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Delaney Sheldon April 6, 2021

From Chin to Chee: An Evolution of the Asian American Literary Canon

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An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of
Bachelor of Arts with Honors

Department of English

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Abstract

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This thesis is an examination of Asian American literature from its early inceptions to contemporary, twenty-first century works. I explore the formation of the field through pivotal texts such as *Aiiieeeee!: an Anthology of Asian American Writers* and *The Big Aiiieeeee!,* with a focus on the effect these historical texts have had on the field for posterity. I analyze what elements the original editors and scholars viewed as essential elements for canonical texts and how contemporary scholars have adapted to those expectations. From these expectations, I question what the purpose of the canon is and how these varying purposes integrate issues of representation, genre, and mainstream success. I further examine how the canon itself has evolved to better represent the Asian American community while still maintaining the foundation that was established in the 1970s.

I focus on two contemporary novels: Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere* and Alexander Chee's *Edinburgh.* I explore how these authors and their works represent an evolution of the field, combining the resistance of early Asian Americans with the intersectionality of contemporary Asian Americans. Specifically, I analyze these texts using the dichotomy of real and fake that Frank Chin introduced as a means to judge Asian American authors. I argue that these moral judgements and gatekeeping tactics are symptomatic of white supremacy and that tradition and modernity do not need to be at odds with each other.

Lastly, I explore the future trajectory of the canon and how Asian American authors will continue to evolve their writing. I examine the potential post-racialist critical lens that some scholars have adopted and propose themes that will serve as connections between contemporary

Asian American authors. Specifically, I argue that fire is a major crossover between *Little Fires* and *Edinburgh*, as the authors explore the cathartic and cleansing nature of the element.

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to my adviser, Dr. Catherine Nickerson, for your constant support and guidance. Without you, I never would have discovered *Little Fires Everywhere* or decided on Asian American literature, and now here we are. You have been a wonderful mentor, showing care for both this thesis and me as a person, and I am grateful for your support.

Thank you to Dr. Ellen Gough and Dr. Mandy Suhr-Sytsma for serving on my committee. I appreciate your willingness to support my research and your enthusiasm for this field.

Thank you to my roommates, Alisa Yan and Maedot Admassu, for putting up with my constant conversations about this thesis. I know it has been a long year, so thank you for helping me get to this point. You guys have been amazing friends, peers, and scholars throughout this process.

Thank you to my thesis partner in crime, roommate, and amazing friend, Colleen Carroll. I have loved bouncing off ideas, having late night breakdowns, and discussing amazing literature with you. I am excited to see how far our research has come and proud of us for all our hard work this last year.

Special thank you to my parents who have provided me with endless love and support, both through this process and my entire life. I would not have the confidence or the knowledge to complete this thesis without you, and you are my greatest champions.

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Introduction

Growing up, I thought the term Asian American was an oxymoron. These two words didn't belong next to each other, not when I saw them on a page nor when I said them out loud. They were like puzzle pieces that didn't quite fit or two magnets repelling one another. When I was a child, I remember thinking that I couldn't be American because I was Chinese, believing that the two were mutually exclusive. To me, being American meant being white. This wasn't something that I was told, it was simply an implicit fact. I wasn't Chinese American, I was Chinese. Although I didn't speak the language or know the culture, I was Chinese, and as a child that was enough.

As I grew, this relationship with my Asian American identity completely reversed and more than anything I simply wanted to be seen as American. Living in a predominantly white town as one of two Asian people in my high school, I did not want to stand out. I convinced myself that people could not even tell I was Asian, and that when they saw me, they simply saw any other American teenager. I accepted my Asian identity, but only begrudgingly and because I knew that it wasn't something I could hide. My almond shaped eyes and jet-black hair always gave me away. When I saw the words Asian American it felt like they were exposing me, calling me an imposter in both the Asian and American communities.

My time at Emory is when my relationship with race began to shift in an unexpected way. For the first time I was surrounded by other Asians and Asian Americans, and I was forced to confront the complicated feelings I had with my identity. Being exposed to many different and diverse people made me realize that there is no one right way to be Asian American. Suddenly, these words that had always seemed to repel one another now began to settle and make sense. If I'm honest, sometimes I still struggle with those words when talking about myself. But even in those moments when I struggle, I recognize that I am Asian American, and those are my words. I

am a member of the Asian American community, not as someone on the margins or an imposter, but as someone wholly Chinese and American and whose experiences bring a uniqueness to the community. One of the things that helped me feel secure in my identity was literature.

My understanding of Asian American literature and its history was essentially nonexistent only a year ago. Growing up, I was not exposed to Asian American authors. Both in my high school curriculum, and even the majority of college, Asian American literature was not given specialized time or attention. One distinct memory I have is from my high school AP literature class. The teacher gave us two options for our next novel: William Faulkner's *As I lay Dying* or Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*. Out of 18 people, only I and one other person voted for Tan's work. I remember thinking, *why would anyone choose this long boring book about an old woman dying over this creative story about immigration and love*? This moment was subtle but important in defining my relationship with Asian American literature. It made me believe that my white classmates were not interested in Chinese American stories, and even made me feel slightly self-conscious for wanting to read Tan's work.

After this moment, I sought out Asian American literature on my own, and once I started to read these works, I felt seen and represented in a unique way. Although most authors are not telling my story, there is a sense of understanding and camaraderie I feel while reading that I do not often get from Faulkner, Whitman, or Keats. While I still appreciate and enjoy these authors' works, reading Asian American stories uncovered a whole field of literature that had been hidden and denied from me for so long. While simply reading the literature is meaningful, as an English student, I wanted to go further and truly understand the scholarship and movement behind these texts. After I was formally introduced to the field and its authors, I gained a deeper appreciation for Asian American culture and the beauty of Asian American stories. Thus, my thesis was

created from a desire to take my nascent interest in the field and develop it into a fully formed passion and understanding of this diverse genre.

My goal is to analyze the foundations of Asian American literature alongside contemporary works to better understand the evolution and futurity of the field. Using historical background and the first anthologies allows me to understand how scholars viewed the structure and purpose of the canon. From there, I will move into the contemporary period and analyze how authors have used these original structures while also moving past them. I will be using two novels, *Little Fires Everywhere* by Celeste Ng and *Edinburgh* by Alexander Chee, as my examples of contemporary literature. I feel that these two works offer a modern perspective by focusing on a unique group of Asian American people that can be understood by and related to readers today. I argue that *Little Fires Everywhere* shows the power of addressing universal themes and that Asian American authors should not be defined solely by race. *Edinburgh* exhibits the power of individual narrative and shows how one person or author's identity can provide better representation for many Asian Americans. These novels together showcase the diversity of Asian American narratives and the political power of storytelling.

In this introduction, it is important to address the term that will be used continuously throughout my thesis: Asian American. Asian American is a term that does not have a single definition; however, I will be using this to represent any person living in the United States who identifies as racially Asian. From that understanding, Asian American literature can be understood as written work that is created by or about Asian American people.

I also need to acknowledge the diversity of Asian American people, and that I do not have the ability to speak for an entire population, nor is that my intent. Asian Americans are from many generations, countries, cultures, upbringings, etc., and I do not want to diminish or

reduce Asian Americans to being only one thing. Colorism is an especially prevalent topic in the field of Asian American studies, and while the field has grown and worked on reducing this discrimination, there are still many failings in this regard. Many South and Southeast Asians have faced erasure from the Asian American community, and I do not want to contribute to this erasure. While I have chosen two East Asian authors as the subjects of my thesis,[1] I recognize and respect Asian Americans from all backgrounds. I will be mentioning some South Asian and Pacific Islander authors and their works throughout, but they will not be the case studies I use as my focus. While I will not be explicitly focusing on South Asian or Pacific Islander writers, they are an intrinsic part of the canon of Asian American literature. The struggles that specific ethnicities face are both unique and understood by all, and I hope that my thesis can be related to and appreciated by a broad community of Asian Americans.

My thesis is not going to be a historical timeline nor am I attempting to trace every key event in the history of Asian American literature. The field is too rich and vast for me to cover wholly in this brief number of pages. Instead, I am going to be focusing on two distinct categories: canon and contemporary. The first part of my thesis will be focused on understanding the canon of Asian American literature. I will lay out the development process and highlight scholars who were influential in establishing this field. I will then analyze important questions regarding the canon itself: what are the essential elements, which authors are allowed in, what is the canon's function? These are all important questions that I will be addressing by comparing and contrasting the origins of the field with thoughts from scholars since. What rules were established during the early stages of Asian American literature and how have these rules affected authors for posterity?

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[1] Celeste Ng is Chinese, and Alexander Chee is Korean and Scottish.

I also want to acknowledge that many of my arguments regarding the history of the canon will be using *Aiiieeeee!:An Anthology of Asian-American Writers*, which is regarded as an influential but controversial text.[2] Many people have expressed their criticism and issues with *Aiiieeeee!* and the editors, citing its "overtly masculine tone and underrepresentation of women, its American-born, monolingual perspective" (Fickle). Today, this anthology and its follow up, *The Big Aiiieeeee*, are often recognized as trailblazing but dated texts. They were essential in carving out a space for Asian American writers in the 1970s but do not always reflect the ideas and makeup of Asian American writers today. Therefore, I am going to be using *Aiiieeeee!* as a historical document, analyzing the historical impact it has had on the field of Asian American literature. Moreover, their controversial and divisive opinions are things that I intend to analyze in their own right, examining their relation to contemporary literature and themes.

My argument is that these editors were instrumental in creating the canon and were vocal with their opinions; therefore, these anthologies provide important background for my thesis. Viet Thanh Nguyen highlights the editors' impact on the canon, saying, "The tropes of self-representation, speaking out, breaking silence, and claiming voice inhered in the anthology's framing and would become common, powerful tropes in Asian American literature as a whole. They were also, of course, found in Asian American cultures in general" (290). Not only did *Aiiieeeeee!* help shape future Asian American literature, but it also gave literary representation to real world Asian American culture of the time. I argue that this is what contemporary authors have continued to do, while also being shaped by past literature and canonical structures.

Part two will be focused on contemporary Asian American literature. For this thesis's purposes, I will be using contemporary to mean twenty-first-century literature. The

[2] I will be covering the specific critiques and controversial nature of this anthology further on in my thesis. One interesting descriptor that has been used to capture this controversy is from Tara Fickle, who has described the anthology as the "embarrassing uncle in the room" for Asian American studies (Smith).

contemporary literary period often includes anything post-1945 or after World War II; however, by that definition, the majority of Asian American literature would be included, as it is a fairly young canon. Therefore, I decided to narrow the time frame and choose works that I believe truly reflect today's contemporary issues for Asian Americans. I will be offering case studies of two Asian American novels: Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere* and Chee's *Edinburgh*. These novels, published in 2017 and 2001 respectively, serve as examples of twenty-first-century Asian American literature. Their novels each explore modern issues that Asian Americans are facing: Ng addresses issues of class and interracial adoption, while Chee addresses queerness and sexual trauma.[3]

By analyzing the themes and issues expressed in these novels, we can better understand the issues contemporary Asian Americans are facing. I will then compare and contrast these issues with those expressed in the 1970s to see how the canon has evolved to better represent its audience. I will be analyzing how recent authors have engaged with the arguments expressed in *Aiiieeeee!*, both intentionally and unconsciously. Comparing these two categories may reveal which elements are essential to Asian American literature and which are subject to change. Further questions might ask, how much can Asian American literature deviate from its origins while still maintaining the unique qualities of Asian American literature? Is it better to have soft borders that are more accepting, or hard boundaries that allow authors to know and follow the rules? I will explore the tensions of tradition versus modernity and how *Little Fires* and *Edinburgh* showcase both sides with great success.

[3] I would like to acknowledge the sensitive nature of some topics that I will be addressing in the context of *Edinburgh*. Chee's novel covers issues of pedophilia, self-harm, and suicide, and I will be handling these topics with care.

I hope to use this thesis as an exploration of the canon and its evolution. At its core, I hope that my thesis will serve as a celebration of Asian American literature and a testament to its beauty.

Chapter One: Canon Formation and Function

At first glance, *Little Fire Everywhere* and *Edinburgh* may not read as Asian American novels. This opens a major question: why is that? What characteristics do readers look for in an Asian American novel, and how do Celeste Ng and Alexander Chee deviate from this standard? These questions are some of the greatest challenges to the field of Asian American literature, as contemporary novelists are forced to grapple with canonical expectations set fifty years ago. A scholarly definition of Asian American literature may simply include all works whose authors identify as Asian American. However, I believe there is more nuance to this definition as we consider the field of Asian American literature and the politics of the genre.

Origins

The term "Asian American" was first coined by student activists in 1968, but from there the origins of Asian American literature are less concrete (Nguyen 289). Most scholars agree that one of the first major texts that codified the field is *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers*. Published in 1974, this anthology and its editors helped to establish Asian Americans as legitimate writers in the eyes of the literary world and created the original structure for what eventually became the canon of Asian American literature. *Aiiieeeee!* is often remarked as a pivotal but controversial text, as the editors articulated their opinions on what it means to be an Asian American writer in this canon.

