asian American masculinity.4 Violence has long

---

4 I recognize that there are divergent representations of Asian American masculinity; such variables as one’s national origin, sexuality, class, and age determine how the Asian American male subject in question is perceived. On the one hand, he is “lascivious and predatory” and thus poses (sexual) threat to White womanhood. Along these lines, Asian American male sexuality was something to be contained with the purview of anti-miscegenation laws in late 19th and early 20th century. (In tandem, perceptions regarding hypermasculinity, typically associated with Black men, illustrate that being “too masculine” does not accrue them social and political cachet either.) On the other hand, he is asexual or homosexual, which fodders mainstream expectation of his deficiencies. Moreover, the contemporary “model minority” stereotype has exacerbated the preconception of Asian American men as passive and accommodating to White standards. Yen Le Espiritu (1997) maintains that the initial construction of Asian American masculinity as “hypermasculine” was later reversed to “asexual” or “homosexual”
been regarded as an acceptable means of accomplishing masculinity in American society, which has mythologized “the formative powers of violence” that begot and regenerated American manhood (Slotkin, 1973, p. 5); it is, in fact, the American (male) subject’s monopoly on legitimate violence that sets him apart from racial and gendered others. Viet Thanh Nguyen (2002) explains that post-1960s Asian Americans recognized their body politic in terms of violence, as an ambient thematic presence they were determined to reconfigure, and which, in the past, had systematically demoralized and objectified their “Oriental” forefathers. Understanding violence as a part of their initiation process into the “complexities of American inclusion and exclusion, mobility and inequality” (p. 88), these young Asian Americans of “post-Yellow Power” movement reappropriated violence to garner agency and to stake out their place in America, with its long tradition of deploying violence to define itself (p. 63). In particular, they identified the male body as a “site for a series of activities and movements that will serve to regenerate [Asian America] through violence,” and anticipated that the Asian American male subject, once recuperated in terms of his masculinity via a productive appropriation of violence, could then be “discursively transformed into a representative of the larger ethnic and national community” (p. 88).

While “phallic aggression,” as Andrea Dworkin (1976) maintains, may be perceived as the “norm” of masculinity, not all acts of violence are treated equally; historically, only the violent exploits of hegemonic masculinity have been, for the most part, socially sanctioned. Violence enacted by unauthorized perpetrators simply reinforces the illegitimacy of the act and its doer. For instance, not only urban riots but all collective action undertaken by people of color (even the Civil Rights Movement) was portrayed as the irrational misbehavior of “troublemakers.” Considering their continued tenure within the racial margins, one can reasonably conclude that Asian American male subjects’ subscription to conventional methods of accomplishing masculinity, especially via violence, has failed to secure them access to American manhood.5

(p. 90), and American history details how Asian American men were systematically desexualized, thus emasculated, by the exclusion of Asian women in the initial stages of Asian immigration to the U.S. mainland, stringent anti-miscegenation laws, the establishment of bachelor societies, and so on.

5 Even via legitimate venues, violence fails to remasculinize Asian American male subjects. One such example can be found in John Okada’s No-No Boy (1957), which depicts marginalized men’s centripetal move to a sanctioned site of violence, the military, which is considered among the most forceful institutions in constructing images of masculinity. The “young, well-muscled, and white” body of the soldier/warrior was believed to embody the attitudes and behavior of traditional masculinity; a soldier’s robust physique not only conveyed his strength but that of the “nation he represented” (Faludi, 1999, p. 16). However, Okada’s No-No Boy illustrates how the discourse of war and its association with formative violence fails to recuperate the masculinity of Asian American men “deeply wounded by racial violence and discrimination” (Nguyen, 2002, p. 62).
Subsequently, even as Asian American cultural nationalists, including writer-activist Frank Chin, proposed that it behooves Asian American men to turn American violence against itself in order to reclaim their masculinity, Chang’s Tom Pak evidences how an implementation of violence serves to mire him deeper into a state of physical and social emasculation and hastens the codification of his body as “savage, illegitimate, decrepit, and ineffective” (Nguyen, 2002, p. 96). Jeff Yang (2007) also indicates how more recent tragedies involving gun-wielding Asian American men have “conspired to swing [their image] away from the ‘meek, passive, and mild’ end of the spectrum and toward ‘violent, bloodthirsty, and dangerous’” (para. 1) and how this transition from victim to agent of violence has had a deleterious effect on their already precarious social position. In lieu of securing their place in the fraternity of American masculinity, Asian American men’s display of “phallic aggression” has rendered them more susceptible to the dominant group’s discipline and punishment. Simply put, their acts of violence were racialized and subsequently disinvested of its regenerative value.

