

Limning Asian American Literature with Social Generationality:
Violence and Subversion

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ABSTRACT

The existence and identity of the Asian American literary canon have been contentious, and thus so have the methods to study it. Operating with a capacious definition of the Asian American literary canon, I argue the canon exists as a vast heterogeneous one encapsulating the diverse experiences of Asian Americans over generations. I apply a longitudinal study of selected works of the Asian American literary canon and adapt a queer reading hermeneutic to identify forms of literary dissent. Applying social generationality (generational identity) and the hermeneutic in reading the canon illuminates a pattern of socially imposed violences and quasi-queer acts of literary subversion. Ultimately, reading the canon vis-à-vis social generationality illustrates the evolution of Asian American experiences via the evolution of their perceived violences and modes of persistence.

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Introduction

The fiction of pioneering Filipino American writer Bienvenido N. Santos stands among the foundational yet overlooked canons of early Asian American literature. His 1955 short story “The Day the Dancers Came” unveils the complex realities of Filipino “manongs”—predominantly male migrant laborers who journeyed to the United States in the 1920s and 30s, relegated to work in harsh agricultural conditions. The aging protagonist, a manong named Fil, futilely attempts to connect with a visiting troupe of young Filipino dancers, representing a new generation of Filipino immigrants in 1950s Chicago:

As he moved about aimlessly, he felt someone touch him on the sleeve. It was one of the dancers, a mere boy, tall and thin, who was saying, “Excuse, please.” Fil realized he was in the way between another boy with a camera and a group posing in front of the hotel.

“Sorry,” Fil said, jumping away awkwardly.

The crowd burst out laughing.

Then everything became a blur in his eyes, a moving picture out of focus, but gradually the figures cleared, there was mud on the pavement on which the dancers stood posing, and the sun threw shadows at their feet.

Let them have fun, he said to himself, they’re young and away from home. I have no business messing up their schedule, forcing my company on them.

He watched the dancers till the last of them was on the bus. The voices came to him, above the traffic sounds. They waved their hands and smiled towards him as the bus started. Fil raised his hand to wave back, but stopped quickly, aborting the gesture. He turned to look behind him at whomever the dancers were waving

their hands to. There was no one there except his own reflection in the glass door, a double exposure of himself and a giant plant with its thorny branches around him like arms in a loving embrace. (121–22)

Fil has struggled with his manong peers for decades in America, holding onto a fantasy of their homeland. Nearing his end, Fil is drawn to reconnect with his Filipino roots. Ultimately, in his attempt, the manong protagonist is alienated despite being around other Filipinos. Santos underlines the bittersweet nature of Fil's manong experience—a “loving embrace” of “thorny branches.”

In his short stories such as “The Day the Dancers Came,” Santos lends voice to the manong generation of Filipino migrant laborers in America. Santos illuminates the distinct hardships endured behind the scenes by these early twentieth-century Filipino immigrants. His stories capture the subtle yet pervasive interpersonal and structural violences that characterized the manong existence, from racial prejudice to labor discrimination. In doing so, Santos resists the erasure of manong narratives, conveying a generational memory that might otherwise have faded into obscurity. The manong testimony articulated in Santos' fiction parallels a broader tradition of resistance in Asian American literature.

Marginalized Asian American communities have often turned to literature to document, critique, and subvert the various configurations of violence particular to their sociopolitical positioning. Asian American literary productions across temporal and subcultural contexts exhibit an underlying activist consciousness, functioning as a vehicle for redress and social transformation. In this thesis, I examine how Santos' fiction and other Asian American texts across the decades expose and challenge the violences inflicted upon their respective generational groups. I argue that in writing against racist and heterosexist prejudice, these works

open queer discursive spaces to recognize those violences and emancipate Asian American subjects from the subjugations of their respective times. Ultimately, I posit Asian American literature as an ongoing, multi-vocal chronicle of marginality through which unheard stories find expression and apply corrective pressures on society.

Defining Asian American

Defining “Asian American”—the artificial pan-ethnic label—and “Asian American Literature” is a precondition to studying it, yet their definitions have been politicized and controversial. Who is Asian American? What counts as Asian American Literature? Manongs were aliens, not United States citizens, following the Tydings–McDuffie Act of 1934, and they did not have a path to citizenship until the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 (Bennett; Stanley). Bienvenido Santos wasn’t a US citizen until 1976 and his manong characters are unlikely to be citizens, yet his work is considered Asian American or specifically Filipino American. Using citizenship to define Asian American literature would be absurd, but defining “Asian American Literature” is a prerequisite to studying it. Frank Chin and his peers offer a comprehensive definition.

