

Cosmopolitan (Be)Longings:
Asian America and the Transpacific Elsewhere

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Introduction

On October 9, 2022, the annual New Yorker Festival convened a panel entitled “Identity and Craft,” featuring four luminaries of contemporary American storytelling. The panelists represented a range of industries and mediums and spoke earnestly about their career struggles while waxing quixotic about how they envisioned a future in their respective fields. Moderator Michael Luo, who oversees *The New Yorker*’s website, noted towards the end of the discussion that this panel wouldn’t have been possible several decades prior, when the participants were just beginning their professional lives. Now they are established players if not household names, interpellating a nascent Asian American identity that proudly lays claim to cultural heritages across the Pacific while enjoying greater visibility and recognition than ever before.

The panel happened to comprise four Korean American individuals: culinary mogul David Chang, director Lee Isaac Chung, novelist Min Jin Lee, and actress Sandra Oh.¹ While their conversation alluded to specific facets of Korean cultural identity, it was clear that their words were intended for the broader audiences of the Asian American community and the American public at large. Oh and Lee spoke of the loneliness they once felt as Asian women in the creative industries, but also of the tremendous strides that have been made and the glimmering potentiality of community going forward. Responding to an audience question about whether she always wants her Asianness to be considered a “core element” of her work, Lee remarked, “How do you *not* discuss your ethnicity and race? When I walk out the door, I don’t leave my Koreanness at home” (“Sandra Oh”).

¹ Oh was born in Canada, but was naturalized as a U.S. citizen in 2018 (Turchiano). I contend that her prominent position as an anglophone actor of Asian descent based in North America justifies her inclusion in this discussion of Asian American culture and identity.

This panel discussion provides a most germane point of entry into the subject of my dissertation. It showcases prominent Asian American figureheads who not only have garnered significant accolades and attention from critics and consumers in the United States, but engage in creative practices that can be said to capture the cultural zeitgeist of a minority community while forming, to some extent, a transnational dialogue with their contemporaries in East Asia. The assemblage of this particular group also suggests that cinema, fiction, and food are all storytelling vehicles, and that these domains are mutually resonant and permeable to a degree in the broader context of American entertainment and popular culture. Their conversation touched upon other significant areas of contemporary social discourse, including the 2021 murders of Asian women at an Atlanta-area spa and the contentious critique that many Asian Americans aspire simply for white privilege, as well as issues of authenticity, gatekeeping, and finding a wellspring for one's creativity. I will return to discuss the hopeful yet fraught outlook of Asian Americans amid the simmering domestic strife and global tensions of the 2020s in Chapter 10, which directly addresses the physical and structural violence that underpins many of these issues as they are debated in America today.

My dissertation is arrayed in three broad sections that focus on American discourses of contemporary Asian American gastronomy, cinema, and literature, each comprising three chapters within. I examine the careers, activities, and positionalities of figures like David Chang and Min Jin Lee, among others, through the lens of a nascent subjectivity premised upon interchange and dialogue between the urban spaces of America and East Asia. Parallel to reportage and analysis of the economic or political issues that shape America's complex relationship with the East Asian region, the influx of Asian popular cultural forms like films, fashion, music, food, and translated books has created an ever broader and deeper pool of commodities to which everyday consumers have access. I propose to analyze the intersection of this mediascape with the homegrown works of Asian Americans like Chang and Lee,

whose public narratives and creative personae are inextricably bound to the other side of the Pacific as they perform the role of cultural agents in reinterpreting and refashioning their own Asias for the American imaginary. I deploy the term “cultural agent” to refer to a person who acts as both a symbol of and intermediary within a “cultural field.” Following Pierre Bourdieu, the cultural field is more than simply a static set of players and platforms, and necessarily encompasses “the interactions between institutions, rules, and practices” themselves (Webb et al. 22). The highly visible class of Asian American cultural agents today enact their identities and produce narratives for public consumption against an ever-shifting global cultural landscape, charting new territories in the American imaginary while remaining beholden, to an extent, to its limits. What arises from this dynamic is a cosmopolitan vision of an idealized pan-Asian urbanism that I have termed the transpacific elsewhere.

Before I explain this concept, I would like to offer a semantic clarification and a justification regarding the scope of this project. My specific definition of the geographical area I call “East Asia” by shorthand, along with my rationale, are elaborated in more detail in the next section. While I believe this notion of East Asia is indeed a salient and cohesive supranational entity that has more cultural cachet in American society than, say, Southeast Asia or South Asia, I also acknowledge that these terms are relatively porous and unstable, their fluidity similar to that of the uneasy political category of the “Asian American,” which I also address throughout this project. I focus primarily on the dialogues between American tastemakers of East Asian descent and cultural forms or contemporary artists from East Asia not to be exclusionary or essentialist, but in order to emphasize and interrogate this particularly strong current of cultural flow. By contrast, I invoke the term “Asian American” in its broadest sense to refer to the larger community of minority subjects who may resonate, to varying degrees, with the dialogues in question, regardless of the country or countries from which they or their forefathers claim lineage.

As noted, this project is concerned with Asian American cultural agents and their entanglements with and interpellations of Asianness in three sectors: gastronomy, film, and literature. These are undoubtedly diverse industries with a host of specific conditions and cultural histories that inform the status quo and shape the roles of Asian minorities in their constituent professions. Storytelling is a common thread across these domains, however, which I will demonstrate in the chapters to come. Moreover, one needs only consider the myriad adaptations of literary works for film and television, or the natural suitability of food to both visual media and narratives of cultural identity, for evidence of the easy cross-pollination between and among these fields. By the same token, I deliberately exclude adjacent areas of cultural interchange not because they are irrelevant to my argument—in fact, I have no doubt that these transversals would provide a rich array of complementary perspectives—but simply to delimit my research and keep this project within the scope of viability. K-pop, Chinese internet culture, and Japanese design, to name just a few fields, are each a fertile domain for academic inquiry into the institutional structures and the transnational players responsible for their emergence in global consciousness today. These are fascinating areas that are absolutely pertinent to the notion of the transpacific elsewhere I propose. However, to include them in any substantive capacity is unfortunately beyond feasibility for this current work. I hope this can be addressed with the appropriate rigor in future scholarship, whether by myself or others.

With that, allow me to return to the work in question and explain what I mean by the “transpacific elsewhere.” East Asia is indisputably a major player in the fast-flowing currents of 21st century global culture. No longer mere niche interests or acquired tastes, the music, films, food, art, fashion, and literature of Greater China, Japan, and South Korea have found ardent audiences and consumers worldwide as the technologies and infrastructures that enable and promote aesthetic cosmopolitanism have matured. Concurrently, this circulation

of commodities is mirrored in and substantiated by the movement of people. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the countries of East Asia were welcoming record numbers of annual tourists (S. Kang; Lies; She), businesspeople (Asian Development Bank and World Tourism Organization), students (Kuroda et al.), and other short-term sojourners. In an era when individual experiences are digitally mediated and oftentimes shared via social media or other platforms, the passage of people through the world implies a profusion of images and impressions with cumulative impact on distant communities.

