Eating Identities

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Class and Cuisine in
David Wong Louie’s
*The Barbarians Are Coming*

David Wong Louie’s novel *The Barbarians Are Coming* (2000) is a culinary event, but one that totters agonizingly between hunger and feast. It is a hunger that no feast can satisfy, and a feast that only accentuates the pangs of hunger. This novel is remarkable in troping food to dramatize the interlocking tensions among race, gender, and class in the psychic development of its protagonist, Sterling Lung. By centering on Sterling’s relationship with food in the harrowing formation of his subjectivity, Louie argues that food practices organize individuals’ identities and that one’s discomfort with home cooking is engendered by ideological demands. Via food tropes Louie constructs a layered narrative moving from melancholia to rage and from rage to recognition, encompassing some of the perennial themes of Asian American literature, including racial emasculation, class identity inseparable from race/ethnicity, and the model-minority complex. Sterling’s self-alienating subjectivity is articulated through his class inferiority, which is laced with ethnic and gender insecurity, and Louie’s literary, culinary tour de force helps articulate the truth that the social etiology behind Chinese American men’s (Genius’ and Sterling’s) feelings of powerlessness and inchoate anger lies in the nexus of their race, gender, and class oppression.

Although we are currently witnessing an academic revival of class analysis,¹ the field of Asian American studies continues to be preoccupied by issues of race and gender, an Asian American discourse that Jinqi Ling calls “the reigning racial and gender ideology” (*Narrating Nationalisms* 14).² Back in 1995
Peter Kwong already cautioned us, “While few works in Asian American literature focus primarily on class, class formation within the Asian American community is very much a reality,” and yet “Asian American studies rarely engages it as an issue” (77, 79). This field’s concentration on race and gender traps itself in a limited concern from which a critical vantage point is maintained often by silencing the question of class. In blocking out class, it fails to engage in a discussion of the systemic structure of domination in which all forms of oppression network en masse.

In *The Political Unconscious*, Fredric Jameson advocates a literary analysis that reveals “cultural artifacts as socially symbolic acts,” acts that allegorize class conflicts in characters and their transpersonal realities (20). Class analysis is significant because the language of class is one of the few public discourses (together with those of race, gender, and sexuality) that openly acknowledge the existence of social conflicts. In this chapter I show how class analysis can yield politically engaged readings of literature without sacrificing literariness. Among the myriad contemporary interpretative apparatuses, few would reject the position that a text’s aesthetic exercise and organization are deeply political, but not many give class the central role Jameson does. À la George Lukács, Jameson writes, “[T]he cultural text is [...] an essentially allegorical model of society as a whole, its tokens and elements, such as the literary ‘character,’ being read as ‘typifications’ of elements on other levels, and in particular as figures for the various social classes and class fractions” (33). In the context of *Barbarians*, the lives of Genius and Sterling not only serve as allegories of class conflicts but also of race and gender struggles, for Louie’s novel exemplifies remarkably well the crosscurrents among class, gender, and ethnicity that saturate the characterizations of its major figures and propel its plot. My main focus is on how Louie employs culinary tropes to articulate these crosscurrents. Because of the organizational difficulty of running all three tracks simultaneously, I center the first section on class and ethnicity and the second on class and gender.3

“The best were Swanson TV dinners”

*Barbarians* begins with two key words—“Feast or Famine”—throwing into question its protagonist’s status as an upward-moving minority, or in other words a model minority (3). Twenty-six years of age, Sterling Lung, a graduate of the CIA—the Culinary Institute of America—is a French cuisine chef. With his skill capital funded by a large loan,4 he obtains his first position as “the new resident chef at the Richfield Ladies Club” (3). This position in the [r]ich [f]ield appears at first to be the realization of the American Dream. His exuberance is palpable at the first sight of the club.
When I drove up for my job interview and first laid eyes on the big white house, with its dark green shutters, vast lawn, ancient oaks and elms, bounded by imposing stone and wrought-iron fences, I felt I had arrived. After spending the majority of my years growing up in the back of a Chinese laundry, I was on the verge of ascending to a new station in life, home in this stately patrician edifice, planting my feet firmly in the American bedrock. (27–28)

To live inside such a mansion, he believes, is his arrival at the promise of America—the promise of full citizenship and economic success. Soon, however, he realizes that his true station is no better than his parents'. The feast of the Richfield makes cruelly apparent his famine. He is “devastated by the news my residence would be the carriage house apartment. […] I saw things for what they were. I occupied the servant’s quarter. And I was undeniably the servant” (29). His education, his apprenticeship in haute cuisine, and his hard work fail to change the fact that he, like all working-class people, lives a life of hunger in the face of the feast he has prepared for others.

The fact that Sterling moves out of his parents' laundry into the suburbs to serve the white and wealthy doesn't move him out of his parents' class position. To mainstream Americans, Asians are a model minority, a reputation historically produced partially by and productive of social obedience. According to U.S. News and World Report,\(^5\) Chinese Americans have “become a model of self-respect and achievement,” and they “are getting ahead on their own with no help from anyone else” (Wu 158). Against the backdrop of the civil rights movement, this report uses Chinese Americans' frugality and tenacity to denigrate other disenfranchised racial minorities, particularly African Americans. What the report refers to as “achievement” and “success” are no more than racialized occupations such as hand laundry and restaurants, which pose little economic threat to white America.\(^6\) In addition, the Chinese Americans were engaged in a subsistence economy without any government assistance and without instigating social unrest. It is precisely because of the rarity of organized class struggle in Chinese American history that the report names the Chinese Americans a model minority.

Mike Savage points out, “Class identification is usually ambivalent, defensive, and hesitant” (36). Sterling's class consciousness initially exhibits all these qualities. He is ashamed of his background, quietly bitter in the face of injustice, and desires power and dignity via the socioeconomic ladder. As in most immigrants' class identification, Sterling's is inextricably intertwined with his discomfort in his ethnicity. Louie shows this complex of class and ethnicity through Sterling's ambivalent relationship with his parents and their foodways. What used to be “a childhood favorite of” his (104) he reviles now as “barefoot food, eat-with-stick food” (75). He opens his parents' refrigerator to expose
mockingly “greens, and roots: bundles of medicinal herbs, twigs, bark, berries, and what look like worms bound with pink cellophane ribbon [...]. Under harvest moons, rinse off the maggots, slice, and steam. It is squatting-in-still-water food. Pole-across-your-shoulders, hooves-in-the-house food” (75–76).

In appealing to our sense of pure/impure, inside/outside, and filthy/clean, Sterling’s description renders his parents’ foodways almost unfit for humans. Monica Chiu comments, “Food’s status as either disgusting or delectable has always pivoted in the space of the slash (/), based on human classification by one (dominant) subset of people for their own finicky and fluctuating tastes in a manner that shapes its meanings for other groups of people” (138). Sterling’s white, middle-class preference structures his tastes and sensibilities to such an extent that the slash (/) between delectable and disgusting food also cuts across white America and Asian America, elevating European (read “civilized”) cuisines over against Chinese food, seen as barbaric and degenerate.

The further othering within the Other becomes a necessary condition for the assimilated self to organize and maintain its tenuous borders. Sterling’s self-appointed affinity with white and middle-class Americans not only deems Asian American foodways filthy but also deems its people outside the borders of the national imaginary. In desiring the “real food,” “[w]hat real people ate,” he demonstrates the operation of the ideology of assimilation that equates “real” people with white middle-class Americans and Asian Americans with poor foreigners (76). Anne Anlin Cheng remarks, “Racialization in America may be said to operate through the institutional process of producing a dominant, standard, white national ideal, which is sustained by the exclusion-yet-retention of racialized others” (10). To white America, Sterling is unquestionably among those to be simultaneously excluded and retained so that American nationality can continue defining its ideal over and against the racial Other. His identificatory complex with American nationality thus feeds upon the very ideal that castigates him. To identify with the national ideal the racialized Other must desire its own denigration. Or as Cheng puts it, “[T]he education of racism is an education of desire” (19). From a young age, Sterling feels compelled to imitate how “real” people eat, “[w]ith forks and knives, your own plate, your own portions, no more dipping into the communal soup bowl. Food from boxes and cans” (76). In demarcating the civilized (read “white”) table service and manner from the ethnic (read “barbaric”) communal dipping, Sterling meets the objectives of the racist, binary pedagogy that introduces political domination into the seemingly apolitical sphere of personal experience.

The distinction between civilized and barbaric food practices elucidates how the national ideal inscribes not only racial/ethnic but also class differentiations. Class ideology has always been a significant component in American
nationalism, which projects its ideal through media images that are predominantly white, heterosexual, middle class, able-bodied, educated, and professional. In Sterling's life such ideological and imagistic coercion manifests itself in his relationship with food. To him Chinese cuisine with everything mixed together symbolizes the way his family lives, while American food shows “[h]ow real people live” (76). He recalls his childhood impression: “The best were Swanson TV dinners. Meatloaf, Salisbury steak. I was convinced Salisbury steak was served in the White House every night. Meat in one compartment, vegetable medley in another, apple crisp next door. What a concept! Everything had its own house or its own room” (76). The young Sterling's comical association of Swanson TV dinners with the first family links food practices with a classed national identification in which everyone has his own house or his own room. In this picture real Americans do not live in a cramped space as the Lungs do.