Circling back to Chang’s novel, it begins and ends with the image of Tom—hospitalized, half-conscious, blind, apathetic, non-responsive to the world around him, wasting away to “nothing”—far removed from the masculine image of the cowboy and detained in a state which guarantees his protracted deposit on the fringes of American manhood (p. 218). The Fruit ‘N Food illustrates that even as racialized masculinities continue to reconcile with the conventional registers of their hegemonic counterpart, accommodating and perpetuating the myth of American manhood ultimately works against those positioned beyond its purview. The promise of legitimacy and regeneration, which White violence affords, is in effect a fallacious one for men marginalized by their race. Per my Baldwin epigraph, “in the United States, violence and heroism have been made synonymous except when it comes to blacks,” The Fruit ‘N Food elucidates how race matters in determining whether a violent act will be sanctioned as heroic or rendered criminal, and once colored by

---

 distrustful of the troublesome terminology of “masculinity.” In Disidentifications, José Esteban Muñoz indicates that masculinity is a category that continues to prioritize a hegemonic rubric, which is cordoned off to those beyond the “norm” (1999, p. 58). In his book Racial Castration, David Eng (2001) also grapples with the viability of “masculinity” as a term to describe Asian American masculinity. Eng discusses how Asian Americans are subjected to multiple castrations by way of their race, gender, sexuality, history, and politics, suggesting that reading Asian American male bodies through the reductive lens of “masculinity” is what prostrates them sexually as well as divests them of all vestiges of sociopolitical power (pp. 14-17). Eng proposes an alternative (and perhaps a more apposite) term: subjectivity. Albeit the denotative proximity of the two terms, the latter, according to Eng and Keith Clark, is less inclined to evoke the linguistic baggage tied to the definition of the former, as “subjectivity” involves “degree of agency of exercises in self-definition and identity formation” (Clark, 2002, p. 2).
its doer, this racialized violence no longer restores but rather invalidates one’s masculinity. Hence, for the men in the racial margins, violence becomes a bankrupt method to obtain their membership into the ultra-elite club of American manhood as it increasingly obscures the boundary between destruction and self-destruction, and further entrenches their locality on the outer edges of society.7

The Fruit ‘N Food

Chang’s novel begins with protagonist Tom’s returns to his old neighborhood Kasdan, Queens—an itinerant loner, a return precipitated by nostalgia. To his dismay, Tom discovers that Kasdan is no longer as he remembers it but has now become a volatile site of racial friction. He is especially disheartened that Kasdan’s Korean American community has all but disappeared; there is a small cluster of stores with Korean signs but the Korean church that Tom’s father attended has been replaced by a dirty grey parking structure with “indecipherable graffiti” (p. 43). A “thin layer of grime” has descended on the neighborhood now populated by multiple generations of lower-class African Americans (p. 43). Tom goes to work for the Rhee family, a Korean immigrant family who owns Fruit ‘N Food, a local mom-and-pop grocery store that mostly caters to the neighborhood’s Black clientele. Confined within the ghetto with no familial ties and no sense of an ethnic heritage, Tom considers himself an accidental Asian American and does not particularly ascribe his peripheral existence to his minority status; yet he is drawn to the Rhee’s who grant him “some inexplicable link to his past” (p. 13).8

7 Sheila Smith McKoy adeptly observes that in the American context, “the violent and violating black bodies are the ultimate markers of racial difference;” lading Blackness with toxic violence is “the pattern of institutionalized racism” (2001, p. 5). According to Smith McKoy, even though racial violence is often enacted by “white bodies that represent the violent embrace of white racial domination, [it] is never read as a white phenomenon” (p. 5). It is important to note that in The Fruit ‘N Food, Tom occupies a space that appears devoid of White (male) bodies and Tom’s embrace of violence is depicted more or less as a personal vendetta against Black violence. Notwithstanding the “ostensible” absence of the hegemony in Chang’s novel, the conflict between the two minority groups cannot fully be understood without examining their respective relationships with the dominant group, which is ever-present in its spectral or metonymic form (e.g., the media). For example, Tom’s anxiety builds as he is exposed to incessant news reports about the mounting tension between the races. Mr. Rhee voices this concern about the presence of the media exacerbating the level of violence of the protestors (p. 133).