The global imaginary of East Asia writ large is an immense topic with multiple points of entry. I propose to venture into this terrain by focusing on the emergent symbiosis of East Asian cultural forms and Asian American creative communities in the United States, particularly as the latter group refashions and recirculates articulations of Asianness that simultaneously take inspiration from and respond to the urban lifeworld from which the former arise. The U.S. saw an incredible influx of Asian immigrants in the latter half of the 20th century, following the 1965 Hart-Celler Act. “No single piece of legislation has shaped the demographic and economic history of this country in quite the same way,” writes former *New York Times* columnist Jay Caspian Kang, detailing how the once miniscule numbers of immigrants from Asia skyrocketed in the ensuing decades (“Enduring Importance”). Despite this explosive growth in the Asian American population, popular representation has only recently become a topic of mainstream discourse under the banner of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Gen X and Millennial Asian Americans who grew up with few role models from similar backgrounds are now the ones telling stories, creating characters, and asserting identities beyond the tropes that previously circumscribed their social worlds.²

² Asian American cultural figures have certainly long occupied discrete corners of the American imaginary, such as actresses Anna May Wong and Margaret Cho; writers Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan; filmmaker Wayne Wang; and so on. Their relative sparsity in previous generations, however, often meant that Asian American youth had to look farther afield for inspiration or edification. Thanks to technology and globalization, Asian American creatives of the Millennial generation have been able to establish a pastiche sensibility and

At the same time, global capitalism and technological development have opened up a kaleidoscopic potentiality for imagining and envisioning the self. This torrent of images in the contemporary mediascape (a point to which I will return later) has enabled Asian American creatives to detach themselves in the best of ways: rather than remain beholden to an insistently monolingual and oftentimes insular American culture, they hover somewhere above this terrain as they consume culture from across the Pacific, in turn reinventing and refashioning their own “East Asia,” responding to specific aspects, moods, and themes from the region’s cultural industries and repurposing them in a variety of new contexts. I argue that this phenomenon coalesced roughly around the turn of the millennium, and within the past decade has shifted to something more like a dialogue or interchange between metropolitan America and urban East Asia, due to the ubiquity of the internet and social media. Concurrently, a growing number of Asian Americans have taken up permanent or semi-permanent residence in China, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, though this phenomenon remains relatively understudied. Whether you call them “sea turtles” or repatriates (Khanna), displaced “Mash-Ups” (H. Kim), or something else entirely, I contend that what materializes from this back-and-forth movement of goods and people is less a subculture than a dreamscape, a nowhere-city that exists in the liminal space between Asia and America. It is a cosmopolis of mirages and memory that I call the transpacific elsewhere. In the spirit of Gloria Anzaldúa’s powerful ruminations on the Mexico-U.S. borderland or *la frontera*, at once a physical place and a metaphor of liminality and hybridity, the urban environment I am concerned arises from a “confluence of primordial images” (19) and flourishes from the unsettled energies and yearnings of subjectivities caught in-between.

aesthetic vernacular drawing upon the work of artists and storytellers from East Asia, as well as the urban trappings typically associated with cities such as Tokyo, Shanghai, or Seoul.

An imaginary megacity is a fitting framework for my meanderings through contemporary culture. Cities, after all, are a sensory experience unto themselves. To dwell in the concrete jungle is to experience an outright “intensification of consciousness,” as the sociologist Georg Simmel wrote over a century ago (193). With a splendid array of objects, experiences, or lifestyles to consume, urban space allows one to indulge in the pleasure of anonymity while maintaining the potential of communion. The metropolis of the transpacific elsewhere is both a site of kinship and a defamiliarized place. Multilingual and multifaceted, the city is premised upon a shared cultural vernacular that is worldly in its orientation, but most heavily influenced by American and East Asian discourses. Despite these affiliations, this imagined landscape is decidedly postnational. Tolerant and inclusive, the denizens of the transpacific elsewhere espouse a cosmopolitan identity, belonging nowhere and everywhere at once. As one Asian American writer observes, “We create our own homeland wherever we go, regardless of country borders or citizenship” (Ho). In this purgatorial space, and through the agglomeration of people caught in-between cultures, a bulwark against the violence of racialized antipathy and resurgent nationalisms is thus established.

A Note on East Asia

Modern scholarship offers multiple ways to conceptualize the region denoted by the term East Asia. One could ascribe its current boundaries to the historical Sinosphere, or “Chinese culture area,” per Fairbank, Reischauer, and Craig (1). The voluminous tome produced by these mid-20th century American academics, centered on the theme of tradition and transformation, encompasses chapters on China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. The authors

of this treatise observe that, in the modern era, three major wars waged by the U.S.—against Japan, against North Korea and China, and against Vietnam—have made it clear that “lives in East Asia can directly affect the lives of Westerners” (2). Although Vietnam is considered by some to be peripheral to East Asia or as belonging to Southeast Asia, these two regional blocs are not necessarily mutually exclusive (Schirokauer and Clark xi). Vietnam, after all, adopted “salient aspects of Chinese civilization ... over long centuries of adaptation and digestion” (3) in a fashion similar to Korea and Japan.

Northeast Asia is an adjacent term that, to some degree, covers the significant swaths of historical Chinese, Japanese, and Korean territory that pertain to the work at hand. Also included, however, is an inland stretch from the Mongolian Plateau to Eastern Siberia, a contested region influenced by Russia, in addition to China and Japan (Li and Cribb 2). Meanwhile, the concept of Southeast Asia may have originally alluded to the region south of China and east of India, a means to orient Westerners by using other prominent lands as a point of reference (Emmerson 2). It was not until the 20th century that the term came into popular usage, and only after World War II did the region become fully “visible” via its reification in the academy and in the discourse of Western foreign policy.³

Writing in 1977, diplomat John Paton Davies observed that East Asia had historically been, in the eyes of Americans, “the most remote part of the earth, and its various civilizations the most exotic” (368). Yet in the modern age, America had intervened in a show of “altruism” over a series of successive wars centered in the region. However one chooses to define East Asia, it is clear that the term cannot escape the military connotations of the 20th century and the geopolitical reverberations that are still playing out to this day. Irrespective of domestic turmoils, America continues to wield tremendous power in the

³ Emmerson narrativizes the steady move towards concretization of a rather unstable and ambiguous term via political events and the formation of international bodies such as the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), founded in 1954, or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), established in 1967 and still extant.

Pacific with its overseas bases in Japan and South Korea, among many other places, while finding itself now locked into uneasy economic, military, and ideological competition with China.

Matters of security and diplomacy aside, I would argue that the echoes of previous wars or the threat of future conflicts in the popular imagination dwell alongside a newer phenomenon and defining feature of the East Asian region: that of urbanization. The World Bank's 2015 report *East Asia's Changing Urban Landscape* observes that the pace and scale of urbanization in East Asia has been unparalleled and offers incredible opportunities for an enormous population to "leave extreme poverty behind and [prosper]" (20). Curiously, this publication encompasses not only the countries of the Sinosphere in its overview of regional urbanization, but countries besides Vietnam that are most typically associated with Southeast Asia: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand. Similarly, a 2006 study on "postindustrial" East Asia includes Bangkok and Singapore among the cities of focus (Yusuf and Nabeshima). From the aforementioned examples, it is apparent that the region known as East Asia is fluid at best, permeable and in constant flux, able to be molded and adapted to the aims of the scholar, diplomat, historian, or economist. Massive and rapid growth are solidly indicated by all metrics, however, in view of a more than 34% increase in the overall urban population of the region within the first decade of the 21st century and areas like China's Pearl River Delta boasting at least eight megacities of more than 10 million people as of 2015 (Fensom).

