Writing the Ghetto
Class, Authorship, and the Asian American Ethnic Enclave
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Last summer, as I was having dinner in Washington, D.C.’s Chinatown, two tourists hesitantly stepped into the restaurant. A waiter summoned them to a table, but they were disoriented and cautious, mumbling briefly together before asking: “Is this Chinatown?” I laughed—not because they were standing in the shadow of a sixty-foot gate, all gilt and dragons and pagodalike peaks, the unmistakable sign that they were smack in the middle of Chinatown. Rather, I laughed because the tourists’ skepticism bespoke an observant irony—not much about this Chinatown is very Chinese. Beyond the gate, one block north and barely two blocks to its east and west, is the entirety of D.C.’s Chinatown, its thin arrangement of restaurants, a few souvenir shops, and not many Chinese people on the streets. The most eye-catching sights are hardly Chinese at all, the blazing marquee of the Verizon Center and the gleaming storefronts of mega-retail stores and chain restaurants that were built in the 1980s ostensibly to renew the neighborhood. The bilingual signs of these shops are ornamental contrivances, shallow significations of an ethnic aura. “Starbucks” and “Subway” translated into phonetic but semantically nonsensical Chinese. But all was not lost for the disappointed tourists. The waiter reassured them, settling them at a table as he chatted them up with a history of the better days, when there were more Chinese people, more dragon dances, flapping fish in sidewalk buckets, and venerated elders officiating over the urban village in high Confucian style. Now I was the one who was disappointed, in hearing the waiter reiterate a familiar, denuded Orientalist script. I expected him to tell a different story, of the communities and histories razed by gentrification and corporatized renewal, or perhaps of the labor market discrimination and structural ghettoizations that led him to scavenge for tips in a dying Chinatown. In other words, I had a fantasy of Chinatown too. If Chinatown was not Chinese enough for the tourists by failing to live up to their fantasy of racial-cultural difference, it failed to be Chinese enough for me in terms of racial-political sensibility. I had expected that the waiter, as someone who might have experienced the racist laws, public policies, and social attitudes that named him as Chinese, would evince more interest in protesting and critiquing his racializations. I was mapping a political position onto a Chinese person’s racial position. Like the tourists, I wanted Chinatown to be more Chinese.

Fae Myenne Ng’s Bone tells a story about a Chinatown that is not very Chinese. Ng’s novel rethinks Chinatown as an idea and a place that, paradoxically, cannot be captured through the lens of race, specifically though the racial categories of
Chinese-ness described above; as a tourist's dream of racial-cultural exotica and as an idealized embodiment of racial-political solidarity. Bone's Chinatown resists the recognizable essentialisms of racial-cultural difference, but it also confronts the less willingly recognized essentialisms of racial-political desire. The latter refers to what Viet Nguyen calls the “disavowed essentialism of racial identity”—a racial-political essentialism that essentializes racialized subjects as politicized subjects who protest and critique their racializations (149). Asian American studies is arguably structured and animated by racial-political essentialism. Its methodologies assume that Asian American voices are politically oppositional, readily contesting the material and discursive disciplines of race. Notable progenitors of this practice are the Aiiteeeeee! editors, for whom being racialized as Asian American is to have a “sensibility” that is necessarily, even inherently, politicized (Chan et al. xxvi). The Aiiteeeeee! editors are routinely excoriated for their overwrought prescriptions, but Asian Americanist practice continues to carry the editors' spirit. Sau-Ling Wong offers a cogent and tempered distillation of the literary field's goal: to build a coalition of texts and social formations that “acknowledge and resist” the discriminations shared by Asian-raced groups, a coalition that does not essentially, but “voluntarily adopt[s]” politicization (6). Yet the texts that volunteer themselves, or that we allow to volunteer, hew to oppositional discourse, resulting in our current canon, which is characterized by antiracist discourse. Race-based politicization, however voluntary, is nonetheless selected for, potentially naturalizing race-based politicization as, if not an innate, then the proper Asian American aesthetic.

Racial-political essentialism has produced important and necessary insights, but it presumes that racialization predictably produces or even inherently embodies political desire. Asian American studies has extensively and convincingly de-essentialized race, yet racial-political essentialism risks retrenching that work by reinforcing the logic of racial embodiment, though admittedly in a less injurious form, that the field works so hard against. Also of concern is the ever-changing character of our contemporary globalized and diasporic sociality, as well as the cross-hatching of race with class, gender, and sexuality, which make allegiances difficult to catalogue into clear-cut racial-political schemes. This is not to suggest an abandonment of politics. Though racial-political essentialism might not hold, political critique need not be evacuated from the heart of Asian Americanist practice. In fact, the fallacy of racial-political essentialism does not suggest a need for less oppositional discourse, but for more of it, given a paradox of race: race still centrally straights Asian American lives, yet is an unreliable rubric through which to contest that discipline. Bone enables us to imagine an alternative politics, specifically one that takes class and sexuality more fully into account. Class and sexuality, in turn, impel a reimagining of what constitutes the political. Like race, these vectors
of social experience can engender political essentialisms, but I look at the potential that class, overlaid with gender and the queer, has to unsettle them.

Read primarily through racial-political essentialist frameworks, Bone has been canonized as a politically oppositional, antiracist text, specifically as a critique of the racialized class inequities that structure San Francisco’s late twentieth-century Chinatown. Of note are Lisa Lowe and Juliana Chang’s works, which show that the novel’s antichronological, anti-bildungsroman structure contests the denial of the racialized, gendered labor exploitation necessary for the national march toward modernity and capitalist maximization. Bone’s assembly of Chinatown’s racialized working class, working poor, and underemployed is attendantly read as desiring to rise against its exploitations. Indeed, the novel’s portrait of the Leong family, beaten down by unrelenting poverty and labor exploitation, as well as by the suicide of Ona, the middle daughter, indicts the structural race, class, and gender inequities that materially and affectively aggrieve Chinatown life.

Rather than unequivocally espousing the kind of racial-political “sensibility” sanctified by the Aiieeeeee! editors, how might Bone’s antinovelistic form critique the assumed link between race and political desire? The standard reading of the text is important and necessary, but Bone also confronts this standard’s limits. The novel presents a more intractable Chinatown than it is given credit for, where racialized subjects’ political desires are not so easily assigned. As a canonical text of racial-political protest, Bone unsettles the orthodoxies of the relationship between racialization and politics, compelling a recalibration of that canon’s assumptions and parameters.