8 Here, Tom undermines stereotypes of Asian Americans as the model minority: successful, intelligent, and tunnel-vision moneymakers, for whom assimilation into mainstream America takes precedence over all else. In a sense, Tom’s divergence from a stereotypical Asian American initiates his destabilization of the dominant discourse,
When a confrontation breaks out between the Rhees and their Black customers, Tom taps into the “myth of regeneration through violence,” which seemingly promises to “[purge] darkness from the hero and the [civilized] world” (Slotkin, 1973, p. 125). To a certain extent violence appears to be the only way for Tom to “take care of business” like a real man: homeless and broke with no physical prowess and no vocational expertise, the antiheroic Tom is hamstrung from gaining access to the cachet of hegemonic masculinity. Though seminal in and of itself, violence nonetheless becomes devoid of its formative qualities in the ghetto, which the mainstream regards as a site of physical and moral degeneration. Tom’s race implicates him as one of the “adversarial other,” and the bravado and machismo of the mythic cowboy fails to transpose onto Tom’s Asian body. Tom’s racialized violence is thus rendered toxic; it not only “precipitate[s] chaos and ring[s] down the curtain on the American Dream” of the Kasdan community, but ends up exacerbating Tom’s emasculation as he is circumscribed within the two invalidating positions of victim and enemy of the state (Baldwin, 1963, p. 337).

By all appearances, Tom, skinny, gaunt, and his long hair tied in a ponytail, is a far cry from the template of the mythic American hero who would wage battles by day and woo women by night (Chang, 1996, p. 10). He is a loner, a drifter, a directionless college dropout with little prospects for the future. In his childhood, he was passed around from relative to relative after his

---

which is intent on inscribing his racialized body as a compliant model minority. Tom’s minor stab at unsettling the hegemony is a trajectory that he tenaciously pursues by appropriating violence to reclaim his masculinity.

9 Krienert (2003) examines Messerschmidt’s claim that men with fewer acceptable outlets to assert masculinity tend to be involved in violent incidents. Messerschmidt postulates that violence can be “used as a resource when other resources are not available for accomplishing masculinity. For example, if a person does not have a steady, reliable job, a stable family life, or other traditional indicators of successful masculinity, violent behavior may be considered an acceptable way to convey the ‘toughness’ that is linked with masculine traits. [...] It is when traditional means of demonstrating masculinity are stifled or do not exist, that violent behavior is most likely to occur” (Krienert, 2003, para. 11-12). The empirical testing of Messerschmidt’s theory was inconclusive, which Krienert attributes to the limitation of the masculinity scales that were employed in the study as well as the use of an outdated operational definition of masculinity (para. 58).

10 Controversial writer Frank Chin also stages the figure of the cowboy in his essay “Confessions of the Chinatown Cowboy.” According to David Leiwei Li (1992, p. 324), Chin erects his ideal not as someone who “apes the Western hero” but belongs to both the “fighting tradition of ancient China” and the American frontier. In so doing, Chin appropriates the familiar figure of the cowboy and appoints him to spearhead the production of Asian (Chinese) American tradition, dislodging American Orientalism (p. 326). Chang’s Tom, however, is distinguished from Chin’s productive rendition of the cowboy as the latter banks solely on the cowboy’s maverick quality and ends up underscoring his inability to embody this American icon.
mother’s death. Because his father was unable to take care of him, Tom was even briefly sent to Korea but he knows very little, if anything, about Korea and being Korean. His father finally sent for Tom after several years but by then the two were too estranged to bridge the gap; father and son lived like “strangers,” only speaking about the “most innocent and mundane” things (p. 13). In college, Tom became even more indifferent toward his father’s attempts to communicate. His father’s unread letters were discarded after searching the envelopes for checks. The irreconcilable difference between father and son culminates in Tom’s refusal to attend his father’s funeral. Not only is this Korean American cowboy deterritorialized from the mythic space of the western frontier and shuttled into the inner-cities, Tom is rendered ahistorical due to his disaffection from his cultural heritage, compounding his anxieties about his lack of identity, without which he ceases to exist; severed from constructive sites of identity formation, Tom’s presence is marked by an absence of a sense of masculine self.