For the purposes of my project, I focus the discussion of East Asia on the contemporary cities and urban cultures of Japan, South Korea, and Greater China—that is, the sinophone region encompassing both the People's Republic of China, including the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, and Taiwan. Despite its geographical proximity, I exclude North Korea from this group for its cultural and economic estrangement from the

bloc, as this study is contingent upon juxtapositions and correspondences rendered impossible by the isolation imposed by Kim Jong-un and his forefathers. Similarly, this area of inquiry is large enough to tackle without enfolding Southeast Asia into it, even countries with arguable ties to the Sinosphere. While Singapore and Vietnam may resonate with some of the broader discussions of urban culture and development, they are nowhere near as intimately linked by economic scale or geographical proximity as are the polities overseen by Beijing, Seoul, Taipei, and Tokyo. As of October 2023, China, Japan, and South Korea are ranked by the International Monetary Fund as the 1st, 4th, and 14th largest economies in the world, respectively. While Taiwan occupies the 22nd spot on this list, I would argue that its historical connections to both China and Japan, as well as its globally acclaimed cinema, in particular, justify its inclusion.

As Margaret Hillenbrand has pointed out in her comparative study of postwar Japanese and Taiwanese literature, a regionalist approach can “uncover parallels, reveal overlapping histories and experiences, and shed light on the solidarities” amid the disparate political and economic realities that coexist within a broad geographical space (*Literature 2-3*). This is precisely what drives me to formulate my project as such. Acknowledging the motley character of East Asia does not preclude the possibility of talking about it as a distinct and multivalent whole, especially when analyzing cultural commodities that are transplanted into and take on new life within an American diasporic context. Political systems, economic conditions, and demographic factors may vary considerably between Taiwan and South Korea or China and Japan, but these countries are united in cosmopolitan yearning via their major cities—a whole lifeworld forged by an overwhelmingly urban middle class weaned on transnational consumption (Hillenbrand, “Murakami” 716). And the yearnings of this urban lifeworld have found resonance on distant shores, offering a textured sensibility to the transpacific elsewhere of the Asian American imagination.

Manifesting Asian America

A brief overview of the history of Asian migration to the United States and the subsequent formation of the Asian American as a category of ethnic identification is essential for the work at hand. The transpacific elsewhere may be rooted in the speed and intense interconnection of the globalized present, but it is important to acknowledge the prior histories of mobility and disjuncture between the American continent and the Asia-Pacific region that have shaped how Asian minorities in the U.S. are contextualized and understood today. Nearly two hundred years before the United States was established as a nation, Madeline Hsu recounts, the first Asian migrants to present-day California were “Luzon Indians” brought from the Philippines by a Spanish galleon (1). The first significant wave of migrations to America occurred in the mid-19th century during the Gold Rush, when southern Chinese from the Pearl River Delta region left their homeland under Qing dynastic rule for economic opportunities on the other side of the Pacific (11). Aided and abetted by transnational networks of commerce, tens of thousands of Chinese not only reached Californian shores but also sought to become laborers in Hawaii, an independent kingdom that missionaries from New England were rapidly industrializing and exploiting. In a similar fashion, Japanese migration boomed during this period, with over 200,000 arriving in Hawaii in the decades following the Meiji Restoration (16). Regional upheaval and annexation by the Empire of Japan also impelled tens of thousands of Koreans to strike out abroad, including the seven thousand who arrived in Hawaii, newly incorporated as an American territory, in the early years of the 20th century (17). After becoming American subjects following the Spanish-American War of 1898, Filipinos too began relocating en masse to Hawaii, forming

yet another wave of early migrants; some of them would repatriate, but tens of thousands more continued on to the mainland United States where they settled as part of a growing community of Asian minorities.

With the increasing numbers of migrants, nativist rhetoric concerning the Yellow Peril emerged out of “a fear that cheap Asian laborers would displace white workers and large Asian communities would not assimilate to the dominant American culture” (Ling and Austin 86). This racist imaginary of the Asian minority subject would have real-world political consequences, with the enactment of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which prohibited Chinese workers from entering the country; the Immigration Act of 1924, barring entry to almost all Asians; and the Hawes-Cutting Act of 1932 that prevented Filipinos from gaining U.S. citizenship even while their homeland was an American colony (Okihiro 31). Popular culture also perpetuated all manner of pernicious stereotypes about Asian people, as vividly embodied in the character of Fu Manchu invented by Sax Rohmer, a figure of diabolical Chineseness that endured across seven decades and spawned similarly typecast villains across television shows and comic franchises (Mayer 1).

Following Imperial Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor, America’s entry into World War II in 1941 provided a pretext for the establishment of internment camps for people of Japanese descent. Issued by President Franklin Roosevelt in 1942, Executive Order 9066 enabled the federal government to forcibly displace 110,000 Japanese Americans on the West Coast into temporary shelters that would endure until 1946 (Hayashi 1). These camps would serve as facilities where white American overseers could keep a close eye on a minority group with potential sympathies for a wartime enemy, while the Japanese residents themselves were encouraged to pledge their allegiance to a country that was holding them captive—a compulsory patriotism to which the majority of them acquiesced (2). Years later, when the newly formed People’s Republic of China entered the Korean War on the side of

Kim Il-sung, Chinese American communities fell under suspicion in a country where they had already “long grappled with public and official hostility to their citizenship and rights” (Brooks). The Chinese Exclusion Act had only been repealed during World War II, a nominal gesture with very little impact on the size of the Chinese American community or their acceptance in the American mainstream.⁴ It wasn’t until the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, also known as the Hart-Celler Act, that discriminatory quotas based on national origin were ended entirely. Despite the claims by President Lyndon B. Johnson, whose administration enacted the policy, that the Act would not fundamentally “reshape the structure of our daily lives,” an enormous spike in legal immigrants from Asia and Latin America in the following decades indeed dramatically altered the demographics of the United States, with reverberations continuing into the present (Milkman).

It was against the backdrop of the tumultuous civil rights movement, wherein Black Americans led by Martin Luther King and Malcolm X fought against segregation and systemic discrimination, that the Asian American subject emerged as we know it today. Rejecting the term “Oriental” that was in common parlance, activists Yuji Ichioka and Emma Gee espoused a new notion of Asian identity premised on a pan-ethnic solidarity inspired by the contemporaneous Black Liberation movement (Wallace). For the first time, minority groups of disparate national origins could begin to envision themselves as part of an imagined community in the country where they made their home. Over the half-century that followed the Hart-Celler Act, 59 million immigrants arrived in the U.S., among whom 88% came from non-European countries—exactly inverse to the demographic trend of heavily European inbound migration at the beginning of the 20th century, Mae Ngai recounts. While Asian Americans accounted for a mere 0.5% of the populace in 1965 (Ngai), these numbers have

⁴ The repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act ostensibly opened the doors for Chinese to immigrate to the U.S. again, but with an annual quota of only 105 people, its impact was very limited and did nothing to help the so-called “paper sons” who had arrived in previous decades posing as the children of American-born Chinese (Brooks).

multiplied manifold to become nearly 7% by 2021 (Budiman and Ruiz). With two discrete pathways for immigration under Hart-Celler, many Asians came to this country by virtue of their technical training, given that their talents were “in demand in the burgeoning health care, pharmaceutical, aerospace, and telecommunications industries in America” (Ngai). This bureaucratic bias sowed the seeds for the model minority stereotype of high-income, education-focused Asian American households in the popular imagination, while simultaneously eliding the experiences of other economic classes in the same demographic group.

Across the Pacific, America sought to remake East Asia in its image by forging political and military alliances with South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan. Before Japan’s economic bubble burst in the 1990s, fears of Japanese economic dominance led to not only a trade war with America, but a resurgence of xenophobic rhetoric that was directly responsible for the murder of Vincent Chin at the hands of white assailants who blamed him for their unemployment, his Chinese ethnicity notwithstanding (Liz Zhou). While Japan was democratized under Douglas MacArthur’s postwar occupation, Taiwan and South Korea only moved away from authoritarianism in the 1980s. China has remained the staunch political outlier, in spite of the economic reforms enacted by Deng Xiaoping beginning in 1979. The collapse of the Soviet Union and China’s arrival on the world stage in recent decades have ultimately recreated a familiar and discomfiting dynamic of competition between the United States and an ascendant global superpower.