Frank Chin’s essay “Fifty Years of Our Whole Voice” (1974), a landmark text prefacing the “Asian American” literary anthology *Aiiiiieee!*, attempts to define a singular, unitary Asian American literary identity. Chin draws an exclusionary definition of authentic “serious” Asian American literature that cannot be Christian, feminine, or Western/American (Chin et al.). Chin provides John Okada’s *No-No Boy* as a model example of “Asian American Literature.” Chin says, “he rejects both [Japanese and American] and works on defining Nisei in terms of an experience that is neither Japanese nor American” (22). Chin highlights Okada’s subversion of

traditional Asian/American narratives for a uniquely Asian-American one, highlighting the experiences of Nisei, second generation Japanese Americans. Chin argues against the notion that Okada's novel does not have literary merit for its poor grammar and prose. He claims they work "to legitimize the language, style, and syntax of his people's experience, to codify the experiences common to his people into symbols, clichés, linguistic mannerisms, and a sense of humor that emerges from an organic familiarity with the experience" (24). Chin not only justifies Okada's imperfect grammar but applauds it. John Okada's novel is an indispensable work of literature as the first Japanese-American novel, but as much as Chin praises it, he disapproves of many popular Asian American works.

Chin posited that many popular "Asian American" works pander to white American audiences, undermine their Asian and Asian-American heritage, and are not proper works of "Asian American Literature." Among them, Frank Chin staunchly opposed Maxine Hong Kingston's fictional autobiography *The Woman Warrior*; he famously or rather infamously described it as "another in a long line of Chinkie autobiographies by Pocahontas yellows blowing the same old mixed up East/West soul struggle" (Bascara and Park). Chin claims that Kingston leans into the racist stereotypes of Asian cultures and exploits Asian and Asian American narratives to pander to white American audiences—like the Pocahontas for Native Americans. Chin attempts to navigate a complicated landscape in his 1991 critique "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake." He claims Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, among other works, present themselves as "symbols of our freedom from the icky-gooley evil of [Asian culture]" (2). Chin adds that these negative portrayals of Asian Cultures are not authentic. Chin adds Kingston "defended her revision of Chinese history, culture, and childhood literature and myth by restating a white racist stereotype" (29). Chin abhors literature in which racist

stereotypes are amplified at the cost of Asian Americans. However, claiming Asian American works as “real” and “fake” may be extreme as he nor anyone else has or should have that ultimate authority. Deliberately excluding narratives that deviate from these specific characteristics creates a binary by pitting Chin’s “authentic” Asian American experience against others (e.g., those informed by Christianity, femininity, or immigrant experiences). This rigid definition has been challenged by scholars and writers who argue for the inherent diversity and complexity of Asian American identities, reflecting the vast cultural and historical backgrounds of the community.

Understanding the complexities in the field, I define “Asian American Literature” as work written in English about the American experience by individuals of Asian descent. This definition of “Asian American Literature” is reminiscent of Elaine Kim’s in her 1982 book *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context*. Kim studies “what Asians in America share” and “how they can be compared within the context of their American experiences” (xii). To Kim, the merit of Asian American literature stems largely from its cultural value, being a documentation of otherwise overlooked Asian American experiences via narratives. Applying this liberal definition of “Asian American Literature” enables the exploration of the diversity in Asian American works.

Lisa Lowe also provides a framework for understanding the diverse tapestry of Asian American Literature in her 1991 essay “Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences” published in *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*. Lowe promptly dismantles the simplistic notion of a singular Asian American narrative (Lowe). Instead, she excavates the profound diversity within the group, drawing attention to the distinct experiences shaped by national origin, immigration history, social class, gender, sexuality, and

generation. By foregrounding these multifaceted identities, Lowe challenges essentialist portrayals and paves the way for a more nuanced understanding of the complexities inherent in the Asian American experience:

...essentializing Asian American identity and suppressing our differences—of national origin, generation, gender, party, class—risks particular dangers: not only does it underestimate the differences and hybridities among Asians, but it also inadvertently supports the racist discourse that constructs Asians as a homogeneous group, that implies we are “all alike” and conform to “types”; in this respect, a politics based exclusively on ethnic identity willingly accepts the terms of the dominant logic that organizes the heterogeneous picture of racial and ethnic diversity into a binary schema of “the one” and “the other.” (30)

Her analysis delves into the profound importance of identifying and studying the heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity of Asian American narratives. She underscores the vastness of the Asian continent and its people, encompassing those from a multitude of countries with distinct cultures, languages, and historical trajectories. To collapse these diverse narratives into a homogenous whole, Lowe argues, not only erases the richness of individual and community histories but also undermines the varied wants of Asian Americans in contemporary political discourse.

One aspect of incongruity in Asian Americans that Lowe underscores is the impact of generational differences. The experiences of first-generation immigrants who arrived as adults with non-American cultural tendencies in the early twentieth century differ starkly from those of subsequent generations raised in the US. Asian American generational subgroups' cultural values, linguistic fluency, and relationship to their heritage are shaped by their distinct historical

contexts and social realities. Recognizing these generational nuances, Lowe argues, is crucial to avoiding generalizations and appreciating the dynamic evolution of Asian American identity.

