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# The “Strange Graft” and “Sumptuous Garden” of Marilyn Chin’s *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen*

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Hubert Zapf claims in *Literatures as Cultural Ecology*, “cultural ecology of literature is that imaginative literature *acts like an ecological force* within the larger system of culture and cultural discourses” (27). Marilyn Chin’s novel *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen: A Manifesto in 41 Tales* (2009) is a rich collection of unique tales that begs for an innovative lens to engage with its fantastic aesthetics and contemporary vernacular as narrative forces that contribute to literary culture. If ecology is the study of the relationships between living organisms and their environs, it includes ethics, or the kinds of relationships that humans ought to have with the natural world. The novel explores a variety of interactions between humans and between species. While the eponymous “vixen” of the collection are the sometimes-human American twins raised by their Chinese grandmother, they do not always assume human form. The magical, shape-shifting characters comment upon stereotypes, bigotry, and systemic racism to promote social change. Imaginative narratives then have the power to act as “ecological forces” in the dynamic context of the ever-changing culture that produces them, altering the culture and its narratives about race. Through the three protagonists, the text offers insights on what it means to be coded an Asian or a Chinese woman—not American—living in contemporary United States.

Chin’s tales foster an important inquiry into the relationship between the natural world (“nature”) and race in the United States. To challenge and respond to racialization of the three female protagonists, the novel blends magical realism and fables to tell stories of immigrants and children of immigrants. The stories imagine human-animal metamorphoses and anthropomorphic creatures to offer insights on what it means to be racialized Chinese or Asian American.

I argue that this manifesto acts as a site for racialized ecocritical

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resistance of the immigrant narrative. Immigrants who choose the United States for opportunities to pursue life, liberty, and happiness confront discrimination in all its forms and become racialized bodies by the overculture. Chin's characters are physically described with catch-all Asian racial signifiers of eye shape and hair color, which reinforce how they are coded and seen by the overculture. While the twins are not always victims of hate crimes, the nation aligns the twins with the Yellow Peril, which dehumanizes and racializes them.

How to articulate sustained traumas from experiences with racism and forced assimilation demands innovations in language, genre blending, and cross-cultural allusions for narrating these immigrant stories. Chin's translation of her heroines' intertwined Americanization and racialization process can be read with a more inclusive ecocritical lens to examine the natural world and its relationships between the human animal and non-human. Neither environment nor culture is an absolute in balance or in some kind of romantic harmony. The natural world, like culture, is not static, and culture-producing humans belong to the natural world, which they continually shape and modify. In her interview with Nissa Parmar, Chin describes the creative process akin to horticulture, where the writer draws from the soil and grafts from existing flora. She explains that, as "an artist, [she] [wants] to wallow in that *rich soil* of possibilities, not to confine [herself] to one given aesthetic principle or cage," adding that "[she] can also visualize a *strange graft*: a *foreign branch* forced upon a gnarly trunk. It's all good, I think. It's all about making the genres richer and more wide-reaching. It's all about making a *sumptuous garden*" (254, emphasis added). The creative process is explained in ecological terms; Chin's image of grafting asks one to consider how writers draw inspiration from existing literatures. A contemporary *American* writer, Chin draws upon and blends diverse literary traditions from China, Western Europe, South America, and her US predecessors. Are the manifesto's fables and parables "a strange graft" or "a foreign branch" on the "gnarly trunk" of American literature? How does this novel explore immigrant experiences with suffering through both human-animal and animal perspectives? Chin crafts a "sumptuous garden" of tales where literature, like the garden, transforms spaces as sites for growing. Revisiting this novel as a model for literature-as-garden opens up a space for an ecocritical reading of

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the racialized immigrant experience.