In America, unflattering depictions and outright yellowface caricatures have been a perennial issue in mainstream representations of Asian people. Asian Americans began to assert agency and reclaim their own stories with the emergence of writers like Amy Tan and film directors like Wayne Wang and Ang Lee, whose breakthrough works in the 1990s represent an early crest of public interest in such stories. With the advent of the internet, as

well as the continuing technological advancement and globalization of popular culture, Asian America has been able to refashion itself in a multiplicity of ways. As Shilpa Davé, et al. observe in their edited volume *Global Asian American Popular Cultures*, Asian Americans now sit at the “crossroads of global and national expressions of culture intersecting with race, gender, class, and religion in multiple arenas of exchange,” an enormously expanded horizon that implicates “emerging textual fields, global producers and technologies of distribution, transmedial circulation, and transnational mobility” (2). The embedded notions of movement and mobility are critical to Asian American identity today, as I argue in this dissertation. Though there are many fine points to be made with regard to representation and imaginings of self versus other for Asian minorities in America, I offer this truncated history as a placeholder for now, with the intention of returning to these key issues in the chapters to come in order to conduct an exploration of appropriate rigor and depth.

Transpacific Orientations: Ethnoscape and Mediascape

Before we venture into the transpacific elsewhere, this imagined megacity where Asian American and East Asia coalesce into one fever dream, I would like to offer a few framing notes to guide the journey ahead. I situate my research in the field of transpacific studies that has drawn renewed academic interest in recent years. In the introduction to their 2014 edited volume, Janet Hoskins and Viet Thanh Nguyen call for scholars to transcend the siloed frameworks of area studies, American studies, and Asian American studies and undertake an interdisciplinary approach that can account for the historical complexity of an Asia-Pacific region shaped by military, economic, and intellectual subjugation. The authors observe that “movement defines and shapes cultures,” but the infrastructure “which enables

or resists these flows” (25) of people, objects, and ideas merits equal attention in the globalized world of today. Indeed, while the COVID-19 pandemic of the early 2020s stymied economic growth, incited fractious debates, and segregated vast swaths of the world in patchwork lockdowns, human civilization remained relentlessly linked via the internet and everyday experience became mediated by digital spaces and representations more than ever. Transpacific studies is a most urgent and appropriate framework to address the whirlpool of global cultural narratives through which we wade today, especially as it concerns the interflows between America and East Asia. Diverting the scholarly gaze from an essentialist notion of nation or society, a focus on transnational currents and entanglements can add nuance to our understanding of past, present, and possible futures.

For Naoki Sakai and Hyon Joo Yoo, the transpacific imagination is inextricably linked to colonial violence or, in other words, “Asia became possible thanks to Europe’s colonization” (6). Sakai and Yoo argue that the transpacific is necessarily a binaristic structure that defines Asia against the Western world, and the colonial structures of the past have simply been supplanted by American hegemony, rather than demolished outright. In this configuration, Japan remains something of a vassal state to the U.S. in spite of its nominal autonomy and plays a vital role in aiding and abetting America’s sphere of influence in East Asia. This dynamic also allows Japan to publicly emphasize its victimhood in World War II while simultaneously downplaying its own imperialist project that visited death, destruction, and trauma upon its neighbors. This reading of the transpacific is no doubt valid in its own right, but privileges a top-down perspective that focuses on governmental and militaristic affairs at the exclusion of almost all else. The security alliances between America and Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan are certainly an important context for East Asian geopolitics, especially vis-à-vis China’s relationships with all players. Yet viewing the region only from this angle misses an alternate history of the transpacific, one that becomes visible once the

focus shifts from state power and jingoistic politicians to cultural industries, creative communities, and the people who transit these countries in search of artistic expression or personal identity, as it were. As Bourdieu noted, the meanings of cultural works change depending on the context in which they are placed. Repositioning our vantage point to focus on transpacific flows between and among specific groups of cultural agents can offer new interpretations of power relations, or even cause us to question the presumptive dominance of existing structures and politics.

Yunte Huang's two monographs on transpacific flow are useful models for recentering the reading of culture at the level of the individual. His earlier volume defines the term transpacific displacement as "a historical process of textual migration of cultural meanings . . . that include linguistic traits, poetics, philosophical ideas, myths, stories, and so on" (3). Huang's notion of displacement refers to American writers and translators who attempt to grasp the cultural reality of imagined Others through linguistic or textual devices in their work. Huang cites the fiction of Maxine Hong Kingston, who appropriates Chinese figures of legend, such as Mulan or the Monkey King, and boldly proclaims them to be "American myths," displacing their cultural origins in an effort to assert their belonging in the canon of anglo-American literature (138). Indeed, displacement is one dimension of the liminal cosmopolis between East Asia and America that I expand upon in Chapters 9 and 10, with specific reference to the work of Kingston, among other Asian American figureheads.

Huang's follow-up book proclaims the transpacific as "the deadly space between," borrowing the term from Herman Melville, who himself appropriated this line from Scottish poet Thomas Campbell (2). Like Sakai and Yoo, Huang reads violence in the Pacific—not necessarily the violence of nation-states struggling for dominance through warfare or the machinery of late capitalism, but rather the ruptures and disconnects between differing interpretations of the past or between assumed truths and fictions in history and literature.

The transpacific imagination is thus animated in these gaps, the in-between space of counterpoetics that Huang describes as “[hovering] between the literal and the metaphoric . . . a means to alter memory and invoke minority survival” (4-5). This liminal space is exactly where I situate the transpacific elsewhere, with its many images and narratives drawn directly from East Asia, in addition to other cultural forms born of diasporic longing and reinvention. For Asian Americans in the 2020s, however, I contend that far more violence is threaded in the texture of everyday life than in their movements back and forth across the Pacific. The deadly space has become America itself, a pressure cooker of a nation that pits marginalized classes against one another while demanding unwavering allegiance and blithe acceptance of the physical and spiritual brutality that can be inflicted on individuals or entire communities on whim. Under these circumstances, the transpacific has become a refuge and a means to secure minority survival; it offers an alternate understanding of the self, at once newer and older than the dominant paradigms, to those who have had to minimize or deny aspects of their cultural background and identity in order to simply exist.

As Arif Dirlik astutely pointed out three decades ago, the twin issues of temporality and vantage point are critical to any discussion of the Pacific region, since the term ultimately remains ambiguous and denotes “a competing set of ideational constructs” more than an objective reality (56). The Asia-Pacific may have indeed emerged as a geographical concept via Euro-American colonialism, later to become a region that Imperial Japan sought to conquer under the auspices of “liberation.” While these complex and interwoven histories are all but inescapable, I am interested in the aura that East Asian cultural products and narratives assume when they are transmitted or displaced across the ocean and circulated in a transnational, American-inflected context. For this reason, I leverage the term “transpacific” to emphasize the dimension of supranational global mobility as I dive into the currents of East Asian culture flowing to and from the cosmopolis of elsewhere. Again, this framework

is less driven by an exclusionary impulse than a practical one. While a multidirectional flow of people and products no doubt exists within the Pacific region itself and from the Pacific to all corners of the world, the dynamic between East Asia and the United States provides a more tangible field of study with provocative insights. Moreover, the economic and political levers controlled by America and Greater China, Japan, or South Korea are of outsize importance to human civilization at large. For this reason, I have chosen to focus on this particular transversal to explore the issue at hand.

