Asian American Radical Literature: Marxism, Revolution, and the Politics of Form

Dissertation

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Abstract

My dissertation argues that Asian American writing between 1930 and 1970 contains a trenchant but overlooked tradition of radical political critique. The left-leaning Asian American writers whom I examine—Chinese American H.T. Tsiang, Filipino American Carlos Bulosan, and Japanese Americans Ayako Ishigaki and Milton Murayama—contest both economic inequalities in the U.S. and the racist, exclusionist sentiments of white working-class culture. From the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act to the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, exclusionary immigration policies nearly ended Asian immigration to the U.S. altogether. Consequently, anti-Asian racism prompted many upper-class Asian American writers, whom the critic Elaine Kim calls “ambassadors of goodwill,” to author narratives that translate traditional Asian culture for American readers, making it compatible with and congenial to American culture and values.

In contrast, the texts I examine utilize Marxist critique to expose the racial divides that fracture the working class and oppress immigrant workers especially. By showing how these narratives incorporate Marxist frameworks, I build on recent scholarship on race, the proletarian novel, and the Communist left. If the proletarian genre hinges on working-class protagonists and protest, these writers differ from novelists like James T. Farrell and John Steinbeck who limit their vision of protest and revolution to the white
working class. Ultimately, the first three chapters of my dissertation reveal how Tsiang, Bulosan, and Ishigaki imagine an international working class bent on a revolutionary end to both economic and racial oppression. My final chapter identifies a literary-historical shift in Murayama’s later proletarian novel, which no longer foresees revolutionary change as a legitimate possibility in the midst of the Cold War’s political gridlock. My project, then, argues for the prominence of radical political critique early on in Asian American literary history and shows the way in which this critique eventually gets folded into the well-known activist formations and literary traditions of the 1970s.
Dedication

For Cami
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Introduction

The radical novel is one which demonstrates, either explicitly or implicitly, that its author objects to the human suffering imposed by some socio economic system and advocates that the system be fundamentally changed.


The idea of imagining otherwise captures my sense of Asian American literatures—of how they articulate the complexities of power and personhood involved in imagining and narrating relations to the nation, America, which is at the same time the same as and more than the U.S. nation-state. It evokes how they at once critique the ways of knowing forwarded in the name of ‘America,’ but also work prophetically, presaging the elsewhere.


From its opening lines, the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act reads like a propaganda tract railing against the “yellow peril.” The document begins,

Whereas in the opinion of the Government of the United States the coming of Chinese laborers to this country endangers the good order of certain localities within the territory thereof: Therefore,

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That from and after the expiration of ninety days next after the passage of this act, and until the expiration of ten years next after the passage of this act, the coming of Chinese laborers to the United States be, and the same is hereby, suspended.

The notion that these workers “endanger” the territory invokes anti-Asian anxieties that would come to define the first half of the twentieth century. According to Gina Marchetti, “Rooted in the medieval fears of Genghis Khan and Mongolian invasions in Europe, the
yellow peril combines racist terror of alien cultures, sexual anxieties, and the belief that the West will be overpowered and enveloped by the irresistible, dark, occult forces of the East” (2).¹ These same racist assumptions underpin the rhetoric of the “good order” that this document proclaims to uphold.

If racism pervades this piece of legislation, then class divisions and economic contradictions also underwrite the “good order” that it privileges. After all, the government does not simply exclude all Chinese peoples. Instead, it targets “Chinese laborers” in particular, revealing something important about the Chinese immigrants that moved to the U.S. Indeed, Asian Exclusion belies the fact that Chinese immigration is not merely an inevitable result of America’s inherent desirability as the heralded “land of opportunity” but, rather, a direct consequence of American capital and the free-market economy hailed by this same government. In this respect, exclusionary legislation signifies a very specific disavowal. Lisa Lowe observes, “[R]acialized immigration is […] along with American empire, part of a longer history of the development of modern American capitalism and racialized democracy, a longer, more notorious past in which a nation intersected over and over again with the international contexts of the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Korea, or Vietnam” (29). Even as the economy depends on racialized labor and immigrant workers, the government disarticulates this dependence

¹ In Yellow Peril!: An Archive of Anti-Asian Fear (2014), editors John Kuo Wei Tchen and Dylan Yeats rightly claim that their archive of anti-Asian xenophobia “demonstrates the ongoing ideology of Yellow Peril in the logic and fears, the symbolic universe and material realities, and the domestic and foreign policies of our governing culture. Indeed, yellow perilism is hardwired into the formulation of Western Civilization itself” (16).
from the national narrative by passing exclusionary legislation and by waging a war on the very workers that its economy requires.

This disarticulation makes legible the contradictions that Lisa Lowe explores in her book *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Politics* (1996). In her landmark work, Lowe “attempts to name the *contradictions* of Asian immigration, which at different moments in the last century and a half of Asian entry into the United States have placed Asians ‘within’ the U.S. nation-state, its workplaces, and it markets, yet linguistically, culturally and racially marked Asians as ‘foreign’ and ‘outside’ the national polity” (8). The U.S. incorporates Asian Americans into the national economy while simultaneously marking them as “foreign” and even dangerous. Sucheng Chan similarly notes, “Asian international migration was part of a larger, global phenomenon: the movement of workers, capital and technology across national boundaries to enable entrepreneurs to exploit natural resources in more and more parts of the world” (4). If the Chinese Exclusion Act suggests that the U.S. does not want these workers, then it also implicitly signals the government’s complicity in their arrival, as well as the ongoing necessity of immigrant labor.

Decades of anxiety about Asian immigration culminated in the Exclusion Act. Beginning with the Gold Rush of the late 1840s and 1850s, the first wave of Chinese immigrants were, according to Robert G. Lee, “both identified with the moral chaos of the [era] and portrayed as the harbingers of industrial wage slavery” (9). Eventually, Ronald Takaki notes, “[A]bout one million people entered between the California gold rush of 1849 and the Immigration Act of 1924, which cut off immigration from Asian
countries” (7). The promise of “Gold Mountain” enticed Chinese immigrants, even as the resulting surge in immigration exacerbated anti-Asian sentiments in California. Robert G. Lee claims, “The representation of the Chinese immigrant worker as a coolie came about as the U.S. working class was formed in the 1870s and 1880s […] The Chinese ‘coolie’ was portrayed as unfree and servile, a threat to the white working man’s family” (9). The “coolie,” then, represented an emerging threat not only to the nation but also to a newly galvanized working class, paving the way for one of the first restrictions on Asian immigration.

The Page Law of 1875 put intense scrutiny on Asian women immigrants and effectively barred them from the country. This initial piece of exclusionary legislation reflected anxieties about Asian reproduction in the U.S. and especially California. Worried about a growing Asian working class, the government quickly acted to diffuse the presumed threat it posed. In this regard, anti-Asian racism and worker exploitation undergirded exclusionary policy from the beginning. Similarly, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 constantly reminds the reader that Chinese immigrants were also laborers.2 In this way, class and ethnicity converge to reveal a vulnerable population, one that fills the needs of various ethnic-labor markets up and down the West Coast and elsewhere while simultaneously being identified as dangerous and made ineligible for citizenship.

2 After mentioning Chinese laborers in conjunction with exclusion over 20 times, the document finally articulates an exception for diplomatic officials, noting that “this act shall not apply to diplomatic and other officers of the government whose credentials shall be taken as equivalent to the certificate in this act mentioned, and shall exempt them and their body and household servants from the provisions of this act as to other Chinese persons.” This exemption makes it clear that this legislation takes aim not at the wealthier travelers of Chinese descent but at a very specific demographic of immigrant workers.
Since the first wave of immigration, then, Asian immigrant identity was forged in racial alterity and working-class political struggle.

Examining Asian American literature alongside U.S. legislation, this project takes this convergence of race and class in Asian exclusion as its initial point of departure. By building on the important work of critics like Lisa Lowe, David Leiwei Li, Colleen Lye, and Robert G. Lee, I explore the way in which left-leaning Asian American authors—Chinese American H.T. Tsiang, Filipino American Carlos Bulosan, and Japanese Americans Ayako Ishigaki and Milton Murayama—respond to and write against a history of exclusionary policy. As a result, my dissertation argues that Asian American writing from 1930 to 1970 contains a trenchant but overlooked tradition of radical political critique. This literary tradition takes shape during the interwar period (1919-1939), which was characterized not only by Asian exclusion but also by a global economic crisis.

Consequently, these writers contest economic inequalities in the U.S., as well as the racist, exclusionist sentiments of white working-class culture. Reading these texts—Tsiang’s *The Hanging on Union Square* (1935) and *And China Has Hands* (1937), Bulosan’s *America Is in the Heart* (1946), Ishigaki’s *Restless Wave: My Life in Two Worlds* (1940), and Murayama’s *All I Asking for Is My Body* (1959/1975)—within this larger historical context, I argue that the Depression era influences of social activism, communism, and Marxism, more generally, left an indelible mark on Asian American literary history during what was a period of extreme class stratification. By exploring Marxian political alliances in conjunction with often overlooked Asian American narratives, this project extrapolates a pre-1965 radical tradition within Asian American
literature. Furthermore, it reorients early Asian American writing toward an earlier period of 1930s activism and Marxian-based class critique.

Asian American literary history lacks any comprehensive account of radical literary production that predates the Asian American movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. While not claiming to be comprehensive, this dissertation begins to lay the groundwork for such an account. With a similar framework in mind, Robert G. Lee notes, “Although Asian immigrants to the United States have and continue to be overwhelmingly working people, their experience of struggle has been made almost totally invisible in the master narrative of American labor and radical history” (257). Breaking important ground on the “Asian immigrant experience,” Lee’s social history traces what he calls the “the hidden world of Asian immigrant radicalism” (256). In turning to Asian American literary history, this project constellates a group of left-leaning Asian American authors in order to highlight this “hidden world” within Asian American letters (256).

Early Asian American Literature and the Revolutionary Imaginary

Beyond initiating a basic recovery project, this dissertation explores the way in which these authors critique social inequality in order to enact and imagine various kinds of political resistance. Indeed, I claim that these texts—as Kandice Chuh puts it—

3 Nineteen sixty-five, of course, is a pivotal moment in Asian American history because of the Immigration and Nationality Act, which overturned the exclusionary legislation of the first half of the twentieth century and the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act specifically.
To imagine otherwise is not simply a matter of seeing a common object from different perspectives. Rather, it is about undoing the very notion of common objectivity itself and about recognizing the ethicopolitical implications of multiple epistemologies—theories about knowledge formation and the status and objects of knowledge—that underwrite alternative perspectives. (x)

Chuh continually highlights the importance of these different epistemologies precisely because they allow for “alternative perspectives.” Foregrounding disparate ways of knowing, then, “imagining otherwise captures [Chuh’s] sense of Asian American literatures—of how they articulate the complexities of power and personhood involved in imagining and narrating relations to the nation, America, which is at the same time the same as and more than the U.S. nation-state” (x). By theorizing Asian American literature in this way, Chuh opens up a new way of reading, one that emphasizes the potentiality of Asian American literature and its various representations and diegetic incarnations of the nation.

With these heuristics in mind, this project will interrogate “the complexities of power and personhood involved in imagining and narrating relations to the nation.” On the one hand, the authors in question condemn the race, gender, and class structures that tether them to an oppressive nation. On the other hand, however, they engage in “alternative ways of knowing” in order to imagine alternatives ways of being. According to Chuh, writers who “imagine otherwise […] critique the ways of knowing forwarded in the name of ‘America,’” but also work prophetically” (x). Similarly, the authors whom I examine marshal what I call the revolutionary imaginary to critique the nation and
prophesy a revolutionary transformation. Throughout these texts, there is a kind of ephemera of possibility, an imagining of what could be. Tsiang imagines the end of capitalism in *The Hanging on Union Square*, Bulosan envisions a future America inhabited not by “native” citizens but immigrants and foreigners in *America Is in the Heart*, and Ishigaki’s *Restless Wave* calls for a “triumphant spring” that would unite exploited female workers in Japan with Chinese laborers against Japanese imperialism and U.S. racism.

Ultimately, this imagining emerges from a wide range of historical and cultural contexts because of the diverse population that constitutes Asian America. In this way, Asian America is a hotly contested and somewhat unwieldy social construction that brings together a vast range of ethnic, national, and linguistic identities. Adopting a comparative framework that brings together Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino American writers, this dissertation traces the revolutionary imaginary in Asian American literature. The texts I examine appropriate and revise a variety of literary forms—including the proletarian genre, the bildungsroman, autobiography, and allegory—to imagine revolutionary change in the economic, legislative, and political structure of the nation. Drawing on Marxian ideas of class transformation, this revolutionary imaginary takes shape as a creative response to labor exploitation and anti-Asian racism during the Depression.4

4 The revolutionary imaginary also resembles and shares certain end goals with what the Communist and proletarian writer Mike Gold calls “revolutionary élan,” which “will sweep this mess out of the world forever” (Aaron 205). Gold insists that this revolutionary scope is crucial to the proletarian literary genre, but the revolutionary imaginary moves beyond the basic strictures of this genre. In the ensuing pages, I will
In many respects, the revolutionary imaginary epitomizes the critical potential of Asian American literature. Chuh writes, “‘Asian American’ is/names racism and resistance, citizenship and its denial, subjectivity and subjection—at once the becoming and undoing—and, as such, is a designation of the \( (im)possibility \) of justice, where ‘justice’ refers to a state as yet unexperienced and unrepresentable, one that can only connotatively be implied” (8; emphasis in original). Indeed, tracing what Chuh calls the “(im)possibility of justice” makes legible the utopic contours of Asian American literary production. She goes on to say, “The overarching purpose of Asian American studies has been and continues to be pursuit of this (im)possibility, the pursuit of an as yet unrealized state of justice by tracing, arguing, and critiquing, and by alternatively imagining the conditions that inscribe its (im)possibility” (8). To that end, this project identifies the “pursuit of an as yet unrealized state” in order to highlight radical writing and incisive political critique in early Asian American literary history. Moreover, the revolutionary imaginary names various attempts to anticipate this “as yet unrealized state.”

This unrealized state shares an affinity with what Ernst Bloch calls the “Not-Yet-Become.” Perpetually marked by a future that is not yet here, Bloch’s work—like the revolutionary imaginary—draws on the past and present in order to imagine a better future. He writes, “Here, then, is where thoughtful hope resolutely holds on, lifts itself precisely out of the Now and its darkness, into itself. Thus does the heart’s thought first cast its light forward into the land where lightning flashes, that land that we all are, in which we all move, which we finally enter decisively, harkening toward our arrival our explain the way in which what I call the revolutionary imaginary actually destabilizes the proletarian literary genre and complicates the basic premises of this form.
absolution” (202). Integrating messianic overtures with Marxism, Bloch theorizes hope and anticipation as crucial components to revolutionary change. In this same vein, my second chapter demonstrates the way in which Bloch’s understanding of hope sheds light on Bulosan’s utopic construction of America in the final chapters of *America Is in the Heart*. While I foreground the role of hope especially in that chapter, the revolutionary imaginary, which unites all of the authors that I discuss in this dissertation, relies heavily on the transformative potential of hope, anticipation, and futurity.

The critical force of this radical literary tradition also resides in what Lowe calls “cultural negativity.” In the words of Lowe, “Contrary to what Adorno would term the ‘cultural negativity’ of ‘high’ art that might lie in the residual resistance of an abstract subject outside instrumentalized culture, Asian American ‘cultural negativity’ inheres in the concrete particulars unassimilable to modern institutions, particulars that refuse both integration” (31). If Adorno—as Lowe suggests—imagines high art as resistant to modernity because of its abstract irreducibility, then Lowe claims that Asian Americans form resistance through particularity. Because they do not “qualify” for the abstract ideal of American citizenship and liberal government, Asian America inhabits this contradictory space within the nation-state.

**Radical Content, Radical Form**

5 While I will use Frankfurt School scholars like Walter Benjamin and Ernst Bloch in this dissertation, Lowe’s demarcation of cultural negativity recognizes an important distinction between the Frankfurt School and Asian American studies. If I borrow theoretical constructs from Benjamin and Bloch, however, I ultimately adhere to Lowe’s theorization of the radical potential and “cultural negativity” of Asian American literature.
Drawing on these contradictions, the writers in question both critique and imagine political alternatives to the liberal nation-state. The radical politics of these texts are legible along two interrelated axes: content and form. First, the content of these narratives constitutes alternative subjectivities and foregrounds previously marginalized subject positions. These narratives depict the liminal lives of unemployed workers during the Depression—Chinese laundrymen, Japanese illegal immigrants, Filipino immigrant workers, and racialized laborers who grow up indebted to the Hawaiian sugar plantation. Thus, they take their protagonists and ensemble casts from the periphery of the American imaginary in order to highlight racial alterity and class exploitation.

Moreover, these narratives comprise important linkages between the lived experience and radical politics of each author and the political developments of each narrative. Bulosan’s *America Is In the Heart*, Ishigaki’s *Restless Wave*, and Murayama’s *All I Asking for Is My Body* all blur the lines between fiction and autobiography. Even Tsiang’s *The Hanging on Union Square* includes a Chinese writer who obviously resembles Tsiang and publishes a book called *China Red* (the same title that Tsiang himself would use for a novel he self-published in 1931). These autobiographical elements reveal complex relationships between these authors and their narratives, relationships that intermix fact and fiction. Connecting the story world and the “real” world, these texts draw attention to the way in which the nation-state produces both the conditions of racialization and economic disparity. The revisionary content highlights the nation-state as an important site of political struggle.

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6 In the final strike in *And China Has Hands*, Tsiang, again, incorporates a writer into the narrative that strongly resembles Tsiang himself.
Second, the formal shape of these narratives breaks with the traditional conventions of Western literature. As Lowe claims, “Asian American literature, by virtue of its distance from the historical formation of American national literature, resists the formal abstraction of aestheticization and canonization” (44). In this passage, Lowe’s “American national literature” signifies a primarily Anglo American tradition that conceals racial and ethnic difference by imagining an ideal universality. Though they ostensibly take on the formal tropes of traditional Western genres, the narratives under examination trouble both this supposed universality and normative genre expectations. These texts articulate “the emergence of Asian American culture as an alternative cultural site, a site of cultural forms that propose, enact, and embody subjects and practices not contained by the narrative of American citizenship” (Lowe 176). Indeed, these writers are not invested in rewriting “the narrative[s] of American citizenship” precisely because those narratives rely on the nation for social inclusion. On the contrary, this radical literary tradition suggests that the nation needs to be challenged, rather than widened. In this way, these breaks in formal convention also mirror the radical politics of these writers.

During the 1930s, Marxian critiques emerge in and give shape to Asian American literature as a way to develop and imagine revolutionary alternatives amidst the social, economic, and racial struggles of the Depression. In her extensive history of immigrant activism, Josephine Fowler warns, “For too long left-wing and Communist Chinese and Japanese immigrants have been absent from the landscape of the history of the American Communist movement and in Chinese and Japanese American history” (3). Like
Fowler’s history of activism, this project is “a work of recovery of hitherto ‘lost’ histories” (3). Restoring a “lost history,” however, simultaneously reveals the radical roots of Asian American literary production. The transformative tenets of Marxism—with its concomitant international scope—lend a great deal of critical leverage to early Asian American indictments of the nation-state. Ultimately, I argue that this critical framework, which coalesces in the 1930s and 1940s, develops in opposition to America’s emerging status as an empire.

In this way, structures of gender, race, and class oppression congealed in an American empire that ascended to power in the twentieth century. In the words of Yu-Fang Cho, “The institutionalization of white heterosexuality critically mediated the contradictions between the U.S. empire’s demand of exploitable labor, land, and resources as well as the U.S. nation-state’s need to produce a unified, homogeneous national body politic” (2). My project, however, explores the way in which these writers contest this “unified, homogeneous body politic.” Each narrative interrogates the exploitative dynamics of race, gender, and class in order to imagine alternatives to this hegemonic version of the nation-state. Combining Marxian critiques of class with a damning indictment of cultural, social, and legal exclusion, they employ revolutionary politics as a means to “imagine otherwise.”

If this leftist political stance manifests in each text along the axes of content and form, then it also emerges historically as a radical critique of American empire, citizenship, and capitalism. The burgeoning American empire gained traction through the annexation of countries like the Philippines, Hawai‘i, and Puerto Rico at the turn of the
century. Drawing on the ever-useful narrative of American exceptionalism, the U.S. began its expansion through imperialist violence under the rhetorical guise of benevolence. In contrast to these centripetal forces of empire, however, I identify these texts as “radical” in part because they take shape within this larger cultural matrix of leftist activity. Still, this term is often employed somewhat problematically to describe a wide range of social upheavals and revolutionary causes across time and space. While Colleen Lye’s delineation of American literary radicalism explains a trend in American literature that evolves around left-leaning politics during the first half of the twentieth century, Walter B. Rideout speaks more generally of “the radical novel [as] one which demonstrates, either explicitly or implicitly, that its author objects to the human suffering imposed by some socio economic system and advocates that the system be fundamentally changed” (12; emphasis in original). But if the authors I examine advocate and imagine systemic change, they envision this social transformation along mutually constitutive lines of class, race, and gender. Similarly, in his study of 1970s social movements, Daryl J. Maeda describes “radicalism” as a theoretical critique that develops around the twinning projects of anti-imperialism and anti-racism. For the purposes of this project though, both “radical literature” and “literary radicalism” will refer to a broad literary tradition influenced by Marxism specifically. Nonetheless, I claim that—in the texts that fall under the scope of this dissertation—Marxist thought works in tandem with Asian American aesthetics to form a very pointed radical tradition, one that critiques racialization, class stratification, and the nation-state.
In her landmark work, *America’s Asia: Racial Form and American Literature, 1893-1945* (2005), Lye reveals an Anglo American radical tradition that is deeply entrenched in racist xenophobia and nativism. She writes, “The legal designation of Asian immigrants as ‘aliens ineligible to citizenship’ reflected the freighting of Asian racial form with an abiding tension between U.S. national interests and capital’s transnational movement, between the exceptionalist dream of the identity of nation and capital logic and the nightmare of nonidentity” (9). Historicizing the Asian racial form, Lye makes it clear that this racial form comes to embody a tension between exceptionalist ideals and the demands of American capital. Moreover, she goes on to note, “Starting in the 1880s, mounting restrictions in federal immigration policy reflected the growing influence of an Anglo-Saxon nativism that drew fundamental distinctions between ‘new’ immigrant groups and America’s ‘original’ immigrant stock” (51). The influence of Anglo Saxon nativism spilled over into labor organizing as well. Linking ostensibly radical writers like Jack London and Frank Norris to Orientalist discourse, Lye insists that their “[a]ntimonopoly novels were also racial polemics—narratives of Anglo-Saxons imperiled by aliens […] They presented monopoly capitalism as a world of Orientalized social relations” (86). In this way, authors like London and Norris connect anxieties about the yellow peril directly to the consolidation of American capital and monopolies.

Unfortunately, London and Norris were not anomalies within the broader movements that brought together union organizers and left-leaning politicians. Drawing on the work of Alexander Saxton, Lye claims, “[A]n Asian exclusion movement arose alongside the U.S. labor movement and was very likely foundational to it” (19). Initially,
major union organizations included Asian exclusion as standard policy. In an effort to create cultural capital that would counter their own exploitation and marginalization, the white working class galvanized around these racist strategies. Lye continues, “The Asian exclusion question magnifies the centrality of nationalist rhetoric to a strategy of legitimation which sought to make ‘unionism’ synonymous with ‘Americanism’” (19). Similarly, Robert G. Lee writes, “Irish immigrants who were in the process of consolidating their own claim to Americanness and a white racial identity led the popular anti-Chinese movement” (9). Ultimately, this rhetoric worked to embed unions and labor organizing within a broader narrative of American nativism. This rhetoric also undercut many efforts to organize pan-ethnic coalitions. Redirecting critiques of class inequality away from white capitalists, then, anti-Asian anxiety only fractured the working-class community and undermined many attempts at cross-racial solidarity.

While Lye’s work reveals an Anglo American literary tradition thoroughly entrenched in racism and anti-Asian anxiety, this project shows the way in which Asian American writers began to enact and envision pan-ethnic solidarity despite these nativist tensions. Tsiang, for instance, brings together racialized and immigrant workers in the strikes that punctuate each of his novels and reveals racialization to be part and parcel of their exploitation. Murayama, too, critiques ethnic divisions among the working class in Hawai‘i by evincing the way in which Filipino and Japanese laborers only perpetuate their own exploitation when they “scab” against one another. Deeply critical of the racist, exclusionist sentiments of this white working class, the Asian American writers in question refuse to fall back on exceptionalist narratives. In this regard, these writers differ
from many of their Anglo American counterparts. Rather than tie monopoly capitalism to Asia, they reveal the ways in which race, gender, and class suture American empire and oppress Asian immigrants especially. In Bulosan’s *America Is in the Heart* and Murayama’s *All I Asking for Is My Body*, these writers foreground the deleterious effects of American empire on Allos’s childhood in the Philippines and Kiyo’s adolescence on the Hawaiian sugar plantations. Allos’s family struggles to “get by” in the rural countryside because of absentee landlords, and Kiyo goes to work on the plantation at a young age because of the family’s overwhelming debt to the plantation. During the Depression, then, this Marxist lens became integral to Asian American literature precisely because these authors foreground the way in which the exploits of American capital depend on racialized and gendered labor. The Depression was especially brutal for immigrant workers who were targeted by the American government and a white working class desperate for cultural capital.

**Marxism and the Asian American Proletarian Writer**

If the economic crisis exacerbated the exploitation of the working class, then it also galvanized ethnic communities. This period brought together a variety of working-class groups and labor organizers. Alan Wald writes:

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* Bulosan’s *America Is in the Heart*, for example, chronicles the emergence of various ethnic labor groups on the West Coast. Indeed, this novel, which I will analyze in detail in my second chapter, gives a fairly detailed account of various Filipino led unions like the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packinghouse, and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA) and important Filipino labor leaders like Chris Mensalvas and Ernesto Mangaoang in the 1930s.
One of the salient characteristics of these associations for Leftists was an intellectual or culture symbiosis that can be understood as an ‘elective affinity’; that is, a convergence of individuals of diverse origins—for example of different genders, ethnicities, and class backgrounds—into a common configuration that became the pro-Communist sphere […] This led first to mutual world outlooks, under the tangible state of affairs of the Depression, centered on the vanguard role of the working-class under Party and Soviet leadership […] Moreover, the individual cultural products—poems, novels, plays, criticism—of such cultural workers with this shared world vision were potentially marked not only by Marxist themes […], but also by common structural patterns. (71, 72)

The Depression not only shed light on the exploitative potential of capitalism but it gave Marxism and—by extension—communism renewed traction in the U.S. and the working class specifically. Still, as Daniel Aaron notes, “The writers who wrote about bread lines, for whom evictions were ‘an every-day occurrence’ and the furniture of the dispossessed ‘a common sight in the streets,’ and who described in novels, poems, and plays, the economic and moral break down of middle-class families did not get their instructions from Moscow” (151). The economic crisis, then, led to certain sympathies and affinities with Marxist critiques that were circulating in American culture. Despite the many Cold War accusations to the contrary, however, these sympathies did not culminate in a crude literary tradition under Soviet command. Instead, these sympathies and alliances created a diverse array of politically conscious literature. Forming a complicated and sometimes contentious relationship with this broader social milieu, Asian American writers forged their own brand of literary radicalism.

This tradition of Asian American radical literature takes shape alongside the proletarian literary genre, which shares certain political concerns and critical ideals, while being mired in many of the political trappings identified by Lye. Barbara Foley refers to this genre as a set of “novels written in the ambience of the Communist-led cultural
movement that arose and developed in the United States in the context of the Great Depression” (vii). Michael Denning, however, hesitates to define the genre. Instead, he warns against generic definitions: “critical attempts to define ‘proletarian literature’ as a genre fail because they treat genres as abstract and ahistorical ideal types; they forget that genres are literary institutions that have grown out of particular social formations” (201, 202). More interested in the questions, “What kind of writers did [this movement] produce? And what kinds of writing, what genres and forms and formulas did those writers produce?” (202), Denning traces the effects of what he calls the proletarian renaissance on culture more globally. Regardless, these Asian American authors fit loosely within and complicate the “Communist-led cultural movement” that Foley, Wald, and Denning highlight and interpret in their work.

For this reason, this project attempts to map these texts alongside—if not directly onto—the proletarian literary tradition. Lowe warns against such an attempt precisely because “Asian American literature […] resists the formal abstraction of aestheticization and canonization” (44). These Asian American texts do not ultimately fit within the basic confines of the genre. With this framework in place, however, I will chart the way in which Asian American radical novels from this period borrow and appropriate tropes from the genre, while simultaneously challenging the basic assumptions and formulas of proletarian literature. Appearing to fall within the basic models of Foley’s proletarian fictional autobiography, proletarian bildungsroman, and even the proletarian collective

8 It is worth noting, however, that the Cold War resulted in the exile of proletarian literature from the “historical formation of American national literature” as well. For very different reasons, then, the proletarian genre also exhibits an uneasy relationship with cannon formation and American literary history more generally.
novel, these texts complicate previous “molds” put in place by Anglo American proletarian writers. Moreover, Asian American radical literature pushes beyond the staples of the genre in order to chronicle the plight of a racially diverse working class.

In this regard, it is no accident that the most well known writers working within the proletarian genre were white men. Even today, Jack London, John Steinbeck, and James T. Farrell—and their white male protagonists—continue to cast the longest shadow on American letters. Paula Rabinowitz observes, “Because gender was not recognized as a salient political category by the Left—although it figured as a metaphoric one—few […] look for the women’s voices among those recorded. Even many women’s historians have accepted the characterization of the 1930s as irrelevant to feminist issues because of the predominance of class struggle” (4). The figurative and literal representations of the working class often relied on strong, masculine white men. As Rabinowitz argues, “The prevailing verbal and visual imagery reveled in an excessively masculine and virile proletariat poised to struggle against the effeminate and decadent bourgeoisie” (8). During this period, class struggle often overshadowed gender inequality. Consequently, important proletarian authors like Josephine Herbst, Mary Heaton Vorse, and Agnes Smedley have descended into relative obscurity over time.

While class struggle came to dominate literary and cultural narratives from the period, then, these same narratives often papered over gender and race inequalities. In tandem with the working class, which was thoroughly entrenched in anti-Asian anxieties, proletarian literature freighted many of these same sentiments. In reading Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) alongside Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White’s *You
Have Seen Their Faces (1937) and James Agee and Walker Evans’s Let Us Now Praise Famous Men (1941), Lye rightly insists, “The Great Depression’s most famous icon is the white southern or Midwestern sharecropper or farm tenant […] The whiteness of the fallen Yeoman who are the protagonists of these texts does not bespeak the racial transparency of universal subjecthood, however, but rather something actively, historically constructed” (142). In Steinbeck’s novel, the Japanese tenant farmer—who actually bore the brunt of worker exploitation and the worst conditions of transient immigrant labor in California—never appears, but the plight of the working-class family from Oklahoma, the Joads, becomes the tragic symbol par excellence. The recognizably white family comes to represent the brutal fate of America’s working class during the Depression and displaces the reality of a racialized working class inhabiting ethnic-labor markets throughout the West Coast.

Still, critics like Wald, Foley, and Kate Baldwin show the way in which white and black writers and workers often united to spur change during the Red Decade. In her work, for instance, Foley “contribute[s] to [an] emerging body of revisionary scholarship by reopening discussion of the relation of the [Communist Party’s] analysis of the ‘Negro question’ to proletarian writers, both black and white, who treated the relation of race to class” (173). Wald similarly insists, “Black artists drawn to Communism could affirm Black pride and, indeed, develop a semi-autonomous Black aesthetic based on a national culture, while concurrently interacting with a multiracial and international cultural and political movement” (80). Even as critics begin to “reopen” this discussion, however, Asian America remains remarkably absent in both older and more recent studies of the
left. Any discussion of race amounts to a suggestive but limited discussion of black and white race relations during this period, especially as it relates to critical understandings of the Jim Crow South. While these investigations into black and white relations have resulted in important revisionist work on writers like Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, authors like Tsiang, Ishigaki, and even Bulosan remain underexamined in proletarian studies.

This project places Asian America at the center of its discussion of race relations and the left. In her related work on the “Asian racial form,” Lye looks to Pearl Buck’s representations of Chinese America as integral to this period’s representations of China. Lye develops a nuanced reading of Buck’s *The Good Earth* (1931) precisely because it “first, reinstates the Asian American into a major episode of American literary radicalism and, second, expands the international contexts for what we know of the cultural politics of the Great Depression” (209). Nonetheless, as the primary account of Asian America’s representational role in Depression era radicalism, Lye’s narrative brackets off the representations of Asian America in Asian American radical literature. Building on Lye’s productive analysis of Anglo American radical orientalism, this project explores Asian American texts that take this orientalist tradition to task.9 Recovering these writers, however, this project reveals the way in which these texts are deeply invested in autonomous visions of Asian American radicalism, pan-ethnic solidarity, and revolutionary change.

9 Perhaps Tsiang engages in this critique most directly when he satirizes the work of Pearl Buck in *The Hanging on Union Square*. In this text, Tsiang mockingly calls her “the woman who made money from her Oriental novels! […] She talks about ‘Earth’ and ‘Soil’ a lot” (189, 90).
Situated at the intersection of Asian American, ethnic, and proletarian literary studies, my dissertation recalibrates both leftist and Asian American literary histories to account for this radical tradition. The chasms that separate these fields along the dividing lines of race and class have prevented important critical conversations from taking place. Attending to this intersection between race and class, as well as ethnic and proletarian literary studies, Timothy Libretti “propose[s] that we begin to theorize a category of working-class or proletarian literature that emphasizes the intersection of proletarian literature as it is traditionally understood with ethnic and racial literary traditions” (22). Libretti even points to Murayama’s *All I Asking for Is My Body*, as an important text that puts these traditions in conversation with one another. Libretti’s articles on proletarian literature begin to delve into these intersections. In “Asian American Cultural Resistance” (1997), for example, he seeks to “explore the possibilities that might be produced from an encounter between Marxism and Asian American literary theory and begin to imagine what an Asian American Marxism (in the spirit of Cedric Robinson’s *Black Marxism*) might look like” (20). Thus, Libretti reads *All I Asking for Is My Body* as a proponent of what he calls a “politicized radical working-class Asian American identity that connects race to imperialism and that recognizes irreconcilable class contradictions within Asian America, rejecting a bourgeois reformist politics that denies class oppression as a politics without real bite but only false teeth” (36). In dialogue with this work, this dissertation draws on both fields to recover and reinterpret this radical tradition in early Asian American literary history.
Although these texts do not fit easily within the proletarian literary genre, they also unsettle critical categories and assumptions often used to interpret early Asian American literature. In contrast to many other pre-1965 Asian American texts, which tend to grapple with trajectories of assimilation and the difficulties in “becoming” American, these novels refuse many of the formal markers that have come to define this tradition. In one of the more widely read novels *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1945), for instance, the Chinese American writer Jade Snow Wong seeks a “middle way” (131), one that eventually makes her feel “more like a spectator than a participant in her own community” (199). Throughout the novel, she laments her parents’ inability to leave an “older China” behind in favor of a “new America.” Like Pardee Lowe’s *Father and Glorious Descendant* (1943), Wong’s novel contrasts different generations of immigrant families in order to foreground their ability (or inability) to adapt to American culture as the central tension within the novel. Unlike other Chinese American texts from the period, *The Hanging on Union Square* and *And China Has Hands*, outright reject this desire to adapt and assimilate to American culture. As a result, Tsiang’s protagonists—like nearly all of the protagonists that animate the narratives in this dissertation—refuse these strategies of assimilation in order to imagine alternative modes of being and revolutionary futures.

Similarly, these authors differ from popular Japanese American authors like Etsu Sugimoto and Monica Sone, whose contemporaneous autobiographies entail a different but ultimately related conversion narrative. Sugimoto’s 1923 *A Daughter of the Samurai*, for example, narrates a progressive modernity that culminates in the U.S. In her account,
the figure of the admirable but antiquated samurai becomes a symbol—in many respects—for Japanese culture as a whole, which Sugimoto portrays as a dying culture. And, though she admits and celebrates the fact that she comes from these traditions and Japanese customs, Sugimoto eventually insists on the inevitability of American modernity. Perhaps less equivocally, Sone’s *Nisei Daughter* (1953) records her successful conversion from Japanese immigrant to American citizen. Sone often talks of her own “Americanization” and contrasts her conversion against her parents’ inability to assimilate to American culture. In the end, Elaine Kim—when discussing Asian American writing from this same period more broadly—writes that these texts “are at the same time much more and much less than their reviewers think. These modern ‘success stories’ are in fact records of sacrifice, self negation, and the repression of anger and outrage” (82). While these narratives require a careful, dialectical reading that accounts for these processes of self-negation and repression, this dissertation examines radical Asian American writers who mobilize more explicit social critiques.

To that end, this dissertation connects heretofore unconnected and overlooked Asian American authors. Although they stand out against their more “canonical” counterparts like Wong and Sone as anomalous, these writers actually form an important counter tradition within Asian American literature.¹⁰ In her work on early Asian America

¹⁰ I place the word canonical in quotes because it seems somewhat disingenuous to call Jade Snow Wong and Monica Sone canonical. After all, Asian American literature—especially early Asian American literature—can hardly be considered as such. Still, Lowe and Sone are among the first names to come up when critics do discuss early Asian American literature (whereas Tsiang and Ishigaki are nearly forgotten entirely). Bulosan, of course, is the exception precisely because he is often held up as the primary example of early Filipino American literature.
and class, Yoonmee Chang notes, “Asian American literature has been historically written under pressures to mute sociopolitical critique, rendering many Asian American authors and texts complicit with the silencing of their class inequities” (6, 7). If Chang investigates the way in which external capitalist forces implicitly constrain and “mute” political critique in early Asian American literature, then I explore the way in which these radical authors—by contrast—identified and actively resisted these forces. In other words, the writers under examination in this dissertation refuse this complicity in favor of a more overt critique of class inequity.

Moving from the Depression forward, this dissertation investigates Asian American literature as a canonical formation influenced largely by immigration legislation. Thus, in many respects, the Immigration Act of 1924, also known as the Johnson-Reed Act, and the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 stand as important bookends to this project. The Johnson-Reed Act initiated a quota system based on the national origins formula, which drastically restricted Asian immigration according to existing populations in the U.S. Because of decades of Asian exclusion, then, the already decimated Asian population continued to decrease because of this legislation. As Mae Ngai notes, “[T]he nativism that impelled the passage of the act of 1924 articulated a new kind of thinking, in which the cultural nationalism of the late nineteenth century had transformed into a nationalism based on race” (23). The authors in question highlight and critique this surge in nativism, which ultimately shaped exclusionist policy. More importantly, they retool Marxist critiques to account for and deconstruct the racial hierarchies that animate these racist policies.
If the Johnson-Reed Act and the Depression re-entrenched racial and class inequalities, however, the Immigration and Nationality Act brought about one of the most impactful changes in immigration policy in the twentieth century. The passage of this act repealed the immigration quotas that strangled immigration since the 1920s, marking the end of the national origins formula. Since 1965, of course, immigration has greatly increased, and America’s demographics have changed significantly. Still, this shift in immigration policy was coterminous with a Cold War bent on expelling certain Others of the nation. As the Soviet Republic grew, Communism became the unquestioned political threat. Although “the Popular Front opened up this appealing form of left internationalism to thousands of Americans who did not think of themselves as Communists” during the previous decades (31), this left internationalism, as Christina Klein suggests, became suspect and even treasonous after the war. This project charts this trajectory and documents its variant, multi-layered effects on Asian American literary production. Focusing on the left internationalism of the 1930s and 1940s, my first three chapters trace the emergence of a revolutionary imaginary during this period in American literary history.

Chapter Outline

In the first chapter, “From Union Square to China: The Revolutionary Imaginary in H.T. Tsiang’s The Hanging on Union Square and And China Has Hands,” I highlight an important evolution in Chinese American H.T. Tsiang’s anti-capitalist body of work, one that begins with a focused critique of racism and national identity in the U.S. and
culminates in a revolutionary vision of international solidarity. This chapter argues that Tsiang’s early novel *The Hanging on Union Square* (1935) combines the proletarian genre with allegory in order to re-envision historical unemployment rallies and race riots in Union Square as foretelling the end of capitalism. This revolutionary vision of class-warfare and protest, however, is limited to the space of the U.S. Tsiang’s later novel *And China Has Hands* (1937) goes beyond the scope of the nation, imagining a radical international population that protests inequality across continents. In the final pages, Tsiang conjoins the communist independence movement in China with multi-racial protest in the U.S. Ultimately, I contend that this change in Tsiang’s work signals the emergence of this revolutionary imaginary as an important vision of and blueprint for international solidarity.

Shifting the focus from international solidarity, my second chapter, “Beyond What Is: The Politics of Hope and Anticipation in Carlos Bulosan’s *America Is in the Heart,*” explores the way in which Filipino American Carlos Bulosan envisions a slightly different revolutionary future that transforms the U.S. specifically. In his quasi-autobiographical immigration novel *America Is in the Heart* (1946), Bulosan documents various examples of labor exploitation in the Pacific Northwest and West Coast regions of the U.S., and he claims a revolutionary future for the U.S. Drawing on Bloch’s delineation of hope and anticipation as integral logics to revolutionary change, this chapter interrogates and historicizes Bulosan’s call for a socially just America. While past critics tend to read this text as assimilationist, I read the novel as a call for utopic transformation. By imagining a utopic future in the final chapter, Bulosan envisions and
even prophesies an America whereby the exploited workers and racialized immigrants
traditionally excluded from citizenship will define the nation. I argue, then, that Bulosan
critiques the present conditions of Depression era America in order to demand an
alternative future, what Bloch calls the “Not-Yet-Conscious, Not-Yet-Become.”

The third chapter, “‘The Foundation of Our House’: Eccentric Women and the
Triumphant Spring in Ayako Ishigaki’s Restless Wave,” explores a related but ultimately
unique vision of the future in Ishigaki’s narrative. I analyze the way in which Japanese
American Ayako Ishigaki uses the autobiographical form to critique both Japanese and
American empires. Recalling her move from Japan to the U.S. as a young woman,
Ishigaki reveals the difficulties of transitioning from life in an elite family in Japan to her
life as an impoverished worker in America. Applying an intersectional analytic that
accounts for the mutually constitutive and exploitative structures of race, class, gender,
and nation, I argue that her liminal status among Japanese and American empires allows
her to critique racism, labor exploitation, and gendered hierarchies in both countries.
Combining Tsiang’s international scope with Bulosan’s utopian future, Ishigaki’s
revolutionary imagining develops important transnational feminist connections that link
oppressed communities in Japan, China, and the U.S.

The final chapter, “‘You No Can Beat da Plantation’: Protest, Revolution, and
Disillusionment in Milton Murayama’s All I Asking for Is My Body,” traces a movement
away from the revolutionary imaginary in Japanese American Milton Murayama’s late
plantations during the pre-World War II period, the novel recounts the life of Kiyoshi
Oyama and his family’s attempts to work off their overwhelming debt. Although the first part of the novel was published as a short story in the *Arizona Quarterly* in 1959, Murayama was unable to publish the entire novel until 1975 in part because of the narrative’s use of the local pidgin dialect. While the narrative centers on a working-class family and critiques class relations in Hawai‘i, it represents protest and revolution as unrealistic because of ethnic divisions among the workers. No longer able to envision revolution as a realistic possibility during the Cold War, Murayama reveals the waning of this revolutionary imaginary and—I argue—a significant shift in this Asian American literary tradition.

In the coda, I elaborate on this claim in order to read Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong’s pivotal anthology *Aiïeee!* (1974). This foundational text laid the groundwork for what we know as Asian American literature. Through a brief close reading of the introduction(s), I show the way in which this anthology delimited the terms with which we both discuss and analyze early Asian American literature.\(^{11}\) Because Tsiang, Bulosan, and Ishigaki center their narratives on working-class protagonists who envision a revolutionary end to capitalism, they root their condemnation of the nation-state in a dually pronged critique of class and race inequality. By contrast, *Aiïeee!* focuses primarily on cultural identity and the racist representational strategies nearly ubiquitous in U.S. cultural formations. In these respects, any condemnation of capitalism gets folded within the broader critique of cultural

\(^{11}\) The anthology has multiple introductions, which function to introduce Chinese American, Japanese American, and Filipino American literature as separate but related traditions.
representation and alienation. The Cold War initiated a second Red Scare that forced nearly all modes of class-critique and Marxism underground, and thus Marxist critique became a subordinated—if not forgotten—subtext to Asian American literature in the 1970s. Rather than call for an end to the capitalist system, then, the editors’ demand equal representation within institutional structures and culture more generally.

If reorienting early Asian American literature toward Depression era activism and Marxist critique brings this revolutionary imaginary to the fore, then highlighting the politically repressive atmospherics of the Cold War explains its near disappearance in literature. After all, Asian America did not simply become less radical in the second half of the twentieth century. On the contrary, the rise of the Asian American movement in the 1970s marked a radical turn that came to define what many critics have called an Asian American “literary renaissance.” The radical activism of the 1970s turned largely on a fight for social equality within the U.S. government and cultural institutions. The Asian American movement and the Third World Liberation Front, amongst countless other political coalitions, fought for the ethnic studies departments that are now housed within various universities across the country. Of course, the purpose of my project is not to devalue this important work, but rather to show the way in which post-1965 activist efforts and literatures did not spring from a historical vacuum. Indeed, this project traces the nascent seeds of “third world internationalism,” a philosophy that united victims of imperialism across national borders and formed the foundation for activist groups like I Wor Kuen and the Red Guard Party, back to early Asian American literature. For that reason, I argue that radical political critique is legible early on in Asian American literary
history, not as an implicit subtext that requires decoding, but as an overt critique of racism, sexism, and capitalism. Yet, the Cold War’s overwhelming repression of Communism had a dramatic impact on the rhetorical strategies that animate Asian American literary critiques of the nation-state during this period.

