Anti-Assimilable: 
(Re)defining Asian American Identity 

by

Ocean Gao
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Finally, this project goes out to a younger version of myself, a child who did not have the vocabulary to communicate the experience of navigating PWIs as a racialized queer, the knowledge to validate the messiness of identity, and who was so, so angry. I see you, I do not blame you, and I love you.
Introduction

Turning to the case of the aesthetic in the case of queerness is nothing like an escape from the social realm, insofar as queer aesthetics map future social relations. 

- José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*

I didn’t really think of myself as “Asian” until I started middle school in New York City. At PS141, my Asian-ness made me different; yet, because the student body had the same amount of Black and Latinx students as it did white students, it felt like everyone wore “difference” in some way. However, when I started attending the Fieldston School – a predominantly white and wealthy private school that felt worlds apart from PS141, despite it only being a ten-minute walk away – I began to loathe being Asian. “I don’t want to associate with being Asian,” I wrote in my journal, “and I’m ashamed of being Asian sometimes, even if it’s beyond my control... all I want is to feel like I can really fit into a community. I hate that I will always feel different because of the way that I look.”

In high school, I began to develop a vocabulary to conceptualize my Asian American racial identity, and felt an immediate affinity with the term “people of color” that owed to my experiences of racial ostracization and humiliation, by students and administration alike. However, I also questioned if I “really fit into” spaces that were designated for people of color, as they were centered on Blackness. “Where do I belong?” I wrote in my journal, “Nowhere, no place, no room for the in-between. Not Black, not white. Not Chinese, not American. Not straight, not gay.”

My experience navigating an Asian American identity, then, has been a negotiation of existing in “in-between” spaces. For me, these liminal spaces have resulted in yearning for a sense of belonging, and for “home.” In many ways, I believe I have searched for belonging through my Asian American identity; as Nayan Shah

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writes, after all, “identity is about belonging.”2 Yet, because of its ethnic heterogeneity and lack of collective “culture,” I’ve found it hard to find something that bonds all of Asian America, aside from the fact that we have an ambiguous tie to the vast continent of Asia, and reside in the United States. And, what’s more, I can’t help but feel as if people have been so focused on the meaning of identitarian labels, that we forget to examine why they are produced in the first place.

My project, then, was born out of an exploration of what it means to embrace an Asian American identity, looking to its past, present, and potential future. However, because my entry point into this project was so personal, my analysis of Asian America – as a Chinese American person – is pretty East Asian-centric, focusing on ideas (such as the model minority) that are not applicable to all Asian American subjects.3

Whereas the project’s written chapters connotate my research on Asian America’s past and present, I have primarily used visual art as a means of imagining Asian America’s futurity. Visual art, for me, is always political, a “form of dissensus that suspends or breaks away from rules of engagement and assigned places,” allowing me to envision alternatives to today.4 As bell hooks writes, “the function of art is to do more than tell it like it is – it’s to imagine what is possible.”5 Thus, this project might be read like an exhibition catalogue, where each chapter corresponds to one print.

The visual arts component of this project is composed of three relief prints: two woodblocks, and one plexiglass (acrylic) block.6 The woodblock prints that correlate

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3 This is essentially to say that it is not equally as easy for all Asian American subjects to assimilate, based on a wide variety of factors, including (but not limited to) skin color and socioeconomic class.
6 Relief printing is a process in which an image is carved into a block (typically wood or linoleum), inked, and pressed onto a surface material (typically paper), to achieve an image from the raised areas of the printing block.
with chapters one and two were created by carving into the surface of woodblock using various knives and gauges, as well as a laser cutter, which allowed me to engrave the text components onto the blocks. The entirety of the plexiglass print that corresponds with chapter three, too, was rasterized with the laser cutter. With the exception of “Palatability” (chapter one), which was created using a reductive process, each of the prints can be reproduced. My prints’ reproducibility speaks to building a collective Asian American consciousness, as I was inspired by the accessibility of protest posters as an art form.

In chapter one, I introduce dominant narratives of Asian American identity through representations of Asian foodways, particularly through the animated short film Bao. I argue that Bao, which uses food to symbolize Chinese culture, tells the quintessentially palatable story of Asian America, where a “cultural gap” between immigrant parents and American-born children prevents the American-born’s social success and assimilation. I argue that my print, on the other hand, is antithetical to Bao, encouraging narratives that blow up hegemonic understandings of what it means to be Asian American.

Chapter two continues to portrays dominant representations of Asian America, particularly through the stereotype of “yellow peril” and that of the “model minority.” Moreover, in exploring the history of Asian American activism, I suggest that even though the construction of Asian American identity was largely informed by Black Power, there were not many instances of Afro-Asian solidarity in the U.S., as defined by Black and Asian American people organizing together. Additionally, I read the desire for Afro-Asian solidarity as part of a potential Asian American identity that

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7 A reductive printmaking process involves printing separate colors from the same block. After the first color (typically the lightest) is printed, the block is “reduced” by carving away the areas that the second color is then printed in. This process continues for each color. Because the block is “reduced,” stage by stage, it is impossible to re-create earlier stages. The multiple colors in the “Yellow Peril Supports Black Power” print (chapter two), on the other hand, were created by printing three different blocks over the same area.
also refutes the model minority, is not driven by nationalist desires, and is critical of the State’s ability to co-opt even coalitional politics.

Through the lens of queerness, chapter three consolidates an understanding of Asian American identity that is defined as a non-normative and anti-state political formation. I also argue that queerness emphasizes the ways in which Asian Americans can seek belonging: that is, through non-normative notions of kinship (chosen families), and within liminal spaces. Queerness, too, is essentially what ties each of these prints together, in that they all envision a queer Asian American identity that is rooted in political affiliation, and in “a desire for another way of being in both the world and time.” Jennifer Ho writes that identity is “the keyword that undergirds the field of Asian American studies… [continuing] to underpin so much of the work that Asian American studies scholars produce.” My project contributes to a larger field of study, then, asserting an Asian American identity that is not palatable, not the model minority, and, and its heart, anti-assimilable.

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8 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 96.
Chapter One
Palatability

1. Make sure the diameter of the pipe casing is around 2" long, and that the length is no longer than 8".

2. Drill a 1/8" hole in one of the pipe caps (for the fuse). Screw the other pipe cap onto one end of pipe.

3. For the filling, firework powder works great. Alternatively, you can also use actual gunpowder.

4. Pour the powder filling into the pipe, fitting in as much as possible. Connect the fuse with the blasting cap.

5. Place blasting cap in the pipe and slide the drilled pipe cap over the fuse. Screw it on tightly.
Asian cuisine in the U.S. has always been a means of representing the racialization of Asian American bodies, an index of how “social hierarchies of power have been inscribed on [Asian American] bodies.” Wenying Xu points out the significance of food and eating in the racial formation that renders Asian Americans as foreigners, writing that racialization “has been achieved prominently through the mainstream’s representation and appropriation of Asian foodways.” Additionally, in *Keywords for Asian American Studies*, under the entry “food,” Anita Mannur notes that the excessiveness of Asian cuisines – “too different, too spicy, too sour, too pungent, too malodorous” – particularly racializes Asian American bodies through the sense of “olfactory otherness”; the trope of the “smelly immigrant” marks and derides the Asian American body through ethnic food odors: kimchee, curry, etc.

Historically, visual representations also tied the Asian American body to the food that they consumed, marking them as uncivilized and “backwards.” For example, a trade card (shown in figures 1-2) published in the 1880s depicts a Chinese man – with a long pigtail, coolie hat, and embroidered clothing – about to consume a rat. Not only does this image point to the foulness of supposed Chinese eating habits, but it also illustrates the Chinese man, himself, as a rat. The man’s pigtail, in particular, visually indicates his resemblance to rats, which is especially pronounced in the version of the trading card (shown in figure 2) that illustrates the man’s hair as a rattail, smooth and tapering off at the end. This visual association between rat and Chinese man suggests that Chinese people – like the rats that they purportedly consumed – were carriers of disease, uncivilized, and dirty. The text reading “THEY

13 Trade cards were essentially a cross between modern-day business cards and advertising flyers, popular from the mid 1880’s to 90’s.
MUST GO”, then, refers not only to the literal rats, but also to Chinese people living in the U.S.

