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and John Zorn**



Ellie M. Hisama

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Postcolonialism on the make: the music of John Mellencamp, David Bowie and John Zorn

ELLIE M. HISAMA

China Girl
Take me to your jasmine place
Cool me with your subtle grace
To know me is no sin

And I won't break you, China Girl
If you take me into your world
It's been my good fortune to find you
China Girl

(John Cougar Mellencamp)

When we acknowledge that an idea, history or tradition is not ours, we distance ourselves from it. When we then proceed to use, incorporate or represent it, we arrogate the right to employ what we acknowledge as not ours. It is not something we do *despite* the foreignness of our subject; it is something we do because of our perception of it as other. The implicit hierarchical nature of otherness invites seemingly innocuous practices of representation that amount to (often unknowing) strategies of domination through appropriation. (Dominguez 1987, p. 132)

Listening to John Mellencamp's 'China Girl', a pop song in which a white male narrator attempts to woo an Asian female, I, an Asian-American female, am feeling fairly troubled.¹ Yet many people will not share my discomfort: 'So it's a love song sung by a white guy to a Chinese girl, but what's wrong with a little interracial romance?'

To clarify just what I find problematic in this and other pop songs in which white men croon to Asian women about their racial virtues, I would like to begin by reading Mellencamp's piece through the lens of Dominguez's essay. (Lyrics for all songs discussed here are included in the Appendix.) 'China Girl' seems to me excellently to exemplify a work predicated on the strategies Dominguez describes. Addressing the object of his affections simply as 'China Girl', the narrator crows that 'stolen flowers/Are sweetest in the morning'. After informing her that to know him is 'no sin', in the chorus he promises that he will not 'break' her if she will take him into 'her world'. The narrator closes off the chorus by congratulating himself on his good fortune to have found her.

This 'chinagirl' is very much the innocent, shy female whose father governs her actions ('Your daddy tells you white lies/To keep you from my blue eyes').² That the narrator believes her to be sexually reserved is evidenced by his persistent attempts to convince her that it will not be a sin for her to take him to her 'jasmine place'.

What makes this song more than merely a male adolescent's whine for the girl to 'do it' is the element of race. Remaining nameless throughout the work, she is not just any girl; she is a 'China Girl', a figure who inhabits a world separate and distinct from his own as the line 'If you take me into *your world*' suggests. She stands metonymically for the entire Orient, possessing a pastiche identity made up of Oriental women from 'Shōgun', *The Mikado*, 'Hawaii Five-O', and observations made by Archie Bunker.³ The narrator's relationship to this chinagirl is composed not of simple binary opposites but of hierarchical ones: weak and strong, passive and aggressive, subtle and direct – as Edward Said argues in *Orientalism*, pairs that the Occident has generally ascribed to itself and the 'Orient', a region located vaguely 'over there' (Said 1978).

Yet Orientalism in a postmodern world diverges significantly from the brand of Orientalism that Said describes. He concentrates on British, French and American representations of the Arabs and of Islam which tend toward the mythic, depicting the Orient as something quite distant. But in the age of the fax machine, satellite and DC-10; of the recent surge of Asian immigrants towards Western shores; and of the subsequent increase in numbers of Asians who step into America's schools, neighbourhoods and workplaces – in this century, the East has drawn increasingly nearer to the West. As Mellencamp puts it, 'Your silk's against my skin'.⁴

One response to this new proximity of the East, what the cultural theorist James Clifford calls the 'salvage paradigm', will initially inform my readings of Mellencamp's song, David Bowie's tune of the same name, and John Zorn's 'Forbidden Fruit'. The salvage paradigm recalls the 'salvage ethnography' performed by early twentieth-century anthropologists such as Kroeber and Malinowski who took it as incumbent upon themselves to 'save' vanishing cultures like those of the California Indians and the Trobrianders. Clifford defines the 'salvage paradigm' as 'a desire to rescue "authenticity" out of destructive historical change' (Clifford 1987, p. 121).