Tom’s achievement of manhood is then forestalled, first and foremost, by his disconnect from a strong paternal presence. Not only was Tom estranged from his father but from the mild-mannered and affable Mr. Rhee, who becomes a surrogate father for Tom; the latter is also overshadowed by his brazen wife, whose dogged determination for success overwhelms Tom. Mr. Rhee’s kindness is shown from the very beginning when he offers a gift of three grapefruits to Tom who has lost his wallet and cannot afford to pay. When Tom starts working at his store, Mr. Rhee invites Tom to share his meager lunch and shields Tom from Mrs. Rhee’s unreasonable rants about coming in late or not keeping a close enough watch on the customers/shoplifters. Mr. Rhee also befriends Mr. Harris, an elderly African-American man whose wife had died two years earlier when an Asian gang-neh, hoodlum, attacked her. Mr. Harris, a regular at the store, also comes to support the Rhees, braving the taunts of boycotters. Their friendship proffers the promise of an “interethnic identifications and alliances” within the racial margins which can be used as “powerful weapons against white supremacy” (Lipsitz, 1998, p. 210).

Mr. Rhee owns a gun as his store has been held up four times in the past. Despite having a strong motive occasioning him to use deadly force to protect his family and property, Mr. Rhee recognizes the drawbacks of using violence to combat violence. Therefore, Mr. Rhee is adamantly against relying on a deadly weapon to shield himself and protect his family from being victimized; for Mr. Rhee, violence cannot be a means to even out his compromised manhood in America. In prioritizing the maintenance of peace in his family as well as in the larger community, Mr. Rhee encompasses an alternative Asian-American manhood that deviates from American national masculinity’s self-definition through violence. Tom however criticizes Mr. Rhee for needlessly placing himself in a position of vulnerability, which Tom believes will invite future depredation. If Mr. Rhee offers Tom an alternative masculinity to adopt, his model is ultimately an unappealing one for Tom because Mr. Rhee’s concilia-
tory demeanor implicates him as a “model minority,” which post-1960s Asian Americans consider a feminized position marking their inferiority.

Tom’s dissatisfaction with Mr. Rhee’s alternate model of Asia-American masculinity leaves him to pursue a more conventional track of achieving manhood. In tandem, Tom struggles to negotiate his burgeoning ethnic allegiance to the Rhees and an antiracist discourse safeguarding all racialized subjects, two motives which have tended to mutual exclusion within inner cities. At first, Tom’s dislocation from an Asian (American) frame of reference enables him to maintain distance and tolerance of both Asian Americans and African Americans. Despite his efforts to stay uninvolved, Tom finds himself unable to remain a bystander as the racial tension between the Rhees and their Black patrons escalates. Tom soon becomes over-sensitized to the issues of race and ethnicity as he is inundated with unrelenting reminders of the dangers of living and working in a neighborhood splintered by racial, cultural, and generational differences. Excessive media coverage and editorials about urban conflicts among people of color prompt Tom’s undue fears that “Judgment is coming” to the “whole city [made] uneasy” by racial disturbances (pp. 104-105).

Overlapping the voyeuristic gaze of the media, which keeps surveillance over the inner cities, is Mrs. Rhee’s scrutinizing gaze over Black bodies, which marginalizes them into criminality and Asian American ones into victimhood. The Rhees are constantly on guard for the Black “drug man” whose “many stealings” and “hold-ups” deprived them of “almost hundred dollars in past three months” (pp. 16-17). Mrs. Rhee, in particular, persists in conveying her contempt for and “irrational” suspicion of Blackness (p. 36). Despite her husband’s admonition, she urges Tom to “watch for gundnggee,” a “bad word, like nig … nigger [sic],” explains Mr. Rhee apologetically (pp. 16-17). In the beginning, Tom refuses to go along with Mrs. Rhee’s hypervigilance toward her Black customers, whom she treats as latent criminals. Tom feels uncomfortable as she stares at a tall Black man with long dreadlocks with “her arms folded across her chest, feet apart, chin jutting forward, […] her body motionless” (pp. 34-35). Though Tom is initially surprised and offended by Mrs. Rhee’s bigotry, Tom unwittingly finds himself replicating her paranoiac fears and hatred of Blacks, who come to embody violent persecution leveled against Asian Americans.

