

A Form of Work We'd Rather Not Do Alone: Chen Chen, Poetics of Relationality,
and the Intersubjective Lyric I

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English

Over the past several decades, both poets and poetry scholars have contested both the political efficacy and the underwriting assumptions of the confessional lyric subject. Replete with humor, tenderness, pain, and autobiography, contemporary Chinese-American poet Chen Chen's debut collection *When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities* offers at least one potential elsewhere beyond the universalizing white lyric subject. Chen's poetry, which explores topics from queerness to immigrant status to relationality to Asian-American identity and more, creates spaces of textual intimacy, both within the poetic lyric subject and with the others it comes in contact with, including the reader. By viewing Chen's work through the lens of Kandice Chuh's illiberal humanities, Brian Glavey's scholarship on poetic relatability, relationality, and intersubjectivity, and Claudia Rankine's discussions of the political dimensions of the lyric I, the further possibilities for the lyric subject that Chen makes space for come clearly into view. Through its reformulation of lyric subjecthood around alternative identities, queer, relational intersubjectivity, and deployment of lyric address, Chen's *When I Grow Up* creates a limited yet intersubjective lyric I, moving beyond a universalizing white lyric subject who is "overheard" toward a specific, autobiographical, marginalized lyric subject that expands the poetic space into one that is conversational and collective.

While the lyric subject, at least in the conventional, John Stuart Millian sense of an overheard subject, expressing "feeling confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude" (Mill, "Thoughts"), has operated with an assumed universality often based in whiteness, power, and

privilege, Chen's poetry offers an alternative understanding of what the lyric subject can be. Although some poets have contested the lyric I due to its apparent political bankruptcy, such as the Language School and Bruce Andrews, who suggest that "poetry must explode the lyric "I" in order to recover its political force" (Lease 391), other poets, such as contemporary author Claudia Rankine, author of *Citizen* and *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, have explored what it might mean to "rescue the first person" (Rankine). Rankine, in a 2006 conversation with fellow poet Major Jackson, suggested that if "the I could open out...and still position itself in a place that was personal, that saw its own limitations...then perhaps the I would open out into a we, into a connected sense of inadequacy" (Rankine), allowing for a politically engaged, socially aware poetics that does not require abandoning the lyric tradition or the lyric subject. Rankine and other contemporary poets refuse to cede the ground and affordances of the lyric subject, instead reimagining it and reformulating it around alternative identities and assumptions. Similarly, in her 2019 book *The Difference Aesthetics Makes: On the Humanities "After Man,"* Kandice Chuh refuses to cede the ground of the humanities, instead claiming the construct, "tak[ing] as axiomatic the humanity and humanism of precisely those people sacrificed to the liberal ideal" (Chuh 4). Chuh elaborates on what she terms the illiberal humanities, which "are directed toward the protection and flourishing of people and of ways of being and knowing and of inhabiting the planet that liberal humanism, wrought through the defining structures of modernity, tries so hard to extinguish" (Chuh 2). *When I Grow Up's* approach to the confessional lyric subject seems analogous to Chuh's approach to the construct of the humanities, and seems to serve as at least one potential answer to Rankine's question of whether/how to reclaim the first person in poetry. Chuh's illiberal humanities work toward "the twofold project of critiquing normativities and the violence of the status quo, and working toward and for alternatives" (Chuh 4), a simultaneously

diagnostic and imaginative vision of the humanities. If applied to Chen's deployment of the lyric subject, illiberal humanities (or perhaps illiberal poetics) might be understood as taking as axiomatic identities and humanisms other than the universalizing and "overheard voice of the "strong, singular, unmediated self"" (Alvergue 227), a self often aligned with both whiteness's limited and exclusive construction of personhood and the overlapping construction of the post-Enlightenment liberal subject. An illiberal poetics, as manifested in Chen's poetry, might seek to both reveal the horrors of the now while also creating sites of intimacy and relationality that do not elide, erase, or assimilate difference or make claims to universality. Just as Chuh does not abandon the construction of the humanities, instead reclaiming it as a site of/for alternative humanities and humanisms, Chen does not abandon the lyric subject, instead reformulating it around a narrow I that both positions itself as personal and specific, acknowledging limitations while simultaneously inviting conversational relationality without assimilating itself. If Chuh presents "humanities after Man" (Chuh 25), Chen's simultaneously porous/interrelational and specific/intimate/autobiographical lyric I presents a lyric subjecthood after the white, universalizing lyric subject.