Figure 1 (left): “Rough on Rats,” date unknown. New York Public Library. Figure 2 (right): Forbes Co. Boston. “Rough on Rats’ Trading Card,” 1880s. www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/texts/rough-on-rats

On the other hand, however, Asian cuisines in American culture have also come to represent the way in which certain Asian American bodies are deemed palatable. The mainstream’s acceptance of specific, assimilated Asian American bodies – as represented through their foodways – is the most evident in “East/West fusion” cuisines. Anita Mannur writes that “Asian spices and ingredients [have been] privileged in fusion cuisine, a kind of hybrid cooking that is at once reminiscent of model minority discourse–Asian ingredients assimilate quietly into the culinary scape of American cuisine creating a newer and better but 'unobtrusive' blend of flavors–all
the while subduing the brash excessiveness of what is unpalatable and inedible.”

Mark Padoongpatt has historicized these fusion dishes – which merged “Oriental” and “American” cuisines – as a result of an attempt to “make the exotic familiar to the American palate while [simultaneously] trying to maintain the food’s novelty and foreignness.” Similarly, Wenying Xu has noted a pattern among white chefs who, to this day, appropriate Asian ingredients to make their own dishes seem more interesting. Xu adds that “in such fusion [dishes between East and West], the East and West often are not equal partners” – “European cuisines occupy a dominant position while Asian cuisines complement and embellish.”

The position of Asian ingredients in East/West fusion dishes is comparable to popular media’s trope of the Asian sidekick, who lends an air of multicultural “diversity” without becoming the story’s focus. Thus, the widespread acceptance of Asian cuisines in the United States alludes to the (white) mainstream’s conditional acceptance of Asian American bodies, whose narratives are palatable, and foreignness is contained.

It is not surprising, then, that the most popular portrayals of food in Asian American narratives use food to tell stories about assimilation into the white mainstream. In these stories, an Asian culture – symbolized through its ethnic food – is presented as an hindrance to assimilation. Pooja Makhijani’s “School Lunch,” for example, is about a second-generation Indian American girl who rejects the Indian foods her mother packs her for lunch, and instead “want[s] to touch a cold, red Coca-Cola can,” or “a yellow Lunchables box” (152). Her desire implies that the consumption of these quintessentially “American” foods will result in her white classmates’ social acceptance; yet, because the problem is that her mother will not pack these foods, the obstacle for Asian American social success becomes framed as a domestic issue, a product of intergenerational cultural differences.

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14 Ibid., 97.
16 Xu, Eating Identities, 8.
*Bao*, the first Pixar production made by an Asian woman, Domee Shi, also follows a script of using food to represent a domestically-controlled barrier to assimilation. The short film also evidences the notion that Asian American bodies are, to this day, seen and read through representations of their foodways, as *Bao* tells the story of a Chinese Canadian mother and son as the story of a woman and her dumpling. The film’s success, moreover, reveals that Asian American narratives are most easily digested by the white mainstream when they cater to dominant ideas about Asian America – initially released in 2018, *Bao* went on to win an Oscar award for Best Animated Short film, in 2019.

The short begins when a woman makes a dumpling that comes alive; she raises the dumpling as her son – feeding it, marking its growth with a pencil on the wall, and bathing it in a pot of hot water when it injures itself. Soon, the dumpling-child makes to join other children in playing soccer, instead of doing tai chi with his mother, and becomes angry when she doesn’t allow him to do so. When she offers him a treat, normally shared between them on bus rides home, he turns away from her. This refusal marks a turning point in the film where he becomes increasingly focused on spending time with his friends, while slowly shutting his mother out. Finally, when he brings home his fiancée – a white woman – and begins to move out, his mother resorts to eating her dumpling-son, so that he cannot leave. As she lies crying about what she has done, her real (human) son – whose face shape resembles that of the dumpling – comes into her room. Looking regretful, he offers her the treat they had, at one time, shared together on bus rides home, and she reluctantly accepts. *Bao’s* last scene takes place at the kitchen table, where the mother, son, and his fiancée all wrap dumplings together.

In the reception of this animated short, many were quick to declare it a “moving encapsulation of the Asian-immigrant experience,” one think-piece cheekily stating that “it doesn’t take a deep philosophical thinker to recognize that *Bao* [is] a
metaphor for the Chinese experience.”\textsuperscript{17} Bao’s narration of this Chinese-immigrant experience, then, uses food as a primary marker of Chinese culture. The son’s rejection of Chinese food – drinking soda by himself rather than cooking edamame with his mother, refusing her home-cooked Chinese food to hang out with his American/Canadian friends – represents not only his rejection of Chinese culture, but also his overly-controlling mother. Similarly, that the son’s demonstration of remorse is through offering his mother the Chinese treats they had once shared, suggests that his “coming back” to his mother is simultaneously a “coming back” to his Chinese culture. Thus, the short’s ending scene, where the son makes dumplings with both his Chinese mother and white Canadian fiancée, represents the son’s reconciliation of a cultural identity that is both Chinese and Canadian. In a review of Bao, writer Inkoo Kang states that “all children go through a period of distancing themselves from their parents, but that process for many children of immigrants involves rejecting aspects of the culture that they’d grown up with.”\textsuperscript{18} Bao’s depiction of a cultural gap between mother and son, then, is why many viewers think of Bao as a quintessentially “Asian American” film.

Perhaps the mainstream response to Bao, too, renders it a familiar “Asian American” tale. When I saw Bao in theaters, it was hard to ignore the white teenage boys in front of me who laughed in shock, horror, and confusion when the mother ate her dumpling son, remarking about how they did not understand the “weird” film at all. When Bao later went on to win an Oscar, then, I could not help but recall the history of Chinese food in the U.S. – something that was historically “smelly and gross,” only to be celebrated now. In Bao’s case, despite its “weird” and unpalatable climax of a mother eating her son, the short essentially tells the classically palatable

\textsuperscript{17} Ho, David. "OPINION: Confusion over Bao is Nothing New for Immigrants." \textit{AsAm News}, August 9, 2018.

Asian American narrative, where food is a site that represents a cultural gap between immigrant parents and American-born children, which is the barrier to the American-born’s social success. This is not to say that it is wrong, necessarily, for Bao to tell this story of Asian America – it is certainly a relatable one – but that Bao’s story has already been hammered in to Asian America. If it is not the center of a narrative, like in Makhijani’s aforementioned “School Lunch,” it is a moment in Jhumpa Lahiri’s “Only Goodness” that remarks on “parents [that] had always been blind to the things that plagued their children: being teased at school for the color of their skin or for the funny [potato curry sandwiches] their mother occasionally put into their lunch boxes,” or the “bacon and eggs [our sons insisted on eating] every morning for breakfast instead of bean-paste soup” in Julie Otsuka’s The Buddha in the Attic. Moreover, that this narrative of food – representing an Asian American desire for assimilation that is hindered by cultural differences in the familial/private sphere – is the one accepted into the mainstream, reveals how white power structures work to hide the effects of white racism, the real “barrier” to Asian American social success/assimilation.

In Sau-ling Cynthia Wong’s foundational 1993 Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance Wong writes that “the notion of cultural conflict between the immigrant and American born generations—the enlightened, freedom-loving son or daughter struggling to escape the clutches of backward,

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19 Though the moment where the mother eats her dumpling-son is the film’s biggest twist, the theme of quasi-cannibalism is not new to representations of an “Asian American experience.” In fact, in her foundational 1993 Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance, Sau-ling Cynthia Wong writes that though “like devouring like’ probably appears to most people as a rather unusual and extreme motif... it appears in several other Asian American works depicting relationships between immigrant parents and American-born children” (31). Referencing works by Maxine Hong Kingston, Fae Myenne Ng, Amy Tan, and Frank Chin, Wong writes that the American-born children in these works “identify with the creatures slaughtered for food, [experiencing] the parents’ attempts to pass on the doctrine of usefulness as a kind of force-feeding; and... frequently feel themselves sacrificed—made into a food source—for the parents” (37).