Capital demands that space be organized hierarchically, with classes ordered in their appropriate places both to minimize social and class conflicts and to maximize productivity. Lisa Lowe, writing about Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*, defines Chinatown as a heterotopia, a term that Michel Foucault uses to describe “[a site] of crisis and deviation” in a system of hierarchically organized social space (122). In its condensed space where no easy demarcation can be made between private and public, leisure and work, legitimate and illegitimate, and commercial and residential, Chinatown frustrates capitalist rationality for spatial organization. The Lungs' laundry is such a space, with business conducted in the front of the house and family life lived in the back and basement. Such a spatial arrangement is a residue from a pre- or infant capitalist era and resists advanced capitalism's disciplinary ordering of space and, as Lowe puts it, “marks the disunity and discontinuity of the racialized urban space with the national space. It's a space not spoken by or in the language of the nation” (122). Pockets of resistance such as Chinatowns and the Lungs' laundry challenge the rigidity of national borders. As we sometimes hear from tourists, Chinatown feels like a foreign country. This explains why Sterling regards his parents' laundry as un-American and their class difference from others as a race matter. “Oh, the privilege of being an American,” Sterling ponders, “cars and quick escapes! Until I was fourteen or fifteen my family never owned a car. That fact was consistent with the profile of Chineseness that was forming in my young brain: We don't own cars, we don't live in houses, we don't eat anything but rice. Each one a racial trait” (45). Louie remembers that he himself, having internalized the othering of Asian Americans, saw his family “as somehow abnormal” (Hirose 199).

The ideology of assimilation is instrumental to capitalism in demarcating civilization and barbarism along the lines of class and race/ethnicity based on
consumption patterns. Bourdieu argues that “art and cultural consumption are predisposed [...] to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences” (Distinction 7). Such ideological demarcation produces in the people of color and the poor a self-alienating subjectivity that is manifested through self-faulting, self-loathing, and self-abjection. Part of the self-alienation one experiences is due to the ideological demand that one renounce one’s relationship to one’s heritage, which may very well be a precapitalist mode of existence such as self-sufficiency. Louie uses references to food consumption to portray Sterling and his mother, Zsa Zsa, as embodying two very different systems of value, and thus their contrasting perspectives on what is considered civilized eating. For example, Zsa Zsa never wastes time and money on serving dishes, but serves “English muffins” in the pan in which they are cooked. “Why do more work than necessary; isn’t there enough to do already? Who cares how food is served, just as long as there is food to serve?” (367). Sterling, however, begins to question this home practice after he visits his classmates, for he is “shamed and mesmerized by their table manners, by their glasses for cold drinks, cups and saucers for hot, dishes of different sizes for different purposes, the dizzying array of utensils, big and small, the beautiful gilt-edged platters on which food was served” (367). Conspicuous consumption and trivially specialized commodities preoccupy people’s notions of self-worth and belonging. Those who are not bothered by how the Joneses live are often perceived as poor, dumb, and crude. In copying the table manners of his classmates, Sterling feels self-conscious and unnatural, “like dogs trained to walk on their hind legs.” But to assimilate, to appear American, Sterling must mimic; “even coarse mimicry [...] was belonging” (367).

On another occasion, Sterling takes his mother Zsa Zsa for a ride through the narrow, maple-lined streets of split-level houses, fresh paint, and two-car garages where many of my schoolmates and her customers lived. In front of one house she had me stop, and she exited the car and inspected the shiny-leafed bushes and shrubs, clipped at crisp right angles, stately as the Parthenon. [...] “Why plant so many plants you can’t eat?” she said in Chinese. “These people are stupid.” [...] “If it were left up to you,” I said [...] “those nice garages would be stables, the lawns vegetable gardens.” How stupid she was, ignorant of the look of success, of civilization at its height. (37)

Fundamentally frustrating to capitalist rationality, Zsa Zsa’s peasant mentality disregards the look of success and evaluates things for their use value alone. What does not contribute to survival is wasteful, and looks mean little in her value system. Sterling on the other hand marvels, “What a luxury unused land is” (37). He fantasizes about his ownership of a place projecting the look of
success. Sometimes when he cooks in the club, he looks out its kitchen window at the Puerto Rican gardener with his son working in the grounds. “From my position inside the house, I feel as if he were my gardener, working under my orders, keeping each of my blades of grass trimmed to the same height” (37, emphasis mine). Instead of viewing the gardener as a fellow worker, another exploited ethnic minority member who serves the rich white ladies, Sterling separates himself, cooking inside the kitchen of the mansion, from the gardener, working outside in the sun. The repeated usage of the possessive pronoun underscores his imaginary power derived from imaginary ownership of property.

It is not surprising that a collective class consciousness is foreign to Sterling, for class in America is a taboo subject. Perrucci and Wyson attribute this fact to “the national reluctance to examine how the class system of the United States operates on a day-to-day basis” (4). For this class system to work, they point out, “the majority of disadvantaged Americans must be persuaded to believe that the way things work out for people is fair. This is done by distracting attention from class inequality and focusing the national spotlight on conflict between Blacks and Whites, women and men, gays and straight, pro-choice and antiabortion partisans” (4–5). As a result, class has been forced underground and remains deeply “embedded in the recesses of our cultural and political unconscious” (Aronowitz 30). The class unconscious manifests itself via Sterling’s class aspirations. The fact that he aligns himself with the Richfield ladies, whose social station he aspires to achieve through his skill capital, over against the Puerto Rican gardener demonstrates that class hierarchy remains a dominant feature in the United States. Despite the sustaining myth that all Americans are middle class and, therefore, America a classless society, millions of Americans like Sterling continue to experience class anxieties in their daily lives.

Sterling’s marriage to Bliss Sass is highly motivated by his class ambition. His half-hearted relationship with her, resulting in pregnancy, begins the novel as its major conflict. While he tries to persuade her to have an abortion, he becomes attracted to Yuk, a Hong Kong girl his parents intend for him to marry. When he agrees to visit Bliss at Thanksgiving, he has no intention of marrying her (134). Things change, however, when he lays his eyes on the Sass estate in New Canaan. Driving up the private road, he experiences a mixture of voyeuristic pleasure, envy, and inchoate anger.

I finally find the Sass property, […] and immediately my eyes are filled with the bright whiteness of the vast groves of birches on both sides of the asphalt drive. The trees are so densely packed in the endless acreage that the moment is dazzling: it’s like tearing through clouds at thirty thousand feet. All I see are
the tall, papery-barked trees and the long black drive that cuts through them to oblivion. I blink, inhale deeply, set and reset my jaws: I’m adjusting my body to the new light, air, and sounds.

The road narrows and winds, five-mile-an-hour curves as tight as fish hooks, to the right, to the left, tortuously luring me in. [...] At last, I see the house plainly—a giant tease, like gold littered on American streets, set among somber centuries-old trees, the ultramodern glass-and-steel jewel Bliss calls home. I am in love! (137, emphasis mine)

Symbolic of the Gold Mountain, a fantasy that lured tens of thousands of Chinese to America, the Sass estate is “gold littered on American streets.” With the metaphors of “tearing,” “cut,” “fish hooks,” and “tortuously,” Louie suggests the danger of this lure. Preconsciously, Sterling understands the peril that the bait of the Sass property presents: once caught he will become their fodder. His white preference and class aspiration, however, propel him forward regardless of his fear. He is described as “set[ing] and reset[ing]” his “jaws” as though anger prepares him for the hook to take him to “the new light, air, and sounds,” a new environment that is fatal to him. Louie’s language depicting Sterling’s state of mind at this moment powerfully evokes contrary emotions with “oblivion” paired up with “new light” and “cut” with “love.” In discussing Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye, Anne Anlin Cheng writes about such paradoxes: “White preference is not a phenomenon that simply gets handed down from society to black women and then to black girls; instead it travels a tortuous, melancholic path of alienation, resistance, aggression, and then, finally the domestication of that aggression as love” (17–18). This insight illuminates the painful operation of class envy, class anger, ethnic inferiority, and rage in the psyche of Sterling, who at the end converts aggression to love and personal displeasure to social pleasure. The lack of institutional space for class discourse effectively sends class anger and grief into hiding.

Social pleasure at such personal costs leads to a symbolic death for Sterling, which commences as soon as he enters the Sasses’ house. By now not only does he no longer resist Bliss’ proposal of marriage but also considers giving up his name for hers.

A switching of names is, in a certain light, like the trading of fathers. Trading hers for mine, Sass for Lung. Anyone can see what a swindle that is. I would gladly accept such a one-for-one swap. And why not? Look at this land, this house, those fine automobiles! He makes tons of money without having to press a single shirt, without having to kiss a single customer’s starch-or-no-starch ass. What’s so bad about that? Change my name, slip free of the old yoke, refathered, reborn, Sterling Sass? Absolutely. (141)
Sterling Lung must die in order for Sterling Sass to be “refathered, reborn,” and mesmerized by the wealth around him, he chooses suicide. In the logic of money and power, such trade of a poor, colored father for a rich, white one can only be considered a “swindle.” Taking in the wealth of the Sass property, Sterling measures it with what he understands and appreciates—the riches in the kitchen:

The bulging bowls of fruit, Golden Delicious, Red Delicious, Granny Smith, Pippin, Empire, Jonathan, McIntosh, Cortland apples: Bartlett, Bosc, Anjou, Comice pears; expensive out-of-season peaches, cherries, plums, and nectarines; crystal dishes brimming with walnuts, pecans, almonds, hazelnuts, brazil nuts, chestnuts; pumpkin, spaghetti, hubbard, acorn, turban squash for show; loaves of white, rye, challah, and pumpernickel [. . .]; twenty pounds of turkey, and the best ingredients money can buy for sides, blue point oysters, Iowa pork sausage, Idaho russets, Carolina yams, Long Island corn, Cape Cod cranberries, Florida oranges. (147)