On the topic of globalization and cultural flows, Arjun Appadurai's 1996 essay collection *Modernity at Large* provides a number of useful terminologies that have grown only more resonant since the book's publication, with the proliferation of internet technologies and mobile phones. Two of Appadurai's neologisms are especially salient and offer a foundational structure for the rest of the theories I deploy. Firstly, the notion of the ethnoscape is more significant than ever, considering the physical mobility that is in many ways a prerequisite and precondition for substantive negotiations of individual identity vis-à-vis cosmopolitanism, transnationality, and so on. Appadurai's ethnoscape refers to "tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and individuals [who] constitute an essential feature of the world . . . [affecting] the politics of (and between) nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree" (33) and, as both a conceptual term and lived reality, succinctly conveys the porous and dynamic nature of the world today. The transpacific ethnoscape could be said to contain multiple categories of transnationally mobile people in this manner: diplomats, third culture kids, migrant workers, travel writers, social media influencers, exchange students, digital nomads, the like. I focus on a narrow slice of the ethnoscape in my narrative, highlighting the experience of Asian and Asian American creatives—translators, filmmakers, chefs, novelists, food writers, and so on—who embrace an unprecedented degree of mobility between East Asia and the United States in the

construction of their sensibilities, as much as their careers and livelihoods. There are no clear lines of demarcation for the transpacific ethnoscape, however; it is necessarily a messy and malleable terrain, with each individual subject belonging to multiple moving cohorts that may be premised upon regional, ethnic, social, or professional identities.

The mediascape that Appadurai proposed several decades ago may seem almost quaint in comparison to the veritable deluge of information that we suffer on the daily now. Beyond newspapers, televisions, and cassette tapes, human civilization now utilizes an enormous array of modes and vessels to both transmit and receive “image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality” (35). Traditional vehicles like film and literature persist, of course, but they exist alongside other platforms that deliver longform stories or fragmentary glimpses of individual lives: Netflix, Twitter (recently rebranded by Elon Musk as X), Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, in addition to all the traditional news media, magazines, and cultural organizations that maintain presences across these platforms by necessity. The megalithic mediascape of today is a matrix of knowledge, entertainment, and resources, a hall of mirrors for constructing the self against the concentric communities, societies, or ideologies which we embrace or reject. In that sense, Appadurai’s theory of the ideoscape is also of utmost urgency to examine, perhaps in the frame of a separate project, given the right wing populism that runs rampant through the world today.

Ultimately, these contemporary tensions demonstrate humankind’s alternating and oppositional impulses of convergence and divergence, as Appadurai suggests, a richly insightful and provocative dynamic echoed by Tina Chen and Eric Hayot in their introduction to the first issue of *Verge: Studies in Global Asias*. Furthermore, to take the migration of people, things, and ideas from “Asia” as a starting point for further investigations into the processes of and potential futures wrought by globalization dovetails perfectly with the transpacific ethos articulated by Nguyen and Hoskins. A decentered approach that privileges

neither universal Eurocentrism nor Asian particularism is critical to understanding the way in which cultural phenomena flow throughout the world, especially as they take on translocal permutations, feed into or merge with other texts, and become part of the global lexicon of modern society. My project, therefore, is a proving ground for the observation by Chen and Hayot that “Asian immigrants around the world have served as conduits for a variety of Asian concepts, objects, or forms of social life . . . and as vectors for economic and cultural transactions directed from their new homes back to their old ones” (xi). I do not intend to suggest that the Asian American diaspora are a monolith or that their sense of belonging in America and relationship to cultural heritage are uncomplicated; far from it. However, with a narrow focus on specific people and the cultural platforms they leverage and, in turn, influence, be they cinematic, literary, or gastronomic, I aim to tease out common resonances among a multiplicity of angles and interpretations. The narrative I offer here will prove, I hope, that the imaging and imagining of culture happens from within and without, taking on myriad forms as the real and imagined coalesce and separate, over and again, in the multiply mediated landscape of the transpacific elsewhere.

Transnationality and Cultural Identity

Denoting a single line that intersects a set of other lines, the transversal is one of the subsidiary concepts that anthropologist Aihwa Ong employs to expand upon the notion of transnationality in her book *Flexible Citizenship*. Ong describes transnationality as “cultural interconnectedness and mobility across space” (4), the prefix trans- implying movement or becoming, giving rise to the further notions of transversal, transaction, translation, and transgression. Viewed another way, the globalization of contemporary culture arises through

actions or relational structures such as intersections (transversal), exchanges (transaction), conversions (translation), and violations or infractions (transgression). This is a most provocative set of configurations through which one can ascertain the contours of the transpacific elsewhere. Picture, for a moment, the heterogeneous complexity of Asian America reduced to a single line, one that not only snakes across the American continent itself, but propels itself outward into the world and intersects with many different regions and nation-states. The transversal of this line with other lines originating in East Asia—representing the entertainment cultures or artistic communities of Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China—effectively creates a miniature graph or grid of sorts. A hybrid subjectivity is produced in the negative space between these lines; or perhaps this is where the phantasmic metropolis of the transpacific elsewhere is situated.

The transpacific elsewhere is a city built upon cultural transactions of all sorts, exchanges between the people who populate this East Asian ethnoscape, but also among artists and craftspeople who cross disciplinary borders: musicians writing books, chefs working in television, translators becoming novelists. Translation is both inescapable and completely superfluous here. English is still necessarily the lingua franca, which means Mandarin, Japanese, Korean, Cantonese, and other East Asian languages require translation for the sake of those who may not be familiar. Thankfully, there are plenty of bilingual or multilingual people on hand. Better yet, there is no need to translate oneself culturally in order to be legible to a white hegemonic power. In an overtly cosmopolitan center like this, one does need to convert, diminish, or transform any facet of personhood to embrace one's fullest existence.

As for transgression, the existence of a cultural megalopolis premised upon Asianness—and the urban allure of cities like Tokyo, Seoul, and Taipei over New York, Los Angeles, and London—challenges the universality of Western modernity, as Ong herself

called for in 1999. “The moral politics of the entire field of discussion about modernity and transnationalism,” she writes, “needs to be interrogated in a world where capitalism is no longer centered in the West but distributed across a number of global arenas” (31). Ong’s argument is a preamble for a chapter on China presenting an “authoritarian Asian model” of governance, but I would like to divert and redeploy her notion of transgression into the realm of cultural power. In the East Asian ethnoscape that lies at the core of the transpacific elsewhere, to be Asian American is far from a disadvantage. Rather, one stands at the nexus of two powerful domains, with the opportunity to draw upon both the historical potency of anglophone American culture and the increasingly sophisticated magnetism of the East Asian city.

This dual positionality aligns with Stuart Hall’s seminal essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in which he identifies two tendencies in the diasporic self. The first looks towards commonality beyond difference in order to establish “unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning” (223); the other foregrounds the “critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute ‘what we really are’” (225; emphasis in original). Although Hall is referring to Black Caribbean communities in England, I find this binary condition to be incredibly apt for considering Asian America, whose contemporary subjects continue to negotiate both sides of the coin in their grapplings with identity in American society. Indeed, the diverse languages, religions, economic backgrounds, and cultural practices encompassed by the unwieldy category of the Asian American are often invoked as a critique of the possibility of solidarity, these eclectic backgrounds and affiliations a supposed impediment to mutual empathy and accord. However, just as the “broken rubric of our past” (225) is revived by Black diasporic communion for Hall, so can a mythology of Asia constructed in the transpacific elsewhere serve concrete ends and construct kinship for a rapidly proliferating American minority. I contend that Asians in America can find a common

thread amid differences if they embrace the vibrant capacities of transnationality and envision a new kind of cosmopolitanism from below, as I will elaborate upon in the next section.