Shifting the focus to identity politics, Asian American literature from the 1970s moves away from the more explicit Marxian critiques central to this earlier tradition. This shift also falls in line with what Marianne DeKoven describes more generally as postmodernism’s pivot away from utopianism in the 1960s. Explaining the reflexive nature of postmodernism, Linda Hutcheon argues, “Postmodernism teaches that all cultural practices have an ideological subtext which determines the conditions of the very possibility of meaning” (xii, xiii). Thus, postmodernism questions the very nature of truth-claims, disallowing any transcendent theory of art or truth. For this reason, postmodernism is deeply critical of concepts like utopianism, revolution, and Marxism. Elaborating on this shift, DeKoven writes, “[T]he cultural-political formations of sixties radicalisms and countercultures, as visible in representative texts, constituted the pivot from modern to postmodern in relation to shifts in the status of the central Enlightenment master narratives, particularly utopianism” (7). She argues that 1960s literature began to reject the utopian possibilities that characterized modernist aesthetics. DeKoven continues, “Where modernism was lodged in a powerful desire for utopian

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12 DeKoven convincingly argues that postmodernism emerges in the 1960s. She notes, “[M]any theorists, critics, and analysts of the postmodern who accept postmodernity as a periodizing concept—Banes, Docherty, Harvey, Huyssen, Jameson, among others—hold that it began either during or in the wake of the sixties” (8). While there is some critical disagreement on when exactly postmodernism emerges as an aesthetic theory, many critics—like DeKoven—date it back to the social movements of the 1960s.
transcendence, postmodernism is suspicious of the failed oppressive utopias of
modernity, and represents its persistent utopian desire in displaced, limited, post-utopian
or anti-utopian terms” (16). This shift mirrors the pivot away from the revolutionary
imaginary. While Tsiang, Ishigaki, and Bulosan write narratives that culminate in
revolution and utopian transformation, Chin rejects any grand narrative of Marxist
teleology or utopian possibility in favor of “cultural nationalism,” which I will explore in
further detail in the coda.

Thus, I argue that Asian American literature reflects this pivot away from the
utopian impulse. The practical demands of post-1965 inclusion exuded a seductive
rhetoric. While Communism became synonymous with treason and therefore un-
American, the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act offered the possibility of citizenship
and even the supposed possibility of integration for the first time in nearly a century.13
Although critiques of capitalism continue to form an important subtext in Asian
American literature, these explicitly Marxian critiques no longer constituted a centripetal
force within this tradition.14 In contrast, this project seeks to illuminate an earlier tradition

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13 David Leiwei Li notes, however, that the impact of this Immigration Act was limited. Breaking up Asian American history into two distinct periods (i.e. pre-1965 Oriental alienation and post-1965 Asian abjection), he writes, “In period I, the ‘Oriental’ was legally constructed as the most visible, most menacing kind of difference as the Other to the (European) American self, and the object of national prohibition […] In period II, however, ‘Orientals’ in the United States became ‘Asian Americans’ […] As the most recently incorporated legal subject of the nation, the Asian American instead inhabits a rearticulated tension between the nation’s commitment to formal equality and the dominant cultural revival of national inheritance” (5, 6). Despite legal gains, the Asian American—according to Li—remains culturally Other in the American imaginary throughout this later period.

14 In the same way that Asian Americans are never really incorporated as a part of the nation, class critique never fully disappears from Asian American literature. After all,
of radical Asian American literary production in order to recover a pre-1965 cast of Asian American radical writers. Reading these authors, we discover unequivocal indictments of the U.S. nation-state. Moreover, we encounter worlds of radical possibility, revolutionary imagining, and transformative futures. These authors refuse to settle for a nation replete with social inequality. Instead, they envision alternative futures of utopian possibility, marked by unlimited potential and indelible hope.

Maxine Hong Kingston and Chin continue to write about working-class immigrants in almost all of their work during this period.
Chapter 1: From Union Square to China: The Revolutionary Imaginary in H.T. Tsiang’s
*The Hanging on Union Square* and *And China Has Hands*

Allegory has to do, precisely in its destructive furor, with dispelling the illusion that
proceeds from all ‘given order,’ whether of art or of life: the illusion of totality or of
organic wholeness which transfigures that order and makes it seem endurable. And this is
the progressive tendency of allegory.

Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (1927-1940)

Asian American culture is the site of more than critical negation of the U.S. nation; it is a
site that shifts and marks alternatives to the national terrain by occupying other spaces,
imagining different narratives and critical historiographies, and enacting practices that
give rise to new forms of subjectivity and new ways of questioning the government of
human life by the national state.


Activist, communist, and literary anomaly H.T. Tsiang left China and entered the
United States enrolled as a student at Stanford University in 1926. Nearly a year after the
death of Sun Yat-sen and the subsequent rise of Chiang Kai-shek, Tsiang immigrated
under the limited conditions of his student visa. Less than two decades later, however, he
would be apprehended by authorities and eventually detained at Ellis Island under the
looming threat of deportation, having failed to comply with his student exemption from
the restrictive measures of the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act. This legislation dramatically
limited the number of foreigners allowed into the country and perhaps signaled the apex
of nativist sentiment in the United States, which had been growing due to the enormous
influx of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe and Asia during the late
nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In her analysis of immigration legislation from that period, Colleen Lye notes, “Asian exclusionism and anti-European nativism were both defined against Anglo-Saxonism” throughout the first half of the twentieth century (61). Forged in this unique historical matrix, Tsiang’s Depression-era novels map these racial dynamics and imagine a revolutionary end to the racist project of exclusion.

If nativism pervaded the national imaginary and curbed this trend in immigration, then Tsiang’s larger body of work, which includes plays, poetry, and novels, contested the racist divisions of an already disenfranchised and fractured working class. His second novel, *The Hanging on Union Square* (1935), turns its critical gaze on the U.S. in order to critique American nativism, white supremacy, and class exploitation. Tsiang’s narrative tells the story of the white protagonist Mr. Nut and his wanderings in New York City as an unemployed worker.\(^\text{15}\) The plot consists primarily of Mr. Nut’s various interactions with marginalized working-class people in New York City and eventually culminates in his communist conversion. Conversely, Tsiang’s later novel *And China Has Hands* (1937) details the life of Wong Wan-Lee, a Chinese immigrant who loses his laundry to an insurmountable amount of debt and—after observing multiple protests and experiencing state violence firsthand—eventually becomes a class conscious worker and striker.

\(^{15}\) Destabilizing Mr. Nut’s racial identity, Floyd Cheung notes, “H.T. Tsiang played Mr. Nut in dramatic adaptations of *The Hanging on Union Square*” and goes on to call him “racially unspecified (though easily read as white)” (228). While Tsiang’s various “performances” of Nut perhaps complicate Nut’s whiteness in the narrative’s adapted form, this essay foregrounds Nut’s clear whiteness within the novel in order to read the narrative as a critique of racialization more broadly.
These novels chart an important arc in Tsiang’s body of work, one that shifts from a narrow critique of the nation and national identity to a broader vision of revolutionary transformation and international solidarity. *The Hanging on Union Square* integrates abstract tropes from the allegorical form and the realism of the proletarian genre to envision the figurative death of capitalism. *And China Has Hands*, however, extends this anti-capitalist critique in order to forge a transpacific connection that unites Communist China with working-class strikers in the U.S. The revolutionary imaginary, then, comes to the fore in both novels as Tsiang envisages a world no longer bound by the exploitative structures of race and class.

Because it does not fall into clearly established categories, Tsiang’s work has been hard for critics to situate within the broader fields of literary studies. Historically, scholars have tended to focus on his later novel *And China Has Hands* for its portrayal of Chinatown and have often characterized the text as a fairly crude aesthetic endeavor and/or political propaganda. In her landmark literary history, Elaine Kim describes *And China Has Hands* as “roughly written” before noting, “it is the first fictional rendition of the bachelor society in English by a Chinese immigrant” (109). Similarly, Jinqi Ling calls the book “roughly composed” (177). Even David Palumbo-Liu—in his otherwise nuanced dissection of the same novel—states, “[It] is written in the rather crude prose style of a social realist fable” (57). For these reasons, Tsiang’s work is often set aside for more canonical and ostensibly less rough or crude portrayals of Chinatown like Louis Chu’s *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1961) and even Pardee Lowe’s *Father and Glorious Descendant* (1943).
Chris Vials suggests that Tsiang’s polemical depictions of Chinatown stand out in the context of other Asian American writing from the period. Vials insists, “[U]nlike many 1940s and 1950s narratives of Chinatown, Hands does not skirt troubling issues of exclusion to make its case for Asian inclusion” (127). Because of Tsiang’s willingness to grapple with the “troubling issues of exclusion,” And China Has Hands was quickly overshadowed by less confrontational depictions of Chinatown. Similarly, the somewhat dismissive critical readings of Tsiang’s “crude” prose style recall contemporary reviews of The Hanging on Union Square as well. Eda Lou Walton blatantly called Tsiang “naïve” in the New York Herald Tribune, and Kenneth White’s review in the New Republic qualified the characterization by noting the book’s “intentionally naïve humor.” These descriptions of Tsiang’s work are perhaps partially responsible for the novel’s descent into relative obscurity.

Including a note of self-deprecation and even mockery, Tsiang incorporates similar reviews and a variety of manuscript rejections in the prefatory materials that precede The Hanging on Union Square. In tandem with these disparaging reviews of the novel, these manuscript rejections help explain the text’s quick disappearance from the cultural and intellectual landscape. While Kaya Press has recently issued a reprint of the novel (thanks in large part to a renewed interest in Tsiang in the last ten years and the efforts of Floyd Cheung), it remains underexamined in both leftist scholarship and Asian American studies.

More recently, however, critics have begun to intervene in the text’s dismissal from scholarship on formal and political grounds. In his article on the novel, Aaron
Lecklider makes a strong case for reading the narrative as a “proletarian burlesque,” one that “reinvented proletarian literature to perform important political work, pushing readers into unexpected thematic, stylistic, and sexual territories” (91). And in an introduction to an anthologized excerpt from *The Hanging on Union Square*, Alan Wald describes him as “among the most innovative and idiosyncratic writers drawn to the United States communist cultural movement of the Great Depression” (341). Cheung also calls attention to the text as an important contribution to proletarian literature. In one of the more sustained scholarly attempts to engage Tsiang’s work, Cheung calls the novel “[a] darkly satirical text [that] dramatizes Mr. Nut’s descent into the hell of Depression-era Manhattan and his Christ-like emergence in the end to defeat Mr. System” (63). Finally, in his introduction to the reprinted version of the novel, Hua Hsu claims “that [Tsiang’s] manic collision of ideas and feelings seems deeply familiar, as does his dense mix of irony and earnestness, his experimental playfulness and all-at-once frustration that nobody is listening” (4). These critics have begun to retrieve the text from obscurity in order to reassess the importance of this narrative to proletarian and Asian American literary history.

Still, it seems that Nut’s whiteness may account for the text’s striking absence in Asian American literary studies. Unlike other Asian American writers from the period, Tsiang takes up whiteness specifically to make legible the process of its construction. Tsiang’s interrogation of whiteness marks an important contribution to Asian American letters. Through this interrogation, Tsiang articulates a pointed critique of the very architecture of race. Moreover, Tsiang’s critique of race highlights racialization as an
integral component of class exploitation, setting up the novel’s climactic ending in which a heterogeneous group of racialized workers unify to overcome both capitalist and nativist oppression.

Drawing attention to the socially constructed nature of whiteness, then, Tsiang traces the contours and fault lines of racialization and nativism. In her book *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (1996), Lisa Lowe quite rightly claims, “[T]he cultural productions emerging out of the contradictions of immigrant marginality displace the fiction of reconciliation, disrupt the myth of national identity by revealing its gaps and fissures, and intervene in the narrative of national development” (9). The myth of national identity and development during this period culminated in the Johnson-Reed Act, which represents perhaps the most aggressive attempt to imagine and construct America as both white and native-born. Mae Ngai writes, “At one level, the new immigration law differentiated Europeans according to nationality and ranked them in a hierarchy of desirability. At another level, the law constructed a white American race, in which persons of European descent shared a common whiteness distinct from those deemed to be not white” (24, 25). Ngai highlights the legislation’s transformative, multilayered impact on racial construction.

While whiteness directly signifies the racial bulwarks that undergird nativism, nativism itself embodies according to John Higham a multivalent “intense opposition to an internal minority on the grounds of its foreign (i.e. ‘un-American’) connections” (4). Matthew Frye Jacobson, too, ties nativism to the constantly shifting and paradoxical construction of whiteness. In fact, Jacobson traces the nation’s legal structuring of the
“Caucasian race” back to In re Ah Yup (1878), the very first recorded application by a Chinese immigrant to become a U.S. citizen. He notes, “Circuit Court Judge Sawyer’s ruling in the case set an important precedent […] it was recalled and repeated over the years in response to a cavalcade of petitioners for naturalized citizenship […] Sawyer’s reasoning in the matter single-handedly established ‘Caucasians’ as a legally recognized racial group” (227). This particular case reveals the way in which this foundational construction of whiteness and the “natural” citizen resulted directly from the exclusion of Chinese immigrants. Setting it apart from nationalism, which Benedict Anderson links directly to his fairly broad definition of the nation as an imagined community, nativism is useful for my purposes precisely because it foregrounds these rather complex processes of racialization and explicitly excludes immigrants.

If Asian American literature from this period emerges from the racializing processes and economic contradictions of modernity, then it also collides with what Alan Wald describes as “a cultural break or rupture [that was] in progress between the 1920s and the early 1930s. The national and international political emergencies of the Depression era, combined with the dynamism of publications and organizations led by Communist Party members and sympathizers, did forge a unique cultural crucible” (12). Indeed, publications like New Masses, Daily Worker, and Partisan Review gave the left—including writers like Tsiang who published in such venues—a cultural presence in America. Similarly, in his massive study of the popular front, Michael Denning briefly highlights Tsiang’s contribution to the cultural left (241). Denning also locates this contribution within a larger shift in American culture. He writes, “the communisms of the
depression triggered a deep and lasting transformation of American modernism and mass culture” (xvi). This lasting transformation can also be seen in the popularity of unions, attention to and renewed vitality in the labor struggle, and, perhaps most importantly, legislation like the 1935 Wagner Act, “a radical legislative initiative […] It guaranteed workers the right to select their own union by majority vote, and to strike, boycott, and picket” (Lichtenstein 36). This broader shift began to integrate Marxist critique into the cultural vernacular, creating what Raymond Williams might call a new “structure of feeling” in the American masses.

Surely, these unique historical conditions account in part for how Tsiang—as Cheung claims—“found a way to critique Chinese conservativism, Japanese imperialism and U.S. capitalism” (59). By tracing the evolution of this revolutionary imaginary in these two novels, we can begin to extrapolate the way in which each novel indict the interconnections between nativism, racialization, and class stratification in the midst of America’s economic crisis. Moreover, Tsiang’s initial vision of revolution in The Hanging on Union Square ultimately moves beyond national boundaries in order to bring workers together across continents in And China Has Hands. My chapter begins with an analysis of the former novel and culminates in a reading of the latter text. In both of these narratives, however, Tsiang reveals the way in which racialization structures class inequality and capitalism. Mapping these dynamics, Tsiang’s work articulates a larger critique of the nation and imagines a revolutionary uprising in the working classes. These novels, then, launch an incisive anti-capitalist critique and envision a revolutionary end to class and race inequalities.
The Destructive Tendency of Allegory in *The Hanging on Union Square*

In the initial pages that precede *The Hanging on Union Square*, Tsiang reproduces Granville Hicks’s praise for the text, which compares this novel to one of the most famous allegories in literature, calling it “a kind of Communist Pilgrim’s Progress.” And in its rejection, which is also reproduced by Tsiang in the opening pages, the publisher *Harcourt, Brace and Company* insists, “[N]o one of us feels sufficiently enthusiastic about this allegory to recommend that we publish it.” The novel employs seemingly antiquated allegorical tropes, but it also borrows from the proletarian literary tradition. After all, the narrative arc depends on Nut’s class conscious development, protest, and finally revolution. When placed in the broader context of proletarian literature, however, Tsiang’s novel seems particularly odd. In her foundational work, Barbara Foley outlines four particular types of proletarian novel: the fictional autobiography, the bildungsroman, the social novel, and the collective novel. Cheung places *The Hanging on Union Square* squarely within this last model, which perhaps allows for some potentially productive comparisons between the experimental techniques of this text and other collective novels like John Dos Passos’s *U.S.A. Trilogy* (1930-1936), John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of

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16 The proletarian fictional autobiography blends the bildungsroman tradition with the autobiographical genre. The proletarian bildungsroman similarly revamps what Foley describes as a historically bourgeois tradition culminating in a unique revolutionary perspective. The proletarian social novel constitutes a fairly straightforward mode of realist narrative that relies on multiple protagonists, and the proletarian collective novel marshals experimental literary techniques and integrates alternative forms often straining the realist transparency that informs these other types. For more on the four types, see Foley’s *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).
Wrath (1939), and Clara Weatherwax’s lesser known Marching! Marching! (1935).

Certainly, Tsiang’s use of multiple genres—and clear disregard for straightforward realism—shares some similarities with the bricolage techniques of these other novelists. Still, if Cheung calls the text a proletarian collective novel because it “focuses not on the interactions of realistic characters but rather on the tension between types” and utilizes experimental prose (63), I opt for the more focused lens of what I call “proletarian allegory” in order to further examine and mine Tsiang’s use of character “types.” In fact, I argue that the dialectical tension between the allegorical form and the proletarian genre animates Tsiang’s critique of nativism and capitalism.

The Hanging on Union Square bears closest comparison to a traditional allegory because its characters have “type” names, which correspond to the ideological positions and/or ideals that they represent. The protagonist Mr. Nut represents the stereotypical “everyman” avidly opposed to communism, who converts politically by the end of the narrative. Nut’s “nuttiness” represents his initial inability to decipher the class warfare and oppressive structures that surround him; he is no longer a “nut” once he becomes a class conscious communist. Mr. Wiseguy, however, represents a compromised, problematic, and—like his female counterpart Miss Digger—ultimately opportunistic middle ground between communism and capitalism. Mr. Wiseguy notably refers to himself as a socialist. Mr. System directly embodies capitalist structures of power, and Miss Stubborn stands in for communist activism. In these respects, these characters paradoxically double as ostensibly autonomous characters and fairly predictable signifiers for ideological causes.
Tsiang wields the allegorical form in order to foreground political orientations within the narrative. As Angus Fletcher notes, in his 1964 study of allegory, “If allegories are abstract, harsh, mechanistic, and remote from everyday life, that may sometimes answer a genuine need. When a people is being lulled into inaction by the routine of daily life […] an author perhaps does well to present behavior in a grotesque, abstract caricature” (23). Rather than lull readers into a transparent realist narrative, Tsiang’s blatant characterizations of capitalism and exploitation demand a political reading. Indeed, the mechanics of allegory lay the groundwork for Tsiang’s critique of nativism and capitalism. While Asian exclusion and the economic collapse combined to oppress immigrant workers especially, these historical forces also created racist divisions within the working class and often concealed actual structures of exploitation. After all, Jacobson remarks, “The awesome power of race as an ideology resides precisely in its ability to pass as a feature of the natural landscape” (10). Racialization, then, further serves to fracture the working class, allowing white workers to blame their oppression on immigrant workers. Through his use of allegory, however, Tsiang explicitly connects racialization to class oppression and disallows race “to pass as a feature of the natural landscape.”

In his famous discussion of poetics and imagination in *The Statesman’s Manual* (1816), Samuel Taylor Coleridge distinguishes the supposedly organic tenets of symbol from the mechanical nature of allegory:

Allegory is but a translation of abstract notions into a picture-language which is itself nothing but an abstraction from objects of the senses […] Symbol is characterized by a translucence of the Special in the Individual […] or of the Universal in the General […] It always partakes of the Reality which it renders
intelligible, and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that Unity, of which it is the representative. (673)

Coleridge privileges the symbol because of its “translucence” and because it “partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible.” Thus, the symbol—in Coleridge’s view—represents a more coherent and even “natural” semiotic chain. Though historically some controversy surrounds this definition of allegory, this essay will take up the mechanical and inorganic nature of allegory as a politically significant constitutive element in *The Hanging on Union Square.* Refusing to conceal processes of racialization, Tsiang utilizes allegory to reveal the mechanical and inorganic nature of race, which he ties directly to capitalist structures of exploitation. This same allegorical trope fascinates Walter Benjamin throughout *The Arcades Project* (2002) precisely because it ruptures the supposedly “natural” and therefore symbolic conditions of the everyday. When writing about the French poet Charles Baudelaire, Benjamin claims, “[A]llegory has to do, precisely in its destructive furor, with dispelling the illusion that proceeds from all ‘given order,’ whether of art or of life: the illusion of totality or of organic wholeness which transfigures that order and makes it seem endurable. And this is the progressive tendency of allegory” (331). For Benjamin—like Coleridge—alllegory contravenes the very myth of symbol, which suggests a coherent and organic connection between signifier and signified.

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17 For more on the controversy surrounding both Coleridge’s depiction of allegory and allegory more generally, see Fletcher’s *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (1964), Edward Honig’s *Dark Conceit* (1959) and Edward A. Bloom’s “The Allegorical Principle” (1951).
Benjamin appears to convert Coleridge’s understanding of allegory into a peculiarly modernist phenomenon. If the symbol articulates a seamless semiotic chain whereby organic connections create meaning, then what Benjamin calls “the destructive tendency of allegory” reveals an inorganic world bound by unnatural connections (191). This destructive tendency shatters the assumed meanings of everyday life and exposes the existential conditions that actually pervade the everyday. Unlike Coleridge, Benjamin privileges allegory precisely because it “views existence, as it does art, under the sign of fragmentation and ruin” (330). Tsiang marshals this model of allegory to enact a devastating critique of racialization, nativism, and capitalism in the U.S. Rather than naturalizing and reinforcing appeals to whiteness and native origins, Tsiang troubles the power dynamics that animate these social constructions. By refusing to mark racialization as translucent, intelligible, and natural, the allegorical form constantly pronounces both whiteness and nativism as inorganic and unnatural.

**Proletarian Allegory**

Before foregrounding Mr. Nut and detailing the sequence of events that ultimately lead to his communist conversion, the narrative opens with a puzzling epigraph. Tsiang writes in verse, “What is unsaid/ Says./ And says more/ Than, what is said./ SAYS I” (11). This idiosyncratic riddle informs the reader that this first person narrator invests a great deal in the “unsaid.” This same narrator disappears from the actual narrative and only reappears in the poems that begin each act. The lyrical verse, then, takes on the more didactic form of first person instruction, and the narrative itself sheds this didactic
narrator. As though situating a particular lens for the reader, the epigraph suggests that this narrative will interrogate and expose the politics of the unsaid. The unsaid should recall the ideological networks that underwrite seemingly “natural” processes of racialization and Jacobson’s assertion that the “power of race as an ideology” consists in its capacity to “pass as a natural feature of the landscape.” As the narrative progresses, Tsiang repeatedly calls attention to and investigates these processes.

Ideology and race intersect in the fourth chapter as Nut—who remains staunchly anti-communist and racist throughout the first act—encounters Stubborn. When recounting the story of Stubborn’s conversion to a communist political orientation, Nut briefly considers the merits of communism. After becoming frustrated with Mr. System’s attempts “to make her face whiter” because “in a movie-house the good looks of the cashier are important” (28) and encountering a strike in the dressmaking business, Stubborn disavows the commodifying (and racializing) tactics of Mr. System and joins the Young Communist League. Still, Nut refuses to follow in her footsteps. He thinks, “‘I, Nut, become a radical?’ Nut said to himself. ‘Become a Red? No. No, Siree! I am no Russian! I am no Jew!’” (30). According to Nut, to become a communist is to become a foreign Other. Despite American communists’ various efforts to repackage communism as a “home-grown” phenomenon and thus uniquely “American,” these xenophobic projections imbricate in order to produce a political, racial, and religious Other to the nation.18 Even as he projects these racializing strategies, Nut envisions himself as a part

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18 This overlap between xenophobic projections reveals the symbiotic relationship between anti-communist and anti-immigrant sentiments. In this way, Colleen Lye cogently identifies “red baiting and yellow perilism” as “tactical instruments of class
of a homogeneous native community. Communist conversion, then, triggers a whole host of “unsaid” alliances. Indeed, to become a Communist is to evacuate any claims to the American Self.

Throughout the narrative, however, Tsiang amplifies these unsaid connections thereby making this racializing process legible. To this end, Tsiang makes the unsaid connections between race and capitalist exploitation explicit when he describes the racial constitution of Mr. Wiseguy. In the following chapter, it becomes clear that “Mr. Wiseguy was of Anglo-Saxon or Teutonic origin. But something had gone wrong and his nose was a little bit non-Anglo-Saxon. Or you may say a bit Christ-like” (31). While the Anglo-Saxon origin appears to signify the normative and, consequently, “right” origin, the Christ-like nose, which has “gone wrong,” calls this supposed origin into question. For this reason, “As a result of twenty years’ care, finally the lower part of the nose pointed upward instead of downward” (31). Tsiang highlights anti-Semitism and the machinations of whiteness. Only twenty years’ care can give Mr. Wiseguy the right look. Also, Mr. Wiseguy is “five feet seven. For the average Anglo-Saxon he was an inch short. This defect had been overcome by shoe-fixing” (31). Like Mr. System, who relies on makeup for the construction of whiteness, Mr. Wiseguy fabricates his own racial composition through “care” and shoe-fixing. Tsiang utilizes allegorical character formations to expose the mechanical and inorganic nature of racial construction. Moreover, Tsiang articulates a satirical critique of the constructive process as well. A sarcastic voice elucidates the arbitrary technologies of racialization. These social

domination […] they were historically coincident and politically coterminous” during this period (129).
constructions destroy any semblance of symbolic coherence between race, ideology, and nation. Instead, these social constructions highlight the manufacturing procedures that sustain this nativist community. Tsiang comically refracts the idealization of whiteness, and he highlights Mr. Wiseguy’s self-conscious reliance on this native origin for power.

Tsiang reveals the way in which whiteness constellates around and against a series of foreign Others. Mr. Wiseguy’s native origin first comes into question because of his “Christ-like nose,” but he had “trouble with his eyes, too. They were rather small and some people suspected him of being partly Chinese. Every day he had his eye exercise and because of his hard work, the eyeballs, though not deeply located were as large as those of the average Anglo-Saxon” (31). Tsiang constantly reminds the reader of the precariousness of these Anglo features. His parodic descriptions also make legible the level of paranoia and suspicion that surround whiteness as a racial category precisely because of these efforts to establish and police a homogeneous nativist community.

Similarly, Mr. Wiseguy’s “hair was artificially bleached. That made him neither Spanish-nor Italian-looking. He had a weak chin. So he grew a beard” (32). His native origin is predicated on distinguishing himself from Jewish, Chinese, Italian, and Spanish Others.

The constitution of an American Self emerges from these negative projections. The allegorical formation of capitalism and exploitation—represented respectively by Mr. System and Mr. Wiseguy—depends on the racialized construction of these two figures. Both characters inscribe their own racial identity within a narrative of native belonging and racial essentialism. Rather than conceal the way in which these racial formations and
social constructions take shape, Tsiang persistently reminds the reader that whiteness is a self-conscious social construction by mocking specifically biological notions of race.

Tsiang also parodies the way in which these racial formations dominated publications and the literary world during this time period. Tsiang writes, “Mr. Wiseguy had a literary appearance […] As to novels, he would say that they were the riskless adventures of an uncourageous maiden, or the companions of a lonely and wealthy wife whose husband was away at a director’s meeting” (34). Despite feminizing the production and consumption of literature, Mr. Wiseguy “was too wise to go against the tide of convention, so most of the time he carried books as conventional culture-decorations” (34). His “literary appearance,” which recalls the elaborate depiction of Wiseguy’s Anglo features, reminds the reader that highbrow literature was primarily produced for a white audience. Moreover, these literary formations existed in large part as a high-culture marker for white bourgeois tastes, and thus the dominant forms of literary culture relied on the tactics of nativism.

Tsiang also parodies the orientalist desires of Miss Digger, who wants to be a writer like “the woman who made money from her Oriental novels! […] She talks about ‘Earth’ and ‘Soil’ a lot, but I think what her publishers gave her as royalties was the same thing that I have received from my customers—dollars” (189, 190). Tsiang makes a fairly obvious reference to Pearl Buck’s Pulitzer Prize winning novel, The Good Earth (1931), which he compares to Miss Digger’s previous profession as a prostitute. Both Buck and Digger traffic in the business of providing pleasure for their clients. Miss Digger notes, “In her book, many of her descriptions and some of her occasional remarks about what
she has already described were of the same stuff as the pleasure I have given to my customers” (189). If Digger sells her body to clients seeking sexual pleasure, then Buck sells a literary invitation into an exotic Other world of orientalist pleasures, even if these pleasures are more voyeuristic than sexual. In this satirical vision of the literary world, orientalism, nativism, and commodification ossify in both high and middlebrow culture. Tsiang notes through the character of Miss Digger that the critical establishment propagates this world: “‘She has been praised by the critics’ […] ‘as a literary genius’” (190). Tsiang constantly satirizes literary culture by comparing it to prostitution because it commodifies Asian populations for the American public while masquerading as a kind of “missionary work” (190). In this respect, nativism relied quite heavily on orientalist representations of Asia and, more specifically, China. Despite these orientalist representations, however, this period was marked by “the United States geostrategic interest in Chinese national independence” (Lye 209). Lye further observes, “Buck’s Depression-era fiction and wartime political advocacy, Edgar Snow’s newsbreaking chronicles of the Chinese revolution, and Steinbeck’s World War II California […] reveal the flexible uses of agrarian fiction, retooled in the service of globalization projects” (209). If their agrarian fiction commodifies the Chinese farmer while revealing a complicated geostrategic investment in Chinese economic integration, then Tsiang’s novel contrasts with these writers—and their diegetic counterpart Miss Digger—who represent a morally hollow, opportunistic effort to orientalize and commodify China.

While nativism during this period represents conservative attempts to define a national community along strictly racial and ideological lines, the strategic coalitions
between the U.S. and China complicate this nativist rhetoric. The Chinese fight for national independence—which was complicated by a tenuous (and temporary) alliance between China’s Chiang Kai-shek led nationalists and its growing communist contingent—against Japanese imperialism must factor into any reading of Tsiang’s work. Because of what Lye calls “the joint specter of German fascism and Japanese militarism […] a Popular Front alliance between—or, some would say, a confusion of—capitalist democracy and revolutionary communism” resulted in the “figural convergence of Chinese Communists and American pioneers” (232), a convergence that Lye makes legible in her readings of the work of Snow and Buck during the 1930s. Although The Hanging On Union Square takes shape in this same historical context, it opts for an urban setting rather than a rural one, and thus it does not conflate American pioneers with communist China. Still, Mr. System warns against a similar confusion that somehow merges Communist China and America. He yells, “‘Say! Don’t mention the Chinese. I am disgusted with them. I am nervous about them. Those Chinese Nationalists are useless. In outside matters, they cannot beat back the Japs, and within China, the Reds are becoming stronger and stronger’” (150). Mr. System makes it quite clear that American capital cannot make any lasting alliance—tenuous or otherwise—with a Communist China. While Chinese nationalism may be “useless” in its current incarnation, his assertion implies that the nationalist movement has the potential to be useful in the fight against Japanese imperialism and the Red Scare. Communist China, however, stands as the potential alternative and therefore the ultimate threat to the capitalist world of Mr. System. Combining political and racial alterity, communist China represents the political
antithesis and literal archenemy to Mr. System’s homogenous community of white capitalists.

In *The Hanging on Union Square*, China’s Marxist potentialities register as an obvious site of anxiety and alterity for Mr. System. The novel posits communist China as the ultimate threat, an Other that takes on the compounded weight of both political and racial opposition. Throughout the narrative, fortifications of the nativist community depend on these perpetual projections of political, national, and racial alterity. Before converting to communism, Nut repeatedly affirms this version of America. In his initial rejection of communism, he reinforces the amorphous identificatory strategies of nativist structures of meaning. Nut insists, “‘I, Nut, will take no money from a girl. I’ll take no money from a Red. I won’t sell my Flag for five cents. I will take no money from a black man. I won’t disgrace the white race!’” (58). Even admitting a “girl,” a “Red,” and a “black man” into the circulation of exchange would mean “disgrac[ing] the white race.”

Nut initially rejects any dependence—financial or otherwise—on these figures of alterity. Refusing the supposed economic “hand-outs” of socialist and communist communities, Nut also conflates whiteness with financial independence. As a result, Nut’s idealized and absurd national economy excludes foreign Others and depends entirely on the circulation of money between native-born subjects.

This depiction of the national economy reveals the heteropatriarchal structures that undergird this nativist community as well. In this economy, women are an object of circulation, as evidenced by Mr. System and Mr. Wiseguy’s attempts to employ both Miss Stubborn and Miss Digger for blatant profiteering. While Miss Stubborn must wear
makeup so that Mr. System can make more money, Miss Digger strips before a crowd and sells her body to profit her so-called manager, Mr. Wiseguy. After Mr. Wiseguy introduces Miss Digger to a crowd of wealthy onlookers, the text states, she “stepped on the stage. Miss Digger took off her clothes. Miss Digger had absolutely nothing on” (85). Because the crowd is impressed with her performance, she garners a great deal of money for both of them. After splitting their money, Miss Digger “loosen[s] her pajamas in front to advertise her breasts a little more,” thinking “[i]t pays to advertise!” (135). Selling her body as a commodity, Miss Digger tries to entice Mr. Wiseguy. In the end, however, “Miss Digger lost money [and] Mr. Wiseguy made money” (38). Ultimately, these allegorical constructions mark capitalism and exploitation as dominated by male subjects, thereby inscribing these oppressive systems within a critique of heteropatriarchy. In this way, Mr. System and Mr. Wiseguy work in tandem to commodify the female body and to exclude these bodies from any network of real agency. These women can only find a very limited degree of agency, then, through the sale of their own bodies. To this end, Nut—like Mr. System and Mr. Wiseguy—imagines a gendered community constituted by native belonging, one that excludes women, communists, and African Americans.

Eventually, Nut undergoes a conversion after he falls victim to police violence, alongside African American demonstrators. When Mr. System orders the police to hurt Nut for “making noise” and refusing to pay the check in a cafeteria, “[s]ome who went outside to help Mr. Nut were clubbed also. Among them were Stubborn, a Negro and a worker in that very cafeteria” (58, 59). The very gendered, racialized, and politicized individuals that Nut previously excluded from economic circulation try to help him
amidst this violence. At this point, “Mr. Nut now began to realize that the policeman’s Irish club clubbed his very Anglo-Saxon, Teutonic and Yankee head the same as other heads. And the blood of the colored race and the blood of the white race that fell on the cement pavement were of one color” (59). Nut’s whiteness most likely suggests an attempt on Tsiang’s part to make this conversion appeal to a broader audience. Yet, disavowing previous understandings of national identity, Nut deconstructs racial difference as he observes that their blood was “of one color.” By denouncing any differentiation theory based on blood, Nut explicitly rejects certain strands of eugenics discourse and raciology from the period. Still, it is worth noting that “a Negro and a worker” have to be injured on his behalf for Nut to finally recognize these similarities and thus their mutual susceptibility to state violence. Regardless, Nut’s conversion to communism and subsequent identification with political, racial, and gendered Others cuts against the logics of nativism. Nut begins to reject his initial desire for a homogenous community of native-born subjects.

Though this political conversion resituates Nut’s understanding of the national community, especially along the lines of race and gender, it is a slow process of gradual transformation. Throughout the novel, Nut moves through worker’s cafeterias and dinner clubs in order to find food and temporary shelter in the city, and thus his displacement pervades the narrative. Appropriately, then, each chapter in Act II begins with a refrain, taken from the poem that initiates the act, “‘Heaven is above,/ Hell below./ Nothing in pocket,/ Where to go?”’ (64). This repeated epigraph speaks to the larger displacement of the impoverished, the people with “nothing in pocket.” Indeed, Tsiang seems to suggest
that these people, who are racialized and gendered throughout the novel, have little or no space within the confines of New York City. Nut, Stubborn, and other workers struggle to find a satisfactory place to eat and sleep throughout the novel. For this reason, Union Square becomes an important site of political struggle and community for the disenfranchised, and, as a result, Nut’s political consciousness develops fully in the square.

Historically, Union Square was an infamous site for political and labor organizing. It was a major hub for both race riots and unemployment rallies in the early 1930s. In these respects, Union Square—especially in 1935 when the novel was published—was known as a place for communist organizing and labor agitation. Union Square, then, serves as a kind of antithesis to the larger space of the nation and thereby the identificatory strategies of nativism. What began quite appropriately as a “burial ground for indigents” eventually became Union Place and finally Union Square, the place where Bowery, Broadway and Bloomingdale Road intersect (Ballon 109). Anti-war demonstrators gathered at the square during World War I and, as early as September 5, 1882, it was the end-point of the first ever Labor Day parade, the place where people gathered to hear speeches from major figures in the Central Labor Union (Ballon 114). By the 1930s, weekly protests pervaded the square. Daniel Opler writes, “Communists staged most of the weekly protests […] as well as what was probably the largest and most important protest of the Great Depression. During their International Unemployment Day protest on March 6, 1930, as many as 100,000 protesters gathered to hear speeches” (156). As the crowd turned toward City Hall, however, the police met the crowd and the
protest turned into a riot with bloody repercussions. Nonetheless, these riots “allowed Communists the opportunity to lay claim to Union Square as their space” (Opler 156), thereby prompting the journalist Matthew Josephson to call it “New York’s Red Square… the very vortex of revolutionary activities” (126).

Nut’s political consciousness and, consequently, his conception of the nation transform through his relational encounters in this vortex of revolutionary activities. Once in the square, Nut pronounces, “Take my word for it. I’m not a Nut any more” (Tsiang 133). He was a nut precisely because of his reliance on and belief in white privilege, capitalism, and nativism. No longer a nut, he disavows these previous beliefs. While Mr. System and Mr. Wiseguy plan for what they call the “salvation” of capitalism, then, Nut continues to undergo his communist conversion. Near the end of the novel, however, Mr. Wiseguy plots, “We’re going to have some poor fellow hang on Union Square […] ‘A grand idea! A Great thesis! An Epic plan!’” (185). A master of exploitation, Mr. Wiseguy insists that Nut’s Hanging will “make money […] and the country will regain prosperity” (185). Galvanizing society around this spectacle of violence, Mr. System praises Mr. Wiseguy as the “Brain Trust,” who is able to turn a profit on Mr. Nut’s death. They plan to hang Mr. Nut, who in the midst of hunger and frustration considers hanging himself. This plot would colonize the antithetical nation space that Union Square comprises within

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19 Nut’s very name suggests his inability to work and ties his unemployment to an apparent disability and—in many respects—opens the text up for some suggestive disability studies readings. Though these readings do not fall within the scope of this study, it is worth noting that those deemed unfit for work were often refused entry into the States. And even if a person was already in the States, as in the case of Nut, Tsiang makes it clear that these incapacitated workers were exiles from the State and constant drifters. Nut’s resultant existence on the periphery and obvious inability to fully integrate into the native community further unifies him with Other exiles from the nation.

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the novel through a spectacle of racialized violence. This ritualistic form of nativist
violence and blatant allusion to America’s long history of African American lynching
would transform this subversive space into a figural site of racial subjugation and nativist
triump.

It is within Union Square, however, that Nut inverts the power dynamics on
display in Mr. System’s epic plan and initiates a revolutionary transformation. Near the
end of the novel, Nut insists, “I, a Forgotten Man, a Little Man, an Average Man, a
Worker—will this time—double-cross you, Mr. System—the Exploiter, the War-maker,
the Man-killer. Here is your neck. This is your rope” (208). The passage provides a
figurative ending in which Nut turns on Mr. System. The forgotten man, the little man,
the African American worker, and Stubborn do not convene for the “salvation of
capitalism” or the protection of the nation. Instead, this constellation of workers unites
because of a developing political consciousness to fight their mutual oppressors. Though
the narrative ends with Nut’s supposed “double-crossing” and avoids showing the actual
“death” of capitalism, the diegesis echoes the recent historical past of the early 1930s, the
May Day parades, and the weekly communist rallies. As is fairly typical in the proletarian
novel, the historical real intrudes on the fictional world of Mr. System. Nut’s betrayal re-
envision the radical violence and mass resistance of earlier riots—the violent opposition
of the International Unemployment Day of 1930 being just one significant example—as
the death of Mr. System and therefore the end of capitalism. The potential site of
racialized violence and nativist triumph turns into a space of utopic possibility for the
Others of the nation.
In its final act, *The Hanging on Union Square* begins to articulate a revolutionary vision of community and belonging in Union Square that constructs identificatory logics outside of nativism. Indeed, these logics converge in processes of radical resistance to and outright refusal of nativist visions of community. The novel’s ending relies primarily on a long, didactic monologue by Nut, and thus the heterogeneous community of workers does not literally appear in the final pages. After he proclaims, “Be good and starve is the order of the day! Prey on others or become a prey,” he repeats, “I was a Nut. But I am a Nut no more” (208). Nut’s allegorical and Whitmanesque invocation of the forgotten working community draws attention to the marginalized workers that pervade the rest of the novel, but it also foregrounds the limits of this allegorical critique. If the previous passage turns capitalism into a single character who can be killed, it also problematically allows Nut to invoke a heterogeneous working class figuratively without literally incorporating that community into the final pages. Furthermore, the exploitative reach of capitalism and class oppression go far beyond the death of a single character, proving, of course, that the practical or pragmatic insight of allegorical critique remains limited. Still, this Whitmanesque monologue and Mr. Wiseguy’s call for an epic plan echo the fact that Tsiang himself calls the novel an “American Epic” on the title page. While Cheung claims that “Tsiang may have hoped that associating his novel with the genre of the epic would help to suggest the global and momentous importance of his relatively local and mundane narrative” (234), I read this reference as a reflective critique of the genre.

Tsiang’s ironic appropriation of the epic indicts the genre precisely because of its connection to empire. In his book *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from*
Virgil to Milton (1993), David Quint connects the structure of the epic directly to empire, noting that historically empires have enlisted the epic form in their imperial projects.

Describing this very phenomenon, Quint writes:

Narrative itself thus becomes ideologically charged, the formal cause or consequence of that Western male rationality and historical identity that epic ascribes to the imperial victors [...] The epic victors both project their present power prophetically into the future and trace its legitimating origins back into the past [...] they always will be protagonists in a continuing story of imperial and national destiny because they always have been. (45)

In their final confrontation, however, Mr. Nut rejects Mr. System’s role as epic victor. Quint notes, “Epic’s losers, the enemies of empire whom epic ideology assimilates with the East, woman, nature, irrationality, and chaos, consequently embody a potential, indeed inevitable collapse of narrative” (45). Subverting the epic form, then, the “irrational” Nut—the supposed “loser” and enemy of empire—turns on Mr. System in the final moments of the narrative. As Nut calls on the working class to fight back, the potential “collapse of narrative” actually charges the novel with revolutionary potential in this climactic confrontation.

Tsiang’s hybrid model of literature, then, critiques the prototypical forms of the epic and allegory. In describing the critical potential of Asian American aesthetics, Lowe rightly insists, “[I]ts aesthetics is defined by contradiction, not sublimation, such that discontent, nonequivalence, and irresolution call into question the project of abstracting the aesthetic as a separate domain of unification and reconciliation. It is a literature that, if subjected to a canonical function, dialectically returns a critique of that function” (44). Tsiang’s reference to the American epic must be read in this context of political resistance, discontent, and irresolution. Tsiang’s conclusion also refuses the synthetic
“domain of unification and reconciliation” proffered by the allegorical form. If allegory is “omnipresent in Western literature from the earliest times” (1), as Fletcher suggests, then Tsiang’s proletarian allegory refuses “the apocalyptical escape into an infinite space and time toward high human goals” (23) that animates the allegorical form in Western literature. The realist tropes of the proletarian novel, which prioritize the historical real, intervene in the larger universalizing project of the allegory. Tsiang’s distinctly proletarian allegory roots the allegorical form in the historical real. Rather than revoke universal ideals and goals, Tsiang anchors them in the recent protest histories of Union Square. Taking the opposite approach of Edward Bloom—who privileges writers like Dante Alighieri, John Bunyan, and Nathaniel Hawthorne over “more essentially topical and less universal” (190) writers like Jonathan Swift and George Orwell—Tsiang’s ostensibly “universal” world of ideals is always already “topical.” In this novel, the reality of the historical present—the unique racial formations in the wake of the immigration act of 1924 and the recent protest histories—consistently disrupts the abstracting process and therefore the allegorical form.

*The Hanging on Union Square* combines elements of allegory and the proletarian genre to envision a diverse working class bent on a revolutionary end to class exploitation and racism. Nut’s final invocation of a heterogeneous body of forgotten, average, racialized, and gendered workers allows him to “double-cross” capitalism, which the novel connects explicitly to heteropatriarchal and racist structures of oppression. In the middle of the Depression, then, Tsiang articulates a radical critique of labor exploitation, racism, and nativism. As a proletarian allegory, the narrative embodies a revisionary
critique of multiple genres and realizes the critical potential of Asian American radical literature. Finally, Tsiang’s utopic vision of revolutionary transformation culminates when Mr. Nut double-crosses Mr. System and Mr. Wiseguy. In this regard, Tsiang allegorizes the death of capitalism as the terminus of racism, nativism, and economic exploitation.