In contrast to the white, post-Enlightenment, liberal lyric subject, the illiberal poetics of the lyric I in *When I Grow Up* are explicitly Asian American, explicitly queer, explicitly immigrant, without being reducible to or separable from any of those identities. Chen's poetry arises out of ways of being in the world that liberal humanism has violently sought to erase or destroy, and often documents the experiences of surviving such attempts at destruction, as shown in "Self-Portrait With & Without." "Self-Portrait," the second of two self-portrait poems in the collection, explicitly engages not only with Asian American-ness, queerness, and immigrant-ness, but also with gun violence, 9/11, poetic tradition, and family, constructing a specific,

limited personal and autobiographical subjectivity. By listing various events, people, and objects that the poem's speaker is either with or without, Chen constructs a depiction of self-identity that, rather than being consistent and unmediated, is instead both mediated by and dependent on the human and nonhuman others in its environment. The variety of items listed causes the I to emerge as kaleidoscopic and complex, not reducible to racial or sexual identity, familial positionality, or temporal or geographical location. Furthermore, the with-and-without formulation allows the poem's I to be defined not only by what is present (such as "a tutor in Mandarin," "William Carlos Williams," "the white boy / I liked" (Chen, "Self-Portrait" 6, 19, 24-25)), but also by what is absent ("a dog or a cat," "citizenship," "my father, for a year" (4, 16, 17)). The fact that the objects, relationships, and events in "Self-Portrait" don't merely exist alongside the speaker, but figure within his understanding of himself, as indicated by the title, allows for a mediated self-definition, breaking down the barriers of what constitutes self and other. In its fluctuating sense of self, depicting it as "a linguistically—and therefore, in Rankine's view, socially and politically—contingent and shifting site" (Javadizadeh 476) similar to the Language poets, "Self-Portrait With & Without" moves away from the traditional singular lyric subject and toward a much more porous and dependent I.

However, despite defining the lyric subject as permeable, contingent, and relational, Chen does not sacrifice the intimate, autobiographical possibilities that the lyric tradition affords. While the list form of "Self-Portrait" allows for the disruption of an "ontologically prior, stable, and self-sufficient subject" (Dowling 57), the content of the poem allows for a degree of emotive and specific intimacy in keeping with the lyric tradition. In particular, the I in "Self-Portrait" explicitly deviates from the assumed whiteness of the traditional lyric subject, discussing "my mother saying, *You have to be three times better / than the white kids, at everything,*" "my other

country,” and “my hands / begging for straighter teeth, lighter skin, blue eyes, green eyes / any eyes brighter, / other than mine” (Chen, “Self-Portrait” 3-4, 21, 26-27). By explicitly defining the speaker’s racial and sexual identities within the self-portrait, the I emerges as “a disruptive voice that is capable of *voicing* “without claiming some reified notion of the universal”” (Alvergue 225), expressing experiences without assuming their universality, while allowing for their reliability. Similar to Iyko Day’s analysis of the work of contemporary Asian Canadian poet Fred Wah in her article “Intervening Innocence: Race, ‘Resistance,’ and the Asian North American Avant-Garde,” Chen’s poetry “does not escape ideology but rather repositions itself against the system that seeks to suture its subjects into a multiculturally homogenous and celebratory national universal” (Day 50), instead charting the traumatic affects and effects of such systems. The final lines of “Self-Portrait” depict a younger version of the speaker, kneeling and praying to become white, to have “lighter skin” (Chen, “Self-Portrait” 26), to achieve assimilation. As, in part, a particular account of a particular violence experienced by people of color within a racist system that demands the assimilation of its subjects and the erasure and elision of difference, “Self-Portrait” claims the poetic space as a space in which to explore, diagnose, and critique the personal affective experiences engendered by the realities of quotidian racial violence that constitute the status quo. However, the poem is not defined by this experience of racialized violence; it also details the speaker’s experiences of his “mother’s multiplying worries. With my brothers, / my brothers” and his “aunt’s calls from China, when the towers fell” (Chen, “Self-Portrait” 14-15, 22), and of being “with dried cranberries. Without a driver’s license. With my mother’s / mother’s worry. Without, till recently, my father’s glasses” (1-2). By discussing connections to pets, grades, siblings, and poets alongside the effects of sexualized racial violence, “Self-Portrait” creates a personal, specific, narrow lyric I that, resists the “binarized

activity of locating either the resistance of “bad subjects” or the accommodation of “model minority” subjects” (Day 35), instead “refusing to submit to the multicultural gaze—refusing to be commodified as an ethnic object of knowledge” (Day 50).