In their introduction to *Racial Ecologies*, an anthology of interdisciplinary critical essays, Leilani Nishime and Kim D. Hester Williams broadly define ecology to include “urban environments and agricultural systems”; “[the editors] consider nature and environment as relational sites for navigating both embodied racial identities and ecological space and place. [Their] use of the term *racial ecologies* instead of the more static term *environment* references these systems that shift and change over time but are always intertwined” (4). The ecology of Chin’s tales includes the human-centric environments or spaces of the family restaurant and higher education; storytelling too becomes a place within those spaces where these characters alter the expectations of race, gender, sexuality, and national identity. To change the systems that bind and confine them, the characters need to be able to shape-shift. The narrative relies on human-animal transformations, which challenges how these environments racialize the women and how the women respond to being racialized. These transformations also disrupt the conventionally linear and anthro- and androcentric American or Western novel.

To represent the first generation American experience, these female characters, specifically the uber-successful twins, assume animal or lunar forms. Their transformations and reincarnations offer insights on the immigrant experience through the lexicon of magical realism and fabelhaft. When Chin notes that her “brand of magical realism has strong Chinese roots,” I build on the author’s ecological language for her writing (Weisner 220). The roots for transformation tales take inspiration from Chinese literature, but the tales are also shaped by the “rich soil” of the writer’s contemporary lens. Buried below the surface and nurtured by soil, roots anchor and sustain the shoots and grafts. Literature, as Chin describes her writing, is then a kind of grafting of old onto new, which she makes possible in fiction.

Chin launches her manifesto with a kind of proem-tale “Moon.” This proem highlights the speech act as a song to inform its listeners (readers) of its eponymous heroine’s rage after a grave injustice. Simultaneously human and lunar, the shape-shifting “little fat Chinese girl” is the moon who “[sings] in an ancient falsetto, a baleful song about exiled geese winging across the horizon” (13). Migratory birds,

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the geese are anthropomorphized as exiles in the moon's threatening song. Like an exile, the human Moonie is vulnerable because she is a round Chinese girl in a blond southern California culture. Moonie is violated when her dress is torn open by the blond twins whose "yellow piss" assaults her; the same perpetrators verbally attack her with the racist denigration of "slant-eyed cunt," which serves to further wound her psychologically (15). While the rape mirrors an individual assault, it also offers up a disturbing image for the violent realities of the immigrant experience on a larger scale. Narrated mostly in the third-person, the fantastic or strange element of Moonie's story imagines her to be a shapeshifter, and it asks its readers to re-see the satellite as a menacing, angry entity who goes on a month-long murder-spree and to re-view the cruel blond boys as human-animals.

Chin crafts an origin tale for her protagonist, linking her to her natural, celestial namesake. Moon's transformative character rejects her stereotyping as a meek Chinese girl or a helpless victim. Predating the #MeToo movement, Moonie as Moon reclaims her power and imagines revenge through magic and murder. Chin weaves Moonie's experience with an omniscient first-person persona, and together these braided personas take narrative revenge. The obvious revenge is against the blond twin boys and all blond boys, while avenging the official national narrative. Moon's story shines a light on her humiliation and shame, which other "little chubby Chinese girls" share with Moonie and the narrating "I" persona (16-17). Because rape and racism are at the root of the American conquest story, stories like Moonie's are buried in the soil of a white patriarchal history and are sometimes lost in the deep network of roots of women's humiliation stories.

"Ryokan's Moon" acts as companion narrative to "Moon." Here, Chin updates the late eighteenth century/early nineteenth century monk's paradox and haiku, where the indigent monk would have given the thief the moon: "The thief/ Left it behind—/the moon at the window."<sup>1</sup> Seeking material gain, the thief fails to appreciate the moon's beauty, and the eponymous Zen priest cannot gift the thief something he does not value. In Chin's version, the thief is replaced by a stoned, would-be rapist. Where Moonie has been objectified and humiliated, Mei Ling is initially objectified, but she outwits her predator three times. Raised by an entrepreneurial and strong matriarch, Mei