Tom nevertheless recognizes that, to a certain extent, Mrs. Rhee has been relegated to a henchman for hegemonic men; she is circumscribed within the racial margins, which she sentinels on their behalf at her peril. Like her neighbors, Mrs. Rhee must weather the harsh realities of racism, which are indiscriminately impinged on all minority subjects. Tom resists such a self-degrading position. Taking an oppositional position against Mrs. Rhee, who at once represents and takes the fall for hegemonic men, Tom retorts that he “wasn’t a security guard [nor] a cop” (p. 55). Yet Tom, interned within the ghetto invoking a hypersensitivity to racial conflict and an attendant “us” ver-
sus “them” mentality, contracts the racist discourse of “Negrophobia” from Mrs. Rhee, and his antagonism toward other men of color intensifies accordingly (Knadler, 2002, p. 87).

Accompanying his irrational fear of Black customers is Tom’s growing engrossment with the pistol that the Rhees keep under the counter. At first, Tom is disconcerted by its proximity, feeling “vaguely uncomfortable” as he believes there is “something menacing about having a gun within his reach” (p. 27) so he stares at it from afar, not wanting to touch nor disturb the gun. Tom’s fascination with the gun increases as he becomes progressively mistrustful of other people of color who appear to him either as junkies or drunks, intent on abusing and undermining his sense of autonomy. In Tom’s suspicious eyes, his customers appear “strung out” with their “harried, bloodshot eyes” (p. 25). In reiterating Mrs. Rhee’s arbitrary fear of victimization, Tom ends up reinforcing the dominant discourse, which gratuitously packages threats to the hegemony in Black bodies.

Even as Tom succumbs to the osmosis of Mrs. Rhee’s negrophobia, he rebukes Asian (American) women as unwitting agents of hegemony, which not only leads to their exclusion from participating in or benefitting from the process of reclaiming agency via violence but also provides justification for reinstating the gender hierarchy within Asian America as an oblique way for Asian-American men to subvert hegemonic authority. For instance, Tom remembers his Korean grandmother as a callous woman with “three front teeth missing [and] her wrinkled sunburnt face yelling at him [and making him cry] for breaking something” (p. 59). Just as Tom posits his grandmother as a source of his infantilization, Tom feels oppressed by Mrs. Rhee’s covert insistence that he side with her against “their” prospective attackers. Subsequently, it appears imperative that Asian-American women are relegated to and occupy the position of the quintessential victim (of racial and sexual violence) in order for their male counterparts to escape this categorization.

11 There is a sharp gender divide in the characterization of Asian-American women in the context of urban conflicts. Whereas Chang’s depiction of Mrs. Rhee renders her a consummate bigot, the three (female) documentary makers of Sa-I-Gu (which literally means “four-two-nine,” for April 29, the date that the L.A. Riots began) endeavor to qualify the widespread portrayal of Asian American women as inarticulate and hysterical victims of racism, and to give voice to these women doubly “othered” by their race and gender. Poignant stories of the shattered dreams of Korean Americans comprise Sa-I-Gu: From Korean Women’s Perspective (Cross Current Media, 1993), an attempt, also, to counter the one-dimensional media representation of Korean Americans as inarticulate, overwrought, or hypervigilant. Dai Sil Kim-Gibson and her co-producers, Elaine Kim and Christine Choy take issues with the fact that the Korean-American perspective was grossly neglected and misconstrued as Korean-American voices were persistently expunged from public discourse about the riots or were often rendered unintelligible and therefore un-American. In 2003, Kim-Gibson released Wet Sand: Voices from L.A. Ten Years Later, which revisits the tragic site to examine the fallout from the riots as suffered by multiethnic communities.
Two separate encounters offer sleep-deprived and often disoriented Tom peace and clarity: an illicit sexual relationship with the Rhee’s rebellious and self-absorbed teenaged daughter June/Jung-Me and a violent exercise of vigilante justice. Though troubled by June’s age, Tom is comforted by her presence, which seems to dissipate the emptiness of his life. Tom is able to alleviate the stress of the daily grind by sexual and verbal exchanges with June. In June, Tom finds a confidante to whom he can unload his worries about the racial tension that he confronts with increasing frequency. Tom finds June’s warm body reassuring in the austere atmosphere of his apartment and the Rhee’s store.