The vagaries of political desire in Bone’s Chinatown map the insufficiency of race as a political category. The novel’s faltering narrative does not unequivocally express a racial group’s political critique, but reflects the failure of its full articulation. This failure is mapped through Ona’s suicide, which remains unresolved throughout the text. Narrativizing the inability to ascertain, that is, to create a narrative about, why Ona killed herself, the novel is a narrativization of narrative failure. This narrative failure tropes and enacts the failure of constructing a unified articulation of racial-political protest, the failure to find a solidarity of Chinatown workers and residents’ political desires. I frame the forestalling of racial-political critique through the intersection of the two essentialisms described above. Bone stages an attempt to articulate racial-political critique by contesting Chinatown’s racial-cultural essentializations. These racial-cultural essentializations rely on a culturalizing logic that naturalizes racialized class inequities as voluntary expressions of Chinese culture. Bone voices its racial-political critique by critiquing the ethnographic imperative, a culturalizing pressure that the narrator explicitly rejects
as she tells her story about Chinatown and Ona’s suicide. However, the novel shows how the articulation of racial-political critique, which is meant to empower the Chinatown community, is impeded by Chinatown residents and workers themselves. They reproduce the obfuscating culturalizations of their life and labor, showing that racialization is not a reliable, or inherent, index of political oppositionality. Bone stages a contest of contestation, how the attempt to critique one insufficient racial epistemology (racial-cultural) is confronted with the limits of another racial epistemology, the racial-political essentialisms that we use to speak differently.

That class-effacing culturalizations are perpetuated by Chinatown residents and workers is not a matter of false consciousness or ideological determinism. Bone’s Chinatown underclass wields culture purposefully, as a means of self-subjectification and agency, just not always toward the goal of racial-political protest. The heterogeneity, or absence, of racial-political desire does not evacuate the possibility of a political future for racialized subjects. But it does impel an examination of how failure, of race-based politics and narrative, can generate alternative, though provisional and imperfect, politicized epistemologies and practices. The first half of this chapter shows the need for racial-political desire, sketching how systems of class inequity structure the family life of the Leongs in Bone’s Chinatown, but are privatized under culturalizations. This makes the need for racial-political protest all the more acute, but Bone depicts the absence of a uniform racial-political desire. The second part of the chapter turns toward the queer for an alternative to race-based politics. The queer is not a cure-all, but it is an effective way of reimagining Asian American politics, as well as a necessary one. It is necessary not just generally, because race is encoded with sexuality and sexuality with race, but also because the queer is constitutive of Asian American sociality. In turn, Asian American race and class formations are necessary in the imagination of the queer. From these cross-hatchings, the queer emerges as a productive channel through which to envision Asian American political practice and imagination.

Chinatown Stories: “Spidery Writing” and the Ethnographic Imperative

The Leongs are a broken family. Their heartache stems from an entanglement of emotional and economic privation: the drudgery of Mah’s life as a sweatshop seamstress; the racial discriminations that preclude Leon from being a steady breadwinner, husband, and father; and the reluctant fealty of the three daughters, Leila, Ona, and Nina, to their parents and the burdens of Chinatown life. The family’s distress is brought to an unmanageable crisis when Ona kills herself. The
novel's loosely backward, antichronological temporality shrouds Ona's suicide in an uncertainty of time and reason, offering scant resolution of narrative or sorrow.

The failure to fathom and narrate Ona's suicide reflects the failure to create a narrative of race-based political protest against the Leongs' race, class, and gender marginalizations. Three characters figure positions in the process of articulating—and disrupting—race-based politically oppositional discourse. The narrator of the novel and oldest daughter, Leila, figures the voice of Asian American critique and its commitment to race-based political protest. The process of her narration is a trope and an example of constructing race-based political critique. An apparent subject of that critique is Leon, who among other family members suffers dearly under racial discrimination. Though Leon is the apparent beneficiary of race-based political critique, he figures its disruption, committing himself to other desires. To put it another way, in the project of building race-based political critique, Leon is unnarratable. A more profound unnarratability is seen in Ona. Her unfathomable suicide creates an epistemological void that impels a rethinkig of Asian American studies' political models and assumptions. She, like Leon, is a subaltern subject of the national polity, a figure from which and for whom race-based political critique is built. However, she emerges as the subaltern subject of Asian Americans studies too, depriving the field of the tools, and the solace, of tidy race-based political schemes.

Leila's narration tries to critique the racialized class inequities that shape Chinatown life, as well as the representational history that effaces them. Lowe writes that the imperatives of capitalist development turn Chinatown's private spaces into annexes of gendered, racialized labor exploitation. Notably, the Leongs' home space is "legibly imprinted" by Mah's work as a garment factory seamstress who routinely brings work home to make a living wage (168–69). The home becomes a factory outpost where she enlists her daughters' help. In turn, the factory becomes a home where the girls seek their mother in order to carry on everyday family affairs and are again enlisted to increase Mah's production.

The Leongs' family life is also structured by racializing, gendered pressures that contribute to Leon's physical and economic absence as male head-of-household. Racially excluded from the mainstream labor market, he is either out at sea as a temporary shipping laborer or wandering around Chinatown seeking odd jobs. In between, he lives in a male boardinghouse, partly to escape family strife, but also to be available to ship out or take on other casual labor. Leon is a modern-day Chinatown bachelor. The labor nativism and other legal and social discriminations that relegated nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Chinatown men to menial work might have abated, and the antimiscegenation laws and immigration exclusion
of most Chinese women that made these men “bachelors” have been repealed.¹ However, exclusionary practices obtain in Chinatown’s contemporary development as an underground sector of the global economy, a sector that is built upon and sustains a racialized, itinerant, casual labor market.² As Juliana Chang notes, Leon is only a nominal family man, a relationally and economically transient laborer like his bachelor forbears (110–33).

This portrait of the Leongs makes Bone a welcome departure from the Orientalist pabulum that pervades Chinatown’s representational history. It contravenes the culturalizing ethnographic imperative, which obscures and naturalizes Asian American experiences of structural class inequity by caricaturing Asian American life as merely and ahistorically cultural. As discussed in chapter 2, these ethnographic caricatures abstract Chinatown into a synchronic ethnic enclave, a cultural oasis rich with Orientalist exotica, but unmoored from the structural pressures of race and class. In Bone, Leila bristles at such obfuscations: “I looked out at the streets and saw the spidery writing on the store signs, the dressed-up street lamps with their pagoda tops…. So this is what Chinatown looks like from inside those dark Greyhound buses … this is what tourists come to see. I felt a small lightening up inside … our inside story is something entirely different” (144–45).