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Ling invokes her grandmother's values of truth to repel the would-be rapist: "The truth is that I have a hideous infestation of the crabs" (115). With ironic agility, the young American protagonist must defile her desirability through narrative. Whether or not she has the crabs, Mei Ling engineers her character's hyperbolic sex drive and its consequences (an STD) into a tale with ammunition. I read the symbolic significance of pubic lice as a trope to reinforce an ecocritical lens because it serves as a commentary on the human as animal. First, the American male acts as a predator. Next, not all predators are on the same scale in the animal kingdom. Small parasitic predators like lice require a host. In this case, crabs are transmitted between hosts through sexual activity, an act shared by many species to reproduce. However, human sex is not always procreative. Chin's twin protagonists, specifically Mei Ling, showcase that these two women labeled as *Asian and Chinese* claim sexual *and* intellectual agency. Moonie and Mei Ling's relationship to each other and to their worlds (natural and cultural) invite questions of symbiosis and imbalances. Finally, Chin's re-telling of Ryokan's parable underscores how her Chinese American protagonists draw parallels to ancient texts and re-examine their relationships to their environment—natural and cultural—to translate the violent assimilation process.

Camping, specifically car camping, asserts the melding of cultural and natural worlds. Mei Ling is situated at a campsite, a place created by humans to be in nature. In a natural state, stripped of clothing and her signifiers of culture, she is more naked than nude. With the threat of rape gone, she is left in peace to enjoy the moon. A universally recognized satellite outside of human systems but part of the natural world, the moon does not reduce the young female character to a racialized, fetishized, or gendered Chinese American body. In her solitude and reflection, she becomes at ease and appears comfortable in her skin. Mei Ling notes, "Ryokan would have given the creep the moon. But she was not that enlightened. Not yet" (115). By contrast, the self-aware, or quasi-enlightened, protagonist articulates her self-worth, which, when contextualized in racial America, is an invaluable enlightenment.<sup>2</sup> Unlike humans who judge and foment feelings, the moon does not intervene or racialize Mei Ling. But the celestial body does serve as a site for inscribing meaning and self-esteem. Moreover, Mei Ling's moongazing at a campsite marks the intersections of culture

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and nature without the human gaze that renders Mei Ling feminine, Asian, and/or Asian-feminine. Serving as actor and observer in two tales, the moon and its mutability allows itself to exact revenge *and* to witness both feminine humiliation and enlightenment. The moon here is reinscribed to comment upon how human culture categorizes and labels through “either-or” constructs, while, in the natural world, the absence of human constructs allows for “and.”

Mei Ling’s moon story entertains ideas about relationships that are not always mutually beneficial—such as the dangers of rape and parasites. Although the two moon-centered stories set up the entwined perspectives of twin sisters, Chin’s collection shows how the twins are not always in accord. Their relationship, acting as a structural and rhetorical device, reveals their sisterhood is not always symbiotic but rooted in competition. Moonie attests to a Darwinian competition for survival in the womb, which she describes as “homicidal urges,” yet she “[decides] to stop bleeding [her] twin [Mei Ling]” (177). Characteristic of Chin’s particular brand of magical realism, Moonie endows her fetus with memory, agency, and ruthlessness. Contradicting a model minority stereotype, this spiteful confession also thwarts the symbolic notions of balance in twins.<sup>3</sup> Humans have historically sought to explain the natural world through various symbols of balance and harmony; the yin-yang is one such symbol.

Even as the twins take turns in narrating their perspectives and offer double the agency in narrating with episodic, yet intersecting, plot lines, they are not emblematic of an idealized cosmic unity but as “the unity of opposites” (Weisner 217). Chin’s pun on the double happiness of girl twins and the yin-yang shows that, in the context of the immigrant children’s narrative, the girls live in a xenophobic country where imbalance is the dynamic constant of their world.<sup>4</sup> They cannot exist as a unified, harmonious, and equal principle in a culture with class, gender, and racial inequalities. As the granddaughters of a Chinese restaurateur, they belong to a capitalist, entrepreneurial, but racially coded, space.