In 'China Girl', the narrator refuses to acknowledge that the world of the Oriental female may intersect or overlap with his world. These lyrics paint a one-dimensional image of the Asian woman he addresses by borrowing heavily from Western stereotypical notions of what constitutes Asian female identity. They present her as some sweetly perfumed, delicate blossom from the East who mysteriously exudes a certain 'subtle grace'; she is a fragile China doll whom he wants to possess.⁵ The musical framework of Mellencamp's melodic lines, a pentatonic scale associated with traditional music of east Asia, is meant to evoke the 'sound of the Orient' and reinforces the narrator's dominant position.

In explicating these works I intend to demonstrate how orientalism in a postmodern age functions in them with regard to their texts and music. But my purpose is not simply to declare that this body of music exists and then to analyse specific examples, confining my observations to what is evident only in the musical texts; I want to examine, expose and speak against the social attitudes that spawn these compositions, attitudes that remain largely unrecognised except by the women to whom they are directed. Because these deeply held notions about Asian female identity tend to be received uncritically, they reinforce a pernicious racial and sexual stereotype that many of us have to live within.

My little fortune cooky

The 1980s proved to be the decade in which professional services that served up Asian brides to Western men exploded into a multimillion-dollar-a-year industry. The concept is simple: the prospective suitor orders a catalogue entitled something like *Jewels of the Orient* or *Lotus Blossoms* which contains photographs, addresses and self-descriptions written in pidgin English in order to ensure these women's authenticity. They market exotic Oriental ladies guaranteed to happily perform traditional wifely tasks.

Ironically, the men drawn to mail order Asian brides seem to be driven by a desire to have the kind of traditional marital relationship their fathers had. According to some of the men mentioned by John Krich, Asian women possess a distinctly refreshing femininity which Western women have unfortunately lost:

American girls left me really disappointed . . . They look like tubs of lard stuffed into Levi's. They're pushy, spoiled rotten and they talk like sailors. They're not cooperative, but combative - and they never appreciate what you do for them. In the morning you wonder how many guys before me? Was it the football team? Maybe it's our fault, the fault of men for repressing them for so long. But they're not psychologically together. They just don't seem to know what they want. (Krich 1986, p. 36)

On the contrary: after the women's rights movement in the United States emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s, women as a group formulated and articulated *exactly* what they wanted - freedom from the oppression of ready-made gender roles. The women's movement initially left many men frantic, but the age of technology, which made it possible for exotic images to float by on our television screens while we eat egg rolls from bright microwavable packages featuring modest, dark-haired, smiling women, cleared many a bewildered man's head: to find the girl of his dreams, he simply had to leaf through the latest issue of *Island Blossoms*.

As the mail order bride business began to prosper during the 1980s, the phenomenon of Asiophilia also surfaced in pop and postmodern music. Within the last decade, several prominent artists have performed works laden with romantic longings for Asian women, a feature I might find less offensive than pitiable if not for the inequality of the relationship as they depict it. 'China Girl' by Mellencamp was released in 1982; David Bowie's 'China Girl' (written with Iggy Pop) in 1983; and John Zorn's many offerings, including 'Forbidden Fruit' and his *New Traditions in East Asian Bar Bands*, have been performed or released within the last five or six years.

The narrators in both Mellencamp's and Bowie's works position her under their blue-eyed male gaze, enjoying the look. (The line in Bowie's 'China Girl' is 'I feel a-tragic like I'm Marlon Brando/When I look at my China Girl'.)⁶ They rejoice that they have finally 'discovered' her, this ideal woman (Mellencamp's line is 'It's been *my* good fortune to find you'); neither mentions whether *she* is content with the relationship.

Yet Bowie's tune presents a different chinagirl from Mellencamp's.