The “inside story” that Leila prefers registers Chinatown’s history and contemporary development as a racialized ghetto formed by anti-Chinese laws, public policy, social practices, and imperatives of local and global capitalist development. It tells Mah’s story as a sweatshop woman and Leon’s as a bachelor laborer, refusing erasure or naturalization by the “spidery writing” of the Chinatown book and its ethnographic counterparts in history and public policy. By articulating these “inside stories,” Leila articulates politically oppositional critique. Leila’s critique is keyed to Ona’s suicide, which is not definitively caused by her family’s structural ghettoization, but is deeply nested in it so that telling Ona’s story is also a narration of the racialized class inequities of Chinatown life.

This narrative-political project relies on the racial-political concord of its subjects, their willingness to voice the same story as Leila’s, or at least to be obedient subjects of her narration. But those who share the experience of racialized, gendered exploitation impede the telling of her story, evincing a fracturing of narrative and political desire. Specifically, they reproduce the culturalisms that obscure a structural portrait of Chinatown’s racialized class inequities. This reflects a lack of racial-political uniformity that racial-political essentialism takes for granted. The recalcitrant subjects are Leila’s own family members, rendering family a trope for racial-political concord. Family, related by blood and imagination, is the organizing entity through which private issues of racial-cultural fealty figure public issues of
racial-political solidarity.

Chinese Families

Narrating Ona’s suicide entails narrating the racialized, gendered class inequities in which her life was nested. As mentioned, Leila’s attempt to tell this “inside story” is an attempt to construct a racial-political critique, especially against the culturalisms that efferce Chinatown’s material history. Leila is interrupted by culturalisms both within and outside the text. She begins to sketch Chinatown’s racialized class landscape by noting that Ona jumped off the Nam Ping Yuen, a building in a mid-twentieth-century housing project constructed for Chinatown’s working class. Leila explains: “Nam means south and ping yuen—if you want to get into it—is something like ‘peaceful gardens’” (14). Leila’s voice is ironic and bitter, denoting the disjunction between the building’s name and the strained lives, and death, that the housing project indexes. Leila is keenly aware that her listeners will not hear this gap, that her depiction of Chinatown’s socioeconomic landscape can be easily refashioned along the more palatable, readily available semiotics of culturalist exotica (“peaceful gardens”). Interrupting herself with the prickly, metadiegetical “if you want to get into it,” Leila anticipates and defends against readers’ expropriation of her translation as an offering for the tourist’s glossary.

Within the text, Leila’s attempt to contextualize Ona’s suicide is derailed by similar culturalist fantasies. These fantasies are structured around caricatures of Confucianistic family practices, such as the solicitous worship of dead relatives and the exacting discipline of living ones. One of Ona’s white coworkers suggests that suicide was Ona’s only escape from draconian Chinese family discipline, asking Leila. “Are your parents really that strict?” (110). Within her family, Leon attributes the suicide to culturalist family ethics, believing that it is posthumous retribution for his failure to return the bones of the family patriarch, Grandpa Leong, to China. Leon also suggests that the suicide is the forewarned consequence of Ona’s own violation of cultural patriarchy. Leon had demanded that Ona break up with Osvaldo Ong, whose father, Luciano, had swindled Leon in a laundry business. Leon prohibits the relationship because of Luciano’s betrayal, but he draws his authority from culturalized patriarchal ethics. Getting “dangerously old-world about his control over Ona,” that is, claiming his authority as a Chinese father, Leon demands Ona’s obedience if she wants to remain his dutiful Chinese daughter (172).

Ona’s suicide is thus turned into a Chinese suicide. It is taken as a cipher of Chinese family culture and is also culturalized as being caused by it. These culturalizations divert the suicide from its racialized class context and interrupt
Leila's “inside story,” her racial-political critique that seeks to make that context visible. They make Leila defend herself preemptively (“if you want to get into it”) and at other times simply halt her narrative. For instance, Leila is often left speechless vis-à-vis Leon's fierce insistence on his culturalized ethics, and in response to Ona's coworker's preconfirmed inquiry about Chinese family discipline, she retreats into weary silence, tired of correcting stubbornly held culturalizing distortions (149, 111).

That Leon culturalizes Ona's suicide shows that it is not only gawking exoticists, but also Chinatown's own who impede the construction of racial-political critique. Leon is discursively wayward, a figure of unnarratability. This is reflected in his physical waywardness, his constant wandering off on feckless expeditions, which makes him difficult to find, much less narrate. His expeditions include his quest to find Grandpa Leong's bones, now irretrievably lost, having been shuttled around after the gravesite lease expired; and his chasing after Osvaldo to scapegoat him for Ona's death. These spatial wanderings serve his culturalist beliefs. If only he can find Grandpa Leong's bones and return them to China, or if only he can blame Osvaldo for leading his filial daughter astray, his and Ona's cultural violations can be redeemed and his culturalist family ethics restored. Leon's spatial wanderings disrupt Leila's story on the narrative level (she must stop telling her story to find him), as well as on the epistemological level. They enact a culturalist epistemology that obscures a structural portrait of Chinatown's racialized class inequities, disrupting Leila's telling of that story, that is, her construction of racial-political critique.

This is not to villainize Leon or overdetermine his intentionality. He willfully culturalizes Ona's suicide, but is not scheming to disavow or exacerbate his family's poverty and labor exploitation. At times, Leon is strongly politicized. For instance, though he culturalizes Ona's suicide, he also blames it on America's “big promises” and its “breaking of every one”: “America,' he ranted, 'this lie of a country!'” (103). Moreover, his culturalisms are compensatory, trading in racial empowerment for gender privilege, as I detail below. Nonetheless, Leon's reproduction of culturalisms unsettles Leila's attempt to construct a critique of Chinatown's class inequities. Though it is mitigated by his occasional critique of the state and the compensatory character of his desires, his reproduction of culturalisms unsettles the assumptions that racialized subjects uniformly share the desire to articulate political critique.

Culturalisms are more intentionally used to hinder racial-political critique by Luciano Ong, Leon's business partner and, to Leon, an imagined family member. Luciano and Leon set up the Ong & Leong laundry together, but the venture collapses because Luciano cheats Leon. He does so by exploiting the culturalist
family ethics that Leon clings to in his rationalizations of Ona’s suicide. In his relationship with Luciano, Leon relies upon a hierarchical fraternalism, deferring to Luciano as Dai Gor, or “big brother” (165). This is an imagined kinship relationship based on shared race and culture. It presumes the loyalty and goodwill of familial relations that are not based on biologically shared blood, but on the bonds of sharing race and the attendant culture—on co-ethnic bonds. Leon defers to Luciano’s authority and goodwill as a Chinese big brother, in exchange for Luciano’s obligation to take care of Leon’s interests as a co-ethnic underling. The two men enter into business the “old world” way, with no legal paperwork, but just a handshake and Leon’s unconditional racial-cultural faith in his Chinese brother (171). Leila and Mah are wary of this arrangement and rightly so. Leon’s faith in co-ethnic bonds gives Luciano the cover to filch the laundry’s investment money and siphon its revenue.