Beyond refusing to submit to the multicultural gaze, “Self-Portrait” also resists the “singular, linear unfolding” (Rifkin 39) of Western post-Enlightenment homogenous empty time, instead creating a heterogenous temporal alinearity constructed from “multifaceted and shifting sets of relationships” (Rifkin 2). The I of the poem moves from being “in ninth grade” (Chen, “Self-Portrait” 16) to being “grown up now” (9), from his mother’s direct words indicated in italics (3-4) to his “mother’s long-distance calls” (21). By oscillating between various (and often blurry) moments of time, “Self-Portrait” troubles temporal linearity in favor of a heterogenous, associative temporal logic, and therefore also troubles the sense of a coherent lyric subject moving linearly through time. Instead, Chen’s porous lyric I experiences both his adult self watching “the children, spared or missed by the child with a gun, / go[ing] back to school” (10-11) on the news alongside his own childhood self, “with a fish I talked to before bed, telling him my ideas for new kinds / of candy” (5-6) and getting “an A in English, / a C in chemistry” (2-3). Rather than operating as flashbacks or flashforwards, past and present mix alongside each other within “Self-Portrait,” bumping up against each other. Through this temporal alinearity and heterogeneity, Chen reveals his lyric subject’s self-definition as porous not only to objects, events, and relationships, but also at any/all times to past, present, and future, which in turn also become porous to each other. Through its relational, mediated self-definition, specific and intimate positionality, and disruption of homogenous linear time, “Self-Portrait” demonstrates an illiberal poetics that names the violences of the status quo without being reducible to them while simultaneously opening out the lyric I and maintaining its specific sociopolitical location.

While Chen's work often explicitly names his various sociopolitical identities as a queer, Asian American immigrant poet, his poetry also queers and recalibrates those categories, inviting the same kind of queer, relational, relatable intersubjectivity that Brian Glavey, in his recent essay "Having a Coke With You Is Even More Fun than Ideology Critique," argues that Frank O'Hara invites.¹ Part of Chen's illiberal poetics is his upending of what is traditionally considered valuable in immigrant narratives under a white gaze, carving space for humor, happiness, and hope alongside experiences of pain or tension or struggle. In fact, Chen has stated that "the act of making a poem seems inherently hopeful to me: that there are things worth giving this much attention to, that I want you to give as much attention as I have, then more" (Chen, "Poet"), suggesting that Chen writes in the direction of hope, calling his own and the reader's attentions to certain things that seem worth giving attention to, even as Chen queers what might be considered worthy of attention. Just as O'Hara's poetics' "rejection of totalizing conceptions like the beautiful or the sublime in favor of campy flirtation revis[e] heteronormative assumptions about what is and is not valuable" (Glavey 1005), Chen's poetics reject totalizing conceptions of what constitutes immigrant-ness, Asian American-ness, or queerness in favor of a more complex, contradictory, and intersubjective "scene of my selves" (O'Hara, qtd. in Glavey 1005). By shifting the metric on what is valuable/valid, Chen's lyric I participates in both O'Hara's project of queering of hierarchies and in Chuh's project of an "illiberal humanist pedagogy, wherein mastery is displaced by the prompt to collective thought, and subjects (critics) and objects (texts) are understood in their mutuality" or what Glavey might call their intersubjectivity or relationality, and those objects often deviate from the beautiful, the sublime, or the expected. Chen's poems are populated with "jelly beans" (Chen, "Poplar" 7) and "extra butter microwave popcorn" (Chen, "Poem" 1), with fart jokes and "reading Harry Potter" (Chen,

“I’m Not a Religious” 6), even as they are also populated with reckonings with a friend’s “radical queer critique of homonormativity, of monogamy, / domesticity, front lawn glory” (Chen, “Poem” 20-21). In an interview with *Brooklyn Poets*, Chen said “I’m thinking about all the strange ways in which poems happen, how distractions and detours and pizza deliveries are necessary” (Chen, “Poet”), indicating the space Chen makes for the unexpected, the quotidian, and the fun in his work. Within Chen’s poetics, subjects and objects, whether those objects are Transformers or citizenship, are understood in mutuality and relationality in a way that upends traditional value hierarchies, establishing “fun as an aesthetic criterion” (Glavey 1005) just as Glavey argues O’Hara’s famous Coke poem does. In *When I Grow Up*, a poem that is about sorrow is just as much about Transformers, as in “Sorrow Song with Optimus Prime,” and a poem about envy and death may include lines like “My envy desires Olympic gymnast / Dannel Levya’s abs” (Chen, “Ode” 13-14). Chen’s poetry’s resistance to the separation of the serious and the fun, the intellectual and the ordinary, the painful and the joyous, allows for readers to take multiple stances before the poems’ specific scenes and details. Glavey’s argument that O’Hara’s poetry shows how “the aesthetics of a particular image do not foreclose the stances we might adopt before it, and acknowledging the seriousness of a work of art does not prevent us from having fun with it” (Glavey 1005) tracks on to many of Chen’s poems, and particularly illuminates the simultaneous seriousness and fun operating in the penultimate poem in *When I Grow Up*: “Poem in Noisy Mouthfuls.”