This question of canon and canon formation is pivotal to my thesis; therefore, it is important to establish the definition that I will be working from. The literary canon is understood

to be a group of books or works that are accepted as genuine or important. It can also be defined as the standard or principle by which something is judged or deemed acceptable (Canon Noun- Oxford Advanced American Dictionary). When I speak of the Asian American canon, I am referring to any works that have been recognized or marked as Asian American literature. This can mean inclusion in anthologies, widespread recognition among readers and publishers, or a label adopted by the authors themselves. I am not personally placing judgement on whether any works belong in the canon or are truly "authentic;" rather, I am examining what rules or patterns these works must follow to be placed in the canon. Canon recognition and canonization are often viewed as the benchmarks or goals for writers. Being afforded the label of Asian American literature offers legitimacy and recognition not only in academic settings, but among general readers, giving authors distinction and providing community.

The question may then be: how do we recognize a work as Asian American literature and grant recognition in the field? There is no bookshelf or definitive list that a person can refer to in order to find every work that has been given this label; therefore, I use the term with a more cultural connotation. How has American society defined Asian American literature, and how has this definition been influenced by the beliefs of *Aiiieeeee!*'s editors? Some authors have addressed a negative feeling that "being an Asian American writer means having to write about being an immigrant, a perpetual retelling of ethnic stories of arrival, struggle, adjustment, accommodation, and resistance" (Song 4). While others have argued that "Asian American fiction has become much more than the commercial categories of 'Asian American literature,' 'ethnic American fiction,' and 'immigrant writing'" (Chen 435). How do these seemingly disparate identities co-exist in the field, and how has the historical structure of the canon helped to shape these sentiments? If we use the canon as a standard to judge Asian American literature

and restrict contemporary authors, then I believe it is important to understand where this standard draws its roots. By helping to establish the field and create a structure, I believe these editors have had a great impact on the formation of what we view as the canon of Asian American literature.

When creating an anthology, you are casting judgements and setting boundaries for what you deem worthy to be included. Whether these judgements are implicit or explicit, as they are in the case of *Aiiieeeee!*, they can create a lasting impact on the field the anthology is establishing or maintaining. Specifically, for Asian American literature, Donald Goellnicht describes this impact as the ability ". . . to form, shape, and fashion Asian American identity, or to produce the Asian American subject, not only describing, representing, and reflecting it, but establishing its contours and content, and attempting to police its borders" (254). This was especially prevalent for the editors of *Aiiieeeee!* as theirs was the first Asian American anthology published in a trade edition and not a textbook, giving agency and voice to these authors without having to educate others. The original editors: Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong have often been referred to as "the Four Horsemen of Asian-American literature" (Hsu). They wanted their collection to serve as evidence that Asian American writers "have a lot of elegant, angry, and bitter life to show" and that "we're not new here" (Chin, et al. XXXVI). This assertion that Asian American writers are historical and have value in the literary world helped to establish Asian American literature as a worthy field.

Though they could not have known the lasting impact of their anthology, they most likely knew the cultural stakes of their work. Goellnicht describes the latter half of the twentieth century as a time in which anthologists and publishers were deeply interested ". . . in the formation of racial, ethnic, and cultural identity . . ." (254). With the rise of the Civil Rights

Movement and the introduction of ethnic studies programs in universities, writers of color knew that this was the time to officially establish themselves in the literary world. Therefore, the editors of *Aiiieeeee!* created an anthology that they believed would help to form a collective Asian American identity, both in literature and in America at large.

While the impact of *Aiiieeeee!* is widely accepted in the formation of Asian American literature, the work itself and the assertions made have been criticized. The preface to the First Edition begins with this statement: "Asian Americans are not one people but several -- Chinese American, Japanese Americans, and Filipino Americans" (Chin, et al. XXV-VI). This explicit definition of who Asian Americans are creates hard boundaries that carry over into literary criticism. While they believed they were being inclusive by naming Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos as Asian Americans, they left out other ethnic populations of Asian Americans and their writers. This exclusion is furthered by their penchant to reference only Chinese and Japanese Americans in their introduction, leaving out Filipino Americans and further reducing their definition. Moreover, their continual use of the term "yellows" as a metonymic representation for Asian Americans is certainly divisive and exclusionary of non-East Asian peoples. Through the inclusion of certain authors and ethnicities, the editors articulate what Asian American literature is and what it is not.

Thus, in trying to expand the canon of American literature and establish a place for Asian American writers, they created their own rules and structures that could be seen as equally exclusionary. Goellnicht describes this irony by saying that the editors were ". . . generating their own hegemonic discourse on what it means to be an Asian American subject." He goes on to quote Elaine Kim who states: "According to this definition, there were not many ways to be Asian American. The ideal was male, heterosexual, Chinese or Japanese American, and

English-speaking." (Goellnicht 260). In trying to create an inclusive field, they created narrow definitions for who was accepted. If there were not many acceptable ways to be Asian American, this meant there were not many ways to create Asian American literature.

Later in the preface, they state: "Our anthology is exclusively Asian American. That means Filipino, Chinese, Japanese Americans, American born and raised, who got their China and Japan from the radio, off the silver screen, from television, out of comic books, from the pushers of white American culture " (Chin et al. XXV-VI). This description is the bedrock of their anthology, placing Asian American culture in a distinctly separate category from both Asian culture and white American culture. Chin was especially adamant regarding this distinction and has argued that "Americanized Chinese who've come over in their teens and later to settle here and American born Chinaman [sic] have nothing in common, culturally, intellectually, emotionally" (qtd. in Hsu). They only include authors in their anthology whom they believe embody the definition of Asian American, while also highlighting the authors and works that they intentionally exclude and their reasons for doing so. If anthologies are one of the markers of being recognized as an Asian American writer, then authors who are purposefully excluded are sent a message about their place in the field and canon.

The editors then expand upon these structures and rules in their second anthology, *The Big Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature*, published in 1991. They open their second collection with a strong statement: "We begin another year angry! Another decade, and another Chinese American ventriloquizing the same old white Christian fantasy of little Chinese victims of 'the original sin of being born to a brutish, sadomasochistic culture of cruelty and victimization'" (Chan, et al. xii). They continue to use a bold and militant tone that shows the stakes they see in this anthology and Asian American

literature in general. One notable difference between the anthologies is in the titles. *Aiiieeeee!* is marketed as an "Anthology of Asian American Writers," whereas *The Big Aiiieeeee!* is an "Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature." The second anthology specifically focuses on Chinese and Japanese Americans, with "the jettisoning of Filipino American writing" that was previously included (Goellnicht 267). While the editors only cite Chinese and Japanese Americans in their title, they continue to use the term Asian American throughout the body of the anthology. This reads as a form of erasure, implying that only those two ethnic groups are truly Asian American. This subtle change also shows one example of how Asian American literature and its structure evolved simply between the publication of these anthologies.

Between the introductions of their first and second anthology more Asian American authors also began to be published and gain prominence, such as Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, and David Henry Hwang. However, the editors did not always view this prominence as beneficial to the field or canon, and they took issue with the narratives that these authors created. In their introduction they distinguish between "real" and "fake" Asian American literature. They describe real literature as finding inspiration "from its sources in the Asian fairy tale and the Confucian heroic tradition, to make the work of these Asian American writers understandable in its own terms." While the fake comes "from its sources in Christian dogma and in Western philosophy, history, and literature" (Chan, et al. xv). Frank Chin was especially vocal in his opinions and expanded on this brief definition in his essay, "Come All Ye Asian American Authors of the Real and Fake." This essay is the first work featured in *The Big Aiiieeeee!*, and cites the dangers that Chin sees in fake Asian American literature and its threat to the canon.

Since the anthology's publication, and predominantly in the last few decades, Asian American literature has seen a marked level of success. There is an Asian American Writers' Workshop; authors have won Pulitzer Prizes;[4] their works have been adapted into movies and television shows; and most importantly, they have been published. With this rise of authors and success, we may question how these authors have been affected by the original editors and historians, both positively and negatively.

Intentions and Purpose

Before I discuss the impact of individual works in the canon, it is important to discuss the issue of deciding which literature is given place in the canon. How we determine what belongs in the canon is largely influenced by what we think the purpose of the canon is. Is the canon meant to serve as a collection of only the best Asian American works? Is it meant to represent the most accurate depiction of Asian American people? Or is it meant to serve the Asian American readers, providing them with a list of works that they can relate to and connect with? These are all questions that have been debated among critics, authors, and readers alike, and it is unlikely that a true consensus will ever be reached. However, analyzing the merits of each of these categories can teach us more about how different people read and value Asian American literature.

One form of criteria that could be used to determine the canon is based on public or reader response. How many copies has the work sold? Has it been recognized or praised by the general populace? These questions would be identifying whether the work has gained mainstream success, which some scholars argue is an important marker for the field of Asian American literature.

[4] In 2016, author and scholar Viet Than Nguyen became the first Asian American to join the Pulitzer Prize Board in its 103-year history (Namkung).

One of the novels I have chosen to focus on, *Little Fires Everywhere*, has achieved marked levels of mainstream recognition. Thus, analyzing Ng's novel allows us to question how we can use mainstream recognition to measure the success of the Asian American literary canon. Ng's book is a #1 *New York Times* Bestseller, named Book of the Year by NPR in 2017, and was recently adapted into a limited television series by Hulu (*CELESTE NG*). These achievements have allowed Ng's novel to gain recognition, not only in the literary world, but also in the general public. A Chinese name like Ng's has become a common sight on American bookshelves, indicating a level of success for Asian American authors as a whole. Tina Chen highlights the idea of literature as cultural capital, and that the success of Asian American literature increases the status of the field as a whole. While some take issue with this idea of the canon's value being measured by mainstream praise, Chen argues that Asian American literature was ". . . designed simultaneously to herald and make possible the transmission of political capital, which is ultimately the capital of representation." (425). However, in order to use Asian American literature as political activism or agents of representation, it needs to be read. Therefore, the cultural capital that mainstream success brings allows for authors to then leverage political and representative capital. This is not to say that all Asian American authors strive to gain mainstream recognition or that this should be the goal; however, we should not disregard this recognition as a valuable indicator of the health of the Asian American canon.

On the other hand, some critics believe that mainstream recognition is a sign that the work is merely catering to a white society rather than creating authentic Asian American experiences. In the introduction to *The Big Aiiieeeee!* the editors address their concerns regarding white supremacy in America, seemingly scolding their counterparts who they see as attempting to gain favor among white readers. They remind Asian American authors that "no matter how

white we dress, speak, and behave, we will never be white" (Chan, et al. 2). They specifically target authors who have gained widespread popularity, citing Kingston, Hwang, and Tan as emblems of this "fake" literature. These authors are said to be ". . . the first writers of any race, and certainly the first writers of Asian American ancestry, to so boldly fake the best known works from the most universally known body of Asian American literature and lore in history" (Chan, et al. 3). Chin cites these authors as being complicit in the white supremacist ideal and asserts that their literature is more aligned with stereotypes than with real Asian American literature.

While these critiques are harsh, they come from a place of concern and frustration. Chin laments the fact that "what seems to hold Asian American literature together is the popularity among whites" (Chan, et al. 2). He is frustrated that even though there are many talented Asian American authors, society only recognizes the ones who are popular among white readers. Essentially his concern is that if mainstream success is the marker of a healthy canon, then Asian American literature will always be relying on white people to make that determination. However, Chen offers a different interpretation of mainstream success, saying that perhaps "The institutionalization of Asian American literary studies has triggered the recalibration of the nature of that relationship by instead arguing that commercial success is one result of the diversification of American literature promoted by the rise of multiculturalism" (425). Instead of saying that commercial success is the goal of Asian American literature, she argues that it may be a result. As American literature prioritizes diversity and multiculturalism, Asian American literature will see a due rise in popularity. Her argument cites a healthy canon as the reason for success, giving the credit to the authors rather than the white readers.

While Chin clearly does not believe commercial success is any marker of a work's merit, others have disagreed. Both Hwang and Kingston were honored by the Asian American Writers Workshop with lifetime achievement awards, and both them and Tan have become recurring figures on syllabi across the country ("The Seventeenth Annual Asian American Literary Awards"). Furthermore, the success of individual Asian American authors can also benefit the canon. A 2018 *New York Times* article, "Celeste Ng is More Than a Novelist," highlights the ways in which Ng's commercial triumph has benefited other Asian American authors. She has been known to use her large presence on social media to recognize and highlight other authors.[5] Ng uses her name to uplift other Asian American authors, such as R.O. Kwon, who comments that he has "especially noticed her name on the books of Asian-American women who are coming out with their first books. And that just seems like a very intentionally generous thing that she's doing" (Lamy). This act, which Lamy describes as "strategic benevolence," is Ng's way of using her mainstream popularity to bring recognition to other Asian American authors.

Similarly, Tan credits Kingston for paving the way for Asian American female writers, saying that "She [Kingston] opened a lot of doors for us" (Iwata). Therefore, whether commercial success is an accurate marker for deciding a work's place in the canon, we cannot deny that Ng, Kingston, and Tan's triumphs have benefited Asian American authors and the field as a result. Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* and Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* have been many peoples' introductions to Asian American literature, serving as the only Asian authors on syllabi filled with white authors for many years. Writing in the 70s and 80s when Asian American literature was first beginning to find its voice, Kingston and Tan helped to pave the way for female Asian American authors. I argue that this tangible effect alone gives them the honor of being real authors. In a similar vein, Ng is helping to further develop the field, not only through

[5] Ng has over 172,000 followers on Twitter and over 40,000 followers on Instagram.

her own works, but by uplifting contemporary Asian American authors and helping them to gain their place in the canon.