One of the disparities between the sisters is the non-human forms they assume. If one girl can transform into the moon, her sister takes animal forms. While there are many animal-human transformations in the novel, the most important one is in the

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eponymous tale “Fox Girl.” Aligned with Mei Ling and her sex drive, the girl-fox transformation celebrates sexual agency. The acceptance of Mei Ling’s sex drive stems from Grandma Wong’s tales about “the tiniest girl [who] always ended up victorious” (26) and “stories about all kinds of magical transformations—women turned into foxes, foxes into spirits” (24). In a string of hyphenated modifiers, Moonie’s epithet describes her twin sister as a “Venus-man-trap, love-goddess-slut-sister-super-vixen” (55), and whom Grandma calls a “mean little fox with many tricks up her sleeve” (184). Instead of the stand-alone denigration of “slut” offered up by the mother figure in the poem “Moon,” Moonie’s and Grandma’s epithets reveal a kind of pride. They align Mei Ling with her absent “vixen mother” by calling her “fox girl” (165) and “an impudent little vixen” (96). Associated with the tricky fox of Chinese fables, Mei Ling can simultaneously rebel through her hyperbolic sex drive and conform to society’s ideas of success. In defiance of the model minority stereotype and what Moonie calls “immigrant behavioral history,” Mei Ling satisfies and scratches her libidinal itch (87).<sup>5</sup> Complex, paradoxical, and trickster-like, the fox of Chinese *zhiyuan* fables is reinvented through Mei Ling’s epithets and in the eponymous tale, “Fox Girl.”

As one who questions prescribed chastity as a cross-culturally “feminine” role and resists fetishization of the Asian female body, Mei Ling mirrors the *femme fatale* fox of the *zhiyuan* most distinctly.<sup>6</sup> In “Fox Girl,” a “so-and-so Mr. Famous Poet” replaces the seduced male scholar of the *zhiyuan* tales (132). Instead, Chin provides a contemporary satire of the American academic scene, which she confirms in a footnote to the tale. With a reputation for preying on “exotic” young females, the fictional male poet seduces a Hong Kong-born literature student who resembles Mei Ling, the poet and literature Ph.D., “spunky, with a confident spring to her walk” (133). Rooted in truth, Mr. Famous Poet, emblematic of white male power and the white androcentric literary canon, continues to grope female graduate students as he becomes irrelevant: “The great Norton Anthology in the sky had already replaced his entries with a younger hipper Croatian Navajo surrealist” (132). However, as an overt parable for multiethnic writers cracking open the American canon and questioning ethnic representation, “Fox Girl” teaches Mr. Famous Poet that, to be American, the American

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canon must be representative of its evolving citizenry, and he has messed with the wrong student.

Fox Girl exacts a twenty-first century feminist revenge. Strategically leading the foreplay, the female literature student transforms into a fox and then “into a two-hundred-pound gargantuan skunk” that sprays Mr. Famous Poet “with a foul yellow varnish” (134). To show the reversal of power and the skunk-girl’s reclamation of power, the narrative borrows from the ancient tale and translates it for the twenty-first century; the “yellow varnish” of the animal’s self-preservation replaces the symbolic marker of male pleasure with the American woman’s magical revenge. The transformed fox—not the human—seduces, but the skunk repels and terminates the poet’s interest in both the girl and her change into a second wild animal.

The recurring motif of the fox in the character of Mei Ling permits what Daniel Hsieh calls an “exploration of things feared and desired, celebrated and condemned” in his study “Fox as Trickster in Early Medieval China” (236); it also permits an examination of the tensions between the animal and civilized natures of humans (237). As an embodiment of the model minority stereotype for her hyperbolic educational success and a rejection of the passive, mute exotic “Asian,” Mei Ling’s persona represents what is “feared and desired.” In *Alien Kind*, Rania Huntington contends that the “[r]hetorical use of the fox [is] a symbol for the dangers of sex” (174). Although the model minority stereotype may have diminished the threat of the Yellow Peril in the Cold War era, I read Mei Ling’s symbolic vulpine status as a reminder of the fetishized “Asian Woman” as Other in the overculture’s national narrative. The female body that speaks out and experiences sexual pleasure still poses a threat to perceived male power in controlling historical and personal narratives as well as controlling the female body.