Like some of O’Hara’s work, “Poem in Noisy Mouthfuls” engages in “mixing chatty observations about culture high and low with gossip about one’s friends, documenting the minutiae of one’s day-to-day life, and joyously dissolving the boundaries between the public and the private” (Glavey 1000); however, despite its colloquial, conversational tone, it also reckons

with racial stereotyping, the monolithizing of immigrant narratives, queer critiques of normativity, and its own status as a poem. “Poem in Noisy Mouthfuls” plays with the fun and humor of “the greasy handfuls, noisy mouthfuls” (Chen, “Poem” 18) of microwave popcorn and the ability to give up on “reading & believing in Ayn Rand” (28) and a “brief phase as a Christian because I liked the cross as an accessory” (29), even as it struggles with the difficulty of giving up on “marriage, house, 1 kid, 2 cats / ...in the name of being a real queer” (24, 25). In the poem, the impossibility of giving up on eating junk food comes to resonate with the impossibility of giving up on the dream of normativity and America. While in Glavey’s reading of O’Hara’s Coke poem “the lover’s extraordinariness transfigures the ordinariness of everyday life” (Glavey 1004), in “Poem in Noisy Mouthfuls” the complexities of intersecting marginalized identities transfigure the everyday object of microwave popcorn. Despite the tonal differences, both poems “invok[e] the transformational power of art to give a new glaze to an ordinary object” (Glavey 1004) in a way that suggests relationality exists not only between the lyric subject and the depicted object within the poem, but also between the poem as an art medium, its author, and the things the poem depicts. In this way, Chen’s poetry, like O’Hara’s, “recalibrates art’s relation to everyday life, suggesting that we might value it in the same way that we value our other attachments, presenting it as a means of relating to the world in complicated and unpredictable ways” (Glavey 1009), opening up space for complicated attachments to queerness and American dreams as well as a “rented movie about an immigrant family / from Lebanon” (Chen, “Poem” 2-3).

The self-referentiality of “Poem in Noisy Mouthfuls” only serves to buttress this reading of Chen’s work; by reckoning within the text with “a writer friend” who tells Chen that “all you write about / is being gay or Chinese” (Chen, “Poem” 8-9), the poem metatextually engages with

the way in which it may be perceived, both by its author and by its readers, opening up levels of relationality beyond just what occurs in the text itself, particularly addressing the assumption that an author of color must play into stereotypes of the “Suffering Minority” (Chen, “I’m Not Here”) in their writing. While “Poem in Noisy Mouthfuls” does explicitly engage with both queerness and immigrant status, it also addresses many other topics, and in the poem’s own words, counters the reductive idea that marginalized peoples only write about their marginalized identities by saying “No, I already write about everything— / & everything is salt, noise, struggle, hair, / carrying, kisses, leaving, myth, popcorn, // mothers, bad habits, questions” (Chen, “Poem” 52-55). “Poem in Noisy Mouthfuls” is a poem about being gay and Chinese-American, but it is also about other complex and complicated relations and attachments. Chen engages directly in the text with the worry that “even when I write with humor, with sarcasm and absurdity, a white reader will only see the Racial Woe” (Chen, “I’m Not Here”), and deliberately offers a rejoinder to oversimplified ways of relating to his work. Just as Chuh’s illiberal humanities seek to dismantle the way “minoritized literary studies...have in the main been framed and studied in terms of authenticity, racism, and resistance rather than literariness” (Chuh 16), Chen’s poetics seek to explore particular marginalized identities beyond racism and what he terms racial woe, making space for multiple intersecting identities, for everyday delights, for unexpected connections. Through queering what is expected or valued in immigrant poetics, by including the silly, the humorous, and the tender alongside the angry and the political, Chen “stakes a poetic claim to the “politics of mere being”” (Lichtenstein). As Jesse Lichtenstein wrote in a 2018 article for *The Atlantic* entitled “How Poetry Came to Matter Again,” Chen’s ““I” that rides the crosswinds of “queer Asian American”...permits itself both to dwell in realms of everyday sadness and to champion the lesser virtues of amusement, curiosity, and delight” (Lichtenstein).