My little china girl
 You shouldn't mess with me
 I'll ruin everything you are
 I'll give you television
 I'll give you eyes of blue
 I'll give you man who wants to rule the
 world (David Bowie)

Rather than evoking jasmine, perfume and oriental exoticism, she, as an inhabitant of the Third World, lacks blue eyes and television – epitomised here to be the destructive, ruinous forces of the West.

When the image of the Asian woman first appears in the music video version, she is dressed in the loose, simple clothing of a Communist Chinese. Her hair is straight and her face fresh-scrubbed. As soon as she begins to march while waving a red flag, little doubt remains that she is meant to represent *Third World China*. As an Asian, she is assumed to have a particularly calming temperament; and as a Chinese, she supposedly possesses amazing, mysterious powers unknown to the West which could greatly benefit from them, much like ginseng root or acupuncture.

This ability is aptly demonstrated in the music, which is introduced, as Mellencamp's was, with superficial notions of what constitutes 'oriental' music – here, parallel fourths played by the guitar. In the first two stanzas Bowie's vocal quality is relatively serene. In the third stanza, his melodic line rises in register and becomes more agitated. In the fourth stanza, after he stumbles into Chinatown with 'plans for everyone', his vocal quality gets increasingly aggressive, higher and louder; he calms down in the fifth after locking his chinagirl into a long caress.

What precipitates her striking shift from tranquil and simple in the video's opening to angry and garish in the closing frame seems to be our blond narrator. After he seizes her, her world starts to spin, changing irrevocably from black and white into colour. Her skin begins to receive layers of make-up – lipliner, eye-shadow, foundation and rouge – and the final image we are left with is of our formerly serene Third World member, attractive in her simplicity, having been transformed into a cross woman with heavy make-up and a bad perm.

Bowie's is a more complex piece to read than Mellencamp's in the context of Orientalist politics because its narrative of Western Man meets Asian woman seems so overdone, and thus done tongue in cheek. The act of stroking her hair while she is on her knees, as if she were an obedient dog; the photo of a debonair Bowie prominently displayed upon her bedside table; and the moment in which he lunges upon her passive body on the bed while he sings 'I'll give you a man who wants to rule the world' all contribute to an exaggerated, self-mocking portrait of white male-Asian female relationships.

Furthermore, the narrator seems to conceive of a role for her other than as demure virgin or sweet little housewife who cheerfully gets his bath ready: she could, to his mind, challenge Hitler's desire to 'rule the world'. Her way of being is so soothing, so antithetical to Western hegemonic energies that she need only whisper 'Oh baby, just you shut your mouth' and the visions of swastikas are scattered – powers of surely mythic proportions. Furthermore, as the line 'I'll ruin everything you are' indicates, the narrator manifests concern about corrupting her: this is new.

To read this work as a sardonic commentary on the practice of Asiophilia would be consistent with Bowie's interest in rethinking gender roles and with a statement he reportedly made regarding stereotypes of Asian women: in discussing the opening track of his album *Scary Monsters*, 'It's No Game', Bowie is said to have expressed a desire for the song to 'break down a particular kind of sexist attitude about women, and I thought the Japanese girl typifies it, where everybody sort of pictures her as the geisha girl – sweet, demure, and nonthinking. So she [Michi Hirota] sang the lyrics in a macho, samurai voice' (Hopkins 1985, p. 217).

Although reading his 'China Girl' as a brilliant piece of irony would leave my admiration for Bowie's work intact (his album *Low* is one of the finest recordings I own), I am still unable to convince myself to accept this interpretation. For while the song *seems* sensitive to the domination and corruption by white men of Asian women, it nevertheless homogenises Asian female identity in a manner which I do not perceive as being critical. When the Western man laments to his little chinagirl that he will 'ruin everything you are', he takes one admirable step towards realising that he is appropriating her. Yet she remains nameless, reduced to a sex and a race. And despite the narrator's claim that she has the power to get him to shut up, the chinagirl is never permitted to speak in her own voice – the first and only time she gets the opportunity to say anything, she mouths her line while Bowie delivers it in a monotone.⁷ Thus, although their conversation seems to be interactive, it is actually monological: Bowie *appears* to allow an Other to speak, but the 'dialogue' only underscores his authority to represent, and at the same time confers upon himself the role of hero in a Kevin Costner-style rescue fantasy, thereby enacting a new form of colonialism.

