

Introduction to Volume Ten: *Aiiieeeee!* at 45

“What does ‘*Aiiieeeee!*’ mean to you?” was the prompt in our initial call for papers for this special issue of AALDP, commissioned in honor of the 45th anniversary of the publication of *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers*. The decision to publish a special issue coincided with a new print and e-book edition of *Aiiieeeee!*, published by the University of Washington Press, a developing digital archive (aiieeeee.org), and a series of events and talks revisiting this landmark anthology. To some extent, we asked this question in order to invite contributors to reflect on the influence the book has had on their own personal and professional development as Asian American writers, artists, scholars, and teachers – especially teachers of Asian American literature. At the same time, we wanted to draw attention to the fact that the word “*Aiiieeeee!*” itself – an onomatopoeia that embodied for the original editors the limited confines in which the Asian American voice had historically been permitted to express itself – no longer has quite the meanings it once did. For Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, Shawn Wong, and their contemporaries, “*Aiiieeeee!*” hardly had to be explained: it was the painfully familiar, singular cry rendered in comic books and film as shorthand for the whole range of emotions allowed “the yellow man” (and it was almost always men), whether “wounded, sad, angry, swearing, or wondering” (xxvi). The editors’ reclamation of this reductively racist term by using it, instead, to name the enraged *refusal* to silence “fifty years of our whole voice” was nothing less than radical.

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What looked radical in 1974, however, looks rather different in 2019. The newest generation of students and writers were born decades after the publication of the original anthology and the radical social movements of the 1960s and '70s that were its backdrop. They no longer inherently recognize "Aiiieeeee!" as a media representation or a call to action – indeed, multiple students in our classes have mistakenly assumed the anthology's title to be pronounced "Aye!" Many of them have likely never heard of the anthology at all. Nor are today's students likely to be aware that *Aiiieeeee!* was responsible for recuperating – and subsequently memorializing – a multitude of Japanese American, Chinese American, and Filipino American literary voices that had been neglected or actively rejected by the publishing industry. In response, critics and writers felt buoyed by but also especially cognizant of the absence of other Asian American ethnic groups in mainstream publishing (and *Aiiieeeee!* itself). The very idea of the absence of Asian American literature from the US publishing industry might even seem absurd in the era of Ocean Vuong, Viet Thanh Nguyen, Kevin Kwan, Min Jin Lee and Rupi Kaur. Yet, *Aiiieeeee!* reminds us, not only is there a history of struggle that made such representation possible; there is still a long way to go.

Although not technically the first Asian American literary anthology, *Aiiieeeee!* remains the only one to achieve significant success as a mainstream trade publication, reviewed widely in popular outlets like *The New Yorker* and *Publisher's Weekly*. Its anger – as emblemized by its title – was also key to its becoming an overnight sensation. *Aiiieeeee!* birthed the concept of Asian American literature as a simultaneously political and literary category, one crucial to understanding the politicization of Asian Americans during the Civil Rights era, Third World movements, and struggles to establish ethnic studies departments and programs. For the teaching of Asian American literature, *Aiiieeeee!* has been the foundational text. It inscribes the category, 'Asian American literature,' without which it would be impossible to conceive a course on the topic. It clearly defines Asian American literature as separate from Asian literature, and positions it as more closely aligned with African American, LatinX, Native American, and other ethnic American literatures than with the literature of Asia. (As anyone who has searched in a bookstore for Asian American literature knows, it is still all too common for 'Asian' and 'Asian American' writers to be shelved together). *Aiiieeeee!* also provides source material for readers and scholars of Asian American literature to examine directly, and connects vibrant voices that had been neglected in the past to the politically charged Asian American authors of the 1970s. For most of us who have taught introductory or survey courses in Asian American literature, it was almost impossible to conceive of such a course without *Aiiieeeee!* until the mid 1990s, when the proliferation of anthologies and primary sources exploded. Even so, the dynamics of the 'real and the fake' of Asian American literature, or as it has often been figured, the gender wars of Asian American literature, have continued to be a compelling narrative through which to organize the trajectory of a survey course.