Within “Poem in Noisy Mouthfuls,” Chen both claims his lyric I’s particular narrow identity, and also insists it is more than the way society may perceive those identities. “Poem in Noisy Mouthfuls” demonstrates how a lyric I that knows it is limited can open itself out, how it can, in Rankine’s words, “still position itself in a place that is personal” (Rankine) while also writing about everything, insisting that, as Chen stated in his essay “I’m Not Here to Play Suffering Minority for White Readers,” a “poem starring a napping rhino is an Asian American poem; in fact, despite it not being about how hard it was to immigrate, it is the most Asian American poem I have ever written” (Chen, “I’m Not Here”). Chen’s statement in “I’m Not Here” reflects the inseparability of any given I’s narrowness from the way it perceives the world, while also asserting that such an I’s narrowness does not necessarily define or restrict it in the way that the white gaze would imagine.

Resisting reductive narratives and characterization, Chen’s poetry redirects the text around other ways of relating to the world, where complex relationalities like O’Hara’s “coexistence of futurism and Coca-Cola” (Glavey 1009) can emerge, where the lyric I can be particularly situated and narrow while also deeply intersubjective, relational, and relatable. In contemporary poet Jericho Brown’s reading of Chen’s poem “Nature Poem” in *When I Grow Up*’s foreword, Brown sees the poem as “an astounding meeting of peace with empire, of nature with technology, and of the individual with the perception others have that he couldn’t possibly be an individual” (Brown), meetings that seem aligned with the “coexistence of futurism and Coca-Cola” that Glavey names. The complex relationalities of “Nature Poem,” where a Starbucks becomes both a site of empire and a site of being “mistaken for Cher” (Brown), but also a place to confront the invisibility of Asian American individuals in the contemporary American context, reveal the interrelation of personal experience and political critique within

Chen's work. However, Chen's poetry does not see this intersubjective permeability as only a site of imperial domination, but also as a site of, as the title indicates, alternative futures. The intersubjectivity of the lyric subject in Chen's illiberal poetics allows for imaginative further possibilities, so that an aesthetic encounter does not have to be solely "transitive or intransitive," solely "a relation primarily with otherness or with the self" (Glavey 998). Within Chen's reformulated lyric subject that is simultaneously intimately autobiographical and also permeable, intersubjective, and relational, relations with the self *are* relations with others, just as relations with others are relations with the self. By simultaneously making alterity axiomatic and also constructing a "new lyric 'I' [that] is open-ended, cumulative" (Lichtenstein), Chen's illiberal poetics presents a vision of mutuality, relationality, and collectivity, wherein no subject or object can be conceived as fully separate from the conditions which created it. The cumulative, mediated, contingent I presented in *When I Grow Up* presents another vision of what the lyric first person can be. In Glavey's reading of O'Hara's work, "abstraction produces an orgy of relationality that, in its boundary-defying abandon, disrupts the forms of professionalism and disciplinarity" (Glavey 1005); in Chen's work, the lyric subject itself opens up such transgression of boundaries. Chen's lyric subject maintains its intimacy and confessional, autobiographical tone while also remaining attached to a variety of expected and unexpected other objects and subjects, remaining a lyric subject that affords for both intimacy and interconnectivity, allowing for the personal without sacrificing the political.

In his article "The Atlantic Ocean Breaking on Our Heads: Claudia Rankine, Robert Lowell, and the Whiteness of the Lyric Subject," Kamran Javadizadeh echoes a question around the racial politics of the lyric subject posed by Rankine, asking: "How can a poet retain the intimacy allowed by the lyric tradition without replicating its pernicious political effects? Why