Generational differences are apparent in Santos' aforementioned short story, "The Day the Dancers Came." Separated by just one generation, Fil and his identity are distinct from the other younger Filipinos. Santos' story is as much about the manongs' generationality (generational identity) as it is about their diasporic experience. In the ever-evolving landscape of Asian American literature, generationality emerges as a multifaceted force, a driving factor underlying Santos' and others' stories. Two distinct, yet interconnected, strands of generationality prove relevant: one of social generation, defined by shared historical experiences of Asian Americans within the United States, and one of immigrant generation, shaped by the specific point of arrival and cultural background. The former stands out as the appropriate lens through which to understand shifting configurations of violence and subversion in Asian American literary production over time.

Adapting Queerness as Subversion

Utilizing "queer" as an analytical rubric illuminates the evolution of subversive textualities within the Asian American literary canon across generationalities. Literary instantiations of queerness themselves subvert the violence undergirding regulatory gender and sexual paradigms. Each generation, shaped by distinct historical contexts and evolving social landscapes, writes their queer narratives by playing off the social conventions of their respective times and pushing boundaries when possible. Tracing this dialectic elucidates how reactionary subversions have discursively constructed, reified, and destabilized queerness within the Asian American literary canon.

The term “queer” has undergone an evolution itself in how it is understood and applied. Martin F. Manalansan states in *Keywords for Asian American Studies*: “queer was and is still used as an umbrella term that designates identities, behaviors, and bodies as nonconforming to specific notions of the normal” (197). Originally a word akin to “odd,” the term has transformed into one that denotes divergent gender and sexual connotations. A derogatory slur at times, queer has been hailed as an inclusive term for all sexual and gender identities outside of societal norms. Its capaciousness as an anti-normative analytic tool has been instrumental in coalescing and scrutinizing divergent subjugated gender and sexual identities. The following lens can also provide a compelling means to study changes in Asian American works.

In utilizing “queer” to examine subversion in Asian American works, the imbrication of race must be acknowledged. Patrick Johnson compellingly advances “quare” studies, “based on the African American vernacular for queer,” as a framework to include race and other factors outside of gender and sexuality (2). Centering that the intersections of racial, gender, and sexual marginalities as pivotal to understanding the multivalent experiences of queer individuals, Johnson writes:

Quare studies addresses the concerns and needs of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people across issues of race, gender, class, and other subject positions. While attending to the discursive constitution of subjects, quare studies is also committed to theorizing the practice of everyday life. Because we exist in material bodies, we need a theory that speaks to that reality. (20)

The intersections of racial and queer identities cannot be ignored under Johnson’s framework. Johnson’s grounding in materialities further provides clarification to his discursive definition in

that individual portrayal of queerness ought to be connected to individuals' tangible culture, rituals, and symbols.

Extending Johnson's declaration, Roderick Ferguson underscores how a queer of color critique must attend to "how culture as a site of identification produces such odd bedfellows and how it—as the location of antagonisms—fosters unimagined alliances" (3). Queerness transcends just sexual or romantic relationships, but extends to fraught, complex relationships across intersectional identities. The radical imaginaries and subversive gestures encoded in depictions of sexual and non-sexual relationships in Asian American literature are critical sites for mapping queerness, subversion and underlying violences.

Literary depictions of queerness shine the limelight on the prejudicial constructs implicit in marginalized intersectional identities, constituting a subversion of systemic suppression of said identities. As such, elucidating queerness as an analytical paradigm illuminates textual transgressions that undermine dominant structures of power. Reading across the Asian American literary canon through social generationality, the spectrum of dissident expressions emerges as linked to their social generationalities: constrained by the strictures of their sociopolitical moment, earlier texts may have subtly limned dissident relationships, while contemporary works directly articulate queer subjectivities and lived experiences. Tracing such mutations in the representation of queerness by writers illuminates the violences perceived by Asian Americans imposed by the hegemonic structures of their social generation.

Bienvenidos Santos' "The Day the Dancers Came"

In Bienvenido Santos' short story "The Day the Dancers Came," the relationship between protagonists Fil and Tony serves as a powerful exploration of queer Asian American

subjectivities and belongings. The two are constructed as foils, emphasizing their profound yet antithetical bond: Fil is romantic while Tony is pragmatic; Fil is deemed “ugly” while Tony is conventionally attractive; Fil’s darker complexion contrasts with Tony’s skin disease that renders him white-passing; Fil speaks their native dialect more fluently while Tony has greater mastery of English. This disparate characterization is comparable to the familiar notion “opposites attract,” that romantic couples are often composed of different personalities and that they may enjoy a mutualistic relationship as they balance each other. Santos underscores Fil and Tony’s symbiotic dynamic as kindred migrant roommates, highlighting that their relationship is a cornerstone of the story.