Reaching for the forbidden fruit

New Yorker John Zorn qualifies as Asiophile *extraordinaire*. Although some critics have suggested that his music contributes to a better society through its attempts to break down boundaries between different cultures, I perceive his musical efforts somewhat differently. Zorn habitually performs works that are predicated upon this troubling gender stereotype about Asian women. Pieces like his *New Traditions in East Asian Bar Bands* and 'Forbidden Fruit' indicate a disturbing obsession with Asian women's sexual impact upon him.

Like many postmodern artists, Zorn freely borrows from musics he admires, either sampling the works themselves or drawing from their aesthetic. He has frequently acknowledged the extent to which many of his works are influenced by East Asian music styles or forms. According to his own account, when he visits Japan he likes to 'look at girls' and to get ideas from Asian music (Zorn 1987). Zorn seems not unlike a James Bond of the downtown music scene: he travels to exotic locales where he encounters numerous beautiful women; when he emerges triumphant at the end of the adventure, his exploits are routinely celebrated.

In many of his recordings and performances that call for Asian females' musical participation, they are assigned the role of either vocalist or narrator who evokes a 'pure' East Asian identity. For example, each of the three songs in his *New Traditions in East Asian Bar Bands* series (performed in the summer of 1991 as part of the New York International Festival of the Arts) requires an Asian female narrator to read a text in Korean, Chinese or Vietnamese (Rockwell 1991).

In these performances, Zorn offers no translations to the texts, and those who do not understand what is said are left with an impression of three beautiful Asian women who babble charmingly but unintelligibly. Furthermore, in each work Zorn pits two male instrumentalists (a pair of drummers, electric guitarists and keyboardists) against each other in competition for the woman. Although Zorn has said that the three works are meant to pay tribute to the Asian actresses Que Tran, Jang Mi Hee and Hu Die, the women after whom the pieces are named, I find it difficult to comprehend how works that require Asian women to be the prize in a

struggle between two white men are supposed to function as any kind of 'homage' to them.

'Forbidden Fruit' (1987) also appropriates Asian female identity. Scored for string quartet, turntables and female Japanese voice, it too was intended as a tribute piece. In the album's liner notes, Zorn identifies a specific image that inspired him to compose the work in honour of Ishihara Yujiro, a Japanese actor who died in 1987: a photograph of Ishihara, a second actor and Ishihara's wife, Kitahara Mie, whom Zorn finds 'unbelievably gorgeous' (Zorn 1987).

In the photo, Kitahara is sitting, foreground centre, in a strapless swimsuit. She is clearly braless and her silkily smooth skin glows. Both men in the photo are riveted upon her. But in contrast to the ready availability of her body, she sits shyly, modestly cupping her arm about her torso as if to shield her breasts from the camera; her eyes do not meet its gaze, but look somewhere beyond it. Her suit is edged with a row of innocent embroidered flowers, perhaps daisies.

Sexy but not sleazy, the irresistibly beautiful Japanese female represents to Zorn a space to which he is drawn over and over again, in his musical as well as personal life. Like the narrators in both Bowie's and Cougar's tunes, Zorn perceives the Asian woman's world as distinct from and opposite to his own. He eagerly wants to explore her world, and invariably ends up exoticising it.



Ishihara Yujiro, Kitahara Mie and Tsugawa Masahiko in Kurutta Kajitsu (1956). Picture used by permission of the Nikkatsu Corporation, Japan.

