# FOREWORD

I initially encountered *Aiiieeeee!* in the winter of 2003, during my first Asian American literature course at Wesleyan University, a small liberal arts college. My professor deftly outlined the major critiques that had been leveled against the anthology over the years – the narrowness of its definition of Asian America, its overtly masculine tone and underrepresentation of women, its American-born, monolingual perspective – and with each contention, I grew more indignant. The magnitude of my indignation was perhaps out of proportion with the size of its source, based as it was on my thin reading of a thin selection: no more than the twelve pages that made up the original 1974 preface. We did not read the introduction that followed, nor the selections that constituted the bulk of the anthology (although we did read two of the excerpted novels, *America Is in the Heart* and *No-No Boy*, in their entirety). I am ashamed to admit that not until recently did I actually read the entire anthology, cover to cover. Yet I would venture that this oversight is not uncommon among Asian Americanists of my generation.[1] Indeed, if what defined Asian Americans for the editors of *Aiiieeeee!* was that they "got their China and Japan off the radio, off the silver screen, from television, out of comic books" (xxv), then for years perhaps what defined me as an Asian Americanist was where I didn't get my Asian America: which is to say, from *Aiiieeeee!*

In short, Asian Americanists have often been far more familiar with what is wrong with *Aiiieeeee!* than with *Aiiieeeee!* itself. From the earliest days of its publication, many Asian Americans did not hear themselves in the scream of *Aiiieeeee!*, did not see themselves in the "our" of its "fifty years of our whole voice" (xxvi). They chafed against what they saw as the editorial limiting of "authentic" Asian Americanness to "Filipino, Chinese, and Japanese Americans, American born and raised" (xxv).[2] This act of border drawing, by excluding Pacific Islander, Korean, and South Asian Americans (among others), further contributed to critics' rejection of *Aiiieeeee!*'s brand of Asian American cultural nationalism as more divisive than unifying.

Add to that the damning charge of gender bias. Many, including the editors themselves, have interpreted this critique to mean that women writers were underrepresented in, even actively excluded from, the anthology. In truth, writing by women made up nearly 30 percent of the literary selections. But the real criticism wasn't so much about the statistical representation of female bodies in the *literature* of Asian America gathered here; it was about the perceived erasure of female voices in the *theory* of Asian American writing that *Aiiieeeee!* delineated in its original preface and introduction. In an aggressive and largely denigrating way, the editors invoked – but did not anthologize – Asian American women writers like Jade Snow Wong, Monica Sone, Sui Sin Far, Betty Lee Sung, and Virginia Lee. Not that women were the only ones to suffer the editors' wrath – the Chinese American author Pardee Lowe, in particular, was alternately razed and raised up as a straw man pandering to white American readers' appetite for "actively inoffensive" (4) stories of exotic Orientalia. But it was,

statistically speaking, mostly women who were criticized for their presumed assimilationist ideals.

The reason for omitting the gendered targeting of this critique, according to the editors themselves, was simply numerical fact: there were at the time far more published female Asian American writers than male. The problem with the imbalance, however, went beyond numerical representation. Feminist critics lambasted *Aiiieeeee!* for its conceptual phallocentrism: the way it took the "sensibility" of the Asian American man as a metonym for Asian Americanness as a whole. The editors, in other words, too quickly subsumed the experience of Asian American women under a default ethnic humanity. In the same problematic way that the word *man* has historically been used in English as a synonym for all human beings, the editors declared that "a man in any culture speaks for himself. Without a language of his own, he no longer is a man" (38) and that "the white stereotype of the acceptable and unacceptable Asian is utterly without manhood . . . contemptible because he is womanly, effeminate" (15). Attempting to spring the trap of "racist love" (Frank Chin and Jeffery Paul Chan's term for white America's embrace of Asians as a model minority), the editors risked falling into the trap of misogyny. As King-Kok Cheung noted, "In taking whites to task for demeaning Asians, [the editors] seem nevertheless to be buttressing patriarchy by invoking gender stereotypes, by disparaging domestic efficiency as 'feminine,' and by slotting desirable traits such as originality, daring, physical courage, and creativity under the rubric of masculinity."[3]