Rather than sensuality and splendor, the quantity and variety of foods inspire awe and repulsion. The Sasses’ kitchen, more like an upscale supermarket than a home kitchen, presents a cornucopia of the best in the world that money can buy—a truly decadent scene of promiscuity and wastefulness. No wonder “an emergent madness surfaces on my [Sterling’s] face, lost as I am in such a magnificent jungle of goodness” (147). Louie’s craft in language vividly portrays Sterling’s class anxiety and ambivalence. As a French chef in the midst of such a “jungle of goodness,” he is both overwhelmed by the joy of recognition of good living and the fright of senseless consumerism that is a jungle with no outlets. And in this “magnificent jungle of goodness,” nonexistence awaits.7

Louie’s choice of Thanksgiving for this occasion requires some meditation. Thanksgiving, one of the two major American holidays underscoring the national imaginary, perpetuates the myth of racial harmony and promotes ideological amnesia of genocide and colonization. It conjures up the rosy picture of the first meal shared by the exiled and their hosts. Through gustatory assimilation, Thanksgiving presents the bounty of this land and the goodwill of its first people. Sterling’s entrance into the Sass family on this holiday stages a parody of Thanksgiving, in which he arrives as an outsider at the bountiful estate of the Sasses, who posture as native American, opening their door and offering their hospitality to the exiled (in two senses: the prevailing perception of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners and Sterling’s self-exile from his ancestral culture). The American deed of goodwill by sharing Thanksgiving dinner with foreigners often exacts religious and cultural conversion. In
Sterling’s case, the staged racial and class harmony leads him onto the path of further self-alienation.

In the face of the Sasses’ wealth, Sterling is filled with gratitude and self-contempt. He is grateful that the Sasses are civil to him in spite of Bliss’ pregnancy, now that he fully realizes the severity of the matter—that Bliss is the precious daughter of rich and powerful people and that they could make his life miserable if they wished. Selma Sass’ first question to him is caustic and insulting: “Is it true that your parents work in a laundry?” Sterling’s immediate answer attempts to narrow their apparent class distance: “They own the business.” Selma’s response shows a touch of ironic condescension: “That must make it nicer for them” (143). Sterling quickly changes “the subject, nothing gained stumbling along that path. It’s guilt by association” (144). His self-contempt illustrates that the ideology of the American Dream conditions one’s sense of self-worth, for it enjoins self-blame for failing to succeed in the land of promise. Consequently, he feels undeserving of his new fortune.

I know then, in my most honest heart, that I don’t belong here, absorbing their heat, eating their food, getting high on their good fortune. New Canaan is mine because of their charity. Bliss is my pipeline to this bounty, and I don’t even love her. [...] Isn’t this love I feel? I find it in a crease inside me like a utility bill I’ve lost, sandwiched between other papers, and neglected to pay. My unworthiness of this bounty explains my vague love. What in my history allows for such presumption? It’s my back-of-the-laundry soul clanging inside her beautiful house; it’s my bigoted immigrant parents who’ll remain, until their deathdays, bottom-feeders, washing and ironing for others. (154)

The analogy of his finding a vague love for Bliss to his discovering a utility bill he has neglected to pay sets in motion Sterling’s inner turmoil in the language of class. An unpaid utility bill entails powerlessness, starvation, or both, and yet to pay this bill requires him to marry a woman he doesn’t love. Ultimately, the payment for class promotion is further self-alienation. The evocation of his parents’ class position in this context reveals his inarticulate anger and bitterness, for deep down he knows that it is not his parents’ laziness or stupidity that render them “bottom feeders,” as the discourse of the American Dream would like him to rehash. Yet such knowledge without a collective class consciousness and its desire to engage in class struggle simply produces melancholia and masochism.

Louie shows the psychological drama centering on class inferiority in Sterling via the objective correlative of a deer battling the expensive electric fences Morton Sass has erected. It is here that his masochism neutralizes his otherwise
explosive rage. When Sterling is first introduced to the fences, he reaches out to test the wires’ tension. Sass doesn’t stop him, knowing fully well the voltage of the fences. “I’m jolted back by a sharp electrical charge that brings tears to my eyes. […] I shout, shaking, then inspecting, my fried hand. Morton Sass laughs. In a dark corner of my mind I register the moment as a milestone in our brand-new relationship: I have made Morton Sass laugh” (140). Sass’ pleasure at Sterling’s expense is weirdly perceived as a reward in a “dark corner” of his mind, and this dark corner of repression converts his rage into love. To let his rage out of hiding would jeopardize the social pleasure he is seeking. As they walk to the house Sterling spots a deer. Sass cusses, picks up a stick, and throws it at the deer. “Here, eat this!” Sass shouts. “Get off my property” (141). Sterling’s identification with the deer comes effortlessly. “His voice thumps off my heart and echoes in my chest, as if the anger were really meant for me. When the deer bounds away, part of me runs with him” (142). Sterling subconsciously recognizes himself in the deer that intrudes onto the Sass property to feed on a few leaves of lettuce in the garden. During the Thanksgiving feast, which Sterling has helped cook, the deer returns, this time coming threateningly close to the window of the dining room.

Framed in the sheet of glass is the same magnificent deer, its antlers spanning the window. He stands inches from the pane, his ears cocked and wary, eyes bright, tender, gleaming like oil in a cast-iron pan. […] We recognize we are in the presence of a force we are not going to understand. As he absorbs our abrasive stares he stares back at us: his dark eternal gaze, bulging with longing, eats right through me, and I feel undressed, dissected, unsexed. (154)

Sterling’s identification with the deer tightens here via the mirror image: “the reflection of my face is superimposed on the deer’s body,” as though it were himself outside the window looking in (154). It is ironic that the electric fences Sass has erected around his property to prevent the trespassing of humans and animals keep out neither Sterling nor the deer. The deer’s magnificence, audacity, and defiance, which Sterling clearly admires, drive fear into the hearts of these rich people. Its dramatic arrival at the Thanksgiving feast represents the return of the repressed in Sterling—the outrage over blatant social inequality and the longing for the same affluence and comfort. Confronting the deer’s courage and maleness, Sterling feels helpless, impotent, and ashamed. When the deer bounds off, he feels as though it had carried “my heart away like a tick,” another metaphor of his symbolic death (155).

Sterling’s class aspiration calls for the disavowal of his ethnicity because in his mind being Chinese is tantamount to being poor. While his parents pin their
hope of class mobility on his becoming a medical doctor, he chooses to pursue a career as a French chef, for in the hierarchy of culinary art, French cuisine occupies an elite position. In his own words, French cuisine is “aristocratic” and Chinese “the plebeian fare” (210). Bourdieu employs “habitus” to describe a socially and historically acquired disposition that is both classified and classifying (The Logic of Practice 54). Because of its consistency through regularities and repetitions, habitus acquires the status of necessity and naturalness. Habit thus is an existential condition of which one is often unconscious—a state of ease in a social locale. One can say that Sterling has been brought to consciousness of his habitus by his heightened sense of racial and class differences manifested in matters of taste, and his spoiled habitus results in his hopeless class aspirations and painful alienation from his kind. With his vocational choice, he believes he has managed to distance himself from his ethnic origin, has gone mainstream or even highbrow in his taste and sensibility. He finds comfort in the apolitical rhetoric of desire and passion: “My purest desires are in the kitchen: for the exact flavor, the clearest consommé, the perfect meringue, precise paysanne-cut potatoes […]. My great desire, the one that inspires the others, is to please my diners, that they love my food and love to take me into their bodies, into their hearts” (88–89). It is cooking and serving French food that allows him to conjure the illusion that the rich white ladies at the club accept him as one of them and that he assimilates by being assimilated into their bodies.

His notion of purest desires existing in the kitchen serves as his opium to put to rest any inkling that his activities in the kitchen are far from being innocent and apolitical. To accentuate this point, Louie places Sterling in his mother’s kitchen where his “purest desires” vanish; instead he feels disdain mixed with awe. It occurs to him “that, improbable as it may seem, I’m watching Zsa Zsa perform the meal’s *mise en place*. To think such similarities exist between her casual, capricious, undisciplined style of cooking and what I learned at a cost of thousands of dollars in student loans” (102–103). Zsa Zsa looks at French food with equal disdain. “That lo-fahn [foreign] food you cook,” she says, “don’t tell me that’s what you eat too! I worry for you” (103). To her Americans are “more concerned with how the food looks than how it tastes” (105). In a moment of exasperation, Sterling grabs at the rice pot Zsa Zsa is carrying and “accidentally hook[s] her arm, and the rice spills out, each grain crashing on the linoleum, crackling like static” (103). Louie sets this scene to be highly symbolic of Sterling’s rejection of his rice-dominated culture. The hyperbolic sound effects—“crashing” and “crackling” of each grain—loud with Louie’s disapproval of his protagonist, underscore Sterling’s own inkling of guilt, vividly conveying the agony he suffers in his self-alienating effort to assimilate into the mainstream by rejecting his parents.
The central allegory that organizes this novel's plot is the abduction of Baby Sterling by Lucy, the white woman with whom Sterling's father Genius has had a brief affair (284–285). Sterling's brief abduction symbolizes his loss to his parents and his ethnic origin. “Days after the incident his [Genius’] wife insisted the baby was not the same baby that had been stolen from her. In the short time they were apart something had happened, though she was unable to pinpoint a single characteristic that was different. She just knew” (286). With this allegory, Louie impresses upon his reader that Sterling's alienation from his parents, his ethnicity, and ultimately himself is an outcome of ideological abduction. In other words, he has been orphaned by the ideology of assimilation. His acquiescence to the socioeconomic demand that “real” Americans be white and middle class is symptomatic of a U.S. cultural hegemony that promises racial minorities economic rewards for self-abnegation. Speaking in Genius' voice addressed to Sterling, Louie condemns this ideological coercion with a parable.