Leon and Luciano are participating in an imagined kinship network in which cultural ethics structure economic behavior. This economic kinship network is an extension of Leon’s culturalized vision of family through which he filters Ona’s suicide. Leon construes economic behavior as being driven by Chinese culture, more precisely, by the loyalty and goodwill that are presumed to arise from the bonds of shared race and culture. Ironically, then, though Leon’s reproduction of culturalizations vis-à-vis his daughter’s suicide disrupts racial-political essentialism, here he puts forth a racial-economic essentialism. Luciano does not question Leon’s culturalized vision of cultural, ethical, and economic family, but rather exploits it.

The organization and drawbacks of the economic kinship system that structures Leon and Luciano’s partnership echo the premises and problems of the “ethnic enclave economy theory.” As detailed in chapter 2, the theory claims that racialized immigrants, excluded from the mainstream labor market or relegated to its dead-end secondary sector, form an alternative enclave economy comprised of co-ethnic labor and business networks. Spaces like Chinatown become sites of “co-ethnic cooperation,” trust, loyalty, and goodwill between employers and employees animated by bonds of shared race and culture, which jump-starts the upward mobility of bosses and workers alike (Zhou 4-13, 119-51).

The ethnic enclave economy theory adds significant nuance to perceptions of Chinatown. It represents Chinatown as a dynamic, cultural-economic space of ethnic agency, instead of a blighted ghetto where workers have little opportunity or will to self-determination. The theory also recovers Chinatown from the Chicago school model and its privileging of assimilation; Chinatown is not an inferior “species” formation that will (and should) dismantle as immigrants acculturate. The ethnic enclave economy theory also subverts the neoliberal, multiculturist
commodification of ethnicity, by empowering Chinatown’s routinely commodified subjects to self-reify their culture for economic gain. It is a strategic culturalization: culture is literally an economic asset rather than, as in the Chicago school, a class pathology. For someone like Leon, who experiences continual racialized labor exploitation and exclusion, a co-ethnic economic partnership like the Ong & Leong Laundry is a hopeful alternative, a path to upward mobility chartered with a trustworthy Chinese brother.

But in the ethnic enclave economy, co-ethnic cooperation can be a cover for co-ethnic exploitation. Exploitation at the hands of co-ethnics can be refashioned into a temporary unpleasantness that workers can count on to be eventually and benevolently rectified by trustworthy bosses. Co-ethnic cooperation can also be used to neutralize political protest. Peter Kwong notes that cooperation among co-ethnic employers includes the sharing of blacklists of activist workers, who are branded as race-traitors (95). The rhetoric of ethnic loyalty is often folded into a kinship ideology like Leon’s. For instance, during a 1984 restaurant strike in New York’s Chinatown, supporters of the restaurant owner urged: “[T]his situation could be resolved without resorting to American courts. After all, we are all the offspring of our ancient emperor Wang-te.... [I]t is wrong to fight among us brothers” (qtd. in Kwong 139–40).

The intra-ethnic suppression of political protest shows that there is a lack of a uniform racial-political desire within Chinatown. This is partly attributable to an internal class divide, between better-off, profit-motivated business owners and exploited, low-wage workers. But Chinatown class divides do not provide an exclusive or exhaustive map of racial subjects’ political positions. Workers who are exploited under co-ethnic cooperation can be committed to it, in spite of their rational interests, as demonstrated in Bone by Leon’s self-defeating faith in Luciano as Dai Gor. Likewise, not all business owners are economically insidious, nor can the entirety of Chinese American ghettoization be pinned on them. Chinatown small business owners are often only relatively better-off than their workers, as well as ghettoized themselves, in that they turn to Chinatown ventures because of their racial exclusion from the mainstream labor market. Even if their businesses do enable a degree of upward mobility, they tend to have lower median incomes than whites with the same level of skills and education (Zhou 130–39). These various configurations of race, class, and political sensibility show that the fault lines of racial-political desire are not easily drawn. Racial-political essentialism does not hold.

Brotherhood: its bonds and obligations falsely promise and cheat Leon of his cultural-economic dream, but also manifest that race is a political mask. Everyday
social relations tell us that the relationship between race and politics is not unmessy. However, if it is palatable enough to recognize how we live, we have been more stubborn in how we read. Drawing on Anne Cheng’s, David Eng’s and Shinhee Han’s discussions of racial melancholia, Juliana Chang argues that Leon figures the nation’s “melancholic remains,” “illegible and illegitimate remainders of history” that refuse symbolic, affective, and bodily incorporation into the national narrative of modernity. As these dogged leftovers, subjects like Leon enable counternarratives that recognize, for instance, that capitalist modernity hinges upon racialized labor exploitation (113). However, these leftover subjects are also illegible as imperfect vehicles of the counternarratives. They mark the continuing need for counternarratives, but also ask us to consider the impediments to creating them. If Leon represents the stubborn detritus that the nation cannot fully kill off symbolically or materially, subjects like him at times kill themselves, or at least their socioeconomic prospects, with the perpetuation of culturalisms and the attendant self-defeating obstruction of racial-political critique. Ona’s death is thus important not only because its narration is interrupted, but also because it is self-inflicted. Suicide figures the complicity of the Chinatown underclass in hastening its political-economic death.

Endogamy and Death

Withholding the consolation of narrative and the solace of racial-political critique, Bone demonstrates that race is an insufficient category of political protest. What, then, is the shape of the political future, especially when it is contravened by death, the political-economic suicide of racialized subjects who perpetuate the silencing of their exploitation? Bone paradoxically imagines a political future through this racial-political death, and its figuration through Ona’s actual death. The loss of Ona’s body, as well as the narrative body that does not show how to political expectations of race, generate in particular an anti-heterosexist political future. This political future forestalls the reproduction of racial-political essentialisms, as well as literal acts and logics of heterosexual reproduction that underwrite political neutralization. My discussion of the latter does not seek to make racial-political essentialism more whole, but to make visible—and call into question—the relationship among race, heterosexuality, and politics. This is not to bankrupt race as a political framework or to offer airtight alternatives, but to truss some of the buckling points in the relationship between race and politics. Those buckling points are borne upon racialized women’s bodies, namely on their heterosexual, biological, reproductive labor.
Death is generative in *Bone* because the text is deeply suspicious of reproduction. Reproduction causes death. The reproduction of culturalisms cultivates figurative death, a political death, as seen in the debilitation of Leila's efforts to construct racial-political critique. The destruction of racial-political critique begets socioeconomic death; culturalist obfuscations of structural ghettoization perpetuate labor exploitation and class inequity. Culturalisms beget this political-economic death through the sexual discipline of racialized women's bodies. Specifically, heterosexual gender obligations are necessary to create and sustain Leon's culturalist ethics of ethnic-economic family. Leon's economic kinship network is organized around an ethos of endogamy—he demands that economic relations are kept within the racial-cultural Chinese family. This metaphor of endogamy is not just a metaphor. Leon needs the obedience of Chinatown women to racial-biological endogamy to sustain his cultural-economic ethics and culturalized ethics more generally. Leon's ethics of endogamous, economic kinship and its attendant culturalist depoliticizations are prescriptions for heterosexuality.