Protest, Diaspora, and Revolution in And China Has Hands

If The Hanging on Union Square envisions a heterogeneous community of laborers who come together against capitalism in the historic space of Union Square only in the final scenes, then And China Has Hands structures the narrative around a community inflected by racial diversity and transnational conflicts from the opening pages. The novel pairs Japanese imperialism and American capital as twinning projects of exploitation oppressing the international working classes. As Cheung observes, “Tsiang envisioned both the Chinese revolution and the U.S. proletarian movement as part of what he called […] ‘the world revolution’” (229). With this broader revolution in its scope, Tsiang’s later novel interrogates the symbiotic structures of imperialism, racialization, and capitalism in the U.S. The critic Julia H. Lee notes, “[T]he supposed transparency of the novel’s leftist politics is undermined by the novel’s presentation of the relationship between triangulated interracial dynamics in a local, American scene and Western inspired, imperial encroachment on a global scale” (81). The “triangulated interracial dynamics” allude to the novel’s two racialized protagonists: the Chinese immigrant Wong Wan-Lee and Pearl Chang, who is half Chinese and half African
American. What Palumbo Liu calls the “crude prose style of a social realist fable” is therefore complicated by Tsiang’s nuanced engagement with the structures of race, class, and diaspora that animate the burgeoning U.S. empire.

While the novel takes up local politics to be sure, it also engages with broader international conflicts and communities in order to address transnational circuits of exploitation. Unlike The Hanging on Union Square, this novel takes on immigrant and biracial protagonists in order to trace the fate of a broader Chinese diaspora. Moreover, Tsiang brings these immigrant and Chinese characters, who merely inhabit the periphery of his previous novel, to the fore in this text. The narrative moves beyond his earlier critique of nativism in order to explore the fates of racialized Others and immigrants more directly. In the final pages of this novel, Wan-Lee dies while striking with Chang and other workers in the U.S., but before dying, he looks to communist China as a significant site of resistance and revolutionary possibility for the international working class. Tsiang invokes the revolutionary Marxism of China as an important bastion of hope for the workers and protesters in the U.S., envisioning a potential circuit of resistance in the Chinese diaspora.

Set almost entirely in Chinatown, Tsiang’s novel follows the life of Wan-Lee as a Chinese immigrant worker in New York City. After working as a waiter for some time, Wan-Lee saves up enough money to buy his laundry. Eventually, however, he loses this laundry and goes back to waiting on tables because “he could not raise another fifty dollars to pay the House Inspector” (119). Indeed, all of his “hopes” come crashing around him after a brief gambling incident causes him to lose what little money he has
left. Wan-Lee “hoped that business in his laundry would jump from sixty a week to a hundred a week […] He had hoped that he would have enough money to finish paying off the two thousand dollars he had spent in his fight to retain citizenship status” (119). As he loses figurative hope and all of his money, he begins to develop a political critique of the corruption that surrounds him. This emerging class consciousness leads to his involvement in a strike near the end of the novel, thereby enlisting the novel somewhat precariously in a long tradition of proletarian literature.

Like The Hanging On Union Square, however, the radical politics of the novel fit uneasily within traditional generic forms. When referring to the traditional bildungsroman, Foley calls it “the classic form of the bourgeois novel” (321) precisely because it hinges on the protagonist’s bourgeois education and the central character’s integration into the nation as a productive citizen and family member. Nonetheless, And China Has Hands articulates a refusal of this bourgeois education. Instead, Tsiang’s narrative appears to fit the mold of the proletarian bildungsroman, which Foley describes as marshaling the traditional form for “left-wing political ends” (343). Although it certainly mirrors the politics of the proletarian bildungsroman on some level, it occupies an uneasy position within the genre because of its preoccupation with and critical orientation toward race. Like Lowe suggests in her analysis of Carlos Bulosan’s America Is in the Heart (1946), which I examine in the following chapter, And China Has Hands “does not ‘develop’ the narrating subject’s identification with a uniform American nation; the achievement of narrative voice is precisely the effect of the subject’s critical estrangement from and dissymmetrical relationship to American culturalist, economic,
and nationalist formations” (47, 48). Similarly, the protagonist’s class consciousness integrates a critique of racialization and anti-Asian racism that sets it apart from other novels that fall more predictably within the formal category of the proletarian bildungsroman.

While Cheung develops a similar reading of the novel as “a standard, if highly inventive, proletarian bildungsroman” (65), other critics focus more centrally on the text’s engagement with the structural inequalities that plague immigrant lives and racialization in the U.S. In one of the first attempts to fully assess Tsiang’s work, for instance, William Wu writes, “Wan-Lee and Pearl Chang are seriously developed characters […] aware that they are part of the Yellow Peril” (155). And Palumbo-Liu rightly claims that the novel suggests, “Asian America be read precisely within a shifting relationship of rearticulations of race, gender and class with the United States, and of the vision of ‘Asia’ as the site of increasingly complex political negotiations […] the novel ends up maintaining a dual focus on socialist utopias in Asia and America” (51). Decades before Asian America emerges as a social construct and political alliance in the 1970s, Tsiang proffers a complicated construction of Chinese diaspora. Indeed, this socialist utopia—referenced by Palumbo-Liu—transcends national lines and interrogates the very meaning of Chinese, Chinese America, and—more broadly—diasporic identity.

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Daryl J. Maeda links the emergence of “Asian America” to the late 1960s and 1970s. He writes, “The category ‘Asian American’ is a social construction that groups together people of diverse ethnicities, religions, languages, nationalities, and cultures. Despite the fact that Asians have been present in the United States for over a century and a half, the Asian American is a relatively recent invention […] in the late 1960s, a variety of people of Asian ancestry in the United States recognized the similar ways Asians had suffered from exploitation and discrimination” (39).
Similarly, Julia H. Lee notes, “Condemning capitalist hierarchies for the racism and the racializing processes that undergird them, Tsiang suggests that those very racialized bodies enable anti-establishment alliances across geographic, class and racial lines, […] fueling a proletarian revolution necessary for the creation of an ethnically transcendent society” (88). These critics begin to trace the contours of racialization within the context of Tsiang’s larger critique of capitalism. Continuing in this vein, this project examines the way in which this triangulated critique of racialization, nation, and capitalism culminates in a revolutionary imaginary, one that calls for social transformation and an end to these structures of exploitation.

The novel begins with Wan-Lee’s grandiose ambitions. After all, “‘Ten thousand fortunes’ was his name in Chinese, and ten thousand fortunes was all he intended to make in America” (20). Like many immigrants before him, Wan-Lee arrives on the continent ready for work and prosperity. Wan-Lee’s arrival and optimistic expectations signal the seductive rhetoric exhibited by the U.S. economy. In this way, Chinese immigration began largely as a result of economic need in the U.S. Robert G. Lee claims—while drawing on the work of Edna Bonacich—“the economic dislocation and creation of populations of workers available for emigration from Asia can be related to the capitalist development of the United States generally and the high demand for cheap labor on the West Coast in particular” (259). Immigrants often arrived with high expectations for new labor markets and high-paying jobs, but the exploitative job markets quickly shattered these expectations. For this reason, Wan-Lee stands in for “[t]he Chinese laundryman [who] personified the forced withdrawal of the Chinese into a segregated ethnic-labor
market” (Takaki 240). Indeed, Wan-Lee’s trajectory charts the plight of workers who labored in laundries during this time period.

Out of this particular labor market, however, an important union emerged. Takaki writes,

On April 16, 1933, [Chinese laundrymen] attended a mass meeting sponsored by the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association [CCBA]. But they quickly saw that the CCBA was more interested in collecting so-called ‘fees’ […] Shortly afterward some of the laundrymen organized an independent laundry association—the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance. (245)

This association took shape as a result of the larger battle for worker’s rights within this ethnic-labor market. Like the Wagner Act, these communal formations and union organizations granted a significant degree of power and authority to exploited workers and ethnic laborers. As Sucheng Chan argues, “The CHLA [Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance] remained for years a staunch opponent of the conservative CCBA [Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association] and a supporter of progressive political activities” (95). Indeed, the trade organization included democratically elected officials and proved essential to the survival of Chinese immigrants in the U.S. Still, Tsiang’s novel highlights the residual corruption in Chinatown, even after the formation of the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance. Throughout the novel, local officials and obvious criminals approach Wan-Lee and ultimately force him to sell his laundry. In spite of union advances, Wan-Lee cannot maintain his laundry. 21 Regardless, the historical formations and labor

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21 Because Wan-Lee picks up a newspaper from the winter of 1936 (Tsiang 26), we can assume that the novel takes place in the same year and, consequently, that the union advances would—at least in theory—impact Wan-Lee’s ownership of the laundry. Also, Tsiang’s reference to “New York State’s labor law,” a law that entailed “one week’s
struggles intrude on the ostensibly fictional diegesis. In fact, the economic exploitation and labor oppression of the Depression propel the plot of *And China Has Hands*.

From the beginning of the novel, Tsiang chronicles Wan-Lee’s difficult life as a menial laborer and eventually a laundryman. After buying the laundry, Wan-Lee quickly realizes that he has some misconceptions about owning this business. Indeed, it turns out that life as a laundry worker “was hard work. Long hours. A bare living. But, he thought, he could move freely, breathe freely, and there would be no boss to tell him how to move” (21). This “bare living” is far less “freeing” than Wan-Lee at first assumes. In fact, most of the novel takes place inside his place of business precisely because he is rarely able to leave. Eventually, Tsiang compares Wan-Lee’s life to the “life” of a machine: “His hand was not a machine, but he had to move his hand as fast as a machine […] putting out the light of the outer room, he retired to the back room, washed, cooked, ate, and slept […] that is the life of a Chinese laundryman” (27). Wan-Lee’s existence is reduced to his ability to work like a machine and survive in Chinatown amidst the corruption that surrounds him. As Chan writes, “Laundries both sustained and entrapped those who relied on them for survival” (34). Moreover, Wan-Lee’s existence highlights the awful conditions of ethnic-labor markets in the U.S.

Wan-Lee’s life as a laundryman also makes legible the racialization of labor that laid the groundwork for U.S. capitalism. After all, Chan argues, “Though Chinese laundries were located primarily in white neighborhoods, their occupants lived in a self-contained world. A great deal of both their business needs and social needs were met by notice before discharge” later on in the narrative likely refers to a Union advance from the decade (Tsiang 111).
people who came to their doors” (34). Despite the fact that his laundry is in Chinatown, Wan-Lee still inhabits a “self-contained world” whereby prostitutes, inspectors, and immigrant officials approach him while he is working in the laundry. Moreover, Wan-Lee’s “bare living” is not anomalous within the immigrant community. Lowe maintains, “[F]rom 1850 to World War II, the recruitment of Asian immigrant labor was motivated by the imperative to bring cheaper labor into the still developing capitalist economy: Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino laborers were fundamental to building the railroads, the agricultural economy and the textile and service industries” (12). These laborers worked under awful conditions, cheap wages, and even indentured servitude. While “[t]heoretically, in a racially homogeneous nation, the needs of capital and the needs of the state complement each other,” Lowe notes that the capitalist economy and the need for cheap labor conflicted with the ideals of liberal political theory (13). In the end, a history of Asian immigration and racialized worker exploitation make U.S. capitalism possible.

Despite the racialization of exploitative labor under the demands of capitalism, Tsiang eventually imbues these ethnic workers with agency and a burgeoning class consciousness. Initially, however, Wan-Lee and Chang lack this degree of agency. As a Chinese immigrant, Wan-Lee struggles to “make it” as a business owner in Chinatown. Aside from the officials, the Immigrant Officer, the House Inspector, and even the school kids aggravate Wan-Lee and keep him from being “successful.” Finally, Chang chases them off yelling, “I was born right in this country and I’m not afraid of nobody […] The kids heard her smart English and saw her terrible look, and they understood that she was
not fooling” (29). Chang helps Wan-Lee learn to negotiate the cultural differences and blatant racisms that surround him. Moreover, as an American born Chinese, who is half African American, Chang represents a complexly racialized protagonist, one who joins Wan-Lee in the strike near the end of the novel. In the beginning, however, she fantasizes about being a movie star. Her conception of China comes from “the movies and [things she] read […] about China in novels” (37). She even “thought of the laundry as a kind of Buddhist temple with bells and drums. But she could not hear the bells and drums” (54). Like the racist Americans that surround her, Chang exoticizes both China and Wan-Lee. As a result, Wan-Lee calls her a “Mo-no,” which translates as “no brain” in Chinese, because she participates in this exoticization of China. Both characters begin with obstacles to overcome before they can develop the class consciousness that culminates in the penultimate strike scene.

Tsiang’s construction of race and Chinese diaspora complicates overly simplistic or monolithic constructions of either. Indeed, Pearl Chang’s very existence within the novel disallows straightforward representations of race and nation by emphasizing the complex histories of immigration and cross-racial identification that often form immigrant subjects. She “was of mixed blood. Her father was Mr. Chang Chung-Li, and her mother was a Negress” (32). Initially, she marshals her ambiguous racial identity to her own benefit in the South. Because “Negroes are not allowed to ride in the same streetcar with whites, but Chinese are” (32), Chang passes as Chinese. According to Tsiang, she—like many other Chinese Americans in the Jim Crow South—believes that
the Chinese are “better” than African Americans (33). Thus, Chang manipulates her own racial construction near the beginning of the novel.

Chang’s attempts to pass reveal the incredibly intricate racial dynamics that pervade the Jim Crow South. With these dynamics in mind, Leslie Bow argues, “Unlike apartheid in South Africa, segregation in the American South made few provisions for gradations of color” during this time period (2, 3). She goes on, “Whether characterized as sojourner, foreigner, or ‘cultural isolate,’ those who could not be placed as either white or black were not exempt from the complex social formations of the American South” (3, 4). In this regard, Chang’s racial identity remains tethered to and yet different from these social formations. Taking on the opportunistic tactics of Miss Digger from The Hanging on Union Square, for instance, Chang “use[d] a large hat to cover [her] hair” and “lipstick and dark powder to make [her lips] look smaller” (33). Evidently, these modifications help emphasize and make legible her “Chineseness,” or at least conceal any black racial signifiers that might undermine her passing. Still, she has difficulty passing, and so she moves to New York City. While in Manhattan, she loses her job waiting on tables because of her eventual failure to pass. This “failure,” again, signals the intricate racial dynamics, which place whites in a clear position of power. After all, white business owners and Southerners are the ones who dictate whether or not Chang can successfully pass. She struggles to construct a legible racial construction, one that she

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22 This failure to pass also reveals what Bow describes as the uneasy role of Asian identity in black and white race relations. She writes, “Situated as aloof from or inconsequential to the workings of racial hierarchy in the region, neither Asian nor Indian appears to be easily reconciled to black or white association” (3).
can use to her own advantage amidst the variegated racisms and worker exploitation that surrounds her in the South and New York.

Ultimately, this inability to fully pass as Chinese and thereby fully access this heritage motivates Chang to find a real “Chinaman.” For this reason, “[s]he had a general idea of how a Chinaman looked […] she felt she would learn more if she could have a chance to see a Chinaman herself, with her own eyes, and to feel one with her own hands. That would be something original” (37). While Chang insists that Wan-Lee is “not American” (25), it quickly becomes clear that Chang has no “authentic” racial identity either. Despite being more “American” than Wan-Lee, she experiences racism in various manifestations, and she is clearly limited to various ethnic-labor markets. Race, then, becomes an unruly identity marker that constantly shifts valences and circulates primarily to deny access to the “white” world that surrounds them.

Yet, it is not only the “white” world that exercises racism within the novel. Julia H. Lee notes—when discussing Chang’s firing at the hands of a Chinese Nationalist—“Tsiang pointedly condemns how the Chinese Nationalists mimic the racial and economic oppression of America […] The owner is concerned about the racial purity of his ‘people,’ but he is more worried that the presence of Pearl will drive away his customers” (89). In New York, Chang works briefly at a Chinese restaurant, but her presence as an apparent African American worker threatens the owner’s business. The Chinese owner objects to her racial background, claiming “[w]e Chinese are black enough” (102). Moreover, he also acts as a kind of gatekeeper who rejects Chang’s ability to pass. In this way, Tsiang maps the shifting fault lines of racialization, which
exist primarily—if not solely—for the dual purposes of commodification and power. Like Mr. Wiseguy’s attempts to make Stubborn “whiter” for the purposes of better sales in *The Hanging on Union Square*, the business owner fires Chang because she threatened to “spoil” the reputation of his restaurant and “drive away customers” (102).

If racialization exists for these dubious purposes, then internationalism also threatens to function duplicitously within the narrative. Indeed, critical images of globalization surface and recur in Wan-Lee’s various encounters. The “Chinese gentleman,” for instance, “recently finished his Ph.D. thesis—‘How to Sell China More Profitably’—and he also made great progress in studying Japanese” (88). The gentleman and his thesis appear to propagate the American exploitation of China. This same gentleman also studies Japanese, a nation whose imperial exploitation of China was in full swing throughout most of the decade. Similarly, Tsiang describes the boss that Wan-Lee and Chang work for in the final chapters: “When the boss talked to the Chinese workers, he would say the whites were no good. The whites were jealous […] When the boss talked to the white workers, he would say that ‘Chinks’ were no good […] He was an internationalist” (122). Tsiang’s satirical invocation of internationalism critiques the boss’s attempts to divide the workers. Again, like Mr. Wiseguy from *The Hanging on Union Square*, the boss ultimately embodies an exploitative opportunism. He utilizes his internationalism to exploit and divide workers across race and national lines. As a result, “He had two gambling houses, two wet-wash companies […] and one noodle factory, besides his new enterprise—Chinese cafeterias” (123). In this context, international relations only serve to negotiate the blatant profiteering of capitalism. Thus, Tsiang warns
against problematic versions of “internationalism” that only appear to move beyond the basic tenets of nativism in an effort to capitalize on “productive” relations between nations.

Instead, Tsiang offers a much more radical vision of internationalism and collective resistance. Notably, this resistance forms in direct opposition to the cafeteria’s boss, whose “internationalism” exploits workers of various races, nations, and genders. In response to the boss’s exploitation, “Chang […] and many other workers quit their jobs and paraded in front of the Chinese cafeteria in which they worked” (123). Shortly thereafter, “Wan-Lee […] joined […]. The workers in the other cafeterias joined: The white, the yellow, and the black, the ones between yellow and black, the ones between white and black” (124). The boss’s very effort to co-opt internationalism as a tactic of capitalism creates pan-ethnic coalitions and even results in a strike. Moreover, this strike moves beyond black and white race relations to account for a range of ethnic identities that include “white,” “yellow,” “black,” “the ones between yellow and black,” and “the ones between white and black.” Like Union Square in Tsiang’s previous novel, the cafeteria, then, becomes a politically charged space for the racialized Others of the nation. Rather than renegotiate the racializing world around her by attempting to pass again after being fired, Chang joins forces with Wan-Lee and even the fictional proxy for Tsiang in order to form a collective resistance. Tsiang includes his alter-ego, noting that “The author of Poems of the Chinese Revolution, China Red, and The Hanging on Union Square also participated, for he thought that since he had written so much about revolution, he had better do something about it. And picketing is a revolution” (124). As
if dissatisfied with the fictional structure of the story, Tsiang inscribes his own activism into the diegesis. While *The Hanging on Union Square* reimagines the historical unemployment riots in Union Square as a utopic revolution, Tsiang envisions this particular strike as a kind of micro-revolution in which he can take part, a class and race based resistance that lays the groundwork for a larger revolution.

This revolution includes—and in fact depends entirely on—the racialized Others excluded by the nation, and yet it relies on a utopic transcendence of race as well. The strikers sing “the song that knows nothing of white, yellow, or black./ They wanted better wages./ They wanted shorter hours” (125). The song anticipates and calls for a future that transcends the racializing tactics of labor exploitation and Asian exclusion, and it remains rooted in the practical needs of the present as well. In other words, this transcendent futurity takes shape under the sign of practical demands in the diegetic here and now. The workers want “better wages” and “shorter hours” for pragmatic and immediate purposes. This dialectical tension between the demands of the present and the utopic blueprint for the future will animate much of my analysis in the following chapter. Nonetheless, this same tension percolates under the revolutionary format of Tsiang’s strike. The revolutionary imaginary emerges here as a realistic critique of the present without compromising a radical vision for the future. Moreover, this vision of revolution unites a diverse Chinese diaspora that includes Tsiang’s proxy as a Chinese immigrant writer of proletarian literature, Wan-Lee as a Chinese immigrant fighting for American citizenship, and Chang as an African American Chinese, who has never been to and seems to know very little about China. Even though race seems to disappear in the workers’ song, these
diasporic connections bring race to the fore and reveal Tsiang’s strategic investment in both pan-ethnic and working-class solidarity.

Ultimately, then, this strike constitutes an image of diasporic protest and collective resistance in the final scene. Indeed, it takes place on North American soil, but Wan-Lee turns to China for hope. At the end of the novel, Wan-Lee is shot and killed by a Japanese agent. But before he dies, he yells, “I have no ten thousand fortunes,/ But I’ll have China!/ […] Up, China now stands,/ And China Has Hands—/ Eight/ Hundred/Million/ Hands!” (128). His class consciousness comes full-circle as he realizes he has no fortune. Moreover, he rejects the prototypical narrative of U.S. modernity, which would suggest that the U.S. is the beacon of hope for this radical futurity and progressive politics. Instead, China becomes the centripetal force of hope. In contrast to Japanese imperialism and U.S. racism, then, the resistance movement in China serves as a model for Tsiang’s radical futurity. In this respect, Chris Vials and Michael Denning point to the novel’s rhetorical aligning with the Popular Front. But beyond that, the novel imagines a realignment of Chinese diaspora with the racialized strikers of New York City. In fact, the final image of protest and potential revolution joins workers across national and racial lines in order to form and imagine radical resistances to both U.S. and Japanese empire. In this light, Tsiang links both the strike in New York and the independence movement in China to a broader fight against the globalizing strategies of capitalism, U.S. empire, and Japanese imperialism.

This depiction of pan-ethnic workers coming together against the nation also disrupts any standard narrative of the bildungsroman. Wan-Lee’s final education does not
interpellate him within the broader narratives of national belonging, nor does it establish a kind of bourgeois individualism. Thus, the novel appears to fit within Foley’s archetype of “authors [who] demonstrate the necessity for revolutionary class consciousness—as well as the threat of developing fascism among those who reject this necessity” (328).

Nonetheless, this narrative does not function simply as another proletarian novel subordinating race struggle to a larger narrative of class exploitation. It does not end with a utopic vision of the strike alone. Instead, Tsiang conjoins this strike in New York City with the independence movement in China in order to reveal a diasporic community that is integral to revolutionary transformation. Like Richard Wright, whom Foley suggests, “discovered multileveled discursive forms that enabled him to articulate the complexity of the politics guiding his analysis of American racism” (212), Tsiang authors an anti-development narrative that refuses to subordinate race to class. Instead, this novel tracks the way in which the symbiotic relationship between racialization and class stratification structure the nation, and it looks beyond this relationship in order to imagine broader communities of resistance, pan-ethnic coalitions, and grander narratives of belonging.

Diasporic Identifications and the Revolutionary Imaginary

Tsiang’s initial critique of nativism, then, lays the groundwork for a powerful reimagining of communal identification and collective resistance. If the nation constellates around what Robert G. Lee calls a “discursive basis for an imagined nationhood,” one that “structures nationality as a fictive kinship, a common ancestry” (7), then Tsiang constantly demystifies this fictive kinship in order to reconceptualize and
reorganize community around alternative narratives of belonging. Thus, Tsiang’s novels embody and consciously take up David Leiwei Li’s assertion that “by inhabiting the nation as a space of contradiction, the Asian American […] constitutes a critique of the national community and proposes an alternative reconstruction” (12; emphasis mine). In this way, Tsiang refuses traditional structures of identification in order to constitute agency through narratives of protest and labor agitation. The revolutionary imaginary begins to take shape in these novels through pan-ethnic coalitions, diasporic identifications, and activist communities that reject the racializing strategies of a burgeoning U.S. empire.

Like the riots, protests, and strikes of the Depression, these narratives bind agency to these communities marginalized by racism and worker exploitation. In this regard, the Depression brought together various communities of resistance, groups who could not—or at least would not—take refuge in narratives of national belonging, class hierarchy, or racial supremacy. If Tsiang’s narratives develop an incisive critique of racialization and class inequality, then they also debunk certain assumptions about literature from this period. Literary histories of twentieth century American literature often devalue and overlook the Red Decade in favor of the high modernist aesthetics of the 1920s. As Jessica Berman claims, “The epithets ‘thirties literature’ and ‘proletarian literature’ still come with the assumption that political commitment imposes ‘social realism’ and instrumental use of narrative and eliminates experimentation in form and content” (241).

Similarly, Wald writes of this decade: “[L]ike the rest of the avant-garde, the Left was always delimited in relation to modernism—not only because it shared many of the same
interests but because modernism conquered as the paramount heritage in U.S. literary culture in the 1940s and after” (323). This rhetoric mirrors Tsiang’s occasional dismissal from Asian American canonical formations because his work is “crude” or “roughly” hewn. Nonetheless, these novels reveal Tsiang’s experimental and dynamic use of the literary form to freight trenchant political critique. In this regard, both *The Hanging on Union Square* and *And China Has Hands* exemplify some of the innovative literary structures that emerged from this historical period and this particular social milieu.

I have argued that in the unique crucible of the Depression, which brought together immigrant exclusion, class stratification, and nativist fervor, a nascent revolutionary imaginary began to take shape in early Asian American literature. Tsiang’s novels combine formal experimentation with social critique in order to envision revolutionary transformations and pan-ethnic coalitions. Similarly, the Depression led to a variety of well-documented protests, rallies, and strikes that united racialized Others and immigrant workers in ways that had not been previously possible. Forged in this period of activism and Marxist critique, then, these novels lay the groundwork for a radical tradition in early Asian American literature. In their explicit rejection of assimilation, these narratives imagine new ways of being and personhood within the context of the U.S. and the world more broadly. Thus, Tsiang’s work forms a theoretical foundation for this revolutionary imaginary, which will become crucial to Bulosan’s aesthetics in *America Is In the Heart* as well, a novel that I will investigate in some detail in the next chapter.
Chapter 2: Beyond What Is: The Politics of Hope and Anticipation in Carlos Bulosan’s *America Is in the Heart*

It was something that grew out of the sacrifices and loneliness of my friends, of my brothers in America and my family in the Philippines—something that grew out of our desire to know America, and to become a part of her great tradition, and to contribute something toward her final fulfillment. I knew that no man could destroy my faith in America that had sprung from all our hopes and aspirations, ever.

Carlos Bulosan, *America Is in the Heart* (1946)

It is a question of learning hope. Its work does not renounce, it is in love with success rather than failure. Hope, superior to fear, is neither passive like the latter, nor locked into nothingness […] The work of this emotion requires people who throw themselves actively into what is becoming, to which they themselves belong.


Filipino American Carlos Bulosan’s 1946 *America Is in the Heart* begins by nostalgically recalling familial reunion. Bulosan’s alter-ego and protagonist, Allos, explains to his father that he believes he has seen his brother Leon making his way to the family home. In response, his father insists that his brother is still fighting in Europe and perhaps even dead. Despite the father’s incredulity, the family soon learns that Leon has, indeed, returned from the war. After greeting Allos and his father, Leon immediately “took the rope from [his] father and started plowing the common earth that had fed our family for generations” (4). This initial scene of reunion, which roots generational ties and the family’s sustenance in the “common earth,” serves as the opening image for this quasi-autobiographical novel and a pivotal moment for Allos. Already marked by
diasporic trajectories that bear the residual traces of colonization in the Philippines, the family nearly loses Leon to World War I, which Allos calls the “strange war in Europe.” Still, Leon is the first—though not the last—family member compelled to leave the Philippines for the sake of work, money, and “opportunity.”

In fact, America Is in the Heart chronicles Bulosan’s own diasporic path. Throughout this narrative, Bulosan recounts his life in various ethnic-labor markets on the West Coast after arriving in Seattle in 1930. Subverting any assumptions about America as the so-called “land of opportunity,” Bulosan documents the extreme class stratification and worker exploitation of American empire. Recalling his move to the U.S. and Leon’s early return, Allos remarks, “The sudden, sweeping years that later came to my life and pushed me into the unknown, the vital negative years of hard work and bitter trials oftentimes resurrected his face for me with great vividness” (4). In the midst of economic exploitation and American racism, this image of familial reunion motivates Allos to keep going. He continues, “And at other times I was to go back again and again to this moment for an assurance of righteous anger against the crushing terror that filled my life in a land far away” (4, 5). This utopic vision of reunion frames the narrative, and it paves the way for Bulosan’s clear investment in social justice and revolutionary transformation. What begins as a nostalgic invocation of his family’s past in the Philippines, then, comes to define his vision for the American future.

If Tsiang’s work employs recent history to reimagine the revolutionary potentiality of organized labor and radical activism during the Great Depression, then Bulosan’s narrative claims a revolutionary future for the U.S. Refusing to accept the
pervasive racism and economic oppression of American capitalism during the Depression, Bulosan co-opts the national future in order to imagine and prophesy a transformative revolution. Moving to the U.S. from the Philippines, he encountered a nation with very little work. Bulosan grew up amongst plenty of corruption and poverty in the Filipino countryside, but he was not prepared for the extreme economic stratification and blatant racism that made life in the U.S. nearly unbearable. Throughout this narrative, Allos describes the brutal conditions of life on the West Coast: “I came to know afterward that in many ways it was a crime to be a Filipino in California. I came to know that the public streets were not free to my people: we were stopped each time these vigilant patrolmen saw us” (121). This passage makes evident the legally precarious position of racialized Filipinos, as well as the nearly ubiquitous surveillance that resulted from public anxieties about miscegenation and stereotypes of Filipino sexuality. For these reasons, Allos struggles to maintain meaningful relationships, jobs, and therefore a community in which he can survive.

Eventually, however, Allos manages to become friends and form political alliances with other immigrant workers. His work in labor unions like the United Cannery and Packing House Workers of America would stem from these relationships and enable Allos to form important connections with other migrant workers in the region. Moreover, these relationships lay the groundwork for a revolutionary vision of the national

23 It is important—if surprising—that Bulosan imbues “America” with this revolutionary possibility. As an imperial hub for proletarian immigrants, Bulosan foresees America as a space charged with transformative potential. Unlike Tsiang, who looks to China for hope, Bulosan casts his lot with America. Nonetheless, his hope depends entirely on a revolutionary future that will transform America.
community. In other words, precisely because the national narrative has no place for him, Allos begins to imagine a nation comprised not of white, bourgeois American citizens but of proletarian outcasts and racial minorities. This transformative vision motivates Allos’s claim on the American future. In the final chapters, Allos mobilizes this vision in order to envisage an America without racial and class inequality.

While Tsiang imagines an immanent, worldwide revolution ignited by striking factions because of the pervasive activism of the 1930s, Bulosan is writing amidst—and after—the Second World War. During this period, the Marxism and radical activism of the previous decade had lost traction in the U.S., giving way to the Popular Front and the war on fascism. For this reason, Allos says, “[F]ascism had spread rapidly in Europe, giving way to a general confusion in all the civilized countries” (301). And though he writes about the Depression, Bulosan knows that the end of the Red Decade will not bring about the greater revolution that he seeks. When describing shifts in the labor force during this period, for instance, Nelson Lichtenstein writes,

> [T]he recomposition of an ethnically heterogeneous, episodically employed proletariat into the self-confident, increasingly homogeneous ‘white’ working class of the postwar era was a product of New Deal liberalism […] The sense of social entitlement generated by the New Deal and the new unions […] provided the institutional and ideological basis for a new Americanization movement that subordinated older ethnic identities within a transcendent sense of whiteness. (74)

World War II ushered in a new era of liberalism that—in many respects—re-galvanized the nativist fervor of the 1920s. As Christina Klein notes, “[A]fter World War II, [America] displace[d] Great Britain as the world’s most powerful nation. Because this was a new role, and because it required repudiating a long-standing intellectual tradition of isolationism, this rise to power demanded a reworking of national self-definition” (9).
Despite or perhaps even because of renewed attempts to conservatively define the national Self along racial, cultural, and political lines, Bulosan’s protagonist stakes his revolutionary claim on the national future. In the face of post-war conservatism and compromise, then, Bulosan refuses to foreclose on the revolutionary demands and ideals of the previous decade.

The basic social reforms, revitalization of unions, and governmental concessions that preceded the war did not completely satisfy Bulosan. Thus, he was not prepared to give up on a revolutionary future for these important—but ultimately limited—political advancements. It is for this reason that America Is in the Heart anticipates and calls for a transformative future. By 1947, the Taft-Hartley law would enact “legal restrictions […] on the trade unions [and become] a symbol of the shifting relationship between the unions, the state, and the corporations at the dawn of the postwar era […] Taft-Hartley’s most overtly ideological […] consequence was the purge of the Communists from official union posts” (Lichtenstein 115). Throughout the Depression, Bulosan had formed important relationships with labor leaders like Chris Mensalvas and played an active role in labor communities.

But as nativism renewed its foothold in the wake of the war, the unions, too, began to allow for what Lichtenstein calls labor’s postwar retreat, which would in turn account for the nearly complete erosion of union power over the next thirty years. The communist contingent, which was sacrificed as a result of Taft-Hartley, also accounted in large part for many of the more radical ideals like racial equality and feminism that were slowly disappearing from the unions. Eventually, Filipino union leaders like Mensalvas
and Ernesto Mangaoang would face deportation charges under the anti-communist McCarran Act of 1950. These shifts in legislation and leadership dramatically limited both the vision and influence of the post-war left. To that end, these shifts laid the groundwork for an administrative return to restrictive definitions of citizenship along the lines of race and politics.

This fraught political context has polarized critics and caused them to read *America Is in the Heart* in significantly divergent ways. Many of these readings reduce the text to a fairly basic assimilationist or anti-assimilationist political stance. In this way, past scholars have struggled to come to terms with Allos’s final claim on America because of what Meg Wesling calls “the ‘mental gymnastics’ involved in any vindication of American democracy” (74). As a result, they tend to read “the nationalist resolution as a compromise made for the purpose of publication and marketing the text during a highly nationalist period” (Wesling 74). Similarly, Michael Denning and E. San Juan Jr. read Allos’s optimistic portrait of America in the final scene of the novel as evidence of Bulosan’s rhetorical alignment with the Popular Front. Denning indirectly inscribes Bulosan within a larger narrative of “sentimental, populist, and humanist nationalism that we are told characterized the wartime Popular Front,” even though he simultaneously insists that *America Is in the Heart* reflects an “attempt to transcend a United States of violence” (274). According to Denning, Bulosan’s positive inflection of America stands in for his broader solidarity within Popular Front coalitions.

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24 Bulosan publicly defended these labor leaders against attacks of red-baiting and eventual deportation. Still, Bulosan lived to see many of these important figures on the left come under attack for labor organizing and Marxist affiliations.
In contrast, Wesling distances Allos’s “education” from Bulosan’s perspective so as to create critical distance between Bulosan and his narrator. This distancing, then, paves the way for Wesling’s final interpretive move, in which she suggests that Bulosan invites the reader to critique the narrator. Similarly, Marilyn Alquizola reads this narrator as ironic in order to “arrive at a more subversive reading of the text, given that an assimilationist interpretation, strongly implied in the text’s conclusion, is a problematic one” (199). As a result, she “propose[s] that reading America Is in the Heart as a subversive text is more tenable than reading it as a narrative which works toward the conclusion that assimilation in America is a viable and desirable goal” (200). While these readings break significant ground on the novel, neither account fully for Bulosan’s politically charged appropriation of the national future.

I argue that, in the final pages of the novel, Bulosan neither aligns completely with the more immediate demands of the anti-fascist, nationalist rhetoric of the Popular Front, nor does he ironically reject his all-too-similar protagonist. After all, the Popular Front emerges from a series of radical alliances and leftist groups in the late 1930s. As Denning argues, when discussing the cultural contingent of the Popular Front, “[T]he cultural front reshaped American culture. Just as the radical movements of abolition, utopian socialism, and women’s rights sparked the antebellum American Renaissance, so the communisms of the depression triggered a deep and lasting transformation of American modernism and mass culture” (xvi). In these respects, aligning with the Popular Front does not suggest that Bulosan seeks assimilationist integration with America. Still, in this text, Bulosan moves beyond the scope of pragmatic, anti-fascist
politics. Instead, he utilizes the future as a trope through which Allos imagines a radically different America. The protest communities and strategic coalitions that take shape within the novel do so under a sign of longing for this Other America, which relies on the marginalized subjects of the nation. In this regard, these longings, which draw on the revolutionary imaginary elucidated in the introduction, give solidarity to the broader communities unable to fit within traditional definitions of the nation and citizenship. The revolutionary imaginary, then, emerges as a way to recognize the transformative potential embedded within the communal ties that bind these oppressed communities.

Bulosan’s vision of revolution and protest foregrounds certain formal dilemmas within the novel as well. Blurring the lines between fiction and autobiography, Bulosan marshals experiences from his life and the lives of other Filipino workers from the period in order to create a kind of composite picture of racialized worker exploitation from this period. Although this documentation of the lower classes reveals the influence of proletarian literature on Bulosan, this novel has a complicated relationship with the proletarian genre. In fact, Bulosan turns a critical eye toward racialized labor specifically and therefore refuses to subordinate race to class, which sets him apart from other proletarian novelists from the period. Similarly, the novel critiques the developmental logics of the traditional bildungsroman. These formal elements align with the novel’s politically charged content, which privileges a class conscious protagonist and working-class coalitions. In this way, the immigrant communities that animate this narrative resemble the coalitions that strike in both of Tsiang’s novels, and yet, Bulosan’s post-World War II novel reveals a very different historical moment than The Hanging on
Union Square and And China Has Hands, novels that were published nearly a decade earlier.

In the wake of World War and the consolidation of American empire, Bulosan refuses to sacrifice the radical vision of his novel. In the final scene, Allos insists, “I felt it spreading through my being, warming with its glowing reality. It was something that had grown out of my defeats and successes, something shaped by my struggles for a place in this vast land […] It was something that grew out of the sacrifices and loneliness of my friends, of my brothers in America and my family in the Philippines” (326, 327). This enigmatic unnamed pronoun blossoms from Allos’s defeats and failures. This passage continues to register the loneliness—the psychological dissonance of Allos’s current life in America—riddled with racial oppression and economic hardship, but it also refuses to renounce this ambiguously formed and unnamed hope. Allos goes on to express his desire to “contribute something toward her final fulfillment” (327). In this desire, Allos invests hope in a revolutionary futurity, an incomplete nation.

By refusing to lose hope, Bulosan echoes Ernst Bloch’s assertion that “[t]he course of the world is still undecided, unended” (153), and thus Bloch’s theory of utopia and art, which I will turn to in the following pages, is central to this reading of Bulosan’s novel. If hope becomes an important political orientation, however, it also allows Bulosan to critique the proletarian genre and the traditional bildungsroman. Ultimately, Bulosan utilizes America Is in the Heart to critique the racism and exploitation of 1930s America, but perhaps more importantly, he installs a radical vision for the future and
refuses to give up on hope as a theoretically significant heuristic for revolutionary change.

Hope as Radical Political Orientation

_America Is in the Heart_ traces Allos’s journey from being a child in the Philippines to a migrant worker in the States. In many respects, the Spanish American and Philippine American Wars (1898-1902) laid the groundwork for American empire in the following century. As Allan Punzalan Isaac observes, “Against the national aspirations of the short lived Philippine Republic (1896-98), the United States incorporated the peoples of the archipelago as a U.S. territory” (XV). Bulosan came of age, then, in the midst of a new era of American colonization. For this reason, the first part of the novel describes Bulosan’s childhood in the rural countryside of Binalonan, a discussion the first half of this chapter will take up in some detail. After describing his childhood in the Philippines, Bulosan delineates the injustices and oppressions of life in the U.S. He spends the rest of the novel detailing the atrocities of capitalism made legible through his depiction of various labor markets occupied primarily by transient Filipino—and other racialized immigrant—communities.

Previous critics shed a great deal of light on Bulosan’s nuanced critique of American capital, but many of these same scholars struggle to reconcile this critique with what appears to be Bulosan’s final embrace of the nation. The question, then, remains:

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25 Bulosan breaks the novel up into four separate parts. The first part of the novel takes place entirely in the Philippines and therefore covers most of the first two decades of his life. The other three parts deal with Bulosan’s initial move to Seattle during the Depression, as well as his movements up and down the West Coast for work.
why does Bulosan detail a damning indictment of America only to announce his indelible
“faith” in the nation by the end of the novel? In order to reconcile these two seemingly
contradictory readings of the novel, I turn to the Frankfurt School scholar Ernst Bloch’s
elaborate conception of hope. Bloch insists, “[Hope] will not tolerate a dog’s life which
feels itself only passively thrown into What Is […] The work against anxiety about life
and the machinations of fear is that against its creators, who are for the most part easy to
identify […], and [hope] looks in the world itself for what can help the world” (3). If
Bulosan’s depiction of the nation highlights the injustices of What Is, then his optimistic
delineation of a future America lays out a blueprint for what Bloch calls the Not-Yet-
Conscious, the Not-Yet-Become. Bloch claims, “The Not-Yet-Conscious, Not-Yet-
Become, although it fulfils the meaning of all men and the horizon of all being, has not
even broken through as a word, let alone a concept” (6). The Not-Yet-Conscious inflicts
a longing and therefore a desire for transformation. It is for this reason that Bulosan’s
future exists only as a kind of trace within the novel itself. And thus Allos continually

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26 In the work of both Bulosan and Bloch, faith and hope are closely related. When
discussing Bloch, Gerard Raulet writes, “[O]ne witnesses in Bloch the retention of faith
which also requires its hermeneutics. Certainly, Bloch rejects the idea of a creator God,
just as he rejects the use that the churches make of Him. Still neither the critique of the
divine hypothesis nor that of the clerical institutions causes faith to disappear” (79). He
goes on, “Faith becomes, for Bloch, the historical energy of both knowledge and practice
as well as the basis and motive force of the historical process” (80). In Bloch’s work,
then, faith animates social transformation. Similarly, Augusto Fauni Espiritu outlines the
significance of the supernatural to Bulosan. Explaining a range of religious and spiritual
influences on Bulosan, Espiritu claims, “[S]cattered references to supernatural belief […]
implicate Bulosan in a larger Christian folk tradition” (66). He goes on, “Bulosan’s
involvement in the world of oral culture, animism, and folk spirituality foregrounds the
importance of religion” (72). Although Espiritu rarely mentions faith specifically, his
work makes it clear that Bulosan’s investment in the supernatural reveals a similar
investment in faith as well.
refers to a “bravery that was still nameless, and waiting to express itself” (109). A sense of open possibility, this futurity disrupts the traditional narrative arc of the bildungsroman proper, causing critics like Lisa Lowe to suggest that this text critiques the traditional bildungsroman. These temporal dislocations register the text’s uneasy relationship with traditional western literary forms and reveal the importance of Bloch’s hermeneutics to Bulosan’s narrative.

One of the primary theorists to bring Bloch’s work to the attention of American critics, Fredric Jameson, explains what he calls the “positive hermeneutics” of Bloch, which establish “some original, forgotten meaning […] a hermeneutic which offers renewed access to some essential source of life” (119). Bloch’s politicized depiction of hope and anticipation registers the significance of longing. In longing, the as yet unrealized potential for revolutionary change entrenches and develops. Jameson then notes that, according to Bloch, “[E]verything in the world becomes a […] manifestation of that primordial movement toward the future and toward ultimate identity with a transfigured world which is Utopia, and whose vital presence […] may always be detected […] by the instruments and apparatus of hope itself” (120). Bloch, who published his initial treatise on hope less than a decade after the publication of America Is in the Heart, theorized the politics of hope in order to make the radical potentiality of longing and anticipation legible to radical movements and Marxists more generally. For Bloch, then, the theoretical advantage of hope is that it can dialectically salvage what seems hopeless.
In this way, Bulosan’s paradoxical portrayal of America registers a slightly confusing temporal compression whereby Allos dialectically critiques America in its present and seemingly hopeless form (What Is) and simultaneously refuses to give up on the revolutionary potentiality of the nation’s future (Not-Yet-Conscious). In other words, Allos shifts rather easily—perhaps too easily—between two very different Americas. On the one hand, there is the present nation, where “it is a crime to be a Filipino in America.” On the other hand, there is a future nation, which Bulosan insists will be unrecognizable. After he parts ways with his brother, Allos says, “If I met him again, I would not be the same. He would not be, either. Our world was this one, but a new world was being born. We belonged to the old world of confusion; but in this other world—new, bright, promising—we would be unable to meet its demands” (Bulosan 324). Bulosan imagines an apocalyptic disjuncture between this “old world” of the present and a “new world” of the future. Richard Gunn, too, explains this disjuncture, “If we fail to recognize ourselves within [Bloch’s] speculation, this is because, as not-yet-existing, we are nothing (no thing) which can be seen and acknowledged once and for all” (9). Bulosan identifies this paradox as he contrasts this “old world of confusion” with a future world where their present selves cannot “meet its demands.” While realizing that the utopic demands of the future will significantly alter the present (beyond recognition), Bulosan takes an active role in bringing this new, revolutionary nation into being.

The sign of hope leads Bulosan to a dynamic and therefore transformative view of the present. As Bloch suggests, “Hope, superior to fear, is neither passive like the latter, nor locked into nothingness […] The work of this emotion requires people who throw
themselves actively into what is becoming, to which they themselves belong” (3). Hope, then, becomes a deeply political ontology for both Bloch and Bulosan, one in which the subject takes a strategic role in the world around them. In the words of Gunn, Bloch’s work offers an ontology of human existence: “This ontology can be summarized by saying that, for him, we are already, as human, what we are not-yet […] we exist ‘ecstatically’ in the literal sense of standing out ahead of ourselves towards an open future which we ourselves actively determine and towards which our hoping is addressed” (4, 5). It is Bloch’s reworking of Marx that provides the theoretical frame through which we can begin to understand Allos’s seemingly uneven political development.