You grow up with wolves, you are theirs your whole life. You howl like them, rip the meat like them. They raise you from infancy, and then the day comes when you wake in dew-wet grass, your feet aching from a hard night's hunt, and you realize you're not a wolf after all. The wolves, of course, know this all along. […] You are confused; you think you had unlearned your wolf days, but the wild's furry edges still must show. As you shake your head, vehemently denying you ever ran with wolves, your lips involuntarily peel back, baring your teeth, and you snarl and growl. (347–348)

Genius' parable powerfully indicted capitalism for having turned human beings into predators. Implicating the ideology of assimilation, this tale also reveals the painful truth that the racial Other remains Other to the national Self even as the former believes otherwise.

Despite his disavowals of ethnic identification, Sterling can never live outside his skin color and physiognomy. Lisa Marie Cacho in her review of Barbarians says it well: “Completely invested in and taking all the right steps to American assimilation […], Sterling still finds his socioeconomic success dependent upon his compliance with being marked and marketed as foreign” (380). He is force-fed with racial stereotypes when he is constantly asked to cook Chinese and to sound comically “Chinese” on a cooking show. Libby Drake, the president of the Richfield Ladies' Club, doesn't understand why Sterling cannot and will not cook Chinese, because in her mind his ethnicity naturally guarantees authentic Chinese cooking regardless of his training, as though the knowledge and art of Chinese cuisine were in his DNA. Sterling’s response, however, is “I’m a chef, one who specializes in continental not com-
munist cuisine” (146). While divorcing culinary art from the notion of ethnic authenticity, he appeals to another U.S. ideological fixture—that communism is evil—to legitimate his choice of vocation and to certify his American-ness. Subscribing to the discourse of assimilation, he believes that America is a culture where a man reinvents himself and where his arbitrary racial makeup matters less than his conscious choice of self. “[W]hat I am is a chef,” Sterling thinks. “Damn it, Morton Sass should know better than label me Chinese. This is America” (148). When Libby Drake finally realizes that Sterling will never cook Chinese for the ladies, she hires a Chinese cook, whom she introduces as an “authentic” Chinese, implying that Sterling is not (198).

The other face of ethnic authenticity is exoticism, and in the global capitalist circulation of commodities, ethnic exoticism generates profit and degrades the ethnic laborer. Sass orchestrates a TV cooking show that stars Sterling; its name, Enter the Dragon French Kitchen, plays on his last name, Lung (dragon), and its ethnic ambiguity (Bliss Frenchifies it as “Lunge.”). Sterling proposes to blend “the aristocratic cuisine in which I was schooled with sprinklings of the plebeian fare [Chinese cuisine] that the masses apparently want” (210). But Sass, a shrewd businessman, insists, “Why do you want to compete with that crowd already cooking normal food?” (210). By labeling French food as “normal,” Sass exoticizes Chinese cuisine. “That Chinese guy is where you go if you want to egg foo yung,” he tells Sterling (211). In other words, normal people cook and eat normal food, and the Chinese, exotic food. Bell Hooks points out, “The commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling. Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture” (21). Understanding the increasing desire to eat the Other, Sass invests in televising ethnic cuisine for one purpose only—profit. With Bliss’ mediation, Sass finally concedes that Sterling will cook Chinese every fourth Sunday and the rest of the month, French. A significant characteristic of being the exploited class is one’s inability to define the product of one’s labor or to determine its market value.

Alienated labor produces alienated selfhood. By shifting points of view, the author further reveals the extent to which such self-alienation afflicts the protagonist. Through Genius’ eyes, the reader sees how Sterling prostitutes himself on TV.

The shiny cleaver chases the knuckles along the stalk of cabbage, a blur of a blade that slams hard against the cutting board, just shy of his hand. Where did this technique come from? All for show. Americans eat this crap up. And what are they really after? They want to see him slip, see the chink lop off a digit. If he had any real balls, he’d drop his trousers, hoist his dickie bird onto
the chopping block and give them a real thrill, something to remember. […] Shameless. Making a fool of himself. Like his dick’s already been cut off.

His son finishes the last stalk of cabbage with an emphatic *whomp* of the cleaver. “Wow!” he says, smiling into the camera, eyes as big as Ping-Pong balls. “Velly, velly fast!” (228)

Genius feels deeply pained by his son’s TV persona, “his flesh and blood on display like a rare zoo creature for everyone to gawk at” (229). Through his performance of the racial stereotype of a Chinese chef, eager to please and unabashed with foreign accents, Sterling commodifies himself in a market that craves the exotic and the comical in the name of multiculturalism. In Sterling’s own words, “I act like an ass on TV because I don’t know how else to act. How am I supposed to be Chinese? By being myself? I’m not the kind of Chinese that viewers want to see […]. So I try to give the people what they want: a goofy bucktoothed immigrant bastard who is humbled and grateful he’s been let into their homes” (348). He is so successful in denigrating himself and his people that he begins to accrue value as a commodity, which Sass sells to San Francisco public TV. “Congratulations,” he tells Sterling, “you finally turned a profit” (295–296). With this business transaction, Sterling’s self-alienation deepens. His complete loss of autonomy is powerfully evoked in his conversation with the butcher, Fuchs. “So now I’m a piece of meat,” Sterling says despondently. “You’re being *sold* like a piece of meat,” Fuchs replies (296). Sterling’s early illusion that in the kitchen he is a man has become shattered, and instead he himself becomes feminized—an object, a piece of meat, to be bought and sold, to be manipulated, cooked, and consumed. In San Francisco his show is given another name, “*The Peeking Duck* (‘evvy week I peek into your life!’—another voice I borrowed from another TV Chinese chef, Hop Sing, the houseboy on *Bonanza*)” (296). The obscenity of the show’s name renders no agency, for a TV chef is the object of gaze, not at all in a position to peek into anyone else’s life. The intertextuality with *Bonanza* solidifies Sterling’s lack of agency, with the TV character portrayed as a powerless, asexual, grinning, and bowing houseboy.

The ultimate self-loathing in Sterling is allegorized in his ambivalent relationship with his sons. At the birth of Moses, his older son, Sterling feels relieved that the baby “at least in his first hours of life, has chosen to resemble Morton Sass, and not Genius or some mutty blend of the two” (182). Sadly, it is the baby’s white looks that form a bond with Sterling. “He is my child, precisely because he is loaded with Sass genetic material” (182). After a few days, however, he is dismayed that Moses has lost the Sass look. “It doesn’t matter how many times I blink, how wide I stretch my pupils, how near or distant I focus my gaze: My baby boy looks like a little old Chinese man. […] He started life
logically, a miniature Morton Sass. [...] Moses has taken on a decidedly Chi-
inese cast” (184). When his second son Ira is born, Sterling is disappointed that
the baby looks like a Lung, but a month later, he has “metamorphosed from
Lung to Sass. No sign of Lung chromosomes remained. Natural selection. We
had finally done something good together. The result was perfect Ira” (217).
The Darwinian language insinuates that the Lung chromosomes are degenerate
and should be discontinued.

In Social Darwinism, which applies physical characteristics to socioeco-
nomic and moral ones, class is part of the language of natural selection. At
its height in the United States, Jane Addams pointed out that the often insur-
mountable barrier between the poor and the rich was due to such ideology:
“It had been believed that poverty was synonymous with vice and laziness,
and that the prosperous man was the righteous man” (14–15). Such a belief
continues in our age. Sterling’s dismay at Moses’ physiognomic transformation
derives from his anxiety about ethnicity as much as about class. In his mind
the Lung chromosomes not only determine their carrier’s racial characteristics
but also his or her class position. Through Moses’ appetite for Chinese food,
Sterling comes to realize with anguish that Moses not only looks like the Lungs
but also acts like the lower class too.

Moses loves rice, and he will eat everything Zsa Zsa puts in front of him,
no matter how Chinese; he loves even the funkiest of her concoctions, the
meanest specimens of a base cuisine, elemental forms born of lean times and
course palates, sodium-rich, designed for the simple purpose of helping ease
the grains of rice [...] past the tongue: salted fish, shrimp paste, black beans,
preserved turnip. (220–221)

Moses’ relish for “the meanest specimens of a base cuisine” alarms Sterling. He
didn’t marry into a white and wealthy family to produce such a son. Contrary
to Social Darwinist notions of genetic degeneracy and natural selection, the
Lung genes dominate the Sass genes in Moses.

It is sadly ironic that Sterling, all his life running away from his parents,
his ethnicity, and his class, ends up fathering another unwanted self in Moses.
To Genius and Zsa Zsa, however, Moses is the son they have long lost. He loves
them, their food, their stories, and “picks up the Chinese effortlessly” (222).
Louie’s characterization of Moses serves as a brilliant allegory of the return
of the repressed in Sterling—his own son turning out to desire exactly what
he has disavowed. Revealingly, Sterling grumbles to himself that “his appetite
for their food and language are registered as trespasses Moses has perpetrated
against me” (222). His ambivalent relationship with Moses is worsened when
they move to San Francisco, far away from Genius and Zsa Zsa. Moses misses
his grandparents—their cooking and their stories. He tapes on his headboard “a Xerox of a photo of six Chinese whom [Sterling] dubbed ‘the ancestors’” (298). Upon close examination, Sterling understands why Moses treasures this picture: “Genius's face blooming on the face of one of the elders, the gentleman in wire-rimmed glasses, and Moses' in the bespectacled boy over his right shoulder” (299). He is deeply disturbed by this discovery: “Genius and Moses, like father and son, skipping my generation, as if I didn’t exist” (299). At a subconscious level, Sterling knows the depth of his self-loathing and self-effacement, and that is why Moses’ resemblance to and love for his grandfather exasperate him so. He is determined to keep Ira from becoming another Moses: “This is why Ira is so important; I won’t let this happen again; I will see to it that Ira remains pure” (222–223). Ira’s purity is no more or no less than his white looks, seemingly unadulterated by the Lung blood.