The text of 'Forbidden Fruit' intimates a sexual encounter between a Japanese female and some unnamed 'he'. Ohta Hiromi reads a narrative in Japanese in which 'You and I, sweat and sweat'; soon 'something happens/He is coming'. Reassured that she can 'do it well', 'pain' ensues, followed by 'shine'. She concludes with the words 'I lick . . . I gnaw . . . I devour' in a sultry whisper.

As is characteristic of Zorn's compositions, 'Forbidden Fruit' is musical pastiche. Fragments of familiar musical themes fly by – Carmen's Habañera vamp; the opening of Mozart's Piano Sonata in Bb major, K. 315; a phrase by the soloist in Bruch's G minor violin concerto – only to have their cadences smudged or snatched away. The vocalist, Ohta Hiromi, delivers the text with a soft, high, sweet vocal quality, and concludes with nonsense baby syllables.

This bestowing of child-like qualities on the Asian female is consistent with both Cougar's and Bowie's depictions of her as innocent little girl. The authenticity of Ohta's Japanese female identity in the piece is bolstered by her pronunciation of the text's English words – 'slash', 'slowmotion' – with an unmistakable Japanese lilt, the equivalent of broken English in mail order Asian bride catalogues. But it is clearly not Ohta who is desired. Zorn reveals that he thinks of her as bodiless, calling her 'one of my very favourite voices in the world' (Zorn 1987). The photograph on the album cover serves as a constant reminder of just what Body we're talking about. Zorn's gaze is obviously as firmly fixed upon Kitahara as Ishihara's and Tsugawa's. But as composer, Zorn can take on the role of puppet-master and the Asian women whose vocal parts he writes will do anything he wants, including licking, gnawing and devouring on command.

A story

Growing up in southern Illinois as an Asian-American female was a rather repulsive experience. For Valentine's Day each year I was presented with the single card from those shiny red plastic-covered boxes in which a grinning, slanty-eyed Oriental wearing a kimono declared, in a bubble coming from her mouth, 'You're my cup of tea!' My classmates did not seem to intend offence; yet the Valentine I opened with dismay every year made all too clear what they perceived me as being – a kimonoed, tea-pouring Oriental. And as the early childhood ritual in which one is expected to declare affection for a particular person wore on, Valentine's Day also taught me that Asians are marked as romantically undesirable Others.

That is, until I turned ten. For our weekly music period my class merged with the other fifth-grade class down the hall. One week during a break I overheard a white boy boast to his friend that 'when I grow up, I'm gonna marry an Oriental girl'. The person to whom he was speaking pointed at me and asked him if he liked me. He said, yes . . . but did not know if he would marry me. His friend was clearly puzzled as to why a person with free choice would ever choose to marry an Oriental, but his bewilderment did not nearly match my own. How could this boy 'like me' when we had never seen each other before?

Sadly, this tale has been repeated many times, not only to me personally but to most other Asian-American females I have spoken with.⁸ It happens at bus stops: a white man sidles up to you and strikes up a conversation in which he reminisces about the time he served in Korea – then the inevitable 'are you married?'⁹ Often when I take a taxicab home alone at night, the driver muses on how fine the women from 'my country' are, or in the classroom, the professor

announces he would like to call me by my Japanese middle name, Michiko, because he finds it 'much more beautiful'.

Let me try to express what I find so unsettling if it is not yet clear:

- (1) To be rejected because of your race and to be desired for just the same reason are both forms of racism. But the latter is a tricky position to negotiate: I know of several women who willingly enter into relationships with Asiophilic men because they are attracted to them; refuse to believe that their individual identity goes relatively unnoticed; feel grateful to be finally accepted; or simply do not mind – in fact they feel proud of this interest in their culture.
- (2) Asiophilia carries with it old-time sexism ('when women were women') as well as heterosexism: if one holds the Asian woman as the quintessential female, the Asian lesbian would be a paradox.
- (3) The stereotypes imposed upon us force a loss of individual identity. A great many Asians living in the United States know that, to many non-Asians, we are all Chinese, and have been repeatedly told that 'All Orientals look alike'. (If this indeed were the case, it would surely be impossible for our family and friends to tell us apart.) This belief quickly goes beyond problems of physical differentiation and name confusion into more harmful realms such as not getting a job as a result of the widely held assumption that Orientals are naturally adept at maths but inevitably struggle with English. (I have been told on countless occasions: 'You speak English very well!!' or: 'You don't have *much* of an accent'. Once as an undergraduate I was questioned by a professor as to whether the writing in what he considered a particularly eloquent paper was 'really my own'.)

Two deaths of Asians in the USA within the last decade speak to the frightening possibilities that can result from the homogenising of Asian identity. In 1982, a Chinese-American, Vincent Chin, was clubbed to death in Detroit by two white autoworkers who said to him, shortly before smashing his skull with a baseball bat, 'It's because of you motherfuckers that we're out of work' (Takaki 1989, pp. 481–4). And in February 1992, a Japanese businessman in California began receiving death threats from a man who claimed that the Japanese had caused him to lose his job; he was killed two weeks later (Mydans 1992).

- (4) The 'pure' identity pre-formed for anyone who looks Asian poses a particular problem for those who are *Asian-American*. Depending on our hometown, many of us have grown up feeling that Asia is indeed the 'Orient' – distant and opposed to what constitutes our own identity: we too were born in the United States, know all the episodes of the Brady Bunch, and despise raw fish,¹⁰ whether asked about Zen Buddhism or demanded to 'Speak some Chinese!', we feel as much at a loss as the next person – yet we are expected to *be* Oriental and are thus doomed to disappoint and to shrivel into inauthenticity.¹¹

Reading as a postcolonial diasporic

In her essay 'Who Claims Alterity?' the literary theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describes a historical shift in the early 1970s into what she calls transnationalism, and locates an economic catalyst for this shift – the computerisation of the stock exchange. She argues that as the old empires get dismantled,

a softer and more benevolent Third Worldism [enters] the Euramerican academy . . . [Yet the postcolonial diasporic] can be uneasy . . . with being made the object of unquestioning benevolence as an inhabitant of the new Third World. (Spivak 1989, p. 275)

This is a sentiment that Trinh T. Minh-ha also describes in her recent book *Woman, Native, Other*:

It is as if everywhere we go, we become Someone's private zoo. . . . We no longer wish to erase your difference, We demand, on the contrary, that you remember and assert it. . . . Now i am not only given the permission to open up and talk, i am also encouraged to express my difference. My audience expects and demands it; otherwise people would feel as if they have been cheated: We did not come to hear a Third World member speak about the First (?) World, We came to listen to that voice of difference likely to bring us *what we can't have* and to divert us from the monotony of sameness. (Trinh 1989, pp. 82, 88, 89)

Like Spivak and Trinh, I find myself nowadays writing from a new, uneasy position. When I mention the practice of Asiophilia to some of my white friends, they quickly list Asian and white couples they know as if to prove that 'good people' partake of interracial romantic relations too. They seem to believe that I am arguing that *all* interracial relationships are based on domination and appropriation, which is *not* what I am saying; or that I am opposed to manifesting a curiosity about worlds other than the ones most familiar to us.

What I *am* protesting, again borrowing Spivak's elegant terminology, is the projection of a 'hyperreal Third world' or the 'comfortable Other' (Spivak 1989, p. 275). Images of Asian females in these works by Mellencamp, Bowie and Zorn might satisfy their creators' personal longings but do they ask what the chinagirl herself wants? feels? needs? Having repeatedly been expected to play the role of chinagirl, I often feel as if I am being placed in Trinh's zoo, or gathered up as just another exotic, fetishised object to be installed in some museum to assure the collector of his own identity while leaving my own blank, without a personal history or time.¹²