20 I will be the first to admit that I, caught off-guard by how relatable this short film was, sobbed when I first saw it in theaters (even in front of my date.)
tyrannical parents—is one of the most powerful ‘movies’ ever created to serve hegemonic American ideology.” Representing Asian-immigrant culture as a combination of the limiting, traditional Asian culture and the liberated Western culture, then, is palatable for the white mainstream, following dominant narratives of Western countries as oppositional to backwards-thinking Eastern countries. The palatability of Bao’s narrative is heightened by relegating “Asian American problems” to the domestic/private sphere, erasing white-enforced racism from the picture entirely— if the dumpling-son’s quest is ultimately to assimilate, the only barriers depicted are his Asian parents, as opposed to white America. In “A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia,” David Eng and Shinhee Han write that “the segregation of Asian American health issues into the domain of cultural difference… covers over the need to investigate structural questions of social inequity.” In a similar vein, Lisa Lowe adds that “interpreting Asian American culture exclusively in terms of the master narratives of generational conflict and filial relation essentializes Asian American culture, obscuring the particularities and incommensurabilities of class, gender, and national diversities among Asians.”

Within the realm of Asian American representation, more generally, it is actually quite common for artists to represent their culture or ethnic identity through food. Author Frank Chin notes that Asian Americans writings are frequently more visible when focused on the culinary, perhaps because, as cultural critic Sneja Gunew points out, food is “one of the few unthreatening ways to speak of multi-

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22 Wong, Sau-ling Cynthia. “Big Eaters, Treat Lovers, ‘Food Prostitutes,’ ‘Food Pornographers,’ and Doughnut Makers,” in Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance (Princeton University Press, 1993), 41. She adds that “intergenerational cultural conflicts are real and often serious, but often they serve as convenient fictions veiling more unruly issues, such as those of economic equity” (40).
culturalism… the usual way in which this diversity is acceptably celebrated is through a multicultural food festival.”25 Anita Mannur, however, has warned against the oversimplification of food-as-ethnicity, writing that though food is the “easiest and most profitable way to represent ethnicity,” and can be helpful in that it focuses on the “everyday” as the site that racializes Asian Americans, it renders ethnicity as a “transactable commodity.”26 In other words, using food as a signifier for ethnicity renders ethnicity as something that be consumed at one’s will, rather than something that is embodied. In Bao’s case, if the son’s representation as a dumpling illustrates how Asian Americans are racialized through their cuisines, the son’s later depiction as a human suggests that assimilation into the white mainstream and away from the “Asian home and culture” removes the bodily markers that racialize an Asian American body.

In many works, moreover, using food to represent an ethnic culture creates a binary of American culture/ethnic culture, an idea that describes culture as discrete and immutable.27 The notion of an authentic culture is heavily tied to representations of Asian American culinary practices, where a diasporic subject’s desire for home manifests in a longing for an “unchanging and enduring cultural essence” that may be found in ethnic cuisine.28 Mannur – and a myriad of other Asian American scholars – is critical of the notion of an “authentic culture,” writing that “the historical circulation of commodities and spices between colonized spaces has sullied the bases of defining a ‘pure’ [ethnic] cuisine.”29 In other words, histories of relation between different cultures have inextricably connected and altered them, rendering “culture” as

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26 Mannur, Culinary Fictions, 151.
27 Mannur, Culinary Fictions, 29.
28 Ibid., 31.
29 Ibid., 35.
entirely and constantly in flux, and therefore “authentic culture” as virtually nonexistent.

There are plenty of Asian American works, however, that do not use food to represent essentialized notions of culture. For example, Sau-ling Wong has written about Asian American works that use food, instead, to testify to the hardships of immigration and histories of labor exploitation of Asian American people. She argues that Necessity has united immigrants across Asian American literature, resulting in their “efficient eating,” or “ability to eat unpromising substances and to… convert [them] into nutrition.”³⁰ Wenyong Xu historicizes the relationship between Asian American bodies and food, writing that “harsh circumstances” made undesirable work in the food industry one of the only work options for Asian American people, who “did what others wouldn’t.”³¹ Anita Mannur, moreover, has praised Shani Mootoo’s writings for her characters’ distrust of originality and purity, which produce spaces for “culinary signs [to be] read anew,” and forges a future “through creative acts of misrecognition.”³²

Thinking along these line of futurity, “Palatability” is a manifestation of my imagining a potential representation of Asian America. By taking dumpling imagery, which is popularly associated with Chinese culture, and juxtaposing it with instructions on how to assemble a pipe bomb, my print recodes Chinese American culture and identity as essentially unpalatable, and speaks to the ways in which identity/culture is made, instead of generationally transmitted or inherited. The print’s association of innocuous dumplings with a bomb-assembly instructional is

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³¹ Xu, Eating Identities, 12. On the history of Asian American bodies and food, Anita Mannur adds that “whether it is the Chinese waiters, cooks, or busboys; Vietnamese shrimp boat operators in Texas; Hmong meatpackers in northern Minnesota; Filipino and Japanese laborers in the plantation economies of Hawai‘I,… or Bangladeshi and Punjabi seamen in Indian restaurants in New York City… employment within restaurants, as tenant farmers, and migrant workers link Asian American livelihood to food” (“Food,” in Keywords for Asian American Studies, 96).
intended to produce the same feelings of shock and confusion that the quasi-
cannibalsitic moment in *Bao* does, a brief moment of cognitive dissonance – resulting
from a non-palatable interruption, whether in *Bao’s* cannibalism or in my print – that
points to the myriad of ways in which one story can be told, in which a narrative can
stray from an audience’s expectations. Thus, my print, as well as *Bao’s* moment of
quasi-cannibalism (which is, arguably, the film’s most compelling moment), asks, *how
have other people told the story of – more broadly – being Asian American?*

A brief reaction of shock and confusion, however, might be the only thing
that “Palatability” shares with *Bao*. In many ways, my print’s message can be read as
oppositional to *Bao’s* – whereas cannibalism suggests one’s turning-in on themselves,
and consuming their own, a bomb’s explosion is directed at others, the antithesis of
containment. Whereas *Bao* drops a “child-of-an-Asian-immigrant guilt bomb”
(according to film critic Alison Wilmore), “Palatability” encodes a bombing of Asian
American palatability. To borrow José Muñoz’s language, “Palatability” can be read as
“disidentificatory” – “using [the code of the majority] as raw material for representing
a… politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant
culture.”

In other words, as opposed to how *Bao* uses a non-palatable image to tell
the ultimate palatable narrative, “Palatability” uses a palatable image to tell an
explosive narrative that encourages Asian American bodies and the stories they tell to
be disruptive, destructive, and un-consumable. Using the same color inks as a spread
of Asian American posters documented in a 1982 edition of *Bridge* (shown in figures
3–4), moreover, “Palatability” pays tribute to an Asian American visual history of
unpalatable narratives, the making of culture, and self-determination.