Chin challenges this patriarchal narrative with intelligent, sexy, and bold women who resist the legacy of objectification through the white male gaze of American wars, (e.g., Japan, Korea, Vietnam, etc.). In line with Newsom’s definition of girl power, the twins narrativize “[t]he personal empowerment of the girl power character [which] is an ability to find both personal pleasure and success simultaneously” (57). The ecology of the human-as-animal as well as human and animal



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relationships comments upon the twins' evolving self-worth and their responses to being coded as Chinese, Asian, or Other, when they are American.

Mei Ling's character offers several transformation stories that appear magical, surreal, or strange, but are central to narrating her immigrant success story. More than a symbol, the American Mei Ling, who transforms into fox girl, revives, and alters the *zhiguai* genre as it becomes part of the ever-expanding US literary canon. In resisting the cage of national literature, these updated *zhiguai* tales reinforce cultural narrative acts as palimpsests; stories are inscribed over other stories while retaining the impressions of the earlier inscriptions. Chin recognizes literature's debt to other literature, "All good art is a palimpsest; what is beneath the surface beauty and weirdness is a history of suffering that can appear only if one looks deep under the veil" (Parmar 258). The "veil" alludes to DuBois's double consciousness and how the overculture racializes bodies along color lines. The raced-subjects, like Moonie and Mei Ling, find cultural acceptance in their professional success, but their metamorphoses call attention to their ethnicity, cultural heritages, race, etc., as outsider. They cross and re-cross cultural boundaries in their family, which includes the restaurant settings, and public lives. Successful in their careers but still marked as Chinese, the twins continue to occupy interstitial spaces. Liminal like the twins, the fox embodies "a double-natured or in-between creature, neither purely animal nor human yet partaking in both" (225). Via magical realism, the narrative's normalization of animal transformation serves to debunk gender, race, and literary expectations. Moonie and Mei Ling both resist homogeneity yet embody the seemingly contradictory traits of rebellion and conformity for their gender and ethnic identity markers.<sup>7</sup> While I understand the fox tales as a record of the anomalous, Chin asks her readers to consider the immigrant's story and assimilation process in a similar light. It is at once what Hsieh calls "real and fantastic," the stuff of fables (234). Chin, like Hsieh, reminds her readers that the fox tales are tales of transformation and transcendence, which fiction makes possible. Less disturbing than human to fox transformations is the reality of the multitude of Mr. Famous Poets who abuse their power acting like predators.

Neither victim nor quarry, Fox Girl owns her sly traits. Rania

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Huntington asserts the fox's association with sex and lust in the word or character for "mei," which, after the Tang, means to seduce or bewitch (172); Mei is the first syllable of Chin's super-vixen's name.<sup>8</sup> She is the savvy negotiator who trades sex for a tenure track position in California, but she knows exactly when and how to pull out (pun intended) of the deal by becoming something undesirable. The authors of the *zbiguai* tradition, specifically in the Qing tradition with which Chin is familiar, "made absolute the link between the fox as a *femme fatale* and sex as a means of advancement" (Huntington 180). In the case of Chin's "Fox Girl," sex serves to advance the end of sexual harassment and the widening of the literary canon. If Hsieh credits the "literati [with taking] the fox out of the world of legend and lore and [bringing] it into a world that was both real and fantastic" (234), then, I argue, Chin the translator-scholar injects the *zbiguai* fox tales into the US literary tradition as a multi-pronged challenge that fetishizes the Asian female body for the heteronormative white male gaze, calls attention to the tenuous nature of the canon, and upends the anthropocentric, linear narrative.