Tom’s sexual relationship with underage June, however, is unable to fully empower him due to its implications of legal and moral impropriety. Late one night when Tom is out on a date with June, the store is burglarized and Mrs. Rhee is badly hurt. Tom feels especially guilty because he and June were having sex during Mrs. Rhee’s attack. His inability to protect Mrs. Rhee abates his sense of manhood even as it is being validated by a sexual encounter with June. The novel intersects scenes of intimacy between Tom and June with those of the break-in at the store; as parallels are drawn between Tom and the “black man with grey teeth [who] scream at Mrs. Rhee to give him the money” (p. 80), sexual intercourse is transformed into an act of violence against Asian-American women, whose position as the quintessential victim is upheld. Waving his gun back and forth in front of Mrs. Rhee’s face, the intruder strikes Mrs. Rhee, grabs her breasts, and leaves her in a puddle of blood. At that same moment, as Tom lies next to June, he thinks that she might resemble a younger Mrs. Rhee. When the bruised and battered Mrs. Rhee returns to the store, Tom is surprised by how young she looks with her hair “falling [down] loosely” like June’s (p. 94). The overlapping image of him and June in bed with that of Mrs. Rhee being held up at gunpoint is a frightening one for Tom as he inadvertently conflates himself with Mrs. Rhee’s attacker (p. 89).

If Tom’s gender approximates him to the Black armed gunman who assaults Mrs. Rhee, he and Asian-American women are yoked together by their race. During yet another confrontation with her Black customer, Mrs. Rhee cries out to Tom for help, and in this moment, all their prior dissensions are forgotten and the corporeal boundary between the two are erased by this language of fear and pain (p. 109). Tom’s earlier vow to never let anyone hold him up, hurt, beat, or shoot him and how he’d “shoot before anyone would hit him” (pp. 86, 110) is extended to include Mrs. Rhee, whom he tries to save by aiming the gun at the would-be robbers. This juxtaposition across the gender line

---

12 Perhaps to obviate the homosexual inscription of Asian-American male bodies, Chang validates Tom’s heterosexuality very early on in the novel. Although his heterosexuality does little to restore Tom’s masculinity, it keeps him from further marginalization as a “sexual deviant.”
becomes even more palpable when one night, after he and June engage in sex, Tom finds his mid-section streaked with June’s menstrual blood: “his groin and lower abdomen were smeared with circular patterns of red, and his still hard sex was covered with a mix of blood and semen.” Thinking that the blood seems more like his, not hers, Tom stares at his bloodstained body, which looks like he had been in an accident and feels a “strange sadness” as he cleans June’s blood off him (p. 128). Tom is reminded of this anointment by blood when he pulls the trigger on a crew of gang members harassing Mr. Harris, and suffers gunshot wounds which lead to his debility (p. 214). Tom is thus situated as both aggressor and victim, two positions which, for Tom and other men of color, are not contradictory but coterminous.

As cowboy justice aggressively extracts respect, Tom begins to consider violence as the most effective way to recover his lost sense of manhood. Tom acts on a misguided belief that violently subverting the equations Asian = victim and Black = perpetrator will abet his transition from the feminized victim to the aggressive victimizer. Tom comes to see the gun and its promise of violence as the most conducive way of restoring his masculinity, which was compromised by the threats of racial violence against the passive and compliant Asian Americans. If sex with June offers Tom a momentary release from the agonizing state of mental and physical exhaustion, it is only when Tom uses violent measures to protect Mrs. Rhee from her attackers that he is able to “sink away instantly […] into a deep, quiet sleep,” for the very first time since his arrival in Kasdan (p. 112).

As mentioned above, when Mrs. Rhee, unnerved by earlier attacks, cries out during a minor altercation with a Black couple at the store, Tom decides to take matters into his own hands and pulls a gun on Mrs. Rhee’s alleged attackers. By disregarding Mrs. Rhee’s plea to “push the alarm! Call police,” Tom refuses to join sides with or rely on representatives of hegemonic masculinity whose delayed response time in the past disclosed their disinterest in coming to the Rhees’ assistance (p. 110); in other words, Tom protests identification with the sanctioned enforcers of hegemonic violence who are intent on subduing racialized male bodies to docile ones. At the same time, Tom invokes an(other) iconic figure of White masculinity—the cowboy—by turning to a maverick form of violence; Tom forcibly seizes respect by pointing the gun at his perceived assailants and even after the incident, Tom does not relinquish the gun but puts it into his pants. The gun epitomizes Tom’s phallic authority, by which he can reclaim his masculinity through enacting violence against destructive Black bodies. In so doing, Tom disarticulates the dominant discourse which inscribes Asian-American male bodies as effeminate and acquiescent.