Fil and Tony’s friendship is written with homoerotic undertones. The narrator says, “In all the years he had been in America, [Fil] had not had a friend until he met Tony whom he liked immediately and, in a way, worshipped, for all the things the man had which Fil knew he himself lacked” (118). Fil’s rapturous admiration of Tony deviates from the heteronormative conventions of platonic relationships. Fil’s fanatical liking for Tony and the transparency of the narrator divulge a peerless intimacy in Fil and Tony’s relationship. The combination of attraction and intimacy—at least from the perspective of Fil—plants Fil and Tony’s relationship as homoerotic, a queer relationship deviating from homonormative sexuality. This relationship is revealed through the story to be the true central theme of “The Day the Dancers Came.”

Fil’s anguish over his alienation from the younger Filipino community of the next generation crystallizes the vital lifeline his friendship with Tony represents. Fil hallucinates a conversation as he arrives at an empty home after his disappointing encounter with the Filipino dancers:

“But, Tony, they would not come. They thanked me, but they said they had no time. Others said nothing. They looked through me. I didn’t exist. Or worse, I was unclean. *Basura*. Garbage. They were ashamed of me. How could I be Filipino?”

The memory, distinctly recalled, was a rock on his breast. He grasped for breath.

“Now, let me teach you how to keep afloat,” Tony said, but it was not Tony’s voice.

Fil was alone and gasping for air. His eyes opened slowly till he began to breathe more easily. The sky outside was gray. He looked at his watch—a quarter past five. The show would begin at eight. There was time. Perhaps Tony would be home soon. (124–25)

Though not corporeally present, the ghost of Tony anchors Fil, mitigating his turbulent angst as he grapples with his profound unbelonging. Fil’s psychic conjuring of Tony can be read as a manifestation of his all-consuming dependence on their friendship; Tony’s absence disintegrates the very cornerstones of Fil’s fragile psyche, fracturing his subjective reality. Amidst a hostile society that marginalizes the manong generation, Fil and Tony’s intimate, transgressive bond emerges as a lodestar integral to Fil’s very sense of self.

Santos’ poignant depiction compels readers to confront how “antagonisms” inherent in the cultural landscape “foster unimagined alliances.” Fil and Tony’s unlikely erotic rapport proffers a subversive vision that radically reconfigures heteronormative scripts of affiliation and desire amidst the unique social and cultural circumstances that circumscribe their lives. Contextualizing Santos’ story within its precise sociohistorical milieu foregrounds the systemic violence inflicted upon manong bachelor communities through racist policies that effectively

foreclosed the possibility of marriage and family formation. As Kent Wong incisively notes, most manong immigrants were single males, and anti-miscegenation laws rendered marriage outside their ethnic group illegal, thereby depriving them of access to heterosexual relationships, normative domesticity, and reproductive futurity (4). Read through this historical lens, Santos' narrative functions as a latent critique of the structural violences that delimited manong subjectivities and a radical reimagining via alternative modes of affiliation. By excavating these subversive spaces of intimacy, Santos' story exemplifies how a framework of social generationality can illuminate the latent yet traumatic experiences of early Asian American communities and the modes of resistance articulated by pioneering writers. These textual rebellions, though subtle, are thus profoundly consequential—as literary artifacts, they immeasurably enrich the Asian American literary canon, and as historical documents, they offer an invaluable lens into the particular struggles and collective resilience of distinct generational cohorts.

Younghill Kang's *East Goes West*

Younghill Kang's *East Goes West: The Making of an Oriental Yankee* is another such rare early Asian American novel published in 1937 which indirectly explores racialized violences through queer relationships. Chungpa, the fictionalized autobiographical analog of Kang, resides with the Livelys as he gets his “education” from Mr. Lively to become a salesman for a self-help tome called *Universal Education*; the business is a thinly veiled pyramid scheme apparent from the beginning to the reader. Chungpa's Korean friend George Jum and his girlfriend June visit him. Mrs. Lively disapproves of Chungpa's friend George whom she has overheard discussing his conquests with women: “How is it? Daddy and I have been so

wonderful to you, yet you cannot have any gratitude for us. This is very bad taste in you.’ I did not know what to say. So I said nothing. My silence inspired her to say more” (144). Mrs. Lively embodies the Puritan-derived taboos of early twentieth-century America. Furthermore, the inherently hierarchical relationship between an indebted Asian Chungpa and white Mrs. Lively imposes these values on Chungpa. Kang uses Chungpa’s silence to highlight the asymmetric relationship and Chungpa’s ultimate inability to challenge Mrs. Lively. Chungpa’s interaction with Mrs. Lively continues:

“My dear boy, see here, I love you just as much as if you were my own boy. But you are getting wrong ideas. I don’t want to see you marry an American girl. Neither would I want to see Elsie marrying an Oriental. And all decent people are like that. It is not as the Lord intended.”

I was very solemn and silent and unable to open my mouth to say anything.”
(146)

Mrs. Lively adds to her statements, expressing disapproval of interracial relationships. Padded by pious intentions, Mrs. Lively’s condemnation is justified as an ordinary god-derived characteristic of America. Chungpa’s silence speaks volumes denoting not only his inability to speak up in the moment but also his inability to challenge the sexual mores directly.