The births of Moses and Ira are episodes crucial to Sterling’s character development, for the children allow him to exteriorize the battle of desire and disavowal raging inside him, with Moses representing his Chinese self and Ira the assimilated self that permits no preservation of the former. As symbolic acts these episodes represent the social and historical contradiction inherent in American democracy, the contradiction between the American ideal of egalitarianism and racial and economic injustices. The author’s choice of killing Ira in a car accident brings about a huge hole in Sterling’s psyche that ironically and painfully makes him whole at the end. Ira’s death is a kind of exorcism that returns Sterling to his people. Only after Ira’s death does Sterling see for the first time Ira’s face “alive in Genius” (324). At the Chinese cemetery where Ira is being buried, Sterling finally comes to fully understand how lost he has been.

Will the ancestors recognize Ira as one of theirs without Genius at his side or there to welcome him? And will those same ancestors claim me, after my breakneck dash from them and into the arms of any willing American girl who would have me—my desperate attempt to overcome the unremarkableness of being a Lung, and create a family more to my liking? I embraced school because school wasn’t home, European cuisine because Escoffier wasn’t home, Bliss because she wasn’t home. My sons were the blades of scissors that were supposed to snip me permanently, and genetically, free from home, from past and present, from here and over there. (With Ira […] I thought I had succeeded in erasing every trace of myself, committed genealogical suicide.) (323)

Ira’s death enables Sterling to live, to live as the son of Genius with dignity and wholeness. Food reference appears at this critical moment as a site of struggle; food sends Ira’s spirit off to the world beyond. It is also food that celebrates a
lost son's return and tests his loyalty to his culture. Beside Ira's grave Genius and Zsa Zsa unpack and spread the food:

Thick slabs of boiled pork belly, strips of glistening cha-siu, a hunk of roast pig with crispy skin the same hue as the dirt. Four pounds of meat. Oranges, sweet tricornered muffins, sponge cakes. And a giant whole chicken at least five pounds, all appendages attached [. . .]. [. . .] At the foot of the grave they've arranged a picnic buffet. Tinfoil trays full of food.

Sterling's initial reaction is repulsion and fear. He shudders at “the thought of Zsa Zsa and Genius down on hands and knees urging Morton Sass to the brink of the grave to dine” (326). When Bliss expresses her outrage over the pork, Sterling replies defiantly, “Ira's Chinese too, you know” (327). His defense of the Chinese ritual leads him to participate in it. “I close my eyes and bow from the waist, a stiff, slight tilt forward. The greasy smoke [incense] burns high in my nose, lifting off the top of my head. I feel free of the others” (328). No longer caring what the Sass family thinks of his Chineseness, he kneels by the grave, “surrounded by the smells of the roasted meat, the incense, the citrus oils” and tries “to dig the delicate, spider-thin sticks into the hard yellow dirt” (328). It is the same ritual bidding farewell to Ira that ushers Sterling into a new life.

In performing the Chinese burial ritual, Sterling reclaims his self and reenters his community. At his last TV cooking show, he wakes up from his act and feels deeply ashamed. “[T]his time I hear myself as I never have. I hear myself as Moses must, as Genius, as Yuk, I hope, never will. […] If Ira had grown up and gotten a faceful of my act, I would have died” (331). Halfway into the show, he drops the Hop Sing accent and the comical act. He looks straight into the camera and says, “Salt was invented by the Chinese. […] We flooded fields with seawater, and after its evaporation, we harvested the remaining crystals from the soil” (332–333, emphasis mine). His claiming of the collective identity signifies his reentrance into the Chinese community. “I hear myself say ‘we,’ as if I were there with the ancestors, among the world’s first Lungs” (333). He remembers the Chinese saying about cleansing and purifying oneself with salt after one has come into close contact with death to ward off the “bad wind.” “I feel it now, a tingling sensation, like teeth grazing my skin. I pour the salt in my hand, then rub my palms together. The salt falls through my hands. I know what I’m doing is not nearly enough” (333). As Ira symbolizes Sterling’s assimilated self, so does his physical proximity to Ira at death symbolize the approach of his own living death. The ritual of purification with salt, which he has mocked in the past as superstition, now cleanses him and removes the peril of self-destruction.
As Sterling succeeds in rediscovering his roots, Genius dies, having completed his fatherhood and his own American journey. His death awakens in Sterling both remorse and comfort.

He was trying to be a father to me. I cried, big noisy tears, because he had to endure me, my meanness, because too late I missed him. From the dirt and dust of these feelings I realized Genius had gone to follow Ira, to make sure he was taken care of, to protect and guide him, to show him the tricks of the trade, the ring around the neck, how to exploit another's appetite in order to satisfy one's own. (360)

After leaving the hospital, Sterling feels compelled to see Moses, whose connection to Genius is stronger than his own. Louie again resorts to food for the articulation of the complicated emotions in Sterling regarding his love-hate relationship with his father and son. He brings Moses an artichoke and explains, “You pull off a scale, she loves me, pull off a scale, she loves me not. You take away all the tough stuff, the prickles and pokey parts, and every time, inside, you find a heart” (361). The metaphor of the artichoke speaks about Sterling’s relationship with his father more than that with his son. With Genius dead and Moses standing in for him, Sterling can finally say to himself that he and his father have loved each other despite their mutual disappointment in each other.

Sterling’s sorrow over Genius’ passing and his remorse at the shame he has felt over his parents’ immigrant life and class status now become condensed in his relationship with Moses, and it is through his interaction with his son that he comes to find final identification with his father, and this identification operates once again through food references. At Genius’ funeral, Sterling holds Moses tight, “as if he were Ira and Genius rolled into one, because he is, and by my holding on they won’t get away” (370). It is at this moment that the author deploys food as a site to construct ethnic identification, an ethnicity that frustrates any notion of authenticity. In the kitchen of the funeral home, Sterling tries to find a snack for himself and Moses. After Moses rejects a variety of choices, Sterling suddenly remembers what Genius used to make for him when he was a schoolchild—“the concoction of saltine crackers, sweet condensed milk, and boiled water” (371). It has been a long time since Sterling has tasted this snack, but he remembers it as “comfort food, warming and soothing. The mere thought of a bowl of Genius’s cracker stew evokes good, safe, happy times” (371). Not until this moment has Sterling ever revealed any memory of a happy time with his father. He asks Moses to help make this snack. When done, Moses doesn’t seem impressed. “It’s Chinese,” Sterling tells him to coax him to give it a try (372). Then he turns to us, readers:
Trust me. If you can only know what I know. Let the steam caress your face, smell the roasted sweetness, the milk’s own sugar, and feel the glow of well-being radiating from within. I don’t blame Moses his skepticism, because until this moment I wouldn’t have believed either. But I’m not making these feelings up, they are as real as the food is pure: just flour, water, sugar, milk, and salt. (372)

The evocation of the maternal in the imageries of milk, warmth, sugar, and sweetness points to the reconstructed father-son relationship and helps Sterling build a loving relationship with Moses. “It really is Chinese, you know,” he tries to convince his son. “Ah-Yeah used to make it for me. It’s a special recipe he brought from China. And think about it, you and I just whipped this up together” (372). Moses now believes it and claps his hands, “We just cooked Chinese food!” (372). This is an epiphany to Moses, because he has never associated Chinese food with Sterling. “That’s right. The real thing!” Sterling reassures. “Moses opens his mouth, and lets me feed him” (372).

This final scene completes the journey Louie has designed for his protagonist, moving from his abduction by the ideology of assimilation and class unconsciousness to his homecoming, with the entire journey immersed in food tropes. At the end, by making and eating his father’s cracker stew with Moses, he finally establishes the link that has been absent between Genius and Moses. Interestingly, Genius’ concoction is neither Chinese nor French; it is his invention out of the circumstances of an immigrant bachelor living in poverty. Sterling, by proclaiming it Chinese and “the real thing,” affirms his ethnicity without appealing to authenticity. Louie’s refusal to authenticate Sterling’s ethnic identity through “authentic” Chinese cuisine resists essentializing ethnicity and proposes that ethnicity is a construct that a particular group performs. With the novel’s conclusion, Louie suggests that we construct our ethnicity based on private and familial history and practices. Sterling is Chinese insofar as he recognizes himself as the son of his father, and only when he becomes Chinese in this sense is he able to pass down his ethnicity to his son.

“What I do with my hands”

Chinese American men’s historical engagement in food service and laundry has decidedly cast them as effeminate in the conventional gender schema. Louie’s choice of these two gendered occupations for father and son sets the stage for the dramatization of their emasculation by racial and economic exploitation, and this dramatization often centers on food references. Like class and ethnicity, class and gender are inextricably interlocked in Barbarians, which
ascribes much of these men’s feelings of powerlessness and inchoate anger to their experience of class and gender oppression.