even try?” (Javadizadeh 477). Chen’s lyric poetry and lyric subject offer such opportunities for intimacy and mutual recognition by displacing the assumption that lyric interiority can ever be separate or singular, even if it appears to operate as a single, even autobiographical, poetic voice. While Rankine’s poetry is much more formally experimental than Chen’s, both poets “inhabit a mode of writing that feels intimate (which is to say, born of and habitable by particular experiences of subjectivity) yet also alert to the historical formations that impinge on and undergird such feelings” (Javadizadeh 477). When, in “Poem in Noisy Mouthfuls” Chen discusses the cognitive dissonance between critiquing “these middle-class gays picking out // garden gnomes, ignoring all the anti-racist work of decolonization” (Chen, “Poem” 21-22) and his own desires for marriage and domesticity, he brings the reader into his inner subjectivity in a way that feels intimate, yet also reckons with the intellectual/political preoccupations of queer theory and the history of LGBTQ+ movements. Though their formal conventions differ, Chen and Rankine reorient and reclaim the assumptions undergirding the lyric I in similar ways, both seeking “a shift in awareness of the pronoun’s deployment” (Javadizadeh 481), both poets disrupting the concept of a coherent, singular self in favor of selves that are contingent, relational, and networked. Although Rankine’s work notably differs from Chen’s in its deployment of a flat affect and experimental forms as well as a diffuse and shifting second person lyric subject (particularly in *Citizen*), Chen, like Rankine, implies that the personal and political may not be as binary or separate as they are often assumed to be. While, in Javadizadeh’s reading, Rankine reclaims the lyric subject by “rerouting the Lowellian investment in the singular self...into a sustained and historicizing attention to dispersed and ad hoc networks of kinship” (Javadizadeh 477), Chen reclaims the lyric subject by suggesting that the concept of an unmediated singular self may be merely a fiction. As much as any I may seem self-contained,

for Chen, that I is permeable to familial relations, experiences of racism, the politics of queer theory, favorite foods, great books, particular localities, romantic relationships, and historical events. His work attends to the pluralities constituting any given seemingly singular subject through the simultaneity of its specific, autobiographical, sociopolitical positionality and its intersubjective relationality and mutuality. Like Rankine, Chen is “interested in the intersections between the larger calamities and the personal ones” (Chen, “Poet”), the ways that subjects, objects, and events are interconnected, the ways that no I is an island.

Furthermore, Chen’s use of lyric address reiterates such interconnectedness, constructing the poetic space as one that is heard rather than overheard, and deliberately conversational. Whereas in the classic Millian formulation, poetry is “like the lament of a prisoner in a solitary cell, ourselves listening, unseen, in the next” (Mill, “What”), in Chen’s poetry, rather than overhearing or listening unseen, the reader is invited in. Chen has stated that he writes with readers in mind, that he sees “poems as poems – language-worlds or meaning-bodies that are meant for a reader” (Chen, “Let”). Chen’s view of poems seems to suggest not the independent, separate world of Mill’s solitary cell, but rather worlds of community constructed through language, places where his lyric I can meet others. Although Chen’s poetry may at first appear to fall into the traditional autocommunicative mode “in the pronominal universe of lyric—cases in which lyric speakers appear to be conversing with themselves” (Khitrova 126) even as they may do so via apostrophe, in actuality he seems deeply concerned with making the poetic space one where people can meet, even as they permeate each other. While he creates his mutual, intersubjective I in part through relational self-definition (as in “Self-Portrait”) and complicated attachments (as in “Poem in Noisy Mouthfuls”), Chen also achieves his specific understanding of lyric subjecthood through claiming a singular I while also clearing space for many “yous” and

“wes” to be addressed, without assimilating the I. Chen’s specific subject positioning makes his claim on the specific lyric I particularly powerful; as Iyko Day points out, the “(white) authorial subject position represented by the lyric “I”” is a “normative identity that writers of colour do not have access to, let alone can dispense with” (Day 38) in the way that predominantly white movements such as the Language School have done. By claiming the normative identity that the lyric I has traditionally represented, Chen’s work redeploys the pronoun around “the protection and flourishing” (Chuh 2) of identities that the lyric I has previously predicated its existence on the exclusion of.

However, Chen does not merely claim the lyric I/addresser for queer Asian American communities; beyond formulating such a subject as permeable and intersubjective, he also challenges the assumptions that such an I must be more autocommunicative than communicative, that the “you,” whether human or non-human other, would only exist in lyric as a way for the I to communicate with itself. As such, the specific, particular, autobiographical lyric subject persists in Chen’s lyric I, but it operates with different assumptions. As Angie Sijun Lou writes, “Chen’s loss of self is not delineated by an explicit anti-identity, but instead a subtle reconfiguration of the subjective” (Lou), and as Travis Chi Wing Lau elaborates, “interdependence is at the heart of Chen’s writing” (Lau). Both Lau and Lou, in their reviews of *When I Grow Up*, identify the way that Chen both claims and revises the lyric subject, reforming it around interdependence and intersubjectivity, going beyond the limited, white lyric I into new and further possibilities. Chen’s I is not a “lacuna for me, a reader, to fill; a role to jump into” (Khitrova 129), wherein the reader can become directly identified with the ways that the I experiences being in the world, but it is also not a single subject walled off in its own cell, separate from the reader that overhears it. Rather, it deploys the I pronoun differently, claiming it for Chen’s particular self, but also

positioning that self within internal and external networks of attachment and kinship, and even within networks with the reader.