Along with the three forces behind Asiophilia that I have mentioned (the quest for the Real woman, the yearning to preserve 'pure' cultures and the urge to collect), I believe the desire to transgress also plays a part: historically, Asian women in the United States have been either invisible or inaccessible to non-Asian men, forbidden by both law and custom. Comprising less than 2 per cent of the current US population, they often remained in Asia while their male kin worked in the States, or they lived in tightly knit Asian communities; intermarriage between Asians and whites in the USA was illegal for a time in several states including California, whose antimiscegenation statute was declared unconstitutional less than fifty years ago (Osumi 1982). Furthermore, enveloped in a mythic sexual aura (the geisha girl, the Singapore girl, the Thai prostitute who eagerly awaits the arrival of the US military), Asian female identity has long been linked with prostitution and naughty sex.

My own repeated experiences of being approached by innumerable white men who expect me to be demure, domestic and doting are both fuelled by these tunes by Mellencamp, Bowie and Zorn and depicted by them. In other words, the orientalist representations in these pop songs reflect a phenomenon that is fast becoming an American way of life, as well as stimulate the practice itself. (I fear that the high visibility of Woody Allen and Soon-Yi Farrow Previn's romance will soon inspire many Asiophilic relationships, given Allen's near cult status in the USA.) Through its ability to reach more and more of the globe by means of

increasingly more elaborate forms of mechanical reproduction, the popular music industry can instantly represent other worlds as its practitioners see fit. Whether they attempt to go beyond representation depends, I believe, on us, its consumers, to assess critically what we hear rather than to valorise it because we like the tune.¹³

Thus I conclude by suggesting the possibility of hearing the line in Mellencamp's chorus, 'I won't break you/China Girl/If you take me into your world', as a threat to an enemy as well as a clumsy attempt at reassurance; the suggestion that she 'take me to your jasmine place' as a demand. Interpreted in this way, the elements of coercion and inequality are thrown into relief: the fear of the East and of the Female invading his world incites our former hero to invade their world first – or rather, again.

Appendix

John Cougar Mellencamp, 'China Girl' (1982). By Joe New and Jeff Silbar.

China Girl
I met you on the sea sand
You touch me with your cool hand
Your perfume's in the wind

China Girl
Your daddy tells you white lies
To keep you from my blue eyes
To know me is no sin

I won't break you, China Girl
If you take me into your world
It's been my good fortune to find you
China Girl

Stolen flowers
Are sweetest in the morning
The Eastern sun is dawnin'
Your silk's against my skin

China Girl
Take me to your jasmine place
Cool me with your subtle grace
To know me is no sin
I won't break you, China Girl
If you take me into your world
It's been my good fortune to find you
China Girl

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David Bowie, 'China Girl' (1983). Lyrics and music by David Bowie and Iggy Pop.

Oh-Oh-Oh-Oh
Little China Girl
I could escape this feeling with my China
Girl
I feel a wreck without my little China Girl
I hear her heart beating loud as thunder
Saw the stars crashing

I'm a mess without my little China Girl
Wake up in the morning where's my little
China Girl
I hear her heart's beating loud as thunder
Saw the stars crashing down

I feel a-tragic like I'm Marlon Brando
When I look at my China Girl
I could pretend that nothing really meant
too much
When I look at my China Girl

I stumble into town just like a sacred cow
Visions of swastikas in my head
Plans for everyone
It's in the white of my eyes

My little China Girl
You shouldn't mess with me
I'll ruin everything you are
I'll give you television
I'll give you eyes of blue
I'll give you man who wants to rule the
world

And when I get excited
My little China Girl says
Oh baby just you shut your mouth
She says . . . sh-sh-shhh.

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John Zorn, 'Forbidden Fruit' (1987). Original texts by Reck.