Related to the idea of mainstream success, we can also look at Asian American authors' presence in popular genres as a deciding factor for the canon. This view of canon determination would question whether the canon is meant to represent a selection of only the "best" or most respected works, or whether all works that are considered Asian American should be allowed in the canon. In her piece, "Popular Genres and New Media," Betsy Huang articulates the struggles and successes of Asian American authors writing in more mainstream forms. In the early stages of the field, not many Asian American authors were writing in these popular genres, such as romance, horror, science fiction, etc. One reason for this was due to the racist themes and undertones that were often present in these narratives. These genres were dominated by white authors, with any depiction of Asian Americans being dictated by this white gaze. Thus, these works were rife with stereotypes and caricatures. In many ways, Asian American and other authors of color did not feel welcome in the genres.

However, Huang expands upon this issue, and argues that the internal struggles among the Asian American community also made authors hesitant to venture into popular genres. She states, "Because Asian American literature's legibility and legitimacy in the U.S. literary and cultural consciousness are hard earned, writing genre fiction, commonly perceived as lowbrow and derivative, would appear misguided or even irresponsible" (143). Asian Americans did not want to be seen as amateur writers; thus, they predominantly worked in the more respectable or erudite genres. This desire to be legitimate is the struggle that the editors articulate in the introduction to *Aiiieeeee!* when they describe Asian Americans as "so long ignored and forcibly excluded from creative participation in American culture" (Chin, et al. XXVI). The field of

Asian American literature was founded on this goal to be taken seriously as authors and included in the esteemed category of American art. Therefore, many Asian American authors felt that they were doing a disservice to the legacy of the field by writing in "lowbrow" genres.

However, these lowbrow genres, often referred to as popular genres, are popular for a reason. Huang specifically looks at three categories of popular genres: chick lit, crime fiction, and science fiction. These genres are not always seen as intellectual or scholarly, and for that reason some might argue for their exclusion from the canon. By excluding certain genres, you are making a statement that there is nothing in those genres worthwhile to the canon. However, Huang illustrates the ways that Asian American authors have used and reclaimed these popular genres in a way that has furthered Asian American literature. Pamela Butler and Jigna Desai, state that ". . . we might ask whether subgenres of chick lit written by and about women of color in the U.S. [. . .] illuminate relations of power in the U.S., or address multiple social and economic formations?" (qtd. in Huang 143-44). These scholars are pointing out that chick lit and other genres like it still provide value to the canon. Stories of romance and domesticity offer insight into gender struggles, class issues, and themes of motherhood, all of which are valuable cultural topics.

Crime fiction is also a genre that has seen a surge of Asian American authors. Historically, Asians have been recurring figures in crime fiction, often representing the unknown or the exotic other. This is due to the white authors that dominated the genre basing their presentations of Asians on stereotypes and setting them up as the inscrutable villain in contrast to the white savior. With a history of being racist, one might think that Asian Americans would want to distance themselves from this genre as much as possible. However, some Asian American authors have decided to reclaim the genre to provide better representation. Research

specialist, Tarik Abdel-Monem, points out that having modern Asian American authors has brought “new perspectives on race, justice, and social inequalities to contemporary crime stories, infusing the crime narrative with critical race, feminist, post-colonial, gay/lesbian, and other perspectives. [. . .] Crime fiction has thus become more and more a platform for social commentary as well as entertainment” (qtd. in Huang 146). By actively partaking in this genre, authors have been able to benefit Asian American representation for those that read crime fiction. They have taken an entertaining genre and leveraged its popularity for political capital.

These examples show the positive impact that popular genres can have for the field. Moreover, authors are not only able to create an impact through their works, but they personally can become impactful. By writing in popular genres, authors are often able to reach a wider and more diverse audience than those who write in purely academic forms. One contemporary example would be Kevin Kwan who has received mainstream recognition as an author while writing in popular genres. Kwan is the author of the romantic comedy *Crazy Rich Asians* trilogy which, for several weeks in 2018, “commanded the top three positions of the *New York Times* bestseller list - an almost unprecedented single-author trifecta” (“Kevin Kwan Books”). In 2018 *Crazy Rich Asians* was adapted into a film which became Hollywood's highest grossing romantic comedy in over a decade. That same year he was also named one of *Time Magazine*’s 100 Most Influential People in the World (“Kevin Kwan Books”). Kwan’s success speaks to the reach that popular genres have and the power of reader response. By writing popular fiction, Asian American authors can form a relationship with a wide audience who may not generally read Asian American literature. Thus, by including these works in the canon you are valuing the reader’s opinion in the determination of which literature has value.

I argue that these popular genres have always had value and add important meaning to the canon, and the reasons for excluding these genres are rooted in sexism and classism. Why is literature that caters to women, such as chick lit, automatically dismissed, and not given the same respectability as genres associated with men? Or why are genres that are not necessarily academically focused given less credence? By excluding these genres, we are tacitly saying that only educated people have the credentials to deem what is worthy to read or canonize. In 2019, Forbes published an article, "7 Publishing Insights Revealed By Last Year's Top 100 Bestselling Books," in which they analyzed the 100 bestselling books of 2018 and studied the trends and data. Their results showed that three of the bestselling genres were crime thrillers, children's books, and cooking (Rowe). None of these genres are considered "highbrow" and yet these are the works that readers are choosing to consume. By writing in these genres and connecting with the readers, I argue that Asian American authors are creating cultural and political capital in a way that is beneficial to the canon and Asian American community.

Power of Representation

This focus on mainstream attention and generic structure puts an emphasis on external factors being used for canon determination. Using these criteria, one might argue that the relationship with the reader and recognition from society is the purpose of the canon. However, another way of determining canon would rely on internal traits or using the content of the work itself. Through this lens, the canon would only include works that provide "real" representation of Asian Americans, or narratives that are deemed "authentic" enough. This criterion better aligns with Chin's ideas of real versus fake literature and allows us to further analyze what the original editors saw as important factors for the canon.

These labels: real, authentic, true, etc. hold political meaning and can be rather divisive. These terms are concerned with the politics of representation among Asian Americans and deciding whether a work is providing an accurate depiction of Asian American people. We should then ask ourselves; how do we determine whether a story is presenting an authentic Asian American experience? Does it need to be true for all Asian Americans, a simple majority, or even just one person? And why is this authenticity and real literature so important for some people when determining canon?

In *The Big Aiiieeeee!*, the editors argue that there is a distinct difference between real and fake Asian American literature. In their anthology they frame this dichotomy as one of the most pertinent issues facing the field. There is an urgency specifically in Chin's tone that has been viewed as hostile towards white people and Asian Americans alike. However, to understand the reasoning behind Chin's beliefs, I think it is important to outline the climate that these editors were living in regarding Asian American sentiment. Asians have a complicated and tumultuous history in America. I am not able to capture this history in its entirety here; however, I will provide a very abridged recount to better understand Asian peoples' reception by white America.

The United States has long created fear and racism towards Asian people by labelling them as the "Other," more specifically the "Oriental" other. Jane Hu describes this Oriental figure as being associated with "aloofness and obfuscation," citing fiction and poetry as tools that have reified these images. She highlights notable authors, such as "Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Jack Kerouac, and Gary Snyder" who have utilized this Orientalism in their works (Hu). They advertised Asia as the Far East, full of exotic customs and strange looking people. This othering gained true political power during the late nineteenth century often referred to as the great American expansion west. Thousands of Chinese immigrants came to the U.S. to work on the

railroads, a job that was grueling and often fruitless. This labor movement exacerbated issues of class and race and gave the US government tangible means to discriminate against Asian people. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 suspended Chinese immigration and ruled that Chinese people were not eligible for naturalization. The government would use fear mongering to justify these policies. The term, “yellow peril” became widespread, as they labelled Chinese people as too “unclean and unfit for citizenship in America" (De Leon). This Orientalist mindset created propaganda that Asians were dangerous and coming to the States to steal jobs from white people.

This fear mongering continued into the twentieth century. Min Hyoung Song offers this quote which is an excerpt from the popular *Century Magazine* published in 1904: “These Orientals have a civilization older than ours, hostile to ours, exclusive, and repellent. They do not come here to throw their lot with us . . . They mean to remain alien; they insist upon being taken back when they are dead; and we do well to keep them out while they are alive” (qtd. in Song 3). This quote shows a popular perspective among white Americans that viewed Asians as a separate people who should not be welcomed, but rather feared. This anti-Asian sentiment reached further heights after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in February 1942. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, allowing for the incarceration of anyone suspected of being an enemy of the nation. This predominantly targeted Japanese Americans who were taken from their homes and placed in detention centers, regardless of citizenship or connection to Japan. Only in 1988 did the U.S. government formally apologize and authorize reparations on behalf of Japanese internees and their families.

Non-East Asians also faced discriminatory policies and racist sentiments. In the early twentieth century, when the Philippines was a colony of the United States, American officers and

doctors would spread propaganda regarding the uncleanliness and “tropical diseases” of Filipinos. They used these medical practices as justification for colonizing and political domination (De Leon). Alongside the term yellow peril arose the term “dusky peril,” which came as a result of increased immigration from India. Much like with the Chinese, Americans used their Orientalist views to spark a fear of Indian people, with one Washington newspaper warning against “Hindu hordes invading the state” (Strochlic). In the twenty first century, discrimination against South and Southeast Asians rose dramatically. Following 9/11, religion-based violence increased against Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and other South Asian people, with the U.S. government doing little to deter or condemn these crimes (Strochlic).

This is all to say that the feelings of anti-Asian sentiment are deep rooted in the American psyche. While the active state of this racism ebbs and flows with different time periods, it has a lasting impact on the experience for Asian American people of every generation. As mentioned earlier, the 1960s and 70s were a pivotal time for the field of Asian American studies, as many scholars felt galvanized by the Civil Rights Movement. The U.S. government began enacting policies that seemed to be an attempt to heal this racist tension from the former half of the century. In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Immigration and Nationality Act into law, erasing the previously enacted policy that limited immigration based on national origin. This act was specifically celebrated by Asians and Africans who had been restricted under the former policy (De Leon). In her work, “Asian American Literature Within and Beyond the Immigrant Narrative,” Song describes this time by saying, “The post-1965 immigrants and their children, working alongside more established communities of Asian Americans, have substantially contributed to an altered understanding of how Asians in America are raced. One way they have done so is by becoming creative writers" (3-4). Song argues that through the act of creative

writing, Asian Americans were able to tell their own stories rather than being spoken for. This authorial representation helped stabilize the reputation of Asians, and after 1965 Asian Americans were able to be more integrated in American society.

Moreover, the editors viewed the power of white society as waning during this time. They argued that "The frightful weakening of the white world during the war opened up revolutionary, even cataclysmic, possibilities;" specifically, possibilities for Asian American and other minority writers (Chan, et al. 13). This white hegemonic power was seen as the ultimate enemy, so the diminishment of that power was ideal. The editors saw this as the time to capitalize on the movement and truly establish themselves in the field of literature. Thus, they published their anthology in 1974, riding on the wave of racial equality and civil rights. They proclaimed that after seven generations of suppression, this was the time that Asian American writers were going to be heard.

Even in their First Edition, they already were making bold claims regarding the correct ways to be an Asian American author. They make a clear distinction between Asian American and Americanized Asian writers. Americanized Asian writing emulates white literature, as these writers model their American identity on this whiteness, having not been born here (Chin, et al. XXVIII). These opinions grew and solidified into the duality of real and fake. Chin believed that Asian Americans would never be able to truly establish themselves if they are catering to white society and writing fake stories. He points out that this will always be a losing battle for the Asians, as ". . . the white Christian, philosopher king, missionary sociologist asserts and promises in the name of white law, religion, and science that yellows who accept white dominance will be accepted by whites . . ." but this is never the case (Chin, et al. LII). White

society will never truly yield power to Asians, especially when Asians continue to play into the mold that was created for them.

Chin and the editors were not only concerned with how America at large viewed Asian Americans; they were also concerned with how other Asian Americans were being educated about their culture. White society has indoctrinated Asian Americans to believe narratives that mark Asians as mystic, passive, and morally repugnant. Thus, these fake authors are simply feeding into these stereotypes that were taught to them and infusing them in their writing. The editors do not show pity for these authors' ignorance, rather they lump them in with white supremacy. They remark: "We expect Asian American writers, portraying Asia and Asians, to have a knowledge of the difference between the real and fake. This is a knowledge they have admitted they not only do not possess but also have no interest in ever possessing" (Chan, et al. 9). They have higher expectations for Asian American authors; therefore, it is frustrating when they remain willfully ignorant. This is where we can see the question of real versus fake become a moral issue for these editors, as they cite these fake authors as being complicit in their own discrimination.

The editors decide that "Before we can outline our history, we have to dispel the stereotypes. Before we dispel the stereotypes, we have to prove the falsity of the stereotypes and the ignorance of easily accessible, one well-known common history" (Chin, et al. XLII). Essentially, before Asians can reclaim the stereotypes, people need to realize that they are untrue, and this will never happen so long as Asian American authors continue to perpetuate these stereotypes in their writing. By continuing to write fake stories they are furthering the belief that the stereotypes are rooted in truth. If Asian Americans accept the stereotypes, it gives tacit approval to white people to accept them as well. Asian Americans need to recognize the lies that

they have been told and have been educated to believe are true. They need to delve into their own history and discover the truth for themselves.