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33 Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*
    (University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 31.
34 Willmore, Alison. On Twitter, 2018.
    www.twitter.com/alisonwillmore/status/1006332834125139973
In the introduction to this poster retrospective edition of *Bridge*, art director C.N. Lee writes, “through the posters we can see how we identify, celebrate, listen, ‘get down,’ give, struggle and remember. The posters act as a prelude to what is to happen and as a historical reminder of what did” (3).
Chapter Two
Yellow Peril
The dominant imagery in my “Yellow Peril Supports Black Power” poster consists of a tiger and a panther, who, at the center of the poster, appear to be circling one another. If the print’s text did not include “support”, one could easily interpret the two animals as antagonistic forces, ready to fight one another. This is, after all, the dominant understanding of Yellow and Black people in the popular U.S. consciousness: within the realm of non-white bodies, East Asian (“Yellow”) Americans – including people of Chinese, Korean, and/or Japanese descent – and Black Americans are depicted as opposites. Yellow people are quiet, Black people are loud; Yellow people are timid and meek, Black people are aggressive; Yellow people are Crazy Rich Asians, Black people are poor, etc. Popular representations of Yellow and Black bodies place us at odds with one another, such as in the 1992 Los Angeles Riots, where media coverage framed the looting and destruction of Korean-owned stores by Black Americans as a result of conflict and growing tensions between the two communities.

My print’s text, however – “Yellow Peril Supports Black Power” – encourages audiences to think beyond Yellow/Black antagonism. The panther and tiger’s mirrored poses evoke the yin-yang symbol, suggesting that Yellow Peril (as embodied by the tiger) and Black Power (as represented by the panther) can actually be conceived of as interconnected and interdependent. That the representation of these racial ideologies are both a species of large cat, moreover, suggests a commonality between the racial positioning of bodies of Yellow Peril and bodies of Black Power.

“Yellow peril,” as defined by historian Roger Daniels, is “this irrational fear of Oriental conquest, with its racist and sexfantasy overtones.”35 Gary Okihiro adds that, like Orientalism, yellow peril was the hegemonic racialization of Asian people up

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until around the 1960’s.\textsuperscript{36} Within the context of the U.S., Okihiro argues that the foundation for yellow perilism were themes of “imperialism, migration, and economic competition,” and that this ideology was the driving force behind Japanese internment.\textsuperscript{37} In other words, the idea of “yellow peril” situated yellow bodies and countries as threats towards white empires, such as the U.S. and England. Within the U.S., however, the dominant racialization of Asian Americans shifted from “yellow peril” to the position of the “model minority” after Japan’s loss in WWII.

The term “model minority” was coined by sociologist William Petersen in a 1966 edition of the \textit{New York Times Magazine}, where he reported that Japanese Americans’ family structure and cultural values allowed them to “climb out of the slums” and overcome discrimination.\textsuperscript{38} This occurred at a time where Asian Americans began gaining rights to “naturalization, immigration, and interracial marriage.”\textsuperscript{39} While model minority discourse seemed to praise Chinese and Japanese Americans, the underlying purpose of this rhetoric served to denigrate Black Americans, blaming them for being unable to “overcome” the systemic obstacles of anti-Black racism.\textsuperscript{40} The \textit{U.S. News and World Report}, for example, explicitly wrote that “it must be recognized that the Chinese and other Orientals in California were faced with even more prejudice than faces the Negro today. We haven't stuck Negros in concentration camps, for instance, as we did the Japanese in World War II. The Orientals came back, and today they have established themselves as strong

\textsuperscript{36} Maeda, Daryl J. \textit{Chains of Babylon: the Rise of Asian America} (University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 77.
\textsuperscript{39} Maeda, \textit{Chains of Babylon}, 77.
\textsuperscript{40} In regards to these systemic obstacles, Claire Kim writes in \textit{Bitter Fruit: The Politics of Black–Korean Conflict in New York City}, about how New York employers operate on “old-fashioned racism—or discrimination based on the construction of Blacks (especially Black men) as undesirable (lazy, dishonest, unreliable) employees” (31), and attributes “increasing rates of overall and extreme poverty, deepening income inequalities, and persistently low
contributors to the health of the whole community.”

Suggesting that the cultural values and hard work of Asian Americans allowed them to succeed, financially and socially, implies (with some instances being more explicit than others) that all marginalized races should be able to do the same; and if they remain racially and economically subordinated, it is because of their own doing. Thus, the most harmful aspect of the model minority stereotype is that it perpetuates the myth of the American Dream – it is a “liberal antiracism” that acknowledges racism only to say that it [the racism] no longer is relevant, as it can be overcome through individual hard work.

The model minority myth, then, commends the culture, attitudes, and family structures of Asian Americans, only in order to denigrate that of Black Americans.

The image of the model minority, too, works to pit Asian and Black Americans against one another. In “Racist Love,” Frank Chin writes that the “assimilable alien is posed as an exemplary minority against the bad example of the blacks… trained to respond to the black not the white majority as the single most potent threat to his status.” Chin argues that Asian Americans are conditioned to internalize the notion that they are – compared to Black Americans – the superior minority. As a result, the model minority has historically worked as an ideological tool that hinders any potential coalition-building between the two races, bolstering the idea that Asian and Black Americans are antipodal minorities.

Perhaps the most infamous example of how the model minority impeded Afro-Asian relations is in the 1992 LA Riots, which the media framed as a conflict between Korean storekeepers and Black customers. In Blue Dreams, however, Nancy

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41 Peterson, “Success Story, Japanese American Style.”
Abelmann and John Lie argue that this emphasis on the Black/Korean conflict “diverts our attention from more pressing problems.”\(^{44}\) The media’s depiction of the LA Riots as a culmination of rising tensions between Black and Korean Americans worked to localize the issue, framing it as a result of cultural differences between Black and Korean people: on the media coverage of the riots, Abelmann and Lie write, “at the heart of the interethnic contrast lies the Korean American entrepreneur–independent and diligent–who embodies the promise of capitalism and the free enterprise system… [personifying] the values of individual responsibility and family solidarity, while African Americans stand for welfare dependence and family dissolution.”\(^{45}\) The framing of Korean Americans as the model minority, in the case of the LA Riots, harmed African Americans in that it detracted from their frustrations towards the larger structural, socioeconomic inequality between Black and white neighborhoods in Los Angeles (as well as the police brutality that sparked the LA Riots to begin with), and instead framed their anger as a result of tension with another ethnic group. Framing the LA Riots as a conflict between two minority groups, moreover, “[evaded] recognition of the collective responsibility of white Americans for material and institutional inequity,”\(^{46}\) making “the problem” essentially more manageable for the majority (white) group. In this case, the model minority stereotype also harmed Korean Americans, in that it “contributed to African American hate crimes against Korean Americans.”\(^{47}\) In an interview that Abelmann and Lie conducted with Roy Hong of the Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates,

\(^{46}\) Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*, 24.
\(^{47}\) Abelmann and Lie, *Blue Dreams*, 157. The study of African American hate crimes against Korean Americans was conducted by E. Erick Schockman. Many other African Americans, however, did note that the black/Korean conflict “was overstated by the media” (192, Charles Simmons: 1993) or that the interethnic conflict was “a diversion to get us not to think about the real problem, which is the oppressor, which is the major majority which are whites” (8, Nate II of the Watergate Crips: 1992).
moreover, Hong stated that “the politicians are again exploiting the Koreans by appearing to favor us.”

However, “even if the stereotype of the model minority designates some form of social death for Asian Americans, by relegating to them a socio-political impotence, this tragic narrative… hides the complicity of some Asian Americans in their own racialization.” In the case of the LA Riots, for example, there were many Korean American storekeepers who indeed believed stereotypes about their economic success, and of Black people and laziness; though the “primary source of [their] racism towards African Americans is the American racial ideology,” it is important to acknowledge that Korean Americans were complicit in structural anti-Blackness.

Historically, moreover, it has been common for Asian ethnic groups in the U.S. to engage in anti-Blackness. After World War II, for example, Chinese Mississippeans sought to be granted a status of “honorary whiteness” by distancing themselves from Black Americans. Susan Koshy’s “Morphing Race into Ethnicity” discusses the “white power structure that determined the terms of racial mobility” for these Chinese Mississippeans, which allowed for their racial and economic mobility, as long as they “[furthered] the racial hierarchy and denigration of African-Americans” and reaffirmed a “posture of deference [to] the superiority of whites… [catering] aggressively and remorselessly to the [white] ruling class.”

