



# On “Chen [No Middle Name] Chen”: Identity in Form

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## Chen [No Middle Name] Chen

*poem made entirely from letters in the title*

called Chad      called mini  
called homo      and ma'am  
called no man    called Chinaman  
                 am I a man?

one man called me    Hannah  
then mad      claimed I had  
a Mom 'do      and needed  
                 a hand

call me    mean    call me  
coal    I am    mad  
ammo    I am    alchemical  
          I am

Chen middle name    ocean    middle name  
dahlia    middle name    nomad    eel-dance    loam

Chen Chen  
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*Contemporary Poems on the Politics of Identity*,  
eds. Fox Frazier-Foley & Erin Elizabeth Smith  
(Sundress Publications, 2016)

When I first encountered Chen Chen’s poem “[Chen \[No Middle Name\] Chen](#),” another example of a poet engaged with the anagram as a formal construct (I have considered, in varying degrees of depth, the anagrammatic work of [Unica Zürn](#), [J. D. McClatchy](#), [Harryette Mullen](#), [Terrance Hayes](#), [Randall Mann](#), [Richie Hofmann](#), and [Phillip B. Williams](#) in recent posts), I basically had to *cheer*. Then, caught in the net of his form, I realized that the word “cheer” almost-but-not-quite stuck to the letters of his title’s constraint: C, H, E, E—but no R. So I had to say *amen* instead, since I could spell it while remaining under the poem’s spell: A, M, E, N.

I stand by both my initial reaction (the irreverent, bodily joy of someone witnessing a show or spectacle) and my second reaction (reverence, even awe, before the poem’s scope and effects). There is, indeed, something prayerful (the work of incantation or litany) here in the way the letters of the

title combine and recombine in an exploration and enactment of identity, and there is something of the slapstick or the high-wire act. The poem is clear about its formal conceit, noting its limited palette, “*poem made entirely from letters in the title,*” before it even begins.

I should note that both the irreverence and reverence that adhere to the formal effects of the poem are in stark contrast with the poem’s thematic materials (particularly in the first two stanzas), an exploration of identity that is, for most of the poem, a list of hateful, misguided epithets thrust on the poem’s speaker (which we take to be a version of the poet himself, as per the title).

The title itself is, of course, the author’s name (“Chen Chen”), along with that name’s perceived “lack” spelled out and bracketed (“[No Middle Name]”), as on an official form, perhaps. Already, the title is interrogating cultural constructs and assumptions: what do “we” assume about a name, and why? The poem’s repetitions of the verb “called” and “call,” along with the variation “claimed” at one point in the second stanza, remind us that the poem’s litany of “identifiers” aren’t chosen by the speaker, but forced on him by others, as assumptions, slurs, and slights. Though all of these problematically otherize, there is a spectrum of these unwanted “namings”; some of these (“called homo”; “called Chinaman”) are unequivocally homophobic or racist, others misgender (“called . . . ma’am”; “one man called me Hannah”), others contain rude personal comments on physical appearance and abilities (“called mini”; “claimed I had / a Mom ‘do and needed / a hand.”

In reading the poem, I find myself implicated, questioning my own role in this relentless and problematic construction of identity through applied language. My response to each “calling” calls me out; the litany becomes a litmus test. While I immediately recoil from the obvious slurs, I am less sure of how I am “supposed” to react to moments I find humorous. The phrase “Mom ‘do” makes me laugh because of its colloquialism and context in a poem—but would it make me laugh if the phrase were applied to *me* and *my* appearance in the “real world” outside of the poem? Not likely. “Called Chad” makes me laugh before I even realize I’m laughing, and then I catch myself and dissect why I might find this funny—I already know the “correct” first name is “Chen,” a name of Asian origin, and here it’s immediately replaced with a stereotypically White and American name (the kind of cultural male equivalent of “Becky”) that shares an initial phoneme. What, exactly, am I laughing about here? And what does it say about *my* assumptions?