Eleven years after I first encountered *Aiiieeeee!* – or rather, the critiques of it – I met one of its notorious editors. I had invited

Shawn Wong as a guest speaker for my own Asian American literature course at the University of Oregon, having in the intervening years gone from being the student to the teacher. I was excited that such a "celebrity" would take time to speak to the class of a first-year assistant professor whom he had never met nor heard of. Indeed, the generosity and kindness Shawn exhibited from the very beginning – working within an awkward time frame, tolerating technical difficulties, never raising the question of any sort of honorarium – surprised me, even made me somewhat suspicious. Where was the militant, cocky chauvinist of lore? Had he simply mellowed with age? I eventually learned that much of the editorial persona was, for Shawn at least, just that – a persona. The language the editors had used in their prefatory remarks had been intentionally polemical and inflammatory. These were agent provocateurs seeking to get people riled up – and talking about – Asian American literature in a style much in vogue in 1974. And the fact that you are still reading *Aiiieeeee!* today suggests that in this aim, at least, they were wildly successful.

During the Q&A with my students, it came up that the archival materials related to *Aiiieeeee!*'s publication – contracts, correspondence, drafts – were alive and well in Shawn's office at the University of Washington. Not only that; he was actively receptive to my going through the archive, even offering to let me cart some of it off to my own office in Eugene to pore over at my leisure. I was thrilled and hungry to learn more. As I began the task of sifting through cardboard boxes stuffed to the brim with paper, some of it actively decomposing and barely readable, my curiosity only increased.

One of my favorite early discoveries was the correspondence between Shawn and Wakako Yamauchi, author of the haunting short story "And the Soul Shall Dance," published for the first time in *Aiiieeeee!* In December 1973, on the eve of the anthology's publication, Wakako wrote, "I'm most humbly appreciative of the interest you've shown in my writing. Si [Yamauchi's friend, fellow nisei writer Hisaye Yamamoto] says you young writers have dug back into your past and have discovered people like us had been writing way back before the language was really ours. Like archaeologists coming upon a rich fossil bed, you are surprised and delighted and everything we said and did then became valid, just as every clay pot and figurine found in ancient shale becomes a work of art."

Although this letter was addressed to Shawn and his contemporaries, when I came across it forty-five years later I felt that Wakako was speaking directly to me and my fellow Asian Americanists – and the clay pots and figurines now included not only prized manuscripts like hers and Hisaye Yamamoto's but those of the *Aiiieeeee!* editors. Like Shawn, Jeff, Frank, and Lawson Fusao Inada, I have been surprised and delighted by the archive – indeed, its contents are such a treasure for the field of Asian American literary studies that my ultimate goal is to digitize and make them publicly accessible.[4]

I keenly feel, as an archaeologist might, the fact that I was not yet born when this "ancient shale" was first being shaped. Yet the secondhandness of my knowledge does not cheapen it; nor does my delight at the discovery blind me to flaws in the objects themselves. Alongside the thrill of the archaeologist is a fascinating doubleness – a vacillating sense of the anthology

and its editors as familiar yet foreign, a collective of which I always have been and never will be a part. This is perhaps what the editors would call the mythical curse common to all Asian Americans – the myth of the "dual personality," the absurd fantasy that, as they put it, Asian Americans can claim both Americanness and Asianness, that "I'm an American because I eat spaghetti and Chinese because I eat chow mein" (xxxi), or the equally absurd notion that "the Asian American can be broken down into his American part and his Asian part" (8).