Gendered occupation is a notion carried over from the social analysis of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Baxter and Western point out, which “was underwritten by a master concept of ‘industrial society,’ or ‘industrial capitalism.’ Economic activity was based on the production of goods, not services” (1). Despite the increasing professionalization and service orientation of the working class in the United States today, the popular image of the working class nevertheless remains masculine, reinforcing a macho culture among working-class men. Food and laundry services continue to be perceived and experienced as women’s work, secondary to industrial and construction work in its wage-earning potential and its demand for physical toughness. The gendering of occupation was even more relevant in the late 1970s in which Barbarians is set than now.

Almost as soon as the book opens, Louie begins to tackle Sterling’s gender complex with dark humor. Through Sterling’s interaction with the butcher over a capon, a “castrated rooster,” Louie demonstrates his protagonist’s heightened sense of inadequacy about his masculinity (5). “Think about it,” Sterling says to Fuchs, “Snip! And as if that’s not bad enough, they throw him back in with the others to plump, big and fat, and he struts around like cocks do, big man in barnyard, only the hens are snickering behind his back” (5). Initially this seems to insinuate Fuchs, a Jewish man, but several sentences later, it becomes clear that it is Sterling himself who becomes the target of such insinuation. He recalls seeing Renee Richards, the transgendered tennis pro, in a newspaper photo. “I was immediately drawn to her looks, found her rather sexy even, that is, until I read the accompanying article detailing her surgical transformation. ‘Can’t tell a she from a he?’ I scolded myself. ‘What kind of man are you?’” (6). This homophobic self-castigation is followed by the scene of preparing the castrated bird that further illuminates his feeling of gender ambivalence. “I rub the mustard onto the capon’s skin, with its largish pores and nipple-like bumps; the mustard’s whole seeds, tiny orbs rolling between my palm and the lubricated skin, produce a highly erotic sensation” (11). A few pages later, subliminally identifying with the capon, he accuses himself of being a chicken: “I’m the chicken around here. Too chicken to insist that Lisa Lee stay; too chicken to tell Bliss not to come” (17).

Sterling’s gender insecurity is not solely determined by his occupation; French cuisine, after all, is a male-dominated world. Furthermore, cooking shows such as Emeril Live and Iron Chef feature masculine performance. In Sterling’s case his vocation is compounded by his ethnicity, and the prevailing stereotype of Asian American men as undersexed produces his experience of diminished masculinity and agency. With his gender imaginary structured
by American hegemonic representations of masculinity as white, heterosexual, and propertied, Sterling cannot help but look up to models of manhood that instill in him only self-loathing. In front of his bathroom mirror, he holds up a photo of Robert Redford, the American epitome of manhood, to his face and “gauged the extent of my deficiencies” (18). Gazing at a replica of Michelangelo’s David at the club, Sterling measures himself against the ideal of masculine beauty: “[W]here does that leave me?” he wonders (43). Louie shows us a truthful but bleak picture about the fact that in Sterling’s world there is no model of masculinity that resembles him.

Brilliantly, Louie later has Sterling deconstruct David by classing the figure as a laborer. “All day I have thought about the David’s hands. They are huge [. . .]. Michelangelo isn’t selling beauty, but deeds. [. . .] The David is a monument to work, what’s accomplished with one’s hands. That’s all I want people to consider when they see Sterling Lung: what I do with my hands” (53). This transcoding of masculine beauty, a rare moment in the Sterling character, challenges racial/ethnic gendering in the effort to unify all working-class men under the icon of masculine hands. Janet Zandy writes, “Hands are maps to history and culture [. . .]. Hands are class and cultural markers” (Hands xi, 1). Although rarely studied, “hands are everywhere in working-class literature,” and hands “signify power relationships of control” (1, xi). Sterling’s observation of the David’s huge hands suggests his gender and economic identification with the working class, particularly men whose hands control materials and create wealth. This identification, however, at the same time frustrates his desire to control his destiny as well as the products of his labor, because the metonymy of hands reduces human beings to working parts, divorces mind from body, and empties ontology from the laborer. For Sterling, this very tension in the signifier of hands, figuring for the paradox of ownership and dispossession, finds an expression in his gender anxiety located in another body part.

And it is his ponytail. Louie aptly utilizes it as a device to yield multiple meanings to explore the intersections among gender, ethnicity, and class. To his parents Sterling’s ponytail is a source of shame because it is culturally associated with both femininity and subjugation. (The Manchurian reign exacted death from any man who lost his queue.) Sterling thinks that because of his ponytail “Genius has no problem calling me his fourth daughter” (40). To the ladies in the club, who find his presence both unthreatening and amusing, it becomes an emblem of Sterling’s servile/feminine position among them. Libby Drake, for example, “touches my shoulder, then caresses my ponytail, her fingers running through my hair like a litter of nesting mice” (40). Millie Boggs jokes that “my ponytail would make a ‘delicious whip,’ as she gave it a playful tug. [. . .] I can’t stand Sharon Fox, who grabs hold and says, ‘Giddyup!’” (40). Sterling’s ponytail becomes a site where gender, class, and ethnicity interlock.
to demonstrate an asymmetrical power relationship between him and the rich white ladies. One cannot ignore that his ethnicity plays a significant role in his emasculation, for it is difficult to imagine the same women fondling a black male cook, for instance. To Bliss, however, Sterling's ponytail is the source of attraction; “she has said that she will terminate our relationship if ever I cut my hair. […] She says this is the way Chinese men have traditionally worn their hair” (40). For her the ponytail becomes a phallic symbol of an exotic manhood that brings excitement into her life. Thus centered on the ponytail is a nexus of meanings contingent on class, ethnicity, and gender.

Sterling's feminization attributable to ethnic stereotypes and his occupation is by no means absolute; his gender imaginary shifts and varies depending on different power and gender dynamics. Although the ladies in the club dominate and harass him, he still retains an illusion of autonomy and control, for in his fantasy these women are his to please, and their teasing and petting ironically reinforce this fantasy. “In this house of women […] I am the engine that makes things go. […] They have to eat, and that’s why they come daily. And praise my cooking, squeeze my arm, caress my hair, pat my cheeks, pinch my rump” (31). Sterling fantasizes himself to be the only man in a house/harem of women who don't restrain themselves in front of him from “their talk of sweets and diets, gynecological procedures and dinner parties, cosmetics and brassieres” (31). Ironically, this scene evokes the picture of a eunuch serving and guarding the emperor’s concubines more than that of a highly virile man pleasuring multiple female subjects, but in his fantasy Sterling congratulates himself for having arrived and sexualizes his relationship with these women via food to conjure up a sense of masculine power. Libby Drake is described to be “as lustrous as a polished apple” (37) and as wearing a “massive braid that resembles a lobster tail” (39). “Her legs gleam in the sun, as my hand […] lift[s] the tomato, which yields to me its loving weight, its thin-skinned plumpness that molds to the curve of my hand. It is the perfect thing to squeeze” (38). By juxtaposing women to food, Sterling manages to exercise the male privilege of objectifying and consuming them. Sterling's participation in this discourse compensates for the feeling of powerlessness toward rich white men.

His experience in the club illustrates the interrelationship between class power and racial and gender hierarchies. The ladies in the club, empowered by their racial and class privileges, feel entitled to direct and humiliate their male Chinese American chef, but as soon as rich white men enter the scene, the dynamics of power change. At Sterling's first culinary event for male guests in the club, both he and Libby Drake feel as though they had been suddenly dispossessed. “I feel so small tonight,” Libby tells Sterling, “with men in my club” (39). Her remark offends Sterling. “Aren’t I a man?” he muses (39). On
the other hand, however, Sterling himself never thinks of the gardener as a man either: “Except for the gardener—he doesn’t really count—Drake is the first man I’ve seen at the club” (37–38). What constitutes a “real” man is contingent on his class and ethnicity. Sterling fails to realize that because of their position as domestic servants and their status as racial minorities, neither he nor the gardener counts as a man.

It is with conspicuous wealth that the “real” masculine presence arrives at the club. Looking out of the kitchen window Sterling observes, “More guests converge on the club, arriving in their Simonized Steel tons, two hundred horses under the hood, commanded by manicured hands, designer-framed eyes, and thin-soled Italian shoes” (38). In this brief depiction is apparent the model of property-based masculinity that is central to the hegemony of capitalism, presenting the businessman as a new model of masculinity. This new model is no longer about physical power; rather it valorizes wealth, unscrupulous competition, and bottomless greed, a hegemonic masculinity that is culturally privileged and has power over other less culturally sanctioned masculinities. Sterling’s desire to identify with this very model only engenders a deeper feeling of deficiency. “My eyes flit to the men. I struggle to get a fix on them. I feel like a boy again, trying to take my father in, his great intimidating size, overlaid with the constant accusation” (42). Reminded of his father, who has constantly chastised him (at least as he remembers), “You’re useless” (42), Sterling returns to his boyhood fraught with resentment and unfulfilled longings. Now, watching these rich men consuming the feast he has prepared that is “so labor intensive, costly in time and energy,” he comes to identify for the first time with his father as a fellow man living at the mercy of other men (38–39).

My eyes can’t hold these men, because they wear suits that fit; because their cars guzzle gas and they don’t care; because their women paint their nails, sign my paycheck, pet my hair; because their shirts […] are synthetic, the wash-’n’-wear fabric that’s killing the Chinese hand-laundry business, and bringing my father to his starch-stiff knees. (42)

Palpable with rage at this realization, Sterling comes to an embryonic awareness of class solidarity in which he joins his father in recognizing the economic injustice in their world.

