

Aiiieeee!'s NO! in Thunder

By Leslie Bow

The first time I encountered Frank Chin, he was on a rant.

Shirley Geok-lin Lim had convened an Asian American literature conference at UC Santa Barbara in 1991. Her *Forbidden Stitch: an Asian American Women's Anthology* (1989) had recently come out as part of the next wave of Asian American literary anthologies following *Aiiieeee!: An Anthology of Asian-American Writers*. It was the title that triggered him.

"The 'forbidden stitch' is a fake!," he was shouting. "There's no such thing! It's not real!" True enough: the idea that embroidery causes blindness is certainly an orientalist myth. But the stitch exists, if more prosaically, as a French knot.

When he paused, I mildly interjected, "I have news for you. Donald Duck is not real."

A woman listening to the one-sided exchange barked out a laugh, recognizing the reference to Chin's own novel. But he kept on as if he had not heard either of us. Nor did he seem to care about eliciting a response. He just kept going.

The tirade was in keeping with Chin's preoccupation with distinguishing between "real" and "fake" Asian American writers in *Aiiieeee!*'s 1991 sequel, *The Big Aiiieeee!*. In 1974, he and his co-editors drew that distinction in more veiled terms by distinguishing between those writers reflecting an "Asian-American sensibility" (3) and those "Americanized Asians" (xix) who pandered to white audiences.

By 1991's publication of *The Big Aiiieeee!*, the original and innovative viewpoint expressed in the first anthology had assumed the air of same old, same old. The posture of militancy attending the frontmatter's swaggering rhetoric had been refreshing, powerful, but now seemed somewhat dated like a story that never changed.

Aiiieeee!'s monumental achievement was to hail "Asian American literature" into being. But it did so in provocative and perhaps untenable ways. As any high school student can tell you, starting a new club requires both inclusions and exclusions. Part of the controversial place that Chin, Chan, Inada, and Wong's anthology holds in

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Asian American Studies lies in its unabashed clubby-ness and a certainty about who merits membership.

The first time that I read *Aiiieeee!*, I only mildly registered the fact that the introductory material is split in two, situating Chinese and Japanese American literature apart from Filipino American literature. This seems to undermine the project's purpose, to establish "Asian American" literature. No Korean American writing seems to have existed. In the waning years of the Vietnam War, no Vietnamese American writing was foretold. As it grappled with the broad determinants of who deserved to be called an "Asian American" writer, Chin, Chan, Inada, and Wong's rhetorical style, and to a lesser extent Peñaranda, Syquía, and Tagatac's, calls to my mind poet Frank O'Hara, who could be both breezy and lacerating. One of O'Hara's poems casually provides a gossipy run down of his and his buddies' literary tastes:

we go eat some fish and some ale it's
cool but crowded we don't like Lionel Triling [sic]
we decide, we like Don Allen we don't like
Henry James so much we like Herman Melville (336)

Taking a cue from this poetic form, the front matter of *Aiiieeee!* might read:

we don't like Virginia Lee
we decide, we like Louis Chu we don't like
Jade Snow Wong so much we like John Okada

or

we don't like Betty Lee Sung
we decide, we like Toshiro Mori we don't like
Pardee Lowe so much we like José Garcia Villa

In our canon, no "pets" allowed but "mad dogs," ok. No Orientalists, no panderers, no FOBs. And especially no one "brainwashed" by white supremacy. Nobody who does not share our sensibility. Nobody we don't like. Sui Sin Far (Edith Eaton), fine, but forget her sister Onoto Watanna (Winnifred Eaton), arguably the first Asian American novelist with *Me: A Book of Remembrance* (1915). But we wouldn't like her anyway. *Aiiieeee!*'s front matter is preoccupied with negative examples in a way that lends an air of competitiveness. Recognition by the white literary establishment? Credentials revoked.

The anthology's invocation of a "sensibility" is interesting. What makes up a people's sensibility, one "that was neither Asian nor white American" (3)? Is it content? Specific treatment of that content indicating a political point of view? Language? It did not wholly depend upon citizenship, nationality, or generation. At first I did not think

that this reflected Jane Austen's use of "sensibility" as distinct from "sense," but that is an intriguing idea: an *affective* stance derived from the aesthetic creates a distinct canon. The claim that the Filipino American writer's sensibility is distinct from that of the Filipino writer seems quite plausible. But other exclusionary nets centered around identity seem more dated, e.g. Peñaranda, Syquia, and Tagatac's assertion, "Only a Filipino-American can write adequately about the Filipino-American experience" (54). "Sensibility" here is a metric for separating the sheep from the goats as in the Biblical parable separating believers from skeptics, real from fake Asian American writers. (I confess to being partial to the sensibilities of goats. Even now I tend to favor those authors not wholly embraced by "Asian American literature": Fiona Cheong, Charles Yu, Shaun Tan, Mariko and Jillian Tamaki, Yoko Ono. And yet, there is not an identifiable sensibility among them.)