Some might argue that 45 years have somewhat muted *Aiiiiiii!*'s voice. To some extent, its volume has been dampened precisely in response to its call; in the editors' search for their own "literary ancestors" as Asian American writers – a term Shawn Wong has regularly used in his own description of the book's genealogy – they ended up becoming a match to strike the flame of a whole generation of new Asian American writers, a number of whom are represented in this special issue. In the immediate wake of *Aiiiiiii!* there also sprung up numerous other Asian American literary anthologies that have helped to showcase a broader range of voices, including *Breaking Silence: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Poets* (1983), *The Best of Bamboo Ridge* (1986), *Blue Funnel Line: A special issue of Seattle Review* (1988), *The Forbidden Stitch* (1989), *The Big AIIIIIIII!: An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature* (1991), *American Dragons: Twenty-Five Asian American Voices* (1993), *The Open Boat: Poems from Asian America* (1993), *Growing Up Asian American: An Anthology* (1993), *Charlie Chan Is Dead: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian-American Fiction*. (1993), *Premonitions: The Kaya Anthology of New Asian North American Poetry* (1995), *Into the Fire: Asian American* (1996), *Quiet Fire: A Historical Anthology of Asian American Poetry, 1892-1970* (1997), *Rice: Explorations into Gay Asian Culture and Politics* (1998), *Queer PAPI Porn: Gay Asian Erotica* (1998), *NuyorAsian Anthology: Asian American Writings About New York City* (1999). Beyond this, though, there has also been what might be called a backlash against *Aiiiiiii!* among scholars in Asian American Studies, who have rightly pointed out the limitations of the anthology in terms of its narrow definition of Asian American identity and experience. The anthology has had an enormous impact on the scholarly field; one is hard-pressed to find a monograph or article on Asian American literature that does not at least mention *Aiiiiiii!*, and many more dedicate whole chapters to the anthology and the debates that it catalyzed and which have subsequently shaped the identity of Asian American studies. As is common with any act of self-definition, scholars of Asian American literature have often used *Aiiiiiii!* as a means to identify themselves according to the logic of negation: to disclaim and repudiate *Aiiiiiii!* has, for some time now, become almost a rite of passage for any young Asian Americanist to call themselves such.

But what looked, beginning in the 1990s, like a radical act of abnegation of *Aiiiiiii!*'s retrograde perspective also looks, in 2019, a bit outdated itself. As editors and scholars, we are well aware of the limitations of the anthology – indeed, one might be surprised to hear that the editors of the anthology themselves are also well aware of them. It was always intended to be a match to light a fire, not a comprehensive conflagration. But we are equally cognizant of the extent to which the act of disinheriting *Aiiiiiii!* also risks relinquishing the crucial legacy of the historical moment which spawned it, leaving a gaping hole in our appreciation of the Asian American 1960s and 1970s and encouraging a generational schism between "old" and "new" Asian Americanists rather than a focus on common goals and struggles faced by

Asian Americans and minorities more broadly. This is why, in our own call for submissions, we sought to better understand how *Aiiieeeee!* had influenced contributors – particularly other creative writers and artists – in ways that went beyond the mode of negation. To be clear, we did not seek out or limit contributions to those that mindlessly praised the anthology or turned a blind eye to its flaws; far from it. Each of the pieces that follow grapple unflinchingly with the constraints as well as the affordances of *Aiiieeeee!*