This mandate for heterosexuality manifests in Leon's prohibition of Ona's relationship with Osvaldo. Leon demands that Ona break up with Osvaldo because Osvaldo's father had swindled Leon in the laundry business ("Crooked father, crooked son" [172]). But he also forbids the relationship because it threatens the purity of his endogamous ethical family. This ethical destabilization is screened through the threat of biological impurity. Osvaldo has non-Chinese lineage (his mother, Rosa, has Peruvian heritage), encoding the threat of miscegenation in his romance with Ona. Leon's hostility toward miscegenation is evident in the vocabulary of racial-biological purity that he uses to prohibit Ona and Osvaldo's relationship: "I forbid you to see that mongrel boy" (169).

This racist animosity marks a radical change of heart. Leon previously embraced Osvaldo, so much so that he called him "son" (169). Yet Leon's *volte-face* bespeaks a consistency, of the intrinsigence of his culturalist faith. Recall Leon's blind trust in Luciano as a co-ethnic brother. This is shibboleth enough to welcome Osvaldo into the fold, despite his not being "purely" Chinese. Implied is that Osvaldo has inherited his father's cultural-ethical Chinese-ness, demonstrated in Leon's interpellation of Osvaldo as his own heir, an appropriate "son" for his cultural-ethical family. But if Osvaldo was Chinese enough through the presumed racial-cultural ethics of his father, Luciano becomes inadequately Chinese through the body of his son. Maligning Osvaldo for his racial impurity is a way to discredit Luciano's cultural-ethical purity. If Osvaldo is a racial mongrel, then perhaps his father is a cultural-ethical mongrel—someone who cheated Leon because his cultural ethics are not fully and adequately Chinese. This supposition denies the possibility
of co-ethnic exploitation. Rather than seeing Luciano as having exploited his co-ethnic trust, as breaking the fiction of cultural-ethical family, Leon holds fast to his culturalisms, attributing Luciano's deception to his implied cultural-ethical tainting. Luciano's previously unseen, un-Chinese ethics are literally embodied in his son's tainted racial body, the manifest, bodily sign of the cultural-ethical impurity that Luciano enacts. Luciano is unscrupulous because he is not ethically Chinese enough, seen in that his son is not ethnically Chinese enough.

Osvaldo's racial-biological body figures violations of cultural-ethical purity, but it is Ona's body that is surveilled to curb them. Leon's command that Ona break up with the "mongrel" expresses his desire for cultural-ethical endogamy through a demand for his daughter's racial-biological endogamy. If bodily, racial impurity is the sign and cause of cultural-ethical deficiency, Ona's relationship with Osvaldo, insofar as it encodes miscegenation, threatens to propagate the biological underpinnings of cultural-ethical impurity. Ona's body must be managed. It is the vessel through which racial-biological purity and the attendant cultural ethics are to be preserved or polluted. Given that culturalisms neutralize political protest, women's bodies are turned against themselves, commanded to beget their own political-economic death.

The instrumentality of racialized women's biological bodies in sustaining depoliticizing culturalisms makes visible that culturalisms are underwritten by an imperative to heterosexuality. It is against this context that Ona's suicide signifies and enacts more than foreclosure, of healing and political critique. Given the cost of perpetuating a certain kind of racial life—the silencing of political critique by the heterosexual production of endogamous ethics and bodies—Bone turns toward the trajectory of death. The relationship among politics, biological reproduction, sexuality, and death is addressed by Lee Edelman, who also sees heterosexual biological reproduction as a means of political silencing. For Edelman, contemporary politics, no matter how apparently progressive, reinstates a conservative, specifically heterosexist, social order. This is because politics is ethically structured and discursively expressed as a "fight for the children": the fantasy of "the Child" is the "perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasomatic beneficiary of every political intervention." Politics is an imperative to heterosexuality, to preserving the value of producing children and of the underwriting heterosexual, social-biological relations. Politics is thereby hamstrung by an ideology of "reproductive futurism," an imagination of the political future as committing and recommitting to ethical and biological relations of heterosexual reproduction (1-3).

The heterosexual imperatives of reproductive futurism take on additional dimensions in the racialized world of the Leongs. Here, the political future is
calibrated by a “racial Child.” The racial Child is the “fantasmatic horizon” of Leon’s endogamy; it is the fantasitical figure of racial, cultural, and ethical purity. As such, it is the producer and product of the racial-sexual discipline imposed on Ona, the sign and material body of the racially pure heterosexual genealogy that is to promise cultural-ethical purity. The racial Child, like Edelman’s abstract Child, reinstatates regressive social orders, in this case, the racial hierarchies and the attendant class stratification naturalized by culturalist ethics. Recall Kwong’s description of how a restaurant strike in New York’s Chinatown was suppressed through the discourse of kinship, through the appeal that employees and bosses are all “offspring of the ancient emperor Wang-te” (139–40). This rhetoric seeks to quiet protest by interpellating workers as Chinese children, more precisely China’s children, who, assembled under a common racial-national biology, are obligated to cultural-ethical solidarity over political protest. An important difference, then, between the racial and abstract Child is that the former does not feign progressive politics but, as the vessel of depoliticizing culturalisms, manifestly undoes them. The racial Child is the abstract Child unmasked. It neutralizes politics without claiming the alibi of doing the opposite.

Death contravenes the fantasy of the racial Child and its depoliticizing, ethical, and biological apparatus of heterosexual reproduction. In the simplest of terms, by killing herself, Ona withdraws from the economy of racial-biological endogamy. This is not necessarily her motivation, but it is an important effect. Ona already threatened to break her family’s lineage through her relationship with Osvaldo, the “mongrel,” but her suicide actualizes the break by destroying the body that is commanded to bear endogamous children and ethics.