In order for Asian Americans to become economically successful, then, they ultimately had to buy into the idea of the model minority, or an assimilation into whiteness at the expense of other non-white groups. However, this form of

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48 Ibid., 154.
50 Abelmann and Lie, Blue Dreams, 150.
52 It is also noteworthy, however, that an attempt by Black Americans to achieve racial/economic mobility in the U.S. through pointing out their differences from Asian
economic success, dependent on accepting the model minority stereotype, also meant that Asian Americans needed to “accept and live in a state of euphemized self-contempt,” where they accepted “white standards of objectivity, beauty, behavior, and achievement as being morally absolute, and [their] acknowledge of the fact that, because [they are] not white, [they] can never fully measure up to white standards.” A 2014 journal of the Center on Race and Social Problems examined the sense of “never being good enough” and pressure to succeed in young Asian American women as a means of understanding their relatively high risk of suicidal behavior. Writing that though “the empirical literature exploring predictors of suicidality among Asian Americans is relatively sparse… emerging epidemiological literature suggests that… internalization of the model minority stereotype… [is] associated with suicidal ideation or suicide attempts.” The model minority myth also contributes to the underreporting of Asian American mental illness; David Eng and Shinhee Han write that “to occupy the model minority position, Asian American subjects must follow this prescribed model of economic integration and forfeit political representation as well as cultural voice… they must not contest the dominant order of things; they

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53 Chin, Frank and Jeffery Paul Chan, "Racist Love," 67.
must not ‘rock the boat’ or draw attention to themselves. It is difficult for Asian Americans to express any legitimate political, economic, or social needs, as the stereotype demands not only an enclosed but also a passive self-sufficiency.\textsuperscript{56} Thus, even though the model minority myth is framed as a “positive,” it has had a detrimental effect on Asian American mental health.\textsuperscript{57}

For the racialization of East Asian Americans, however, minority discourse has been dominant to this day, with a 2015 article in the \textit{New York Times} entitled “The Asian Advantage.”\textsuperscript{58} Today, the widespread fact that “the median household income of Asian Americans is even greater than that of White Americans” is used to point to Asian American exceptionalism. Indeed, without context, this fact tells a story in which anyone can be economically successful in the U.S., if they try hard enough. What this myth conveniently ignores is the context behind why the median household income of Asian Americans is relatively high – the majority of Asian adults in the U.S. (with statistics in recent years ranging from 74-80\%) were born abroad, and many already had some degree of economic and/or educational privilege before entering the U.S.\textsuperscript{59} Moreover, their entry into the U.S. was because of State interest – one “wave of Asian immigrants arrived,” for example, “after the 1990 Immigrant Act that sought skilled workers during the tech boom. Many of the latest


\textsuperscript{57} As a tool to uphold white dominance, the model minority myth erases any form of cultural racism against Asian Americans by focusing on the financial comfort of some Asian ethnicities. By doing so, moreover, the myth homogenizes Asian America and erases those who are not financially well-off. In a review of Southeast Asian American education, Bic Ngo and Stacey Lee write that “the data of Asian American… achievement are frequently aggregated. Significantly, aggregate data mask the tremendous differences in achievement and attainment across Asian ethnic groups.” Ngo and Lee cite the 2000 U.S. Census, writing that “Hmong Americans averaged the lowest per capita income of any ethnic group included in the 2000 census,” when incomes of Southeast Asian families are disaggregated into average per capita (per-person) income. Moreover, “with the exception of Vietnamese Americans, when compared with the per capita income of other racial and ethnic groups, Southeast Asians earned less than any other group. (Ngo, Bic and Stacey Lee. “Complicating the Image of Model Minority Success: A Review of Southeast Asian American Education,” in \textit{Review of Educational Research} (2007), 415-453.)


arrivals came from India, initially under the high-skilled H-1B visa program.” The economic and educational success of Asians in the U.S. paradoxically contributes to both the image of the assimilated model minority, and that of the threatening yellow peril.

Because of the relatively recent rise of Asian capital on the global stage, there remains the notion that these “Yellow” people – specifically the Chinese – are “taking over” U.S. spaces. A New York Times article, for example, stated that “since June 11 [2018], the State Department has been restricting visas for Chinese graduate students studying in sensitive research fields to one year... the move rolls back an Obama-era policy that allowed Chinese citizens to secure five-year student visas.” A report from Inside Higher Ed, moreover, revealed that students from Washington University in St. Louis purported that Asian students were invaders of study spaces. The same article quoted an associate professor at the University of Maryland at College Park, who said that “the characterization of Asian students as ‘taking over’ is common.” Sure enough, the phenomenon that Asian students are “taking over” spaces of higher education are not new (and recalls a YouTube video posted in 2011, by a student at the University of California, Los Angeles, that criticized Asian students for talking loudly in the library), though this notion has been heightened by, or has shifted with, the U.S. Presidential election of Donald Trump. President Trump has said, explicitly, that “it’s time to take a stand on China. We have no choice. It’s been a long time. They’re hurting us.” His view of China as “a strategic competitor that

60 Jan, Tracy. “This racial group has the biggest – and fastest-growing – income divide.” The Washington Post, July 12, 2018.
requires a more aggressive response by the United States,” directly reflects a fear of China as a country that threatens the economic power of the United States. These statements reflect a fear that “Asian manufactures and goods would compete with and ultimately supplant European products,” a quality of yellow perilism, from an article written in 1895. Though the ghosts of yellow peril remain, then, and are being recalled in the current political climate, its ideology (and terminology) is not nearly as hegemonic, today, as the model minority stereotype.

To call back “yellow peril,” then, as a means of self-identification in this day and age, is to acknowledge, recall, and reclaim a history of racism against Asian Americans. To use “yellow peril,” especially in conjunction with black power, is to vehemently reject the image of the model minority, to reject the idea that Asian Americans are passive, silent, and docile. The positioning of the tiger and the panther in my print, moreover, suggests that there can only be harmony between Black and Yellow subjects when there is an explicit rejection of the model minority myth – without the statement, the tiger and panther may as well appear to be antagonistic forces. That is to say, a yellow-ness that accepts model minority rhetoric, is one that inherently cannot be in harmony with Black power/self-determination.

In this poster’s context, to call back “yellow peril” also changes the meaning of what yellow peril was in its original iteration. One could argue that this shift in meaning is reclamatory in nature, and empowers Yellow people to reappropriate a negative image so that its meaning is no longer derogatory. However, one could also argue that to change the meaning of “yellow peril” erases the history behind the term, rendering it commonplace.

The first recorded appearance of the specific phrase “Yellow Peril Supports Black Power” stems from a photograph taken of Richard Aoki, who holds a sign with

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65 Ward, Alex. “Trump’s China strategy is the most radical in decades – and it’s failing.” *Vox*, September 19, 2018.
this phrase during a 1968 rally to free Huey Newton, one of the co-founders of the Black Panthers. The “Free Huey” campaign began after Newton was convicted of voluntary manslaughter of Oakland police officer John Frey (a conviction that was overturned three years later.)