In keeping with our goal of historicizing *Aiiieeeee!*, we begin with a probing reflection by Eric Chock, one of the founding editors (along with Darrel Lum) of the Honolulu-based Bamboo Ridge Press. Chock offers a rich, nuanced account of the 1970s milieu in which *Aiiieeeee!* emerged and speaks to its profound impact on the Asian American literature scene both on the mainland and in Hawai'i. He importantly grounds *Aiiieeeee!* within a broader series of Asian American literature conferences in the 1970s, including the 1975 Asian American Writers Conference in Oakland, California (organized by the *Aiiieeeee!* editors), the 1976 Pacific Northwest Asian American Writers Conference in Seattle, Washington (organized by Stephen Sumida and Arnold Hiura), and the 1978 Talk Story: Our Voices in Literature and Song; Hawaii's Ethnic American Writers Conference held in Honolulu (organized by Sumida, Hiura, and Marie Hara), during which Chock first met the *Aiiieeeee!* "gang" and began to consider how some of the issues raised in the anthology, and during the conference, could be brought to bear on the formation of a literary identity for Hawai'i-based Local writers.

While Chock speaks to the impact of *Aiiieeeee!* on a whole generation of Asian Pacific American writers, award-winning poets Garrett Hongo and David Mura each provide a more personal look at how the anthology affected their burgeoning identities as writers coming up in the late 1960s and '70s. For the young Hongo, the anthology constituted nothing less than "a revelation," "a bolt of lightning" flashing "over a horizon I'd never imagined." While Mura took somewhat longer to warm to the anthology – and, indeed, to the idea of himself as an "Asian American writer," having been chastened by his creative writing teachers' warning that to write about minority experience was to exile oneself to a "literary ghetto" – once he does, he too is thunderstruck by the momentous realization that "my identity as a Japanese American might possibly be seminal to what I could become as a writer." Both Hongo and Mura, interestingly, speak of receiving *Aiiieeeee!* as a gift – for Hongo, from Ishmael Reed, noted Black Arts writer and longtime champion of *Aiiieeeee!* and its editors, and for Mura, from African American poet Marilyn Nelson. Although the copies were intended only as temporary loans, both Hongo and Mura somewhat sheepishly admit to having kept the copies for life – a testament, perhaps, to how their first encounters with *Aiiieeeee!* also elevated them to a place of self-insight from which there was no return.

Divisions between “old” and “new” generations of Asian Americanists have perhaps been overstated in scholarship on *Aiiieeee!*, and in the pages that follow we seek to highlight the commonalities more than the differences between experiences of writers who are technically separated by decades. Bryan Thao Worra’s “*Aiiieeee!* and I” and Susan Ito’s “We are Here” speak to their individual yet shared experience of discovering *Aiiieeee!* for the first time, many years after its original publication, alongside the numerous Asian American literature anthologies that emerged later, as listed above. While Worra uses these examples to contend with the continued dearth of Southeast Asian – particularly Lao – writers in the Asian American canon (even as he remarks on the possibility of such a thing as the Asian American canon in the first place), Ito draws on the profusion of post-*Aiiieeee!* writing to highlight the dilemma posed by “this flood of choices ... more than my flimsy syllabus pages can hold.” If, in the past, we had too few texts to choose from, the post-*Aiiieeee!* moment is perhaps marked by an embarrassment of riches.

Another striking cross-generational pairing is evidenced in the work of Patricia Ikeda and Kenji C. Liu, both of whom use ecological imagery, particularly that of fire, to characterize the force of *Aiiieeee!* – which, as Ikeda puts it, “burns its hole” in the American literary canon – while simultaneously linking its reach to the present ecological crises occasioned by climate change and evidenced through wildfires raging across the globe, from Los Angeles to Australia. Liu, like Adrienne Su (described below), invokes an Asian literary form – in Liu’s work the *zuihitsu* – which answers Ikeda’s call to disrupt the Eurocentrism of the American literary canon by using Asian literary forms to communicate Asian American content.