If Hsieh defines fox tales as "brief narratives that recorded all manner of the odd, unorthodox, and the strange" (234), the reincarnation narratives show other kinds of strange through animal transformations. While drawing on Buddhist tales, fables, and other origin tales, Chin sheds light on origin stories, such as who we are and where we come from. "How Was I Conceived?" is both the title and question Mei Ling asks Grandma Wong. Granny narrates Mei Ling's reincarnation and transformation from a worm in her mother's ear into a spotted dog whose "scratchy bark [...] sounded like *Mei Ling*, *Mei Ling*" (123, original emphasis). The worm impregnates the woman, and the dog's bark names the baby, which lends the story its fable-quality. Again and again, animals possess power to create cross-species life, transform into another animal, and communicate with humans. Moreover, in non-Christian traditions, like Buddhism and Daoism, life continues through rebirth and taking different forms (human, worm, dog, ghost, etc.). Not only does the Great Matriarch offer a different kind of conception story in fable form, but she also tells her granddaughter, "I know that this story sounds very *strange* to you. But all family stories are strange. You'll get used to that" (123, emphasis

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added). Therefore, this tale is no more or no less strange than tales passed down from parents to their children. Most importantly, Grandma Wong offers Mei Ling a unique origin or birth story, but quickly reassures her that *all humans* have strange family histories. Some family stories are grafts on the trunk and roots of the ancestors, and some stories are buried secrets.

In these tales, while reincarnation explores hierarchies of all animals, human and non-human, the food chain also raises questions of power and order. Again, the setting is largely in the context of the Double Happiness restaurant where humans consume other animals. The novel experiments with non-human, anthropomorphic perspectives of the barking dog, a carp, the restaurant, and a chorus of cockroaches. The hierarchy of viewpoints is questioned and subverted by beings that, in this world, cannot communicate or debate ethics. They just *are*. Nevertheless, the carp's ballad is positioned after it has reputedly died of a broken heart and in response to Grandma Wong's death. Putting a spin on the theme of eternal return, the fish sings, "I'll reborn myself over and over" (167). While the carp's reference to reincarnation reminds one of Buddhism's parables or lessons, the trope of suffering alludes to a goal of happiness and peace desired by Buddhists. However, the carp's song suggests that the immigrant experience runs parallel to Buddhist truths of impermanence and change at the root of suffering. Although the carp is at the bottom of the food chain, mirroring the position of the newest generation of immigrants, this fish never ascends, but is reborn infinitely in its carp form. The immigrant, however, seeks a new life—a kind of rebirth—in the adopted country, where she seeks change to improve her quality of life.

In addition to experimenting with non-human points of view, the text also plays with form. In an *Indiana Review* interview, Chin reminds readers that, while she is a "political poet," she is "also crazy about formal experimentation," which she sustains in a sestina from Double Happiness's point of view (113). The defunct restaurant informs us that it has been sold upon Grandma Wong's death in repeating, "They have all gone away," and "there's nothing left to say" (169). "Only the crying cockroaches will stay," yields to the cockroaches' prose-scat that follows the sestina. Switching from the complex, conforming structure

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of the sestina for imagining the commonplace pests' rebellious, improvisation of scat mirrors and interprets how immigrants adapt to survive: conformity and improvisation are both necessary. Through the Kafkaesque vermin metaphor, Chin's vignette reminds us of the history of bigotry and hatred of immigrants in the US. Quick to forget their own immigrant ancestors, Americans are reminded that they stand on the shoulders of their forebears as they tread on the newest wave of immigrants. The inventive cockroaches' scat, "Ho, Ho, Ho! We are courageous, we're bold, we're not afraid of your foot-soles!" (170). Stepped on and denigrated with racial epithets, immigrants, like Grandma Wong and her granddaughters, must be courageous and unflinching. Americans do dehumanize émigrés. Chin's fables and parables showcase how human beings are racialized through her integration of animal metaphors.