Kang’s inclusion of this interaction is his method of acknowledging and subverting Puritan culture and prejudice against interracial relationships. The dramatic irony of Mrs. Lively stating these biases orients the reader to identify the violence in her statements. Mrs. Lively’s family is conning Chungpa, having received a deceitful payment to enroll him into a pyramid scheme business and currently using him as a servant due to his lack of funds. Mrs. Lively appears blind to this reality and her name “Lively” too reflects her oblivious chirpy attitude.

Consequently, Mrs. Lively's expressed intent—that is, loving Chungpa and treating him as if her own—and the validity of her bias are undermined.

Kang's critique of these oppressive social strictures is deeply rooted in his own lived experiences. As Alexander Chee notes in his introduction to the novel, Kang himself entered into an interracial marriage with Frances Keely, a white woman, a decade prior to the publication of *East Goes West* (xxxix). As a consequence of their union, which was illegal at the time, Frances Keely was compelled to surrender her American citizenship, underscoring the severe ramifications of the racist prohibitions on interracial intimacy. Kang's firsthand experience of discrimination and marginalization as a result of his interracial relationship in the 1920s and 30s emerges as a thematic preoccupation of his novel. Operating within the constraints of the repressive social mores of 1937 America, Kang cannily employs Chungpa's silence as a vehicle for encoding his own dissent and critique, subversively testifying to the everyday violences inflicted upon racialized subjects not only through social strictures but the deprivation of a voice to reform them.

Furthermore, the unconventional domestic arrangement in which Chungpa resides and is dependent on the Lively family functions as a powerful subversion of traditional kinship structures and dynamics. Chungpa's liminal positionality within the Lively household, as he oscillates between the roles of a family member and an indentured laborer, destabilizes normative categories of social relation and affiliation. This interstitial space that Chungpa occupies within the domestic sphere can be read as a form of queering, as it engenders modes of intra-racial intimacy and interdependence that exist outside the strictures of heteronormative scripts.

A queer reading of Kang's text thus illuminates how transgressive modes of affiliation and belonging can emerge within the literary representation of everyday life, even in the absence of overt violations of heteronormative relational paradigms. Kang's *East Goes West* demonstrates how queer forms of sociality inhere not only in visible transgressions of heteronormativity but also in the silent subversions and resistances that suffuse the quotidian experiences of marginalized subjects. Applying a queer hermeneutic framework to the novel enables us to apprehend the ways in which Kang deftly encodes his dissent towards the racist prohibitions on interracial marriage and the hegemonic imperatives of normative domesticity, giving form to the subversive realities that structured the lives of early Asian American immigrant communities. This approach, combining a queer reading with an attention to the authors' social generationality, offers a productive lens for illuminating the complex ways in which early Asian American authors grappled with the systemic violences and exclusions that delimited their social and intimate lives. Additionally, not only does this reading limn the works of early male Asian American authors, it also applies to more contemporary works by women Asian American authors exploring themes such as feminism.

Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*

In her 1976 fictionalized autobiography *The Woman Warrior*, Maxine Hong Kingston underscores the inferior position that Asian American women experience from multivalent forms of gendered violence that structured the lives of Asian American women, foregrounding the ways in which the intersection of racial, cultural, and gender-based marginalities produced a distinctive form of oppression. In the self-contained chapter "No Name Woman," Kingston interrogates the circumscription of women's sexual agency as an insidious subversion of

patriarchal violence, one that is profoundly colored by the social and historical context of Kingston's social generationality. Through a haunting revisioning of her apocryphal aunt's transgressive affair, Kingston writes:

Adultery is extravagance. Could people who hatch their own chicks and eat the embryos and the heads for delicacies and boil the feet in vinegar for party food, leaving only the gravel, eating even the gizzard lining—could such people engender a prodigal aunt? To be a woman, to have a daughter in starvation time was a waste enough. My aunt could not have been the lone romantic who gave up everything for sex. (6)

In this evocative passage, Kingston links the pervasive cultural devaluation of women's subjectivity to the material deprivations that constrained women's lives. Evincing deep empathy for her aunt, whom she imagines as disdained from birth and trapped in an unfulfilling marriage, Kingston frames her aunt's singular act of sexual autonomy as a rebellious rejection of the misogynistic social order that continuously sought to efface her very humanity. Juxtaposing this to viscerally depicted Chinese culinary practices coded as equally excessive, Kingston subverts dominant cultural paradigms to critique the punitive response to her aunt's affair as absurdly disproportionate. In this sense, Kingston applauds and suggests a queer feminist praxis—one that seeks to resist the unique forms of gendered oppression experienced by Asian American women—ultimately resisting the unique brand of misogyny observed by Kingston.