In both Genius’ and Sterling’s world, class exploitation often comes hand in hand with ethnic and gender othering. The white male guests at the club, deeply rooted in America’s history of legal exclusion of people of color from citizenship (e.g., the Naturalization Act of 1790 granting citizenship to “any free white person”), insist on treating Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners. Drake persists in practicing his awkward Mandarin on their “Chinese chef”
and in asking where he is from, refusing to believe that Sterling is from Long Island, New York (47). When the dinner conversation moves to the subject of the Chinese “Ping-Pong diplomacy,” one man comments, “It’s suited for the whole race of them. Those petite paddles and little balls are perfect for their little hands.” Another joins in, “Ping-Pong doesn’t require strength” (49). To legitimize such racial emasculation Drake resorts to pseudo science:

“The physiological differences are the product of Darwinian adaptations. [...] Chinese culture doesn’t value the individual. That’s why you always hear them talking about ‘the people’ or ‘the masses.’ [...] They put three or four of their men on a job that one average American can do by himself. For this reason the Chinese have no evolutionary imperative to develop bigger, stronger bodies.” (49–50)

These racist remarks are made within Sterling’s earshot as he brings their coffee and buses their dirty dishes. Racism, almost always collaborating with sexism, homophobia, and class oppression, so degrades the humanity of the Other that the victim becomes paralyzed with fear and resentment. Pinioned by his class position, Sterling has no choice but to swallow the racist poison as he swallows the cold leftovers of the fancy dinner he has cooked for others.

Class powerlessness engendered by class unconsciousness and subscription to the myth of the American Dream drives the oppressed into masochism, with the oppressed reviling themselves as solely responsible for their misfortune and misery. In Sterling’s case, his class powerlessness compounded by racial emasculation brings about a compensatory pathological fantasy of mastery, a revenge that is both impotent and melancholic. Inside the big white house empty of the rich women, Sterling conjures up the illusion of ownership and power that arouses him. On the bed of its master bedroom,

I feel myself harden, my prick hooking on a spring, and I begin moving my hips, back and forth, slowly. I think of Libby Drake’s rich bosom, Sally Hayes’s pouty lips, Millicent Boggs’s long calves, Dottie Cone’s painted toenails; then I summon up every one of my parents’ customers I had a crush on, women who lived in houses as nice as this, who spent their days making their faces and bodies beautiful for men. (31–32)

Class envy and class revenge are at the heart of his sexual fantasy in which a reversal of the real-life asymmetrical power relation takes place. The more sexual the fantasy becomes, the angrier and more violent his acts, as if masculinity could be experienced only through violence. He fantasizes:
I fuck the rug some more, then the brass bedpost, the armoire, the back of the overstuffed chair; eventually I fuck the entire bedroom. Still unsatisfied, I fuck the runner in the dark hallway, the moldings, the telephone and its stand just outside the bathroom. I fuck the banister, the stairs, the dining room table, where the ladies are most intimately acquainted with me. I leave droplets of myself everywhere, the sticky residue of my love [...]. I fuck the front door like crazy, then the shabby mat at the threshold. When they enter the house their well-heeled feet must cross this very spot. I roll onto my hip, yank the elastic band down, setting myself free, and let loose instantly, long body-shaking shots that seem to originate in my brain. (32)

What deserves a pause here is the fact that Sterling not only imagines “fucking” the rich white women who treat him like a maid but also “fucking” their properties that give them the power to dominate him, pointing our attention to the intersection between class and gender.

Sterling's father, Genius, has none of his son's illusions. In his old age he faces his abject position without self-loathing. “What is he, in this country, but work?” he understands. “Without it, he's worthless, he is even more a nobody than he already is: he goes from laundryman to Chinaman” (232). The apparent anger and resignation in his realization reject the promise of the American Dream and rip apart the romantic camouflage of poverty as dignity. The young Genius, however, has also dreamed of Americanization and success. Lured by the promise of the Gold Mountain, he enters America under a purchased identity, suffers detention at Angel Island, and works ten hours a day in the laundry, making barely enough money to feed himself and to support his family in China. Yet he dreams about “driving a car, in his suit and hat, honking the horn as he drove past,” and this dream walks into his life in the shape of a blond woman named Lucy. Her hair is sunshine, and her dress delicious—a “dress with eggs” (242). Genius sets out the beautiful Japanese tea set meant to be a gift to his wife in China to catch the dream. Lucy drinks the tea and pilfers a cup upon each visit until the whole set is in her possession. A curious relationship begins to develop, with Genius sewing her dress and feeding her with his best food. Lucy, a working-class girl abused from time to time by men, comes to acquire through her whiteness a position of power over Genius. Through food and eating, Louie vividly pictures their lopsided relationship. “She asked for a fork and, with it, piled her bowl of rice high with the meat. He resisted thinking she was greedy” (251). Genius tries to seduce her with food, “whiskey in a shot glass, then coconut candies and fruit jellies in rice paper” (252). After she eats her fill, she points at the can of roasted chicken on the shelf that he plans to send to China and takes it home.
Genius begins to visit her at her house on Mondays, a long bus ride from his laundry store. “Often he brought a bag of groceries, roast pork, soy sauce chicken, bok choy, things he purchased on his Sunday excursions to Chinatown. Before long she started telling him to buy her soap, beer, Quick Soup, Colgate toothpaste. He might cook for her, wash and iron her clothes” (257). He has become not only a provider but also a servant. “It was work on top of work” (257). In his mind Lucy is his American wife whose wants and needs are his responsibility, a white wife lording over him in a way that he would never tolerate of his Chinese wife. Between them is a gender-role reversal enabled by racial hierarchy. “He was awed at the size of his nonexistence. How he was nowhere, barely noticed in the solid world […] Governments did not know him, his own daughter did not know him, his own wife addressed him by another’s name, his presumptive wife hardly felt his presence” (261). Now the only thing that makes him go to visit her is the junk car in her yard. He takes apart and reassembles the engine and becomes ecstatic over its signs of life. One day on his way home, a group of white men beat him up and call him “Jap! Jap! Jap!” (263). A few years later, Lucy shows up at the laundry and briefly steals Baby Sterling.

This American history of Genius can be interpreted as an allegory of the bittersweet relationship between America and the Chinese immigrants. Lucy’s initial interest in Genius is a metonymy of American fascination with the Chinese as the exotic Other upon their first arrival at San Francisco. America first found the Chinese useful in various services and industries, particularly in the construction of the transcontinental railways, just as Lucy keeps Genius around as long as he is useful to her. Lucy’s relationship with Genius allegorizes race-, class-, and gender-based power relationships holding between Chinese immigrants and America, nonreciprocal ones in which America gains socioeconomic as well as psychological advantages over the Chinese. In this encounter the Chinese were changed forever by their American experience. They became feminized in that they were deprived of socioeconomic and political power, many were forced to live as bachelors because of the Page Law and antimiscegenation laws, many had no choice but to make their living by serving the whites, and many hopelessly longed for white women. Mirroring this larger social phenomenon are Genius’ long years of loneliness and the short episode with Lucy that poisons his relationship with his wife after she finally joins him in America. Lucy’s brief abduction of Baby Sterling symbolically sets off his estrangement from his parents and ancestral culture.

Genius’ loss of his son to assimilation is also metonymical of the difficult relationship between many Asian American men and their fathers. Fatherhood is a central motif in Barbarians with strong connections to the themes of race, class, and gender. In Asian American literature, particularly by male authors,
fatherhood is in crisis. Under the coercion of assimilation, many Asian American men experience agonizing ambivalence toward their immigrant fathers, whose authority has been usurped by other male figures, American or Americanized, who seem to be more American, more affluent, and more authoritative than their own fathers. In Frank Chin's *Chickencoop Chinaman*, the Chinese American filmmaker, Tam Lum, desperately seeks a father figure in the black boxer, Ovaltine Jack Dancer. His denial of “Chinatown Kid” as his father—“He wasn’t my father. He was...he was our dishwasher”—is fraught with race, class, and gender shame (45). Chang-Rae Lee in *Native Speaker* portrays a Korean American man, Henry Park, who is embarrassed with the ways of his immigrant father and finds a suitable alternative father figure in the Korean American politician John Kwang, who appears to be thoroughly assimilated, envisioning himself as mayor of New York City. Sterling's reluctant love for Genius and resentful acceptance of Morton Sass as an alternative father figure vividly dramatize the painful psychological complex of Asian American fatherhood.

To Sterling, though, Genius occupies a contradictory position as both a masculine and an emasculated figure. On the one hand he admires and envies his father’s “dark, ponderous prick,” which he regrets that he fails to inherit (111). In the incident of hauling the old refrigerator, Genius’ response to the racist remark by other drivers turns him into a superhero in Sterling’s eyes. Unlike his son, who is so diffident that he agrees with the racists that “there was something unerringly Chinese about hauling this useless machine,” Genius “stuck his [...] head out the window, bracing himself with his Lucky Strike hand, and shouted, ‘Fuck you!’ without a trace of accent, and flipped them off with his free hand” (81). Sterling remembers, “At that moment Pop was Superman. If he’d gotten hold of the thugs’ car he would have torn loose the hood and tossed the engine into their laps” (81). On the other hand, Sterling is ashamed of his father for his “stupid smile, eyes cast down, head bowed and bobbing, the obsequious professionalism,” which he hates but believes he has inherited (344–345). Genius’ sucking up to his customers renders him feminine and repulsive in his son’s eyes precisely because Sterling loathes himself for living daily the life of powerlessness. His own docility and model-minority complex become painfully humiliating when rendered patent in his father.