Chin's narrative innovations also challenge the nature of culture. Literature as an artifact produced out of a cultural and historical moment builds on its predecessors. The final story reaffirms how literature "acts like an ecological force" in the context of culture. Continuing to draw upon and Americanize classical Chinese and Buddhist literary traditions, Chin updates these tales to demonstrate her brand of magical realism and the strange. In the final piece, "Three Endings," Chin puns on a cliffhanger Zen parable, whose meaning is disputed: a man clings to a vine growing up the cliff to avoid one tiger waiting for him above and two tigers waiting below; risking a fall, the man reaches out to pick and savor the berry he discovers within reach. In the face of death, he embraces the moment, or life, to enjoy the berry's sweetness.

Chin's revision proffers a parable on race relations in twenty-first century America. Chased by three boys and their dogs--instead of tigers--, Mei Ling escapes her tormentors by climbing a five-story apartment building's rooftop. In all three versions, she carries a backpack with a secret compartment for her mooncakes, but Chin imagines three potential outcomes. The first ending remains closest to the parable. Instead of a strawberry, Mei Ling savors the last of her grandmother's mooncakes; she savors its sweetness and her life. The mooncakes, unlike berries, act as emblems of culture and family, which nourish. If that ending is unsatisfactory to her readers, Chin offers a

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second possible ending, where each of Mei Ling's three mooncakes are thrown to her paired human and canine predators, one above and two below, resulting in peace and harmony between all. While peace is desirable, sharing food does not resolve the bullies' bigotry and malicious intentions. Unlike fiction, eradicating racism is not as easily written as a denouement. In the third and final ending, Mei Ling's mooncakes "are really death stars dipped in blowfish poison" she inherits from Grandma Wong (204). If readers choose this ending of revenge, where Mei Ling assaults the bullies and their dogs, it allows for a kind of justice for bullied Chinese girls, like the opening story achieves. But the tale does not end there because Mei Ling relieves herself in the rooftop's potted tomatoes and plucks five juicy strawberries, one for now and four for later.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, through narrative, Mei Ling satiates her own palate and acts as a character-author who offers three possible denouements; *deus ex machina* resolutions are possible in fiction but not in reality. "The sweetest revenge, of course, is that the writer gets to tell the tale the way she wants to tell it," Chin confirms to Weisner (224). Chin imagines three possible endings for the bullied Mei Ling, granting her female character agency as an American woman of Chinese descent for whom all and any of these endings are possible.

However, Mei Ling's gesture of urinating in the potted garden has another ecological, racial significance. First, human beings are part of, not separate from, nature. Obviously, her action is a physiological response to a full bladder. Although the human animal has created culturally specific sites for this function, humans do continue to urinate in unsanctioned places. Having earned multiple terminal degrees, Mei Ling, whose rebellious nature has been established (as a protagonist with a possible STD and as a shape-shifter), is not constrained by culture to meet her physical needs. I read the third ending as a metaphor for how Mei Ling's racialized body eschews the overculture's prescribed expectations for her. Representative of human desire to control, contain, and cultivate nature, the potted vegetable stands in for the US overculture. Her action simultaneously sticks it to the androcentric overculture *and* fertilizes it.

This ending also codes nature through the lens of class, race, and ethnicity. Mei Ling's deathstars are metonymic of a catch-all Asian stereotype produced by the film industry that collapses the martial arts

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and ninja archetype in the American overculture. Blowfish poison, a neurotoxin produced by the fish, marks human manipulation of “natural” elements that take on a cross-cultural significance as a deadly weapon. Next, the “paradise roof garden” belongs to “some rich white lady,” but, as the omniscient narrator explains parenthetically, it was created by men named Jesús and Truong (204). Here, Chin expounds on the realities of class and the access to green spaces. The anonymous woman is identified by her race and class, which enable her to create or, more accurately, pay for this paradise. No more is said about Jesús and Truong, but they are named and credited with creating the roof garden Mei Ling stumbles upon. Their names hint at cultural, ethnic, and/or racial identity markers.