Prioritizing real literature means excluding work that is otherwise good but is not necessarily good Asian American literature. For instance, for all the mentions of Kingston being a fake writer, Chin has admitted to finding Kingston's work "moving and lyrical." However, her talents for writing do not outweigh the harm she has created for the canon by catering to white racism. In a letter to Kingston, he remarks, "I want your book to be an example of yellow art by a yellow artist, not the publisher's manipulation of another Pocahontas" (Iwata). As an Asian writer, Chin expects true Asian literature to emphasize factual history rather than the distorted, fictionalized version she creates. The editors did not want the sexist, foreign, uneducated image of Asians that Kingston and other fake authors purported to be the one that America consumed. Chin argues that Kingston is selling out her authentic "yellow" identity, betraying the Asian community in her quest to be published.

The editors are not necessarily saying that there is only one way to be an Asian American writer, but they are saying that there is a correct way. This moral judgement was problematic in the 1970s and perhaps even more so today when there are so many diverse definitions of what it means to be Asian American. I argue that this castigation of fake Asian American authors is a symptom of the hegemonic white society. By shaming individual writers for their perceived role as fake authors, it feeds into the white supremacist narrative that requires authors of color to be without fault to be validated. Rather than blame individual authors, we should turn our attention to the white supremacy that has forced Asian Americans in the place of defense. Historically, white society has excluded Asian American authors from the American literary canon as a whole, forcing them to create their own separate canon. Therefore, by further excluding Asian

American authors and creating harsh restrictions for recognition into this Asian American literary canon, the editors are emulating white supremacist tactics. Elaine Kim also points out the ironic nature of the editors' critiques, specifically regarding masculinity and the sexist tone of their writing: "After lashing out at the emasculating effects of racial oppression, Chin and Chan accept the oppressors' definition of 'masculinity'" (Kim 205). Chin and Chan's basis for masculinity and heroism is built on the white supremacist structure. By attempting to overthrow the "oppressor," they are upholding the system in different ways.

These issues of blame open larger questions surrounding the responsibility of the author regarding representation. Are Asian American authors responsible for representing Asian Americans as a whole, or are they simply representing themselves as an individual? Chin would argue for the former. When Asian American authors write they are speaking on behalf of Asian culture and history, specifically when they use this culture and history to further their narrative. Therefore, they open themselves up to judgement and criticism. However, I would argue there is a difference between critiquing and attempting to erase literature that you do not agree with. We should also examine how these expectations of representation have unfairly restricted Asian American authors both in the 1970s and today.

Why do authors of color have this responsibility when white authors do not? Rarely do we use a white author's work as an educational tool to learn about white people as a whole. Whereas Asian American authors and other authors of color are expected to provide an accurate representation of all people of their race. This requirement is a tool of white supremacy that forces people of color to educate white society on what it means to belong to that community. One way this standard has been described is as "the brown man's burden," taken from a poem by

Henry Labouchère. This poem was a critique of Kipling's view of British colonialism and shifted the perspective to those that have been "othered" and burdened by white society (Labouchère).

This term has been used to specifically articulate the struggle of minority artists or authors. Nahem Yousaf describes this burden as the pressure that brown artists face when attempting to depict their community for a white society. He makes the argument that the "process of representation undermines any pretence to a 'holistic, organic identity'" (Yousaf 14). Essentially, brown artists are faced with the impossible challenge of representing their community in a way that will never be wholly authentic, but still must please an audience. One example of an author who has faced this burden and acknowledged it through his writing is Hanif Kureishi. Kureishi is Asian British writer of Pakistani descent who has been critiqued for his presentation of the Asian community. Some accuse him of perpetuating stereotypes and not having the proper cultural knowledge to speak on certain issues.

Kureishi has used these criticisms to form the identity of characters. In his novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, the protagonist Karim struggles with finding an authentic voice in his acting career. He is simultaneously punished for being too brown and not brown enough. During his portrayal of Mowgli, he is continually pushed to be more "Indian" and is chastised by his director, Shadwell, for not speaking his "own language" (Kureishi 140). Karim does not fit the stereotype of what Shadwell believes an Indian should be and is therefore seen as ignorant of his culture. However, after Karim bases his character on a specific man, Anwar, and openly embraces his Indian culture, he is accused of feeding stereotypes and pandering to the white community. Tracey explicitly asks, "Why do you hate yourself and all black people so much, Karim?" (Kureishi 180). She further argues that as minorities they must protect their culture from white people.

Through Karim, Kureishi responds to his critics that chastise him for his presentation of all Asians in Britain. He turns his focus on an individual narrative, actively subverting the expectations of the brown man's burden. When Tracey is critiquing Karim's depiction of Anwar, she creates an umbrella of "Black and Asian people " that he is offending. Karim then reminds her that he is only depicting "one old Indian man" (Kureishi 180). This rebuttal narrows the focus and reminds the readers that Kureishi is only depicting what he knows to be true, not defining community as a whole. Yousaf reminds us that "Neither cultural nor national identity is organic but social institutions may operate hegemonically to make it appear so" (16). Essentially, he is saying that there is no right or correct way to behave or identify as Asian and that this understanding is created by white power structures.

Although Kuresihi is an Asian British author, Asian Americans have also struggled with this burden of representation. In his book, *Chinese American Literature since the 1850s*, Xiao-huang Yin analyzes whether Asian American representation should be individually or ideologically framed. Yin cites both Kingston and Tan as authors who promote individual expression. Kingston has stated: "I am not a sociologist who measures truth by the percentages of times behavior takes place" (qtd. in Lape 145). Kingston argues that as an author, it is not her responsibility to ensure that her narratives are wholly truthful, and that truth is not always quantifiable. Tan has similarly expressed frustrations with these demands for the author, specifically regarding Chin's "tendency to interpret literature as a representation of life" (qtd. in Lape 145). Tan seems to fight back against this idea that Asian American literature needs to have representative or political capital, and that instead it can simply exist on its own merits.

Tan and Kingston have both been open with their opposition towards the editors, especially Chin. Through their language and the way they target individual writers, the editors

created a hostile environment and field. They were not simply critiquing writing or style; they were giving character judgements. However, while it is fair to criticize the editors' brash and polemical tone, I think it is also important to recognize the literary world they were writing from within. When the original editors were creating *Aiiieeeee!* there was no established field of Asian American literature and no canon. They were essentially fighting for their existence and were viewed as brash and bold because of their passion. In her foreword to the Third Edition of *Aiiieeeee!*, Fickle remarks that, "A lot has changed since the publication of *Aiiieeeee!* But we could also say that a lot has changed because of *Aiiieeeee!*; or that *Aiiieeeee!* presciently anticipated these changes" (Chin, et al. XXII). Although their anthology is regarded as controversial, it is still considered one of the bedrock texts of the field. Asian American literary criticism has changed since the 1970s in both language and decorum; however, these changes may have never occurred without *Aiiieeeee!* sparking the flame. The editors are responsible for uncovering many works that had long been overlooked or forgotten, and they did it for very little praise.

They also acknowledge their own flaws in the preface to the 1991 Edition as they plainly state that "We are not critics" (Chin, et al XXXIX). The editors recognize that they are not literary critics, they are writers, and because of that, there were many things lacking in their first publication of *Aiiieeeee!*. However, their frustration stems from the fact that rather than critique the literature that was included in the anthology and recognize the power of Asian American authors, people only critiqued the editors themselves. While they recognized they were not perfect, they seemed to be the only ones doing the work. Therefore, their words carried immense weight but drew ambivalent reactions from readers. Hua Hsu examines this ambivalence by saying, "The book seemed overly earnest. Revisiting it today, I was struck by how fatalistic the

editors sound . . . They can't see the vast energies that will one day gather in their wake, under the banner of Asian-American literature, or the possibility that markers of difference will come to distinguish, rather than limit, a writer" (Hsu). This quote encapsulates the idea that *Aiiieeeee!* and its editors are writing from a sincere, although dated, perspective, not knowing the change that would proceed in the coming decades.

Now, with Asian American literature gaining mainstream recognition and expanding past generic expectations, we might question whether it is as necessary for all Asian American literature to be "real." At a time in which there were not many narratives being published and read, the editors emphasized the importance that literature painted Asian Americans in an authentic way. However, with more authors and more works, we could argue that this need has been diluted. Viet Thanh Nguyen states, "The ideological argument about the need for Asian American authors in Asian American literature is reasonable enough, although the urgency of that claim may be lessened now that there are so many Asian American authors publishing" (297). America is not getting their education of Asian American culture from only a few stories; they have the option to read hundreds and thousands of stories written from an Asian American perspective. The responsibility of the individual author to be an educator has been diffused, and I argue, should never exist at all.

Whether we view Kingston, Tan, or Hwang as real or fake Asian American authors is a loaded question; however, I would argue that the true impact lies in what we decide to do with the answer. If they are fake authors does that mean we erase them from the canon? And would the canon of Asian American literature truly be complete without *The Woman Warrior, The Joy Luck Club*, or *M. Butterfly*?

These questions of canon determination do not have easy, or perhaps any, quantifiable answers. The Asian American canon is an evolving collection, continually adapting and including new works. by tracing and understanding the origins of the canon we gain more insight into the values of the field and how it could evolve in the future. The contemporary canon looks different than it did in 1974; however, many of the foundations and key works are the same. Therefore, I think it is valuable to see how the original editors and their rules apply to contemporary Asian American literature. How can we use the beliefs of the editors to understand these twenty first century works, and what things could the editors never have predicted?

Elaine Kim argues that "By weaving connections between us and our history, our forebears, each other, other people of color in this country and the world, these writers are inventing Asian American identities outside the realm of racial romance and externally imposed definitions" (206). Essentially Kim is saying that it does not need to be as black or white as the original editors make it seem. I agree with Kim's sentiments, and I argue that this diversity, this weaving of history and culture, is what makes Asian American literature unique. Rather than gatekeeping and controlling authors and their works, we should focus on celebrating the narratives that Asian American authors have created. By fighting within the community and creating internal conflict, we are feeding into the white supremacy that has so long excluded these voices from the field.

Perhaps in the 1970s we needed the sharp contrast of real vs. fake or good vs. bad to establish the field and understand what the canon meant. But I argue that today, contemporary authors have expanded the bounds of what Asian American literature is and can be. They have done it in a way that does not cater to the white racist ideals of the fake, but also does not strictly follow the heroic traditions of the real. Rather, they have shown their own agency as Asian

American artists and shown that the canon is able to adapt to these contemporary voices that still have as much "elegant, angry, and bitter life to show" as those in the original anthologies (Chin, et al. XXXVI).

Chapter Two: *Little Fires Everywhere* and the Universal Experience

Published in 2017, *Little Fires Everywhere* came out 43 years after *Aiiieeeee!*, and yet many of the issues proposed in the anthology have narrative and thematic occurrences in Ng's novel. However, she also exhibits patterns that may fall under Chin's category of fake Asian American literature, allowing us to question how much contemporary literature must follow the set rules to belong to the canon. Using *Little Fires* as an individual case study, I will examine the ways that Ng builds upon the original editors' arguments as well as deviates from them. One of the first questions we can interrogate is: what does it mean to be Asian American?

Ng seems to be deeply interested in this question of Asian American identity and creates a conflict that centers around the future of one Chinese baby. To give a quick summary: Bebe Chow, a Chinese immigrant, is unable to take care of her infant daughter, May Ling. She leaves the baby on the doorstep of a firehouse in the hopes of giving her a better future. May Ling is found and is adopted by a white couple, Linda and Mark McCullough, who love May Ling and want to raise her, re-christening her as Mirabelle. However, Bebe soon finds herself in a more stable job and economic position and desires to have her daughter back. What ensues is a messy, painful custody battle, with enormous stakes and no clear right answer. As sides are taken and the case becomes personal, individuals are forced to remember that "This whole thing is about Mirabelle. Everyone involved -- we all just want what's best for her. We just have to figure out what that is" (Ng 135). In the quest to determine "what's best for her," May Ling-Mirabelle's[6]

[6] This combination name is given to her by one of the characters in the novel to include both of her identities. It is the name that I will continue to refer to her as throughout this chapter.

race becomes the biggest issue at hand, as they try to decide how an Asian baby in America should be best raised.

Ng bases the novel's presentation of race relations on her own experience growing up in Shaker Heights, Ohio. While she values Shaker Heights's progressive policies regarding race, she remarks that "what I remember about race relations in the 1990s is that you showed your awareness by saying you didn't see race, that you were colour-blind" (Laity). This practice of "colour-blindness" is debated amongst those following the case. On one side you have those who praise Linda McCullough because "when she looks down at the baby in her arms, she doesn't see a Chinese baby. All she sees is a baby, plain and simple'" (Ng *Little Fires* 152). However, Bebe's supporters are quick to point out, "that was exactly the problem . . . She's not just a baby. She's a Chinese baby. She's going to grow up not knowing anything about her heritage. How is she going to know who she is?'" (Ng 152). Essentially, the issue is one of nature versus nurture. How much of May Ling-Mirabelle's racial identity is determined by her birth and how much will be determined by her upbringing? Throughout the novel, May Ling-Mirabelle's Chinese identity is referred to in different ways: birth culture, heritage, roots, etc., but all of them imply that there is an innate Asianness about her that must be protected.

