

Remembering the Impact of *Aiiiiiii!* in the 1970s in Hawai'i

By Eric Chock

It's baaaaack! In the 1970s, at a time when there were no University of Hawai'i courses focused on "minority" writers, and no significant anthology of Hawai'i writers, the first *Aiiiiiii!* was a significant catalyst for the Local literature movement in Hawai'i. While the book itself was not widely known locally, it was a major force in the national Asian American literature movement. In turn, that emerging movement led to a watershed moment for Local literature, the 1978 "Talk Story: Our Voices in Literature and Song; Hawaii's Ethnic American Writers Conference," in Honolulu. Organizers Stephen Sumida and Arnold Hiura had returned from graduate work on the West Coast, where Sumida had been conference organizer for the 1976 Pacific Northwest Asian American Writers Conference, considered a follow-up to the 1975 Oakland Asian American Writers Conference. Both conferences included editors and writers from *Aiiiiiii!*. Spurred by the growing Asian American literature movement and *Aiiiiiii!*, Talk Story organizers Sumida, Hiura, and Marie Hara rode that momentum in planning their version of Hawai'i's ethnic writers conference, which included mainland Asian Americans, local Asian Americans, Hawaiian chanters, and other local writers. Many Asian American writers and scholars considered this to be the third national Asian American writers conference. Whether we recognized it or not, *Aiiiiiii!* and mainland Asian American writers had a significant impact on Local literature.

Not only were *Aiiiiiii!* editors and writers in attendance at Talk Story, but the political tenor of much of the conference was based in the philosophy of the *Aiiiiiii!* project. *Aiiiiiii!* editors and mainland writers challenged local writers for not having enough political consciousness apparent in our stories and poems. Hawai'i resident, Maxine Hong Kingston, was openly confronted regarding whether *The Woman Warrior* was a novel or a memoir—and whether the details were representative of authentic Chinese culture. The open confrontation surrounding such definitions was somewhat new to us, though we had already faced similar controversy in determining who Talk Story represented and what "ethnic" meant in this context. Such controversy about a writer's identity or how to define a literature foreshadowed much of what we at Bamboo Ridge Press would later experience in our own efforts to authentically

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represent and define what we called Local literature, and who should be called a local writer.

Another distinguishing factor making *Aiiieeee!* stand out was how its editors used their scholarly introductions to frame the way its little-known ethnic writers deserved to be read. They pointed to socio-political contexts or nuances of imagery that created sensibilities that could be called Asian American, and which would be better appreciated within their given contexts. They discussed the need to combat negative stereotypes, and worse, the perpetuation of such stereotypes within the culture itself. Then, after arguing for the validity of an authentic ethnic literature, these writers and editors were appearing at conferences and university classes around the country, sparking debate and fueling the growth of Asian American literature. The traditional English canon had to change, courses had to change. In addition to the fight for ethnic studies departments at universities, writers began to demand Asian American literature courses as well. Publication practices had to change. Presses and cooperatives needed to be created. These were all issues we shared in Hawai'i. Who were we? What was our literary heritage? Why didn't we have Local literature in our classes? The *Aiiieeee!* questions, style, and methods demonstrated some of the core elements we would need to develop further in order to nurture our burgeoning Local literature in Hawai'i. While we had already started addressing many of the same concerns, there was a synergy to be found by observing what had already been done on a national scale, and developing networks with like-minded fellow writers. The Talk Story conference was the initial venue, and the *Aiiieeee!* gang was ready to share. Ironically, they did not come just to talk story.

Like many—dare I say most—young writers today, the Asian American or ethnic or minority literary approach was not my first interest as a young writer or reader. I was more interested in lyrics by Bob Dylan or Joni Mitchell, and in poets like Lawrence Ferlinghetti and T.S. Eliot. I was aware of Black writers and literature, but that often didn't speak to my experience in Hawai'i. As far as ethnic political interests, I was keenly involved with local culture, local music, and the local pride movement, and was immersed in land rights protests as a community organizer and VISTA worker. From the early '70s, while in grad school, I was involved in organizing and promoting local writers of Chinese, Japanese, Hawaiian, local haole, Korean, Puerto Rican, Filipino, and other backgrounds—but we never called them or ourselves Asian American. That would have excluded some who were essential to local culture. The political focus for us was still more on the contrast between local and haole cultures, to use the nomenclature common at the time. We were local writers writing Local literature.

Asian American-anything did not really impact my consciousness until the planning and events leading up to the 1978 Talk Story conference. At that time, ethnic or multiethnic identity became distinct threads in the wider tapestry that was my view of literature. The interests I had already developed in graduate school, when I

promoted various local writers, became temporarily more focused on Chinese American, Japanese American, Filipino American, and other non-white mainland writers who shared cultural backgrounds with many of us. But "Asian American" was a relatively new term then, based on political ethnic movements of the late '60s. Its roots were in racial conflicts in America. While we had mutual concerns about being Asian American in the larger American culture, at Talk Story we local writers were challenged to foreground that sense of being a minority, even though many of us had not grown up with that sense in our multicultural state. We got to know more about how the political backgrounds of mainland Asian Americans informed their writing, and why *Aiiieeeee!* was so important to them. Interestingly, one writer and editor who did not appear at Talk Story was Frank Chin. Then, the following year, he came for a month-long "visit" in Honolulu. He did readings, held workshops, visited high school and university classes, toured various cultural sites, did news interviews, and generally expounded every night to whoever would listen. He was the embodiment of the *Aiiieeeee!* philosophy.