Aihwa Ong and Donald Nonini's edited volume on Chinese transnationalism in the late 20th century proposed a deterritorialized subjectivity that existed outside state apparatuses and embraced cultural hybridity, made possible in part due to quotidian encounters in the mediascape of globalization. Nonetheless, they are careful to note that "[diasporas], like any cultural formations, are grounded in internal hegemonies and systems of inequalities" (324). Critiques of Asian American subjectivity often cite the privileging or presumption of high-income individuals of East Asian descent as stand-ins for the community at large, overlooking the struggles of others in the same demographic, such as those of Southeast Asian heritage who may come from refugee backgrounds and "contend with poverty and subsequently lower rates of educational attainment" (Yam). Though the scope of this project does indeed focus on East Asian cultural forms and cultural agents primarily of such heritage, I do not mean to overlook stratification and disparity within the Asian American community. Quixotic though it may sound, it is my belief that the broader narrative of a transnationally inclined subjectivity can be a beacon of hope for all Asian minorities in the United States, regardless of their own background, challenging the confines of an overly narrow imagination of the self and setting the tone for future generations in an increasingly diverse and cosmopolitan society.

The City and Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism

In 2010, Deborah Wong wrote about the transnational tendencies of Asian American youth in the early 21st century, a group whose enactment of "the globalized circuit of

exchange” (127) led to the creation of an eclectic cultural vocabulary from which they could easily draw. Honing in on the West Coast subculture of this minority demographic, Wong described its constituents as “hip, playful, often aware of Asian American history, and closely in touch with certain forms of East Asian mass mediated culture (especially Japanese anime and Hong Kong martial arts films)” (130). Despite their social consciousness, these youth were less passionate about the pan-Asian solidarity that both catalyzed and arose from the 1960s civil rights movement in the United States. Their access to internet technologies and consumption of contemporary Asian popular culture led to the formation of a cosmopolitan, almost chameleonic sensibility, which at the time could coexist unperturbed with the American identity they might also claim by birth or upbringing.

A little over a decade has elapsed since Wong published this chapter, but American society and human civilization at large have undergone a number of dramatic transformations or evolutions. In terms of technology, social media and the proliferation of the smartphone have reshaped humans’ relationships with others and experience of the world around them. The children who grew up with ubiquitous wireless internet and digital identities are now beginning to come of age, their generation embracing incredible fluidity and openness in self-expression while also being afflicted by the darkest impulses of human behavior online. America itself has become ever more polarized, discontent on all ends of the political spectrum intensified manifold since the Obama era. In the final year of Donald Trump’s presidency, the rancorous disputes and cultural wars between political factions within the U.S. were further exacerbated by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Xenophobic rhetoric from Trump and other political leaders have culminated in an astounding increase in anti-Asian violence, with even diverse metropolitan hubs like San Francisco reporting a 567% increase in hate crimes against Asian Americans between 2020 and 2021 (Anguiano).

Against this backdrop of violence and isolation, East Asian cultural products have continued to achieve mainstream recognition and success in the Western and American imagination. Japanese literature and Korean cinema and television have generated lively discourses in the anglophone world, while narratives of Greater China have also threaded their way into popular consciousness through the work of writers, filmmakers, artists, and digital content creators. In a similar vein, Asian diasporic chefs, restaurateurs, and food industry figureheads have expanded American diners' minds and palates through their culinary establishments and media franchises. In concert with the various permutations of transnationality I introduced earlier, I propose to narrativize these trends as a manifestation of aesthetic cosmopolitanism. Vincenzo Cicchelli et al. offer the notion that cosmopolitanism is a means to understand the outcomes of globalization, in a world where transnational flows and processes equate to commonplace encounters with cultural difference. As part of this process, the aestheticization of everyday life means that individuals are now liable to construct identities through the content they opt to engage or consume, whether that happens to be streaming video and music, physical accoutrements like books and clothing, or ethnic alimentation.

In 2021, the Pew Research Center reported that the Asian American population grew an incredible 81% between the years 2000 and 2019, nearly doubling to a total 22.4 million people (Budiman and Ruiz). In urban centers, Asian American youth culture nowadays has the advantage of critical mass: many more subcommunities and avenues of expression are accessible, from queer dance party BUBBLE_T to independent magazines like *Banana* or *Burdock*, all of them enjoying further amplification through the easy communication and interaction afforded by the internet. As Cicchelli et al. observe, aesthetic cosmopolitanism has “roots in the intergenerational and demographic transformations . . . rising levels of education and youth mobility (academic, touristic or professional)” (8). Thanks to the intense

connectivity of today's world, younger generations have been exposed to culture from around the world and are able to develop an idiosyncratic aesthetic vernacular of their own. Motti Regev notes that cultural openness is a prerequisite for aesthetic cosmopolitanism since this condition implies the absorption, appropriation, and acceptance of "alien cultural elements." Viewed another way, however, the foreign or alien can also be perceived as part of a "universal modernity." "Total cultural otherness hardly exists anymore," contends Regev (31). Indeed, to use Asian cuisine as an example, it seems absurd to imagine a time when Americans balked at the mere idea of sushi or considered fried rice exotic. Urban America is practically overrun with "Asian hipster and street cuisine," to borrow a phrase from Shoon Lio and Megan Bott. And at the fore of such cultural trends, one often finds Asian diasporic entrepreneurs such as David Chang, Danny Bowien, and Roy Choi.⁵

Regev observes astutely that media and cultural industries wield major power in the construction and dissemination of a global popular consciousness, but "*collective and individual actors* at various national and local levels . . . [contribute] to the global circulation of cultural forms and practices" (32; emphasis added). Cultural production in today's world takes place primarily in a global context, for better or worse. Forces beyond the local and national exert influence on the creative professions and the trajectories of individual careers within them. "In most countries of the world," Regev notes, "local production of cultural materials [is] intertwined with globally circulating stylistic trends and creative innovations" (33). At the sociocultural level, aesthetic cosmopolitanism allows individuals and communities to express or create a "sense of status or class destiny" (34) within the mosaic of

⁵ It must be stated that the diaspora are by no means the exclusive source of cultural influence and authority when it comes to the dispersal of Asian cultural commodities. In the book chapter by Lio and Bott, for example, white American chefs Andy Ricker and Ivan Orkin are mentioned alongside Chang, Choi, and Bowen as demonstrative of "Asian hipster cuisine." In a similar fashion, non-Asian American writers, translators, filmmakers, et al. are also part of this circuit of cultural transmissions through their career trajectories, transpacific movements, collaborations, and so on. Given my intentions here to emphasize and examine in depth the role of the diaspora, however, I will respectfully relegate these other cultural agents to a supporting role in my narrative.

contemporary life, especially in urban environments. There is an unavoidable upper-middle class subtext to the consumption of cultural products of diverse national origin. To be “cosmopolitan” or “worldly,” after all, implies the ongoing capacity to explore leisure pursuits and the ability to travel abroad, both of which require not insignificant resources.