Bulosan’s narrative appears to embody a paradox, one that Allos even acknowledges within the novel. Allos notes, “I began to wonder at the paradox of America. Jose’s tragedy was brought about by the railroad detective, yet he had done no harm […] yet in the hospital, among white people—Americans like those who had denied us—we had found refuge. Why was America so kind and so cruel” (Bulosan 147). Jose and Allos hitch a ride on a train before getting caught by “four detectives with blackjacks.” In one of the more brutal scenes of racialized violence, the detectives cut off one of Jose’s feet completely, while leaving “half of the other still hanging” (147). In this crucial moment, Allos wrestles with a dualistic and quasi-Manichean perspective of the nation. He recognizes what he calls both the kindness and cruelty of America. By the very end of the novel, however, Allos no longer considers resigning to a cruel and hopeless vision of the nation. For hopelessness, Bloch suggests, “is itself, in a temporal
and factual sense, the most insupportable thing, downright intolerable to human needs” (5). Instead, Allos appropriates the future in order to call for America’s “final fulfillment.” Allos does not passively embrace the future. On the contrary, he actively shapes what the national future will look like by building coalitions among the workers and developing ties with marginalized immigrants throughout the narrative.27

Drawing on this construction of the future, Bulosan’s narrator relies in part on an alternative understanding of history as well. The critic José Muñoz—who utilizes Bloch’s delineation of hope to rethink queer theory—writes, “[Q]ueerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine the future” (1). Though he insists, “The here and now is a prison house,” he simultaneously observes, “We must strive […] to think and feel a then and there” (1). Muñoz illuminates the incredible significance of hope in our often pessimistic and all too practical contemporary moment. In transposing this framework from a clearly productive queer studies field, however, I return Bloch’s theoretical construction of hope to a Marxist tradition in need of revitalization. Though I will be working more strictly within this particular tradition, I will utilize Muñoz’s articulation of what he calls “queer futurity” in order to be “attentive to the past for the purposes of critiquing the present” (18). Similarly, Bulosan draws the reader’s attention to certain moments in the present tense of the narrative whereby Allos, his friends, and even other Americans—like the hospital workers—enact and anticipate a better future. This complex portrayal of time relies on a “temporal calculus [that]

27 Over the course of the narrative, Allos joins the Committee for the Protection of Filipino Rights, the Filipino Workers Association, and various other labor-oriented groups.
perform[s] and utilize[s] the past and the future as armaments to combat the devastating logic of the world of the here and now” (Muñoz 12). This conception of time, of course, complicates both the formal trajectory of the novel and Allos’s often confusing feelings toward the world and, more specifically, the nation that surrounds him.

While the formal shape of the novel appears to match the European bildungsroman, Bulosan’s narrative—like Tsiang’s And China Has Hands—exceeds, complicates, and critiques this tradition. As Lisa Lowe notes, “to the degree that [America Is in the Heart] captures the complex, unsynthetic constitution of the immigrant subject between an already twice-colonized Philippine culture, on the one hand, and the pressure to conform to Anglo-American society, on the other, it troubles the closure and reconciliation of the bildungsroman form” (45). Indeed, Bulosan’s paradoxical representation of two very different Americas makes it difficult to extrapolate any easy reconciliation between Allos and the society around him. In his work, James Hardin outlines the prototypical bildungsroman. According to Hardin, the paradigmatic bildungsroman includes a “central figure who, after going out into the world and experiencing both defeats and triumphs, comes to a better understanding of self and to a generally affirmative view of the world” (qtd. in Foley 322). Still, Allos’s “affirmative view of the world” embraces a Not-Yet-Conscious future in the final pages of this novel. In the end, Allos’s closure is always already displaced by both a critique of the present and an anticipatory glance toward the future. Furthermore, the temporal calculus outlined by Muñoz resists any easy “development” narrative offered by the traditional bildungsroman.
Though we might tentatively call the narrative a kind of proletarian bildungsroman precisely because the novel “harnesses[s] the conventions of a quintessentially bourgeois genre, the bildungsroman, to serve left-wing political ends” (Foley 343), the class conscious development narrative incorporates a critique of racialization never fully present in Anglo American proletarian novels from the period.\textsuperscript{28} Perhaps Clara Weatherwax’s \textit{Marching, Marching!} (1935) comes closest, but this almost completely forgotten novel eventually devolves into a raceless—and suspiciously white—version of mass protest in the final pages.\textsuperscript{29} Moreover, Allos’s uneven development embodies an unusual temporal logic, which draws on both the past and future to critique What Is. Ultimately, then, Bulosan complicates any straightforward development narrative embodied in the typical bildungsroman. In this regard, Bulosan’s novel perhaps falls within—but also critiques—this formal category. This fact is not a revelation to scholars of Bulosan’s work. After all, Gabrielle Jose Gonzales aptly notes, “Bulosan’s novel deftly distinguishes the social forces that make it impossible for a

\textsuperscript{28} Barbara Foley would likely refer to the novel as a proletarian fictional autobiography and not a proletarian bildungsroman because the novel combines autobiographical elements, testimonial discourse, and fictional devices in order to construct a class conscious novel. However, because Lowe, Gabrielle Jose Gonzales, and others identify the novel as a kind of bildungsroman, I will occasionally refer to it as such. Ultimately, this distinction does not dramatically impact the outcome of my analysis, and Foley herself observes, “[proletarian fictional autobiographies] draw to a significant degree upon the model of the bildungsroman” (284). With that said, I will refer to the novel from here on out as a bildungsroman and a proletarian fictional autobiography because the formal properties of both tropes are central to the narrative.

\textsuperscript{29} Clara Weatherwax’s now neglected novel \textit{Marching, Marching!} won the New Masses prize for best novel in 1935. The proletarian collective novel, which experiments rather productively with collective narration and other innovative literary devices, includes a Filipino protagonist named Mario who dies at the hands of a local lumber mill. Allos references this novel in the latter half of \textit{America Is in the Heart} (Bulosan 238).
colonial-immigrant subject’s story to be told faithfully following a nineteenth-century bourgeois literary form [and] exposes the fact that the literary form itself is political” (109). Nonetheless, drawing on the novel’s alignment with and critique of this particular genre makes legible the radical politics of America Is in the Heart, and it reveals the way in which the theoretical frame of hope shapes the formal arc of the narrative.

Because Bulosan ends with an anticipatory vision of the nation, the novel appears to re-entrench a problematic nationalism in its closing paragraphs. While this prophecy marshals the language and moniker of the nation-state somewhat controversially, I will show the way in which Bulosan’s “America” is no longer recognizable as such. When writing about the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act, Mae M. Ngai observes, “Immigration restriction produced the alien as a new legal and political subject, whose inclusion within the nation was simultaneously a social reality and a legal impossibility—a subject barred from citizenship and without rights” (4; emphasis in original). She goes on, “The legal racialization of these ethnic groups’ national origin cast them as permanently foreign and unassimilable to the nation” (8). In response to what Ngai calls the new “social reality,” Bulosan employs the literary form and, more specifically, the revolutionary imaginary to strip the nation of the very nativist structures of meaning that undergird it. Bulosan utilizes the language of the nation and citizenship in order to deconstruct national boundaries and include subjects historically excluded by the racial and legal logics that animate legislation and immigration. The constitutive exclusion, which happens along racial and political lines, that makes this social reality possible comes undone as Bulosan refuses to conceive of America in these hegemonic terms. In other words, if the nation is
no longer defined by racial and national boundaries, then the constitutive elements of nationhood lose their meaning.

Finally, the novel critiques the national apparatus and the literary form of the bildungsroman in order to think, hope, and actively bring an alternative “nation” into being. As Lowe suggests, *America Is in the Heart* “does not represent an identification of the immigrant subject with the national fiction of inclusion so much as it contests that identification by inserting a heterogeneous ‘we’ [...] into the concept of polity” (47). Indeed, subversive communities and protest groups—this heterogeneous “we”—come together within the novel and give glimpses into what different identificatory strategies might look like in the absence of nativism. If the traditional bildungsroman reconciles the protagonist with the nation, then this unruly narrative envisions a radically different nation reconciled to a heterogeneous “we.” The very definition and parameters of the nation dissolve as Bulosan imagines a home for the proletarian outcasts that animate his narrative.

**U.S. Empire and the Making of a Proletarian Epistemology**

In the opening pages of the novel, Bulosan constructs a prelapsarian and therefore pastoral image of the family’s relation to the land. Leon’s return to the family farm epitomizes this relationship. Allos’s descriptions of farm work further reinforce this image: “We had crop rotation as an insurance against starvation, and the generosity of the soil was miraculous” (5). In the very beginning, then, the family depends on and literally gets life from the farmland that they have worked for generations. Martin Joseph Ponce
productively contrasts the “lyrical world of Bulosan’s imagined childhood” in the Philippines with the lack of “wholeness in the U.S. […] a […] scattering, dramatized in the dissolution of Allos’s family” (72). Ponce’s diasporic reading reveals the way in which this nostalgic construction of labor and family in the Philippines never coalesces in America. In this way, Allos’s journey to America accounts—at least in part—for the stunted form of this bildungsroman. That is, Hardin’s reconciliatory end never fully materializes because of Bulosan’s oppressed life in the U.S. In fact, it is the inchoate American empire that gradually encroaches on Allos’s idealized construction of his childhood and his family’s relationship to the land.

While Allos initially idealizes their life as farmers on the Filipino countryside, the corruption of the ruling elite in the wake of the Philippine American Wars eventually culminates in the family’s displacement. Slowly, his father’s relationship as a tenant farmer with those “few powerful Filipinos of foreign extraction squeezing a fat livelihood out of [the national government]” (23) begins to crumble, and these absentee landlords take all of the family’s land. Indeed, the fraudulent dealings of these landlords, whom America left in place after the war, led to his family’s crushing poverty. Allos notes, “Those who could no longer tolerate existing conditions adventured into the new land, for the opening of the United States to them was one of the gratifying provisions of the peace treaty that culminated in the Spanish-American War” (5). While Bulosan initially describes this “provision” as appealing to those Filipinos “who could no longer tolerate

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30 This lyrical world is also rooted in a proletarian epistemology, which I will explore in some detail later on in this chapter. Suffice it to say that these lyrical descriptions register Bulosan’s idealization of this epistemology.
existing conditions, the “opening of the United States” also filled a clear need for cheap labor. Indeed, the burgeoning U.S. empire exploited immigrant workers in order to meet the demands of a quickly expanding capitalist economy.

After moving, these workers would come to realize that life in the States was not what it appeared to be. It is for this reason that Allos refers to his time in the U.S. as “the sweeping years that later came to my life and pushed me into the unknown, the vital, negative years of hard work and bitter trials […] the crushing terror that filled my life in a land far away” (4, 5). Allos describes the racialized exploitation of workers throughout the narrative. When Allos’s brother Macario discovers work as a cook, for example, his employers insist, “‘You can hire these natives for almost nothing’ […] ‘They are only too glad to work for white folks’” (141). Bulosan’s descriptions of life in America refute any stereotypical narrative of progressive modernity, and thus Allos quickly realizes that American prosperity actually masks a deeply stratified and exploitative class system.

Bulosan also makes it clear that America’s fraught relationship with the Philippines ushers in a new era of colonization and empire. Wesling notes, “Education was a central promise offered by US officials looking to legitimate the occupation of the Philippines, so its importance in America allows us to explore the contradictions inherent in the project that President McKinley called one of ‘benevolent assimilation’” (64). She continues, “Education must be considered in terms of Bulosan’s implicit critique of US imperialism” (64). In his 1898 Benevolent Assimilation Proclamation, McKinley elucidates the broader project of American empire rather transparently. He insists, “it should be the earnest wish and paramount aim of the military administration to win the
confidence of the Philippines by assuring them in every possible way that full measure of individual rights and liberties [...] and by proving to them that the mission of the United States is one of benevolent assimilation.” Of course, the military administration belies the way in which this project took place under the constant threat of militaristic violence.

The Filipino’s liminal space within the American nation paves the way for what Christina Klein describes as a geopolitical imaginary of integration propagated by the U.S. The complicated racisms of American history are eventually enfolded within—and concealed beneath—a condescending project of geostrategic integration, economic networking, and politically motivated alliances. Though the Philippines represents a very specific anomaly because of its annexed status within the nation after the Philippine Wars, the political project—in many respects—offers a new model for the U.S.’s burgeoning empire, which can no longer subsist entirely on the exclusionary policies and blatant racisms of a previous century. Indeed, the growing need for cheap immigrant labor reveals an economy deeply invested in immigration, even while exclusionary policies suggested otherwise. The rhetoric of “benevolent assimilation,” then, emerges as a newly revamped grammar of colonization, one that hides imperial strategies under the guise of cooperation and supposed altruism.

Still, Bulosan’s novel makes the exploitative subtext of American empire legible in its depictions of the Filipino countryside. Allos observes, “We had free education, but the school was in Lingayen, the only high school in the large provenance of Pangasinan […] Going to school in Lingayen, in those predatory years, took plenty of money” (14). The supposedly free education costs a great deal of money for rural and often
impoverished Filipinos because of room and board, laundry, and travel. Moreover, the “education” served as one of the primary facilitators for colonization. Ponce observes, “[T]he institutionalization of English under U.S. colonialism in the Philippines created […] ethnolinguistic, regional and class divisions […] there would not exist over a century’s worth of Anglophone literature in the Philippines had Americans not recolonized the islands and its peoples and implemented English in the classroom” (18).

Drawing on the work of Benedict Anderson, both Ponce and Wesling establish the colonial context for what Allos describes as a “free education.” This education, however, only reinforced class divisions. Rather than serving the purposes of national integration, then, schools further fractured families and communities, which is evident throughout Bulosan’s narrative. When Allos and his family work hard to send his brother Macario to school, for example, the cost of this education contributes greatly to the family’s financial ruin.

In spite of constant financial turbulence, Allos receives a very different kind of education while inhabiting the “lyrical world” of his childhood and working with his father. Allos describes his brothers’ stories: “It was inspiring to sit with them, to hear them talk of other times and lands; and I knew that if there was one redeeming quality in our poverty, it was the boundless affinity for each other, this humanity that grew in each of us, as boundless as this green earth” (10). His family’s poverty entrrenches a certain understanding of the world around him, a network of relations and affection that binds a broader world of victims. This network travels across both temporal and spatial fields. Indeed, “the talk of other times and lands” revealed this “redeeming quality” to Allos.
Early on in the text, Allos’s brother Macario connects the plight of the Filipino peasants to the Israelites, who were held in captivity in Egypt in the Old Testament. Moreover, he connects the tragic plight of Filipino revolutionary Jose Rizal to Moses’s fight against oppression. In 1896, Spanish colonizers assassinated Rizal because of his resistance to Spanish imperialism. Connecting these two figures across continents and centuries, Macario enlists Rizal and Moses in a long history of resistance to social injustice and oppression. Allos is drawn to “men who had died for their persecuted peoples centuries ago” (46). And when recalling a late night of reading, Allos regrets that he “could not travel through history into other lands and times” any longer because of the darkness (46). In this way, a revolutionary imaginary begins to take shape within the text as Allos accounts for his oppressed existence across two nations.

Allos constantly conjoins his childhood experience in the Philippines with these other resistance movements and with peasant rebellions across other nations. Later on, while learning that his brother Luciano died of tuberculosis, Allos realizes, “Far away […] in the workers’ republic of Spain a civil war was going on that a democracy might live. I remembered all my years in the Philippines, my father fighting for his inherited land, my mother selling boggoong to the impoverished peasants” (56). Bulosan refuses to disaggregate these struggles. He grafts the embattled existence of the Spanish Republic, his father, and his mother onto a broader effort “to contribute something vital

31 Because Allos notes that he, too, was currently in a hospital, we can infer that Bulosan most likely learned of his brother Luciano’s death while he was battling tuberculosis in the States. In highlighting the Spanish Civil War, which also took place while tuberculosis immobilized Bulosan in a Los Angeles hospital for two years, the narrative implies that Luciano’s death took place during Bulosan’s own near-death encounter from 1936 to 1938.
to the world” (56, 57). And, again, their plight “gave [Allos] a strange courage and the vision of a better life,” one where he envisions that he “will be a writer and make all of you live again” (57). Allos compares and unites his parents’ struggle against the landlords and the fight of the Spanish Republic against the conservative General Francisco Franco and the nationalists. After connecting these struggles across national boundaries, Allos marshals the totalizing narrative of hope to redeem these causes. The revolutionary imaginary, then, connects the plight of the poor Filipino to the impoverished lives of people across space and time.

These transnational networks of sympathy are integral to the proletarian epistemology that Bulosan privileges within the latter half of the novel. Moreover, this epistemology accounts in part for the “lyrical world” of Allos’s childhood. When speaking of his father, for instance, Allos states, “[M]y father believed in the eternal goodness of man, and only once did he almost give up his faith […] Illiterate as he was, my father had an instinct for the truth. It was this inborn quality, common among peasants, that had kept

32 Although Marxist scholars draw a sharp distinction between the proletarian and the peasant, Allos’s initial existence in the Philippines as a peasant clearly informs his proletarianization in the U.S. Explaining this distinction, B.R. Roberts writes, “Peasants, farming a small amount of land directly with the aid of household labor and mainly for their own consumption, have been the enduring basis of agricultural production throughout the ages […] The proletarian […] work for wages with little or no control over the means of production” (354). He then goes on to suggest, “The shift in the balance of population from predominately peasant to predominantly proletarian is one of the major social changes of the modern era […] Proletarianization, it can be argued, is the most significant process in the making of the contemporary world: It is the heart of modern class formation” (354). The trajectory of Allos’s life reflects this shift. While initially a peasant in the Philippines, Allos becomes a wage laborer once he moves to the U.S. Nonetheless, Allos’s experience as a peasant in the rural countryside of the Philippines helps shape his emerging class consciousness and his eventual proletarianization in America.
him going in a country rapidly changing” (23). His father’s faith registers a particular way of confronting and knowing the world. First, a faithful orientation and indelible belief in the supposed “goodness of man” partakes in Bloch’s theoretical construction of hope. Indeed, this knowledge, which is “common among peasants” (23), kept him going, and thus it reveals a dynamic and active view of the present. Second, this epistemological stance refuses to renounce hope and give up on the transformative potential of their circumstances, even as the farming relations crumble around their family. Furthermore, Allos inscribes this lyrical world within a broader narrative of “the most pleasant period of my life. My father taught me to be kind to animals […] from him I had learned to deal with our caraboas as though they were human beings” (52). His father’s understanding of labor and the land revolutionize Allos’s relation to both the animals and the world that surround him. In this regard, Allos inherits this worldview from his father, brothers, and mother.

Later on, Allos aptly describes a revolution in the South, one that coalesces as a revolutionary articulation of hope in the midst of these deteriorating labor conditions. Allos makes it clear that “[t]hese sporadic revolts and uprisings unquestionably indicated the malignant cancer that was eating away the nation’s future security and negatively influenced the growth of the Philippines” (24). Drawing on the Marxist tradition, Allos utilizes the language of medicine to describe the corruption of the Filipino elite as a malignant cancer. This passage reveals one moment of many in which Allos filters memories of his childhood through the Marxist lens of his later years.
This proletarian epistemology allows Allos to retroactively transpose a Marxist tradition onto his father’s worldview. He salvages his father’s “instinct for the truth” in order to establish a narrative of class consciousness. In the following chapter, Allos remarks,

This family tragedy marked the beginning of my conscious life […] It was only long afterward in a land far away, long after these conflicts were conquered and forged as a weapon against another chaos that threatened to plunge me into despair and rootlessness, that the full significance of our tragedy burst into a flaming reality and drove me, suddenly and inevitably, into the struggle for the fulfillment of the redeeming qualities which I believed were inherent in me. (29)

This class conscious frame allows Allos to accurately interpret the plight of his family and make sense of his past. Moreover, this re-interpretation of the past fortifies Allos against the exploitative conditions of the U.S. Once again adopting the language of a Marxian vernacular in which the past embodies a “forged weapon,” Allos conjoins class consciousness with his father’s faith in humanity in order to orient himself toward the future, or—what he calls—the “fulfillment.” These redeeming qualities, then, drive Allos and prepare him for life in the States.

While this epistemology appears to descend through a problematically gendered, patrilineal line, Allos establishes “a rare and lovely understanding” with his mother, one that includes “the unmistakable cry for help between two suffering people” while they work to sell beans in the market (36, 37). For the most part, the narrative privileges homosocial bonds and certainly registers the influence of a proletarian literary tradition focused primarily on male labor, but Bulosan’s depiction of his mother lodges a trenchant critique of female labor and recognizes the influence of his mother on his own class conscious development. Through a postcolonial lens, critics like Rachel C. Lee and Viet
Thanh Nguyen examine the gender politics of this narrative in productive detail. Lee argues, “[W]omen do not appear as (laboring) Subjects in this ideal brotherhood but only as the symbol for the generative spirit in man as the erotic object at the heart of fraternal divisions” (42). Similarly, Nguyen suggests that Bulosan casts a “vision of America as a feminized embodied land that embraces Carlos” therefore imbuing him with a privileged masculinity (67).

Although the novel leans heavily on these gendered tropes, it also draws attention to the matrilineal line of labor through which Allos’s class consciousness descends. While working in the market with his mother, Allos learns a great deal: “[M]y mother was a patient and trusting woman, even when our profit for a day’s work was only twenty centavos, or ten cents, her interest in our business never diminished” (36). In fact, her labor is essential to the survival of the family. Allos goes on, “Like my father, she could not read or write, but her practical sense was sharper than most of those who had learned to read. Her common sense had kept our family going for many desperate years” (36). The novel, then, registers the gendered labor in Allos’s family, and it traces the way in which Allos’s experiences working with both his mother and father drive his development as a class conscious worker and writer.

This development forces the reader to wrestle with the autobiographical elements of the novel as well.33 Foley claims, “[T]he fictional autobiography is […] drawing

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33 These autobiographical elements have been a subject of critical controversy. Of course, the “fictional autobiography” blurs the lines between the two genres and allows Bulosan to play “fast and loose” with the facts. To that end, critics like Alquizolola attempt to distinguish between what actually happened to Bulosan and what may have been stories that Bulosan heard from other Filipino workers from the period.
sustenance not only from conventional modes of novelistic realism but also from testimonial discourses of the marginalized and oppressed” (320). The testimonial discourses, which this novel clearly draws on, forge a radical proletarian epistemology that the reader fastens onto Bulosan himself. In this regard, Bulosan, Ayako Ishigaki, and to a lesser extent Milton Murayama lean heavily on the autobiographical form and thus testimonial discourses. These novels share the tropes of other prototypical proletarian fictional autobiographies like Mike Gold’s *Jews Without Money* (1930), Agnes Smedley’s *Daughter of Earth* (1929), and Jack Conroy’s *The Disinherited* (1933). Nonetheless, Bulosan, Ishigaki, and Murayama employ a critique of immigrant labor that not only incorporates but also hinges on a critique of racialization and nativism. In this regard, these narratives are in conversation with but also different from the typical proletarian novel.

The narratives, then, employ testimonial discourse to underwrite the validity of their critique. Augusto Fauni Espiritu writes, “It was not until 1944 that this amalgam of childhood fantasy and American life became a ‘personal account’ hinged upon Bulosan as the narrator, part fictive, part real” (63). Yet, the clear parallels between Allos’s life and Bulosan’s lend weight to the authority of the narrative. In this regard, the proletarian epistemology is not simply a fictional construct, but rather an authoritative appeal to the reader that invites us to join in the text’s conclusions. As Foley observes, these “texts represent selves who articulate a world that is struggling to come into being” (320). In contrast to Tsiang’s novels, Bulosan and Ishigaki marshal a personal history in order to
compel the reader and imagine a better future.\textsuperscript{34} For this reason, both narratives conclude with a utopic vision of the future.

As I argue in the introduction, this future also runs against the grain of other Asian American autobiographies published around this time. In particular, second-generation Asian American autobiographical narratives from this period, which were among the most popular immigrant narratives, often imagine a future that somehow resolves the tensions and battles of American assimilation. Pardee Lowe’s \textit{Father and Glorious Descendant}, Jade Snow Wong’s \textit{Fifth Chinese Daughter}, and Monica Sone’s \textit{Nisei Daughter} grapple with the pressures of assimilation and generational division, without offering alternative visions of the nation. As Elaine Kim suggests, these narratives are “records of sacrifice, self-negation, and the repression of anger and outrage” (82). While Kim rightly reads these narratives as more than simple, one-dimensional trajectories of assimilation, these texts form a very different kind of autobiographical form, one that seeks to create some middle ground between a diasporic heritage and American demands for assimilation.

For this very reason, Sone’s protagonist, Kazuko, teaches her friend George the value and significance of citizenship. While this narrative articulates a progressive critique of Japanese American internment, it simultaneously articulates a more covert critique of Asian exclusion. When talking with Kazuko, George states, “You, who had never been allowed citizenship, showed me its value [...] That I retained my faith and

\textsuperscript{34} Although Murayama’s narrative includes certain autobiographical elements, it does not imagine a “better future” in the same way that these other texts do. I will explore and explain this crucial difference in some detail in chapter four.
emerged a loyal American citizen, I owe to your understanding” (235). Sone’s protagonist becomes the immigrant par excellence, revealing the ironic plight of immigrant-subjects who attempt to earn citizenship in the face of anti-Asian racism and legislation. If Kazuko reveals the true meaning and final value of America to George by being the “best” model of citizenship, however, Allos rejects this model of citizenship altogether. After all, *America Is in the Heart* relies on a transformative vision of America, one that reveals the fissures and power dynamics that structure the administrative logics of citizenship without bending to its modes of reason.

In line with this vision, Bulosan’s initial depiction of the Philippines elucidates America’s role as an emergent empire in the beginning of the twentieth century. And though Allos invests a great deal in the future of America, he also insists when leaving the Philippines: “I was determined to leave that environment and all its crushing forces […] I would go back someday to understand what it meant to be born of the peasantry. I would go back because I was a part of it, because I could not really escape” (62). In this regard, the narrative rejects the basic logics of assimilation, and it foregrounds the interpenetrating relationship between the Philippines and the U.S. in the wake of the Spanish American and Philippine American Wars. The history and future of each are inevitably connected to newly found logics of annexation, colonization, and “benevolent assimilation.” Furthermore, Allos desires to “go back to [the Philippines to] give significance to all that was starved and thwarted in [his] life” (62). This desire to go back to the Philippines complicates the linear narrative of the traditional immigrant bildungsroman. Rather than fully assimilate and integrate into the U.S. nation, Allos
desires to return to the homeland. Similarly, Bulosan lays the groundwork for Allos’s proletarian epistemology in the rural countryside of the Philippines, the lyrical world of his father, and the suffering of his mother, and this foundation prepares him for the “crushing terror” that will characterize his life in the U.S. These initial years pave the way for his class conscious development, and they provide him with the figurative optics to see suffering across nations and even continents. His brothers’ stories and his father’s worldview portend Allos’s transformative vision of America. This proletarian epistemology rivets the logic of hope, formats Allos’s revolutionary purview, and allows Bulosan to wield a critique of American empire that—as Kandice Chuh states—“imagines otherwise” in order to prophesy an alternative future.

**Beyond What Is: Anticipating the Not-Yet-Become**

Allos struggles to find work and community as soon as he sets foot on American land. The very day after his arrival in Seattle, Allos and his friends are “sold for five dollars each to work in fish canneries in Alaska” (101). Despite his desire to “find a home in this new land,” Allos quickly learns that this new country, which he initially describes as “native and promising […] like coming home after a long voyage” (99), comprises a new kind of oppression. Allos notes, “It was the beginning of my life in America, the beginning of a long flight that carried me down the years, fighting desperately to find peace” (101). Ultimately, this “long flight” takes Allos away from this imaginary construction of a native and promising home in the States. After all, this construction threatens to place Allos within a narrative of assimilation and longing for American
acceptance from the family that now defines his new “home.” Instead, this long flight leads Allos to alternative narratives of belonging and communal resistance outside the figurative confines of this new nation.

His work in Alaska links him to other racialized Filipino workers, who then teach Allos about labor exploitation and the significance of unions. He meets Conrado Torres, for instance, “who was fired with a dream to unionize the cannery workers” (101). These fictional constructs stand in for real life labor leaders like Mensalvas and Mangaoang, figures who—along with Bulosan—galvanized mass Filipino labor movements on the West Coast during the Depression and after. Shortly after moving to Seattle, then, Bulosan began to organize. Carey McWilliams notes, “[Bulosan] and my friend Chris Mensalvas […] were caught up in the effort […] to organize independent unions. The campaign […] was a reaction against the consequences of the depression—wage cuts, unemployment, vile working conditions […] against the drive to exclude Filipinos which was in full swing from 1930 to 1934” (xvi). These efforts coalesced in a variety of important resistance movements and labor organizations. McWilliams continues, “This independent organizing effort, 1934 to 1938, culminated in the formation of a new international union (CIO) known as UCAPAWA—United Cannery and Packing House Workers of America—which had been spearheaded by the organization of fish cannery workers in Seattle and packing house workers in Salinas, California” (xvi). He also notes that these efforts eventually led to the International Longshoremen and Warehousemen’s Union in Seattle (xvi). Unsurprisingly, then, the story of Allos overlaps with Bulosan’s own efforts to organize during the Depression.
Allos’s class conscious development takes place gradually over the course of the narrative. Recalling an important meeting, Allos notes, “The surreptitious meeting at a cannery […] was the beginning of a friendship that grew simultaneously with the growth of the trade union movement and progressive ideas among the Filipinos” (101). This meeting lays the groundwork for various Filipino labor unions and important relationships. The “instinct for the truth” that Allos saw in his father—an instinct that was “common among peasants”—binds these friendships and undergirds these movements. These efforts to unionize, however, were met by “henchmen in every cannery who saw to it that every attempt at unionization was frustrated and the instigators of the idea punished” (141). If the rural peasants bear the nascent seeds of revolutionary potential, then the Depression era urban workers bring these seeds to fruition as they begin to utilize this instinct for truth to form coalitions in opposition to capital. In this way, shared histories of oppression enable these relationships and bind these communities.

These coalitions develop in response to the racializing technologies of the West Coast. Allos states, “[W]e were drawn together because the white people were suspicious of us” (107). If a dually pronged (and symbiotic) narrative of racial and national belonging entrenches suspicions among the “white” community, then these racialized workers develop communities outside of these narratives. Still, Allos makes it clear that the “white” community refuses to acknowledge them precisely because they threaten to destabilize racial and national hierarchies. Allos explains, “Years before […] Two Filipino apple pickers had been found murdered on the road to Sunnyside […] instigated by orchardists who feared the unity of white and Filipino workers […] A small farmer
who had tried to protect Filipino workers had his house burned” (107). These examples of racialized violence pervade the rest of the narrative and frame a broader critique of “whiteness.” These racializing technologies create an oppressive present, the awful conditions that characterize What Is, which Bulosan contrasts with his utopic vision of a future America.

In order to combat the restrictive conditions of this present, Bulosan cultivates relationships with exploited workers and racialized victims. He says, “I knew that I could never be unkind to any Filipino, because Julio had left me a token of friendship, a seed of trust, that ached to grow to fruition as I rushed toward another city” (112). Again, Allos refers to a “seed of trust,” one that recalls his father’s figuratively and problematically gendered “faith in man,” that will grow and format other relationships. Though he inscribes this trust in a fellow Filipino man, Allos also develops a relationship with a young African American woman while traveling in a boxcar on a freight train. After a man rapes her in the dark and knocks Allos unconscious for trying to intervene, Allos begins to form a brief friendship with her. This scene of racialized violence creates a common bond between the woman and Allos. He states, “I felt there was a bond between us, a bond of fear and a common loneliness” (115). Her existence within the narrative—echoes Allos’s relationship with his mother—and, again, complicates Rachel C. Lee’s claim that “the cross-racial, egalitarian brotherhood (of labor) is secured by the objectification of women” (37), if only slightly. That is, these women do not dominate the narrative, but by making their victimized existence legible, Bulosan acknowledges a violent subtext to this “brotherhood.” In fact, Allos highlights the tragic conditions of
these women. More importantly for the purposes of this project, however, these relationships and affections develop from broader narratives of victimization (rather than narratives of racial or national belonging). The exploitative present creates relationalities of resistance and alterity, relationalities that develop in opposition to nativist desire.

These narratives of victimization, however, create two different kinds of characters within Bulosan’s novel. Allos’s brother Amado, for instance, loses hope and thus America “changes” him. Amado tells Allos, “‘Life is tough, Carlos,’ […] ‘I had a good job, but the Depression came. I had to do something. I had to live’” (124). Because of the current oppression constituted by What Is, Amado retreats into a life of apparent hopelessness. He joins the “bootleg racket” and nearly robs Allos during their first encounter. And although he recants after realizing that his “mark” is in fact Allos, Allos insists that his brother has changed. Amado comes to represent Karl Marx’s figure of the lumpenproletariat: an unorganized member of the lower classes disengaged from revolutionary elements and involved in petty crime. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), Marx utilizes this figure to legitimate class conscious revolutionaries in contrast to the violent morass of people who were a part of Louis Napoleon’s coup d’état. The lumpenproletariat, then, is a person without hope. In this regard, Amado serves as an important foil within the novel, a character trapped in what Bloch calls “the nothingness of hopelessness.” Though he sympathizes with his brother’s plight, Allos refuses to follow in his footsteps. Moreover, Allos contextualizes his brother’s crime within the broader conditions of American capitalism. Thus, he refuses to individualize his brother’s criminal existence as aberrant. On the contrary, Amado’s hopeless state
articulates the current position of racialized immigrants within the economic conditions of American empire.

After diagnosing the state of his brother, however, Allos utilizes his father’s worldview to theorize hope as a politically resistant alternative for combating the apparent hopelessness of What Is. As a result, he proclaims, “‘Please, God, don’t change me in America!’” (126). Allos rejects Amado’s trajectory and offers a different response to the present exploitation. His other brother Macario later comes to embody this divergent response as well. Initially, however, Macario appears to be on the precipice of hopelessness. Allos explains, “I found my brother Macario in a strange world. I could stand the poverty and hunger, but this desperate cynicism disturbed me. Were these Filipinos revolting against American society in this debased form? Was there no hope for them?” (132). Although the impoverished state of his brother’s condition seems to sadden Allos, ultimately, it is the “desperate cynicism” that upsets him precisely because it threatens to vanquish all hope. In these relatively early moments in the novel, Allos traces the damning consequences of a life without hope in these racialized immigrant communities. Indeed, hopelessness and division constantly threaten to weaken ties and dissolve potential protest communities and worker relations.

For these reasons, Allos highlights the way in which racialization divides the oppressed and galvanizes the white community. He observes, “Hundreds of Filipinos were arriving […] Japanese workers were also arriving […] I did not discover until some years afterward that this tactic was the only way in which the farmers could forestall any possible alliance between the Filipinos and the Japanese” (146). The farmers house
various ethnic groups in different locations in order to fracture these groups and disallow any sort of united protest. The divisive tactics of these farmers wear on potential networks of affection and his father’s faith in man that Bulosan inherently grafts onto the “common peasant.” In other words, if histories of oppression bring peasants and proletariat together in communities of resistance, then racialization combines with economic scarcity to employ wedges and split these communities. Shortly thereafter, Allos notes, “I understood it to be a racial issue, because everywhere I went I saw white men attacking Filipinos” (146). With the scarcity of jobs and economic desperation that characterized the Depression in the States, racialization becomes a divisive lever bearing down on various immigrant communities fighting for a limited amount of jobs.

Moreover, it functions to unite the white community around racist violence. As Colleen Lye argues, “The […] crescendos of nativism and labor repression […] following the First World War […] suggests more than an analogy between red-baiting and yellow perilism. As tactical instruments of class domination, they were historically coincident and politically coterminous” (129). While her passage refers more specifically to Japanese tenant farmers on the West Coast, the broader implications of her argument reveal the way in which class exploitation relies on and further complicates racialization, especially during the period following the First World War. In this light, Bulosan exposes the political logics of nativism that break strikes throughout the novel. For instance, when the Lompoc farmers organize a strike in California, rumors of communist elements cause division among the laborers and eventually break the strike. Allos notes, “[A] newspaper reporter […] reported that the strike was inspired by Communists. The next day […]
some of the townspeople joined with Mexican and Japanese laborers in the field” (200). Unwilling to identify with a Communist-led strike, many of the strikers go back to work and thereby end the protest.

As these instruments of class domination bear down on his life in America, Bulosan’s narrator struggles to comprehend and disentangle the elements of labor exploitation, national identification, and blatant racism. Allos says, “It was not easy to understand why the Filipinos were brutal yet tender, nor was it easy to believe they had been made this way by the reality of America. I still lacked the knowledge to synthesize […] only when I had become immune […] was [I] able to project myself out of it” (152). Though his class conscious development is gradual, Allos eventually processes his experiences and the present reality of America, figuratively projecting himself out of these conditions. This passage resonates with Bloch’s anticipatory vision of the future in which the revolutionary must imagine a then and there in order to critique the here and now. Bloch writes, “Hope, the expectant counter-emotion against anxiety and fear, is therefore the most human of all mental feelings and only accessible to men, and it also refers to the furthest and brightest horizon” (75; emphasis in original). Hope, then, becomes the lens through which Allos can envision an alternative to his present conditions and thus the “furthest and brightest horizon.”

From friends like Jose, Pascual, and his brother Macario, Allos resurrects a class conscious vision of hope. Indeed, they start a journal with the express purpose of
manifesting hope in the workers that surround them. Pascual tells Allos: “‘It is for the workers that we must write’ […] ‘We must interpret their hopes as a people desiring the fullest fulfillment of their potentialities. We must be strong of voice, objective of criticism, protest and challenge’” (187). Allos utilizes this dialogue to theorize hope as a politically active device of radical protest. Moreover, Allos appropriates the future by foretelling this “fulfillment.” Later on, Allos utilizes Macario to install this vision. To Allos, Macario insists, “‘We must advocate democratic ideas and fight all forces that would abort our culture. This is the greatest responsibility of literature: to find in our struggle that which has a future […] We must destroy that which is dying, because it does not die by itself’” (188). In these passages, Allos imagines a future pregnant with hope, potential, and inevitable fulfillment. Indeed, literature functions primarily as a catalyst for this future. Furthermore, the destruction of “that which is dying” registers Allos’s outright rejection of both hopelessness and the exploitative conditions of his present life in the States.

Allos even refuses to recognize America in its present context. As Muñoz suggests, “The present must be known in relation to the alternative temporal and spatial maps provided by a perception of past and future affective worlds” (27). Allos refracts the present through these alternative maps in order to reorganize the nation as a conceptual category. In fact, Macario states, “America is not a land of one race or one
class of men. We are all Americans that have toiled and suffered and known oppression and defeat, from the first Indian that offered peace in Manhattan to the last Filipino pea pickers” (189). Refuting narratives of national belonging, which restrict native access to white capitalist males of the middle and upper classes as a result of various legislative efforts and cultural constraints, Bulosan claims the nation for this community of racialized (and nationally illegible) subjects. In the wake of the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, Bulosan defies and critiques nativist desire, a desire that—as I have tried to show—linked America directly to both “one race and one class.” Thus, Macario’s proclamation blatantly undermines this desire and constitutes a radical attempt to reimagine the country.

In their conversation, Macario and Allos also undo the geographical cartography of the U.S. and thereby erode the imaginary construction of a national space. Macario insists, “America is not bound by geographical latitudes. America is not merely a land or an institution. America Is in the Hearts of men […] America is a prophecy of a new society of men: of a system that knows no sorrow or strife or suffering” (189). Macario challenges the very tenets of what Benedict Anderson would call the “imagined community” of Depression era America. Anderson writes, “[T]he nation […] is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (6). He goes on to note, “the very idea of ‘nation’ is now nested firmly in virtually all print-languages; and nation-ness is virtually inseparable from political consciousness” (137). Macario, however, indicts both the inherent limits and sovereignty of this community. He revamps the very grammar of this political consciousness. As a result,
Macario radically transforms the constitutive elements of this community. He critiques current constructions of native belonging in order to orient America toward the Not-Yet-Become, the brightest and furthest horizon.

Citizenship, then, becomes an unruly category fit for immigrants, racialized subjects, and other victims of American empire in this new vision of the nation. Macario insists, “‘America is also the nameless foreigner, the homeless refugee, the hungry boy begging for a job and the black body dangling on a tree. America is the illiterate immigrant who is ashamed that the world of books and intellectual opportunities is closed to him’ (189). The victims of exclusionist policy, economic exploitation, and racialized violence now make up the national community in this dramatic revision of the nation-state. These shared histories of oppression, which bind the racialized immigrant community throughout the narrative, become the criterion for figurative citizenship.

Macario continues, “We are all that nameless foreigner, that homeless refugee, that hungry boy […] native born or alien, educated or illiterate—We are America!” (189). In this radical appropriation of the nation, Macario assumes citizenship and national belonging without bending to the logics of the nation-state. Instead of assimilating to the restrictive conditions of citizenship, he redefines the national community.

Macario utilizes this moment to call for the final fulfillment, a new world, and a revolution. He states, “The old world is dying, but a new world is being born. It generates inspiration from the chaos that beats upon us all” (189). By anticipating a new world, Allos initiates the second half of the novel in which he will constantly allude to and even attempt to usher in this new world. After all, he begins “Part Three” with the words: “The
old world is dying” (193). Although he references this world and its final fulfillment in the first half of the narrative, the latter half comprises a trajectory structured more prominently by this shift into a Not-Yet-Become. Bloch writes, “[R]eal venturing beyond never goes into the mere vacuum of an In-Front-of-Us […] Instead, it grasps the New as something that is mediated in what exists and is in motion, although to be revealed the New demands the most extreme effort of the will” (4). In this way, the final pages of the novel articulate a rather jarring effort of the will to install this fulfillment into the present tense of the narrative. While this effort perhaps rings hollow with a critical audience all too familiar with nationalist logics that conceal the violent subtext of America underneath a utopic veneer of democratic rhetoric, Allos renders this violent subtext legible throughout the narrative. Thus, this ending constitutes an attempt to transform the present, an attempt forged in the violent chaos that defines the narrative’s present tense.

According to Allos, this transformative vision begins with the labor movement. He speaks of “[a] new generation […] re-invigorated with new social attitudes. The labor movement was a paramount issue […] Listening and watching attentively, I knew that it was the dawn of a new morning” (194). This “new generation” invokes Bloch’s hopeful future. The “new,” then, stands in for the transformative potential of this future. After coming into contact with other racialized workers in the labor movement, Allos realizes that this new dawn is already percolating within the workers of these ethnic-labor markets. He goes on, “I did not have to wait for the birth of a new world, because what I had been told to fight for was here with its brilliant promises. I knew that the most forlorn man, in those rootless years, was he who knew that love was growing inside him but had
no object on which to bestow it” (194). Again, Allos rejects the passive stance of waiting. Instead, he insists on the revolutionary potentiality of the present. Moreover, the forlorn worker—who has the inherent faith in man and potentiality of his father and Julio—already has the capacity to become a revolutionary, the seed of trust found in every peasant. Bloch calls this potentiality “revolutionary interest,” an “interest that always begins with hunger” (75). For Bloch, this interest “begins when the body-ego […] becom[ing] rebellious […] seeks to change the situation,” and eventually says, “No to the bad situation which exists […] Yes to the better life that hovers ahead” (75). Bulosan traces this interest in the forlorn worker, the ethnic-labor markets, and the “rootless” immigrants. Indeed, each worker and community harnesses this revolutionary potential.

While finding this potentiality in the working community, Allos also locates hope in other relationships in America as well. In Eileen, for example, Allos recognizes “the America [that he] had wanted to find in those frantic days of fear and flight, in those acute hours of hunger and loneliness. This America was human, good, real” (235; emphasis in original). These networks of affection and relational bonds will format the new America. In these moments, Allos’s friendships offer a brief glimpse into the future. His relationship with Mary also foreshadows this future, and toward the end of the novel, Allos acknowledges, “I could not sleep. It was the same life all over again. None of us was employed. But we were together, and out of this fraternity something binding might come to give us some sort of foothold in America” (300). These relationships register the only potential hope in America. Otherwise, Allos realizes that a life of perpetual loneliness, exploitation, and oppression is inevitable.
In the final chapters, a multiethnic community of cannery workers embodies this transformative coalition for Allos. Indeed, racialized workers come together. Describing a meeting, Allos notes, “Nick was trying a new territory […] One night he invited me […] and in the living room, discussing in whispers, were several cannery workers: Japanese, Mexicans, Filipinos, and white Americans. The woman of the house, a big Yugoslav, was possessed of a dynamic personality” (310). This meeting reminds Allos of “something growing inside […] There was the same thing in each of them […] their common faith in the working man” (310, 311). In this way, Allos reimagines the country as a land of displaced immigrants. He goes on, “We who came to the United States are Americans too. All of us were immigrants—all the way down the line. We are Americans all who have toiled for this land” (312). This new found hope in a nation of immigrants anticipates the final pages in which Allos engages in a prophetic vision of American utopia.