One can see other struggles with the terms of inclusion and exclusion in the anthology, particularly in regard to what I see as the somewhat slippery concept of "dual personality," which is roundly rejected as an indication of ideological contamination (21). Is the split between Asian ethnic and US cultures a trumped up discursive formation and instrument of white power or is the negotiation of cultures actually viable subject matter for Asian American literature? Who drank the Kool-Aid of the myth of "dual personality" and who did not? Monica Sone's *Nisei Daughter* gets judicious treatment on this score, as if the editors are not exactly sure how to locate her. She registers "self-contempt," but affirms being inextricably a child of Skid Row. Novelist Diana Chang is praised for her use of the "logical dramatic metaphor of the conflict of cultures" (xii) expressed through her mixed-raced and mono-raced Asian characters. But that seems to be another way of conveying "dual personality." *No-No Boy* is cited at length to demonstrate how Okada gets it right, even as the passage on Ichiro's "halfness" seems to articulate psychological debilitation ("I wish with all my heart that I were Japanese or that I were American. I am neither and I blame you and I blame myself and I blame the world" (28)). The line between *rendering* "self-contempt" and *believing* it seems a bit porous.

To state the obvious, *Aiiieeee!* did not erase gender as much as it tended to erase women [e.g. "Without a language of his own, he no longer is a man" (35)]. The masculinist rhetoric here created a gendered and sexual rift at the foundations of Asian American literature. Much ink has been spilled about this fissure (some by me) so I won't rehash it here. Suffice it to say, in the early nineties when an Asian American male novelist included in *The Big Aiiieeee!* (1991) heard about the focus of my academic work on Asian American women's literature, he dramatically and dismissively rolled his eyes. (Our bro-club not good enough for you?!) Granted, to writers, critics can be faintly ridiculous. Girl critics apparently more so. And girl goats, they suck. As a foundational text, *Aiiieeee!* allows us to "teach the conflict" as they used to say about the "culture wars" of the 1990s. So, thank you. Week 7 of the syllabus? Done.

Of course, the anthology's masculine rhetoric is intentionally provocative and performative. In her introduction to the volume's 2019 reissue by University of Washington Press, Tara Fickle marks the "militant, cocky chauvinist" point of view as a persona, one that co-editor Shawn Wong, as she reveals, does not share in real life. The bravado calls to my mind the character Steve in Wayne Wang's film *Chan Is Missing* (1982) who tries to be "fly" in front of the ladies, one of whom is played by poet Virginia Cerenio. The women call him out: "Hey, who do you think you are anyway? You think you're Richard Pryor or something like that?" (52-53). That is, seventies dude-ness seems to require a "Blackcent" which, as any member of Gen Z will tell you, is cultural appropriation. *Aiiieeee!* seeks a voice of its own for Asian American literature, but in the effort to eschew "ventriloquizing" white culture and values, there's some other borrowing here.

But when all is said and done, *Aiiieeee!* has swagger. Thus, Asian American literature came out of the gate with swagger. The anthology represents a historical document that retains the echoes of Third World Liberation politics that have now become muted. It calls white supremacy out on the carpet. I value its narratives of restoration and recovery, of finding something once lost, thrown out, or manipulated by an indifferent or hostile public. In rereading the preface and first introduction, I see how many of its ideas were lifted from Frank Chin and Jeffrey Paul Chan's seminal 1972 essay, "Racist Love." Together, these essays articulate the interconnection between art and ideology that inform my practice as a critic today. They affirmed what we now take for granted: that art actively produces culture with salutary or injurious effects, that literature scripts how we are conditioned to see ourselves. And I'm appropriating the seminal idea of "racist love" as the affective structure enmeshing Asian Americans.

Aiiieeee! insists not simply on presence but a specific kind of presence. It celebrates literature that demonstrates an awareness of racialization and affirms that such work has aesthetic value. It dared to establish that both the content and *feeling* of ideas can function as a formative rubric for a newly born canon in ways that exceed the now somewhat watered-down calls for greater Asian American representation against whitewashing in the media. Early on, the editors saw that more was not necessarily better. Counter to inclusivity? Or gutsy political move?

And while we differ on what is or is not "better," I see that, back in the day, one criterion for Asian American literature centered on being "Woke." I'll take it. There is a voice of defiance claimed on behalf of all of us. With *Aiiieeee!*, Asian American literature burst forward echoing critic Leslie Fiedler's ventriloquism of Herman Melville, shouting "NO! In thunder." And if that sounds like a rant, so be it.

Madison, Wisconsin, 2019

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