The following year, at another action to Free Huey, the same sign appears again, in a photograph taken by Roz Payne, in Oakland.67

Daryl Maeda, in Chains of Babylon, cites Free Huey actions as an example of Asian Americans working together with Black Americans, writing that “carrying posters written in Asian languages [as depicted in figure 6] was an important statement for a group composed chiefly of native-born Asian Americans whose primary language was almost assuredly English. The posters suggested that Asian

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American support for Newton derived from their own identities as racialized people. Furthermore, pointing to the racialization of Asian Americans drew an implicit parallel between the travails of blacks and Asian Americans.68 To say Yellow Peril Supports Black Power, then, is to also suggest some common oppression between Asian and Black people, especially because “the idea of yellow peril [in its original conception] does not derive solely from the alleged threat posed by Asians to Europeans... but from nonwhite people, as a collective group, and their contestation of white supremacy.”69 In Afro-Asia, an anthology of “linkages, connections, cross-cultural borrowing, and mutual solidarity” of Afro-Asian encounter, Fred Ho and Bill Mullen write that “from the earliest days of the United States, Africans and Asians have been linked in a shared tradition of resistance to class and racial exploitation and oppression,” pointing to the Asiatic coolie trade that emerged with the formal abolition of African slavery (which “brought Asian laborers, often on the very same ships that transported captured Africans, to the very same plantation societies in the West.”)70 Vijay Prashad, moreover, in his Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting, uses the term “polyculturalism” – an idea grounded in anti-racism, rather than institutional multicultural diversity – to describe the blending of working-class Afro-Asian cultural practices. In particular, Prashad cites the Hosay festival (that was East Indian originated, but ended up being a regionwide holiday in the British West Indies for “African, Amerindian, Chinese, and other” workers) that ended up turning into a labor protest in 1884.71 It is notable that Prashad’s analysis of polyculturalism looks

68 Maeda, Chains of Babylon, 84.
69 Okihiro and Jung, Margins and Mainstreams, 120.
71 Prashad, Vijay, Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 79-81. A Guyanese planter, for example, recorded in 1884 that the Hosay had "gradually degenerated into a Saturnalia in which Hindus, Mohammedans, and Negroes mingle promiscuously."
specifically at cultural mixing within the working-class of the British territories in the Caribbean, as another common oppression that Black and Asian people rallied behind, together, as that of imperialism/colonialism.

Many Black people in the U.S., in fact, supported Asian resistances of imperialism abroad. African American newspapers, for example, were openly opposed to U.S. colonization of the Philippines, scholar W.E.B. Du Bois adamantly denounced U.S. intervention in Korea, and the anti-Vietnam War movement within the U.S. included a large African American involvement.\(^2\) Moreover, many Black radicals in the U.S. even received inspiration from Asian revolutions. In “Black Like Mao: Red China & the Black Revolution,” Robin Kelley and Betsy Esch discuss how the works of Mao Zedong and the Chinese Cultural revolution of 1966 “offered black radicals a ‘colored’ or Third World Marxist model that enabled them to challenge a white and western vision of class struggle,” which they used “to suit their own cultural and political realities.”\(^3\) Black activist groups, such as the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM, 1962-1969), saw themselves as an all-Black version of Mao’s Red Army.\(^4\) The Black Panthers, moreover, used Mao’s Little Red Book as their “bible,” and described Black peoples within the U.S. as colonial subjects.\(^5\) In turn, Mao Zedong issued a 1968 statement “In Support of the Afro-American Struggle Against Violent Repression” after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., where “millions of Chinese demonstrators” marched in the rain to denounce American racism.\(^6\) The most popular image of Afro-Asian solidarity, however, emerged in the

\(^2\) Ho and Mullen, *Afro-Asia*, 15.

\(^3\) Kelley, Robin and Esch, Betsy. “Black Like Mao: Red China & the Black Revolution,” in *Afro-Asia: Revolutionary Political and Cultural Connections between African Americans and Asian Americans*, 99.


\(^5\) *Ibid.*, 113, 126. “Describing black people as colonial subjects was a way of characterizing the materialist nature of racism,” Kelley and Esch write, “that is, it was more of a metaphor than an analytical concept” (126).

\(^6\) Vicki Garvin, in a January 16, 1996 interview by Fred Ho and Bill Mullen. In *Afro-Asia: Revolutionary Political and Cultural Connections between African Americans and Asian Americans*, 124.
era of the 1955 Bandung Conference, where 29 Third World countries gathered and were united by, in the words of Indonesia’s President Achmet Sukarno (host of the Bandung Conference), “a common detestation of colonialism in whatever form it appears.”

Within this context of Afro-Asian anti-imperialist tradition, then, for an Asian American person to assert Yellow Peril in conjunction with Black power highlights a uniquely Asian American subject position that is not driven by nationalist desires. It places Asian racialization alongside Black racialization, both subject to the workings of the U.S. State, and highlights the cultural othering that we face (whereas Afro-Asian solidarity in the Bandung-era highlighted anti-imperial commonalities between Black and Asian countries.) To state that “Yellow Peril Supports Black Power” is to challenge this racism in a way that does not depend on a new nation, such as the emergence of China as a global superpower, but to strive for solidarity between non-white subjects, within the margins of the United States.

Perhaps, in this way, “yellow peril” becomes an Asian American identity, of sorts, defined not only by someone’s ethnicity, and/or where they were raised, but also by an anti-racist political orientation that acknowledges the role of the state in both anti-Black and anti-Asian racism. Using this form of “yellow peril” in conjunction with “Black power,” moreover, demonstrates how “adopting and adapting the ideology of black power” has shaped Asian American identity as “a new subjectivity that rejected assimilation and consolidated multiple Asian ethnicities under the rubric of race.” To assert “yellow peril” in conjunction with “Black power,” today, additionally reflects an Asian American desire for Afro-Asian solidarity.

Consulting histories of 1960-80s Asian American radicalism, however, instances of actual Afro-Asian solidarity seem limited. Maeda demonstrates that the

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77 Prashad, Vijay. “Foreword,” in *Afro-Asia*, xii.
Red Guards – a group that was “among the first radicals to arise from Asian American communities[,] and in their later incarnation as I Wor Kuen (IWK)[,] constituted one of the two preeminent Asian American leftist organizations” – were extremely influenced by the Black Panthers, particularly in terms of their language and style, which "underlined [the Red Guards’] espousal of the Panthers’ radical politics."79 According to Alex Hing, the Former Minister of Information for the Red Guard Party and Founding Member of I Wor Kuen, Red Guards “took pretty much [their] directions from the Panthers” in its early formation.80 While Maeda’s work demonstrates that the Panthers’ influence on the Red Guards is undeniable – BPP co-founder Bobby Seale even named the organization – his only example of the two groups actively working together is through Free Huey actions. Outside of the Free Huey campaign, the forms of Afro-Asian solidarity that Maeda discusses in Chains of Babylon are merely that Asian and Black Americans “rubbed elbows” in the postwar period, and that Asian American studies owes a tremendous debt to Black intellectual figures.81 On the specific relationship between Red Guards and Black Panthers, moreover, Laura Pulido writes in her Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left, that their relationship was “distant.”82 Texts like William Wei’s The Asian American Movement, too, introduces a multitude of Asian American groups that were inspired by the Black Panthers (such as the Asian American Political Alliance of Columbia and Yale), but provide little to no evidence of the groups strategizing together.83 Perhaps this lack of working/planning together can be explained by Pulido’s argument that Asian Americans “seemingly did not exist as a group for the BPP… most [of the Black

78 Maeda, Chains of Babylon, 83.
79 Maeda, Chains of Babylon, 75-76.
81 Maeda, Chains of Babylon, 80-81.
Panthers] just dismissed Asian Americans as a nonoppressed group without considering how the ‘model minority’ image was oppressive to all people of color, as seen in its ability to erase noneconomic forms of racism and the humanity of Asian Americans.\textsuperscript{84} Pulido’s argument also explains Colleen Lye’s claim that historical moments of Afro-Asian unity were more “cases of Black recognition of interracial kinship than the other way around.”\textsuperscript{85} Perhaps, then, Maeda’s \textit{Chains of Babylon} speaks more to a desire for Afro-Asian political unity and working together, than the reality of it.