The reflection of Russell Leong, one of the original authors included in *Aiiieeee!*, and a [video recording](#) of a conversation about the anthology between Shawn Wong, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Marilyn Chin at San Jose State University in November 2019, represent the voices of those involved with the anthology from its inception. Leong, whose “Rough Notes for Mantos” appeared in *Aiiieeee!* under the pseudonym Wallace Lin, offers a remarkable multimodal composition in the form of a poem, “Donkey Room, Human Room,” with accompanying prefatory essay and painted self-portrait entitled “Mantos, Unmasked.” He remarks on the experience of being “outed” in the latest edition of the anthology as the author of the short story, while also historicizing that experience by pointing to the tension between political and sexual “allegiances” that often cropped up in 1960s-1980s activism for gay and lesbian people of color. Like Ikeda and Liu, Leong underscores the continuing relevance of that tension, tying his observations on *Aiiieeee!* to contemporary demonstrations in Hong Kong for democratic reform.

In “*Aiiieeee!*’s NO in Thunder,” Distinguished Professor Leslie Bow nimbly outlines the limitations of the anthology while also acknowledging its important contributions. By putting the prefatory material of the anthology – the series of critical prefaces and

introductions that have since the 1970s come to stand in for *Aiiieeee!* as a whole – under a microscope, Bow performs a beautiful close reading of some of the “terms of inclusion and exclusion” the editors used, in particular their understanding of the term “sensibility.” In the end, Bow acknowledges, “*Aiiieeee!* has swagger. And thus, Asian American literature came out of the gate with swagger.” Such is also an observation of Shawna Yang Ryan, American Book Award winner and author of two novels, who finds, amidst the “swaggeringly masculine” prefaces, an unexpected affinity with the editors’ call to attend to the “racist love” heaped upon Asian Americans by white society and to “decolonize the love of Asian American women and Asian American men.” As a novelist, Ryan’s ruminations on the possibility of finding a distinctly Asian American voice or vernacular constitute a provocative continuation of an experiment begun by the editors, yet one which heeds warnings like Bow’s that such attempts have historically looked an awful lot like appropriation.

Novelist and professor Brian Ascalon Roley, and poet and artist Mộng-Lan, pick up the strands of Ryan’s and Bow’s observations about the simultaneously exclusionary/inclusionary dynamic of *Aiiieeee!* and its prefatory materials. Both Roley and Mộng-Lan speak to the sense of alienation and even shame of growing up Asian American; like Ryan and the *Aiiieeee!* editors, they are keenly aware of the particular burdens of audience and voice facing Asian American writers. While Mộng-Lan, like Worra, certainly registers the absence of Southeast Asian – for her, specifically Vietnamese American – writers upon her first encounter with *Aiiieeee!*, she finds, nonetheless, that the editors still articulated radical artistic possibilities that resonated with her, making her “realize that I could have a voice, as they did.” Roley, too, finds in the anthology a simultaneous comfort – particularly in the work of another mixed-race Asian American author, Diana Chang – and a relief. Finally freed from the burden of “representing’ some ‘authentic’ Asian American culture,” Roley credits Asian American anthologies like *Aiiieeee!* with providing him the crucial space to develop and pursue his own particular style and focus as a writer.

We conclude with “I Didn’t Know *Aiiieeee!*, But It Knew Me,” Adrienne Su’s delightfully irreverent take on the anthology and the word “*Aiiieeee!*” Su describes the piece as a “mildly adapted” *ghazal*, a poetic form that traces its roots to Arabic verse, consisting of a chain of couplets linked by an intricate rhyme scheme. In adopting and adapting this form, Su notes, she hopes to “capture some of the emotional and intellectual effects of needing such an anthology but not knowing about it in my earliest years.”

The call of *Aiiieeee!* is both a call back and a call forward. Its editors validated the voices of their “literary ancestors” and their own voices and in so doing, they invented the context for their own writing, freeing themselves from endless historical contextualization and explanations of Asian American identity. Chan, Chin, Inada, and Wong may not have in that moment imagined the robust body of Asian American

literature that would be born, but they also called forward to those who would become the present and future of Asian American writing. Whether those writers know it or not, whether they desire or reject the label “Asian American” for their writing, *Aiiiiieee!* was the call that brought their writing and its publication into existence.

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