Before leaving for World War II, Macario tells Allos: “I think this is really the meaning of life: the extension of little things into the future so that they might be useful to other people” (323). Again, the future—the brightest and furthest horizon—becomes the ultimate determinate of meaning. As Bloch writes, “[M]an is essentially determined by the future” (5). Jameson later calls this phenomenon “the ontological pull of the future” (129). Anticipating his brother’s final depiction of America, then, Macario insists that each of them must actively engage their present conditions in a way that both anticipates and ushers in the future.
As he attempts to live out his brother’s mandate, Allos seems to inhabit a temporally liminal space poised between a dying past and a potential future. Nonetheless, Allos cannot fully seem to inhabit either. Allos says, “Our world was this one, but a new one was being born. We belonged to the old world of confusion, but in this other world—new, bright, promising—we would be unable to meet its demands” (324). Again, this paradoxical passage refers to the radical disjuncture between the oppressive What Is and the revolutionary future that he envisions. The entire narrative reveals the way in which this old world estranges, exploits, and exiles Allos. For this reason, Allos moves up and down the West Coast in search of work and community. Allos is then “filled with a great loneliness” (325). This loneliness follows Allos’s parting words with his brother. The next morning, however, Allos’s prophetic vision of the nation appears to coalesce into reality.

In the final pages, Allos’s America transforms into the utopic space that he expected years ago when he first arrived in Seattle. After connecting the church bells of America to the bells back home in Binalonan, Allos says, “I glanced out the window again to look at the broad land I had dreamed so much about, only to discover with astonishment that the American earth was like a huge heart unfolding warmly to receive me” (326). In this instant, America, which he initially characterizes as the “crushing terror” that filled his life, metamorphoses into a radically new category of figurative acceptance. Like a vision that unfolds before him, the country becomes an image of transformative kindness. The “seed of trust” initially planted by his father and Julio grows inside of him and—Allos notes—“spread through my being, warming me with its
glowing reality” (326). This reality springs from “the sacrifices and loneliness of […] friends […] brothers in America and […] family in the Philippines” (326). Histories of oppression culminate in this final attempt to make this transformative vision a reality.

In this regard, the formal tenets of the bildungsroman allow Bulosan to imagine an ending in which Allos finally reconciles with his family and feels at home in this nation. This reconciliation, however, stems from a trenchant critique of the nation in its current formation. The citizen subjects of Allos’s America are the very victims cast out by a nation-state constituted by technologies of racialization, class exploitation, and empire. Once he revamps the criterion for citizenship and national community, Bulosan becomes able to write an ending that imagines an alternative then and there to the oppressive here and now. In the midst of his final revision of America, Allos describes an ambiguous unnamed potential growing from within, one that is “something that grew out of the sacrifices and loneliness […] something that grew out of our desire to know America […] to contribute something toward her final fulfillment. I knew that no man could destroy my faith in America that had sprung from all our hopes and aspirations, ever” (327). By grounding a proletarian epistemology in this philosophy of hope, Allos reconfigures the present as ripe for revolution and therefore transformation. Indeed, it is the very hopes and aspirations of racialized immigrants and workers across time that charge the present with this politically subversive potentiality. Bulosan draws on what Bloch calls “the power of anticipation […] with its open space and its object which is to be realized and which realizes itself forwards” (157). For this reason, these final pages reject compromise and assimilatist strategies. Instead, Bulosan utilizes these final
moments to envision a radically different and totally Other America, one always already rooted in the unwritten histories and unlikely relationalities of racialized workers and immigrant communities across time.

**Revolutionary Futurity**

Bulosan’s ending, then, ruptures What Is in order to imagine the Not-Yet-Become into being. If Jameson—drawing on the work of Thomas Müntzer—calls Bloch a “theologian of the revolution” (117), Allos, too, appears to draw on a connection between Judeo-Christian theology and revolution. In some respects, the ending resembles the prophetic tradition in which prophets utilize lyrical language to envision an apocalyptic future. Nonetheless, Allos’s forecast of a revolutionary future articulates a Marxist teleological history in which utopia marks the end of History, the furthest and brightest horizon. In these respects, both Bloch and Bulosan theorize hope as a crucial heuristic for revolutionary change. After all, Macario calls America “a prophecy of a new society of men: of a system that knows no sorrow or strife or suffering” (189). By drawing on the prophetic tradition, Bulosan—like Bloch—traces the seeds of this future in the past and present in order to bridge the gap between an oppressive here and now and a utopic then and there.

In the wake of World War II, Bloch and Bulosan reject the compromising tactics of post-war conservatism. *America Is in the Heart* is perhaps the most radical Asian American novel from the period precisely because it envisions an alternative trajectory for America, one that relies on the ontological pull of the future to envision a
revolutionary transformation in the national community. Soon after this novel was published, the Taft-Hartley bill would register a major blow to radical organizations across the country, the McCarran Act would target communists outright for deportation, and the Cold War would further divide radical groups. These conservative trends would come to define the decades following the war, but in contrast, Bulosan’s narrator inhabits—even if only momentarily in the closing pages of the novel—an alternative future unmoored by class and racial hierarchies.

Bulosan and Bloch articulate separate but—as I have tried to show—related logics of hope in the midst of a nation dominated by practical concerns and post-war pragmatism. Bloch argues, “The obsession with what is better remains, even when what is better has been prevented for so long” (42). Refusing to foreclose on the revolutionary elements of the previous decade, Bulosan continues to dwell on what is better. Indeed, this text can be read as a chronicle of Depression era revolutionary activity, which threatened to be erased altogether in the thick of the Cold War. This chronicle archives the revolutionary potential and politicized longing of the previous decade. Bloch suggests, “[W]here there is the imagined idea of something better, ultimately perhaps perfect, wishing takes place, possibly impatient, demanding wishing” (46). Throughout Bulosan’s novel, Allos imagines something better, an unseen future that provokes his impatience and causes constant longing. Bulosan traces the significance of a yet unformed and undecided future. Jameson claims that Bloch corrects “the lack of attention given the future as such, as though there were something essentially frivolous in a consideration of that which does not yet exist” (125). Bulosan, too, draws our attention to
the ontological pull of the future and its radical significance to social protest and radical movements. If we fail to recognize the significance of this ontological pull, then we threaten to “lose the very possibility of imagining a future which might be radically and constitutionally other” (Jameson 127; emphasis in original). In a post-war era that threatens to foreclose on this possibility, Bulosan reveals the damning consequences of this foreclosure in the hopeless life of Amado.

While drawing attention to the philosophical significance of a yet undetermined future, then, Bulosan utilizes Allos’s life in order to excavate an anticipatory logic uniquely equipped to salvage that which seems hopeless. In the beginning of the narrative, America itself seems entirely hopeless because of the “crushing terror” that fills Allos’s life. Nonetheless, hope transforms the constitutive technologies of the nation-state. The exclusionary rhetoric and blatant racism, which constitutes the American community in Allos’s present context, comes undone as this new America belongs entirely to immigrants, victims of racialized violence, and the jobless. Elaine Kim rightly calls the narrative a “testament of one who longed to become part of America” (57), but in this very longing, Bulosan also transforms the nation into something no longer recognizable. Directly opposed to assimilationist strategies and the ramifications of nativist desire, Bulosan literally rewrites America in these final pages.

Like Tsiang before him, Bulosan takes up Li’s construction of the Asian American as a dually pronged critique of the nation. Indeed, Allos’s very existence constitutes a “critique of the national community and proposes an alternative reconstruction” (Li 12). In refusing to bend to the logics of nativism, Allos launches a
damning indictment of interwar nativism and marshals a totally new construction of America. This novel fully realizes Lowe’s claim that “Asian American culture is the site of more than critical negation of the U.S. nation; it is a site that shifts and marks alternatives to the national terrain by occupying other spaces, imagining different narratives and critical historiographies, and enacting practices that give rise to […] new ways of questioning the government of human life by the nation state” (29). The novel enacts this critical negation and critiques the formal tenets of the European bildungsroman. After all, the conciliating measures of a traditional bildungsroman only function to imagine an alternative future in this novel, one in which Allos can finally fully inhabit the nation: not as a contradiction or a critique, but as a recognizable member of a much broader community. In other words, Allos can only reconcile and find closure in a radically reimagined future in which alterity and Otherness now define the very nation that established these identificatory technologies in the first place.
Chapter 3: “The Foundation of Our House”: Eccentric Women and the Triumphant Spring in Ayako Ishigaki’s Restless Wave

But I am not traveling alone, searching for a dream in darkness. Around me there are many people moving in a single tide, their warm hands clasping mine. And I know the time will come when the voice of my people, like silent buds growing unseen under snow, will burst forth gloriously, in triumphant, unconquerable spring.

Ayako Ishigaki, Restless Wave (1940)

Three years before Bulosan stepped onto the shores of Seattle, the activist and groundbreaking feminist Ayako Ishigaki moved to Washington D.C. with her sister and her sister’s diplomat husband. In 1926, the same immigration restrictions that nearly led to Tsiang’s deportation dramatically limited the entry of Japanese travelers. Nonetheless, while accompanying a diplomat, Ishigaki could gain entry into the U.S. and stay for a prolonged period of time. Initially, she lived a very different life than Bulosan, who was quickly sold into menial labor in the Alaskan canneries. Raised among the Japanese elite, Ishigaki began her life in a traditional and fairly conservative home and enjoyed the comforts of relative wealth. This comfortable life continued in Washington D.C. because of her brother-in-law’s privileged position within the government. However, she eventually moved to New York City, where she came to know the life of a displaced proletarian. This impoverished life, which she only briefly glimpsed in others during her childhood in Japan, characterized most of her time in Manhattan. It instilled a unique
radical perspective in Ishigaki, one that shaped her life as both an activist and writer long before moving back to Japan in 1951.

Restless Wave: My Life in Two Worlds (1940) is a narrative that recounts much of Ishigaki’s life in Japan and the U.S. Although the text resembles a “memoir,” Yi Chun Tricia Lin and Greg Robinson note, “Ishigaki herself referred to the book as a ‘novelistic semi-autobiographical text’” (254). Ishigaki’s rather ambiguous description of the text foregrounds many of the formal tensions that animate this narrative. Her unique mixture of “novelistic” and “autobiographical” elements allows her to create a hybrid model of literature. Like Bulosan, then, Ishigaki employs a fictional narrator, Haru Matsui, who further enables her to blur these formal boundaries between fiction and nonfiction. Ultimately, I argue that this formal indeterminacy explains the text’s complicated relationship with proletarian and Asian American literary genres from the 1930s and

36 I place quotes around memoir because I will refer to Restless Wave more strategically as a fictional autobiography or Ishigaki’s preferred description, “novelistic semi-autobiographical text.” The text troubles any simplistic understanding of the narrative as a straightforward memoir by intermixing autobiography and fiction. I use the term “memoir” because it is on the cover of the 2004 print of the book. I also want to undermine assumptions that often accompany reading practices associated with the genre. With that said, in any further usage, I will exclude quotes assuming my position on the term is clear. For a more straightforward autobiography, Robinson and Lin note that “[Ishigaki’s] 1987 memoir Waga ai ni hana miteri (I saw the flower on the tree of life) present[s] a franker and more complete record of these years” (254).

37 Haru Matsui was one of Ayako Ishigaki’s pen names. Because of her critical stance toward Japanese imperialism and her father’s position as a professor at an elite university in Japan, Ishigaki wrote under various pen names throughout her career. Due to Haru’s central role in the narrative and the text’s complicated use of fiction and autobiography, I will refer to Ishigaki’s alter-ego narrator as Haru throughout this chapter. I will only use Ishigaki’s name when referring unequivocally to the flesh-and-blood author.
1940s. Inhabiting a liminal space between the two genres, then, this narrative critiques proletarian fiction and Asian American autobiography.

Despite these formal tensions, however, the text opens—like many memoirs—with a significant early memory. In the prologue, Haru recalls her very first memory in order to construct an image of Japanese labor inflected by class hierarchies and gender. She notes, “Those women who made firm the foundation of our house. The house in which we were to live. The house in which Younger Brother was to be born. […] The house which would be spotless and well kept and would hide the deep struggle” (3). These working women build the house that Haru grows up in, and this house symbolizes her father’s patriarchal reign over the family. For Haru, this initial memory becomes a pivotal scene, one that exhibits the exploitation of female labor and frames the entire narrative.

Haru’s house represents the state of gender and class relations within the Japanese empire. These women work alongside men, and yet their labor gets concealed beneath a world of conservativism and upper-class female domestication. Nonetheless, these working-class women defy the gendering of labor even as they carry their babies with them, “strapped to their back” (3). Working difficult manual labor jobs, these women perform the supposed work of men, even while taking care of their children. Haru insists, “These women remain with me. The sun burned their faces, the heat smeared them with dirt and sweat. Their broad grins bared white teeth” (3). For the rest of her life, then, this image and these women shape Haru’s understanding of the world that surrounds her. If, in Bulosan’s narrative, Allos’s family plants the early seeds of class consciousness in
him, then Haru’s initial encounters with these women similarly inform her eventual proletarianization.

Through her depiction of the working class, Haru reveals the way in which class and gender structures intersect to define and create expectations for traditional Japanese women. Unlike these working-class women, for instance, the upper-class women in Haru’s family are expected to grow up and get married, fulfilling a domestic role within their family’s home. With this framework in mind, I argue that this initial vignette foregrounds structures of exploitation and erasure that intersect and complicate one another throughout the text. Triangulating an analysis of class, gender, and ethnicity, this chapter will trace the way in which Haru critiques nativist structures of meaning and identification in both American and Japanese empires. In the end, she makes it clear that gender, race, and class oppression undergird both imperial regimes. Through formal hybridity and social critique, then, Ishigaki contests entangled structures of exploitation in each country.

Rather than endorse the imperial logics of either regime, Haru rejects both nationalist agendas in order to imagine an alternative future. Even before the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, which dramatically increased anti-Japanese sentiments in the U.S., Haru condemns Japanese imperialism. Franklin D. Roosevelt’s 1942 Executive Order 9066 ordered the relocation and internment of over 110,000 Japanese Americans living on the West Coast (Robinson 4). Internment and anti-Japanese racism put a great deal of pressure on Japanese Americans to “choose sides,” forcing many Japanese immigrants to renounce all ties with Japan. As Takashi Fujitani notes, “[I]n the aftermath of Pearl
Harbor, even the feeble signs that some Japanese Americans were becoming full-fledged members of the national community rapidly collapsed” (78). Before the war, Haru’s citizenship status in New York was already precarious. When describing Ishigaki’s actual life after the war, however, Lin and Robinson write, “The Ishigaki’s, like many left-wing and progressive activists who had formerly worked for the government or received official endorsement, now found themselves targeted for investigation and harassment by Washington” (269). Eventually deported because of “anticommunist hysteria” (270), Ishigaki’s already unstable citizenship status became even more vulnerable in the wake of World War II.38

Published in 1940, however, this narrative predates Pearl Harbor and Japanese American internment. Before this surge in pressure to “choose sides,” then, Haru wields a critique of both the U.S. and Japan. Haru indicts, “the invisible forces which inexorably destroyed men who spoke my language, who were born into my country” (247). She is critical of Japanese imperialism, nationalism, and the “invisible forces” that pervade Japanese empire. In fact, Haru’s rejection of Japanese nationalism animates the narrative.

38 During the early 1950s, the leftist coalitions of the Popular Front gave way to a second Red Scare. As Robert Griffith notes, “The relationship of conventional politics to McCarthyism is well illustrated by the Senate’s reaction to the McCarran Internal Security Act and to the Communist Control Act. The first measure passed Congress in September 1950, near the beginning of the McCarthy years. The second was enacted in August, 1954, at the time when the Senator’s influence was rapidly diminishing […] Yet they typified the collapse of congressional courage, and good sense in the face of the communist issue” (26). McCarthyism, the McCarran Internal Security Act, and the Communist Control Act eroded the communist ranks, demonizing anyone with any connections to or sympathies with the Communist Party in the U.S. Deported in 1951, the Ishigakis were early victims of this broader anticommunist trend.
Once she realizes that she does not have a place within the Japanese empire or her father’s home, Haru moves to the U.S.

This initial indictment of Japanese nationalism does not, however, culminate in a reactionary claim on American exceptionalism. Instead, Haru’s critique extends to both nations. It reveals what Eiichiro Azuma calls “[t]he hegemonic constructions of racial and national belonging or nonbelonging,” which “emanating from both states, posed fundamental challenges to the Issei (and Nisei) in terms of how they defined their relationships to, and actually engaged with, both their adopted country and their native land” (4). Recognizing her increasingly tenuous position, Haru attempts to negotiate alliances with and critiques of both countries. Ultimately, she reveals the way in which these two empires embody parallel social structures. Despite the fact that America was at war with Japan, these countries share certain racist structures, class hierarchies, and patriarchal assumptions. In his comparative analysis of empire, Fujitani describes his work as writing,

[A]gainst the grain of most academic writings and everyday common sense, in that […] these tend to distinguish Japan and the United States during the war as two incommensurable political formations—the one post-New Deal, liberal-democratic, egalitarian, and a country with few colonial possessions; the other fascist, ultranationalist or totalitarian, a proponent of racial supremacy, the oppressor of its colonial subjects, and an expansionist empire that brutalized peoples throughout the Asia-Pacific region and that launched illegitimate war against the United States. (8)

In contrast, Fujitani identifies what he calls “historical convergences in the characteristics of these two wartime regimes, with special attention to their treatments of and discourses on colonial and racialized subjects” (8). As a forerunner of this radical critique, Restless Wave contests labor exploitation, racism, and class stratification in both countries.
Turning her critical lens on the U.S., Haru reveals a nation desperate to conceal unjust labor practices. To that end, she observes, “Even though Japanese immigrants have cultivated the wild land to green, have laid down railroads and cut and brought down lumber through the mountains, and have lived several decades in this country, they cannot become American citizens” (232). U.S. capital’s demand for cheap labor makes legible the nation’s need for immigrant workers throughout the first half of the twentieth century, but the anti-Asian exclusion legislation simultaneously erases this demand from the national imaginary. By disallowing Japanese citizenship throughout this period, the U.S., thus, undergoes a certain disarticulation of ethnic history and labor. As Robert G. Lee claims, Asian immigrants’ “experience of struggles has been made almost totally invisible in the master narrative of American labor and radical history” (257). Like the working-class women who lay the foundation for Haru’s patriarchal household, these invisible immigrants undergird the narrative of American labor and history. In this way, Haru draws our attention to these erased histories and to the very process of erasure.

At the heart of this narrative, then, Haru inhabits a unique position between two nations that affords her a two-pronged critique of Japan and the U.S. and therefore of the broader logics of empire. If, as David Leiwei Li insists, “The in/out position of the Asian American abject […] illuminates the unique contradiction of legal and cultural competences in contemporary American citizenship” (12), then Haru’s rejection of imperial desire in both countries articulates her disjunctive position within the broader structures of national identification. Unwilling to fully identify with either nationalist project, Haru grounds her existence in a broader network of international working-class
people. In the final pages, Haru imagines a future in which familial bonds link oppressed Japanese and Chinese laborers across nations in order to create what she calls a “triumphant spring.” Thus, I contend that Ishigaki’s initial critique of imperialism in the U.S. and Japan paves the way for this revolutionary vision, which allows her to call for international alliances and pan-ethnic solidarity among the working class.

Unlike the previous texts in this dissertation, Restless Wave’s depiction of revolution foregrounds the exploitation of female labor and critiques the patriarchal structures that undergird nativism. Moreover, Haru highlights the way in which these structures of oppression are inextricable. In other words, gender and ethnicity are intimately linked to class and empire in Japan and the U.S. In her important study of gender and proletarian fiction from the same period, Labor and Desire: Women’s Revolutionary Fiction in Depression Era America (1991), Paula Rabinowitz claims, “[R]adical women’s writing of the period elaborated female subjectivity as the site where desire and history (e)merge, thereby challenging both Marxist and feminist criticism by its insistent reminder of the material bases of sexuality, gender, race, ethnicity, and class” (xi). However, Ishigaki never comes up in Rabinowitz’s elaboration of white and black “female subjectivity” during the Depression—not an unusual absence, considering her near invisibility in studies of the left. Nonetheless, Ishigaki’s attention to Asian American female labor and desire merits further consideration and revamps our understanding of class, the revolutionary imaginary, and women’s proletarian fiction. Indeed, her narrative culminates in Haru’s projection of a transnational futurity, which seeks an alternative to
nativist community, one that no longer adheres to traditional class, ethnic, or gender formations.

Haru concludes the narrative by envisioning a revolutionary transformation. The triumphant spring that comprises the final pages envisages a world without class, race, and gender inequality. Applying an intersectional analytic that accounts for these mutually constitutive structures of race, class, gender, and nation, I argue that Ishigaki’s “novelistic semi-autobiographical text” allows her to critique racism, labor exploitation, and gendered hierarchies in both Japan and the U.S. Finally, by combining Tsiang’s international scope with Bulosan’s utopian future, Ishigaki’s revolution develops important transnational feminist connections that link oppressed communities in Japan, China, and the U.S.

A Life Between “Two Worlds” and Two Genres

Although she went on to write many books and articles on feminism in Japan after 1951, Restless Wave is the only book length Anglophone text that Ishigaki wrote before leaving the U.S. Perhaps this dearth of writing explains—at least in part—Ishigaki’s near invisibility in scholarship on the left and Asian American studies. Michael Denning briefly reads Restless Wave as a “remarkable account of the intertwining of feminism,

39 Ishigaki went on to become a famous public figure in Japan for her writing on America and catalyzing what is now known as the “housewife debate.” Her 1955 article “Shufū to iu dai-in shokugyō-ron” claimed that the domestication of women—and even the conveniences of modernity—dramatically stunted their intellectual development. According to Lin and Robinson, the article “ignited a firestorm of attention” and launched “a set of polemics on the condition of women that dominated Japanese media for several months” (273). Despite her relative fame in Japan, Ishigaki’s work virtually disappeared from the academic community here in the States.
labor radicalism, and émigré antifascism in the Popular Front social movement” (146).

Discussing the prologue, Denning traces what he calls the “proletarian sublime” whereby Haru’s initial “class fear of childhood” transforms “into a new hope” (146), but Denning’s one-page analysis only begins to shed light on the importance of this narrative. For the most part, proletarian scholarship has largely overlooked Ishigaki’s contributions to the left. In this chapter, I will begin to read this narrative in the context of other proletarian and Asian American fiction from the period in order to reveal the way in which it engages with but also distances itself from these genres.

Lin and Robinson draw attention to the text’s many formal registers. The text functions simultaneously as a narrative, a collection of lyrical essays, a feminist analysis, and even a bildungsroman. The formal unevenness of the text, which is split into a series of essays or chapters, attests to its generic complexity. However, I will read the novel as a proletarian fictional autobiography precisely because it marshals testimonial discourse and the politics of class struggle in order to “teach […] not the fixity of the bourgeois world, but its ripeness for revolution” (Foley 284).40 Ishigaki’s use of a slightly removed protagonist culminates in what Foley calls—when discussing the proletarian fictional autobiography—

40 Ishigaki’s text fits somewhat uneasily within Foley’s rather narrow definition of the genre, especially given her explicit exclusion of Nelson Algren’s *Somebody in Boots* (1935) and Edward Dahlberg’s *Bottom Dogs* (1929), however, the memoir appears to meet Foley’s basic criterion, which suggests that the work cover the protagonist’s lifespan and centralize the development of class consciousness. While Foley would perhaps balk at the text’s inclusion because of Ishigaki’s upbringing in the upper echelons of Japanese society, Lin and Robinson make it clear that Ishigaki worked in various menial labor positions in order to finance her and her husband’s meager existence in New York City (256). Moreover, Ishigaki forged her class consciousness in the midst of the “intergroup and interracial camaraderie she experienced among the workers in these jobs” (Lin and Robinson 256).
autobiography—“a peculiar mix of fictionality and actuality” (288). Lin and Robinson insist, “Restless Wave is not a straight forward chronicle” (254). In this regard, there are disparities between Haru’s life in the text and Ishigaki’s actual life, which is a staple of the proletarian fictional autobiography. According to Foley, the genre “efface[s] the boundaries demarcating any firm distinctions between author, narrator, and protagonist” in order to elucidate the oppressive conditions of an objective world outside of the text, rather than the oppressive conditions of an imagined world or diegetic universe (288). Thus, the text points to and makes use of oppressive conditions in the “real” world.

When placed alongside other proletarian fictional autobiographies like Mike Gold’s *Jews Without Money* (1930) and Agnes Smedley’s *Daughter of Earth* (1929), which Foley examines in some detail, Ishigaki’s narrative recounts a similar “self-discovery” that leads to class consciousness and revolutionary desire. Nonetheless, Haru’s eventual class struggle in the States cannot be separated from patriarchal oppression and racialization. More specifically, Ishigaki’s education as a class conscious worker highlights the particular struggles of an Asian American female immigrant laborer. In this way, the text develops a sophisticated critique of class exploitation that incorporates other structures of oppression, structures often excluded from other proletarian fictional autobiographies from the period. Indeed, Haru’s plight shows a world in which class, gender, and ethnicity intertwine to exploit and divide the working class. In this light, Foley’s dissection of the genre, which takes place primarily through an examination of the work of Gold, Smedley, Isidor Schneider, and Jack Conroy, remains
somewhat incomplete precisely because these writers do not account for the Asian American immigrant laborer in their work.

Rather than rely solely on a one dimensional class critique, then, this narrative details the way in which racialization and patriarchy inflect class stratification and labor exploitation in these dueling imperial regimes. Without an intersectional analytic, however, it is difficult to account for the way in which these structures of exploitation interpenetrate one another. Grace Kyungwon Hong draws on the work of Kimberle Crenshaw to define intersectional analysis as “an analytic mode that does not privilege one site of identification over another, but insists on the importance of race, class, gender and sexuality as interlocking and mutually constitutive” (x). This analytic complicates any straightforward—or overly simplistic—account of class consciousness and self-discovery. Similarly, Ishigaki makes it clear throughout her narrative that racialization and gender mediate class formations.

Moreover, Ishigaki traces nativist logics in both the Japanese diaspora and the U.S. in order to highlight the constitutive vectors of class, race, and gender. In this way, Hong’s delineation of intersectional analysis and women of color feminist critique sheds light on the way in which Ishigaki further revamps the revolutionary imaginary to envision an alternative to patriarchal nativism in the U.S. and Japanese expansionism. Indeed, an intersectional lens allows the reader to “make sense of that which is pathologized or rendered invisible by the epistemologies of nationalism” (Hong xii). Ultimately, Ishigaki’s narrative interrogates epistemologies of nationalism and imagines an alternative futurity no longer limited by these pathological ways of knowing.
Ishigaki’s critical depictions of class stratification and immigrant labor lay the groundwork for her invocation of a transformed future.

In her contribution to what Rabinowitz describes as a broader tradition of “[l]eftist women’s fiction of the 1930s [that] rewrites women into the history of labor and workers into the history of feminism by encoding classed gender and gendered class narrative” (4), Ishigaki inserts racialization into this broader equation. Instead of approaching these structures of oppression as uniquely exploitative and singular, Ishigaki understands racialization, gender, and class stratification as mutually constitutive. Near the end of her prologue, Rabinowitz insists, “Historical amnesia has erased [women’s fiction of the 1930s] from our memory, but the (classed and gendered) subject continues to write itself” (16); indeed, the intersectional analytic suggests that the classed, gendered, and racialized subject endures.

Because of the text’s formal complexity and its critical attention to class, gender, and race, contemporaneous reviewers from the 1940s had difficulty contextualizing the narrative within a broader tradition of Japanese American autobiography and proletarian fiction. Some critics attempted to shift focus onto earlier parts of the narrative, stripping the novel of radical critique in order to read the text as an opportunity to appropriate the “ethnic experience.” In the Saturday Review, for instance, Harold Henderson writes, “The reader feels that he is seeing Japan from inside, with a Japanese personality, not that he is looking at it from the outside like a stranger” (7). In this reading, Ishigaki’s narrative turns into an ethnographic account that allows the American reader to become a voyeur with privileged access to the “Japanese experience.” Of course, this particular reading...
relies especially on Ishigaki’s initial account of growing up among the Japanese elite. Similarly, Pearl Buck’s review appears to appropriate Haru’s experience calling her the “most solitary of human beings, a woman who cannot conform to the patterns her people have set for a woman” (165). Enlisting Ishigaki in a broader narrative of feminist struggle, Buck focuses primarily on Haru’s plight as a “solitary” woman amongst “her people.”

Other critics transpose Ishigaki’s fictional autobiography onto a narrative of American exceptionalism and progressive modernity. In this vein, Elizabeth McCausland first refers to Ishigaki’s recollections of life in Japan as “elusive memories […] a world of exquisite and balanced forms […] But underneath the formal beauty misery seethed” (604). Conflating Ishigaki’s critique of patriarchy with orientalism, McCausland’s depiction turns Japan into a shadowy, substanceless country in which “formal beauty” only hides misery. This setup also allows McCausland to endow America with a progressive modernity and feminist values: She insists, “Later [Haru] would come to the United States, break with her father and relatives, live the free life of a woman in America, find love and find work to do” (604). In this account, once she leaves Japan, Haru enjoys the many freedoms of America; it conveniently elides Haru’s struggles as an impoverished immigrant living in New York City. Lin and Robinson recognize the prevalence of orientalist discourse in Bradford Smith’s review in *Books* as well. Smith traces what he calls a “womanly warp of imagery which binds the book together” and ultimately “reminds one of the short imagiac poems that are Japan’s best contribution to the world’s poetry” (262). Smith’s odd depiction of the narrative genders Japan and
essentializes Ishigaki’s poetics as inherently female and Japanese. According to Smith, then, Ishigaki’s prose reveal a racialized and gendered author who “warps” the narrative form thereby reducing her work to another intriguing account of Japanese identity.

Still, some of her contemporary critics recognized and lauded the sharper edges of Ishigaki’s work. Schneider, who authored *From the Kingdom of Necessity* (1935), another significant proletarian fictional autobiography from the period, observes in his review in *The New Republic* that the narrative places “the emancipation of women” within “a larger struggle against a composite of social injustices” (391). Schneider draws our attention to the variety of social injustices compounded within the text, injustices that include sexism, racism, and labor exploitation. Beginning to work in this same vein, Lin and Robinson rightly claim, “Haru finds completeness as a person by addressing cross-class and international solidarity against Japanese imperialism […] the work reveals the intricacy of transnationalism as an instrument of women’s liberation and Haru’s use of a transnational stance […] to strike a balance in her struggles for equality in gender, race, ethnicity, and class” (276). Ishigaki’s unique subject-position enables her to see political oppression along multiple axes. As Lin and Robison note, the narrative is a rather “striking record of the germination of feminist consciousness within dissent,” and “Ishigaki’s refusal to identify herself within either country or to find belonging in a national context puts *Restless Wave* in conversation with current discourse on globalization and transnationalism” (281). In the final pages, Lin and Robinson begin to elucidate this important thesis, but because they are constrained by the broader concerns
and length restraints of an afterword, these critics never really delve into the way in which this politically charged “refusal” shapes the narrative.

While these critics lay the groundwork for understanding the text’s significance to Asian American studies, I hope to show the way in which it embodies a more fully developed articulation of what I have been calling the revolutionary imaginary. Recovering this significant and often overlooked anomaly within the broader traditions of Asian American literature and the proletarian novel, this chapter reveals the way in which Ishigaki’s revolution develops important transnational feminist connections. Indeed, working-class women come to the fore in Ishigaki’s “triumphant spring.” Compounding her critique of gender, race, and class inequality, then, Ishigaki authors a rather unique narrative that remains rather anomalous in the context of other Japanese American narratives from the period.

After all, Ishigaki rejects American assimilation and thus the seductive—yet hollow—narrative of American conversion. Ishigaki differs from Japanese American authors like Etsu Sugimoto and Monica Sone, whose autobiographies entail a kind of conversion narrative. As I note in the introduction, throughout these texts, narrators struggle to “become” American. Sugimoto’s 1923 A Daughter of the Samurai narrates a progressive modernity that culminates in the U.S. Thus, an antiquated Japanese culture ultimately gives way to American modernity. Similarly, Sone’s Nisei Daughter (1953) records her difficult transition from Japanese immigrant to American citizen. These narratives hinge on “Americanization” and therefore illuminate the significance of
Ishigaki’s narrator Haru, who refuses to identify with either Japanese imperialism or the traditional narrative of American assimilation.

Instead, Haru highlights flaws in each of these structures of identification. In fact, Haru’s rejection underscores her trenchant critique of racism and labor exploitation in each country. And while Foley and Rabinowitz construct a foundation for our understanding of women’s proletarian writing from the period, Ishigaki’s exclusion from their work reveals a definite gap in our understanding of both the genre and what critics now call the Red Decade. Ishigaki’s text, then, has something to say to both Asian American studies and proletarian scholarship. Finally, Ishigaki marshals Haru’s liminal subject-position in order to envision a revolutionary futurity no longer constrained by these structures of oppression. For this reason, the final pages in the narrative band people together across continents and nationalities in order to imagine an end to Japanese imperialism, American racism, and global capitalism.

“Strange, Overeducated Women”: The New Woman in Japan

The compelling depiction of female labor in the prologue foregrounds labor exploitation, specifically gendered and classed labor in Japan. Haru describes this image of women laying the foundation for her family’s home as her “first memory” (3). The memory, then, serves as a pivotal scene for Haru’s life and the text as a whole. Though these women strike her as strange, a subconscious recognition seems to take place in this first memory. Initially, Haru asks, “They frighten me, these women […] Are these strange people who work with men, banter their men, roll up their sleeves—are they
women” (4)? Deconstructing their gender, the young Haru even confuses these women with men because of the clothes they wear and the work they do. In the following pages, however, Haru insists, “[t]hese women are no longer strange to me […] These women give me hope” (5). This house becomes both a literal depiction of female labor exploitation and a figural depiction of Japanese society in which structures of patriarchy stand on a foundation built by these exploited workers.

These women strike Haru as strange because she is accustomed—at this early stage in her life—to the domesticated upper-class women of her childhood. Yet, these “half a dozen women bent their backs and gripped the ropes. They tugged and the huge log rose. They relaxed, and the log fell hard, pounding the foundation trench” (4). Haru goes on, “Mothers bared their large breasts and suckled their young. They laughed and joked with the men. In loud voices” (4). Her brief glimpse into this working-class community undoes various gender boundaries and expectations and finally registers a potentiality for Haru, a vision for a different kind of community than the patriarchal one in which she comes of age.

Though she recalls parts of her childhood lovingly and nostalgically, Haru is not content in her father’s traditional Japanese home. She notes, “I can still see them, those women […] who made firm the foundation of our house […] The house which would be spotless and well kept and would hide the deep struggle” (3). Indeed, this “spotless” house, which signifies the oppressive patriarchal structures of Japanese society, conceals Haru’s struggle and the struggle of these women. Beyond concealing their struggle, however, this initial scene also shows the way in which class and gender norms define
normativity. Because these women are a part of the working class, their very labor makes them “strange” to Haru. Adhering to the traditional Japanese society, Haru conflates upper-class identity with femininity. Eventually, however, she suggests that these women will come to occupy this figurative house. After claiming that she no longer sees these women as strange, Haru observes, “I have seen them everywhere, working, singing, laughing with their men […] These women no longer make me fear. I can see them occupying the house whose foundation they make firm. These women give me hope” (4). Haru’s hope rests on these women, who now threaten to occupy this house and therefore defy their own oppression. Like the working-class community that defines America in Bulosan’s *America Is in the Heart*, these working-class women characterize Ishigaki’s hope.

In this way, Haru resurrects a moment from her past to explain the presence of these women in her contemporary moment. Making “firm” the foundation for this house, these women project a future without the patriarchal rule of Haru’s childhood. Rather than conceal this narrative of female labor exploitation, *Restless Wave* foregrounds this history and recalls this moment in time in order to envision a better future. After all, the very first sentence of the novel proceeds, “Out of the past the scene becomes vivid—my first memory” (3). As she envisions the “triumphant spring” in the final chapters, Haru will return not to her grandmother, her father, or anyone else in her family. Instead, these laboring women from the prologue return and she remembers “the sweat-smeared faces of women who pulled thick, heavy ropes to build the foundation of our house” (249). Haru’s recollection foretells her hope and the revolutionary potentiality that comprises
the final pages of the novel. She rewrites Japanese history in order to make the labor and tales of these women legible and meaningful. According to Haru, any hope for revolution and an end to racism, nationalism, and empire begins with the hope manifested in these working-class women.

From very early on in her life, Haru struggles to embody her upper-class female identity and the expectations concomitant with that identity. Reflecting on her earlier years, Haru notes that—unlike her older sister—she had some trouble because “nobody was attracted to [her]” (8). Still, her grandmother insists that she will have no difficulty finding a husband who is happy with an “obedient” wife. For this reason, she observes, “Throughout my childhood and into my teens I was docile and obedient, holding my grandmother’s ideal as my ideal” (8). Initially, Haru looks up to her grandmother and accepts these ideals as absolute. She attempts to assume the upper-class female identity articulated by her family. Over time, however, Haru slowly begins to question her grandmother’s worldview. Haru says, “The Code of Greater Duties of Women, drawn up in the seventeenth century, taught that woman’s highest obligation is obedience to man: to her father before marriage; to her husband when she marries; to her son if she becomes a widow” (8). She draws attention to these ideals as the last vestiges of an antiquated Japanese culture. Indeed, the industrializing forces of modernity caused the “Old and new [to] clash […] everywhere” (9). Haru claims, “Feudal Japan had jumped with a single bound into a new age. But my grandmother refused to see any change. She wished her grandchildren to live in the past customs of her own childhood” (9). Upholding a fairly standard narrative of progressive modernity, Haru describes the upheaval between an
older Japanese culture and the newer generations. Despite these potentially advantageous
shifts in the roles of Japanese women, however, Haru makes it clear in the following
chapters that these shifts are less radical than they seem. She also ties this supposedly
progressive industrializing process to displaced workers and exploited laborers.
Complicating the traditional narrative of western modernity, then, this text suggests that
this “progression” from the west actually upholds gender hierarchies and re-entrenches
class inequalities.

In a slightly different way than her grandmother, Haru’s father embodies the
contradictory and therefore problematic logics of modernity and what she calls
“enlightenment.” She describes him as “a college professor. An intellectual and a
scientist, he was full of the contradictions of all enlightened Japan” (15). She even quotes
Emperor Meiji—the emperor of Japan from 1868 to 1912—who oversaw Japan’s
transition from a feudal economy to a modern empire. Haru observes that her father
“believed firmly in the charter oath of the Emperor […] ‘that harmful customs must be
abolished and that knowledge of the entire world should be sought’” (15). Haru’s father
appears to condemn certain antiquated customs. Nonetheless, her father simultaneously
reflects the paradoxical logics of the expanding Japanese empire, which can be seen
perhaps most explicitly in this colonizing desire to obtain “knowledge of the entire
world.” In spite or perhaps even because of his “enlightenment,” Haru insists that her
father’s desire for totalizing knowledge contains very little reflexive interrogation. She
notes, “Much of Father’s spirit of inquiry stopped at his own front gate. His home was to
him a background where elaborate rules of Japanese etiquette, the signs of good breeding,
had to be observed. In his home he was master” (15, 16). Despite the veneer of modernization, then, her father and his home fall in line with a very conservative and traditional structure of patriarchal rule.

Haru’s father’s contradictory principles structure his understanding of Haru’s education as well. If Haru and “Elder Sister were to receive a sound education” (18), then he made it clear that this education served as a means to a very particular end. In reality, their father differs only slightly from their grandmother. After all, the sisters receive this “sound education […] to become better wives and wiser mothers. In tending to our studies we were not to forget our gentleness as women. Man remained woman’s superior. ‘It is an incontestable biological law,’ said Father, ‘which keeps woman tied to her home’” (18, 19). Reflecting a variety of patriarchal logics from the period, Haru’s father marshals “biological law” and modern science—the fruits of his privileged education—in order to justify his own sexism and absolute power over the family, affirming Haru’s remark that “[w]here a scientific explanation was untenable, he passed off the matter as a law of nature” (15). In this passage, science genders the female body and roots that same body in the domestic sphere. Moreover, her education—working in tandem with her father’s “science”—reinforces her father’s rule and prepares her for a domestic role within Japanese society.

Ultimately, these codes of conduct and customs pave the way for a patrilineal succession of power within their household. Her father “esteemed his son more than his daughters, for by natural superiority his son would carry on the destiny of the house; his daughters would be given away as brides and would then belong wholly to their
husband’s families” (19). The daughters become commodities eventually given away, while the son takes on the family inheritance and assumes the role of their father. Nonetheless, Haru does not exactly fit into this “perfect” mold. Her teacher tells her that she is “good in mathematics and composition and penmanship. But since you will not be a public performer when you grow up I will excuse you” (20). Of course, the irony here is that Ishigaki would become a famous speaker in both the U.S. and Japan, even though her prescribed role as an upper-class Japanese housewife did not suggest that these opportunities would be available to her. More importantly, while she receives good marks in math and composition, she struggles only in what she calls the “womanly arts.” As a result, Haru worries that her inability to take on the proper roles of her gender will frustrate her family and, more specifically, her father. She assumes, “I received a less than perfect rating in sewing. Since sewing was one of the most important womanly arts, I was mortified when I handed my report to Father” (20). Though her father does not react in this particular case, Haru fears that she will not live up to her father’s gendered expectations.

While her birth mother dies when she is four, Haru’s “Second Mother,” whom her father marries shortly thereafter, appears to embody perfectly the domestic role that Haru finds so frustrating and oppressive throughout the narrative. As she describes this woman, Haru notes, “She submitted with strict obedience to carrying out Father’s wishes. This was a matter of course; but so submissively did she discharge her duties that even in the internal affairs of the house, which she was supposed to control, she did not emerge as a real person” (40). Her critical description of this woman anticipates Haru’s later writings.
on the role of the housewife in Japan, and thus her second mother fails to “emerge as a real person” precisely because she spends her entire life “warding off that deadly bugbear of a Japanese wife—failure in fulfilling her obligations” (40). Second mother upholds her father’s ideals perfectly and appears to serve him entirely.

In spending some time away from Tokyo with her second mother and siblings, however, Haru observes a significant distinction between the luxuries of her childhood and the childhood of other children at the beach. After seeing them years before, she is later “surprised to see these same fishermen’s daughters [...] my own age, sweeping and washing stairways and doing other menial work [...] I could not understand why they had gone from childhood to womanhood without, like us, passing through a period of girlhood” (55). In a scene that clearly recalls the working-class women from the prologue, Haru’s encounter on the beach makes legible the class difference that her childhood and secluded home conceal. As she slowly becomes aware of her own privilege, Haru becomes even more critical of her father’s rules and the life that her family lays out before her. Haru begins to realize that not everyone gets—or necessarily wants—to live this life dictated by traditional Japanese customs. Moreover, she is, again, drawn to the tragic plight of working-class women specifically.

If her entire family comes to represent or esteem the traditional ideals of upper-class Japanese femininity, then Haru turns to an alternative figure in Japanese history for guidance. Indeed, the “new woman” eventually reveals an alternate path for Haru.\(^{41}\)

\(^{41}\) The “new woman” created a great deal of cultural anxiety in Japan. Emerging in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this figure defied traditional gendered expectations and the confines of domesticity. For this reason, the new woman becomes
Growing up, then, Haru will come to idealize the way in which this figure contradicts her grandmother’s ideals, as well as her father’s supposedly enlightened understanding of the role of Japanese women. Haru gradually begins to identify with this figure, which sets her apart from the rest of the family. Integrating the ideals of the largely middle-class “new woman” with her relatively limited experience in working-class districts in Japan, Haru begins to enlist herself within a transnational community of oppressed women workers. Moreover, she identifies the way in which class and gender intersect to create loyal female subjects for imperial Japan.

In the chapter entitled “New Woman,” Haru finds a subversive figure that she admires and even a harbinger for her future in America. When speaking of one of the women in their village, Elder sister remarks, “‘I have heard that Granny lives differently from normal people. While she is at work in the school, her husband stays at home and does the housework and takes care of the children.’ I was shocked” (60). Haru cannot believe this inversion of traditional gender roles, and so she is initially revolted by the idea. Her teacher explains that these women are called “the ‘new women.’ ‘They do not want to stay at home, but wish to go out and work just as men do’” (60). These women defy traditional expectations and provide for their husbands. This same teacher “launche[s] into an attack on women who demanded freedom and equal rights with men. ‘New women insist that their husbands help them with their wraps and carry their parcels […]’ If Japanese women lose their gentleness and obedience, they will soon become base

an unwieldy and potentially subversive figure within the broader structures of Japanese patriarchy. For more on the “new woman” in Japan specifically, see Dina Lowy’s The Japanese ’New Woman’: Images of Gender and Modernity (2007).
and useless” (60). The teacher reflects fairly typical anxieties about the way in which these women destabilize gendered hierarchies, and she even worries that their choices strip these women of their very womanhood, and thus their basic use value as a kind of commodified product, what makes them “useful.”

Though these new women initially frighten her, further conversations with her sister cause Haru to become unsure of how to “read” these women. When her sister tells her, “The new women are much younger. They read and write and make speeches. Some of them, Haru, even write novels and other books” (61), Haru becomes vexed by the overdetermination of these new women. She observes, “By this time I was quite confused. Teacher, the maid, and Elder Sister all had different definitions of the new woman. I asked Nobu, ‘Is it proper to admire them—the new women’” (61). Haru admires their intellectual prowess and becomes perplexed by these dueling interpretations. If she buys into her teacher’s understanding of new women, then these women brazenly defy the traditional customs of Japanese society and even undermine their very “usefulness” as women. Her sister’s definition, however, begins to paint a very different picture of intellectually curious, ambitious, and even admirable women.