13 Interestingly enough, even as Tom appears partial to the outlaw mode of the cowboy and expresses aversion to allying with sanctioned enforcers of hegemonic violence, he seems equally unwilling to align himself to Asian gang-neh (gangsters), cowardly blackguards who would condescend to tormenting a feeble old man.
Tom’s exterior also appears to reflect his heightened aggression: Tom is transformed from a “young Asian Christ” with his “gaunt face, deep set eyes, [and] long hair, tied in a ponytail in back” to a “big man with gun,” whose physicality ostensibly manifests his increased militancy (pp. 10, 212).

Even as Tom aims to separate himself from the hegemony, he inadvertently consorts with its authority by employing cowboy justice. The outcome unanticipated by Tom is his demotion to a social menace. When Tom brandishes a gun, he is no longer the “big man” but attenuated to an out-of-control and unstable “crazy sucka,” a threat to social order (p. 111). Tom’s violence can only be read as illegitimate and the efficacy of Tom’s strategy to reclaim his masculinity is severely limited from the get-go. Tom undertakes proactive measures to subvert the dominant discourse by asserting his masculinity of which he was deprived, but Tom remains an “unmanly” Asian American from a hegemonic perspective. Tom is still a “skinny, gaunt” Asian with long hair. Tom’s endeavor to remasculinize himself via violence proves to be a miscarried attempt because he ultimately fails to destabilize stereotypes about Asian-American masculinity (p. 141).

Tom is further marginalized when his misappropriation of cowboy justice provokes a massive protest against the Rhee’s store from the African American community, frustrated by racial discrimination. As the boycotters hurl racist slurs at Tom and the Rhees, Tom is taken back to his childhood, a time when he was defenseless against racial violence. At this moment, Tom prepares to combat these hateful words, which “blend together around him [trying to] sink him” with his tightened fist (p. 184). Tom’s response derives from his mistaken belief that one can only counter violence with violence. The police momentarily thwarts a violent outbreak between the two warring factions but, police and media presence—hegemonic masculinity’s gaze—escalates the intensity of the conflict, despite Mr. Rhee’s desperate gestures of conciliation.

The tension between the Korean-American and African-American communities and between the Rhees and Tom reaches zero hour when the Rhees discover Tom’s intimate relationship with June. Tom’s guilt-ridden outburst coincides with an explosion of the boycott into a race riot, and Tom is again conflated with the violent and violating Black bodies of the rioters. Tom tries to escape from the store and to flee from his feelings of guilt for causing the boycott and for betraying the Rhee’s trust by sleeping with June. Tom returns later only to discover that the store is ravaged beyond recognition. In a state of devastation and chaos, Tom witnesses Mr. Harris being mugged by members of an Asian street gang. Once again, Tom confronts violence with violence and once again, violence fails to reward Tom. Tom’s intention in gunning down the gang members is noble in the sense that he is trying to protect Mr. Harris from harm; good intentions notwithstanding, his violence ends up being destructive both to self and others. Rather than restoring his agency, violence leaves Tom in dire straits as he falls blind and comatose after a gang member shoots back at him.
When he regains consciousness several months later, Tom finds himself in the hospital, paralyzed and enveloped in that “whiteness he had dreamed about” (p. 215). The Rhees, he learns, have lost the store, their daughter June’s college fund, and the American Dream that both epitomized, and Tom is left only with the remnant of racial conflict, which remains unresolved by the end of the novel. Tom invokes the figure of the cowboy, and yet, his racialized and hence delegitimized violence leads to failure not only in his individual aspiration to reclaim his masculinity but also the communal aims to gain greater inclusion into American society. Ironically, Tom awakes to a world of Whiteness that erases all markers of difference but discovers that this Whiteness is “an ever-lasting blinding coldness like a cruel sun” coinciding with his paralysis (p. 215).