As Kingston's narrative unfolds, she reveals the insidious ways in which violent stories like that of her aunt were weaponized to enforce gendered discipline and deprivation. Reflecting on her mother's deployment of these cautionary tales, Kingston writes, "Whenever she had to warn us about life, my mother told stories that ran like this one, a story to grow up on" (5). By

framing these stories as deliberate pedagogical tools employed by her mother, Kingston underscores the intergenerational transmission of patriarchal violence and the ways in which women were often conscripted into enforcing the very norms that oppressed them. Recounting how her mother would emphasize the austerity and hardship that characterized her aunt's life, from the meager sustenance of misshapen tomatoes to the bitter irony of consuming food offerings meant for the gods (5), Kingston reveals how these narratives were used to implant a sense of guilt and shame around women's transgression and excess. As Kingston recounts her childhood thoughts, "we did frivolous things, we used up energy" (6), she underscores how her mother's denigration of extravagance fueled an obsessive fixation against profligacy. The psychic toll of these internalized strictures is further evoked in Kingston's recollection of the family's rare indulgence in carnival rides: "After the one carnival ride each, we paid in guilt; our tired father counted his change on the dark walk home" (6). Through these haunting recollections, Kingston illuminates the damaging ways in which her aunt's transgression was adapted to police and constrain the desires and aspirations of her and others.

Yet even as she exposes the devastating impact of these oppressive narratives and traditions, Kingston also evinces a deep empathy for her mother, recognizing the ways in which she, too, was a product of the same patriarchal system that sought to efface women's agency. Characterizing her mother's use of these stories as "powered by Necessity, a riverbank that guides her life" (6), Kingston situates her mother's complicity within a broader framework of structural oppression, one that left women with few options but to conform to the dictates of patriarchal authority. In this sense, Kingston's nuanced portrayal of her mother's role in perpetuating these violent narratives serves to underscore the cross-generational impact of

gendered violence, illuminating the ways in which the trauma of women's subjugation was passed down from mother to daughter like a bitter inheritance.

This interrogation of gendered violence in *The Woman Warrior* resonates profoundly with Sau-ling Cynthia Wong's popular analytic framework for reading "No Name Woman" and Asian American Literature. Wong reads Asian American works through "necessity" and "extravagance." The terms "necessity" and "extravagance" were operationalized by Wong in her 1988 paper "Necessity and Extravagance in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Art and the Ethnic Experience*," taking the words from "No Name Woman" in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (S. Wong). In her book *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*, she defines them as the following:

The terms *Necessity* and *Extravagance* signify two contrasting modes of existence and operation, one contained, survival-driven and conservation-minded, the other attracted to freedom, excess, emotional expressiveness, and autotelism...*Necessity* usually appears with words like *force*, *demand*, or *constraint*; *Extravagance* with words like *urge*, *impulse*, or *desire*. (13)

In reading Asian American literature, Wong defines "necessity" as the actions that are driven by survival that go along the grain, and extravagance as those defined by freedom and against the grain—of which those marginalized were often deprived. Wong's paradigm proves indispensable for examining the evolving contours of systemic violence within Asian American literary portrayals across periods. Charting oscillations between "necessity" and "extravagance" in Asian American literary works across discrete sociohistorical contexts illuminates how each generation navigated dominant structures of power and carved out fragile spaces for themselves.

Wong's analytic framework unravels symbiotically with my proposed framework foregrounding subversion and the intersectional violences of the author's social generation they are reactionary to. The deliberate framing of "necessity" and "extravagance" as oppositional poles in Wong's model illustrates the dominant regulatory structures in each era and the "extravagant" possibilities eked through textual interstices. As Wong charts mutations in Asian American cultural productions across time, the shifting thresholds of "extravagance" offer oblique representations of what exceeds or evades the "necessity" of externally imposed subjections. In this sense, tracing displacements of "necessity" by emergent "extravagance" remains consonant with a queer hermeneutic attuned to diverse modalities of dissent against oppressive paradigms. Both approaches illuminate evolving contours of violence alongside discursive countermeasures that rewrite scripts of marginalization.

Wallace Lin's "Rough Notes for Mantos"

As Kingston explores her feminism, Wallace Lin's short story "Rough Notes for Mantos," on the other hand, covertly explores his queer sexual identity. Published in 1974 amidst the liberatory energies of 1970s identity politics yet influenced by enduring homophobic prohibitions as a part of the anthology *Aiiiiieee!*, Leong's encrypted text explores the interplay between self-actualization and internalized oppression with a distinct postmodern first-person narration:

Somewhere there must be a tree, new growth pushing upon the bark, upwards now, forcing exultation. I must train my body to live a thousand miles away from you, to drink dry water, to inhabit a dry landscape like a desert rat: to harmonize into fate as a shifting dune. I ignite easily now; my face and arms and skin have

become flaccid and layered with dust and I am growing old. And Mantos, I wonder whether you are still alive. (210)

In this excerpt, the narrator's address to the enigmatic figure of Mantos is suffused with a sense of anguished yearning, as the narrator shares the imperative to suppress his homosexual desire through a series of evocative metaphors. Lin likens his suppression of queerness to having to "drink dry water" and to "inhabit a dry landscape like a desert rat." These cryptic metaphors serve as a powerful figuration of the psychic violence engendered by homosexual prejudice. At the same time, the narrator's description of his aging, enfeebled body, "flaccid and layered with dust," can be read as a haunting reflection of the corrosive effects of internalized homophobia, as the denial of self-expression spoils the narrator's body.