The final line of the first stanza, “*am* I a man?” speaks to the toll these relentless epithets and assumptions have taken on the poem’s speaker. Here, we have a phrase historically used by anti-slavery abolitionists and again in the Civil Rights Movement, a rhetorical question intended to declare the equality of men of color. Here, however, the italicized “*am*” seems to hint at the speaker’s questioning of his own value—a powerful, affirmative rhetorical question undermined. Or perhaps this historical phrase is being repurposed by the speaker as an interrogation of gender and masculinity as cultural constructs.

The only phrase left unexamined in the first two stanzas is “then mad,” which comes in the second stanza as part of the sentence “one man called me Hannah / then mad claimed . . .” Here, there is a subversion of expectation; shouldn’t the poem’s *speaker* be the angry one? The poem asks us to consider the action that might have occurred alongside the poem’s given speech acts; did Chen defend himself? Correct the “caller”? Insult the insulter? One thinks of white (and/or cis, heterosexual, male, etc.) fragility; did the one doing the “calling,” called out on their racism or homophobia, get defensive, “double down,” and deflect with yet another personal comment?

Keep in mind that the author is enacting *all* of this through *anagrams*, using perceived “limitation” to generate biting and abundant commentary. This paradoxically reinforces both the sense of humor (how did you get *that* from *that*!?) and the sense of pain (if *that* was there all along, does its latent presence lend some inevitability to these epithets?). We know the latter isn’t “true”; these are just letters! But as the author shows us words we didn’t realize were there all along, we start to get the sense of how those calling the names might falsely lead the speaker to see some part of himself in them.

Then, in the third stanza—a turn. The tone shifts. This is also where, on first reading the poem, I realized the poem had, in addition to a marked tonal turn, fourteen lines and lots of internal rhyme. The poem is not only operating in the tradition of the anagram, but in the tradition of the *sonnet* as well. The sonnet has a long history of functioning as an argument with the self, and that mode of self-argument is certainly at play here. Who gets to shape the speaker’s identity? In the third stanza, the answer to this question seems to change. Rather than a third person past tense (“called” or “claimed”), as in the first two stanzas, the poem shifts to the imperative and the first person present tense: “call me mean call me / coal I am mad / ammo I am alchemical / I am.” While this stanza doesn’t provide easy answers about identity, one gets the sense that the speaker is summoning and declaring a kind of power here, speaking both to personal identity and the poem’s materials. The final line crescendos both to “I am” as a declarative answer to the first stanza’s question (“*am* I a man?”) and to a beautiful, lyrical final articulation of selfhood, enjambed into the closing couplet: “I am // Chen middle name ocean middle name / dahlia middle name nomad eel-dance loam.”

“Chen [No Middle Name] Chen” first appeared in *Political Punch: Contemporary Poems on the Politics of Identity*, edited by Fox Frazier-Foley and Erin Elizabeth Smith, published last year by Sundress Publications. This is certainly not the first poem of Chen’s that deftly explores identity and assumptions; his beautiful poem “[Set the Garden on Fire](#),” is one of my favorites, and a poem I return to in the classroom as a model of engagement and celebration-as-resistance / resistance-as-celebration (I often pair it with Lucille Clifton’s “[won’t you celebrate with me](#)”). In an

[interview](#) last year with PBS NewsHour, Chen said:

*I felt like I couldn't be Chinese and American and gay all at the same time. I felt like the world I was in was telling me that these had to be very separate things . . . Poems were a way for those different experiences to come together, for them to be in the same room.*

I'm not sure if Chen has employed anagrams elsewhere (or will), but it is fascinating to me to see this very particular and idiosyncratic formal constraint used seamlessly and powerfully in the service of some of the recurring concerns of Chen's body of work.

(Chen Chen's first full-length collection of poems, [When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities](#), selected by Jericho Brown as winner of the A. Poulin, Jr. Poetry Prize, was just released by BOA Editions.)

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