The editors rightly observe that this "question of choice" (xxviii) – of choosing between, or choosing when to be, Asian or American – is ultimately false and externally imposed. The literary example they use to illustrate this illusion is the anthology's excerpt from Diana Chang's *The Frontiers of Love*, in which the "Eurasian" protagonist Sylvia – born of a Chinese father and a white American mother – "cannot choose between her parents or identify her blood as one thing or the other" (xxviii). Like the trope of the "tragic mulatto," the mixed-race Asian American in literature is often an emblem of cultural, national, and racial betwixt and betweenness. Yet "Eurasian" characters like Sylvia and authors like Diana Chang – and, perhaps, even mixed-race Asian American scholars like myself – are as often seen as paragons possessing a sort of double consciousness, not dissimilar to what W. E. B. Du Bois described in relation to Black Americans. The key difference is that where Du Bois saw double consciousness as a painful burden – to constantly be made to feel that one is an American problem – the mixed-race Asian American seems more often than not to symbolize the assimilative *solution* to the problem, a first step toward worldwide colorblindness and the end of racism in the form of race

mixing so extensive that there is, ostensibly, no such thing as race any longer (which is often taken to mean no such thing as a "white" race any longer).[5]

But simply being born of a Chinese mother and a white American father is not what has made me sympathetic to the editors as well as their critics; this is part of my inheritance as an Asian Americanist. "Must a Chinese American critic choose between feminism and heroism?" King-Kok Cheung once asked.[6] The *Aiiieeeee!* archive offers up no definitive answer; yet it has forced me to question what I thought I already knew about its editors' interest in "heroism" vis-à-vis accusations of machismo, misogyny, and even homophobia. The greatest archival challenge to those assumptions has been the most recent, coming to light because of this republication.

The University of Washington Press edition is the sixth publication of *Aiiieeeee!* The first, in hardcover by Howard University Press in 1974, was followed by Doubleday Anchor (1975), Howard (1983, paperback), Mentor/Penguin (1991), and Meridian/Penguin (1997). The UW Press edition is special, however, not only because it is the latest, marking the forty-fifth anniversary of the anthology. Rather, the present edition includes updates to the author biographies, and one in particular. In their original introduction, the editors noted that many Asian American writers had historically faced pressure to adopt a literary pseudonym that might disguise the "foreignness" of their names, for fear that the latter might lead to rejection (or, conversely, fetishization) by American readers.[7] A cursory skim of the table of contents reveals no such obvious erasures of Asian names: and yet there is, in fact, a pseudonym nestled there, an author who has remained disguised for nearly fifty years.

I would not have known until I began collecting permission forms from the archive for each of the selections printed in the anthology. One form, for the story "Rough Notes for Mantos," caught my eye. The typed name of the author had been redacted – not merely crossed out but completely blacked out with a thick marker – and next to the black mark were the handwritten words "Wallace Lin."

A bit of detective work revealed that Wallace Lin was none other than Russell Leong, the award-winning writer, professor, and editor. But why would Russell have adopted a pseudonym? The answer was in a series of letters between Russell and Shawn. Throughout their correspondence, neither explicitly mentions the issue of sexuality – either the homosexuality latently explored in "Mantos" or Russell's own. In subsequent conversations I had with Shawn and Russell, however, this was clearly inextricable from Russell's decision to adopt a pseudonym. In the letters, Russell initially refuses Shawn's request to print "Mantos" (or another of his stories, "Phoenix Eyes") because "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." "Family," Shawn later told me, specifically meant Russell's father, Charles Leong, a noted writer in his own right and publisher of important San Francisco Chinese American periodicals in the 1940s through the 1960s. Ironically, Charles had in early 1974 made a special stop in Taipei to visit his son (who had moved there for a time to study Chinese) and to bestow upon him the gift of a hot-off-the-presses copy of *Aiiieeeee!* "Of course, [my father] hasn't read it yet and won't know I'm in it, but that's o.k.," the twenty-four-year-old Russell wrote. Indeed, the prospect of a father not recognizing

his own son was made all the more likely by "Wallace Lin's" transformation into near-caricature in the author biography that preceded "Mantos": 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."