Significantly, the radical indeterminacy of Lin's text, with its disguised narrative structure and its elusive, unnamed narrator, can be seen as a two-fold reflection of the author's social generationality encompassing literary trends and the broader cultural constraints on literary depictions of homosexuality. Indeed, as a work published in the 1970s, Composed of a fragmented narrative and an unreliable narrator, "Rough Notes for Mantos" is written in a postmodern style—a mesotrend linked to his generation. A consequence of the style and other deliberate stylistic choices is that it conceals the queerness of the story. Nothing in the story directly addresses the sexuality of the narrator. The recipient, Mantos, is most likely a last name which is inherently genderless. Nothing in the story actively prevents a reader from interpreting the work as a heteronormative love story—or more aptly, a tragedy.

It is only with the recent confirmation by its true author Russell Leong that its themes can be interpreted as homosexual desires. In his correspondence with Shawn Wong, an editor of *Aiiieeee!*, Leong expressed his desire to use a pen name, "I don't have enough confidence in

them yet, but more importantly, I am afraid of the loss of face it would cause to my family, friends and me” (Fickle). Persecuted by the queer taboo internalized by Leong and others in the 1970s, Leong is consigned to mask his groundbreaking barrier-pushing work—perhaps the first to explore Asian American queerness. The heteronormative reading was further supported by the fabricated biography of Wallace Lin: “in the demiurgic hands of Frank Chin, who wrote the biography, Wallace Lin became not simply straight but had ‘recently married his childhood sweetheart and now lives in Phoenix, Arizona’” (Fickle). The stark disjuncture between this manufactured heteronormative facade and the queer subtext of Leong’s story serves as a haunting testament to the pervasive power of homophobic proscriptions of his social generation.

Even as “Rough Notes for Mantos” is marked by a pervasive sense of concealment and self-censorship, the story nonetheless is a profoundly transformative work in Asian American homosexual advocacy. By encoding his own experiences of homosexual desire and identity within the fragmented narrative structure, Leong circumvents the overt strictures of homophobic censorship, creating a text that subversively vibrates with the urgency of advocating for the acceptance of homosexualities. In this sense, “Rough Notes for Mantos” can be seen as a pioneering work of queer Asian American literature, one that has subversively subverted a historic violence while anticipating more explicit and politicized expressions of queer identity that would emerge in the following decades.

Ultimately, by reading “Rough Notes for Mantos” in dialogue with the broader canon of Asian American literature, we can begin to apprehend the complex and multifaceted ways in which homosexual desire has been articulated and negotiated within the context of a pervasive heteronormative order. If Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* offers an emphatic critique of the patriarchal structures that have served to constrain and delimit Asian American women’s lives,

then Leong’s text can be seen as a complementary exploration of the heterosexist strictures that have always existed alongside and patriarchal ones. Oppressive norms also throttled the parameters of Leong’s subversion; fear of familial and communal censure compelled textual self-censorship—where the line of too “extravagant” lay in the 1974 sociocultural sand. Reading into that unfortunate self-censorship with the work of his successors further illuminates how the line on the sand has shifted over the recent social generations and the true grandness of Leong’s then-overlooked subversive work.

Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*

Ocean Vuong’s 2019 debut novel *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* addresses his sexuality head-on, offering an uncompromising exploration of homosexual identity, relationship, and self-discovery, marking a radical departure from the veiled representations of same-sex love that characterized earlier works of Asian American literature. Ocean Vuong’s fictionalized autobiographical counterpart, Little Dog, talks to his mom about his queerness in the epistolary novel:

“I don’t like girls.”

I didn’t want to use the Vietnamese word for it—pê-đê—from the French pédé, short for pédéraste. Before the French occupation, our Vietnamese did not have name for queer bodies—because they were seen, like all bodies, fleshed and of one source—and I didn’t want to introduce this part of me using the epithet for criminals.

You blinked a few times.