Though I emphasize the role of the Asian American diaspora in reifying the global imaginary of East Asia, the audiences and consumers of cultural commodities are much wider and broad-based, of course. Aesthetic cosmopolitanism is not limited to specific environments by definition, but much of my work will focus specifically on the flow of people and goods between urban America and East Asia. In addition to having the highest concentration of Asian Americans, cities like New York and Los Angeles are also home to culturally influential institutions and platforms that promote discourse and concretize emerging trends. That is to say, though one may consume Korean dramas via Netflix, read Japanese literature in translation, or enjoy Chinese cuisine in many places around the world, the transpacific elsewhere is most keenly felt where physical communities of the Asian diaspora are most visibly entrenched.

Regev identifies four channels of cosmopolitanism in the everyday: creative practices, taste preferences, the public cultural sphere, and embodied knowledge. He also keenly notes that these areas are necessarily imbricated. The hybridity reflected in the creative practices of artists, for example, is a direct result of exposure to diverse cultural forms under globalization. I would like to highlight the additional layer of nuance in the phenomenon of Asian Americans drawing inspiration from East Asian cultural commodities because it diverges from Regev’s narrative of internalizing or indigenizing the “alien” aspects of another culture. Instead, Asian Americans gravitate towards these aesthetic tropes or sensory experiences due to their inherent intimacy, the images, narratives, sounds, and tastes recalling the familiar and familial. To wit, Taiwanese American filmmaker Alan Yang names Wong

Kar-wai, Edward Yang, and Hou Hsiao-hsien among his influences (R. Yang) not because they are alien or exotic, but for the opposite reason: through their explorations of Hong Kong or Taiwanese modernity, these directors have also resonated with and become part of a shared cultural lineage among the Asian American diaspora. I discuss the influence of Wong Kar-wai on the American cultural imaginary in more depth in Chapter 5: The Museum.

On the matter of taste preferences, I contend that the cultural products of East Asia are not only commonly consumed in urban America, they are simultaneously amplified and nuanced by the Asian diasporic individuals, establishments, and communities that facilitate popular understanding of these goods. The food writer Ligaya Mishan, for example, cites Asian cuisine as “the new American palate” in spite of ingredients that may have once been considered exotic or, indeed, alien: soy, ginger, fish sauce, cardamom, Sichuan peppercorns, and so on (“Asian-American”). While recognizing the inherent shortcomings of conflating Asian cuisine of diverse origins under one umbrella term, Mishan nonetheless sees the critical role played by diasporic chefs in hybridizing and localizing traditional dishes for an American context—with resounding success. For further detail on the imaginary of East Asian cuisine in the United States, see Chapter 1: The Noodle Shop and Chapter 2: The Grocery Store.

Regev’s idea of the public cultural sphere includes older forms of mass media such as television and radio, as well as the internet platforms, apps, and websites that form an integral part of the contemporary world. Indeed, one need only browse Twitter or Instagram for a few minutes to acknowledge the incredible breadth and depth of anglophone discourse on a TV series like South Korea’s *Squid Game* or to recognize how widely Japanese literature in translation has circulated around the world. Besides traditional and new media, Regev believes the urban environment itself to be a banal manifestation of cosmopolitanism in its quotidian agglomeration of the local and the exotic. The American metropolis exhibits this

casual diversity most keenly through its array of ethnic enclaves: Chinatown, Koreatown, and Little Tokyo are sometimes just a stone's throw from neighborhoods that served as historic hubs for Italian, Bangladeshi, or Filipino immigrant communities. Other physical spaces, of course, exert their influence on the shaping of transnational cultural discourse at the local level; see Chapter 6: The Nonprofit for a prime example.

Finally, the dimension of embodied knowledge in cultural or aesthetic cosmopolitanism can be demonstrated most succinctly in the practice of wielding chopsticks that is now second nature to many Americans, no matter their own ethnic origins. Habitual enactment of the cosmopolitan might also be read in everyday excursions to the bookstore or movie theater, a museum or restaurant. This category is provocatively mundane, and perhaps somewhat nebulous for the same reason. Regev conceptualizes embodied knowledge as “sensory knowledge, patterns of perception and evaluation, affective and emotional states, manual skills and forms of bodily motion” (37). In this way, every new recipe one tries to cook is a form of cosmopolitanism, as is the practice of martial arts, the playing of a musical instrument, a conversation about art. Can an emotional state be considered cosmopolitanism, in and of itself? The pastiche cinematic tropes and influential aesthetic of Wong Kar-wai might be considered a case in point.

The continuum of cosmopolitan practice, ranging from conscious and intentional engagement to passive and inadvertent, is an apt scale upon which we can transpose the Asian American subject. I would venture so far as to say that the diasporic subject is inherently cosmopolitan by virtue of his background and pedigree, though the extent to which he embraces this identity may vary depending on history and happenstance. To speak a language other than English in the United States already signals filiation to elsewhere; no matter how prevalent Spanish or Cantonese are in certain communities, these languages ultimately connect the speaker to another land, with migration as a subtext, both as an

objective reality and by the perception of the monolingual nativist. Mundane though it may be, the existence of immigrant communities exemplifies one of the definitions, among many, of cosmopolitanism: a sociocultural condition that is inherently pluralist and challenges “various ethnocentric, racialized, gendered and national narratives” (Vertovec and Cohen 9). Otherness wields power in this sense, disrupting conformist ideologies and presenting instead an endorsement and embodiment of America’s founding principles of tolerance and inclusion.

Locating the Self

This doctoral project is fundamentally an outgrowth and extension of my continuing interrogations of cultural identity as someone nurturing sentiments of intimacy and ambivalence towards both China, the country of my birth, and America, where I lived for thirty years of my life. My feelings towards Chineseness and my family’s immigrant background shifted from blithe indifference to intense self-rejection when I moved, as a middle schooler, from a relatively diverse East Coast metropolitan area to the suburban Midwest. Then, in my final year of high school, my parents made the choice to return to China to pursue professional opportunities. I went out west to California to attend film school, and it was in Los Angeles that I began to recuperate and reforge my relationship to my cultural heritage. Through my explorations of cinema, and eventually translated literature, I recognized an intense yearning to understand more about East Asian history and politics, as well as the myriad forces that shaped my life and those of my family members. It was also during those years that I first began traveling back and forth across the Pacific with some amount of regularity. I often found myself marveling at the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the

airport alone. I'd gawk at the timetables in Shanghai Pudong listing flights bound for Helsinki or Rome, Seoul and Osaka, and listen to the soothing announcements in Mandarin, English, Japanese, and Korean, wondering where I fit in among what I viewed as a casually sophisticated crowd.

After college, and a yearlong interlude of working in film distribution, I moved to New York to pursue my master's in East Asian languages and cultures, with a concentration in Chinese cinema. I would live in America's largest city for twelve years, building a career in university administration while turning my attention to the storytelling impulse that I'd long neglected. I went on to complete a creative writing MFA while cultivating a literary translation practice. In my professional life, particularly through my role managing global partnerships for Parsons School of Design, I witnessed firsthand how transnational creative networks were being forged via mobile individuals and the institutional structures that support them. Outside of the office, I was eager to find companionship and community among Asian Americans working in the cultural or creative industries. This led to my involvement with a number of independent magazines based not only in New York, but also Shanghai and Beijing. I continued to travel often to China to visit family, usually in Shanghai, where my parents resided, with occasional trips to our ancestral home of Wuhan. In the 2010s, I also had opportunities to spend time in Taipei, Hong Kong, Shenzhen, Seoul, and Tokyo for personal and professional reasons. The whole of these experiences throughout my twenties and early thirties were woven together into an image of the urban lifeworld of East Asia. They offered me a chance to look both inward and outward as a Chinese American man, recognizing how the position I occupied was definitively liminal and perhaps unsettled. In time, I learned to embrace this in-betweenness as a sort of freedom in itself.