But death is no guarantee of withdrawal from a depoliticizing, heterosexual, culturalist economy. Gayatri Spivak’s discussion of another suicide, of Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri, an unmarried, female Indian independence activist, is illustrative here. Bhuvaneswari was assigned to assassinate an enemy, but wanting neither to execute the murder nor disobey her group, killed herself instead. Spivak notes that colonialist scripts would read the suicide in the genre of sati, the self-immolation of widows on their husband’s funeral pyre; the self-inflicted death of any woman without a husband manifests the barbaric routines of Indian cultural patriarchy. Yet ironically, it was Bhuvaneswari’s activist community that rehearsed these scripts, by reading the suicide as a response to unrequited love or spinster melancholy. These narratives, like sati discourse, inscribe the woman’s body in the sexual-semiotic economy of culturalized, heterosexual male possession (307–8).

Spivak’s famous point is that the subaltern cannot speak. The subaltern subject is not inherently or guaranteed to be political, but must be discursively constructed as
such, evident in that they can be denied such a construction. Bhuvaneswari’s body, even in death, is made to bear depoliticizing, culturalist, gendered ethics by being read as the sign of not fulfilling them—the racialized, gendered body can confound rather than enable political speech. This political neutralization is effected by subjects who are assumed to be political, by Bhuvaneswari’s fellow activists whose shared subaltern status does not manifest a uniformity of political desire when gender and sexuality are taken into account. Even in death, depoliticizing culturalisms stubbornly refuse to die.

If the fact of death is not enough to counteract culturalisms, the manner of Ona’s suicide prevents their reproduction. Beyond withdrawing her body from Leon’s endogamous economy, Ona kills herself in a way that precludes the posthumous culturalization of her body. Jumping off the Nam Ping Yuen mangles her body, which then requires cremation, disheartening the mourners who seek something tangible onto which to invest their grief. Cremation also forestalls the post-mortem narrativization of her body, furnishing no body to serve as an artifactual object lesson of the tragic consequence of violating heterosexual culturalist ethics. If the physical condition of death contravenes the racial-sexual management of Ona’s body, the manner of her suicide contravenes her body’s narrative and epistemological management.

Ona is a recalcitrant child who refuses to give biological and epistemological life to depoliticizing culturalisms. Withdrawing bodily and epistemologically from her father’s endogamous economy, she refuses to bear the racial Child and its culturalist political neutralizations. That the terms of racial depoliticization are enfigured in the heterosexual imperative to produce the racial Child makes visible the embeddedness of sexuality and race. Sexuality is at the center of racial problematics, and racial relations can preserve the privilege of heterosexuality. Race, in turn, can map a more particular terrain of sexuality. These intersections can help us imagine interventions into heterosexual, racial-political neutralizations. They do so by suggesting a turn to the relationship between race and the queer. Edelman looks to the queer, as well as to death, to counteract the regressions of politics-as-reproductive-futurism. However, Edelman concludes that the intervention of the queer and death into politics is to render politics effete, to show that there is “No Future,” as pronounced by the title of his study. In contrast, my use of the queer and death seeks to enable a political future. Ona’s death is a queer death that generates, rather than evacuates, political possibilities. This difference stems from the differences in social relations—and social exigencies—that are immanent when the role of race is accounted for in the queer.

The Political Future and Queer Exogamy
In Asian American studies, modest attention has been given to the queer as a mode of politics. David Eng argues that turning to the queer will “engage[], renew[] and render[] efficacious” Asian American politics and Asian Americans as political agents (225). Such renewal is necessary because of at least one stumbling block—the inability to count on race to impel political protest. This is not an essentialization of the queer as political, nor is this to premise the queer exclusively on sexual identity. Rather, Eng posits the queer as a critical methodology that is capable of looking at “multiple axes of difference in highly dynamic ways,” and that is “an organizing topos that affirms rather than effaces a host of alternate differences,” yet enables the organization of new and flexible “coalitional possibilities” (216, 225). Other axes of difference can honor this heterogeneity (though some better than others, as my discussion of the inadequacies of race shows), and the queer can certainly be homogenizing. The point is that the queer is a productive choice of critical lens that has an effective capacity to shore up the sags of race-based politics.

Imagining politics through the queer might be a critical choice, but it is not an arbitrary one. The queer constitutively structures Asian American subjectivity and sociality. Eng and Nayan Shah point out that Asian Americans have entered the U.S. polity and space as queer formations. Of note are the Chinatown “bachelor societies” that were institutionally constructed, but politically oppositional. They subverted social management by modeling antinormative practices of homosociality and homoeroticism (Eng 17–19; Shah 77–97). Mid-twentieth-century liberalizations of immigration and citizenship laws enable Asian American social formations to develop along normative models, but the queer remains a constitutive mode of Asian American political oppositionality. The queer emerges as such in response to the heterosexism and homophobia that underwrite one of the most vocal modes of Asian American oppositional discourse. I am referring back to the Ailieeeeel editors’ political “sensibility,” which Eng and many others point out recuperates racial subjectivity, especially that of emasculated Asian American men, through an aggressively masculinist, homophobic discourse. Inasmuch as Asian Americans seek a capacious terrain of politics, this heterosexism and homophobia must be contested, and is immanently contested through the queer. Inasmuch as the Ailieeeeel editors’ heterosexist and homophobic political model, as roundly criticized as it is, nevertheless underwrites our dominant political rubric—the racial-political essentialisms that I delineated at the outset of this essay—the queer is necessary to craft a more nuanced political practice. The queer is not essentially political, but given the genealogy of Asian American oppositional discourse, it is essential to Asian American politics.
Edelman's critique of "reproductive futurism" does not address race, but its insights enable the imagination of Oña's death as a queer death that has a relationship to politics. But because I seek to account for race, I reach the different conclusion that the queer and death generate rather than destroy politics. For Edelman, the queer embodies death as the act and figure that reject the constitutive heterosexism of politics. Queer sexuality is an act of death in that it entails sex that does not presume or aspire to biological reproduction. The queer is a figuration of death in that it embodies the death drive, the move toward instability and dissolution in the Lacanian realm of ontology and meaning. The queer shatters the fantasy of stability in the Imaginary, the realm of meaning, identity, and social form, which, being engendered by teleologies of production, is subverted by the logics of heterosexuality. As a set of figural relations derived from sexual relations without reproductive aims, the queer is thereby a figuration of nonproductivity that does not wend toward the Imaginary and social form, but destroys it instead. The queer "figures the place of the social order's death drive," embodying and exerting an energy of negativity and dissolution against the heterosexually underwritten instantiation of Imaginary form. This energy is radical and relentless. Not merely an antidote to the heterosexist social order, the queer is the antithesis of social order itself, "the negativity opposed to every form of social viability" (6–8, 9, 3).