There are two sides in this custody case: those who believe that the McCullough family and their stable, two-parent home are the most loving option, and those who support Bebe Chow and believe that her biological mother will provide the best future. The tacit question that is being asked is, can a white family truly raise a Chinese baby? Today, interracial adoption is much more common. Thousands of Chinese babies have been adopted by parents of a different race and raised in loving homes, but the issues that Ng raises persist, nonetheless. She seems to

recognize the impossibility of answering this question and does not take a firm stance; rather, she shows the complexity of this issue and the consequences of each decision.

Through this adoption narrative, specifically regarding transracial adoption, Ng is able to show how themes of race intersect with more universal topics of motherhood, family, and loss. The adoption narrative presents a new, contemporary form of Asian American literature. Asian international adoption began in the 1950s after the World Wars when American couples brought Asian children back to the States and raised them to be American. In her book, *Global families: a History of Asian International Adoption in America*, Choy describes these adoptions, with their main purpose being ". . . the successful Americanization of the Asian adopted child, a theme that reflected the politics of the specific historical time period in which the news stories were written. These stories soothed anxieties about American racism and U.S. military involvement in Asia during the Cold War" (107). The American government viewed these adoptions as a mutualistic relationship; Asian children were being given a new life and great opportunities in the U.S., and the U.S. was gaining good publicity and recreating their racial image. However, while Asian international adoption began in the 50s, the 1990s can be seen as the height of this phenomena.

In 1979, the Chinese government enacted their one child policy after there was a boom in the country's population during the 1950s. The government feared that there were not enough resources to provide for this larger population for posterity; thus, this one child policy was meant to curb further growth. 1991 became the first year that China allowed foreigners to adopt Chinese babies, with 206 children adopted to the US, and this number only grew throughout the nineties ("The Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism"). *Little Fires* is set in 1998[7] when an estimated four thousand U.S. Orphan Immigrant Visas were issued to Chinese children ("The

[7] As a personal note, I was born in 1999 and adopted from China in 2000. I was also raised in Northeastern Ohio, so I felt many connections to May Ling-Mirabelle's identity while reading this novel.

Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism"). With the influx of American families adopting Chinese children, there were new concerns regarding how these children should be best raised. These children were majority girls and were predominantly being adopted by white couples. These cases of transracial adoption created ethical concerns as many people worried about how to best raise the children.

In 1974 when *Aiiieeeee!* was published, Asian transracial adoption was not a widespread concern, especially for these editors. There was little to no literature regarding transracial adoption; therefore, none of the selections in the anthology reference this niche population of Asian Americans. However, by 2017, with around 80,000 Chinese American adoptees, Ng's narrative speaks to a rather large population of Asian American people. The adopted children, many of whom are now grown, can see themselves represented in this story. The issues surrounding May Ling-Mirabelle's identity are ones that Asian American adoptees have had to personally confront. Ng also gives representation to both the birth and adopted parents of these children. She empathizes with Bebe and humanizes Linda, showing the power of a mother's love and the sacrifices that come with parenthood. Thus*, Little Fires* represents an example of a way in which the canon has grown to better represent the Asian American community.

While Asian adoption narratives are becoming more common, the majority are focused on the adoptive parents' narrative. *Little Fires* is also guilty of this. While the trial is about May Ling-Mirabelle, the true players are the parents and their stakes in this custody battle. I believe that we will likely see this narrative shift in the coming decades as more adoptees age and are able to articulate their own stories. While *Little Fires* and other adoption stories are powerful, there can often be a sense of white saviorism in these narratives. They create an image that Asian

babies should be grateful that they were adopted and saved, rather than highlighting the mutualistic benefits of adoption.

However, despite some of the flaws in these parent focused narratives, we cannot deny their emotional power. Some of the most poignant moments of the novel occur during the trial, when the mothers are forced to fight for the daughter that they both love. While on the stand, Linda McCullough is asked the pivotal question: “What exactly will you do to keep May Ling connected to her birth culture?" (260). Her answers to this question are what Ng herself labels as “cringeworthy;” however, they are given with sincerity and good intentions (Laity). Linda has a vague perception of Chinese culture, reducing it to white rice and restaurants called Pearl of the Orient (Ng *Little Fires* 153). While these answers may read as ignorant, they also force us to question what authentic culture is. Can it be found in books, dolls, and food? Or does it require a deeper understanding of history, society, and struggle?

In *The Big Aiiieeeee!*, the editors express the challenges of understanding Asian American culture and learning their identities, saying, "Way past our childhoods, we had to gather 'the stuff of the real' the hard way. We had to ask, inspect, corroborate, challenge, and prove the factual, textual reality of the stuff and its place in Asian universal knowledge" (Chan, et al. xv). This statement shows that real Asian American culture is not easily identified, nor is it easy to find. Those on Bebe’s side use this argument, saying that May Ling-Mirabelle will struggle to find her real Chinese identity if she is not raised by Bebe. However, according to these editors, this is not a unique experience; it is an experience shared by all Asian Americans. Therefore, would being raised by a Chinese parent truly make the difference in defining her racial identity if these authors, who were raised by Asian parents, also experience the same insecurity in their culture?

In an emotional climax, Linda McCullough cries, "It's not a requirement that we be experts in Chinese culture. The only requirement is that we love Mirabelle. And we do" (265). Linda believes that she does not have to know everything about Chinese culture in order to raise a Chinese baby, and I believe that Chin's definition of Asian Americans may actually support this. Whoever May Ling-Mirabelle is raised by, growing up in Shaker Heights, she will be Chinese American, not Chinese. To use the editors' own words, she will be getting her "China and Japan from the radio, off the silver screen, from television, out of comic books, from the pushers of white American culture" (Chin, et al. XXV-VI). Linda might not be able to provide a complete understanding of Chinese culture and identity, but she can provide love and a happy home. This is what most parents are praised for, so why do we expect more from the McCulloughs?

Ng also highlights the difficulty that Asian American parents have in providing an authentic cultural experience for their children. Ed Lim, Bebe's attorney, reminisces on his experience trying to find a Chinese Barbie doll for his daughter only to be met with Oriental Barbie and her racist presentation of East Asia. If Ed Lim cannot provide this piece of cultural representation for his daughter, then how do we expect the McCulloughs to provide this representation for May Ling-Mirabelle? Rather than simply blaming Linda McCullough for her ignorant attempts to understand Chinese culture, we should focus our attention on the society that does not provide the opportunity for her to understand. Through her novel, Ng seems to imply that rather than blaming individual people, we should look critically at society and the systemic treatment of Asian Americans. Even the court case's name, Chow vs. Cuyahoga County, demonstrates this issue, placing one Chinese woman against the entire county government (Ng *Little Fires* 151).

Ng refuses to place blame on either mother, showing the pain and loss for both. She humanizes them and creates conflict in the reader as we act as a sort of judge, rooting for one side or the other in this battle. The court rules in the McCullough's favor and May Ling-Mirabelle is legally given to them. Then, in a dramatic turn, Bebe takes her daughter in the middle of the night and flees back to China where they are not seen again. In this way, Ng also refuses to decide on who May Ling-Mirabelle belongs to. One could argue that this conflict embodies the "Chinese American 'identity crisis,' the Japanese American 'dual personality,' the yellow/white either/or" that the editors articulate as problematic to the canon (Chan, et al. 14). May Ling-Mirabelle's life is trapped between these ideals of Chinese and American culture, struggling to find harmony between them. Chin criticizes this identity crisis, citing it as a tool of white supremacy and a narrative that is harmful to Asian Americans. He places authors that use this tool in the fake category, separate from the real authors that can be found in *Aiiieeeee!* and *The Big Aiiieeeee*!.

However, Ng's use of this narrative identity crisis exhibits many of the characteristics that Chin defines as authentically Asian American. The largest indicator is the argument of choice. The editors believe that, "Sensibility and the ability to choose differentiate the Asian American writers in this collection from the Americanized Chinese writers . . . They were intimate with and secure in their Chinese cultural identity in an experiential sense, in a way we American-born can never be. Again, unlike us, they are American by choice" (Chin, et al. XXIX). In this case, choice and free will are completely taken from May Ling-Mirabelle. As an infant, she does not get to decide who her parents are or which cultural identity she would like to embody. Rather, everyone else makes that decision for her: the judge, the public, and ultimately Bebe when she decides to kidnap her and flee. Chin and the editors make it clear that being

forced to choose between being Asian or American is socially constructed, and Ng seems to agree. By using a baby as her subject, she shows that society is creating this identity crisis, as May Ling-Mirabelle is clearly not constructing it. Therefore, while Ng may at face value seem to fuel the narrative of an identity crisis, she actually subverts this trope, and shows the damage that is created when we force this crisis on a person.

Ed Lim also occupies an interesting narrative space with regards to the field. Ed embodies one of the issues that most concerns the editors regarding fake literature: the Asian American male. The editors are especially concerned and outraged with the stereotype of Asian American men as effeminate and weak. They credit the white author, Earl Derr Biggers, with the conception of this stereotype through his racist fictional creation, Charlie Chan. They describe Charlie Chan as a "fat, inscrutable, flowery but flub-tongued effeminate little detective" who served as a model onto which white supremacy could cast their image of Asian men (Chin, et al. XXX). Ng is aware of this racist image and actively acknowledges this through Ed Lim. Ed is described as "a tall man, especially for an Asian: six feet, lean and rangy, with the build of a basketball player . . ." (Ng 258). This description recognizes the stereotype, subtly subverts it, and then carries on without needing to overtly state the message. She does not dwell on what Ed Lim is not, but rather simply focuses on who he is.

The original editors' preoccupation with the Asian male can perhaps serve as context for the criticism and scrutiny they received for their misogynistic and overly masculine focus. They believed that to combat the weak, effeminate Charlie Chan archetype, Asian American literature must return to the heroic tradition inspired by real Chinese folklore and literature. This heroic tradition tends to be male dominated. Much of Frank Chin's work features ". . . male characters [who] fight to gain that respect, that lost childhood. They search for a 'true' Asian-American

manhood and history . . .” (Iwata). Chin fought against Asian American literature that he believed perpetuated a false image of Asian American men. In his essay he argues that there are only three Asian American Christian writers who are not “white racist in form or content”: Sui Sin Far, Diana Chang, and Dr. Han Suyin. His reasoning for choosing these three specific authors is that “the only Chinese men who are not emasculated and sexually repellent . . . are found in these books” (Chan, et al. 12). For Chin, the representation of Asian men is clearly a dominant priority, and by continually emphasizing this masculinity he created an environment that did not feel as accepting towards Asian women.

In her foreword to the Third Edition of *Aiiieeeee!*, Tara Fickle acknowledges these criticisms, saying that "In taking whites to task for demeaning Asians, [the editors] seem nevertheless to be buttressing patriarchy by invoking gender stereotypes, by disparaging domestic efficiency as 'feminine,' and by slotting desirable traits such as originality, daring, physical courage, and creativity under the rubric of masculinity" (Chin, et al. XI). The editors often seem to target Asian American women specifically, accusing them of being complicit in white supremacy and marrying outside their race more often than men. Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston have an especially infamous relationship that many have attributed to an issue of gender. The *Los Angeles Times* article, “Is it a clash over writing…” recounts Chin and Kingston’s relationship by saying, "Call it a clash of writing philosophies between a proud feminist and a Chinese-American Normal Mailer. A debate over how writers of color should portray the myths of their cultures. Or, as some see it, a vendetta by a male author embittered by Kingston’s success" (Iwata). Their public feud was seen by many as having to do with gender, furthering Chin’s image of targeting female, specifically feminist, writers.

Regarding contemporary portrayals, Ng does not make Ed the antithesis of the effeminate Charlie Chan either, as this would be an equally stereotypical image. Rather, she highlights the assumptions that society has about Chinese men and forces her characters, and perhaps her readers, to challenge these assumptions. One of these assumptions is of the "inscrutable Asian" that was created to bolster the arguments of yellow peril. This image of Asians as inscrutable or difficult to read enhanced fear and made it easier for white society to other them. We see this occur during the trial when Bill Richardson, the McCullough's attorney, observes Ed Lim and remarks, "*You had to watch out. You just can't tell what he's really thinking,* Mr. Richardson thought, and then, immediately chagrined, *What a terrible thing to think*" (Ng 263-4). Mr. Richardson immediately expresses remorse for his thought; however, he has the thought, nonetheless. This shows how deeply ingrained these biases are, and that they do not always come with malicious intent, but rather are unconscious.

Ng shows that the Asian American men who actively challenge this effeminate image also face scrutiny. The media paints an image of Ed as aggressive, which troubles the societal narrative of the submissive, docile Asian. Again, Bill Richardson knows the stereotype and uses it for his advantage by leveraging Ed's perceived hostility against him. He reflects that "an angry Asian man didn't fit the public's expectations, and was therefore unnerving. Asian men could be socially inept and incompetent and ridiculous, like a Long Duk Dong, or at best unthreatening and slightly buffoonish, like a Jackie Chan. They were not allowed to be angry and articulate and powerful . . ." (Ng 267). Ed's strength as an attorney disrupts the racist image that society has created of Chinese men; therefore, he must be sanctioned. Ng's characterization of Ed Lim challenges both the sexist tone of the editors and the racist tone of white America. She does not feed into the Charlie Chan stereotype, nor does she return to the machismo heroic tradition. She

shows that there can be more nuance in how authors create Asian American male characters, and that there is no one structure that they must follow.