While J. Mark Smith argues that “no lyric address ever reaches its “you”” (Smith 412) and that it is better to define lyric address as “an attunement rather than a meeting or encounter” (Smith 414), *When I Grow Up* seems to disagree; the final poem of the collection, “Poplar Street,” makes explicit both Chen’s view of poetry as a place where different perspectives and persons can meet, as well as his move toward a larger sense of a collective we. Throughout much of *When I Grow Up*, the “you” that Chen addresses is easy to identify and known, to a degree, by the speaker, whether the you is God, as in “Talking to God about Heaven from the Bed of a Heathen” or a significant other, as in “Irreducible Sociality.” However, in “Poplar Street,” the narrowness of the you in most of the earlier poems of the collection gives way to a conversation with a largely generic and unidentified stranger on a street. The lack of detail about the you allows “Poplar Street” to function as one of the few poems in *When I Grow Up* where the reader can position themselves directly in the poem, becoming the you to Chen’s I, even as the rest of the collection “invites the reader into itself” (@sinethetamag). Through its unanswered questions, ranging from “Are you on your way to work?” (Chen, “Poplar” 1) to “Do I have to / forgive in order to love?” (22-23), “Poplar Street” functions as a conversation, one which jumps from whether “your mother / loves you when you fart” (8-9) to street names to personal experiences of homophobia to larger questions about love and forgiveness. Many of these questions seem in service of discovering whether or not the I and the you of “Poplar Street” “have some things / in common” (6-7). The quest for common ground that drives the various anecdotes and questions of the poem suggests that the I of Chen’s poetry is “trying to get to the we” (Lease 395). The poem’s main move seems to be seeking to find spaces of direct

interrelationality, to construct networks of kinship and mutuality even with those one has just encountered. If the opacity of the you of “Poplar Street” allows the reader to identify with this you, then the poem seems to suggest that Chen seeks to establish such networks of intersubjectivity with the reader, whomever they may be. The poem’s refusal to supply answers to the questions that its speaker asks allows a reader to respond in multiple ways, avoiding assuming that any given reader might have the same response to the questions posed about queerness, love, family, and forgiveness. In this way, the lyric I is not only a singular subject, but also can function as “a mediation between individual and community—an agent of transformation in both self and history” (Lease 396), and for Chen, what motivates this transformation is interdependence, intersubjectivity, and kinship.

By reformulating the lyric subject around an I that is simultaneously particular and permeable, Chen defies the assumed universality and separateness of the traditional lyric subject, and suggests, alongside Chuh, that “relationality...is as much a principle for organizing knowledge production as it is a reference to a condition of being” (Chuh 5). Relationality is the mode of knowing the world and of being in the world that underwrites *When I Grow Up* more generally and “Poplar Street” in particular. Chen directly references this concept in the final stanzas of “Poplar Street,” with his speaker declaring that “I’m trying out this thing where questions about love & forgiveness / are a form of work I’d rather not do alone” (Chen, “Poplar” 26-27). These lines imply both that knowledge about being in the world, as well as being in the world itself, is both work (and by implication, a sustained process rather than a single event) and something to be done in community and kinship. The possibility of the formation of collective knowledge becomes desirable and sought-after, implying that knowledge constructed relationally has more to offer than knowledge constructed alone, lining up with Chuh’s assertion that the

within the illiberal humanities, “mastery is displaced by the prompt to collective thought” (Chuh 5) and Glavey’s argument that “art and poetry are valuable because they create spaces of relationality” (Glavey 1009). The relationality valued by Chen’s illiberal poetics displaces the autocommunicative, overheard lyric subject with an I that actually does address the reader, inviting them into conversation and the coproduction of knowledge and kinship. “Poplar Street” concludes with the invitation to “continue meeting as if we’ve just been given our names” (Chen, “Poplar” 29). Chen’s request to “continue meeting” directly contradicts Smith’s argument that a lyric address cannot be a meeting or an encounter, instead seeing the poetic space as a collective one that may even make an interrelational encounter possible. The use of the word “continue” also suggests that the meeting or encounter will keep going, that “meeting” is not an instance, but a process with duration. Furthermore, the modifier that the I and the you will continue meeting “as if we’ve just been given our names” (29) suggests that the space in which they meet is a beginning, a starting point. If names can symbolize or represent identities, “Poplar Street” suggests that kinship and collective thought can create a place where identities can exist without the presumptions that come along with them, or at least a place where it is “as if” those presumptions are not there. The imagination of a future in which both the I and you have names, but one in which they have just been given, suggests a future where identities are not irrelevant, but also not the sole defining factor in constituting a person. The final line of “Poplar Street” also plays with the sense of a meeting, in which two people give each other their names by way of introduction. However, the introduction of the word “been” into the final line, so that it reads “as if we’ve just been given our names” instead of “as if we’ve just given our names” allows the names to stand for more than an interpersonal introduction, and instead signify a sense of an identity given at birth. The passive voice of “just been given” also suggests the presence of