I found the epilogue to this episode in another archive, this time in the special collections library of the University of California, Santa Barbara. There, I discovered a postcard Charles Leong had written to Frank Chin in October 1974. The elder Leong had read *Aiiieeeee!*, and while he considered it an "excellent" and "solid" anthology, he remained skeptical about one particular aspect. "Wallace Lin sounds suspiciously like Russell Leong," he told Frank. "If so, great, because flashes of good writing in it." Should we read this as a familiarly muted, begrudging example of the high-expectations Asian parent? Or, given the tenor of the times, was this an actual affirmation of his son's sexuality? . . . Or both? Russell, for his part, declined to say which, while also noting that he doesn't recall his father ever speaking to him about the story.

This account is not meant to redeem the editors from the charges of heteronormative chauvinism brought against them, although it is interesting to note that Shawn insisted on the inclusion of "Mantos" over other, less face-risking stories of Russell's. This history nonetheless underscores how my time in the archive created a new picture of *Aiiieeeee!* that fundamentally challenged what I thought I knew about the editors' sensibilities.

The archive has, further, radically reshaped my beliefs about the importance of reading *Aiiieeeee!* within its historical context. Classroom and academic discussions of *Aiiieeeee!* rarely

mention how difficult the anthology's path to publication was. The archive, however, reveals a parade of curt, dismissive, and frequently patronizing rejections from major publishing houses. "The fiction and the poetry in this collection [are] quite ordinary, more ethnic than good," concluded one editor. "The least ethnic of the pieces are the best." Another, seeking to soften the blow of rejection, encouraged Shawn to look, for a model, to Jewish American writers "like Saroyan and Chaim Potok – just to name two who have taken the 'difference' and molded it to enrich the society. . . . Books like [theirs] move people because we are all foreigners in this society."

Such sentiments continued after the book was published. A remarkable number of publications reviewed *Aiiieeeee!*, from the *New York Times* and *New Yorker* to *Rolling Stone*, *Essence*, *Publisher's Weekly*, and *Choice*. While the reviews, on the whole, were extremely positive, the language in which both praise and critique were often couched is a reminder of what the editors were seeking to change with the anthology. One reviewer, for example, suggested that the literary selections "illuminate areas of darkness in the hidden experiences of a people who had been little more than exotic figments of someone else's imagination."[8] Another noted that "anthologies like this ask to be judged both as propaganda and as literature. As propaganda which makes the reader understand and sympathize with a much-ignored minority, these stories and the anthologists' fine essays and notes are very successful."[9] Other reviewers were more willing to concede the literary value of *Aiiieeeee!*, if in a somewhat back-handed manner. "Surprisingly, the pieces in *Aiiieeeee!* don't read like a minority literature," remarked one. "Anger, frustration, confusion there may be, but they

have been annexed in every case to a well-crafted sensitivity via memoir, story, or play."[10] Another agreed that the anthology contained "a thoroughly interesting and varied gathering of writings." But the assessment continued, "Unfortunately, it is preceded by the editors' very angry and militant introductory material." "For all the abrasiveness of the style," this reviewer finally admitted, "patient readers will find some hard facts."[11]

In their original preface and introduction, the editors traced the literary history of Asian America from around the turn of the twentieth century until the early 1960s. As they put it, "Before we can talk about our literature, we have to explain our sensibility. Before we can explain our sensibility, we have to outline our histories" (xlii). This perspective is equally true of *Aiiieeeee!* itself; the political context in which the anthology was written and received is of essential importance to its literary and historical content. This includes, most obviously, the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War.[12] Equally significant is the role of Howard University Press, a historically Black press that made *Aiiieeeee!* one of its first offerings. It was no coincidence that Howard saw the promise of the book where others did not; the very fact of a Black publishing house is an example of the power of interracial coalition, a refusal to be blinded by historical divide-and-conquer strategies of pitting Blacks against Asians by holding up the latter as a "model minority."