Although *Little Fires* has several Asian American characters, such as Ed and Bebe, they are not the main characters of the novel. This narrative choice highlights important questions regarding how much an Asian American novel must explicitly deal with race. At first glance, *Little Fires* may not initially market itself as an Asian American novel. It centers on two white families in Ohio and deals with the Chinese American experience only as it relates to these white main characters. However, this novel serves as evidence that Asian American writers can use their race and identity to influence their writing without it needing to be the defining characteristic. Ng and other authors showcase the intersections of their identities, and how their race influences other aspects of their lives. She manages to interweave issues of racism as a whole and how these issues create division in an entire city.

We must also be careful when questioning *Little Fires*'s status as an Asian American novel simply based on how much it explicitly deals with themes of race. This method can be problematic, as we are assuming that Asian American authors must always write about race to be included in the canon amongst their peers. In her essay, "Why I Don't Want to be the Next Amy Tan," Ng explains her fears of being automatically grouped with and compared to other Asian American writers. She argues that this "does writers and readers a huge disservice. Comparing Asian writers mainly to other Asian writers implies that we're all telling the same story . . . It places Asian writers in their own segregated Asians-only pool" (Ng "Why I Don't"). This method of comparison reduces Asian American authors to their race and implies that their works cannot transcend this identity. Ng challenges this diminished mindset by creating a novel that deals with universal themes of motherhood, class, belonging, and yes, race. Some authors, such

as Virginia Lee, have been described as ". . . not so much concerned about being Chinese or American or Chinese-American or American-Chinese as she is about being human" (Goellnicht 257). This description was used a critique of her writing, and perhaps an insult, arguing that Lee is less of an Asian American author because she chooses to write about themes that are ubiquitous and not explicitly Asian. By sanctioning authors who choose to write about more universal topics we are furthering this white supremacist narrative that says Asian Americans can only write about one thing.

By choosing to not deal solely with Asian American themes, Ng shows that there is a nuanced relationship: themes that may seem to be uniquely Asian American affect other communities, and likewise, themes that may not be seen as Asian American affect the Asian community. In her interview with *The Guardian*, Ng describes *Little Fires* by saying, "It's a novel about race, and class and privilege" (Laity). By pinpointing these three issues as the major components of her novel she is showing how they are interconnected and affect one another. Bebe's economic status and inability to succeed as a Chinese immigrant force her to give up May Ling in the first place; therefore, her class and privilege are inherently affected by her race. The other plotlines of the novel also display these themes of race, class and privilege, showing the struggles that Asian Americans share with other minority communities.

The characters in *Little Fires* pride themselves on their color-blind approach to race, saying, "We're lucky. No one sees race here" (Ng 42). They believe that the opposite of racism is simply acting as if race does not exist, but Ng shows the naivety of that ideal with Moody arguing that "Everybody sees race. The only difference is who pretends not to" (42). This exchange mirrors the author's relationship with their identity in writing. It is not about being color blind and pretending that Ng is not Asian American; rather it is about recognizing Ng's

race but seeing the rest of her as well. Ng infuses her Asian American identity into her novel in non-traditional ways and forces the reader to evaluate what the expectations are for Asian American authors.

Ng's narrative choices, coupled with her mainstream success, help to evolve the canon by expanding what an Asian American novel looks like. She serves as an example that Asian American authors are not confined by a mold, and that they do not need to conform to the original structure to be successful. In her essay, Ng expands upon why she does not want to be compared only to Asian American writers, citing a loss of agency as a writer. She argues, ". . . such comparisons place undue weight on the writer's ethnicity, suggesting that writers like Tan, Chang, and Kingston are telling first and foremost A Story About Being Chinese, not stories about families, love, loss, or universal human experience" (Ng "Why I Don't"). While *Little Fires* is Asian American literature, to reduce it to being only a novel about race would erase the other important themes. By refusing to write solely about being a Chinese woman, Ng is reiterating the original editors' intentions, showing that Asian American writers are talented in their own right, and that they do not need to be reduced to their race to show this talent.

Little Fires Everywhere tells a story that can resonate with Asian Americans personally while also reaching a universal audience. Ng celebrates the beauty of Asian American people and culture while also not confining herself to closeminded structures, capturing the spirit of contemporary Asian American literature.

Chapter Three: *Edinburgh* and the Individual Experience

The other novel that I am using in my case study of contemporary Asian American literature is Alexander Chee's *Edinburgh.* Published in 2001*, Edinburgh* follows Aphias "Fee" Zhe, a Korean American who learns to navigate his experience as a gay man while also coming to terms with the sexual trauma of his childhood. Like Ng's *Little Fires*, *Edinburgh* is a novel

that represents a unique Asian American experience that has been historically marginalized and shows the intersectionality of contemporary literature. By analyzing Chee's work, we can better understand the evolution of the canon and how an author's personal identity can provide better representation for Asian Americans as a whole.

Chee's writing is raw and thought provoking as he details issues of child molestation, depression, and suicide through the lens of his Korean American protagonist. I would first like to provide a brief summary of *Edinburgh*, although this is a story that is difficult to capture in only a few sentences. Fee is a biracial Korean American boy growing up in Maine. When Fee is twelve years old, he, along with several other boys, is molested by his choir director, Big Eric. Fee undergoes a dramatic journey of self-discovery and pain as he comes to terms with his homosexuality while also feeling immense guilt from his youth. Many years later, when he is in his late twenties, he is serving as a high school swim coach when he meets Warden, a teenager who reminds him of his childhood love, Peter. Fee's sense of right and wrong is tested with this inappropriate relationship as he is forced to confront the ghosts of his past.

Fee's identity as an openly gay Asian American created some challenges for Chee in how the novel was categorized. When speaking about the marketing process of *Edinburgh*, he writes that "Editors didn't seem to know if it should be sold as a gay novel or an Asian American novel" (Chee *How to Write* 218). His work represents two historically marginalized groups; therefore, people had trouble deciding which genre to emphasize. While others struggle with labelling *Edinburgh* as a gay or Asian American novel, Chee chooses to not pigeonhole his story as one or the other. Rather, Edinburgh is a gay novel *and* an Asian American novel, and both of those identities are intrinsic to the story.

It can be difficult to view *Edinburgh* or any queer Asian American fiction through the lens of *Aiiieeeee!* and the original editors because they did not overtly explore these themes or identities. Whether this was because they simply did not think it necessary or they were actively against it, I cannot say. However, the emergence of a queer Asian American genre less than thirty years after the original anthology's publication is evidence of the fast evolution that Asian American literature has undergone.

Queer and non-heterosexual desires were being subtly represented in the 1970s through the inclusion of "The Shoyu Kid" by Lonny Kaneko and Russell Leong's "Rough Notes for Mantos" in *Aiiieeeee!* and *The Big Aiiieeeee!* respectively. However, neither of these stories were explicitly queer, and Leong even chose to have his story published under a pseudonym. In the introduction to his book, *Inscrutable Belongings: Queer Asian North American Fiction*, Stephen Hong Sohn describes the 1990s as a groundbreaking decade for queer Asian North American cultural studies (18). He specifically credits Leong's *Asian American Sexualities* in 1995 and David L. Eng and Alice Y. Hom's *Q &A* in 1998 for mapping out ". . . central concerns for queer Asian North Americans, ranging from the dangers of coming out to the challenges of developing a sense of community" (Sohn 18). These works, which predominantly included academic text and personal testimonies, paved the way for a novel such as *Edinburgh* to openly explore queer Asian American desire. Chee described the writing experience by saying, "I wrote a book I wanted to read . . . I wrote a book that I wanted to see in the world" (Yu). As a gay man, Chee used his identity to fill a void that he saw in the literary world by writing a queer Asian American narrative.

Chee's openness with his sexuality, as well as his character's sexuality, are a clear change from the literary space the editors were writing in. In her foreword, Tara Fickle reveals that

"Rough Notes for Mantos" was truly authored by Russell Leong, one of *Aiiieeeee!*'s editors. In a letter from Leong to Shawn Wong, Leong says that he does not want the story printed under his name as he is "afraid of the loss it would cause my family, friends, and me" (Chin, et al. XVI). While Leong does not state that the queer tone of the story is the reason for his fear, we can infer that it impacted his decision to publish under a pseudonym. This can be seen through the description of Wallace Lin, the fictional author, as having "recently married his childhood sweetheart and now [living] in Phoenix, Arizona" (Chin, et al. 205). They create this image of domesticity, further separating any queer themes in the short story from the author himself. However, forty-three years after the original publication, Leong allowed Fickle to reveal his identity. Today, Russell Leong is openly gay and has published several works exploring Asian American sexualities through a lens of heterosexuality. Leong's story not only shows his personal evolution of openly identifying as a gay Asian American, but as one of the original editors, it also helps to show a larger evolution in the field itself.

Edinburgh is an explicitly gay and queer novel, showcasing Fee's journey of navigating and accepting his sexuality. Sohn specifically explores Fee's journey as a "protoqueer," a term that he uses to represent Asian American characters whose exploration of their sexuality is complicated by their young age (87). While Fee fits this model of the protoqueer, Chee's narrative presents a unique interpretation of this model. Sohn describes *Edinburgh* as differing from other queer Asian American fiction as it places ". . . the Asian North American proto queer child at the narrative center and finally illustrates how fragile the illusion of innocence can be . . . (90). Fee is the protagonist of this novel, not a side or secondary character. He also does not exhibit the traditional questioning or coming out phase; rather, Fee is always sure of his male attraction. This challenges the generic expectations of other gay novels, and boldly recognizes

Fee's queer identity. Moreover, Fee does not represent the dead gay character that is used as a moral lesson or simply to further the plot,[8] as in some other texts. In the words of Sohn: "queer Asian North American protagonists are lucky simply to survive" (3). *Edinburgh*, at its core, can be described as a story of survival, as Fee learns to heal and live despite the trauma he has faced. Chee asserts that survival is possible for gay Asian Americans, allowing other authors to expand their narratives and showing real life Asian Americans the possibilities.

Fee's overt homosexuality and queer love also present an interesting view of the Asian American man. As discussed in relation to *Little Fires*, the original editors were concerned with the literary representation of Asian men. They actively fought the stereotype of Asian men being effeminate or emasculated, and homosexuality was a point of contention for them. Chin and the editors have been accused of being homophobic, and I think that can be best characterized by this quote: "It is an article of white liberal American faith today that Chinese men, at their best, are effeminate closet queens like Charlie Chan and, at their worst, are homosexual menaces like Fu Manchu" (Chan, et al. xiii). The editors invoke homosexuality to explain the problems with the literary representation of Asian men. They use the queer community as a scapegoat, othering themselves from the "closet queens" and "homosexual menaces" that embody the stereotype.

This comment also insinuates that queer or gay Asian American men are part of the problem and are furthering these stereotypes simply by existing. One example is made through David Henry Hwang, as they go on to comment that it is "No wonder David Henry Hwang's derivative *M. Butterfly* won the Tony for the best new play of 1988. The good Chinese man, at his best, is the fulfillment of white male homosexual fantasy, literally kissing white ass" (Chan,

[8] Lee Edelman's book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* explores the ways in which queer people have historically been positioned as the antithesis of reproduction and conceptions of the future. Another media trope, commonly referred to as "Bury Your Gays," looks at how queer characters are killed from television and movies in order to further plot, often through violent means (Snarker).

et al. xiii). Hwang's play presents a Chinese man who dresses as a female opera singer and falls in love with another man while posing as this woman. Though others have expressed concerns for Hwang's presentation of gender nonconformity, Chin's issue lies in the emasculation of the Asian man. He implies that gay men will always perpetuate this effeminate stereotype and are complicit in this racist plot. It is also important to note that Hwang is a straight man. So, while Chin's criticism is a personal attack, the comments are made more personal for those authors who themselves are LGBTQ+.

The editors, specifically Chin, tended to work in heroic genres that emphasized masculinity and virility. Neither *Edinburgh* nor Fee as a character embody these qualities. Instead, I argue that the novel has a divine feminine spirit, invoking a matriarchal line through Fee's ancestors. Fee draws strength from the female members of his family, specifically his grandfather's lost sisters, and they are continually referenced during times of struggle. One of the reasons for this feminine tone can be attributed to Fee's complex relationship with gender. This complexity stems from his sexual assault and the knowledge that one of the reasons he was chosen was because of his gender. Big Eric is a pedophile who preys on young boys. Fee links this boyhood, specifically his voice, with this trauma, saying, "We boys stab like swords -- our voices tremble not at all. In this way, musically, innocence is represented. Knowledge, specifically knowledge of passion, makes you shake, apparently. As you answer for it before God, singing for your short, beautiful life to inch forward even by another minute" (Chee 55). This quote highlights the pain that these boys have endured, as their innocent, young voices become their prisons. Fee views his boyhood as the reason for his assault; therefore, it makes logical sense that he would turn from this in search of a safer femininity. One of the greatest

male figures in his life committed the ultimate crime against him, making it easier to find comfort in the female figures of his life.

These qualities do not make Fee any less of a man, nor do they present a stereotypical representation of Asian American men. The editors seem to believe that any literary presentation that does not actively work against the Charlie Chan image is supporting it; however, this does not have to be the case. Chee is showing that vulnerability does not make a person weak and that homosexuality does not mean someone is any less masculine.