someone giving the names. If taken literally, one could read these lines as invoking parents and lineage, as well as the beginning of the I and the you's meeting functioning as a sort of birth. Reading further, this final line also seems to suggest the same conception of identity presented in "Self-Portrait With & Without" and "Poem in Noisy Mouthfuls"—that identity or subjecthood is intersubjectively constituted and constructed, and not formed alone.

Through this gesture in the final line of the entire collection, the end of *When I Grow Up* seems to invite an imaginative, potentially utopian future space of collective and mutual being and knowing, following through on the further possibilities indicated by the title. As Lau stated in his review of *When I Grow Up*, Chen's writing investigates what "revising, reinventing, and reimagining the relational modes we currently have" (Lau) might look like, and his vision seems to consistently prioritize the collective, both in the sense of a mediated self constructed through communities and cultures, and in the sense of kinships constructed between selves. As Chen puts it, "every kind of someone needs / someone else to insist with" (Chen, "Nature" 26-27), explicitly stating the significance of interrelationality and communication to the formation of both self and knowledge. Chen himself is deeply invested in lineages and kinships, and calls literary lineage "a pretty queer thing," as it claims "to insist on connections with dead people you've never known, with strangers you might never meet, except on the page" (Chen, "The School"). By identifying literary, "word-based kinship" (Chen, "The School") as a valid modality of community, lineage, and togetherness, Chen suggests that the literary space creates possibilities for identification and family, for meaningful meeting, a suggestion that he follows through on in the direct lyric address of "Poplar Street." In fact, in his statement to *West Branch*, Chen wrote that "Perhaps what I am most drawn to is the act, the creative act, of finding new family" (Chen, "The School"). By positioning the idea of finding new family as a creative act

alongside his discussion of word-based kinship and literary lineage, Chen proposes that writing (or reading) a poem is a way in to finding new family, offering the page as the place of kinship and community, just as the speaker in “Poplar Street” extends the hand of kinship to the you, extending the invitation to continue meeting, to continue being in the world together.

Just as its title implies, *When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities* explores imaginative futures of new family and queered lineages and kinships, ones in which being and knowledge are mutually and intersubjectively defined, wherein address becomes a starting space for kinship and the production of collective thought. Though Chen suggests these further possibilities through more than his redeployment of the lyric I, the first person lyric subject stands as a notable site through which Chen’s poetics alters the traditional assumptions undergirding the lyric. Certainly, Chen’s possibility for the redeployment of the lyric I is not the only way forward, not the only way to, in Rankine’s words, “keep the intimacy of the language that is afforded the first person in the meditative, introspective lyric, and yet make it democratic and aware of its political investments” (Rankine, qtd. in Javadizadeh 477); other contemporary poets, such as Rankine herself, are invested in answering that question and have done so through various and multiple methodologies. However, through its simultaneous particularity, permeability, intersubjectivity, and use of lyric address as a gateway to kinship, Chen’s lyric subject puts forward one way by which poets might shift the ground of the lyric I, finding further possibilities for it. Perhaps, Chen’s poetry implies, if we could imagine ourselves as interrelated, as intersubjective, as interconnected without being universal, as particular, as porous and mutual, perhaps we might be able to imagine elsewhere, to imagine otherwise,ⁱⁱ to make our being in the world a form of work we’d rather not do alone.

ⁱ Chen is often compared to O'Hara and/or referred to as being an "Asian American O'Hara." Chen himself, with humor and atemporality, recently referenced this phenomenon by tweeting "o'hara is the white me" (@chenchenwrites). This paper does not aim to suggest that Chen merely rehearses the trademarks O'Hara's work through an Asian American lens; as analysis into the permeability and particularity of his lyric subject hopefully illustrates, while Chen sometimes can appear stylistically similar to O'Hara, he does not always use the same means and is not always after the same ends.

ⁱⁱ The phrase "imagine otherwise" comes from the title of Kandice Chuh's 2003 book *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique*.

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