Gary Okihiro’s “Is Yellow Black or White?”, in his \textit{Margins and Mainstreams}, too, reflects an immense desire for Afro-Asian solidarity. He writes to refute a narrative of antipathy between Black and Yellow bodies, beginning his “Is Yellow Black or White?” chapter with an Ice Cube lyric: “Every time I wanna go get a fucking brew / I gotta go down to the store with a tool / Oriental ones (can you count) mother-fuckers … So don’t follow me up and down your market / Or your little chop-suey ass will be a target … ‘Cause you can’t turn the ghetto into Black Korea.”\textsuperscript{86} Okihiro attempts to create parallels between Black/Asian discrimination, primarily through a legacy of slavery, coolieism, and cheap labor; he also discusses the African American press that was in solidarity with anti-Japanese segregation. The Asian American people he historicizes, however, are a (literally) different “Asian American people” than the Korean American immigrants that Ice Cube raps about. Korean immigrants who immigrated to the United States in the 1960s through the 1980s did not come as coolies or indentured laborers, migrating voluntarily as a result of the “high unemployment rate, political insecurity, and military dictatorship” in Korea.\textsuperscript{87} The most compelling part of Okihiro’s piece, then, is his immense longing

\textsuperscript{84} Pulido, \textit{Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left}, 159, 170.
\textsuperscript{86} Okihiro and Jung, \textit{Margins and Mainstreams}, 31.
\textsuperscript{87} Chung, Soojin. “History of Korean Immigration to America, from 1903 to Present,” in \textit{Boston University School of Theology: Boston Korean Diaspora Project}. 
for Afro-Asian unity – “yellow is a shade of black,” he writes, “and black, a shade of yellow. We are a kindred people, African and Asian Americans.”

To desire a history of Afro-Asian solidarity can, in a positivist light, be read as a hope for a future of solidarity; “[turning] to the past for the purpose of critiquing the present… is propelled by a desire for futurity,” writes Muñoz, “a moment of the not-yet-here that is as vivid as it is necessary.” However, these desires are also in danger of constructing “willfully idealized pasts,” and of absolving accountability in the present. For example, the photo of Richard Aoki (where he holds a “Yellow Peril Supports Black Power” sign), and the contemplation of his legacy, exposes nuances in the desire for Afro-Asian solidarity. When Richard Aoki was revealed to have been an FBI informant, Asian American leftists were devasted; Diane Fujino (Aoki’s biographer) and Fred Ho (activist and friend to Aoki), in particular, were quick to defend him, arguing that his allegiance had, over time, shifted towards radical movements and away from the FBI. Tamara Hopper writes, on the “emotional struggle involved in reconsidering [Aoki’s] legacy,” that “he represented what we consider the forgotten truths among progressives: that Asian Americans have suffered, that we’ve been racially targeted, that whites continue to treat us like shit, that we are not all rich or even middle-class, and that we were there and are here politically. And Aoki also represented for Asian Americans a relief from political indictment, of Black scrutiny of our racism or racial privilege.” Hopper’s analysis of Aoki’s legacy speaks to an anxiety amongst Asian American leftists about navigating,
on the one hand, the racism we have experienced, and on the other hand, our relative proximity to whiteness and complicity in anti-Black racism.  

A previous iteration of my “Yellow Peril Supports Black Power” poster seemed to emulate the idea of Yellow/Black as shades of one another – as suggested in Okihiro’s piece – where the background was a clean gradient that went from yellow to black (shown below.)

\[92\] Here, I am referring specifically to the racial privilege of having lighter skin, as well as class/economic privilege, noting that this certainly does not apply to all Asian Americans.
The final background I created, however, is much messier, demonstrating that reading yellow and black as shades of one another is over-simplistic, and that even a desire for Afro-Asian solidarity is imbued with contradictions and nuances; though Black and Yellow oppressions are bound together through white supremacy, they, too, are vastly different. The usage of the word “support” in “Yellow Peril Supports Black Power” demonstrates this difference, and recognizes that Yellow Peril and Black Power are not one and the same. A cursory Google search gives two primary definitions of the word “support” – the first, being “bear all or part of the weight of; hold up”; the second, being “give assistance to, especially financially; enable to function or act.” In both definitions, for Yellow Peril to “support” Black Power situates Yellow Peril as a position of higher privilege.\(^93\) If we understand anti-Black racism as one of the key components of U.S. white supremacy, Black liberation means the dismantling of a white supremacist social structure, and thereby includes Asian American liberation. Yet, historical examples such as the Chinese Mississippians demonstrates that this logic does not work the other way around, in that an Asian American “liberation” – as defined by an acceptance into whiteness – does not equal Black liberation.

And perhaps it is because of this understanding of U.S. racial structures that the dominant instances of Afro-Asian solidarity (in U.S. history), we find Asian American individuals invested in Black causes. Perhaps this is also why the majority of Afro-Asian studies comes from Asian American scholars. For Asian Americans to politically align with Black Americans, we must queer what it means to be a yellow body, defining ourselves as people who have adamantly rejected the position of the model minority. Yet, as Richard Aoki’s legacy warns us, refusing to be a model minority also means being critical of the State. That Richard Aoki – someone people

\(^{93}\) The second definition of support, which centers financial assistance, is compelling in that it imagines economic power as social power, which groups like the Black Panther Party also
presumed to be “hip” and “down for the cause” – was an FBI informant demonstrates how the State can strategically use the image of the “anti-model minority” to repress radical movements, such as the Black Panthers.

On its own, then, perhaps my “Yellow Peril Supports Black Power” print is not enough, and needs to be read in conversation with the others in the series: namely, “Not Gay as in Happy / Queer as in Fuck the State.”
Chapter Three
Queering Asian America

NOT GAY AS IN HAPPY
QUEER AS IN FUCK THE STATE
When reflecting on the intersection of being queer and Asian American, the original print I made was based off of a photo from the 1980 *Gay Insurgent: A Gay Left Journal*. The photograph, shown below, depicts seven smiling Asian people behind a banner that reads, “WE’RE ASIANS / GAY & PROUD.”

In my (online) search for posters that were explicitly “Asian” and “queer” in content, this image was the most widespread, having been covered in a short NBC News clip as part of a series on “Searching for Queer Asian Pacific America.” In the clip, activist and author Alice Hom says that she thinks there isn’t much documentation of queer Asian America, because people have had the tendency to highlight one identity over the other.94

Inspired by the simplicity of the “WE’RE ASIANS / GAY & PROUD” banner, I created a print that read “QUEER / & / ASIAN / & / PROUD,” shown below.

And yet, the simplicity of the print I had created felt reductive of the multifaceted identities I had named. Not only did I feel like the print had nothing to say about the nexus of queerness and Asian American-ness, but I also did not like the usage of pride as a means of reconciling these two identifiers, especially because 1) I’ve never been particularly proud of these two identities, really, and because 2) pride parades, in my mind, are inextricably bound with corporate sponsorship and capitalism.

Dana Takagi, in one of the most well-known essays on sexuality in Asian American Studies, writes that “marginalization is not as much about the quantities of experiences as it is about the qualities… [identities] are simply not additive.”

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Instead, she proposes that the topic of sexuality be “envisioned as a means, not an end, to theorizing about the Asian American experience,” and that non-straight sexualities present an “opportunity to rethink notions of identity.”  

Similarly, in his “Out Here and Over There,” David Eng proposes using queerness – defined more broadly than non-straight sexualities – as “a critical methodology for evaluating Asian American racial formation across multiple axes of difference and in its numerous local and global manifestations.”

My final print for this chapter, then, uses queerness as a methodology to reformulate conceptions of identity. With text that reads “NOT GAY AS IN HAPPY / QUEER AS IN FUCK THE STATE,” it advocates for a conception of queer identity that is grouped around anti-state political affiliation. While the print is not explicitly “Asian American” in text, its depiction of Asian American people invokes conceptions of an Asian American identity, that, like a queer identity, might be united through an anti-State political orientation. This understanding of identity follows Angela Davis’ argument that we might think of “U.S. women of color” as a formation of people who share a particular political agenda, rather than as a combination of different groups that are organized around racial identity. "In my opinion,” she says, “the most exciting potential of women of color formations resides in the possibility of politicizing this identity – basing the identity on politics rather than the politics on identity." Similarly, my conception of queering an Asian American identity is to understand it not as something one is born into, nor as a category that is dependent on one’s ethnic makeup, but as a grouping that is based on political affiliation. Asian America, in particular, can be conceived of as a political formation that is fundamentally opposed to the U.S. State based on shared histories.