“You don’t like girls,” you repeated, nodding absently. I could see the words moving through you, pressing you in your chair. “Then what *do* you like? You’re seventeen. You don’t like anything. You don’t *know* anything,” you said, scratching the table. (130)

Vuong’s vivid portrayal of his mother’s response to Little Dog’s coming out is revelatory, exposing the fault lines of generational and cultural difference that shape the reception of homosexual identities within his immigrant family. The mother’s incredulous repetition of Little Dog’s declaration, followed by her dismissive assertion that “You don’t like anything. You don’t *know* anything,” captures the ways in which his homosexuality is dismissed across their relationship. At the same time, the mother’s physical response, as the words seem to move through her body, “pressing [her] in [her] chair,” suggests the visceral impact of this moment, highlighting the deep underlying emotional bonds between Little Dog and his mother. Vuong’s clear emotional depictions lie in contrast with that of Vuong, presenting a different and commanding method to represent and advocate for Asian American homosexualities.

Throughout the novel, Vuong continues to push the boundaries of homosexual representation, offering frank and unapologetic depictions of same-sex desire and intimacy. In his graphic portrayals of Little Dog’s relationship with his lover Trevor, Vuong eschews the constraints of euphemism and self-censorship, depicting the physical and emotional intensity of their bond with raw and unflinching transparency. In one particularly powerful scene, Little Dog, hallucinates his “lover” Trevor in his darkest moments:

When the dark in the bus returns, I look down at my lap and hear his voice.
You should stay. I glance up and see the fabric peeling from the top of his truck,
 the yellow foam spilling out at the tear, and I’m back in the passenger seat. It’s

mid-August and we're parked outside the Town Line Diner in Wethersfield. The air around us dark red, or perhaps that's how all evenings, rendered in my memory of him, appear. Bludgeoned...

"Don't be scared," his voice says. He stares at the people glowing in the diner. The tenderness in his tone holds me to the seat, the washed-out town. "You're smart," he says. "You're gonna kill it in New York." His voice sounds unfinished. And that's when I realize he's high. That's when I see the bruises along the upper arms, the vein bulged and blackened where the needles foraged. (167)

In this haunting passage, Vuong captures the bittersweet intensity of his love and loss, as the memory of a fleeting moment of intimacy becomes suffused with pain. The lush and lyrical language of the scene, with its evocative imagery of the setting and then the visceral depiction of Trevor, heightens the emotional realities of the moment.

Like Santos, Vuong places a hallucination to highlight the depths of non-normative relationships. But contrary to Santos, Vuong's approach is uncensored in discussing the pronounced issue of homosexual relationships. Additionally, Vuong's version is filled with an array of imagery and elisions to pace his meter. Vuong's work departs from the tradition of Asian American literary merit primarily deriving from capturing histories in attempting to create a highly aesthetic work. Both changes are reflective of Vuong's contemporary social generationality which has opened up such possibilities.

Conclusion

Illuminating the profound ways in which the concept of social generationality can enrich our understanding of the political and aesthetic imperatives that have shaped Asian American

literature, an underlying and evolving dynamic of violence and subversion has been traced across key works of the Asian American literary canon. Central to the analysis has been an attentiveness to the potentialities of queerness as a mode of subversion that extends beyond the realm of sexual identity to encompass a broader critique of normative social relations and structures of power. Drawing on the insights of scholars such as Lisa Lowe, Martin Manalansan, Patrick Johnson, and Roderick Ferguson, I have argued for the importance of a capacious understanding of Asian American literature and of queerness as an analytical framework. Whether reading Santos' critique of the structural violences inflicted upon Filipino migrant laborers, Kang's subversion of racist prohibitions on interracial intimacy, Kingston's feminist contestation of patriarchal authority, Leong's encrypting of homoerotic desire, or Vuong's radical articulation of queer self-fashioning, the texts examined in this study all bear witness to the enduring power of literature as a site of contestation, a space for imagining alternative modes of being and belonging in the face of systemic marginalization and erasure.

Ultimately, by bringing together texts from disparate historical and cultural contexts identifiable by examining social generationalities, this study has sought to offer a more nuanced and expansive understanding of the Asian American literary tradition, one that evolved through the shared struggles and collective acts of resistance. In doing so, I have aimed to contribute to the ongoing project of Asian American studies, which has long been committed to the task of challenging dominant narratives of race, nation, and identity, and to the creation of new forms of knowledge to transform the material conditions of Asian American lives.

At the same time, I am acutely aware of the limitations of my own study, which has been selective in its choice of texts and contexts, and which has been shaped by my own positionality as a scholar and critic. As such, I view this work not as a definitive statement on the relationship

between social generationality, violence, and subversion within the Asian American literary canon, but rather as an invitation to further dialogue and debate, a call for continued engagement with the rich and complex histories of Asian American cultural production.

Moreover, as the Asian American literary canon continues to evolve and expand, it will be important for the writers to consider how their works interplay with their social generationalities; what violences do they perceive and ought to subvert now? Perhaps nuances in racial prejudices ought to be further developed or new intersectional violences have risen in the contemporary. Regardless, it seems that such Asian American literatures have made big strides in concordance with social movements to ameliorate social ails—or at the very least, have been a tool of acknowledging and documenting the voices of the subjugated. Thus, I urge the contemporary Asian American writers to contemplate what maladies are present today and fervently voice them.

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