Her father, of course, agrees with the teacher. For him, these women represent the utter defiance of traditional wisdom and even total anarchy or—in his words—“barbarism.” Her father recalls that when he “was a young boy, there was a movement among wealthy Japanese women to abandon the kimono entirely and to give social dances where men and women embraced each other to wild music. Soon they gave up this barbarism to the Japanese customs” (62). In this passage, the new woman becomes
another incarnation of an earlier movement, which her father characterizes as driven primarily by the frivolous desires of wealthy Japanese women. Classed in a rather peculiar way, Haru’s father describes these women as “mocking their womanhood” and then remarks, “Even though my daughters receive a Western education, I want them to maintain all of a Japanese woman’s virtue and charm” (62). Again, these women go against the grain of their own gendered identity and thus “science.”

After her second mother dies, Haru’s grandmother returns with her utter dismissal of the new woman and a renewed interest in imposing her values on the growing daughters. The grandmother insists that Haru and her sister must “turn their thoughts to their future homes” (71). Their grandmother notes that she was “betrothed” at their age, and so she wants to begin preparations for their eventual marriage. Haru’s grandmother’s language transparently describes the subjugation of the betrothed, who must—her grandmother suggests—“become familiar with the habits of her future family and learn to conform to them […] and center her thoughts where they should be—on making ready for her husband’s position” (71). Indeed, the life offered by her grandmother foretells a life of subservience and a very telling epistemological shift, one that hinges on Haru’s future husband’s values, ideals, and priorities.

Their grandmother also critiques their education and indirectly connects it to the threat of the new woman. Haru notes, “Grandmother shook her head. ‘I cannot see of what use higher education is to girls. All these boys’ subjects taught in girls’ schools—it’s against the design of the gods. I hear many disturbing stories of overeducated girls’” (72). According to her grandmother, the gendered nature of education itself makes it
unnatural for Haru and her sister to go to school. Moreover, the “overeducated girls,” whom she warns Haru against, and their “disturbing stories” recall the unwieldy desires of the new woman. Finally, her grandmother goes on, “I am glad to see that my granddaughters […] retain their womanly virtues” (72). Whether marshaling traditional Japanese customs or even modern science, the family roots these arguments in an essentialized understanding of women as directly linked to domesticity. The end of childhood, then, marks a decisive moment for Haru and her sister, both of whom are officially hailed by these interpellative narratives of upper-class Japanese womanhood.

During high school, however, Haru begins to subvert these customs and traditional teachings. Haru observes, “In Ethics we learned spiritual education for wifehood and motherhood; it was an important course for us” (82). In this class, Haru learns of General Nogi—a famous soldier from the Russo-Japanese war— and his wife, who is another perfect example of female devotion and utter submission. Once Emperor Meiji died, the general and his wife committed suicide in order to “follow” the emperor. The teacher insists, “[The resolution to share death with her husband was a noble one. [S]he […] achieved a beautiful end […] Although a woman, she sacrificed her two sons for the nation during the Russo-Japanese War. For a mother there is no greater honor than this. Madame Nogi is indeed the mirror of Woman” (83). For the teacher, Madame Nogi embodies the idealized construction of Japanese Womanhood, which entails sacrifice and eventually even suicide. Indeed, her loyalty to the emperor confirms her status as the “mirror of Woman.”
Nationalism and gender converge in Madame Nogi’s embodiment of the perfect woman. Only these actions can culminate in a “beautiful end.” As a result, Nogi becomes a “mirror” that confirms or denies the image of Womanhood for the imperial regime. By this time, however, Haru no longer takes on these ideals unquestioningly. In fact, she questions the mandate that a wife must partake in both life and death with her husband and feels sad for Madam Nogi’s tragic end. In this way, she reinterprets this moment in Japanese history and mythology in order to claim, “In Madame General’s heart lay hidden the sorrow of a mother who had lost her children” (84). Through this revision, Madame Nogi becomes a tragic symbol overwrought with grief, rather than a beacon of national strength. In the place of a proud figure who commits suicide in complete devotion to a fraternal emperor, Haru imagines a grieving mother whose only resort is suicide.

Haru continues to question the cultural hegemony enforced by these politically charged histories. In the following chapter, Haru recalls the social upheaval of the rice riots in Japan. During 1918, the cost of rice climbed precipitously. As a result of the subsequent World War and continuing inflation, these prices led to protests across Japan. Haru recalls, “[A] riot had begun as a protest against the doubling of the price of rice […] Fishermen’s wives in a fishing village in Toyama Prefecture had raised a clamor […] and led finally to the mobilization of the army” (99). Though her uncle—who has recently come into a great deal of money because of the war—condemns the riots, Haru, again, becomes aware of her privilege and a kind of repressed guilt. When lying in bed, she imagines “a glistening white mountain of rice and the forms of fishermen’s wives who
could not buy it [...] the memory of a beggar woman and her child whom I had seen in the street came to me fleetingly and it seemed to me that they were saying something” (99). Even at a young age, Haru implicates herself and therefore makes her own privilege legible to the reader. While her aunt calls the rioters “ignorant people” (99), Haru silently sympathizes with their plight while struggling with her own complicity. Rather than relate to her aunt, she recognizes the plight of this “beggar woman,” who cannot feed her child.

At this point in the narrative, Haru begins to ignore her supposed obligations as a Japanese woman. Instead of attending a tea ceremony lesson, for instance, she chooses to pick up an English textbook from the library. When her sister asks about her absence, Haru reflects, “Again I had neglected my womanly duties. I explained that I had gone to the library,” but her brother does not approve (104). Instead, he echoes the claims of Haru’s father and grandmother. In response, Haru begins to realize that she has “invaded his masculine world and hurt his pride” (104). Now fully aware of the stakes, she realizes that her intellectual curiosity and studiousness—not to mention her incipient class consciousness—threatens the patriarchal rule that surrounds her.

Haru’s visit to a local factory brings the class stratification and labor exploitation previously cordoned off into the periphery of her existence into the foreground. While in this lower class neighborhood, the students encounter a district where the “doors were broken and the paper screens were torn so that we could see inside. Out of these huts came […] the sorrowful wails of weak and sick babies” (108). The neighborhood sits next to the Sen River, which “had once been a bay, but now it was a narrow open sewer
in which garbage and refuse were thrown. Black oil floated on top of the water […] the riverbanks overflowed, and the foul refuse caused epidemics of typhus, typhoid fever, scarlet fever” (108). If Haru struggles to understand the poverty that surrounds her, then her teacher blames the poverty on the inhabitants themselves. Her teacher explains, “It is not good manners for well-bred young ladies to run in panic no matter how rudely they may be spoken to. These low creatures deserve their misery; it is of their own making” (109). Their education—in this context—serves to nullify the conscious and naturalize class disparity. The students learn that this poverty is a supposed result of the inhabitants’ own moral failure.

Her experience of the textile factory in this neighborhood only compounds her earlier feelings of guilt. The exploitation of labor that pervades what the teacher calls a “modern factory” concerns Haru, but she does not always reveal her concern to the reader explicitly. Instead, Haru’s condemnation of the factory becomes clear through her descriptions of the labor conditions and what Barbara Foley calls “editorializing.” Foley writes, “‘editorializing’ commentary interrupts the flow of the narrative and requires the reader to draw larger lessons from the protagonist’s represented experience” (305). In this regard, the narratorial voice intervenes in the reading of the story proper. Drawing on the story/discourse distinction, Foley explains this strategy: “If the reader is not to be kept at the level of the relatively naïve experiencing protagonist, but brought into alignment with the perceptions of the politically seasoned writer/narrator, it is indeed helpful for the text to include ‘discursive’ interventions ‘from outside’” (305). After noticing a piece of colorless cloth, for instance, the company official explains, “that it was a warning to the
girls that badly woven cloth would not be tolerated” (110). Haru goes on to note, “I later learned that when the cloth was bad it was usually due, not to the girls, but to the poor machines and the inferior cotton with which they worked” (111). In this way, the official’s justification of oppressive labor conditions contrasts against Haru’s retroactive explanation of labor exploitation.

The older, “politically seasoned” Haru occasionally mediates the reader’s experience of the story. The official claims, “[T]he wages were higher here than in most factories, and so they had to insist on good quality” (111), papering over the brutal conditions thrust upon these young working women. Again, Haru draws our attention to the tragic plight of working-class women specifically. Although she does not fully understand the breadth of their exploitation at her young age, the older Haru explains, “We did not know then that 20 per cent of these girls had beriberi; that their feet were so swollen that the least unevenness in the floor caused them to fall” (111). As she quotes the company official, Haru simultaneously undermines the official’s descriptions by interpolating her retroactive critique of labor conditions.

Haru also makes it clear that both class exploitation and nationalism ensure that these women labor under these miserable conditions. In the factory, a sign reads:

WORK HARD WITHOUT COMPLAINT
IT IS FOR YOUR COUNTRY. FOR YOUR PARENTS.
FOR YOUR HAPPINESS.

This sign makes legible the nationalist logics that extract labor from these young women. Indeed, the empire is contingent upon their labor. In the same way, the official says, “We can best safeguard our girls from dangerous and corrupting thoughts by publishing our
own paper instead of letting them read papers and magazines from outside” (114). By controlling what they read, the company guarantees their labor power and affirms the official’s description of “the humane considerations which prompted the company to protect the girls” (114). These young women read only what the factory provides and so the factory constantly reminds them of their own protective measures and supposedly humane considerations. Still, the morally hollow claims do not ease Haru’s “troubled heart.”

While her older sister gets married, Haru worries over the figural bondage that appears to condemn both her and her sister to the very particular life of a traditional Japanese bride. At the wedding, Haru’s unhappiness contrasts against the many happy guests at the wedding. She describes her body as “bound by many layers of unseen threads, and I wondered how I could cut the threads and fly away to my own domain” (124). Configuring her metaphorical bondage in the very “womanly arts” she so despises, Haru longs to be cut free. She then quotes the Japanese writer Akiko Yosano—a pioneering feminist and controversial poet from the Meiji period—in the following sentences: “Somewhere/ To escape,/ But unable to flee,/ With heavy heart/ I gaze at the wide sky” (124). Drawing significantly on this tradition of proto-feminist poetry, Haru describes her own entrapment and begins to imagine a way out through the voice of this politically charged poetic tradition.

In addition to this feminist poetic tradition, Haru discovers that socialism inspires her. Her brother has “heard […] that Socialists have rioted and rushed on the Imperial palace. They say that is was Socialists who incited the Koreans” (142). Her aunt also
connects these Korean uprisings to the socialist struggle, but Haru assures her, “Koreans are just like us suffering from calamity like us. They too are in great trouble. I don’t believe these stories” (140). Haru speaks in detail of her admiration for the famous socialist, anarchist, and public speaker Sakae Osugi, as well as the labor activist Toyohiko Kagawa. After she meets Kagawa, he encourages Haru to visit the “slums” in order to know the “outcast class, rejected by society and forced to live in […] extreme poverty” (151). In this way, she slowly becomes aware of the poverty and state violence that surround her. She explains, “[T]hirteen hundred people thought to be harboring dangerous thoughts were arrested. Nine labor leaders who were being held […] were taken out behind the building and stabbed one by one with bayonets” (142). After learning of some of the murders that took place during this great act of imperial suppression, Haru recognizes the brutal force of the state.

Both socialist traditions and Korean independence movements caused a great deal of unease within the context of Japanese Empire. Comparing race relations in Japan and the U.S., Fujitani notes:

> [E]ven before the establishment of their total war systems (beginning in July 1937 for Japan and December 1941 for the United States), the relationship of states and dominant metropolitan majorities in the United States and Japan to Japanese Americans and Koreans, respectively, had a complex and contradictory character that conjoined racialized exclusion and universalizing inclusion. (24)

In fact, Japan’s 1910 annexation of Korea galvanized Korean independence movements throughout the region. Japanese imperialism required policing within the nation-state and

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42 Throughout this section of the text, Haru describes the famous assassination of Osugi and other socialists, which happened in 1923. In the wake of The Great Kanto Earthquake, Lieutenant Amakasu Masahiko organized the arrest and murder of Osugi and a handful of other high-profile socialists (Hotta 132).
violent suppression abroad. And thus only a few years after the atrocities of the The Great Kanto Earthquake, in 1919, the Korean March 1st Movement—or Samil Movement—culminated in a massive gathering of students in Pagoda Park. Hyung-Chan Kim notes that these students, who were influenced in part by “Wilson’s Declaration of the Principle of Self Determination,” read the Korean Declaration of Independence out loud in protest to Japan’s annexation of Korea (84). Eventually, this massive protest culminated in brutal violence when the police turned on the crowds murdering many Korean activists and leaders. The violent control of empire, then, pervades both the domestic state and the imperial periphery.

Though she does not yet fully understand it, Haru’s indirect encounters with the brutality of empire further develop her nascent class consciousness. Of course, Haru’s position of privilege within the Japanese empire shields her from any actual contact with this brutal violence. For the unfortunate political and racialized Others of Japanese empire, specifically Korean nationals, the possibility and reality of direct violence constitute the very conditions of daily existence. Despite limited contact, she notes, after reading the newspaper coverage, “I felt beyond the newspaper and beyond the picture something I could not fathom. I could see the thick arms of the police and feel their fingers tighten around my throat. Darkness descended before my eyes” (143). The state becomes a dark force stretching its oppressive reach of surveillance and suppression across the country and as far as her throat.

Moreover, Haru draws our attention to the gendered, classed, and politicized victims of this violence. In the wake of the earthquake, she observes, “In […] Yoshiwara,
many girls and women had been burned alive. When they rushed out of the walls surrounding the burning factories, they had been thrust back by guards who told them that they had been bought and that their lives were not their own” (146). In this way, working-class women, socialists, and Koreans become the primary targets for state violence in Japan. Finally, the aftermath of the earthquake and the suppression of these independence movements and political protests reveal the state’s bloody disavowal of political, national, and gendered Others. In recounting the story of Haru’s life—an account that we cannot fully separate from Ishigaki’s own life (given the obvious overlap)—Ishigaki resurrects a history of labor exploitation, protest, and revolutionary insurrection in Japan. Indeed, the Others of the nation animate this history and constantly decentralize Haru’s privileged position within the narrative.

Similarly, Haru’s early romanticization of the slums comes apart as she encounters actual poverty. She worries, “Could I endure this slum living […] I had come to the slums with heroic feeling, determined to be selfless […] In thinking to make myself selfless for the slums, I had considered the slums […] below me” (155). Ascribing to a kind of liberal condescension, Haru selfishly imagines her own superiority as a prior condition to assisting the poor. She goes on, “For Madame Kagawa, slum life had seeped into every corner of her being, until no part of her was alien to it. Could I be like that?” (156). Of course, the “slum life” has not yet “seeped into every corner of her being,” but this moment foreshadows her life in the U.S. Once she lives in New York City, Haru works in factories and lives in poverty. Ultimately, the “slum life” that she cannot yet
fully inhabit as the daughter of a wealthy professor in Japan will comprise most of her existence in New York.

While still in Japan, however, Haru begins to work for the magazine *Women and Labor*. Her work for the magazine appears to resolve the existential crisis that causes Haru’s “restlessness” and struggle within the confines of her father’s home. Through oddly gendered language, Haru notes, “Just as a coal miner feels the answer to his hand when his pick strikes a vein of coal, so I finally had found some answer to my search for a meaning in existence” (170). Writing for this progressive feminist magazine, Haru seems to find her raison d’être. Still, an intelligence officer comes to her house and warns, “If you mix with scarlet, you will become red” (173). Between writing for this progressive magazine and attending meetings for the Farmer-Labor Party—a left-leaning proletarian political party from the period—the policeman lets Haru know that “[i]t’s important to choose your acquaintances” (173). Because of her politics, Haru becomes a target of the state. Indeed, she begins to embody the politically “new woman” that she admired years before. Although her radicalization is far from complete, Haru’s political activism slowly takes her further and further away from her family in Japan. While this distance is initially figurative, Haru’s final move to the U.S. quite literally distances her from her family and—in many respects—finalizes her political transformation.

**The New Woman in the Land of “Free and Unhampered Womanhood”**

After spending the night in a jail cell, Haru decides—to the relief of her family members whom consider her an “eccentric” because of her unwillingness to marry and
her politics—to leave for America. Although America first represents the land of “free, unhampered womanhood” (194) and thus a nation of apparent hope and promise, it quickly loses this idealized veneer. Initially, the language barrier causes a series of problems. Haru remarks, “The expectancy of knowing America seemed to crumble before this unfamiliarity of language, and the ringing in my ears was like the uneasy sound of the crumbling of hope” (194). More importantly, Haru appears to experience a kind of phenomenological and epistemological dissonance as she walks around Washington D.C. Haru observes, “Although my body was here, it seemed to me that America was wrapped in mist and could not be touched” (197). Haru poetically renders the experience of an immigrant, one excluded from the domains of political citizenship and cultural legibility.

As she did in Japan, Haru feels quite out of place in the U.S. Indeed, the alienation creates a cognitive dissonance through which Haru feels cut off from the nation that surrounds her. In this regard, to be Japanese in the States in 1930 was to be racially and nationally Other precisely because of a long history of immigration legislation and anti-Japanese racism that rendered Japanese subjects irreconcilably alien to a “white” nativist community. In the words of Lowe, “A national memory haunts the conception of the Asian American, persisting beyond the repeal of actual laws prohibiting Asians from citizenship and sustained by the wars in Asia, in which the Asian is always seen as an immigrant, as the ‘foreigner-within,’ even when born in the United States” (5,

43 In slight contrast to Ishigaki—who came to America on a visa with her sister and her sister’s diplomat husband—Haru accompanies an aunt to the States.
6). In this regard, Ishigaki eloquently renders the psychological dissonance of being a “foreigner within.”

Haru insists that her very subjectivity threatens to dissolve in the face of these alienating forces. She notes, “It seemed to me that I had lost myself when I landed in this country. All knowledge and observation that were a part of me seemed to have left me” (197). Indeed, the alienating effects of Asian exclusion pervade the final chapters of this narrative. She goes on, “I was surrounded by things American—the landscape, the language, the people—but the moving American life was shut away from me. Since I had stepped on American soil […] I could get no glimpse into the substance of American life” (197). Haru appears to skip along the surface unable to access this American essence that lies somewhere beneath the landscape, the language, and the people.

In moving to New York City, however, Haru begins to recuperate her class consciousness and thus the concerns of her younger self in Japan. At first, she worries, “[S]itting alone with drooping shoulders and head cast down, I wondered if I would vanish and disappear in bottomless New York” (204). In this passage, the congruencies between Ishigaki and Haru are, again, quite evident. By moving to New York City, Ishigaki violated the terms of her visa, which secured her entry into the States. She could travel to the U.S. precisely because she did so with her sister’s diplomat husband, but after leaving her sister behind in Washington D.C., Ishigaki no longer met the conditions of her visa. For that reason, New York City—at least for Ishigaki the flesh-and-blood author—represented the constant threat of deportation under the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act. These congruencies only continue when Haru—like Ishigaki—eventually meets a
Japanese American artist who lives in Greenwich Village, an impoverished neighborhood for literary and artistic types who are much more to her liking.\textsuperscript{44} When her father visits New York a year later, Haru tells him that she will marry this man. Of course, she does so without his approval. Because of her clear disregard for the traditional customs and patriarchal hierarchies of Japanese society, Haru’s father calls her “imprudent and uncontrollable, and a self-willed daughter” (216) but still asks the artist to take care of her. Haru begins to forge a new life with her artist husband in the “slums” of New York City, initiating her proletarianization.

For the most part, her privilege disappears as she cuts ties with her Japanese family and therefore her wealthy status only to take on the daily tasks of menial labor amongst various ethnic-labor markets in New York. When discussing this time in her life, however, Haru often invokes metaphorical tropes to describe her experience. She claims, “The one year of living among strangers in New York, unprotected by Father’s name and position, had strengthened me. The cold-blowing wind of the world had deepened my mind” (212). Invoking the lyrical language, which comes up again in her description of the “triumphant spring” in the final pages, Haru never really describes her menial labor in New York City in detail. Instead, she metaphorically describes the development of her political consciousness, her “deepened mind.”\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{44} This artist resembles Eitaro Ishigaki, the artist whom Ayako Ishigaki would eventually marry and support. Notably, Eitaro Ishigaki played a major role in founding the Japanese branch of the communist party in the U.S. and the John Reed Clubs. He would also serve as the impetus for their deportation in 1951.

\textsuperscript{45} Lin and Robinson, however, make it clear that Ishigaki worked as a “lampshade factory worker, waitress, sales clerk, and cashier” (256). The “cold-blowing wind” of New York City clearly alludes to her existence as a day laborer in the city.
Despite Haru’s reluctance to call America an empire, which would compromise her already precarious citizenship status, Haru makes it clear that the structures of class, gender, and race plague her life in the U.S. In a later chapter, Haru recounts the loss of her child as a result of her impoverished life in New York. Because of this poverty, Haru’s child dies after only ten days of life. She, then, recalls a conversation with a “farmer’s wife” in Japan whereby the wife insists, “that her child’s death was the hardest thing to bear” (223). At the time, Haru could not understand the woman’s position. After losing her own child, however, Haru can “know for the first time the mind of the mother who lives in poverty, unable to care adequately for her children. I had not understood this mother who worked busily with the rice plants in the fields” (223). Now that she knows both a life of poverty and the death of her child, Haru can relate to this woman. She now “know[s] the pain of a mother who cries in her heart, wishing she could feed her children until their stomachs were full” (224). This identification with the working-class mother continues to connect Haru’s plight to oppressed women across the world. Haru notes, “Wherever one goes there are mothers in the midst of cold and hunger, worrying about their children, restraining their bitter tears. My sorrowful tears at last spread out into a love which enfolded the mothers of the world” (224). Like the prologue, which galvanizes women as a result of their labor oppression and victimization, this passage imagines a connection between these women and paves the way for the utopic vision in her final chapter.

In line with Rabinowitz’s depiction of 1930s women’s proletarian fiction, which, she insists, “relied on a conventional narrative of feminine desire derived from domestic
ideology to deflect the narrative of history away from the purely masculine proletariat” (136), Restless Wave, too, draws on this conventional narrative in order to trace the contours of class exploitation within the domestic sphere. Haru’s specific exploitation draws attention to very different technologies of oppression than the technologies in novels like Gold’s Jews Without Money and even Smedley’s Daughter of Earth. Indeed, Haru’s plight reveals the particularities of gendered and racialized exploitation. Set alongside Gold’s alter-ego protagonist Mikey Gold and even Smedley’s Marie, then, Haru indexes the compounded oppression of working immigrants who cannot even attain citizenship status. She writes,

Even though Japanese immigrants have cultivated the wild land to green, have laid down railroads and brought down lumber from the mountains and have lived for several decades in this country, they cannot become American citizens […] they turn to the thought that their children, born here, will have the privileges of American citizenship, denied to them. (232)

Still, Haru makes it clear that even “[m]embers of the second generation, even though they are American citizens, find themselves pushed toward social ostracism because their skin is yellow; and they tend to accept discrimination as their fate” (233). She does not explicitly invoke the rhetoric of empire, but she highlights racialized exploitation and discrimination as constitutive elements in the Asian American immigrant experience. Indeed, the racialized rhetoric and labor exploitation mirrors her earlier critiques of Japan.

In her critical depictions of the U.S., Haru highlights exploited ethnic-labor markets whereby immigrants toil day and night simply to make a living. Haru recalls, for example, a “Japanese fishing village” in which “the men spent a twenty-four-hour day on
the sea as fishermen, while the women were hired in the fish canneries” (230). While in this village, Haru connects with one of the working women who wears the local trade union badge: “Seeing her smile, I felt deeply moved […] The Japanese are treated as stepchildren by American society, and are always hedged in by fences of prejudice, but sometime […] these fences may be removed. The C.I.O., from the beginning, ruled out racial discrimination and encouraged the Japanese to join” (231). Because of their obvious exploitation, Haru heralds “a close bond of intimacy” with this woman (230). Like Ishigaki, Haru encounters what Lin and Robinson call an “intergroup and interracial camaraderie,” one that—for Ishigaki—“inspired her vision of social justice” (256). In New York City, Ishigaki’s work in various menial jobs allowed her to develop lasting relationships and important alliances. In this crucible of exploitation, Ishigaki forges her working-class consciousness and a vision for the future, one that is legible in Haru’s bond with Japanese workers as well.

Throughout the narrative, then, racism and exploitation often strengthen these bonds and draw workers together. California becomes an important hub for these alliances precisely because “[i]n California the notion that the Japanese are an inferior race is still prevalent. Often Japanese do not even have the liberty to rent and live in houses outside of certain districts […] to avoid the hard, lonely feeling […] the Japanese cling together as closely as they do” (231). Haru highlights the potential political resistance percolating within these communities, but she reads this potential dialectically.

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46 The Congress of Industrial Organizations (C.I.O.), which Haru praises in this passage, brought labor unions across the country together and—unlike many other labor organizations—promoted pan-ethnic worker solidarity.
as well. After drawing the reader’s attention to Japanese immigrants work on American railroads and farms throughout the West Coast, Haru notes the Alien Lands Laws of 1913 and 1920, which disallowed Japanese immigrants from owning land in California. In spite of this history of literal nation building, the government denies these immigrants citizenship and property rights. As a result, they often turned to Japanese nationalism as an alternative narrative of belonging.

Haru explores the way in which class stratification and racism in the U.S. shape immigrant views on Japanese nationalism and empire. Indeed, Haru links Japanese American support for Japanese imperialism back to worker exploitation and Asian exclusion. She notes that Japan “had been more and more controlled by militarists who moved national policy at the point of the sword” (228). Even as she delineates this violent turn in Japanese empire, Haru makes it clear that Japanese American support for this violent turn reflected part devotion to the so-called homeland and part reactionary frustration because of their massive dispossession in the U.S. After all, the anti-Asian legislation kept many immigrants from believing that they could make any kind of long-term “home” in the States.

Haru indexes the damaging effects of this nationalist fervor. During her stay in California, Haru attends a lecture entitled “Lecture on the Truth of the Sino-Japanese Incident.” She describes the workers attending this lecture: “Their bodies, which had suffered from long years of labor, were bent; their bones, thrusting out the skin, were like joints of old trees that had been exposed to wind and rain” (236). An “Army man” assures these workers, “For the sake of eternal peace in the Orient, our Imperial Army is
fighting under blazing skies against savage and merciless China. China was contemptuous of the strength of our army” (236). The soldier sings the many praises of Japanese empire. Eventually, he laces the benevolent logic of a parent into his argument. He says, “In order to save our neighbor, China, we took the present step, without stint of sacrifice, and with the mercy of a parent’s mind” (236). The domestic rhetoric of a neighboring nation enables the convenient expansion of Japanese empire, which recalls—in many respects—Amy Kaplan’s analysis of American empire in “Manifest Domesticity” (2002). In her work, Kaplan interrogates the relationship between domesticity and what she calls “the institutional and discursive processes of national expansion and empire building” (113). Indeed, the rhetoric of domesticity and domestication are often—if not always—integral to imperial expansion. To that end, the soldier compares conquest to a domestic concern between parent and child. He justifies imperial expansion as the responsible duty of a loving parent.

Anti-communism, a rhetorical position held by U.S. and Japanese empires, undergirds this imperialist logic as the soldier decries the supposed Communist takeover of China. When talking about Chiang Kai-shek, for instance, the soldier calls him “a puppet of the Communist Party, and, inciting the ignorant Chinese masses, [he] has made them resist our Army […] the Chinese masses are deceived by Chiang Kai-shek” (237). In reality, of course, the alliance between a nationalist and Communist China was rather tenuous. Still, the soldier warns against a “Chinese population […] drowning in the poison of Communism” (236). Ironically, the political divide between Chiang Kai-shek—leader of the Nationalist Party—and the Communist Party was great, but the nation
unified in opposition to Japanese expansion. The condescending rhetoric of the soldier
to tell of a nation of “ignorant” masses
controlled by a few political leaders. Near the end of his lecture, however, the soldier
speaks rather transparently: “Our nation is a superior nation, unparalleled in the world.
On the day our flag of the rising sun is planted on the Chinese continent, on that day
eternal peace will come” (237). This reasoning, which recalls the imperializing desire to
“know the world” of the Charter Oath that her father so loves, now converts this
expansion into the raison d’être of the Japanese nation. Lofty rhetoric aside, the soldier’s
speech falls on sympathetic ears because of immigrant exploitation in the U.S. Drawing
attention to American complicity, Haru notes that the “honest, quiet, working people
were engulfed in war spirit” (237). In fact, the speech so moves the crowd that they
quickly move to fund a new airplane for the Japanese Army, “a patriotic contribution
from the Los Angeles Japanese” (237).

In contrast, Haru laments the war fever and their willingness to accept what she
calls “false propaganda.” Nonetheless, she makes it clear that their exploitation and
racialized subjugation in the States ignites this fever. Similarly, Azuma identifies this
phenomenon in his work on the Issei population during the Depression. Azuma writes,
“The decade of the 1930s ushered in the ascendancy of militarism in Japan and a
resounding surge of nationalism in the Japanese immigrant community” (163). Rather
than “naturalize” some sort of alliance between the immigrant and the “homeland,”
however, Haru highlights the way in which immigration legislation and worker
exploitation pave the way for these conflicting alliances. As a result, her “whole body
was filled with a hot current of blood, and in [her] mind sorrow and anger ran wildly” (237). She goes on, “[T]here are true patriots left who, though they are few in number, oppose the invasion of China fearlessly, like the pine tree which stands boldly on a steep crag” (238). Of course, Haru identifies herself with these “true patriots.” Through the rhetoric of patriotism, Haru attempts to enlist herself within a tradition of Japanese anti-war radicalism.

The following chapter, “The Soldier’s Notebook,” continues this critique of war fever, imperial expansion, and patriotism. Receiving a soldier’s notebook from an “American writer traveling in China” (240), Haru marshals the soldier’s notes to contest the war.47 As she reads the notebook, Haru describes the writing: “The sentences, too, strove to paint an objective picture of this soldier going to war; they were embellished with brave words like those written in newspapers” (241). Initially, the journal freights the lofty rhetoric of Japanese newspapers and echoes the soldier in the previous chapter. Over time, however, this rhetoric erodes. Haru notes, “But as the diary went on, the borrowed adjectives disappeared, and honest feelings that welled up in him—fear, loneliness, uneasiness—stood naked and exposed on the pages” (241). The soldier’s fear counters the embellished logic and “brave words” of the earlier pages. In this way, Haru interprets the journal as an implicit critique of Japanese empire. Indeed, fear, loneliness, and uneasiness become ciphers for the soldier’s internal irresolution. Haru imagines that

47 Though Ishigaki was completely unaware of it at the time, Lin and Robinson write that it was Agnes Smedley who sent this notebook to Ishigaki (267). Smedley, too, was deeply critical of Japan and supportive of Communist China, which she writes about in some detail in her book *Battle Hymn of China* (1943).
the soldier begins to question the very “brave words” that led him to the war in the first place.

In the same way that she reinterprets the mythology of Madame Nogi as a critique of nationalism and absolute devotion to patriarchal rule, Haru reinterprets this soldier’s notebook as a critique of Japanese imperialism. She imagines questions for the soldier: “Over and over, in order to raise his depressed spirits, he told himself that he was sacrificing his life for the Emperor. But in the corner of this soldier’s mind, did not doubt of the need of his sacrifice reveal its face? Did not his repetitions show his suffering and pain” (244). Reading the soldier against the grain, Haru interrogates the logic of empire. The soldier describes the beheading of two Chinese soldiers in even-keeled prose. Haru indicts the way in which these soldiers grow numb to the constant violence. Though they begin as “ordinary human beings,” eventually “when gentleness was condemned as cowardice and femininity, when cruel violence was exalted as strength and valor, when massacre was made their duty as soldiers […] then these soldiers extinguished their human minds” (245). Haru folds her critique of the soldiers and war more generally within her condemnation of Japanese imperialism and, again, what she calls “the invisible forces which inexorably destroyed men who spoke my language” (247).

These “invisible forces” constitute the Japanese nativism that frustrates Haru throughout the text. Nonetheless, this critique extends beyond the moral erosion and even literal death of the actual soldier, who dies for his nation. Indeed, the soldier’s family falls under the scope of Haru’s interrogation of nativism as well. Haru thinks of “the stooped heavy-eyed old mother, and of the wife forlornly bearing her suffering in the
winds of the fleeting world [...] and within my heart burned hatred of the power that started the war which destroyed this family” (246). Ultimately, then, the duties of the soldier cripple this family. Haru goes on, again, to imagine the questions that must plague each member of this family. She claims to understand “[t]he soldier who dies telling himself that it is for the sake of the nation, the wife who tries to console herself even a little by saying that she lost her husband for the sake of the nation [...] lonely people, clinging to blind faith. But do they really believe it from the bottom of their souls” (246)? Transposing these questions on to this unwitting family, Haru wields a speculative reading of the soldier’s notebook in order to challenge traditional narratives of Japanese loyalty.

In the epilogue, Haru converts her critique of nativism into a politically charged vision of a very different future. Shifting to the present tense, Haru begins the chapter: “Today there is a self inside me which is no longer drifting [...] This self has been born from the suffering and pain which I have seen on the earth, and which has rocked my heart on the traveled pathway of life” (249). A critical class consciousness emerges, one forged in the “intergroup and interracial camaraderie” that Lin and Robinson highlight in the afterword. Indeed, she invokes the working-class women from the prologue in order to frame the narrative. She has a vision: “Before my eyes float the sweat-smeared faces of the women who pulled thick, heavy ropes to build the foundation of our house [...] I trace the lifeless, dry-skinned faces of the girls in the textile factory” (249). By tracing the emergence of her class consciousness back to these women working on the
foundation of her house and the girls in the textile factory, Haru resurrects a history of
gendered labor exploitation in order to imagine an alternative future.

This future projects the “revolutionary élan” that Mike Gold so esteemed as the
engine of proletarian literature. Indeed, this future exhibits a distinct rupture from the
racialized and gendered oppression of the present. Like Bulosan’s construction of this
“Other America” in the final pages of America Is in the Heart, Haru resurrects an often-concealed history of exploited workers in the U.S. and Japan in order to imagine this radical future into being. Haru claims to “hear the weeping voices of women who have lost husbands, mothers who have lost sons […] I hear the suppressed but ever more audible voice of my people reaching to their Chinese brothers across the sea that they shall join hands together against their common oppressors […] this hope is not vain” (250). Amplifying these suppressed voices, Haru draws—like Bulosan—on the rhetoric of hope. In this light, she continues, “[M]any well-known men and women were imprisoned for anti-war activity; that mutinies are reported in the Army; the anti-war leaflets are found in the pockets of dead soldiers; that only the militarists have started and are waging this war” (250). This revolutionary imagining entails a very practical end, one that terminates the Japanese invasion in China; however, it moves beyond this practical end as well.

The utopic transformation culminates in what Haru calls a “triumphant spring.” This spring is shot through with transnational connections and a desire to constellate oppressed communities across countries against their oppressors. Haru first notes, “When spring comes in America, I see white cherry-blossom petals drifting into the cool pool of
the garden where I played as a child. My country lives in my heart” (251). Echoing Bulosan’s depiction of the heart, Haru—perhaps problematically—imagines the heart as a space of transnational possibility, a palimpsest of national belonging. Still, Haru’s image does not transfigure America into the ultimate site of utopic potentiality. Instead, she invokes a revolutionary image: “Around me there are many people moving in a single tide, their warm hands clasping mine. And I know the time will come when the voice of my people, like silent buds growing unseen under snow, will burst forth gloriously in triumphant, unconquerable spring” (250, 251). This “single tide” of communal resistance resonates with the “restless wave” of the title. In an image that invokes a Marxist teleological history, Haru weaves an inevitable revolution into the turning of the seasons. This revolution does not just embody the end of war and Japanese invasion; it embodies the ultimate redemption and justification of an exploited, gendered, and racialized working class. After tracing multiple axes of oppression, Haru envisions the end of oppression through the unification of working women, immigrant laborers, and anti-war activists.

“Triumphant Spring”

Like Bulosan and Tsiang, Ishigaki utilizes the tropes of the proletarian genre in order to envision the terminus of capitalism. This terminus also destroys “the invisible forces” of nativism that animate Japanese Empire. Compounding a critique of gendered labor exploitation and nativism, Ishigaki utilizes her fictional counterpart, Haru, to structure her trenchant condemnation of American and Japanese empires. Indeed, gender,
race, and class emerge as co-determinant factors in each imperial regime. Instead of subordinating these discursive constructions to class stratification, this analytic accounts for the way in which these factors are mutually constitutive. Though Grace Hong’s remarkable historicization of this intersectional analytic insists on the primacy of the 1970s and 1980s in the formation of “women of color feminist practice” (xix), Restless Wave stands as an important—if somewhat unique—harbinger to this mode of critique, one that makes legible important connections between the theoretical concerns of 1970s activism and Depression-era radicalism and the old left. In large part, critics ignore significant continuities between women of color feminist critique and the old left precisely because—as Foley notes—“The 1930s Communist Party did not […] place adequate stress upon the ‘woman question’ and to a degree uncritically reproduced the sexism of the dominant culture” (215). Turning to Ishigaki, however, renders these continuities legible—without overlooking the clear differences in two disparate historical contexts and political projects—and therefore reveals the way in which her Marxist critique indicts gendered and racialized exploitation as significant vectors in the matrix of class struggle.

In this light, the text also articulates an important contribution to our understanding of 1930s women’s proletarian fiction. If Rabinowitz insists, “Women’s revolutionary fiction rephrased the rhetoric that encoded the proletariat as masculine by putting female sexuality and maternity into working-class narratives” (182), then this novel foregrounds maternity and inserts ethnic-labor markets into our understanding of working-class narratives. It demands that racialization be understood as an integral
component of class stratification. This text also animates important transnational connections. While proletarian novels like John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) graft the proletarian narrative onto a nativist tradition and envision the working class as a uniquely “American” tragedy, *Restless Wave* draws attention to a diasporic working class that spans continents and encompasses the global displacements of capitalism. As a result, this text stands in blatant contrast to other Japanese American narratives from the same period as well.

If Japanese American narratives from this era often invoke a “conversion” experience in order to overcome the plight of the immigrant who is unable to assimilate, then Ishigaki’s text rejects this conversion template. Yoonmee Chang writes, “Asian American literature has been historically written under pressures to mute sociopolitical critique, rendering many Asian American authors and texts complicit with the silencing of their own class inequities” (6, 7). Falling in line with much of the scholarship on pre-1965 Asian American literature, Chang highlights an important and suppressed subtext to Asian American literature, one that certainly merits exploration. Nonetheless, Ishigaki’s narrative often amplifies its sociopolitical critique even in spite of these tremendous pressures. After all, Lin and Robinson note that both the CIA and FBI had files on “Haru Matsui,” and *Restless Wave* “was a central text in the government’s file on Ayako” (270). Certainly, these pressures shaped the text. In the end, Haru’s critique perhaps relies unevenly on a critique of Japanese imperialism, which threatens to conceal the violent subtext of American empire and class struggle. Nonetheless, she rejects the conversion
narrative and therefore assimilation as the ultimate goal of the immigrant, which probably led—at least in part—to these government files in the first place.

Incorporating the tropes of a proletarian fictional autobiography, Ishigaki challenges our understanding of pre-1965 Asian American literature as muted by overwhelming social pressures. While exclusionary legislation and governmental surveillance certainly impact these narratives, *Restless Wave*—like the work of Tsiang and Bulosan—draws our attention to an often-overlooked and politically charged intersection between proletarian and Asian American literature. From this intersection, an important critique of American capitalism, Japanese empire, and American nativism emerges. It is through this critique that Ishigaki imagines a revolutionary futurity in the final pages of her narrative, one that moves beyond gender, race, and class inequalities.

The text “unfolds the bleakest moment of world history, inter-Asian politics, women’s movements, labor struggles, and interethnic tension, both in Asia and the United States (Lin and Robinson 282), but it also resurrects a history of worker and anti-war activism in order to articulate this critical futurity. Finally, *Restless Wave* poses a critique of and imagines a lyrical end to capitalism. As a result, it both fits within and complicates the literary formation of Asian American radicalism that I have begun to outline in this dissertation.
Chapter 4: “You No Can Beat da Plantation”: Protest, Revolution, and Disillusionment in Milton Murayama’s *All I Asking for Is My Body*

Whenever this happens, everybody says, “See? Loi Loi, buang buang, you no can beat da plantation,” and loafs.


Capital is dead labour, that vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks. The time during which the labourer works, is the time during which the capitalist consumes the labour-power he has purchased of him.

Karl Marx, *Capital* (1867)

In 1898, President William McKinley signed the Treaty of Annexation, which officially claimed Hawai‘i as a U.S. territory. Setting the stage for American empire, the annexation was a part of the broader imperial project that would lead the U.S. to incorporate other territories like the Philippines, Cuba, Guam, and Puerto Rico. As a result, America would begin the new century as a burgeoning overseas imperial power and add yet another layer of colonization and economic exploitation to Hawai‘i’s long history of imperial subjection. In the following decades, the Hawaiian economy depended almost entirely on exploited labor and a vulnerable workforce of both Native Hawaiian and immigrant workers. Despite the extreme economic stratification that pervaded Hawai‘i, these working communities helped constitute a vibrant and diverse culture on the islands, as well as a long history of activism.
Set among these pre-World War II communities in the sugar plantations of Hawai‘i, Milton Murayama’s late proletarian novel *All I Asking for Is My Body* (1959/1975) depicts the indentured lives of the Japanese American Oyama family as they work to overcome multiple generations of debt to the plantation. The protagonist Kiyoshi Oyama—referred to as Kiyo throughout the novel—grows up as the youngest son and victim of the family’s debt. Eventually, however, Kiyo overcomes this debt by winning a large sum of money through gambling. After working for years on the plantation, and following a successful stint in local and regional boxing, Kiyo joins the military. While waiting to be deployed, he wins enough money to overcome the family’s substantial debt of six thousand dollars. In the climactic moments of the narrative, a “*deus ex machina*” salvages what appears to be a hopeless situation (Sumida 111). With this peculiar literary device in mind, I argue that Murayama’s narrative makes legible an important literary-historical shift in Asian American literature. In line with the standard tropes of the proletarian novel, Murayama initially privileges working-class solidarity and Kiyo’s emerging class consciousness. As the narrative develops, however, this class consciousness becomes secondary to Kiyo’s individual freedom from the plantation. The novel takes on the tropes of the more traditional *bildungsroman*, which privileges the individual. Rather than rely on protest and revolution for economic liberation, Kiyo resorts to “crap games” to escape his debt. After seeing the failure of various strikes and coalitions, then, Kiyo gives up on revolution as a political possibility. Ultimately, I argue that this novel registers the waning of the revolutionary imaginary in Asian American literature.
Murayama’s account of Kiyo’s life chronicles years of worker exploitation. In this way, the sugar plantations constitute an oppressive environment, which Kiyo finally escapes in the last pages of the novel. Describing the emergence of these plantations in Hawai‘i, Ronald Takaki writes, “Between 1835 and 1920 planters had developed the sugar kingdom and inducted workers of many nationalities into a new world of labor and production; workers, in turn, had transformed both the economic and political terrain […]. By 1920 the industry was reaching beyond sugar to pineapple production and toward tourism” (xi). As Sally Engle Merry notes, these plantations fractured and dispersed Native Hawaiian communities. She maintains, “The opportunity for private landownership, soon made available to foreigners, proved a boon to the nascent sugar plantation economy. This economy, resting largely in foreign hands, ultimately displaced the vast majority of Hawaiian commoners from their lands” (5). Forced from their land, Native Hawaiians often went to work on the plantation, laboring alongside immigrants from China, Japan, the Philippines, and elsewhere.

At the turn of the century, however, the conditions of labor on the plantations began to shift. Edward D. Beechert writes, “The annexation of Hawaii in 1898 and the abolition of the penal contract drastically altered the terms of labor supply” (55). The 1900 Organic Act officially “established Hawaii as a territory of the United States on June 14 [and] abolished the contract-labor system” (Takaki 149).48 From then on, Beechert argues, “[O]nly two forms of labor would be available—day labor and short-

48 The Organic Act had serious effects on the sugar plantations. Takaki notes, “After annexation and the prohibition of contract labor in the Territory of Hawaii, laborers were no longer bound to the plantations, and planters anxiously witnessed an exodus of Japanese laborers to the mainland” (147).
and long-term contracting” (55). Despite these relative legal gains, however, the low wages of the plantations continued to ensnare working-class families in an overwhelming amount of debt. In this way, plantations relied on a vulnerable workforce unable to overcome these debts.

In response to legal changes and terrible wages, workers began to organize and fight back. Beechert continues, “The realities of labor supply and the costs of importing labor required making do with whatever was available. Efforts by plantations in the Hawaii strikes of 1909, 1920, and 1924 proved the use of strikebreakers an expensive, largely futile exercise” (57). During this period, Beechert notes that there was “a deep belief by management that an ethnically diverse work force would prevent collaboration” (58). Attempting to divide the work force, management often pitted ethnic groups against one another. Throughout his narrative, Murayama critiques these ethnic divisions and indexes their detrimental effects on the working-class community.

Despite Murayama’s clear-cut critique, however, the novel also documents Kiyo’s eventual disillusionment with strikes, protest, and revolution. This disillusionment reveals a dramatic change in both political perspective and historical circumstance. During the Cold War and the McCarthy era, political revolution and communist critique fell away from the prevailing political discourse. Indeed, talk of protest and Marx signified patriotic

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49 Plantations used debt, low wages, and ethnic divisions to retain labor. In this respect, Carol A. Maclean argues that plantation centers actually developed a variety of means for labor control. She writes, “The plantation center had distinctive features as a workplace, a community, and a landscape. It developed new policies of pay and discipline that segregated workers, established housing and food policies that bound workers to the location for sustenance and shelter, and built plantation stores that used debt to keep them for lengthy stays” (108).
disloyalty, ideological ties to the Soviet Union, and the potential undoing of America democracy. Through the implementation of anti-Communist institutional structures like the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), which lasted from 1938 to 1975, and the investigations of Senator Joseph McCarthy, Marxist critique became wholly synonymous with treason. Writing on left-leaning African American literature from the same period, Anthony Dawahare rightly claims, “The U.S. government knew who its enemies were, and they were precisely those making the most uncompromising demands for social equality in the United States, those calling for interracial working-class unity and the end to capitalism” (xviii). These institutional structures worked to dissolve interracial working-class unity and turned even the most nuanced and liberal reformist critiques into grounds for persecution and even deportation.