When he marries Bliss, Sterling imagines that he has traded Morton Sass for Genius. He believes that Sass’ whiteness and money have the transformative power to de-ethnicize, up-class, and masculinize him, and his union with a white woman is the crown for successful assimilation. However, he cannot help feeling fake, as if he were hiding something upon whose discovery he would come to ruin. One cannot help hearing the echo from Louie’s collection of short stories, *Pangs of Love*, in which dark comedies present male Chinese
American yuppies afflicted with anxiety, displacement, and alienation. Sau-ling Wong comments on these characters, “Fluency in the hegemonic culture [...] is no guarantee of authority. When assumed by someone with the ‘wrong’ skin and hair color, it is mere impersonation, mimicry, occupation of a subject position that is not yours, or can be yours only through acts of fakery” (“Chinese/Asian American Men in the 1990s” 185). Louie in Barbarians stages a homoerotic comedy of errors in the men’s room at Sterling’s wedding that vividly demonstrates Wong’s sharp observation. Morton Sass says, “Now, Sterling, I want you to show me what you got.” Sterling nervously thinks,

He wants to see your sex. Wants to see if you measure up. He’s going to whip out his prodigious horse and you your wee birdie. Assert his dominant position in the family. More than ever, you wish your real father had passed on some of his size.

“Give me your best shot,” your father-in-law says. […] You’re not sure you’re willing to do this. You were right the first time, his purpose isn’t biblical but urological. […] That’s what this is, a test of your worthiness, your virility, and it’s going to take quite a shot, slightly uphill, across a span no sperm under normal reproductive conditions would ever have to cover. (161–162)

Sterling is relieved to realize what Sass wishes for is no more than the conventional act of male bonding. “Come on, show me your knockout punch,” Sass commands (162). Sterling takes the invitation, unleashing the long repressed anger and frustration at the white male world. “You feel you had wanted to hit him your entire life. When you’re through, your hand is on fire” (163). His anger toward the world of injustice can only take such symbolic form of aggression contained by the façade of male comradery.

With the legacy of the problematic Asian American fatherhood, Sterling is most susceptible to pressures about his own authority in front of his sons. Sass strategically uses this issue in coercing Sterling to quit his job at the club to be the sole owner of the latter’s labor and product, the TV cooking show. Sterling resists Sass’ coercion in an attempt to maintain his sense of autonomy. “You can’t play houseboy the rest of your life,” Sass reasons with him. “What will Moses think of you? […] He sees it on your face. In your body. Your posture. His little brain is soaking you up. He’s forming opinions about you that will turn your heart to chopped liver one day” (188). Sterling wavers, imagining what Moses sees and trying to remember how he as an infant had seen his father. His resentment of Sass at this point is suggested by a food analogy. Sass’ “elbows planted on the desktop, chin perched on his hands, one layered on top of the other, like cuts of pork” (188–189). Sass, a tough businessman, never
gives up on a profitable idea. He pokes where it most hurts in Sterling—the truth that he really has no autonomy at all: “You’ve got too many bosses. A bunch of females telling you what to do. You think Moses doesn’t see that? This one wants something, that one wants something. Every want-something is like a blow to your head. The kid sees that. Punch-drunk daddy. It’s all over you” (189). Sterling is so devastated by the image Sass paints of him that he cannot meet the old man’s gaze. “Too intense, too harsh, and to stare back I might lose myself, be immolated like bugs in fire” (189). What Sterling experiences in this encounter with his rich white father figure is as emasculating as his encounter with the male guests dining at the club. On both occasions, the assault of emasculation against Sterling is performed through class and ethnicity, reducing him to a sexless and powerless child. “I’m a little boy craning his neck, shattering his eyes on gold-robed authority” (189).

Keenly aware of the fragility of his own authority with a racially mixed son, Sterling fears and hates Sass for the possibility of having his own fatherhood usurped by the very man who has replaced his own father. He reacts strongly to Sass’ possessive remark, “my little Moses”: “Sweat boils on my brow. I’m startled by his claim on the little boy’s body. He is my son. He is my blood. I ball my hands into fists. I salivate remembering the impact my flesh made against his flesh” (188). In the meantime he knows very well that if a war broke out between them, he would be the one vanquished. This intense hatred of Sass, however, is ironically contained by his masochistic, identificatory desire for the same man. Having lost respect for his own father, Sterling ties his sense of manhood to the new father figure, whose approval and love are paradoxically sought after and resented. On Father’s Day he and Bliss visit her family. “A celebration of me and Morton Sass! The two ‘dads,’ as we were called by Selma Sass. I loved how she lumped us together. I brought steaks from Fuchs’s, and the two dads grilled, like real men” (194). Louie’s irony is hard to miss: Sterling’s gender security is dependent on the very man who dominates him and threatens his fatherhood. Sass occupies such a position of power solely because he is white and rich.

Genius’ brief but tortured relationship with Lucy, Sterling’s abduction, and his difficult father role toward Moses all serve as allegories of Asian American history saturated with race, class, and gender injustices. With the minor character Yuk, however, the political unconscious in Barbarians presents another allegory projecting its utopian impulse to resolve the irreconcilable conflicts in Asian American history. Food references play a significant role in this allegory. Yet this resolution is fraught with class and ethnic crises as well. Near the end of the novel, Louie shifts Sterling’s emotional tie from Bliss to Yuk, subtly suggesting that Sterling will eventually make good his parents’ promise to Yuk. At the narrative level, this suggestion entails Sterling’s character growth, from
someone who holds “no romantic interest” in Chinese women to someone who feels “the bright yearning” for Yuk (7, 364). At the level of the political unconscious, however, Yuk allegorizes a borderless existence that seems to undermine demarcations along the lines of class, nationality, and ethnicity, and this borderless existence figures for globalization.

Yuk, from Hong Kong (before its return to China in 1997), is a woman without a country. As a flight attendant she travels between continents and speaks different languages. She is not only deeply ingrained in traditional Chinese culture but also familiar with American pop culture. Her ease in border crossing is best portrayed in her relationship to food. She is a culinary cosmopolitan, lover of Chinese cuisine and connoisseur of Western fare. Interestingly, Louie has her introduce steak, Texas toast, and Sizzler restaurants to Genius and Zsa Zsa, who have lived in the states for decades (73, 75). Ironically, it is she who Americanizes the old couple better than America. To Ira’s grave she brings the funeral food from Chinatown, culturally correct to the last detail. Her ease in border crossing makes Sterling’s American life seem old-world, his awkward attempts at assimilation pathetic.

In the matter of class, Sterling assigns Yuk the position of a peasant even before their meeting—“a barefoot girl with oily scalp and barbarian tongue” who is trying to secure a green card through an American marriage (74). He is deeply ashamed when he finds out that the David statue at the club has been made in her uncle’s factory in Hong Kong and that she has traveled extensively in Europe. As a gift she presents him with two moon rocks (91). Louie’s choice of this particular gift is wonderfully sarcastic. On the one hand, it points to the absurdity of global circulation of commodities and of the commodification of anything imaginable. On the other, Yuk chooses moon rocks because the globalizing pop culture of America deludes her into wondering “what to get for man who is from the land of everything” (92). Yuk’s character undermines the divide between the First World and Third World by the fact that she is more affluent than Sterling in both cultural and economic capital. Contrary to Sterling’s presumption that he has to rescue Yuk from a backward life, she has transformed the lives of the Lungs with her beauty, worldliness, and confidence.

Yuk as a political allegory for globalization projects a utopia of a diasporic Asia that maintains the integrity of traditional cultures even as it gains fluency in Western culture, and this diasporic identity sustains its consistency without alienation. As her name, meaning “jade,” symbolizes riches and strength, so does the character Yuk allegorize the sophistication and strength of the diasporic. Such a utopian vision becomes possible, however, only at the suppression of Asia’s colonial history and its present postcolonial condition. Asia’s becoming increasingly diasporic is a consequence of colonial violence and
neocolonial exploitation by transnational corporations that create both a small elite and a large working class in a diasporic subject’s native land. Many critics of globalization have argued that the global market has worsened poverty, increased national and international inequalities, and deepened the ethnic and religious divide.\(^\text{13}\) In addition, some of the intraethnic exploitation occurs in the diasporic Asia that moves fluidly between nations. Yuk, as the allegory of a new breed of hybrid Asians, arouses no more than a utopian impulse that critiques the American history of racializing, emasculating, and impoverishing Asian immigrants.

Such an American history is incarnated in the characters of Genius and Sterling, who represent an Asian America that has undergone humiliation in its early phase and alienation in its recent one. Their stories serve as an allegory of race, class, and gender conflicts in the social life of America. Genius’ tortured and lopsided relationship with Lucy typifies that of Asian immigrants with America in which nation building rested on gross economic exploitation of Asian immigrants. Lucy’s kidnap of Sterling likewise stands for assimilation’s abduction of Asian Americans, an abduction that attempts to turn them into seekers of the American Dream at the cost of ethnic and gender dignity. Sterling’s difficult relationships with his parents and son Moses lay bare the consequence of this abduction. Louie’s novel marvelously presents these nuggets of truth embodied in his characters, who are fashioned by his apt culinary tropes and references to delineate the nexus of race, class, and gender motifs.

Diasporic Asia, a direct product of global capitalism, has altered the Asian American community in many ways. One of them is that questions about its ethnicity are no longer easy to answer because many diasporic Asians do not identify themselves with nation-states, which Louie exemplifies well in Yuk. It seems that the identification between Asian Americans and diasporic Asians is least problematic in their common or proximate culinary practices. The next chapter examines how Asian food references ethnicize Li-Young Lee in his poetry despite his disavowal of an ethnic identity and his insistence on diaspora and transcendence.