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96 Ibid., 28, 22.
of racialized state oppression. After all, a critique of the U.S. Empire has, according to Sau-ling Wong’s “Denationalism Reconsidered,” marked the inception of Asian American Studies as a field.

In the same piece, Sau-ling Wong also argues that “Asian America, a quasi-geographical term… with no territorial sovereignty or integrity to underwrite it, appears to [be] a yearning for the kind of containing boundaries and contained site enjoyed by the dominant society, a nation-state.” Similarly, Anita Mannur writes that an Asian American obsession with the culturally “authentic” stems from the diasporic communities’ “spatial and temporal distance from the geographic parameters of the nation-state” and “an affective longing for the home.”

In my personal experience, too, I and many Asian Americans have remarked on the sense of non-belonging that is integral to experiences of being Asian American, where our identities operate in a liminal space that affectively don’t belong in the U.S., but also don’t belong within an ethnic “home” country.

Queer people, too, have had a history of tenuous connections to “home”: domestic spaces that are coded as heterosexual. Gloria Anzaldúa, in her 1987 Borderlands / La Frontera, has defined homophobia as her fear of going home. David Eng, moreover, has conceptualized an affinity between queerness and diaspora,
writing that they are both forms of “traumatic displacement from a lost heterosexual origin,” its subjects sharing a process of “impossible arrivals.”

Perhaps this affective lack of “home” is why “claiming America” – or “establishing the Asian American presence in the context of the United States’ national cultural legacy” – was the focus of Asian American cultural politics for around two decades after the Third World Student Strikes of 1968, as part of a larger Asian American cultural nationalist project. Often heralded as the face of promoting Asian American cultural nationalism, although they were by no means the only group to do so, the writers of *Aiiiiiiieee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers* (1974) advocated for the establishment of a distinct “Asian American cultural integrity… a counterhegemonic, antiassimilationist form of cultural nationalism” that countered stereotypes about Asian American perpetual foreignness. Their desire for a distinct Asian American culturally nationalist identity, however, created the notion of an “authentic” Asian American subject that was “male, heterosexual, working class, American born, and English speaking,” which feminist scholars (such as Elaine Kim and King-Kok Cheung) have challenged. David Eng, specifically, wrote that their “forced repression of feminine and homosexual to masculine, and of home to the nation-state, is a formation in need of queering.”

Opposing notions of cultural nationalism, Lisa Lowe’s oft-cited model of identity formation – in “Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences” – invokes an Asian American identity that centers the differences within Asian America, the varying axes of power that these differences operate on, and an “ongoing construction of identity”… [that is] contested and

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104 Eng, “Out Here and Over There,” 32.
107 Eng, “Out Here and Over There,” 34.
108 Ibid., 35.
unsettled.”

Though she acknowledges the importance of an Asian American identity as an organizing tool that relates different ethnic Asian American histories in the U.S., she adds that this identity also bears the danger of erasing differences within Asian America.

To reformulate Asian American identity as a political formation, then, instead of a racial or ethnic identity, does not just acknowledge the heterogeneity of Asian America, but also suggests that an anti-state Asian American “identity” is only possible because of our differences. Furthermore, if Asian American “identity” can be conceptualized as political affiliation, our differences do not become a hindrance to forging a collective Asian American culture, but rather “represent greater political opportunity to affiliate with other groups whose cohesions may be based on other valences of oppression.”

Emphasizing the multitudes of difference within Asian America is an emphatically queer approach – as Judith Butler says, queerness “must never purport to ‘fully describe’ those it seeks to represent.”

Defining Asian American identity as based on political affiliation, moreover, follows David Eng’s notion of a queer diaspora, that can “[provide] new ways of contesting traditional family and kinship structures–of reorganizing national and transnational communities based not on origin, filiation, and genetics but on destination, affiliation, and the assumption of a common set of social practices or political commitments.” Furthermore, these new ways of conceptualizing kinship also respond to Asian American desires for belonging and for home. Queerness can inform Asian American identity by emphasizing the non-normative ways to seek belonging; that is, that there are means of finding

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110 Ibid., 74.
“home” outside of statehood. “Chosen family,” in particular, is arguably a pillar of queer communities – unlike traditional families, chosen families are more expansive than those who are biologically related, or those who are bound together legally (though marriage or adoption). These chosen families are often born out of necessity, when queer people seek the support that their biological families do not, or cannot, provide. Similarly, perhaps it is within these liminal spaces of chosen family where Asian Americans can carve out a place to belong, a place to call home.

Of course, building these spaces, like building a chosen family, is not just simply achieved, but is an active process of social exchange. Analogously, the definition of Asian American identity, as a common political orientation, will necessarily have to change, in keeping up with political shifts and transformations. As Martin Manalansen writes, “normality and, for that matter, queerness are moving targets… historically and culturally constituted.”113 As cultural productions are the medium through which we continuously define what it means to be Asian America – Karen Ishizuka writes that cultural productions are “not just the means of representation,” but also the “makers of meaning” – my print can also be read as a conversation through which Asian Americans continuously work out notions of identity/culture.114 The imagery from my print was appropriated from a poster by Leland Wong in 1971 (shown in figure 10), where he cleverly replaces “year of the pig” to “year of the people / off the pig” to depict resistance against police violence. His imagery draws a clear inspiration from the work of Emory Douglas (shown in figures 8 & 9), whose graphic art was regularly published in the Black Panthers’ newspaper. That Wong’s poster is so clearly inspired by the ideologies of the Black Panthers demonstrates how much Black Power has impacted Asian American identity; as previously referenced in chapter two, “adopting and adapting the ideology

of black power... enabled [Asian Americans] to construct... identity as a new subjectivity that rejected assimilation and consolidated multiple Asian ethnicities under the rubric of race.”

Figure 9 (right): Douglas, Emory. *The Black Panther* (October 11, 1969), page unknown.


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My print, however, alters the crowd of Asian Americans in Wong’s original poster (primarily through “updating” their dress), attesting to the fluidity of a queered Asian American identity. That Wong’s original image has been translated through so many mediums – initially digitized through a photograph, I then altered it in ProCreate, used a laser cutter to raster the image on a plexiglass plate, and then printed that image in blue and black ink to achieve my final print (which is not to mention that this final print was then scanned and digitized, again, to include in my chapters) – demonstrates how the making of Asian American culture – and in this case, Chinese American culture, in particular – is negotiated “between ourselves and our communities,” and is “contested… unsettled… taking place in the travel between cultural sites and in the multivocality of conflicting positions.”116 In other words, my adaptation of Wong’s original work is a copy of a copy of a copy, removing an image from what it once represented: resisting police violence in Chinatown. This process of translation highlights, moreover, that “the grouping of ‘Asian American’ [has] not a natural or static category; it [has been] a socially constructed unity… that we assume for political reasons.”117 My print, then, uses queerness to envision a non-normative, anti-state Asian American identity, looking at the history of this identity to call forth its futurity.

116 Lowe, Immigrant Acts, 64, 82.
117 Ibid., 82.
Image comparison: above, a section from Leland Wong’s original poster; below, the corresponding section from my print.
Figure References

Figure 1. “Rough on Rats,” date unknown. New York Public Library.

Figure 2. Forbes Co. Boston. “Rough on Rats’ Trading Card,” 1880s. www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/texts/rough-on-rats


Figure 5. Richard Aoki holds a “Yellow Peril Supports Black Power” sign at a Free Huey rally in 1968. Photographer unknown.

Figure 6. An unidentified person holds the same “Yellow Peril Supports Black Power” sign at a Free Huey rally in 1969. Photograph taken by Roz Payne.


Figure 8: Douglas, Emory. The Black Panther (March 3, 1969), 8.

Figure 9: Douglas, Emory. The Black Panther (October 11, 1969), page unknown.

Bibliography


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