Politics, as a channel through which heterosexist form and social order are produced, as evidenced by its production of and constitution by the Child, is the particular heterosexist social form that the queer destroys. Since politics produces social form and is a version of social form, the queer as the negation of social form is inherently antipolitical. The intervention of the queer, for Edelman, is therefore its destruction of politics—not just retrogressive politics, but all politics, insofar as all politics are a version of heterosexually produced social form (therefore all politics are retrogressive). However, Edelman's critics note that the queer need not be opposed to politics in toto because all politics are not inadequate—or unnecessary—in toto. Moreover, Tim Dean points out that linking the queer with the antisocial is not to place queerness outside of the empirical world of the social, but to exploit strategically the elements of homosexuality that trouble the disciplines of the social (826–27). This is particularly important for racialized subjects, like those represented in Bone, because their battle is not to opt out of the social but, as subjects who are persistently stripped of social, political, and economic legibility, to write themselves in (for better or worse and not without revising the social along the way). Factoring race into "reproductive futurism" helps to imagine for racialized subjects a political future, the foreclosures of which are crises, not resolutions.

Bone gestures toward the queer as a mode of political futurity through its
suspicion of not just endogamous reproduction, but of heterosexual reproduction more generally. Ona's suicide repudiates her father's endogamous mandates, but her death also defeats a possibility for exogamous sociality. If endogamy mutates politics, it might follow that exogamy does the opposite, as a reproductive and social act that crosses rather than crystallizes racial-biological and cultural-ethnic boundaries. This is demonstrated by discourses and practices of cross-racial coalition-building, an important and effective strategy in race-based politics. As a way to minimize fractures and hierarchies of class, gender, and sexuality within a racial group, cross-racial coalition-building is a favored mode of political organizing and critical inquiry. This sociopolitical mixing can be metaphorized as a kind of exogamy, the miscegenation of sociopolitical relations to amplify the shared voices of individual racial groups while indexing the continuing centrality of race, for racial groups individually and in their aggregation as a nonwhite collectivity. As with endogamy, exogamy as a trope for sociopolitical relations is rooted in the racial-biological relations from which the trope derives. Cross-racial political alliances are often born out of the intimacy of interracial relationships or through the multiracially identified interests of interracial individuals. The political implications of biological exogamy are intimated in Ona and Osvaldo's romance. Their cross-racial, social-sexual relationship tropes and enacts the sociopolitical crossing of racial boundaries, and their potential reproduction of miscegenated offspring is symbolic of building a cross-racial genealogy.

This potential, however, is short-circuited by Ona's death. Ona's death rejects the discipline of endogamy, but it also cuts off the possibilities of producing an exogamous political future, insofar as the latter requires the reproductive labor of her body. Ona's death derails this exogamous potential because though exogamy might be a more effective race-based political model, it remains linked to the chauvinistic ethics of heterosexuality. If cultural-ethical endogamy demands racialized women's obedience to racial-biological endogamy, exogamy as a trope for sociopolitical mixing can be seen as freeing women to participate in racial-sexual behavior outside the bounds of masculinist racial prescriptions. However, cross-racial political alliances born out of racial-biological exogamy maintain the obligation of women's bodies to heterosexual reproductive demands, even if for politically progressive purposes. A political future imagined through Ona and Osvaldo's miscegenated offspring entails the continued requisition of women's bodies—erecting a political future upon a fantasy of a cross-racial Child. Whether because endogamy is silencing or because exogamy is an imperfect alternative, Bone turns us toward a politics dissociated from the reproductive functions of the heterosexual body.
If the queer is stereotyped as being “sterile, unproductive, antifamily and death-driven” (Dean 827), it would further destroy the already destroyed Leong family. But recovering normative nuclear familiality is not an option either. After all, the ethics of family fuels the Leongs’ grief. Instead, through Ona’s death, the drive toward death and dissolution of the queer productively aggravates the Leongs’ family degeneration. Ona’s death destroys her family by queering it. It repudiates the heterosexual imperatives embedded in endogamous familiality and exogamous alternatives. Ona’s death as a queering death is not merely a theoretical celebration of negativity and destruction. It emotionally and materially helps the Leongs recuperate their ruined lives, specifically by impelling them toward the production of queer family relations. Ona’s death takes us from the queer destruction of family to its queer production.

Generative, queer family relations are most notably found between Rosa (Luciano’s wife and Osvaldo’s mother) and Mah. Unlike the many broken relationships in Bone, theirs is abiding. Spending long hours working together at a sweatshop, the women become “like sisters” (164). The language of sisterhood is important for it invokes and claims a cross-racial political bond. Rosa, we recall, has Peruvian lineage, her adulterated body originating the racial-biological and cultural-ethical contamination mapped onto her husband and son. By considering themselves “like sisters,” Mah and Rosa imagine a kinship network, like Leon does with Luciano, but one with political possibilities. Mah and Rosa create a familiality of gendered cross-racial bonds born out of the conditions of work. Sisterhood as such is a prevalent discourse and mode of political organizing that frames the activism of racialized female laborers. Sisterhood discourse can have the disciplinary effects of the brotherhood that structures Leon and Luciano’s relationship, but the imagined kinship community that Mah and Rosa model is animated to challenge, not compound, racialized, gendered labor exploitation. For instance, in Miriam Louie’s interviews with female laborer-activists, Julia Song of the Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates (KIWA) notes that to build trust with exploited female restaurant workers she claims the role of onni, or protective, older sister figure. She does so not to depoliticize them (or to exploit, as Luciano does as Dai Gor), but to motivate them for political action. Notably, Song is onni not only to Korean workers. Advocacy groups like KIWA initially formed around racial-cultural identity, but have flexibly adapted to organize around shared, cross-racial exploitation within a workplace, for instance, challenging Korean bosses on behalf of Asian and Latino workers (Louie 181, 157). Mah and Rosa’s relationship represents the empirical seed of these sisterhoods. They are cross-racial familialities crafted at work to do political work.