It is important to recognize *Aiiieeeee!* as part of a broader politicization of Asian Americans engaged in protracted struggles in the late 1960s and early 1970s to establish ethnic studies programs at institutions like the University of California, Berkeley, and San Francisco State College. Indeed, the value and necessity of the extensive prefatory material in *Aiiieeeee!*

derived in part from the historical paucity of formal instruction in Asian American history, literature, or culture.

As a result, we can and should acknowledge that *Aiiieeeee!* did a remarkable job accomplishing some of the aims for which we consider race and ethnic studies to be most successful and necessary; namely, challenging white supremacy and hegemonic narratives by offering evidence-based historical correctives and busting stereotypes. Within the field of Asian American literary studies, *Aiiieeeee!* makes a valuable contribution in its emphatic refusal to accept diminishing, derogative claims about the perceived inferior quality of much minority literature, particularly that written in nonstandard English or "dialect."[13] In calling out such thinly disguised racism as a form of linguistic cultural imperialism, the editors remind us of the tension that continues today between what Colleen Lye has eloquently called "the ethnic" and "the aesthetic": the implicit mutual exclusivity that many of *Aiiieeeee!*'s reviewers expressed between "minority literature" and "good literature."[14]

Despite being compiled forty-five years ago, *Aiiieeeee!* continues to be relevant, and not simply because it remains Asian American studies' controversial origin story. No, the reissue of *Aiiieeeee!* is more than a return of the repressed. In his *New Yorker* essay on the anthology, Robert Coles observed that "the past does not yield so easily to the demands of the realities of the present. The past, with all its class tensions, racial animosities, and ethnic antagonisms, remains part of the present, as this book poignantly reminds us."[15] This remains as true now as in 1975, when Coles penned those words. Many of the questions posed in *Aiiieeeee!*, whether explicitly by the editors or implicitly by the authors, are ones we are still asking today.

What, and who, counts as authentically Asian American? How can we define ourselves and our identities outside of both white racism and Asian origins, in terms of what we are rather than what we are not?

Much has changed since the publication of *Aiiieeeee!*, certainly. Four of the contributors have since passed away – Toshio Mori, Diana Chang, Hisaye Yamamoto, and Wakako Yamauchi. The editors themselves are in their seventies and eighties. In the wider world, great demographic shifts have transformed Asian America from a largely American-born to a majority foreign-born population. A post-9/11 America has been marked by the domestic vulnerability and hypervisibility of Arab Americans and Muslim Americans. At the international level, US-Asian relations have undergone numerous shifts: in the 1980s, with the economic rise of Japan; and more recently, with the global ascent of China.

At the same time, in stark contrast to the situation in which the *Aiiieeeee!* editors were writing, one is no longer hard pressed to find Asian American literature in prominent places. Award-winning Asian American authors have become more visible – Viet Thanh Nguyen's Pulitzer Prize–winning *The Sympathizer* is one obvious example. *Aiiieeeee!* has been joined by many more Asian American literary anthologies. The field as a whole has greatly expanded, encompassing broader regional diversity in the form of Asian Canadian and North American literature and working toward more expansive panethnic rubrics that account for South and Southeast Asian and Pacific Islander writers. There is also a whole 1.5 generation of writers that has received significant attention: Ha Jin, Yiyun Li, and most recently, Kevin Kwan, author of the infamous *Crazy Rich Asians*.[16]