While anti-communist institutional structures took aim at interracial solidarity in the working class, anti-Japanese racism laid the groundwork for martial law in Hawai‘i. Gary Y. Okihiro writes, “[A]s early as World War I, military intelligence saw local Japanese as an implanted ‘Fifth Column’—a sinister alien presence within the republic’s gates—waiting Japan’s command to spring to action” (xiii). Decades before World War II, anti-Japanese anxieties undergirded military intelligence and paved the way for martial law. Describing the expansive reach of this law, Okihiro notes,

[Martial law] established a curfew and prohibited assemblies and the operation of automobiles, except by military permission; it stripped ‘enemy aliens’ of their telephones; it closed down foreign language newspapers, theaters, and pool halls; and it regulated radios, firearms, cameras, and liquor. With one stroke of a pen, martial law allowed extensive control over the lives of civilians. (125)
In December of 1941, only hours after the Pearl Harbor attack, president Franklin D. Roosevelt declared martial law in Hawai‘i.

Nonetheless, Okihiro makes it clear that the plans for martial law began decades earlier because of anxieties about Japanese strikes and labor organizing in Hawai‘i. Colonel John L. De Witt, who “would become commander in charge of the Western Defense Command during World War II,” contributed to the War Plans Division’s preliminary suggestions for martial law in the 1920s (Okihiro 124). Explaining De Witt’s plans, Okihiro writes, “The key features of De Witt’s plan included martial law, selective detention rather than mass confinement, and the twin purposes of ensuring internal security and maximizing labor productivity” (124, 125). Labor productivity, then, was integral to martial law, which was a direct result of both anti-Japanese and anti-union anxiety.

In the decades following World War II, what Nelson Lichtenstein calls the “erosion of the union idea” supplanted the robust leftist culture of the previous decades throughout the U.S. He writes, “During the 1950s and 1960s the reputation of American unions and of the entire New Deal bargaining system began a precipitous decline. Even as unions reached their twentieth century apogee […] the old labor question practically vanished from popular political discourse” (141). This precipitous decline mirrored a significant decrease in worker’s strikes and labor agitation, revealing a historical climate in which revolutionary change was no longer imaginable and even considered poisonous to more “practical” political goals. Lichtenstein goes on to outline multiple contributing factors to this major shift in the political landscape:
Many will point to McCarthyism, but the anti-Communist purges that destroyed the CIO left wing proved but a small part of the answer. For those intellectuals and writers oriented toward the Communist Party, the wrong unionists won office and the progressives were purged from labor’s ranks, thus opening the door to a social and foreign-policy bargain that emasculated unions, ensured the dominance of capital, and advanced the interests of the Cold War state. (159)

During this period, collective bargaining dominated political discourse and concealed the total evacuation of radical politics under a banner of labor accord and supposed resolution. If—as Michael Denning suggests in his work on the Popular Front—Marxist critique began to enter the cultural vernacular in the 1930s, then it would recede just as quickly only a few decades later.

With anticomunism on the rise, President Harry S. Truman tethered American capitalism closely to the rhetoric of freedom and individualism. As Christina Klein notes in *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (2003):

The Truman administration forged this Cold War historical bloc in large part by boosting anticomunism […] to the status of national ideology. Beginning with the Truman Doctrine speech in 1947, the president spearheaded a campaign designed to sell his foreign policy […] Truman deployed anticomunism as a political weapon against the competing alternatives of left and right. (33, 34)

Truman’s important 1947 speech appeals to the rhetoric of freedom, pitting communist governments against the freedom and independence of their nations’ subjects. Throughout the speech, the president constantly alludes to the significance of freedom. Truman declares, “I believe that it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples […] I believe that we must assist free peoples to work out their own destinies in their own way […] In helping free and independent nations to maintain their freedom, the United States will be giving effect to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations” (Truman Doctrine). This document hinges, then, on the importance of freedom and
independence, which are—according to Truman—under attack by communist nations.

While this rhetorical battle is writ large on the foreign policy of U.S. empire, I claim that it mirrors the way in which Murayama explains his use of pidgin in the novel. Similarly, Kiyo will draw on the importance of freedom and independence as he attempts to overcome his debt to the plantation.

Despite his emphasis on freedom, however, Truman’s tirade against anticommunism would wreak havoc on the lives of “free” Americans, whether they had actual ties to communism and the Soviet bloc or not. Klein maintains, “Thousands of Americans, overwhelmingly on the left-liberal side of the spectrum lost their jobs and had their reputations ruined” because they were accused of being communists (34). The institutional structures that bore down on the lives of these Americans also took aim at the Popular Front coalitions and rhetoric of previous decades. No longer as concerned with fascism more broadly, the U.S. honed in on its Soviet target, seeking to eradicate any and all Marxian alliances. Klein claims:

Between 1948 to 1955 the Attorney General’s office and the House Committee on Un-American Activities published long lists of allegedly subversive organizations, participation in any of which was grounds for suspicion, a hearing before a loyalty board, and often dismissal from one’s job. These actions quickly winnowed the ranks of the Popular Front and decimated its institutional structure. (34)

To this end, the Cold War and its concomitant policies would decimate the revolutionary imaginary as well. Marxist revolution, then, became a fascist delusion of Soviet rhetoric, one that mainstream Americans understood as devoid of freedom, independence, and democratic ideals.
Murayama’s novel bears the marks of this shifting political terrain and this extremely fraught cultural context. Rob Wilson writes, “Milton Murayama—alias Morris Kiyo Oyama—was able to become, against all social odds in the postwar period of Civil Rights struggles and wars in Asia, a writer of ethnic integrity, postcolonial polyphony, historical sway, racial tensions, and global/local vision” (475). Indeed, the novel embodies each of these political tensions and contradictions. Loyal to the pidgin dialect of his novel, Murayama refuses to compromise his linguistic style. Moreover, he stages a polyphony that privileges this dialect and reveals important generational and racial tensions in the working class. Still, the working-class politics of this novel lose traction as the narrative develops. Eventually, Kiyo opts to fend for himself. For these reasons, this chapter uses the novel as a kind of map on which we can trace these political tensions and historical changes in the American past.

**Pidgin and the Working Class**

Thoroughly entrenched in familiar tropes from the proletarian genre, *All I Asking for Is My Body* initially marshals these tropes toward class critique but stagnates in the final pages precisely because it rejects protest and revolution as a realistic possibility. The omission of effective protest may be explained by the rather peculiar book history of this novel. Spanning multiple decades, the book was written and revised in the thirty years that followed World War II and therefore takes shape in the midst of this Cold War historical context and thus Lichtenstein’s “precipitous decline.” The first part of the novel, “I’ll Crack Your Head Kotsun,” was published as a short story in *Arizona*
Quarterly in 1959. This fairly brief story follows Kiyo’s adolescent friendship with the son of a Japanese prostitute, who lives and works in the Filipino labor camps. Eventually, the two part ways because of Kiyo’s parents’ disapproval. In his brief biography, Seri Luangphinit notes that Murayama had finished a draft of his novel in the early 1950s as a Master’s student at Columbia University, but the novel was not published until 1975 (251). In the end, the narrative grew to encompass three fairly disparate parts of Kiyo’s childhood and teenage years. Many presses, however, refused to publish a text that relied so heavily on pidgin. As a result, Murayama would have to form his own press in California in order to publish the novel.

Sixteen years after the original publication of “I’ll Crack Your Head Kotsun,” Supa Press, a name that Murayama and his wife took from their dog Supa, would publish the narrative in its full form. Stephen Sumida writes, “[I]n 1975 All I Asking for Is My Body came off the Supa Press, rippling with pidgin and mixed languages and all the local color of Murayama’s style, just exactly the way the author wanted it” (112). Refusing to compromise the idiosyncratic style of the novel, then, Murayama waited until it could appear in the local vernacular. In criticism, scholars often praise Murayama’s use of pidgin: the critic Bonnie TuSmith writes, for instance, “[T]he novel offers a view of the United States that is fundamentally multicultural and comfortably multilingual. In Kiyo’s world, linguistic versatility is a given and ‘no big deal.’ Murayama’s work can be viewed as a significant step in the evolution from standard to vernacular English in ethnic American literature” (54). TuSmith lauds the novel for foregrounding protagonists who converse in multiple languages.
Tracing the origins of pidgin back to the plantation, Morris Young outlines a brief history of pidgin. He claims, “[A] pidgin language developed on the plantation as a rudimentary form of communication. The plantation management needed to be able to direct their multiethnic and multilingual workers, and so used a simple language system intermixed with vocabulary from Hawaiian, Japanese, Chinese, English, and other languages” (409). Young goes on to trace the historical context of pidgin—looking to Murayama’s novel specifically—in order to “describe how the plantation and English Standard school have acted as tropes in Hawaii’s local literature producing narratives written in response to the anxiety about race, class, and language generated by these institutions” (423). Critics have taken up the politics of pidgin in some detail, especially as it relates to the intergenerational tensions of Japanese American families in the novel and, of course, the exploitative tactics of the plantation, American capital, and imperialism. These scholars index the progressive and even subversive potential of pidgin.

When referring to his use of pidgin, however, Murayama appears to subscribe to a fairly basic philosophy of verisimilitude. In a separate publication entitled “Problems of Writing in Dialect” (1977), Murayama notes, “The aim of writing is to get as close as possible to the experience, and if the experience is dialect, you write dialect” (7). If this strict adherence to realism appears to guide Murayama’s representations of language, then it also extends to his representations of culture. He states, “When you’re dealing with two conflicting cultures, you face a problem. Are you going to be pro one, pro the other, or impartial? If impartial, how? What I worked out was simple: I will use the same
yardstick of honesty on both; I will criticize the Japanese family system with the same
candor with which I criticize the plantation system” (9). This two-pronged critique, which
Murayama calls “impartial,” allows him to indict both Japanese tradition and American
capital. Murayama goes on, elucidating some of the rhetorical questions that animate his
work, “But what about the priority of values? Which is number one? […] Freedom was
freeing oneself from group loyalties and collective myths and stereotypes. Freedom was
finally freedom of mind” (9). Emphasizing “freedom of mind,” Murayama’s values echo
Truman’s articulations of freedom and independence. This historical resonance is no
coincidence. Indeed, Murayama’s definition of freedom becomes integral to
understanding the final chapters in this novel. Moreover, this rather abstract reference to
“freedom” recurs in critical work on the novel as well.

The word “freedom” comes up in Elaine Kim’s foundational work *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context*. Kim argues, “*All I Asking for Is My Body* is a rejection of the oppressive aspects of the
Japanese family system and the plantation system that nurtured it, in favor of the freedom
of the individual” (146). In this context, freedom signifies solely for the individual. While
freedom for the individual is incredibly important, this vision of individual freedom
eventually supplants Kiyo’s desire for collective resistance. What begins as a fairly
experimental proletarian novel turns into a somewhat uneven bildungsroman. In the final
chapter, freedom comes to Kiyo and his family, but not to the other plantation workers,
who remain indebted to the system. Thus, Murayama’s critique does not culminate in the
same revolutionary vision that characterizes the other novels in this dissertation. Joan
Chiung-huei Chang observes, Kiyo’s supposed “depression results from the irony that after he has gained physical freedom from the family, he simply gives away his autonomy to this war when he enlists in the army” (168). Chang, then, highlights the limits of Kiyo’s supposed freedom.

Still, critics tend to read the narrative “as a counter discourse to that of domination,” one that, Benzi Zhang suggests, “has the effect of interrupting the canonized horizon of history. Starting from an extremely marginal position, Japanese-American literature has been undergoing a long process in which it slowly legitimates its own view of history” (37). It is certainly worthwhile to take up this critical lens in order to read the novel as a postcolonial critique of American empire. In this same vein, Chang writes, “The transformation of pidgin from an index of shame and oppression to an expression of pride and emancipation corresponds to the theme of this novel: a transformation from the plantation mentality to a new consciousness, however subjective, of ethnic autonomy” (162). These readings trace important counter-hegemonic strategies within the novel, but these strategies draw largely on a postcolonial critique of plantation labor, class stratification, and American annexation.

Shifting the focus from postcolonial critique to a Marxian lens, Timothy Libretti reads the novel as a satirical depiction of capitalist exploitation. Libretti claims, “The novel figures, then, a recognition that the interests of the Japanese working class in Hawai‘i do not lie with the Japanese capitalist imperialist mission but rather with the formation of a pan-Asian working-class nationalist consciousness” (34). He highlights this significant recognition within the novel and therefore reads the ending of the novel as
a satirical indictment of the plantation system. He notes, “While the formation of this solidarity consciousness is never positively represented in the novel, Murayama demonstrates the need for it negatively through satire; his message is unambiguous as he demonstrates the need for a militant working-class nationalist response to Asian American exploitation and oppression in the U.S” (34). In the final sentences, however, Kiyo sincerely assures Tosh, “I think the Oyama luck has finally turned around” (Murayama 103). I argue that the novel’s ending lends credence to gambling as a legitimate expression of “individual freedom” and a bastion of hope against capitalist exploitation, which throws any satirical reading into question. Thus, Kiyo does not seem to need a “militant working-class nationalist response.”

Although the novel appeals to working-class solidarity and “pan-Asian working-class nationalist consciousness” early on in the narrative, it eventually denounces this solidarity and privileges Kiyo’s ability to achieve his own freedom. Rather than pin the blame and thus this broader historical trend in politics entirely on Murayama, however, this chapter uses this text as an essential case study in Asian American literature, one that makes legible the broader political shifts that animated the Cold War. This turning away from working-class solidarity toward “individual freedom” makes legible the Cold War’s demonization and clear devaluation of Marxist critique.

In this regard, Kiyo’s early admiration for radical politics is eventually displaced by a set of more practical goals. After all, overcoming the family debt seems impossible enough, but ending the exploitative tactics of the plantation would require an entirely different approach and perhaps even a violent revolution. To this end, Kiyo gives up on
mass protest and the tactic of strikes fairly early on precisely because authorities target and diffuse these efforts rather quickly. Furthermore, pan-ethnic solidarity seems unlikely, as the Filipino and Japanese workers often neutralize protest efforts through “scabbing.” As a result of these failures, Kiyo worries primarily about his own well-being and the overwhelming debt of his family.

In this regard, the novel follows the journey and character arc of Kiyo. Appearing to fit within the basic strictures of the bildungsroman, the narrative details Kiyo’s “coming of age.” Indeed, Murayama’s novel threatens to fall in line with what Barbara Foley outlines as the basic ideological tendencies of the traditional bildungsroman. When discussing the genre, Foley notes that the bildungsroman “presupposes a ‘character’ possessing intrinsic potentialities who enters an ‘environment’ that either fulfills or restricts his/her individuality. The bildungsroman, which purports transparently to convey the essential qualities of both self and world, thus furnishes the textual epitome of ‘programmatic individualism’” (323). Because of its focus on individualism, Foley identifies the traditional bildungsroman as a bourgeois form. She, however, distinguishes this traditional form from what she calls the proletarian bildungsroman, which tends to “treat working-class protagonists in the process of acquiring militant or revolutionary class consciousness” (327). As I have noted in previous chapters, writers of the proletarian bildungsroman “harness […] the conventions of a quintessentially bourgeois genre, the bildungsroman, to serve left-wing political ends” (343). While Murayama’s narrative initially privileges pan-ethnic solidarity and revolutionary class consciousness, it eventually foregrounds the individual and contradicts what at first appears to be “left-
wing political ends.” Finally, Kiyo seems to achieve his “freedom of mind,” but this individual liberation from the plantation system does nothing for the workers who remain trapped within it. In the end, then, the narrative cuts against the rhetorical tactics of the proletarian bildungsroman because Kiyo’s class consciousness never really fully develops.

Wilson calls the entire “Oyama saga,” which now features four novels—*All I Asking for Is My Body* (1975), *Five Years on a Rock* (1994), *Plantation Boy* (1998), and the more recent *Dying in a Strange Land* (2008)—a “fictionalized autobiography.” Wilson then goes on to describe *All I Asking for Is My Body*’s effective use of history: “tangling the self into this Oyama family, this novel also tells the story of the rise of the Japanese plantation workers in Hawai‘i, the issei and nisei, into middle-class success and diaspora from Japan to Hawai‘i and the USA” (476). Wilson’s suggestive description links this novel to the proletarian autobiographies of Carlos Bulosan and Ayako Ishigaki. Indeed, the autobiographical elements perhaps complicate any impulse to follow the traditional development narrative of a proletarian bildungsroman, which relies somewhat schematically on a progressive account of class consciousness. Instead, Kiyo narrowly escapes the nearly inescapable structures of exploitation that perpetuate the plantation system in Hawai‘i. Rather than imagine a revolution that liberates all of Hawai‘i’s working class, Kiyo liberates his family. Near the end of the novel, Kiyo insists that he has “manufactured some of the luck, but I think the Oyama luck has finally turned

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50 Written over the course of five decades, each of these novels is told from the perspective of a different member of the Oyama family. *All I Asking for Is My Body* is told from the perspective of Kiyo.
around” (103). Dependent on this narrative of mere coincidence and “luck,” the resolution of Murayama’s novel depends solely on the family’s “turn” in luck, rather than a new understanding of class exploitation.

Long before his luck turns, however, Kiyo grows up surrounded by exploitation, diverse cultures, and multiple languages. In the opening pages, Kiyo explains the mixture of languages that pervade his youth: “[W]e spoke four languages: good English in school pidgin English among ourselves, good or pidgin Japanese to our parents and the other old folks” (5). Through speaking various languages, Kiyo learns to negotiate a range of communities and contrasting social relationships. Indeed, he speaks Japanese with his parents, English with his teachers, and pidgin with his friends and coworkers. In this regard, the different uses of English and pidgin make legible certain social relations throughout Hawai‘i. When interacting with a fellow student, for example, Kiyo claims, “She was acting too damn haolefied. Whenever anybody spoke goody-good English outside of school, we razzed them, ‘You think you haole, eh?’ ‘You think you shit ice cream?’” (63). “Goody-good English” was for school and haoles only, and thus pidgin became the standard language for Kiyo and his friends.

Furthermore, Murayama articulates the subversive potential of pidgin throughout the novel. Kiyo goes on, “At the same time the radio and haole newspapers were saying over and over, ‘Be American. Speak English.’ Pidgin was foreign” (63). Speaking pidgin literally articulated a refusal to speak English and “be American”; it signified a clear refusal of assimilation. As Susan Najita writes, “The politics of pidgin facilitate the emergence of local identity through a critical alliance, one that recognizes and challenges
the way the homeland’s cultural values are translated and resignified in the colonial context” (113). While these state and cultural institutions urge immigrants to speak the English language, Kiyo and his friends reject the demands of these institutional structures. Despite the efforts of various newspapers and radio shows, Kiyo, his friends, and—as I claim in the following pages—the working class refuse to fully adopt the hegemonic English language as their own.

In this regard, pidgin becomes a subversive tool within the novel and the lingua franca for the working class. Past critics document the “double-lingual discourse” in the novel, which “undergoes a transformation and becomes multi-lingual, i.e., a polyglot discourse of different Japaneses and Englishes” (Chang 160). This polyglot discourse becomes the quintessential language of the working class in Hawai‘i. Similarly, Najita writes, “[P]idin is the language of interethnic solidarity on the plantation, […] it is the means by which groups who speak different languages negotiate a mutual, shared politics of oppositionality” (130). After all, Ronald Takaki confirms, “As pidgin English became the common language of plantation laborers and their families, it enabled people from different countries to communicate with each other and helped to create a new island identity for them” (119). He goes on, “On the plantations, pidgin English began to give its users a working class as well as a Hawaiian or ‘local’ identity” (119). While Young rightly suggests that pidgin initially emerges as a means for the plantation management to communicate to an ethnically diverse workforce, Kiyo and his fellow workers eventually co-opt this language as a tool to thwart the plantation.

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Using this dialect enables strategic alliances, working-class solidarity, and pan-ethnic communities. When working on the plantation, Kiyo details an important conversation between two workers: “‘Eassy, eassy, all right,’ Awai watches Philemon, ‘take care the body. You work too hard, bye ‘n’ bye, the plantation cut down the price. Use your cabeza” (40). Awai is Native Hawaiian and Philemon is Filipino. In fact, the work crew is predominately Filipino. Kiyo notes, “It’s a Filipino gang except for Awai, Mr. Nosawa and me” (40). Despite these linguistic and cultural differences, this crew of Filipino, Japanese, and Native Hawaiian workers uses pidgin to communicate and educate one another. Moreover, by working with the Filipino gang, Kiyo makes a clear effort to cross ethnic boundaries and disrupt the plantation’s attempts to divide ethnic workers.

If the working class relies on pidgin to communicate, however, the ranking bosses, of course, often use the language of the colonizer. The ability to speak English even enabled immigrants to inhabit a fairly limited position of power within the plantation. When Kiyo describes his father’s admiration for his grandfather, he notes, “Grandfather was working for the Canadian consul in Tokyo. Father kind of bragged about him, saying that he was educated unlike most of the immigrants to Hawaii. He spoke English so his first job on the plantation was that of luna” (42). While the ability to speak English suggests an ability to speak the language of power and thereby gain a relative position of power, pidgin becomes the channel of communication and potential subversion for the working classes.

51 As Murayama notes later on in the narrative, the luna was a supervisory position on the plantation.
These workers use pidgin to protect the laborer and “work” the system. Awai encourages Philemon to take care of his body. As Philemon nearly overheats, Awai assures him there is no use in exhaustion. Awai tells him, “The fucking sun too hot! Yot yot the sun!” (39). While Philemon imagines that the hard work will literally yield a larger profit, Awai reminds him that this is not the case. Kiyo goes on to explain, “On days when we all work hard and fast and make $3 a head, the plantation cuts the rate the next day so that we can make $1.50 for the same production” (40). For this reason, it does not pay to work harder. Awai expounds on this fact while they work in the fields. Kiyo notes that Philemon has the ability to work the hardest because of his physical build and age, and so he sets the pace for the crew. Despite this fact, Awai advises Philemon against a pace that will exhaust the body and cut the value of their production.

The workers, then, use this language in their effort to “cheat” the plantation system and the logic of capital. After all, the plantation depends on the renewable labor of these workers, and it will extrapolate as much labor as possible. In other words, the plantation system does not offer or factor in protection for their bodies. In a famous passage from his multi-volume work Capital (1867), Karl Marx similarly insists, “Capital is dead labour, that vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks. The time during which the labourer works, is the time during which the capitalist consumes the labour-power he has purchased of him” (342).

Engineered to consume labor-power, the system will extract all that it can from the body of the worker. Without having ever read Marx, Awai is keenly aware of this fact. Awai tells Philemon to use his “cabeza” and consider the consequences and repercussions of
expending more labor power than is necessary. In the end, however, the entire gang
realizes the unrelenting logic of the plantation. Kiyo observes that after each pay cut “the
crew says, ‘See? Loi Loi, buang buang, you no can beat da plantation,’ and loafs” (40).
Like the “house” in Vegas, the plantation always wins. It seems that no matter how
Philemon, Awai, or Kiyo try they all become victims of the plantation.

Throughout this rather short chapter, Kiyo explains the careful balancing act of
plantation work. On the one hand, the workers must take care of their own bodies, watch
their pace, and ensure that they do not work so hard that they receive a pay cut. On the
other hand, they need to work at a pace that allows them to keep their jobs. In this same
chapter, Kiyo observes, “[T]he luna (straw boss) comes over and tells Philemon, ‘You no
pock around too much. Bye ‘n’ bye the beeg boss come. Philemon sighs and picks
himself up, and in a second he’s swinging his pick into the caked ground and shoveling
chunks of dirt onto the bank” (40). In this passage, the crew boss reveals the managerial
roots of pidgin, which momentarily becomes a language of discipline in this scene. Under
the watch of various bosses, the crew must work at a certain pace in order to satisfy the
plantation oversight. Despite the subversive potential of pidgin, they are reminded of
Awai’s redundant warning: try as you may, “[Y]ou no can beat da plantation.”

**Labor, the Body, and the Plantation**

The body, as the very title of the novel suggests, becomes a contested source of
labor, power, and control. *All I Asking for is My Body* signals the discontent of these
workers, who are asked to sacrifice their bodies to the system. Kiyo’s older brother Tosh
continually fights with his parents for this very reason. After fighting with his mother, Tosh tells his brother, “‘Shit, all I asking for is my body. I doan wanna die on the plantation like these other dumb dodos. Sometimes I get so mad I wanna kill them, you know what I mean?’” (48). Using pidgin with his brother, Tosh echoes the sentiments of Awai. Moreover, Tosh remains frustrated with the lack of class consciousness that surrounds him, the “dumb dodos.” Tosh and Awai rely on a semi-developed class consciousness that can decipher the class warfare that surrounds them, and thus they are frustrated with the family members and workers who are not able or perhaps choose not to understand these antagonistic class relations that perpetually undergird plantation life in Hawai‘i.

Tosh identifies certain Japanese values as complicit in the plantation’s broader system of worker exploitation. He says, “Bullshit. These Bulaheads, they no can see they so poor because they poop so many kid […] Papa, he been do his big thing already, he was a filial number one son, so now he figure his turn to sit back and catch the gravy. I doan think it bother him if we all die on the plantation so long as we filial” (48). Tosh’s growing dissatisfaction results from his parents’ inability to work off this debt and their clear resolve to rely on their kids for work, money, and survival. Tosh insists, “The whole system is upside down. You pay and pay and you never pay enough. And they treat me like I was the bad guy. They want me to be a nice guy so they can bury me alive. I no can see that. The more you shut up. The better they look” (47). In this context, the filial system that characterizes Japanese families becomes a tool of the plantation.
Later in the narrative, Kiyo asks his father about this overwhelming debt. His father responds with a lengthy account of his debt, which of course begins with his work at the plantation. After quitting his job there, his father takes up fishing, but this new profession does not “pan out” (89). Still, even his father has difficulty pinning the blame on one particular culprit. Kiyo recalls, “He stopped, startled, ‘Hmmmm. The Depression. All the fish in the area had been fished out. There were too many fishermen.’ ‘Why didn’t you quit earlier?’” (89). As he struggles to explain, it becomes clear that his father does not—or perhaps refuses to—understand the class relations that surround him. His father states, “It happened so suddenly. You remember when mother had her teeth pulled […] I stayed home for three months looking after the children […] I never really got out of debt since leaving the plantation. I had to buy a boat. And fishing is gambling […] You could put in twelve hours a day and lose money” (89). Finally, his father traces his debt back to the plantation, but only after fumbling through all the other possible reasons for his debt. Hearing his father explain this account of the family’s financial woes, Kiyo worries, “But what about me and Toshio? We don’t have a chance. We’ll be old men by the time we pay off the debt” (89). The filial relationships, then, ensure future generations of labor power for the plantation.

Seeing these filial relationships as complicit, Tosh continues to fight with his parents. In an earlier conversation, Tosh says, “‘They consider you a better man if you said yes all the time.’ ‘The plantation the same way,’ I said. ‘Yeah, we gotta fight two battles all the time’” (68). These two battles, however, are related and mutually constitutive. Because of their parent’s debt to the plantation, Kiyo and Tosh remain
obligated to work for the plantation. Like Awai, however, Tosh refuses to give up his body to the plantation. Tosh’s contentious relationship with his family is evidence of this refusal. Through Tosh’s critique of his parents, Murayama develops an incisive critique of the plantation. Moreover, Tosh’s warnings to Kiyo and frustrations with his parents foster a burgeoning class consciousness in Kiyo.

The working-class politics of Murayama shape the content and formal strategies that animate this narrative. What begins as a proletarian bildungsroman takes on various other tropes from the proletarian genre as well. In line with Foley’s description, which I highlighted earlier, the novel at first appears like “most proletarian bildungsromans [to] treat working-class protagonists in the process of acquiring militant or revolutionary class consciousness” (327). Kiyo seems to undergo this process as he learns to take care of his body. The injustices of the plantation system catalyze an apparent transformation in Kiyo, who begins to decipher and critique the class relations that surround him.

Kiyo begins to change because of his encounters with labor organizing and strikes early on in the narrative. Kiyo notes, “In March 1937 the 1,100 Filipino workers on the Frontier Mill Plantation went on strike” (32). While the Filipinos go on strike, the plantation recruits Japanese students—including Kiyo—to come fill the vacant spots. As a kid, Kiyo initially sees the strike as an opportunity to make some money. After debates in class and conversations with Tosh, however, Kiyo undergoes a transformation. According to Kiyo, “The strikers looked like a ragged army of stragglers. They set up tents along the government road along the shore. They couldn’t build any fires because of the plantation […] The police arrested the leader […] They were accused of beating up a
Filipino scab. The strikers couldn’t raise the $200 bail set” (36). As the strike progresses, Kiyo grows more and more sympathetic with the Filipinos. Eventually, the strike “ended in July. The plantation crushed the union and blacklisted its leaders; the strikers got nothing they asked for” (37). The strike presages the strangling effects of the plantation.

Nonetheless, Kiyo’s sympathies with the Filipinos pave the way for Murayama’s formal experimentation in the following chapter, which draws on the proletarian genre in order to imagine collective resistance. The narrative appears to take on a collective voice, reflecting the genre tropes of Foley’s proletarian collective novel, which is slightly different from the proletarian bildungsroman. Unsurprisingly, this same chapter is the chapter in which Awai, Kiyo, and the work crew attempt to pace their work in such a way that they can take care of their bodies and keep their jobs. Foley writes, “[T]he collective novels’ treatment of the group as a phenomenon greater than—and different from—the sum of the individuals who constitute it means that it tends to foreground interconnection as such” (400). She continues, “Sometimes this is accomplished through direct assertions of the group’s cohesiveness; narratorial interventions unambiguously remind readers that they should conceive of the characters as a unified group” (400). This genre type presents the novel through a collective perspective, and thus it exhibits a rather unusual and jarring style, one that attempts to dissolve individuality into a broader, cohesive mass of individuals.

Shifting from the previous chapter, which relays the details of the Filipino strike, Murayama begins the chapter in media res. Without contextualizing the passage, then, Murayama writes, “The dust hangs in reddish clouds all around us. We are drenched, our
denim pants cling to our wet legs, sweat trickles down faces and necks and moistens palms and backs of hands. We wipe continually, hands on pants, shirt sleeves over eyebrows, blue handkerchief around neck” (39). Thrown into the hot, sticky environment of work on the plantation, the reader gets a visceral description of working-class life in Hawai‘i. Moreover, the passage focuses on the work crew as a unified group. Rather than focalize the narrative through a particular individual, this chapter seems to disappear Kiyo into a broader “we.” In fact, Kiyo and the first person pronoun do not show up until the following page, when Lino—a Filipino worker—finally asks him for the time. This pan-ethnic work crew appears to take on a collective voice in this passage.

This chapter also appeals to the second person voice by directly addressing the reader. After his detailed description of working in the fields, Murayama notes, “You wear a broad straw hat against the sun, you hold your breath and try to breathe the less dusty air in gasps, you tie the bottom of your pant legs to keep the dust and centipedes out, you stop and clean your nostrils of chocolate dust with the blue handkerchief wet from wiping your neck” (39). Unlike any other part of the novel, this passage “breaks the fourth wall” and appeals to the reader. Combining the collective voice with this literary device, Murayama attempts to collapse the distance between character and reader, forcing

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52 Discussing the second person voice, the critic Brian Richardson writes, “The second person is a playful form, original, transgressive, and illuminating, that is always conscious of its unusual own status and often disguises itself, playing on the boundaries of other narrative voices” (23). He goes on, when explaining the effects of the second person voice, “Its usage can engender a heightened engagement between reader and protagonist in different directions: we may oppose identification with a ‘you’ we resist, or we may sympathize more fully with a central character” (28). Although All I Asking for Is My Body only utilizes this voice for a few pages, this temporary usage invites the reader to sympathize more deeply with Kiyo’s plight and the work crew more generally.
readers to immerse themselves in the labor conditions of this plantation. In these moments, the novel experiments with various tropes from the proletarian genre and foregrounds the supposed evolution of Kiyo’s working-class consciousness, simultaneously impressing upon the reader the joint exploitation of these workers.

Indeed, the novel seems to take on the working-class consciousness and lay the groundwork for mass protest and perhaps even revolution. Eventually, however, the novel pulls back from this collective voice in order to focus on Kiyo and his experience.

Dissolving the collective voice, then, the novel shifts back to the first person voice and centralizes Kiyo’s perspective. He ends the chapter reflecting on his own adolescence: “My childhood was really over. At least I had lots of company in ‘Canetop College’ in Kahana. At Liliuokalani nearly everybody went to high school. It was better to be in Kahana if you were going to be so poor” (41). Changing the focus from the broader plight of the workers, Kiyo returns to his experience in order to re-prioritize his own perspective. To that end, the novel pulls back from this revolutionary vision concomitant with the collective voice. This rather jarring formal shift in the novel mirrors the political content of the novel and the narrative’s representation of strikes.

53 After all, Foley writes of the collective novel: “Insofar as it can attract the writer to reified or mystical conceptions of the group and apocalyptic views of historical process, the genre even poses its own set of rhetorical and political problems, distinct from those posed by novelistic realism. In general, however, the collective novel’s generic politics reinforce rather than undermine the possibility of articulating a revolutionary doctrinal politics. For one thing, the collective novel facilitates, indeed requires, focus on the group as a group; it proposes social consciousness as its starting point rather than its terminus” (440). In this respect, the collective novel requires a kind of revolutionary vision or—as Foley puts it—“a revolutionary doctrinal politics.” While Murayama briefly gestures in this direction, the novel is ultimately about the individual plight of Kiyo and his family.
Moreover, it reminds the reader that the novel was written over the course of multiple decades, explaining—at least in part—it\'s jagged tripartite structure.

Still, the narrative initially appears to endorse strikes and working-class protest by experimenting with proletarian forms and giving voice to revolutionary perspectives. During the Filipino strike, for example, Kiyo\’s eighth grade teacher remains somewhat disgruntled and tries to explain the plantation\’s tactics to the up-and-coming working class. Kiyo observes, \"Everybody was happy except our eighth grade teacher. Mr. Snook was a newcomer to the islands\" (32). According to Kiyo, Mr. Snook\’s inexperience with Hawaiian culture erodes his credibility. He does not come from the working class of Hawai\’i, and, therefore, the students initially question his authority. Nonetheless, Mr. Snook, also known as Snooky, pushes them to question various power structures in Hawai\’i and thus the implications of their recent opportunity to work temporarily for higher pay. He asks, \"[W]hy are you people so passive? Why do you just sit there and believe everything I say? […] Wake up. All through life it\’s going to be the same story over and over. It\’s going to be one dictator after another\" (32). In challenging their passivity, Mr. Snook seeks to instill a certain kind of education, one that empowers the students and compels them to question the nature of class relations and racial divides.

Mr. Snook cannot believe the students\’ reluctance to see what he calls the \"big picture.\" Kiyo recalls a conversation in which Mr. Snook \"said one day, ‘I’m shocked. I’ve never seen the likes of it till I came to this paradise of the Pacific’\" (33). Ironically drawing on the historical legacy of Hawai\’i as a \"paradise,\" Mr. Snook makes it clear that this so-called paradise comes at a price. He goes on, \"Ray Stannard Baker called this the
last surviving vestige of feudalism in the United States. He was absolutely right. The plantation divides and rules, and you the exploited are perfectly happy to be divided and ruled. Do you see what I’m driving at?” (33). Frustrated by the students’ inability or outright refusal to understand the class exploitation that surrounds them, Mr. Snook continues to draw their attention to the bigger picture. Moreover, he makes it clear that the plantation rules in part because of their clear refusal to unite with other ethnic workers.

In response, the students point out that even the strikers themselves lack a larger vision of protest. Kiyo states, “[T]he Filipinos don’t want anybody else to join them. They ask a raise only for themselves. They not mad at us. They mad only at other Filipinos who scab, not us. We not scabs” (33). These ethnic divisions reinforced a hierarchy of labor on the plantation. Yen Le Espiritu claims, “The sugar planters segregated the labour force along racial and ethnic lines with whites (or haoles) as the managers, Spanish and Portuguese as the lunas (foremen) and plantation overseers, Japanese as the skilled workers and Filipinos as the unskilled labourers” (35). According to Espiritu, “This segregation system was so entrenched that throughout this forty-year period (from 1906 to 1946), the vast majority of Filipinos in Hawaii remained unskilled workers, dependent upon the plantation” (35). Dividing the working class along ethnic lines allowed the plantation to keep strikes in check. In addition, the extreme poverty and crushing circumstances of these laborers often caused them to seek more immediate

54 Ray Stannard Baker was a progressive journalist from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who worked for the muckraking magazine McClure’s and covered multiple famous strikes in the U.S., including the Pullman Strike of 1894.
goals, thwarting their ability to establish a pan-ethnic working community bent on a larger revolution. In the end, Mr. Snook cannot seem to understand the depth of this poverty, and the students do not fully understand the need for pan-ethnic solidarity and multi-racial organizing.

For legitimate reasons, then, the students worry about the immediate consequences of a larger strike. After Mr. Snook encourages the students to consider the injustices that undergird hierarchical structures of power within the plantation system, one student asks, “[W]hat’s wrong with the pecking order” (33)? After all, “‘It teaches everybody to know their place. It make everything run smooth,’ Tubby said. ‘That’s true. It makes trains run on schedule. It’s efficient in making money and winning wars’” (34). The “pecking order” recalls this ethnic stratification of labor. Like Japanese filial relationships, which encourage family members to adhere unequivocally to this social hierarchy, the “pecking order” inscribes each person within the plantation system. Rather than challenge the plantation, the students prefer to reap the immediate—if rather limited—benefits of this system. Again, strikes, mass protest, and revolution threaten these immediate benefits. This constrained political perspective marginalizes revolution as a possibility precisely because revolution appears to lack these benefits and therefore a certain practical value. Joining the Filipino strikers, these students would not enjoy the temporary pay increase or other similar opportunities. Their desperation, which stems from their extreme poverty, limits the purview of their class consciousness and reveals an important distinction between Mr. Snook’s position of relative privilege and their working-class upbringing.
At this point in the conversation, Mr. Snook draws on the rhetoric of freedom, but he anchors that freedom in collective action. By invoking freedom, Mr. Snook at first seems to resemble Murayama’s position on freedom in “Problems of Writing in Dialect.” Freedom, in this context, threatens to foreground the individual and perhaps even to obscure the value of collective organizing and the group as a whole. By saying, “freedom means not being a part of a pecking order. Freedom means being your own boss,” Mr. Snook appears to idealize the “freedom of the individual” (33). As the narrative develops, the novel, too, privileges individual freedom over collective action and mass liberation. Nonetheless, Mr. Snook’s freedom remains tethered to collective action. Through a kind of Socratic questioning, he draws the students into a debate over the importance of pan-ethnic unity. After some time, they concede that the “underdog” must join ranks and unite in order to fight for this freedom. Mr. Snook then asks, “‘How much together? Filipino labor, period? Japanese labor, period? Or all labor? Hmmm? And when do you stop being an underdog and become a top dog, hmmm? Are you underdogs to the Filipinos, hmmm?” (33). Drawing their attention back to ethnic divides and fragmented communities, he pushes them to understand the importance of pan-ethnic organizing. Still, the students fall back on a more immediate understanding of freedom. Kiyo says, “‘Freedom means being a plantation boss’ […] Everybody laughed” (34). Relying on a fairly limited political perspective, Kiyo locates his own understanding of freedom within the plantation system; it is the only version of freedom that makes any sense to Kiyo and his classmates. In this same vein, Kiyo later claims, “‘Canetop College’ people married their own kind, and you couldn’t get anywhere on the plantation without a high school
education, unless you were an athlete and even then the highest a Nisei could be was *luna*” (75). In this context, “freedom” appears to be a relative term determined mostly by the social and economic context in which it circulates.

Eventually, this debate over freedom and labor culminates in a visit from the plantation. According to Kiyo, “The next day Mr. Nelson walked into the classroom in his breeches and boots and safari hat and sat in the back of the class for an hour. Snooky turned beet red and mumbled hello and cleared his throat several times and said, ‘Well, now, who can give me an example of a dangling participle and tell me why it dangles?’ (34). As soon as the upper echelons of the plantation learn of Mr. Snook’s politics, they show up to scare him. While he temporarily shifts the discussion from politics to grammar, Kiyo insists that he “kept hammering away at one thing” for the next couple months (34). Mr. Snook continues to discuss the politics of labor and the plantation system during his tenure at the school.

Mr. Snook’s tenure, however, does not last very long. Kiyo states, “I felt sad when school ended, even when I won the DAR medal. I wouldn’t be seeing Snooky anymore. He was not coming back next year to Kahana or Hawaii. He was so different from any teacher I’ve had, haole, Oriental, or Hawaiian” (34). In this passage, Kiyo makes it clear that Mr. Snook’s politics set him apart from everyone else that Kiyo knows. Indeed, his radical politics mark him as strange in this community. When Kiyo tells Tosh about his teacher, Tosh says, “‘He a Communist or a queer. Nice haoles always

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55 If Snook’s attempts to teach the students to develop a critical class consciousness upset Mr. Nelson, then it should come as no surprise that grammar lessons, which support the hegemonic English language, are considered “acceptable” teaching material for the class.
after something else”” (36). Always skeptical, Tosh assumes that Mr. Snook’s critique of the plantation carries alternative motives.56

Despite the fact that he, too, sympathizes with the Filipino laborers, Tosh remains suspicious of Kiyo’s teacher. Nonetheless, Tosh insists at one point that the Japanese laborers should have gone on strike as well in order to support the Filipino workers. While his parents remind him that the Filipinos were strikebreakers during Japanese strikes in the 1920s, Tosh empathizes with the starving workers. Like the students, his parents prioritize observing the “pecking order,” as Kiyo’s father says, “We should know our place and not anger them. That’s the only way we’ll gain their respect” (37). In this passage, the filial values of his parents bolster the plantation’s order. Tosh, of course, disagrees, knowing that systemic change only occurs when the workers refuse to “know their place.”

Despite Tosh’s suspicions, Mr. Snook and Tosh have a great deal in common, and they remain integral to the evolving class consciousness of Kiyo. When Tosh’s parents insist, “We shouldn’t worry about other people’s business,” referring to the Filipino labor strike, Tosh responds, “It’s our business too […] We fighting the same plantation” (37). Tosh rails against what Takaki calls “the divide and control strategy” of the plantations, a

56 According to Tosh, Mr. Snook’s whiteness makes him an outsider. Tosh’s skepticism, then, alludes to a long history of colonization and immigrant exploitation in Hawai‘i. Despite Mr. Snook’s attempts to educate the class, he eventually moves away and effectively “washes his hands” of what he calls the “last surviving vestige of feudalism in the United States.” Though Mr. Snook means well, Murayama makes it clear that Snook’s investment in working-class solidarity is mostly theoretical and therefore removed from the dire conditions of Kiyo, Tosh, and the other students.
well documented tactic that enabled plantation owners to create and foster “distrust between the [...] unions” (153). In contrast, Tosh calls for the same pan-ethnic community that Mr. Snook invokes as he attempts to educate the students. Despite these sympathies, Tosh falls back on the inevitable logic of the plantation.

Recalling other moments in the novel, Tosh points to the strikebreakers as yet another reason “nobody can beat the plantation” (37). In this regard, pessimism pervades Tosh’s worldview. While he sympathizes with the Filipino workers and understands the value of a pan-ethnic community, Tosh’s fatalism insists that—in the end—nobody beats the plantation. Tosh’s bleak and prophetic vision comes true. After all, Murayama makes it clear that the strike culminates in failure. Because this splintered workforce fails to unite across racial divides, the plantation is able to force the Filipino workers to come back without any concessions. Moreover, the plantation strips the workforce of any radical elements and blacklists the labor leaders, decreasing the possibility of future strikes.

Instead of making a push for consolidating an interracial working community, Tosh opts for what appears to be total assimilation. After deriding the Japanese workers for failing to unite with the Filipinos, Tosh says, “But first we must forget about returning to Japan. We have to cut off all our ties with Japan and become American” (37). Aligning himself with his friend Kuroda, whom Tosh’s father calls a “radical,” Tosh insists that he must “become American,” which means erasing any and all connections to Japan.57 Tosh’s father, however, insists, “It’s because of upstarts like Kuroda that don’t know

57 Kuroda is the editor for the local bilingual newspaper the Hawaiian Daily in Honolulu, Hawai’i.
their place that the *haoles* hate the Japanese” (37). Tosh’s father identifies Kuroda as a very different kind of “radical” in this conversation, one who seeks to become wholly American. In seeking to cut ties with Japan and assimilate entirely, Kuroda represents a new generation of Nisei, who will fight for citizenship rights and fully adopt America as home. As a “radical,” Kuroda seeks not revolution but dramatic change within the broader political system. Regardless, Tosh adopts this assimilative logic as his own, and he ensures that Kiyo will operate under this same logic.