Detained in a hospital ward, Tom is overwhelmed by a sense of despair that he has not felt since he started to work for the Rhees. For a brief period, Tom manages to reinscribe the urban ghetto of Kasdan as a space of inclusion: home. As he lies half-conscious in a hospital bed, Tom nevertheless realizes that his experience at Fruit ‘N Food was “meaningless, really” (p. 225). Though he aspired to belong to the Asian-American community, which the Rhees represented, Tom understands that he was mistaken to believe that he “belonged there, belonged somewhere” (p. 225). Tom has fallen further into the margins of a segregated ghetto, which, in Chang’s novel, shows no chance for a genuine reconciliation among its disconnected inhabitants. Cognizant that he has “nothing to come back to,” Tom departs from the real world; he ignores his counselor’s prompting to “react to the world around him,” and increasingly withdraws into a dream world (p. 226). Tom’s bedridden and emaciated body reduces him to “nothing,” and Tom’s earlier concern about the insignificance of his existence is confirmed in the end (p. 218). Alienation and emasculation are two interlocking forces that collude in the eradication of Tom and other racialized subjects from the fraternity of American manhood. Chang offers no closure as he leaves the blind and disabled Tom, indifferent to the things he could have done to “avoid what wasn’t an inevitable conclusion of violence”—that is, a way to resolve interracial conflict that debilitates the marginalized by perpetuating racial fears and economic despair (p. 225).

Race coupled with violence always relegates subordinated men to a no-win situation; in this respect, perhaps the irresolution and the hopelessness that pervades the novel’s end is to be expected. In Nguyen’s (2002) estimation, those who succeed in reclaiming their masculinity are able to do so because

---

14 Via the conflict between the Rhees and Tom, the novel suggests a deep-seated intergenerational discord within the Asian-American communities. When Mr. Rhee first meets Tom, he says that Tom is “no Korean. You gyupo” (p. 4). This division between Koreans and gyupo (or Korean Americans) is again addressed when Mrs. Rhee underscores and places blame on Tom’s inauthentic Koreanness for bringing them to ruins (p. 207).
they learn to reinscribe the urban ghetto from a “space of exclusion” to a “space of inclusion” (p. 98); Tom’s fall from grace is illustrated by his disaffection from the Asian-American community and the futility of his efforts to belong.

Moreover, Tom’s misappropriation of violence devastates Kasdan and reinforces society’s misconception of this multiracial neighborhood as a place of degradation. Tom’s exercise of cowboy justice to reclaim his masculinity ultimately reiterates hegemonic anxiety of violent racialized bodies losing control and wreaking havoc on the social order. Tom inadvertently reinforces the dominance of hegemonic masculinity in that its sanctioned representatives, the police, are sent in to regulate the anarchy spawned by the unruly denizens of the racial margins and racial violence is, once again, used to subjugate people of color. Even as Chang signals a burgeoning camaraderie between Asian and African Americans and a possibility of their collective stand against disenfranchisement of racial others, Tom’s deployment of violence seemingly stamps out any likelihood of recuperation. In the end, Tom’s violence, delegitimized by his race, cannot rework the ghetto into a site of inclusion and reconciliation, wherein Asian and African Americans can converge. The urban landscape remains a demarcated ghetto in The Fruit ’N Food.

Albeit the conceivable merits of situating the Korean-American cowboy as a principal figure of American mythology, we would be amiss to elide that such positioning relegates him as a “perverse ventriloquist [dummy] of the White dominant ideology,” to whom racialized subjects have a “tenuous and contingent relation” (Palumbo-Liu, 1999, p. 187). Ultimately, it is important to understand Tom’s devastating turn to violence not necessarily as an unfortunate corollary of an individual’s shortcomings but as a result of the propaganda of formative violence, which mythically regenerated American national manhood amid pandemonium. In this context, we can re-interpret the frustration that meets the readers at the end of Chang’s novel and salvage its meaning as, perhaps, the author’s tongue-in-cheek way of frustrating the dominant discourse that seeks yet another stereotype—the Asian-American cowboy—to delimit Asian-American subjectivity within its boundaries. Though truncated by the fallacious promise of regeneration through violence, Tom’s resistance against hegemonic masculinity is significant for those endeavoring to locate their identity in the blended community that is America.

REFERENCES