Close my eyes
Take deep breath
My memories slash

You and I, sweat and sweat
Keen . . . keen . . . slowmotion
In my ears . . . endless echoes
color . . . empty . . . colors

Sitting still, listening still
Flowing, wrapped within
Something happens

He is coming. So beautiful
 So I can do it well
 I'm waiting on the beach

Soon I awake
 Thirst and sigh
 Dazzling and grow dizzy
 Pain . . . shine

I lick . . . I gnaw . . . I devour

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Endnotes

- 1 By 'Asian-American' I mean persons of Asian descent who are citizens or residents of the United States. Asian-American groups include persons with origins in East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia or the Indian subcontinent. The three tunes I discuss in this article focus on Chinese and Japanese women; examples of other recent artistic representations of Asian women include Asian Indian women in Mira Nair's 1992 film *Mississippi Masala*, and Vietnamese women in the musical *Miss Saigon*, currently running on Broadway.
- 2 I refer to the concept of the mythical Chinese woman using the term 'chinagirl' in order to parallel the derogatory nineteenth-century American term for a Chinese man, 'chinaman'.
- 3 Gish Jen (1991) and Irvin Paik (1971) discuss the portrayals of the stereotypical Oriental in American films and mass culture.
- 4 The 1980 US census estimated the number of Asians in the US at 1.5% of the total population, a figure which nearly doubled by the time of the 1990 census, to 2.9% (Barringer 1991).
- 5 Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* exemplifies a Western masculinist representation of Asian female as exotic blossom, a fantasy David Henry Hwang confronts in his 1988 play *M. Butterfly*. Hwang's work was inspired by a news item about a French diplomat who discovered, at his trial for espionage, that his Chinese lover of many years was not a woman, but a man. This oversight was apparently due to the diplomat's belief that his lover was extremely modest, as was the way of all Chinese women (Hwang 1988). Dorinne Kondo (1990) analyses orientalism in both *Madama Butterfly* and *M. Butterfly*.
- 6 In the 1957 movie *Sayonara*, Marlon Brando was one of the two actors who broke the taboo in American films against on-screen sex between a white male actor and an Asian actress (before this watershed in movie history, Asian women were played by white women in yellowface). This event led to a slew of such films (*The World of Suzie Wong* (1961); *Diamond Head* (1962); *The Hawaiians* (1970)). Brando also starred in *The Teahouse of the August Moon* (1956) as a white man in yellowface (Paik 1971, p. 32).
- 7 Barbara Bradby has argued more generally that male rock performance 'makes the woman into a silent object of exchange among men' (Bradby 1990, p. 345); for example in 'That'll Be the Day', Buddy Holly and a male chorus utter the woman's response *for* her, rather than letting her speak for herself.
- 8 Matsumoto (1989) and Wong (1983) provide other such accounts of males' sexual interest in the 'little Oriental woman'.
- 9 In her essay 'G.I.'s and Asian Women' Evelyn

- Yoshimura relates how United States drill instructors during the Korean and Vietnam wars dangled images of Asian women as willing, immoral sex toys before the GIs in order to incite them to kill the less-than-human Oriental and to instill in them the desire to return to the good White women who were waiting at home (Yoshimura 1971, pp. 27-9).
- 10 In his recent book *Turning Japanese: Memoirs of a Sansei* (1991), David Mura poignantly describes his own emotional and physical separation from Japan as a *Sansei* (a third-generation Japanese-American), a distance which began to close after spending a year in Japan.
 - 11 The assumption that all people of Asian descent are not *really* American was the US government's premise in ordering persons of Japanese ancestry (including US citizens) to be incarcerated during World War II, but not those of German or Italian descent.
 - 12 In his essay 'On Collecting Art and Culture' James Clifford discusses collection-making as an appropriative act which creates the illusion of adequate representation while helping only to define the collector's self (Clifford 1988).
 - 13 One critical theorist who has written quite perceptively on issues of race, sex and class in popular music is Michele Wallace, addressing black male rap (1990a) and the Michael Jackson phenomenon (1990b).

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