As cross-racial coalitional formations, these sisterhoods might be a form of
heterosexist political exogamy. On the contrary, they contravene the heterosexual requisites of exogamy by being queer sisterhoods. This is intimated in the erotic charge of Mah and Rosa’s relationship: “They joked that they sewed more than they slept, and sewing side by side, they were more intimate with each other than with their husbands” (164). Mah and Rosa’s erotic intimacy is an erotic domestic relation. As mentioned, for Mah the home becomes a factory and the factory becomes a home, turning the workplace into a domestic space that, as we see, is overlaid with a same-sex erotic charge. Mah and Rosa’s relationship thereby models a form of “queer domesticity,” to use Nayan Shah’s phrase. Shah uses this term to describe domestic arrangements in San Francisco’s early twentieth-century Chinatown. Because of immigration and citizenship laws, these arrangements were characterized by densely inhabited household units of unrelated, unmarried Chinese men (the homosocial and homoerotic “bachelor society”), with the few women identifiable as wives and mothers, though more identifiable as prostitutes. These arrangements transgressed heterosexual nuclear family norms. Chinatown residents were thereby pathologized as “sexually maladjusted” and “delinquent and deficient of normative aspirations” to monogamous, heterosexual marriage. “Queer domesticity” thus describes homosociality and homoeroticism as well as delinquent heterosexuality. Queer domesticity as such is generative, Shah argues. Specifically, it enables the cultivation of networks of domestic care and intimacy outside the bounds of conjugal heterosexual reproduction. It enables the cultivation of queer familialities (82–85, 78).

As a cross-racial political familiality crafted outside the political-sexual economy of racial-cultural heterosexuality, Mah and Rosa’s relationship models what I call “queer exogamy.” The women form a queer sisterhood that does political work. Queer exogamy diverges from Edelman’s trajectory of the queer as politically effete. Rather, because these relations are queer they do political work, given the depoliticizations of heterosexual familiality. Louie’s laborer-activist interviewees articulate the connections between politics and queer familiality. For instance, Maria Antonia Flores turns away from heterosexual domesticity by turning to the sisterhood of La Mujer Obrera. Heterosexual domesticity teaches her to be a self-sacrificing Mexican wife, a role that naturalizes her exploitation in her factory job (“When you are just sitting there listening to your husband, you think it’s perfectly natural that you have no rights as a woman, as a person”) (qtd. in Louie 91). Flores rejects heterosexual domesticity because it is depoliticizing (“just sitting there listening”), and turns to a familiality that is queer in that it is homosocial and politicized. Queer sisterhoods emerge as the dialectical result of a contradiction of masculinist, culturalist family ideology that perpetuates racialized, gendered exploitation. These women remain committed to the ideology of family, but of a
family that is more capacious and politically effective than is prescribed by heterosexual normativity.

All the *Bone* women, Mah, Rosa, and Ona, gesture to the cutting off of heterosexual biological production of family (not incidentally, Nina, the middle sister, has had an abortion). But they model the propagation of a rearticulated family organized by politicized queer sisterhoods. Queer sisterhoods enable a mode of production, the production of family and politics that Leila cannot create through the category of race. This is not to idealize queer familiality. Juliana Chang points out that Leon and Luciano’s relationship is figured as a romance and courtship, seen in Leon’s eroticized admiration of Luciano’s body, and his eager, lady-in-waiting type anticipation of their meetings (22–23). Yet in this case, the same-sex eroticism serves Leon’s demand for biological and ethical endogamy, amplifying the depoliticizing norms of heterosexist family. Mah herself is not an airtight figure of queer exogamy. She ultimately leaves her job at the sweatshop to run a children’s clothing shop (the “Baby Store”), suggesting an endorsement of heterosexist reproduction. However, Mah keeps the shop in less than perfect repair, even foregoing to change the old storefront sign, which still reads “Herb Shop” (20). Leila puzzles over this ineffective business strategy, and her boyfriend concludes that Mah “wants to hide” (20). The Baby Store is Mah’s cover. It provides her the cover of participating in the logics of heterosexual normativity but, insofar as her behavior is economically irrational (not properly advertising her heterosexist wares), she resists being fully pulled into reproducing the depoliticizing norms of heterosexual family.

The queer sisterhoods described above refract racial as well as sexual norms. Their erotics extend through the terrain of race to engender cross-racial familialities, which draw from the queer to provide alternatives to the depoliticizations of racialized heterosexuality. They are queer exogamies.

**Destroyed Narratives**

Ona’s suicide impels a queer, exogamous mode of imagining and living race, politics, and family. It traumatically destroys a normative nuclear, particularly culturalist, model of Chinatown family, which is nonetheless destroying itself via the self-neutralization of politics. “Chinatown” emerges as metalepsis, the signifier of an idea and a place that is only fictively Chinese insofar as it disappoints racial-cultural fantasies as well as racial-political ones. But Chinatown also enables the imagination of queer exogamous familiality, which is not a fail-safe mode of politicization, but one way that racialized, gendered subjects can make themselves
legible, particularly when they are invested in erasing each other. Queer politics offers an alternate mode of narrative, of enabling racialized subjects to write themselves into the social. The queer enables a generative destruction, the production of alternatives to race-based political critique through the destruction of the heterosexist culturalisms that immanently destabilize that critique. This drive toward legibility is paradoxically enabled by the textual and physical unavailability of Ona’s body. The absence of her physical body confounds the construction of textual bodies, either as culturalist scripts that perpetuate racialized, gendered exploitation and the propagation of biological bodies that feed these scripts, or as the race-based political critique that seeks to voice oppositionality, but cannot fully do so.

That Ona’s death thus turns us away from heterosexist culturalist Chinese family and its attendant depoliticizations is indexed by Bone’s backward, halting chronology. This reversal of narrative temporality is accompanied by a generational reversal—instead of families and futures generated through Ona, as a representative of the second generation, the generation of hope and progress in immigrant narratology, Bone turns us back to Mah and Rosa, to the first immigrant generation, whose values and bearings are typically coded as outmoded, dying, and defunct. However, it is through acts and hermeneutics of death and degeneration that Bone imagines a political future. This enables the generation of a productive formation out of the traumatic damage of Ona’s suicide, a suicide that is Chinese insofar as it is taken as a code for culturalist visions of Chinese family, but that is ultimately not Chinese enough, in that it cannot be narrated through the racial-political essentialisms we assume to gainsay these culturalisms. Ona’s death impels another kind of Chinese suicide, the turning away from the racial-political essentialisms that we have relied on, to good end, but that have limited efficacy in imagining a political future. We learn this through Bone, a novel about failure, not of Ona or of the possibility of healing for her family, but of the narratives we have relied upon to tell our stories.

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4 / Chinese Suicide: Political Desire and Queer Exogamy

1. Nineteenth and early twentieth-century Chinatown in San Francisco was a “bachelor society” because immigration laws favored the entry of male laborers (until the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882), most Chinese women were prohibited entry under the 1857 Page Law, and antimiscegenation laws prohibited Chinese men from forming new families. See Hing for laws affecting pre-1965 Chinese immigration to the United States (19–27).

2. Saskia Sassen writes that the domination of normative channels of goods, labor, and information by behemoth transnational corporations pushes smaller producers into unregulated, underground economic activity, creating a market for asd of itinerant, casual labor that is concentrated in densely racialized spaces like Chinatown (289–305).