A lot has changed since the publication of *Aiiieeeee!* But we could also say that a lot has changed *because* of *Aiiieeeee!*; or that *Aiiieeeee!* presciently anticipated these changes, not least by highlighting the vibrant diversity of Asian American experience in the literature. The stories in the anthology you have before you, the earliest of which were written in the 1940s, range from those exploring the lives of Filipino migrant laborers to Japanese American internees to mixed-race Chinese American expatriates, from plays to novels to short stories. Taken as a whole, *Aiiieeeee!* captures the tension but also the power of envisioning Asian American literary and political sensibilities in tandem, of viewing the works of art themselves as, in Sau-ling Wong's formulation, a "textual coalition."[17] Writer and minority literature champion Kay Boyle noted in her 1974 review that *Aiiieeeee!* was an exception to most anthologies, which "leave one with the feeling that what is in them has been anthologized at least twice before."[18] Forty-five years later *Aiiieeeee!* still feels fresh. A thread runs through it, a continuous narrative that makes the anthology more than the sum of its parts, tying *Aiiieeeee!* to the present and projecting it into the future. Maybe that thread can be called Asian American. After all, "Asian American" need not be restricted to common geographic origins or racial identities; instead, it can be thought of as the name for a collective, radical critique of power relations.[19] For this is where, through endless struggles and painful declensions, one still hears the call to action against the silencing violence of social injustice that is "Aiiieeeee!"

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## NOTES

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1 *Asian Americanists* simply means, in the broadest sense, those who study Asian America.

2 It is worth noting that the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which led to massive growth in the foreign-born Asian American population, had not yet fully taken hold, so indeed the demographic at the time of *Aiiieeeee!*'s first, 1974 edition was majority American born (61 percent native-born, 39 percent foreign-born). See Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, *Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population of the United States: 1850 to 2000* (Washington, DC: US Census Bureau, 2006).

3 King-Kok Cheung, "The Woman Warrior versus the Chinaman Pacific: Must a Chinese American Critic Choose between Feminism and Heroism?," in *Conflicts in Feminism*, ed. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (New York: Routledge, 1990), 234–51.

4 See http://Aiiieeeee.org.

5 For a brilliant discussion of this, see David Palumbo-Liu on *Time*'s "The New Face of America" in his *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 108–10.

6 Cheung, "The Woman Warrior versus the Chinaman Pacific."

7 This was especially the case with Japanese American writers during the post–World War II period, as has only recently been discovered. See

Frank Abe, Greg Robinson, and Floyd Cheung, ed., *John Okada: The Life and Rediscovered Work of the Author of "No-No Boy"* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018).

8 Jan Carew, "Going beyond the Clichés," *New York Times Book Review*, September 22, 1974.

9 K. M. R., *KLIATT*, November 1974, 48.

10 Suzanne Mantell, *Harper's Bookletter* 2, no. 2 (September 1, 1975).

11 *Publisher's Weekly*, March 11, 1974.

12 Indeed, the earliest versions of *Aiiieeeee!*'s preface and introduction appeared in a special issue, coedited by Victor and Brett DeBary Nee, Shawn Wong, and Connie Young Yu, of the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* (now *Critical Asian Studies*) 4, no. 3 (Fall 1972), a scholarly journal "born out of the crisis of the Indochina Wars as an attempt to analyze U.S. policy in cold war Asia." See https://criticalasianstudies.org/about.

13 See, in particular, the introduction's discussion of publisher responses to the diction and syntax of Toshio Mori and John Okada.

14 Colleen Lye, "Racial Form," *Representations* 104 (Fall 2008): 92–101.

15 Robert Coles, "Outsiders," *New Yorker*, June 2, 1975, 107.

16 The term *1.5 generation* was historically used to denote those who immigrated in childhood or young adulthood, compared to the terms *first generation* (the foreign-born immigrant generation) and *second generation* (offspring of the first generation, i.e., the American-born generation). The few writers mentioned here should not be taken as representative of all Asian American writers, nor the only significant ones. A list of all the important Asian American writers would take up many paragraphs.

17 Sau-ling Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

18 Kay Boyle, "I Am Furious (Yellow)," *Rolling Stone*, August 29, 1974.

19 For a powerful recent discussion of this critique in relation to Arab Americans and Muslin Americans, see Moustafa Bayoumi, "Asian American Studies, the War on Terror, and the Changing University: A Call to Respond," in *Asian American Matters: A New York Anthology*, ed. Russell C. Leong (New York: Asian American and Asian Research Institute, City University of New York), 21–24.