For myself, Frank Chin was the most influential *Aiiieeeee!* editor. He seemed to be the main promoter of the ideas in the "Preface" and "An Introduction to Chinese- and Japanese-American Literature" in *Aiiieeeee!* His explanation of voice and ethnic identity and all that language carries with its myriad nuances reinforced our idea of valuing local literature as much as canonical American and European literature. Statements about perpetuating negative stereotypes or cultural imperialism dovetailed with various ideas we already had about using local pidgin, about "correctly" interpreting and applying local imagery, and about paying local writers who gave public readings. His theories were certainly a distinct contrast to my University of Hawai'i courses which were usually focused on an analysis of the mostly non-political work itself, not the cultural context it came from and represented, as if those were separate things. It was enlightening to read not just how pervasively mainstream white culture conflicted with mainland Asian American culture, but also how deeply that conflict could be buried within any given story or poem, regardless of its apparent main thematic focus. What were earlier interpreted as so-called universal themes became imbued with cultural nuances as never before. Also, the idea that a body of literature represented the ethnic culture its writers came from—for the most part, that was just not relevant in my university's view of English Lit, which seemed to think that British and American Lit were all-encompassing and representing everyone with their universal themes—and which assumed that there was no established Local literature yet. After *Aiiieeeee!*, race and racism—or the denial of such attitudes—became a more prominent issue in literary discussions. Chin challenged us to see white racist attitudes not only in other writers, but also in our own work. He challenged us to not only identify racist stereotypes in stories and language, but also to identify when such stereotyping was being self-perpetuated by writers with ethnic backgrounds, even writers we knew. Chin was not

shy about calling people out and stating his positions. This is difficult in a small community where the ethic has always been, "No make waves, you might be related."

In *Aiiieeee!*'s introductions, theories about the cultural sensibilities embedded in language also pointed to a richer interpretation of the poignant, inspiring stories of Asian America. It linked the stories to the cultures and people they sprang from, people we easily understood, creating a kind of meaning not ordinarily found in the average UH writing workshop or Intro to Lit class at the time. It reinforced a gut-level desire for us to establish and define a sense of our own multiethnic Local culture and literature in Hawai'i. After Talk Story '78, and after the 1979 extended visit from Frank Chin, several notable events occurred, all influenced to some degree by what we learned from the movement surrounding *Aiiieeee!* editors and writers. Around that time, we had just started publishing Bamboo Ridge, The Hawai'i Writers Quarterly; we organized and took over the board of the Hawai'i Literary Arts Council (formerly run mainly by UH professors) and used its funds to support Asian American writers and Local literature events; Talk Story '78 was followed by three more conferences focused on our Local literature; we lobbied the newspapers for more coverage of local literary events; we lobbied the University of Hawai'i and the Hawai'i State Department of Education for inclusion of Local literature in their curriculums; and we formed what became known as the Bamboo Ridge Study Group, which has met monthly since then. It was called a study group because the focus was not only on workshopping our own creative writing, but also on reading and studying the historical context of local and Asian American writing that had come before, as well as that which was being published contemporaneously. This ethnic political focus made it unlike any other workshop I'd experienced. It affected our writing for years to come.

With *Aiiieeee!* and the Asian American literary movement, the bar was set high enough to keep us reaching for decades to come. It engendered significant debate, still ongoing today in various conferences, panels, and academic papers which sometimes focus on local Asian/Pacific writers. The overlap between local writers and Asian American writers was further explored, and networks were formed. *Aiiieeee!* and the swelling minority literature movements reinforced our desire to publish local writers who probably would not get published by mainstream presses, so we secured grants to support publication, mostly from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Hawai'i State Foundation on Culture and the Arts. Asian American writers from *Aiiieeee!* or the Talk Story conference became a regular feature at UH, while Hawai'i literature began to appear in university courses nationwide, and local writers were invited to speak across the country. You don't have to completely agree with a philosophy to benefit from it. Though Chin was flamboyant, aggressive, and confrontational, we found enough commonality for ideas and actions to flow. When Bamboo Ridge writers became a regular feature at Association for Asian American Studies conferences, when we began selling more books on the West Coast than in Hawai'i, I realized that the Asian

American networking and synergy was really working. We had successfully followed the model of creating our own literary structures—presses, conferences, workshops, readings series, and even courses, and our literature was growing.

In Hawai'i, we learned much from the Asian American movement. Not only was the conceptual framework of the *Aiiieeeee!* introductions invigorating, but then reading of the lives, motivations, struggles and successes of characters whom we could quite readily relate to was doubly rewarding. After all, we all had family or friends living on the mainland. When I realized that there was a growing body of literature by writers whose Asian American background somewhat overlapped with mine, I knew that culturally based ways of relating to art were being validated nationwide. It was a reminder that the lives of Asian Americans—and local people—are valid material for great literary art, and those stories need to be told. In our early years, *Aiiieeeee!* was a strong assertion that those voices would never be silenced again. The introductory essays, the stories, poems, and plays, the movement it fueled—all of a piece, powerfully integrated, sparking controversy and action, and worth revisiting again.

Forty-five years later, this re-publication of *Aiiieeeee!* is still relevant and a must-read for anyone who wants to know about the roots of Asian American or any so-called minority American literature; perhaps more importantly, it shows how valuable writing can be to the culture that it represents or portrays. It illustrates essential basic principles: know your history, know your theory, and know the literature that is being created around you in your own culture or cultures. Then, do all the necessary work to publish, distribute, and sustain that literature, and grow an audience that appreciates just how valuable it is. The *Aiiieeeee!* editors may have been aggressive, confrontational, or worse. Local writers may have been accused of not being political enough. But we knew how to work, how to get things done, and we knew how to build the apparatus and networks for our own version of Local literature to flourish. We took more control of our literary destiny. And that, in large part, was inspired and supported by those mainland Asian Americans and the *Aiiieeeee!* project. Forty-five years later, we still have work to do.