Beginning to cut off all ties with Japan, Tosh asks his father to cancel his and Kiyo’s Japanese citizenship. His father says, “Everyone born before 1924 is registered in Japan,” and Tosh responds, “We want to cancel ours” (37). After some questioning from his mother, Kiyo agrees with Tosh. Tosh goes on, “We have to choose […] In case of war, Kiyo and me will fight for America” (37). Tosh and Kiyo see the war as their opportunity to earn American citizenship. No longer invested in a pan-ethnic working-class community bent on revolutionary change, this younger generation of plantation workers opts to “become American,” to work within the system. Of course, this motif recurs in other Japanese American novels from the post-World War II period. After refusing to fight in World War II, the main character Ichiro in Japanese American John Okada’s *No-No Boy* (1957) seeks to cut ties with his Japanese family and assimilate. In

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58 As I noted in the previous chapters, 1924 was an important year for immigration legislation. During this year, the Johnson-Reed Act passed, greatly restricting immigration into the U.S., especially Asian immigration. Adding to a long history of Asian exclusion, this Act included yearly immigration quotas that nearly ended Asian immigration altogether.
this respect, Kiyo and Tosh turn away from the subversive potential of pan-ethnic community in order to literally fight for their own American citizenship.

After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Kiyo’s attitude toward Japan only continues to sour. When talking with Mr. Takemoto, whom Kiyo calls “unusual for an *issei*” (81) because he answers his questions without equivocation and usually sympathizes with the younger Nisei, Kiyo asks him about the fate of Japanese immigrants in America. Kiyo asks, “‘The *haole* papers keep saying the Japanese can’t be assimilated because they don’t intermarry. Shouldn’t the Japanese intermarry more?’,” and Mr. Takemoto responds by saying that they should (81). Ironically, however, Mr. Takemoto translates the importance of assimilation through his understanding of Japanese marriage. He says, “Yes. It’s like a wedding, where the bride cuts off all relationship with her original parents and is reborn a member of her husband’s family. That’s why she wears a white death robe beneath her wedding kimono. It’s a symbolic death and she can’t go back to her old family” (81). Like Tosh, Mr. Takemoto encourages the logic of assimilation. Instead of recommending that Kiyo develop pan-ethnic ties with other minorities and maintain loyalty to his Japanese cultural identity, he metaphorizes the Japanese wedding ceremony in order to endorse “cutting off all ties.”

Kiyo follows a similar line of questioning when asking Mr. Takemoto about Pearl Harbor. Reflecting on the bombing, Kiyo insists, “‘You know, you’ve always said, ‘Be proud you’re Japanese.’ Never bring shame to the Japanese race.’ What if they, all of them, bring shame to me? What about me? I feel ashamed I’m Japanese. I feel a shame I can never erase’” (82). Despite these overly broad generalizations about Japan, Kiyo
struggles to make sense of the war and Pearl Harbor specifically. In the same chapter, Tosh tells his parents: “‘Japan would be lucky to lose to America, that is, if they don’t all commit suicide before they surrender. America is not petty and harsh like Japan. America would overthrow Japan’s generals and give the government back to the civilians’” (82).

After the bombing, Kiyo, Tosh, and the larger narrative pivot away from working-class politics toward the cultural tensions that characterized World War II.

With little hope for pan-ethnic organizing, governmental recognition, or economic success, Kiyo and Tosh resolve to assimilate. Indeed, Japan becomes the scapegoat for all that is wrong with their working-class lives in Hawai‘i. Reacting in large part to the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the role of Japanese cultural values in perpetuating plantation labor, and martial law, Kiyo and Tosh resolve to cut ties with Japan. Shifting from an interrogation of the plantation system, the novel centralizes Tosh’s critique of his parents and Japan for the life of debt that they pass on. This shift in emphasis derails the proletarian tropes of the novel precisely because Kiyo’s class-conscious development stagnates and nearly disappears from the novel altogether.

The historical tensions concomitant with World War II and Pearl Harbor threaten to marginalize the family’s debt and the brutalities of the plantation. When talking about Tosh, Kiyo observes, “But he wasn’t ranting anymore. The anger and bitterness were gone. The debt had been pushed into the background the way a toothache is dwarfed by a brain hemorrhage” (86). As class critique falls by the wayside, cultural identity comes to the fore. Protest and poverty become secondary because of the increasing pressures of xenophobia. Even in spite of this war, however, the family slowly begins to realize that
they cannot ignore their debt, no matter how hard they try. The debt, of course, would become “a raging toothache again” (91). In this regard, the war further disables any efforts to work off the debt and further entraps the Oyama family. Kiyo notes, “It was going to take ten more years at least, and here I was frozen on the plantation at $2 a day. It was like a prison term. It was going to drain ten years of my life, six days a week, eight hours a day, and at the end of it, there’d be nothing to show for it” (88). As Okihiro suggests, then, martial law entraps the laborers and assures productivity. Furthermore, Kiyo connects the “exceptional” state of war to his plight on the plantation and—to extend the metaphor—realizes that the “raging toothache” is part and parcel of the “brain hemorrhage.”

After discussing their debt with his father, however, Kiyo assures him, “Our luck will change” (89), and indeed it does—but only once Kiyo tries his own hand in gambling. Luck plays the determining role in the fate of the Oyama family. Rather than blame the larger forces at work in the fates of his family, such as the plantation, imperialism, and capitalist structures of exploitation, Kiyo abstracts the problem into a basic matter of luck. Speaking of his father, he claims, “He’d spend many Sundays and many hours after work planting a new banana patch, new papaya trees, building a new chicken coop. Just his luck was bad” (90). Despite his earlier denunciation of the social injustices that animate working-class life in Hawai‘i, Kiyo marshals the rhetoric of “luck,” as though the plight of his family is tragic but coincidental. Rather than tie his father’s fate back to the exploitative tactics of the plantation, then, Kiyo hinges his father’s tragedy on luck. This recurring motif shifts the focus of the text from class
critique to the individual fate of this particular family in Hawai’i, effacing the broader tragedy of working-class families all over Hawai’i. In other words, once luck “turns” for the Oyama family, the novel ends with a somewhat shoddy resolution that may satisfy the six thousand dollar debt of the Oyama family but resolves nothing for the rest of the working-class immigrants that pervade the novel.

Still, Kiyo is well aware of the pressures bearing down on working-class immigrants and workers. World War II, martial law, and Pearl Harbor dramatically altered the political climate for the working class in Hawai’i. In the words of Kiyo, “The war was going to last forever and martial law froze us to our jobs forever. Everything was exploding in the rest of the world while we were like some prehistoric monster frozen in ice” (94). Returning to the metaphor of frozen time, Kiyo insists on this image of a working class unable to move through space and time because of the war and the plantation. Kiyo refers to being “frozen” multiple times over the course of the narrative. This metaphor signals the various purposes of martial law. Indeed, this law ensures that Kiyo and his family remain deeply indebted to the plantation. Any resistance to debt and exploitation reinforced racist assumptions about the “suspect” loyalties of Japanese Americans. As a result, the workers must endure exploitation without complaint, as well as the racist assumptions that they tacitly attempt to undermine through “loyal” obedience. If work was difficult before the war, then it became a state of nearly intolerable toil after the war began.

Shortly after discussing the war, Kiyo explains the effect of what Lichtenstein calls the “erosion of the union idea,” which I discuss in the opening section of this
chapter, on working-class life in Hawai‘i. Kiyo remarks, “Union talk was disobedience and treason, and if you were caught talking it or organizing, you were fired and your family and your belongings were dumped on the government road” (96). In this passage, Kiyo depicts the plantation’s rather brutal countermeasures for workers who attempted to organize and form resistance movements on the plantation. After describing these countermeasures, Kiyo recalls the lectures of Snooky. He briefly invokes the potent anti-capitalist critiques that come up earlier in the novel. Kiyo misses his old teacher: “I kept wishing Snooky had come back to teach Kahana. I’d go talk to him. He was the only guy who helped you to see things as they were out there. The others ignored your questions or what you saw out there, or tried to make you see only the things they wanted you to see” (96). Recalling his former teacher, Kiyo focuses once again on the exploitative tactics of the plantation.

This indictment of the plantation even extends to Kiyo’s critical exposition of the sewage system on the island. Conveying the hierarchical structures that undergird plantation work, Kiyo describes this system in some detail: “The camp, I realized then, was planned and built around its sewage system […] Shit too was organized according to the plantation pyramid” (96). According to the racialized structures of plantation work, the “shit” flows from one community to the next, signaling a fairly intricate scale of ethnic workers. Kiyo goes on, “Mr. Nelson was top shit on the highest slope, then there were the Portuguese, Spanish, and nisei lunas with their indoor toilet which flushed into the same ditches, then Japanese Camp, and Filipino Camp” (96). The feces, then, literally map the racial gradations that organize power structures on the plantation. In this regard,
Kiyo begins to identify the nuanced dynamics and ethnic divisions that allow the plantation to maintain both order and power. Of course, the systemic order is integral to the plantation’s power.

Throughout this chapter, Kiyo highlights the importance of this systemic order to the plantation. Kiyo notes, “Everything was over-organized. There were sports to keep you busy and happy in your spare time. Even the churches seemed part of the scheme to keep you contented. Mr. Nelson knew each of us by first name, knew each family, and asked each time anxiously about the family” (96). From organized sports to religion, the plantation determines the existence of each worker, dictating how they spend their time throughout the workweek. Organizing their lives on and “off” the plantation ensures the powerful reach of the plantation. Similarly, Kiyo’s critique echoes Marx’s claim that the church functions as an “opiate of the masses,” assuring a future redemption that only validates the sufferings that the workers endure in the present. The plantation, then, organizes each of these institutional and social activities for a very deliberate purpose. He goes on, when speaking of Mr. Nelson, “He acted like a father, and he looked after you and cared for you provided you didn’t disobey” (96). Playing the role of benevolent dictator, Mr. Nelson “cares” for his workers and their families. Mr. Nelson displays compassion for his workers but only insofar as they work diligently and comply with plantation rules. Kiyo calls attention to this fact in the same paragraph in which he addresses the plantation’s zero-tolerance policy for union organizing and resistance from the working-class community. The assurance of benevolence came at the cost of organized resistance and pan-ethnic solidarity.
After critically outlining these class relations, however, Kiyo resorts to his misinterpretation of Mr. Snook’s concept of freedom. Kiyo says, “Snooky gave me a glimpse of what it could be. I would have to go out and be on my own even if the old man was successful and he was doing me the favors, even if the plantation made me its highest luna” (96). While Snooky clearly offers Kiyo an alternate future to plantation work and the overly organized life of Mr. Nelson, Kiyo latches on to his misinterpretation of Snooky’s call for working-class unity. Instead of privileging pan-ethnic solidarity, Kiyo relies on the rhetoric of individualized freedom. He does, however, begin to understand the inevitable confines of freedom as a luna. After all, the plantation both grants and demarcates the limits of this freedom. He says, “Freedom was freedom from other people’s shit, and shit was shit no matter how lovingly it was dished, how high or low it came from. Shit was the glue which held a group together, and I was going to have no part of any shit or any group” (96). In this passage, Kiyo makes it clear that this “shit” holds both the group and the system together. Without ethnic divisions and racial hierarchies, the system would fall apart.

Kiyo cannily identifies the ethnic divisions among the working class that help the plantation maintain power. Nonetheless, he prioritizes “freedom from other people’s shit,” and, in doing so, he reveals priorities that actually depart from Snooky’s stated investment in community. Mr. Snooky, after all, could not understand why immigrant workers would not come together and strike against the plantation as a pan-ethnic community. And while Kiyo correctly rejects Mr. Nelson’s seeming compassion and therefore refuses to read this compassion as sincere, he also explicitly refuses to be linked
with a larger collective body. He “was going to have no part of any shit or any group.”
Thus, he sets out to achieve his own freedom, effacing the problems of the broader
working-class community and denying the primary argument of Snooky’s lectures.

At this point in the narrative, the war becomes an opportunity for nisei to escape
the plantation, the “frozen” time that inevitably mired Japanese American workers in a
constant state of exploitation. According to Kiyo, “Everybody in Kahana was dying to
get out of this icky shit-hole and here was his chance to be delivered on a silver platter.
Beside, once you fought, you earned the right to complain and participate, you earned a
right to a future” (98). Joining the war offered the supposed opportunity to “earn your
way” as an American citizen. Seduced by this rhetoric, Kiyo buys into the idea that
fighting in the war will resolve his identity crisis and get him out of this “icky shit-hole.”
Yet, Kiyo knows that even the army remains segregated. He notes, “In January 1943 the
Army asked for 1,500 nisei volunteers. We would form an all-nisei regiment with
volunteers from the mainland and be allowed to fight in Europe” (97). The racial
hierarchies and ethnic divisions that plague the plantation will only follow him into the
army. Ignoring this fact, Kiyo optimistically imagines that the war, which initially
“froze” the workers, will now grant them some reprieve from the racial tensions and
crushing poverty of the plantation. This slight reprieve from poverty comes at a fairly
hefty price. Kiyo tells his mother, “If I die, there’s $10,000 insurance you will get. If I
live, I’ll come back and help you” (97).

Critical of Kiyo’s desire to go to war, Kiyo’s mother actually explains to him that
the poor must stick together, echoing the earlier sentiments of Mr. Snook. His mother
insists, “We’re poor and poor families have to be more careful. Acting as an individual is a luxury the rich can afford. The poorer you are the more you have to be united” (97). In this passage, Kiyo’s mother reinterprets the filial relationships of Japanese American families as important armaments against worker exploitation. While these relationships become a tool of exploitation threatening to enlist future generations of debt, as Tosh persistently reminds Kiyo throughout the novel, they simultaneously protect immigrant parents from complete and utter destitution. Still, the protective measures of these relationships never move beyond the basic confines of the family. Moreover, these measures only help the plantation as it works to secure immigrant bodies for work, which should, of course, recall Tosh’s refrain, “All I asking for is my body.” In the end, the plantation’s battle is for the body.

His mother calls for a relatively limited version of worker unification within the family, but she also articulates a brief but potent critique of individualism. In contrast, Tosh compares his mother’s call for unity to a Japanese stereotype. Tosh says, “She’s goin’ hold you to your samurai’s sword” (97; emphasis in original). For this reason, the family dynamics have a lot of layers, and thus it is difficult to fully parse these dynamics. Their mother’s call for family unity serves multiple purposes, and Kiyo’s overwhelming debt to his family and the plantation cannot be separated. Nonetheless, she insists that “acting as an individual” is a luxury that only the rich can afford. In a somewhat startling moment of clarity, she notes that the impoverished must stick together in order to have any strength, and therefore only the rich can truly act as an individual, independent of other people’s needs. Kiyo dismisses his mother’s assertion, saying, “I couldn’t blow up
like Tosh, but I’d learned not to jump at her bait” (97). Signaling a final turn in the novel, Kiyo refuses to take his mother’s advice or heed her clear warning. While he continues to “look out” for the family, Kiyo opts to join the army.

In doing so, he no longer has to worry about working-class unity and the exploitative structures of the plantation. After all, Kiyo says, “It was my first time away from home. It was the first time I had over $25 in my pocket” (99). At this point in the novel, it takes a fairly abrupt turn. For the first time, Kiyo moves beyond the powerful reach of the plantation. Away from his home and family, Kiyo decides to try his hand in gambling. Kiyo gambles with other soldiers training for war. Surrounded by other Japanese Americans, Kiyo decides that through gambling he can overcome the debt that has plagued his family for so long. After coming up with a fairly complex strategy (Murayama explains Kiyo’s gambling process at great length), Kiyo figures out how to “padroll” and decides that it will allow him to overcome his debt. Kiyo claims, “It floored me. You eliminated all chance of crapping out in the first roll. Your chance of making 6-8 was 3 to 2 in your favor; 9-5 or 10-4 was 50-50! And it wasn’t really cheating” (100). By learning to roll in a particular way, Kiyo quickly discovers how to win a great deal of money. After losing some money initially, Kiyo finally wins the full sum of his family’s debt.

In making this money, however, Kiyo acknowledges that his good fortune comes at the expense of other working-class immigrants like himself. He reminds himself, “It wasn’t really cheating, not like marked cards, or loaded dice anyway. Besides, if I didn’t take their money, another padroller would’ve” (103). Justifying his success, Kiyo takes
from other soldiers entrenched in the same impoverished conditions that he is. He goes on, “It was their fault if they couldn’t spot it. In gambling it was dog eat dog, every dog was after something for nothing, you never gave a dog an even break. But no matter how many excuses I came up with, I felt bad” (103). Comparing the other gamblers to dogs, Kiyo attempts to relinquish his guilt but is unable to do so. In this way, Kiyo focuses primarily on his own freedom. Gambling becomes the strategy that will allow him to pay off his debt by capitalizing on the debt of other workers and soldiers. No longer invoking Snooky’s vision of pan-ethnic solidarity and working-class unity, Kiyo justifies his own individual freedom, which comes at the expense of other ethnic workers.

This freedom delivers Kiyo from the various power structures that seem inescapable throughout the narrative. Kiyo says, “I felt like busting out into a song and dance! I’ve been freed! I’ve made my bail money out of this prison of filial piety and family unity! Out of ten more miserable years on the plantation! I took a deep breath and tried to keep my hands from shaking as I scooped in the pile of money” (102). He no longer has to worry about filial piety or the powerful reach of the plantation. In this regard, Kiyo’s entrapment finally comes to an end. By renouncing this servitude, however, Kiyo also gives up on any last vestiges of pan-ethnic solidarity. On the next day, he writes Tosh and includes a six thousand dollar check, “Won this in crap game. Pay up all the debt. I manufactured some of the luck, but I think the Oyama luck has finally turned around. Take care of the body. See you after the war” (103). The rhetoric of luck comes up again. In fact, this “manufactured luck” allows Kiyo to “take care” of
his body. Moreover, it enables Kiyo to tell Tosh to do the same. In this way, Kiyo resolves the central tension of the novel by winning a craps game.

Whereas the previous novels under investigation in this dissertation culminate in pan-ethnic solidarity and revolution, Murayama’s novel rather abruptly culminates in a craps game and a “turn in luck.” The terminus of the novel, then, reveals a shifting political landscape where political revolution is no longer a legitimate possibility. The decades following World War II nearly erased revolution from the American imaginary altogether by simply demonizing protest and idealizing civil obedience and unquestioning loyalty as integral efforts in the Cold War. Even in the throes of World War, the Oyama family cannot conceive of a plantation-wide revolution. Instead, Kiyo must fight solely for his own liberation and his family’s. Discussing All I Asking for Is My Body and Ronyoung Kim’s Clay Walls (1987), Libretti argues that “[T]hese novels speak to the need in contemporary society for a politicized radical working-class Asian American identity that connects race to imperialism and that recognizes irreconcilable class contradictions within Asian America, rejecting a bourgeois reformist politics that denies class oppression” (35, 36). At times, All I Asking for Is My Body does indeed highlight this need for a radical working-class Asian American identity, one that unifies a diverse working class of Asian people. Nonetheless, in the end, the novel pulls back from this vision, privileging the individualized plight of Kiyo and his family over the broader working class.

Although Kiyo’s final integration into society remains somewhat open-ended in the final pages, his suggestion that “the Oyama luck has finally turned around” (103)
suggests a degree of success. Foley writes, “The bildungsroman is the classic form of the bourgeois novel. In texts of this genre, naïve protagonists, usually young, encounter various trials that enable them to test their mettle” (321). Tested by the plantation, Kiyo overcomes the trials of working-class life in Hawai‘i in order to pay off the family debt and join the military. In many respects, he fits the mold for the traditional bildungsroman hero, who is “set apart from [his] peers by a number of distinctive traits—looks, intelligence, ambition […] at once ordinary and extraordinary” (Foley 321). Kiyo endorses protest early on, but in the final chapters, Kiyo’s revolutionary class consciousness disappears as he gambles his way into good fortune.

Libretti’s critical praise for the novel appears to fold Murayama’s novel into what Foley calls the anti-bildungsroman, wherein “proletarian protagonists align themselves with ideas and practices that contradict their class (and personal) interests, [allowing] the authors [to] demonstrate the necessity for revolutionary class consciousness, as well as the threat of developing fascism among those who reject this necessity” (328).

Nonetheless, Kiyo’s celebratory success at the end of the novel lacks any ironic critique. Indeed, Kiyo finally gets ownership over his body and assures Tosh—in his letter—that he, too, can now take ownership over his own body. No longer beholden to the call of filial piety or the overwhelming debt of the plantation, Kiyo appears to demonstrate that gambling is in his own personal interest. For this reason, the novel finally rejects its initial political stance and even appears to take a strangely apolitical turn. In this way, the prolonged publication history of the novel reveals the shifting political landscape of the Cold War. The radical union organizing and political protest of the Depression era, which
Kiyo encounters during his pre-World War II work on the plantation, disappears as Kiyo focuses—in large part because of ethnic divisions among the working class and martial law—on “earning” his American identity in the wake of Pearl Harbor.

Protest, Revolution, and Disillusion

What begins as a proletarian novel slowly turns into something very different. Within this narrative, tropes from the proletarian novel, the bildungsroman, and the ethnic literary genre collide and ultimately produce a fairly uneven and sometimes perplexing novel. Combining anti-capitalist critique with a “coming-of-age tale” and intergenerational tensions among Japanese American families, Murayama’s ambitious endeavor chronicles working-class life in Hawai‘i. Yet, the narrative’s unevenness also testifies to its lengthy book history. From its initial draft in the early 1950s to the 1959 publication of “I’LL Crack Your Head Kotsun” and the novel’s eventual publication in 1975, the narrative’s final articulation bears the marks of nearly three decades. While Murayama’s critique of the plantation certainly merits close reading, it is Kiyo’s eventual disillusionment with labor organizing and protest that ultimately reveals the deleterious effects of martial law, anti-Japanese racism, and even the Cold War.

These historical realities change the scope of the novel entirely. The inability of workers to effectively organize and the devastating effects of martial law eventually take their toll on Kiyo. Because of the plantations and the unique imperial history of Hawai‘i, this novel is—to a certain extant—an anomaly within Asian American literature, a very specific account of immigrant life in Hawai‘i. Nonetheless, Kiyo’s eventual
disillusionment with unions and revolution is not exactly unique. Turning to the 1970s more generally, the coda looks at the way in which Murayama’s disillusionment with Marxian critique and revolution resonates with broader trends in Asian American literature from the decade. While activist groups like I Wor Kuen and the Red Guard Party continue to invest in revolution and Marxist critique, Asian American literature appears to turn away from more explicit versions of anti-capitalist critique.
Coda: Between Old and New Lefts: Asian American Radical Literature Before the Asian American Movement

By the early 1990s, scholars of the new field remarked with wonder at the quality and quantity of work by authors such as Maxine Hong Kingston, Gish Jen, Amy Tan, David Henry Hwang, and Jessica Hagedorn, to name just a few. [...] But what tradition, if any, preceded this renaissance of the last quarter of the twentieth century? From what was Asian American literature reborn?

Keith Lawrence and Floyd Cheung, Recovered Legacies (2005)

[T]he dreams and commitments of the Communist avant-garde would quickly revive just a few years later in forms that were unanticipated, but recognizable nonetheless—as the latest and most novel installment of the ever-present longing to remake the world.

Alan Wald, Exiles from a Future Time (2002)

This project brings together four left-leaning Asian American writers from the 1930s to the 1970s in order to recalibrate critical understandings of early Asian American literature. In many respects, it responds to Keith Lawrence and Floyd Cheung’s call “for approaches to early texts and authors that, through careful and clearheaded analysis, would not only define and explain fractures and flaws but would also engage texts and authors on their own terms and in ways that would fairly and logically reveal their strengths and contributions” (vii). While their collection of essays, Recovered Legacies: Authority and Identity in Early Asian American Literature (2005), establishes a variety of

59 The critics Keith Lawrence and Floyd Cheung refer to early Asian American literature as “virtually all texts written before the late 1960s” (vii). Similarly, due to the indelible impact of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which literally split the decade, my dissertation takes this year as the dividing line between early and later Asian American literature.
new and suggestive approaches to early Asian American literature, this dissertation builds on their work, recovering and reinterpreting the overlooked writers in question as integral to Asian American literary history. Without subscribing to what Lawrence and Cheung call a “presentist model,” which retrofits and therefore manipulates the past for the political needs of the present, this project traces a pre-1965 radical tradition within Asian American literature.

The role of Depression era activism in this radical literary tradition cannot be overstated. After all, because of his activist efforts, the Los Angeles Times called Tsiang “the leader of the radicals” in 1928 (Cheung 59). Like Tsiang, Bulosan and Ishigaki were involved in labor organizing, political rallies, and various other activist events. Each of the authors that I discuss in this dissertation constructs narratives that indict worker exploitation and sympathize with union efforts to organize. The Red Decade, then, had a profound influence on this small band of Asian American authors and activists. Describing the political terrain of this decade, Michael Denning asserts, “[T]he cultural front reshaped American culture. Just as the radical movements of abolition, utopian socialism, and women’s rights sparked the antebellum American Renaissance, so the communisms of the depression triggered a deep and lasting transformation of American modernism and mass culture” (xvi). If Denning’s work accounts for the way in which the “communisms of the depression” revolutionized American culture, then this project traces the imprint of those communisms on Asian American literature specifically. In line with critics like Josephine Fowler and Robert G. Lee, who have begun to unearth an
often-overlooked world of Asian American activism during this period, I explore the world of activist literatures.\(^{60}\)

But one of the more difficult questions remains: what happens to this radical literary tradition in the 1970s? Oriented toward Depression era activism and the old left, these writers address class struggle directly. Rather than fold their critique of class within an explicit interrogation of “identity politics,” a term and discourse that did not really circulate until the 1970s and 1980s, they identify racialization as integral to U.S. capitalism.\(^{61}\) In this regard, these writers are immersed in the Marxian critiques of Depression era radicalism. It is no secret that the schism between the old left and the new left is wide. If the old left focuses largely on labor exploitation and class struggle, then the new left emerges in the early 1960s as what Alan Wald calls “a nascent [movement] birthing beneath the placid surface of U.S. society evidenced by the burgeoning civil rights movement” (9). He goes on, “Within three or four years, this new radicalism would burst forth as a powerful and transformative social and cultural force encompassing the Free Speech, anti-Vietnam War, Black Power, and Women’s Liberation movements” (9). Shifting the critical frame of reference, the new left focuses less on the traditional Marxian category of “class warfare” and, instead, telescopes in on identity politics and civil rights.

\(^{60}\) For more on Asian American activism from this period, see Fowler’s *Japanese and Chinese Immigrant Activists: Organizing in American and International Communist Movements, 1919-1933* (2007) and Lee’s “The Hidden World of Asian Immigrant Radicalism” (1996).

\(^{61}\) For more on identity politics, see Combahee River Collectives’ 1981 “A Black Feminist Statement” and/or Barbara Ryan’s *Identity Politics in the Women’s Movement* (2001).
Despite these important differences in scope, however, the radical ideals and critiques of governmental oppression endure throughout both the old and new left. And with these similarities in mind, Wald describes an important congruence between the two movements: “[T]he dreams and commitments of the Communist avant-garde would quickly revive just a few years later in forms that were unanticipated, but recognizable nonetheless—as the latest and most novel installment of the ever-present longing to remake the world” (324). This “longing to remake the world” echoes Bloch’s orientation toward a transformative future, “the furthest horizon.” It reflects the revolutionary imaginary that I map out from the archive that animates this dissertation. In this regard, this revolutionary imaginary makes legible some important bridges between the old and new lefts. In many respects, the writers that I examine foresee the concerns that would come to dominate the new left during the ensuing decades. Drawing on Marxian ideas of class transformation, these authors certainly long to “remake the world.” Moreover, their indictments of racism and class exploitation anticipate the critical concerns of the Asian American movement and its various radical incarnations and organizations during the 1960s and 1970s.

**Asian American Radical Literature, Frank Chin, and the Asian American Movement**

While this radical literary tradition may be read as a harbinger for the Asian American movement, it exists in opposition to Frank Chin’s famous definitions of Asian American literature. In 1974, Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn
Wong published their groundbreaking anthology *Aiiieeeee!*, an anthology that the *Partisan Review* called “a manifesto for an Asian American renaissance.” Indeed, this anthology quickly became a foundational text for Asian American canonical formations, cementing the place of writers like John Okada, Frank Chin, Louis Chu, and Hisaye Yamamoto in Asian American literary history. To that end, the editors published a remarkable anthology, one that—according to a *The New York Times Book Review* issue from that same year—“demolishes those comfortable clichés about the mysterious, cunning, impassive, silent, invincibly polite Oriental . . . an introduction both to the diverse strains of one of America’s minority cultures and to some unheralded writers.”

Countering the deeply embedded mythologies of the yellow peril, these editors sought to put together a collection of Asian American texts that contradict and contest stereotypical constructions of Asian American identity.

While recovering and championing certain writers, however, these editors also constructed a very particular version of Asian American literature. In their preface, the editors insist, “None of the Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino American works in this volume are snow jobs pushing Asian Americans as the miracle synthetic white people that America’s proprietors of white liberal pop, like Tom Wolfe, ABC television […] and such racist henchmen passing for scholars as Gunther Barth […], make us out to be” (xxi, xxii).\(^62\) Opposing their collection to mainstream representations of cultural figures like Charlie Chan and Fu Manchu, who circulated in popular culture throughout the 1930s

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\(^62\) Their fairly clever slang term, “snow job,” articulates a damning pun on the name of Chinese American writer Jade Snow Wong, whom they suggest writes for—and therefore caters to—a white audience.
and 1940s, these editors suggest that the Asian American characters in their anthology embody more fully realized incarnations of Asian American identity. These authors, then, attempt to recuperate Asian America. Still, the editors compose a collection, which includes only a specific set of politically charged texts, rather than a basic recovery project that represents a diverse array of Asian American literature.

As a result, this collection excludes and even condemns certain kinds of Asian American writing. Looking at early authors like Lin Yutang and C.Y. Lee, for example, the editors claim, “They consciously set out to become American, in the white sense of the word, and succeeded in becoming ‘Chinese American’ in the stereotypical sense of the good, loyal, obedient, passive, law-abiding, cultured sense of the word” (xiv).

Similarly, they denounce a variety of early Chinese American writers as descendants of what they describe as the Charlie Chan tradition. The editors continue, “The Charlie Chan model of Chinese Americans was developed in books like Pardee Lowe’s *Father and Glorious Descendant*, Lin Yutang’s novel *Chinatown Family*, [and] Jade Snow Wong’s *Fifth Chinese Daughter*” (xvii). Suggesting that these authors perpetuate “positive” stereotypes of Asian America, Chin, Chan, Inada, and Wong offer an alternative to the “Charlie Chan model.” Indeed, their anthology highlights writers who reject this model, refuse assimilation, and contest ethnic stereotypes.

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Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan represent equally problematic but opposing sides of the Asian stereotype. That is to say, if Fu Manchu is the evil, cunning, and deceptive villain, then Charlie Chan is the docile and often bumbling character who usually aids the efforts of more fully realized white characters, despite a heavy accent and difficulty with the English language.
While their reasons for composing such an anthology are perhaps obvious, the protracted effects of this anthology on Asian American literature and Asian American studies more generally are, I argue, more complicated and perhaps less obvious. Deeply invested in interrogating cultural representation, this collection defines Asian American literature against various Asian stereotypes in Western culture. Similarly, critical interpretations of pre-1965 Asian American literature often derive value primarily from the text’s capacity to serve the political needs of the present. Because of its foundational position within Asian American literature and the field of Asian American studies, this influential anthology helped demarcate the limits and stakes of political struggle for Asian American literature. The editors write, “Asian America, so long ignored and forcibly excluded from creative participation in American culture, is wounded, sad, angry, swearing, and wondering, and this is his AIIIEEEE!!! It is more than a whine, shout, or scream. It is fifty years of our whole voice” (xii). Critics, of course, note that this collection is not immune to critique. After all, claiming that this anthology represents the “whole voice” of Asian America is an ambitious provocation, which clearly poses a variety of problems for the voices that are left out of this anthology. On a very basic level, the gendered pronoun, which lays claim to this shout, suggests that this voice is masculine, begging the question: what about the other “half” of Asian America?

64 Lawrence and Cheung write, “During the first phase of recovery, Asian American literary critics tended to read early literature as either supportive or unsupportive of present-day political goals—and to advocate individual texts according to such readings” (5). Aiiieeee!, too, appears to enlist early Asian American writers primarily for political support.
What then of the voices left out of this anthology? This question permeates previous critiques of *Aiiieeeee!* as well. As David Leiwei Li argues, “*Aiiieeee!’s sensibility hardly entertains the mutability of culture, the multiplicity of identity, and the fluidity of experience” (32). Instead, it idealizes a singular, masculine identity that rejects assimilation and white supremacy, leaving little or no room for literary narratives and forms that do not fit this mold. Li goes on, “For the discourse of political opposition, *Aiiieeeee!’s essentialist sensibility is problematic and inescapable” (37). Like Mike Gold and other proletarian writers, who idealized the proletariat as a bastion of masculinity, these editors respond to feminizing Asian stereotypes by imbuing Asian American cultural formations with a kind of overwrought masculine identity. After all, the editors rail against the “white stereotype of the acceptable and unacceptable Asian [who] is utterly without manhood” (14). Looking specifically to critics like Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong, John Christopher Cunningham cites a history of feminist critique: “Feminist critics have located the four writers (Chin, Chan, Wong and Inada) associated with the anthologies, *Aiiieeeee!* and *The Big Aiiieeeee!* as primary bearers of a masculinist Asian American critical bias” (17).65 This problematic gendered construction of identity undergirds the editors’ vision of Asian American literature.

Reinscribing patriarchal power structures, the anthology leverages gender inequality in order to revamp cultural representations of Asian America. Jinqi Ling, too, describes the anthology as subscribing to “the belief […] that Asian American writers

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65 *The Big Aiiieeeee!* was published in 1991 as a new, expanded edition of the initial anthology. Notably, it included writers like Sui Sin Far and Milton Murayama but no longer included the Filipino American writers from the original publication.
must participate in a male-oriented heroic struggle against cultural domination along a singular, predictable path” (8). When discussing editor Frank Chin’s 1971 play *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, Daryl J. Maeda similarly observes, “Chin […] linked Asian Americans to blacks through masculinity, which he defined in some troubling ways” (5). These critics reveal the way in which this anthology counters stereotypes of Asian male effeminacy with somewhat “predictable” versions of masculinist cultural nationalism. More importantly, however, this critical history shows how this landmark collection limits the breadth of Asian American literature, as well as the scope of Asian Americanist critique.

Despite the limited scope of Asian American literature in this collection, my point is not that Chin and company are completely oblivious to class difference and worker exploitation. In fact, these critical discussions of cultural nationalism perhaps threaten to obscure their clear investment in the experiences of working-class Asian immigrants. In the end, however, the editors rely on a masculine ideal for cultural critique, effacing the critical value of radical politics, working-class solidarity, and revolutionary possibility. In contrast, then, this dissertation asks what happens to early Asian American literature and Asian Americanist critique when we bring anti-capitalist critique and working-class politics to the fore? My project is in conversation with what Yoonmee Chang calls “the emerging body of American and ethnic studies scholarship that is dissatisfied with treatments of class, whether because class is neglected or omitted, or because it is treated as the perfunctory or epiphenomenal third in the ‘race, gender, and class’ triad” (3). Thus, I explore Asian American writers who highlight class inequalities and imagine
revolutionary transformations in their narratives. These authors recognize exclusionist racism as part and parcel of the larger project of U.S. capitalism, making it clear that capital relies on cheap labor, and cheap labor depends on racialized minorities and immigrant workers. With this framework in mind, this project excavates a radical version of Asian American literature, one that begins with the Depression era writers and activists Tsiang, Ishigaki, and Bulosan. Rather than focus primarily on cultural representation and identity politics, these authors combine Marxist critique with an indictment of racism and reveal the radical roots in early Asian American literature.

In this regard, the writers under examination anchor their critique of cultural representation in their condemnations of U.S. capitalism and empire. Whereas Chin et al define Asian American literature against mainstream American culture, this project understands early Asian American literature as forged in the proverbial fires of white supremacy, class stratification, and labor exploitation. Taking aim at assimilation specifically, the editors of Aiiieeeee! note, “In terms of the utter lack of cultural distinction in America, the destruction of an organic sense of identity, the complete psychological and cultural subjugation of the Asian American, the people of Chinese and Japanese ancestry stand out as white racism’s only success” (10). The express purpose of the anthology, then, is to articulate a kind of positivistic Asian American culture, “an organic sense of identity.”

The publication of this anthology followed the emergence of important activist groups and movements—like the Third World Liberation Front, the Yellow Power Movement, the Red Guard Party, and I Wor Kuen—in the late 1960s and 1970s. These
activist groups and movements reflect what Maeda identifies as “the choice of some to reject whiteness and instead practice a politics of multiethnic unity, interracial solidarity, and transnational anti-imperialism” during this period (17). Indeed, at San Francisco State College, the Third World Liberation Front joined a variety of ethnic groups together and managed to lead “the longest strike in U.S. history” during the years of 1968 and 1969 (Maeda 50). The strike forced the college to install the first ethnic studies department in the country on San Francisco State’s campus. Similarly, the Yellow Power movement drew on the rhetoric of Black Power to combat Asian American stereotypes and envision a new role for Asian Americans in the U.S.66 Activist groups like the Red Guard Party and I Wor Kuen began in Chinatowns in New York and San Francisco in the late 1960s. Describing the contributions of these groups in some detail, Maeda notes, “They built community programs, organized Asian American workers, fought for better living conditions, protested against the Vietnam War, and became integrally entwined in the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist left” (180). Looking to figures like Karl Marx and Mao Tsetung, these groups challenged institutional racism and utilized their Ten Point Plan to make a series of demands of the government. These radical Marxist organizations initiated important community programs and fought for social equality and equal rights. Ultimately, this matrix of political activism formed an important counterpart to Aiieeeeee! and thus what the Partisan Review dubbed the “Asian American Renaissance” hailed by these literary organs.

While both these activist groups and the anthology take aim at Asian American stereotypes, I Wor Kuen and the Red Guard draw on Marxian rubrics to critique Asian America’s precarious position within American cultural, economic, and governmental institutions. In contrast, Chin dismisses these rubrics. In Stud Terkel’s *Race: How Blacks and Whites Think and Feel about the American Obsession* (1992), Chin recalls a formative encounter with the Red Guard and ridicules the group’s allegiances to Marxian critique and revolutionary possibility. Chin describes his conversation with a member of the party: “He says, ‘Identify with China!’ I say, ‘Wait a minute. We’re in America. This is where we are, where we live and where we’re going to die. There’s not going to be any revolution. That’s crazy’” (311). According to Chin, the very possibility of revolution is nearly unthinkable. Chin eventually calls the Red Guards’ performance of blackness “a yellow minstrel show” (310). The irony, of course, is that—as Maeda notes—“both [Chin and the Red Guard] drew upon and performed blackness in order to reject assimilation, argue that Asian American constituted a racialized bloc, and emphasize linkages between Asian Americans and African Americans” (5). Despite their mutual efforts to perform blackness, however, Chin’s recollection actually delineates an important distinction between these radical political groups and the anthology’s critique of Asian stereotypes.

The Red Guard’s commitment to Marxist ideologies and revolution confounds Chin. Mocking this commitment, Chin highlights the party’s inability to understand

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67 In Chin’s play *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, the main characters grow up in Oakland and perform blackness, as well as masculinity. For example, during a conversation, one of the main characters Kenji notes, “Maybe we act black, but it’s not fake. Oakland was weirdness […] Me, I was the black one. ‘Blackjap Kenji’ I used to be called and hated yellowpeople” (Chin 135).
satire. After they tell Chin to quit asking his students to sing a “racist song,” Chin states, “Have you ever heard of satire? We know it’s a racist song. That’s why we’re singing it. We’re making fun of the people who make fun of Chinese. Do you understand?” I could see I wasn’t cutting it” (311; emphasis in original). Falling back on clichés about political activists (especially Marxists), Chin suggests that the Red Guard does not comprehend the formal purpose of satire. Formal complexity seems to elude their overly sincere political ideologies. In this recollection, Chin reflects a broader trend in aesthetics, a shift from modernist to postmodernist sensibilities. Because he privileges satire and scoffs at revolution, Chin reflects this shift from sincerity to pervasive irony. Of course, irony and satire are not the same, but these two tropes share the reflexive marks of postmodernism. Explaining this transition as characteristic of the 1960s, Marianne DeKoven writes, “The sincerity, originality, authenticity, aura, depth, reality, and directionality of modernity, in tension with irony and commodification in modernism, are supplanted in postmodernism by a pervasive irony” (17). As I note in the introduction, DeKoven’s work identifies a pivot away from utopian possibility and meta-narratives in aesthetics. In the end, Chin ridicules the “sincerity” that undergirds the Red Guard’s radical politics and their revolutionary aspirations. His condemnation of the party’s politics—as well as his work more generally—fall in line with this broader trend in aesthetics and culture.

Chin’s dissatisfaction with Marxist politics reveals his rather narrow commitment to cultural critique and what Maeda calls “cultural nationalism.” In this regard, Chin

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68 As Maeda notes, “The Red Guard Party’s rap constituted yellow minstrelsy for Chin because he rejected its emphasis on the Panthers’ version of revolutionary nationalism as
and the Red Guard represent a broader historical split in Asian American activism and aesthetics, what Maeda calls a “tension.” Maeda claims, “Discrepant genealogies of the origin of Asian American identity reproduce this tension: social histories and documentary collections of Asian American activism in the 1960s and 1970s [...] locate Third World internationalism as its central ideology, while literary and cultural histories generally privilege domestic U.S. nationalism” (77). If Asian American activism during these decades invokes third world internationalism, then “Chin and his cohorts argued that Asian Americans were bound by a common culture that was born and bred strictly within U.S. national borders” (76). Consequently, Chin’s argument has had a significant impact on Asian American canonical formations. In this way, the editors of Aiiiiieeee! sought to define and articulate this “common culture” by including literary texts that they thought served this fundamental purpose.

**Sowing the Seeds of Third World Internationalism**

What I have tried to suggest in this project is that the revolutionary imaginary reflects the inchoate existence of third world internationalism in early Asian American literature. In distinct contrast to Chin’s efforts to retrofit a body of early Asian American literature that buttresses cultural nationalism, this dissertation draws out disparate articulations of third world internationalism in Asian American literary history. These writers marshal the revolutionary imaginary in order to unite oppressed communities across nations, continents, and oceans. Both Tsiang and Ishigaki, for example, envision a way to ‘organize’ and ‘get together’ (90). Disinterested in revolutionary nationalism and organizing, Chin opts for his particular version of cultural nationalism.
transpacific connections as integral circuits of resistance to both U.S. capitalism and Japanese imperialism. All of these texts begin to call for a transfigured world. And if Maeda describes the Asian American movement as “the choice of some to reject whiteness and instead practice a politics of multiethnic unity [and] international solidarity” (17), then this project identifies an important precursor to this movement in Depression era Asian American literature.

In the decades following the 1940s, the revolutionary imaginary slowly disappeared from Asian American literature. Although later writers like Chin and Maxine Hong Kinston continue to write about working-class immigrants, their Asian American protagonists no longer seem to consider revolution a realistic possibility. This disappearance is due in part to what DeKoven identifies as the shift from utopia to utopia limited, modernism to postmodernism. She writes, “Where modernism was lodged in a powerful desire for utopian transcendence, postmodernism is suspicious of the failed, oppressive utopias of modernity, and it represents its persistent utopian desire in displaced, limited, post-utopian or anti-utopian terms” (16). She goes on, “Where modernisms embraced meta- or master narratives—universal syntheses premised on hierarchical self-other dualisms—postmodernism rejects them, emphasizing the diffuse, antihierarchical, antidualistic, local, particular, partial, temporary” (16). In her discussion of literature in the 1960s, DeKoven accounts for the way in which utopian transcendence nearly fades away from aesthetics altogether. In this context, Chin’s rejection of revolution and Marx should come as no surprise.
Nonetheless, the conspicuous disappearance of this revolutionary imaginary perhaps owes even more to the constrained historical context of the Cold War. Maeda suggests that Asian American radicalism during the 1950s was a “victim not only of McCarthyist red baiting from the mainstream society but also of repression from within Asian American communities” (39). Indeed, the McCarthy era, the second Red Scare, and the institutionalization of anti-communist policies rendered revolution a near impossibility. These political pressures only exacerbated an already harsh reality for Asian American leftists. For this reason, Fowler notes, when discussing Chinese and Japanese Communists, “[I]t is important to recognize that there were very real risks and costs involved in such resistance to the nation-state” (9). In tandem with this shifting political ground, changes in legislation made assimilation more attractive than ever before. Maeda observes, “Between 1952 and 1967, Asian Americans gained rights to naturalization, immigration, and interracial marriage. These legal changes accompanied a social shift that suggested the possibility of Asian American assimilation in the form of a discourse that has come to be known as the ‘model minority myth’” (77). Despite his resistance to assimilation, Chin’s articulations of Asian American literature reflect both the Cold War’s erosion of revolutionary possibility and the renewed importance of civil rights to Asian American cultural formations.

In spite of these historical realities and political constraints, however, activist groups like I Wor Kuen and the Red Guard Party continued to invoke the transformative potential of revolution and Marxist critique. The revolutionary imaginary, then, portends these activist ideals and political concerns. Sowing the seeds of third world
internationalism, these writers begin to imagine Asian America as a diverse pan-ethnic population resisting its imperial oppressors. While Tsiang unites strikers in the U.S. with Communist China, Bulosan imagines an American nation comprised not of native subjects but of immigrants and “foreigners.” Ishigaki joins Chinese victims of imperial Japan with exploited laborers in multiple countries in what she calls a “triumphant spring.” And in the first half of his novel, Murayama, too, envisions a diverse working-class community of Native Hawaiians and Asian Americans coming together to resist the exploitative tactics of the sugar plantations. Rooted in anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist critiques, these authors formulate an alternative literary history to the cultural nationalist version proffered by Frank Chin. Moreover, these texts reveal a brief but incredibly productive overlap between Depression era activism and Asian American literature, one that yielded an incisive critique of U.S. capitalism and anti-Asian racism.
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