This manifesto, as the author calls it, is indeed a call to action. Immigrant literature is American literature. Inadequate attention has been given to the ecology of immigrant literature as it translates historical, literary, and cultural otherness into the American literary tradition, which cracks open, expands, and enriches the canon. Certainly, Chin’s manifesto-collection of tales subverts and questions the American Dream for Chinese American women, confronts racism and misogyny as part of and not separate from contemporary American history, and engages with diverse literary tropes and structures to find ways to translate the violent assimilation process. More importantly, *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen* explores the confrontation between the immigrants’ realities and the natural world to provide an immigrant narrative that grafts on diverse literatures to proffer a “sumptuous garden.” Through human and non-human personas, the characters’ experiences with sexism and racism materialize as strange but actual human experiences. Chin’s text comments on the dynamic *nature* of cultures through literature and how the natural—real and imagined—world can teach us something about racialized human experiences.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>In seeking translations from Japanese to English, I cite Blyth’s *Haiku, Vol. 3: Summer-Autumn*, Hokuseido, 1982, pp. 940. I also include Asataro Miyamori’s here, “The moon at my window is left/Unstolen by the thief” from *Anthology of Haiku Ancient and Modern*, Maruzen, 1932, pp. 602-03.

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<sup>2</sup> The scrolls of the Sung dynasty will be cited by an older Mei Ling later as source for her shift in self-love, not her accomplishments of earning two doctorates, “It was not until I turned thirty-five that I finally realized that I was a beautiful Chinese woman and that my ancient features were hand-painted on the elegant Sung Dynasty scrolls” (23). Having pursued literary studies, Mei Ling reads and discovers her beauty through her translation of these scrolls; she translates her body by seeing it through the Sung dynasty lens, not the white overculture lens.

<sup>3</sup> In *The New York Times Magazine*, January 9, 1996, William Peterson opines about Japanese Americans whom he describes as “exceptionally law-abiding alien residents” in contrast with the “problem minorities” (21). The “model minority” is attributed to Peterson and his views of Japanese Americans as model citizens who value education and maintain familial ties through traditions; his comparative piece is read as a divisive one today.

<sup>4</sup> The doubling of the restaurant appears in the eponymous poem from *The Phoenix Gone, The Terrace Empty*: “open/the gilded facade [sic]/ of restaurant ‘Double Happiness’” (48).

<sup>5</sup> For the “Bad Girls in Fiction” panel at the October 2012 Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association, Reshmi Dutt-Ballerstadt presented, “Reinventing America and the Immigrant Experience: Marilyn Chin and her Subversive Tactics in *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen*,” drawing upon Celine Parreñas Shimizu’s book about Asian American women’s sexuality, namely “productive perversity.” Dutt argues that “the agency of these twin Wong sisters lies in not just performing ‘productive perversity’ but also in sustaining their ‘model minority’ status” (n.p.).

<sup>6</sup> For instance, her foxiness is repeatedly noted by Moonie (55, 88, 184), Ming the cook (165), her mother (96), and grandmother (165).

<sup>7</sup> See Alison Graham-Bertolini’s article “Marilyn Chin’s *Revenge*: Rewriting the Racial Shadow” for her reading of the twins as “complementary subjects” who resist the trope of the “Asian American racial shadow in conflict with itself” (18).

<sup>8</sup> In her widely anthologized poem, “How I Got That Name: An Essay on Assimilation,” Marilyn Chin relates the origin of her full name to Marilyn Mei Ling Chin (line 1), which her father “transliterated ‘Mei

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Ling' to 'Marilyn'" (12). The writer's name originates in Chinese with the "mei" of bewitching or seduction for an imposed, assimilationist name associated with the archetypal seductive blonde woman of the 1950s, Marilyn Monroe, who arguably "bewitches" men. Note that the nuances of the Chinese and American names retain seductive meanings from their respective cultural contexts in both languages.

<sup>9</sup> The stream of yellow that Mei Ling deposits in the planter harkens back to the significance of Moonie's entry into the world in "A Zygote's Confession"; she urinates on the male doctor who delivers her. Drawing on racist stereotypes for Asians, Chin develops the symbolism of yellow blood in "Blues on Yellow" from *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow* (2002).

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