This feminine spirit that I argue the novel has can further be seen through Chee's focus on the past. This novel is largely invested in looking at the past and analyzing how it has impacted the present. Fee's Korean heritage and its personal meaning are largely indicative of this return to the past, specifically through the continual allusions to Lady Tammamo, the fox-demon. Fee's father tells him the story of Tammamo, a fox who takes the shape of a woman in order to be with her lover. After he dies, she joins her husband's body on the funeral pyre, and they burn together. Fee and his family believe themselves to be ancestors of this fox-demon due to the traces of red in their hair, and Fee occasionally refers to Tammamo as his "long-ago great-grand-mother" (Chee 21). This tale and the image of the fox are continually thought of by Fee, especially during times of strife. The prologue ends by saying, "This is a fox story. Of how a fox can be a boy," emphasizing the importance of this divine connection (Chee x).

This use of a classic Korean folktale may be analyzed using Chin's dichotomy of the real and fake. In his essay, Chin argues that "Myths are, by nature, immutable and unchanging because they are deeply ingrained in the cultural memory, or they are not myths (Chan, et al. 29). Fee's relationship with the myth of Lady Tammamo stands in almost direct contradiction with Chin's definition. Throughout the novel, we see Fee alter the myth and personalize it to relate to

his life experiences better. The first indication of this altering is through Chee's spelling of Lady Tammamo's name, including an extra "m" than what may be traditional.[9] In his book, Sohn remarks that, "Intriguingly, the father's version of the fox-demon folktale contradicts traditional accounts. One of the more established tales of Lady Tamamo-no-ae involves the fox-demon employing her shape-shifting abilities to infiltrate the emperor's (Toba's) court . . ." (93). The story that Fee's father tells him is one that frames Lady Tammamo more as a hero than a demon. Her legacy is framed as one of self-sacrifice, devotion, and cunning, rather than violence and gore. This provides a more inspiring and palatable tale for Fee who is thought to be her descendant.

We see the ways in which this legend and the fox itself are recurring images for Fee in times of pain and difficulty. After Zach[10] dies by suicide, Fee is the one who finds his body and, in the moment, he sees a fox cross his path who ". . . darts a look over his shoulder and when he sees me, turns back to where he's going, and seems to leap out into the air and vanish" (Chee 93). The reader is not sure whether there is a true fox that appears or whether it is a figment of Fee's imagination. In either scenario the fox is meant to represent strength and transformation, especially after witnessing the horrible image of his friend's body.

We also see how Fee changes the physical image of Tammamo to make her more personable. Fee is an artist, and one day decides that, "I am drawing my favorite character from D&D,[11] a sorceress I've named Lady Tammamo, for my long-ago great-grand-mother . . . I try to make her look like one of my grandfather's missing sisters" (Chee 21). He draws on the imagery of his ancestors, drawing Tammamo to look like his grandfather's sisters that he has grown up

[9] Traditional spelling is Tamamo
[10] Zach is a choir friend of Fee's and is also a victim of Big Eric. Fee and Zach engage in a sexual relationship before he ultimately dies by suicide.
[11] Dungeons and Dragons.

hearing about. This further strengthens the familial connection and the sense of intergenerational strength. Both his grandfather's sisters and Lady Tammamo have tragic stories; however, both have been used as points of strength and inspiration for Fee. He turns this mythical creature into one of his D&D characters, creating a contemporary image and relationship. In contrast, Fee receives a comic book from his cousin in Korea, who describes the story of Tammamo as, "FOX-DEMON MUST EAT THOUSAND LIVERS, YOUNG MEN VIRGINS, TO BECOME HUMAN" (Chee 22). The comic's image is one that is coming directly from Korea and portrays Tammamo as a true demon. This interpretation aligns more with the traditional folktale where Tammamo embodies the demonic elements rather than the loving, sacrificial character that Fee envisions.

Fee not only changes the myth to make it more personal, he also anglicizes Tammamo to an extent. As he is lying in bed, he feels comfort in thinking that he is like Lady Tammamo. Through these thoughts, he also begins to ". . . compare her to the Greek gods and goddesses . . ." (Chee 23). He invokes Greek mythology, referencing the powers of Europa, Atalanta, and Zeus, and eventually decides that "Tammamo is mightier" than those gods (Chee 23). This moment shows another example of Fee using things he is familiar with and connecting them to this Korean myth to create a personal connection. Fee is deeply interested in history and the old world; therefore, his declaration that Tammamo is mightier than all of these Greek gods carries true significance. However, Chin might argue that this is the antithesis of what Asian Americans should do with the original tales. Fee is essentially disfiguring the myth, simply selecting the parts that he relates to and abandoning the rest. He is also framing a Korean tale in relation to more popular Greek mythology, seemingly catering to a white framework.

From these usages, Chee's presentation of Tamammo could be seen as aligning more with the literature of the fake than the real. Though Chee is not building off a stereotype or racist image, he is perverting the traditionally understood myth for his own purposes. Moreover, the folktale is not a story that Chee grew up with or had any familiarity with before using it in his narrative. He describes the inspiration behind Lady Tammamo's presence by saying, "When I read in the lore that red hair was considered a possible sign of fox ancestry, I recalled the single red hair my father used to pull out of his head and the benign stories he made up for me at bedtime about foxes, and went looking for a more ancient fox ancestor. I found the story of Lady Tammamo" (Chee *How to Write* 216). While Chee is himself Korean and does have a subtle familial connection to this story, it is not a story that was an overt part of his childhood. Therefore, we can question whether he has the right to take narrative liberties with it in the way he does.

While by Chin's definition this literary imagining may be fake, I argue that Chee's experience writing about Lady Tammamo is representative of a real Asian American experience. Although Chee did not grow up with this story, he felt a strong connection to Tammamo; strong enough to use her as one of the major points in his novel. When further describing his writing process he remarks that "I could continue Landy Tammamo's story, braiding her, fantastically, into the ancestry of my autobiographical character" (Chee *How to Write* 216). Chee was excited at the prospect of getting to carry on Tammamo's legacy and tell her story to a wider audience. This excitement comes from a desire to share this folktale and his culture. One quote that I think best demonstrates this phenomena is in *Aiiieeeee!*, when the editors announce: "It's late for us to be children. But then it's never too late to be children" (Chin, et al. LV). This quote demonstrates that even though many Asian Americans were not afforded the myths and tales of Asian culture

in their childhood, it is not too late to uncover these myths for themselves. Chee found this story in his adulthood and felt a connection to his Korean heritage and his character. I would further argue that Fee's relationship with Lady Tammamo is made more realistic through Chee's experience of discovery. Fee is a young American born Korean, and his relationship with Tammamo represents this boyhood youth. His use of comic books and board games represents the contemporary Asian American experience that many children have as they try to relate to their cultural roots. Chee seems to be imagining the childhood connection he would have had with Tammamo and allows Fee to live this experience.

This practice of finding connections in the past is not unique to Chee, but rather, is shared by other contemporary Asian American authors. One notable example is "comfort woman"[12] narratives. Comfort women were young girls and women who were forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese during World War II. Chinese and Korean women make up a large portion of these victims, and it is estimated that 90 percent of women forced into sexual slavery did not survive the war (Blakemore). For many years, the Japanese government refused to acknowledge the existence of these comfort women and destroyed the documentation of these crimes. These women and their families were not granted reparations or even apologies until 1993 (Blakemore). However, during the 1980s, survivors began to come forward and share their stories on the atrocities they were forced to endure. While there are not many living survivors remaining, their stories and the legacy they have created has inspired others. One way this inspiration has manifested is through literature.

[12] I use this term in quotations to acknowledge the troubling use of comfort to describe these women's roles and their forced sexual labor. One powerful quote that captures this issue is from survivor Yong Soo Lee who said: "I never wanted to give comfort to those men. I don't want to hate or hold a grudge, but I can never forgive what happened to me" (Blakemore).

Nora Okja Keller's novel, *Comfort Woman*, details the multigenerational trauma of this tragedy and was highly praised by critics for bringing attention to this often-overlooked history. In her book, Maria Rice Bellamy argues that "Keller portrays the process of haunting and reclamation as a means of defining the contours of a Korean (and Korean American) collective consciousness" (104). Bellamy is saying that Korean Americans have been shaped by this trauma, but that through reclaiming and sharing this past, the community can begin to heal. Chee also touches on this historical trauma in *Edinburgh*. In the preface, Fee tells us that, "My grandfather lost his six older sisters to the Japanese during World War II. Gone and never heard from again" (Chee vii). This is one of the first things we learn about Fee and is significant in defining his character. From a young age he has been burdened with this story of his lost aunts and invokes them often in the same way he does with Lady Tammamo. They provide him with comfort while also giving him the strength to face his own trauma.

Keller and Chee create narratives in which characters are forced to confront the past to heal the future. Bellamy describes stories such as these by saying that "Representing this violence became the quest of those haunted by it, even if they themselves were not direct inheritors of it . . . Only when represented, particularly in forms of written, spoken, and visual narrative, can the ordinary violence against women be recognized as violence" (106). While Keller is specifically detailing violence against women, both novels highlight important aspects of sexual violence that are often hidden or shamed. These authors give voice to people who have been silenced and seemingly lost. They show that while our past can haunt and traumatize us, only by facing it are you truly able to heal. Specifically, contemporary Asian American people who have inherited this trauma from the generations before are able to read novels such as these and feel themselves represented and validated.

I argue that this emphasis on the past and history can be seen as a way in which *Edinburgh* further aligns with the original editors' ideals. The editors emphasized that in creating their anthology they had to delve deep into the past, uncovering seven generations of lost literature and culture. By doing this research they encountered painful trauma, but they also found powerful truths. Likewise, Chee shows that looking to the past, whether personal or historical, can be painful but healing. This seems to be the task for Asian Americans, past and present alike: look to the past, reclaim the culture, and change the future. Kim describes this effort, saying, "Asian American writers must piece together and sort out the meaning of our past, distorted and omitted by racism, from shreds of stories heard in childhood or from faded photographs that have never been explained" (207). Through their anthology, the editors begin this process of piecing together the past so that future Asian Americans can better understand this history for themselves. Therefore, Chee could even be seen as a product of their work, carrying on this tradition of uncovering lost treasures of Asian American culture.

This thematic focus on trauma and healing can further be translated to broader issues of mental health and how they affect contemporary Asian Americans. The open communication that Chee uses to describe depression and mental illness in *Edinburgh* is not always common among Asian American communities. Research conducted by the National Latino and Asian American Study (NLAAS) found that Asian Americans are three times less likely to seek mental healthcare than white Americans. They also found that "only 8.6 percent of Asian-Americans sought any type of mental health services or resource compared to nearly 18 percent of the general population" ("Mental Health Among Asian-Americans"). Mental health is often stigmatized or simply not talked about among Asian American families due to the taboo nature of such discussions in many Asian cultures. However, we are explicitly attuned to Fee's mental health

struggles throughout the novel, even if Chee does not use official medical diagnoses. Fee suffers from depression and PTSD due to the sexual assault from his youth. Chee also shows that trauma does not exist in a vacuum and that there are intersecting factors that affect a person's health. There are several forms of trauma that are touched upon in this novel: sexual trauma, intergenerational trauma, and identity-based trauma. Thus, we see the ways that his Asian American identity, his queer identity, and his sexual assault all contribute to his mental health.

Chee represents this cultural struggle regarding mental illness as Fee visits his grandparents in Korea. Fee notices that ". . . my grandparents regard me then with furtive glances that end in a smile for me and a nod. My grandfather knows about hauntings . . ." (95). His grandfather later confronts Fee and tells him, "We call someone to look for you. Your ghost missing" (97). His grandparents recognize Fee's deteriorating mental health and attribute it to a missing ghost or soul. They call in a mudang, or ghost-singer, to help him find his ghost and heal him. His grandparents recognize his struggles and attempt to help; however, they never blatantly address his depression. Instead of western medicine, they rely on more spiritual methods which are unsuccessful in locating Fee's ghost. This scene shows the cultural and generational struggles when dealing with mental health and how younger people are often forced to struggle in silence.

Self-harm and suicide are recurring topics and images. All Big Eric's victims have struggled to cope with the assault, not just Fee. After Big Eric has been arrested and sent to prison, the boys must attempt to cope with their loss and what has been taken from them. We see Peter turn to drugs and self-harm, and Fee witnesses as Peter "takes a straight razor from his pants and runs the razor up his forearm. A bright bead of blood follows. He does it again. And again" (Chee 59). Fee is shocked by his friend's actions while Peter seems nonchalant towards the violence to his body. This eventually culminates in Peter taking his own life by setting

himself on fire. We also see Zach, another victim of Big Eric's, die by suicide. Zach and Fee engage in sexual activity with one another throughout their youth, seemingly using each other as a coping mechanism. On the day of his death, Zach invites Fee to the greenhouse late at night; his last words are: "Everything's fine" (93). Fee is the one who finds Zach's body, and this further adds to his guilt, as he believes he is the cause of his friends' deaths. Chee is not encouraging self-harm or suicide, nor is he glamorizing them in an exploitative way. Rather, he is showing the raw pain of these boys and the coping mechanisms they rely on to deal with their trauma.

During his time at college, after he has moved away from his hometown and the site of his assault, his mental health continues to decline. Fee bluntly states that, "The first time I try to die I am on a mountain near my aunt's house" (107). He vividly describes his actions as he sits on a frozen lake, praying for the ice to break, and then his panic when it eventually does. He later describes the diary he kept that he "only wrote in when I wanted to die. I wrote in that diary, that year, almost every day" (113). These actions are all recounted in a matter-of-fact tone, informing the reader without much emotion, and perhaps mimicking his own mental state. Fee is aware of his depression and states it plainly. However, although Fee is aware of his depression, there are moments where his PTSD surprises him and he discovers triggers. While Fee is posing nude for his drawing teacher he begins to cry uncontrollably and does not understand why. He later calls his doctor who tells him that, "if my eyes had been itchy then yes the crying was an allergic reaction, but that otherwise it had been an emotional one" (Chee 119). This moment of catharsis and confusion shows the surprising ways that Fee's trauma affects his life. These moments also offer a realistic representation of the way we often deny or are afraid to admit vulnerability.

These moments of vulnerability from Fee are important not only as an Asian American, but specifically as a man. American society has a stigma against men showing emotion, associating this with femininity or homosexuality. By openly articulating these mental health struggles, Chee is normalizing them, both in the canon and in the real world**.** He is offering the opportunity for other Asian American men to be open with their emotions and mental health struggles, showing that recovery and healing is possible.

Lastly, *Edinburgh*'s semi-autobiographical nature presents a challenge to Chin's definition of real and fake Asian American literature. In his essay, Frank Chin outlines his disdain for autobiographies and the harm they create for the Asian American community. He explicitly says, "The autobiography is not a Chinese form;" rather, it is a Christian form that Asian American authors have utilized to gain favor by white society (Chan, et al. 11). Chin argues that autobiographies are all told from the "white racist"[13] stereotype that has been passed down from American culture and indoctrinated in the minds of Asian American people. The harm of Asian Americans writing within this Christian form is that it reinforces stereotypes and labels them as truth or autobiography. Chin elaborates on the real-world harm this creates, as ". . . the stereotype, and its corroboration in science and art, sharpened the racist laws against Chinese and Japanese, from Congress to city hall" (Chan, et al. 8). Literary stereotypes have real world political consequences. This argument against autobiographies is essentially the same argument for why fake or inauthentic Asian American literature should be separated from the canon. By including them in the canon you are tacitly saying that you approve of these stories as Asian American literature.

[13] White racism was a term used by Chin and Chan in their essay "Racist Love." They use this term to describe Asian Americans who have willingly taken a subservient position to white people to gain the favor of white supremacy.

However, while the novel is based on true events from Chee's life, the novel is not a memoir. In Chee's words: "I needed to make a 'fake autobiography,' for someone like me but not me, giving him the situations of my life but not the events" (*How to Write* 209). There is a distinct difference between Alexander and Aphias. He is not attempting to portray his novel as truth, but rather to give voice to a narrative truth and give representation to voices that have been historically silenced. Viet Thanh Nguyen describes the author's function as "an informal spokesperson either through an explicit claim to doing so or through being appointed, or seen as, a representative of a certain population by the readership or audience of the aesthetic work" (290-1). If Chee is serving as the spokesperson for his novel, then he is advocating for the ability to heal and survive traumatic events.

Although the novel is not a memoir, the emotions are rooted in real life testimony; therefore, one might argue that Chee is feeding into this fake form of autobiography. However, I believe that this judgement takes credit away from Chee's creative writing skills. As discussed in relation to canon determination, Asian American authors are often challenged on the authenticity of their stories and are burdened with an extra layer of racial representation, especially in memoirs. I believe that *Edinburgh* serves as evidence that contemporary literature does not need to by wholly authentic or real to be good literature and that readers are able to forge a deep connection regardless. Chee is not representing the entire Asian American race as Chin might argue; he is representing himself and the story that he wants to tell. This should be the expectation for all Asian American authors, allowing them to simply create literature that exists in its own right.

Epilogue

This past year has been a tumultuous time for Asian Americans to say the least. There has been an increase in xenophobia, hate crimes, and overall racism towards the Asian American community. With these contemporary and unforeseen issues, the importance of my thesis and the appreciation for Asian American literature has been made more relevant.

Even in this last year, we can see the ways in which Asian American literature has evolved to better represent the contemporary world. Essays and books about the Asian American experience have been more popular among major publishers and news sources. Cathy Park Hong's *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* has provided catharsis for many Asian Americans as they face new anxieties. Movies like *Minari* highlight the Asian American immigrant experience and have been receiving widespread praise and recognition. In the wake of these anti-Asian sentiments there has also been a surge of Asian American advocacy and awareness being raised, creating stronger community bonds. These few examples show the ways that Asian Americans are continuing to establish themselves and showcase their diversity through art and politics.

In my thesis I have provided a brief glimpse at the evolution of Asian American literature by looking at the development of the canon with a focus on how contemporary literature has been impacted by these early scholars. Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere* and Alexander Chee's *Edinburgh* serve as model examples for how contemporary literature has both grown with and apart from the original scholars. Asian American literature may appear to be conflicted between tradition and change, but I argue that these categories do not need to be mutually exclusive. Rather, contemporary authors have shown that part of the canon's beauty lies in its ability to capture the history of Asian American resilience while also allowing for the progress of

Asian American voices. In these last few pages, I would like to shift focus and look to the potential future of the canon.

The future of Asian American literature is hard to picture and even harder to predict. This is a field that has grown and evolved immensely in only fifty years; therefore, imagining even the near future may be difficult. However, many have begun to think about the future of the field and have debated whether "Asian American" is the best moniker for this diverse group of people. Contemporary authors have challenged this broad term, with some arguing that it diminishes the authors and forces them into a category they did not choose for themselves. Some others do not identify with the term at all, such as Jia Tolentino who identifies herself more ". . . as a nonwhite person or as a brown person than as an Asian American person" (qtd. in Yu). Whereas, other authors, such as Ling Ma, have expressed their appreciation in being part of this community, saying, "I like the idea of being part of an [Asian American literary] tradition, even if I'm not sure what that means" (qtd. in Yu). This contrast shows that race alone is not always the way that authors themselves choose to define their work.

With a decentralized focus on race, we may question what makes the Asian American canon uniquely Asian American. With the mainstream popularity and surge of Asian American authors, Nguyen argues that Asian Americans may be evolving from "minority" literature to "majority." He reiterates Chin's fears, saying that the popularity of the canon may actually come with negative consequences as Asian American literature ". . . comes closer and closer to being an ethnic rather than racial literature, with the typical promise of assimilation into American culture that is attached to being called ethnic. This, of course, can be a very good thing, depending on what one wants, but it is also a cost . . ." (Nguyen 302). While being accepted into the American literary canon and recognized for their merit has long been the goal of Asian

American authors, this goal may come at the risk of assimilation. Many scholars have begun to examine literature through a "post racial" lens and have questioned what the future is for these identity-based fields. Is race the connecting point for Asian American literature or have we perhaps moved beyond that? I would like to briefly analyze these questions through the lens of my two novels and explore what they represent regarding the future of Asian American literature.

From a distance, *Little Fires* and *Edinburgh* appear to be opposites. Ng is Chinese and Chee is Korean; *Little Fires* is female focused while *Edinburgh* has a male protagonist; and the novels seem to face in opposite directions of past and future. At first, I thought that these vast differences were the spirit of contemporary Asian American literature, showing that there is truly no right way to be Asian American. In some ways I still believe this. However, in reading and analyzing both novels, I stumbled upon surprising similarities in both narrative and theme. These similarities speak to the future of Asian American literature and how the field may continue to evolve past racialized elements. The major crossover between the two novels is simple, but I would argue significant: *fire*.

Chee and Ng invoke fire throughout their text in physical and metaphorical forms with great intention. Fire has had varied significance in literature and society in general. In his article, "Fire in the mind: changing understandings of fire in Western civilization," Stephen J Pyne explores the philosophical significance that fire has maintained. He traces the meaning of fire in early mythology and religion, arguing that, "With fire, humans begin to act for themselves" (Pyne 2). Humans are set apart from all other creatures through their ability to make and wield fire for their own purposes. Thus, fire is often equated with power. This power can be freeing or damning, depending on the intentions. In many religions, fire is both sacred and an act of

vengeance used by the gods. In practical use it can save lives or cause mass destruction. Ng and Chee seem to be aware of this dual nature and explore this further in their novels.

With a title like *Little Fires Everywhere*, it is not surprising that the element holds important significance to the plot. The novel begins and ends with the same event: a house burning down. This event is described by saying, "There were little fires everywhere . . . Multiple points of origin. Possible use of accelerant. Not an accident" (Ng 7). We later learn that Izzie[14] is the one who set the fire, intentionally burning down her own home and abandoning her family. While the fire and the act are destructive, there is deeper meaning behind Izzie's actions. Izzie is the black sheep of her siblings, constantly rebelling and feeling misunderstood. During the climax of the novel, when everything seems to be falling apart, Mia tells Izzie: "Sometimes, just when you think everything's gone, you find a way . . . Like a prairie fire. I saw one, years ago, when we were in Nebraska. It seems like the end of the world. The earth is all scorched and black and everything green is gone. But after the burning the soil is richer, and new things can grow . . . People are like that, too, you know. They start over" (Ng 295). Izzie uses fire as a means to start over. Fire is devastation, but it is also hope. It allows for new beginnings from tragedy.

Chee uses fire in a similarly cathartic, but darker, purpose. Fire is present from the prologue when we are introduced to Lady Tammamo who burns herself on her lover's funeral pyre. Peter later mirrors this event when he takes his own life by setting himself on fire. In *Edinburgh*, fire is used as freedom from pain and suffering. Tammamo and Peter both see fire as the cure for the pains of this life and the means to carry them into the painless afterlife. Fee on the other hand views fire as his prison. Fire embodies his guilt, reminding him of Peter's death

[14] Izzie is the daughter of Bill Richardson, the McCullough's attorney.

and his perceived responsibility in this event. Fee recognizes the power of the element, but his emotions are rooted in anger as he questions, "How can I set this world on fire? How can I get the whole thing to burn?" (208). Rather than peace, fire only grants him pain. However, this relationship turns at the end of the novel as he is forcefully confronted with the power of the element. Like *Little Fires*, *Edinburgh* ends with a house fire. Warden sets this fire to destroy the past, burning the evidence of Fee's abuse, including the abuser himself. Although Fee is not the one who sets the fire, this symbolic gesture allows him to finally confront his trauma and reach a place of healing. This is not framed as a positive or light-hearted moment; it is dark and gritty like the rest of the novel. However, through fire, Fee finds freedom, just as Peter and Izzie do in their own ways.

The similar theme between these vastly different novels resonated with me and made me question what this could mean for the present and future of Asian American literature. When discussing the potential future meaning of fire in society, Pyne states: "The point of alternative fire metaphors is to avoid conflict, to redefine our past with fire as a symbiotic relationship . . . My best guess is that we will not create a new metaphor . . . A great movie or novel about fire will not be about fire directly, but about a gripping human drama for which fire furnishes a context" (8). I argue that this is exactly what Chee and Ng do through their narratives. They do not reinvent fire; rather, they use the already understood meaning of fire and create stories that play with these disparate identities to create new life. These authors play with both the dark and light elements of fire, showing that humans can forge a deep relationship with the element in contrasting ways. Fire is destructive and dangerous, but when yielded properly it can have a cathartic effect. However, to yield fire, you must overcome your own fear of the element.

This relationship with fire can be compared to the relationship that contemporary authors have with the field of Asian American literature. The history of the canon is powerful but misunderstood. As I have shown throughout this thesis, the origins of this field can be troublesome and perhaps scary for some authors and scholars. However, by working with these origins and confronting their challenging nature, you open possibilities for the future. *Aiiieeeee!* and its editors created a foundation that is perhaps outdated but is still sturdy enough to build on and durable enough to withstand the changes that naturally occur. Like with fire, contemporary authors are creating unique narratives, showing both the light and dark, the beauty and pain of Asian Americans.

I am not arguing that fire is a theme only used by Asian Americans, or that it is even a theme largely used by Asian American authors. I do not feel that I have read enough literature to make that claim with any expertise. However, I was surprised to see that fire was intrinsic to both the novels that I chose, and I have seen it used by other Asian American authors to similar ends. Thus, I think we can question what the significance of fire is for Asian American authors and why it has become a recurring theme in contemporary works. I believe that the themes of renewal and resistance that fire represents are appealing to contemporary Asian American authors as they forge a similar path in the field. Themes like these transcend the racial confines of the term "Asian American" and yet still speak to the spirit of Asian American literature. As we begin to explore and perhaps evolve to this post-racial lens of writing, I believe fire will continue to make thematic appearances in Asian American works.

When I set out to make this thesis my hope was that it would serve as a celebration of Asian American literature and a testament to its beauty. I believe I have done this. Through this process, I have been introduced to dozens of Asian American authors, scholars, and works, and I

have grown closer to this field that was foreign to me only a year ago. Asian American authors are diverse and talented, but too often overlooked. Therefore, I feel grateful that I have had the opportunity to bring any amount of attention to this canon and highlight the talents of Asian American artists. I would like to end my thesis with a quote that I believe captures the spirit of my research nicely:

> Tradition and movement need not be put in opposition to each other… for any literary movement can be said to need a tradition it seeks to uphold, renew, reinvent, resist, or betray. Just as important, even if a writer doesn't see him- or herself as part of either a tradition or a movement, the presence of either can add extra dimension to, more interest in, and greater influence for their writings, so that the effects of both on a writer's career can be very similar. (Song 9-10)

The historical foundations of Asian American literature do not need to compete with the contemporary works. They can and do coexist, benefiting from one another and creating a more impactful canon for the future.

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