To me, New York always represented the ideal, and perhaps pinnacle, of American multiculturalism. It was the place where my first memories of the United States took shape, a

city that I delighted to make my home as an adult. In the twelve years I spent there, I developed a strong sense of belonging and attachment. This was unquestionably *my* city, I felt, a place where I could cut my teeth professionally, lay roots creatively, get grounded and take confidence in myself. In my twenties, I often wondered if and when I would ever leave. Where did one go, where *could* one go, after life in the great American metropole? My doctoral studies at Waseda University would provide the answer to this question, many years later. I said goodbye to my Brooklyn apartment in June 2020, in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. My purgatory would last many more months, thanks to strict border controls as countries around the world grappled with the virus and attempted to contain it, without much success. Luckier than most in my position, however, I managed to arrive in Japan in November that year.

To live in Tokyo as a Chinese American is yet another layer of cultural ambivalence. It is also a distinct privilege. I count myself lucky to not have personally experienced any racially motivated aggression in my final years in America, though these incidents indeed recalled unhappy memories from my youth in suburban Ohio. Trump's inflammatory rhetoric throughout the duration of his administration, but particularly in his final year in office, set the tone for the acts of violence that would come to dominate the Asian American psyche in the early 2020s. In Japan, where my linguistic capabilities are still rather limited, I feel the stifling smallness of being a foreigner whenever I'm confronted with any bureaucratic matter or incomprehensible interaction in public. Yet by virtue of my East Asian face, and likely the additional physical layer of my cloth mask, I can escape scrutiny for the most part until forced to engage in dialogue. Anonymity itself is a delicious freedom. It is something that I rarely experienced in America, or perhaps it was just that my otherness was always hyper-visible, unlike in Japan. In Tokyo, I have slowly been getting to know more and more East Asian diasporic creatives who have settled here. This community largely hails from North

America, although some have more complex histories of migration. Their lives are echoed, too, in the experiences of other friends and acquaintances who are based in China, Taiwan, or South Korea. We are all denizens of this transpacific elsewhere, multiply displaced and also consoled in some measure by this shared dream of urban East Asia.

I offer this condensed narrative of my life up to now as a brief rationale for why I have chosen to pursue this particular project. I hope that my positionality as a Chinese American man in Japan, with significant lived experience in Los Angeles and New York, as well as academic and creative interests in language and storytelling, proves to be an asset more than a liability. At the very least, I know that I am privileged with access to certain communities of Asian Americans in the creative professions by virtue of my social networks in the United States and abroad, and it is their expansive visions of personhood and cultural pastiche I seek to highlight through my wanderings in the transpacific elsewhere. I nonetheless seek critical distance as I write about the ethnoscape of which I very much consider myself a part. On the subject of cosmopolitanism, the particular inflection and popularization of urban East Asia that is central to my project is, as I have previously noted, at odds with an increasingly tense domestic atmosphere for Asian Americans, whose everyday lives have been impacted by pandemic fear-mongering and political distrust of Chinese autocracy, fairly or not. I am obligated to acknowledge and address this particular social climate, even as I focus on the mainstream appeal of certain facets of East Asian and Asian American cultures in the American imagination. I attempt to synthesize my research findings and conjectures into a prognosis for the future of Asian America in Chapter 10, the conclusion of this dissertation.

Fitting that the cosmopolitan condition can connote trajectories of migration or exile, varying degrees of cultural integration, or sometimes even privileged social status. Georgina Tsolidis conceptualizes the cosmopolitan city within a framework that is Mediterranean or

Levantine, or perhaps broadly European. As with the New York writer André Aciman, Tsolidis locates the quintessential plight of the diaspora in the trajectory of the Jewish people over the course of generations, even millennia. In so doing, cosmopolitanism becomes equated with exile or placelessness, the quality of being everywhere and nowhere at once—a binary tension I invoke throughout my exploration of the transpacific elsewhere, but perhaps crystallized most succinctly in Chapter 3: The Cocktail Bar, which examines American drinking establishments riffing on East Asian aesthetics. “I am an unreal Jew, the way I am an imaginary European,” writes Aciman of his eclectic upbringing and tenuous connections to Egypt, Turkey, Italy, and France, among other places (185). Reflecting on movement and migration, his own and that of his ancestors, Aciman accepts that cosmopolitan identity is inherently unstable, revealing each and every bond to place or language as fundamentally illusory or indefinite. The lifeworld or culture of the diaspora, in this context, is amorphous and susceptible to all kinds of forces, be they familial, environmental, or political.

This state of ambiguity is oftentimes evident in the terminology of diaspora itself. As mentioned earlier, the category of “Asian American” has long been subject to dispute and contention. While this label undoubtedly flattens and overlooks the nuances of a demographic group that is heterogeneous in socioeconomic status, not to mention country of origin, it has been argued that members of this group share experiences as people of color in a majority Euro-American country (Ty and Goellnicht 1). But existential hand-wringing remains robust, particularly as this minority population has grown considerably and become more visible in contemporary cultural discourse. Far from its radical activist roots in the late 1960s, the term “Asian American” today, charges Jay Caspian Kang, “is mainly a demographic descriptor that satisfies almost nobody outside the same upwardly mobile professionals who enter mostly white middle-class spaces and need a term to describe themselves and everyone who looks like them” (“Myth”). Kang contends that, by the same token, those who have most

comfortably internalized this descriptor are the ones idealizing and yearning for white privilege themselves amid the racial tensions of multiethnic America.

Perhaps ambivalence, if nothing else, can be said to be a defining characteristic of the diasporic subjectivity, a state of liminality made even more profound by the increasing fervency and ubiquity of global migrations and transnational forays for educational, professional, or personal development. “At the heart of the notion of diaspora is the image of a journey,” notes Avtar Brah in her study of British diasporic identities (179). But beyond the traveler himself, the timing, mode, and context of the journey are equally as important. Asian Americans have commonly bristled at that age-old question, “Where are you from?” or “Where are you *really* from?” This deceptively simple query, even when asked with supposedly benign intentions, usually implies a presumption of otherness on the part of the interlocutor. No matter how the addressee chooses to respond, the answer typically sought is not so much the environment of one’s domestic (as in, local) upbringing as it is the starting point of one’s migratory past, the diasporic journey from a foreign place. Regardless of whether or not one was born in the States, the person asking the question usually means, “What country are your ancestors from?”

I understand why this assumption of otherness is irksome at best, infuriating at worst to many people. For me, this question is more existential than irritating due to the bifurcation within my own family. Having lived a world apart from my parents since my teenage years, I have also traveled back and forth between the U.S. and China with such regularity since then that I don’t feel attached to American identity as my sole unimpeachable prerogative. Conversely, neither do I feel that Americanness can represent me in my entirety. When asked this question, I usually answer that I was born in China, but grew up mostly in the States. That much seems to be a satisfactorily accurate encapsulation of my experience. I certainly sympathize with those who may have flimsy or nonexistent ties to their countries of origin,

whose families may have been in the U.S. for generations already. I can well imagine why this rhetorical elision of one's Americanness is insulting. But beyond the cumulative experience of making one's home in the West, beyond the passport that one holds, I feel that it does no one any favors to efface the reality that, at some point within the past several generations, most likely, one's ancestors or oneself did indeed make a journey, traveling far across the world to begin anew. That no matter how culturally assimilated one becomes into Western society, the acknowledgment of one's ancestry—and, by association, the sacrifices made in immigrating from one's country of origin—should absolutely be an act of empowerment, not a sensitive topic or source of shame.

The reason this inquiry of origins disturbs so many Asian Americans is because we crave belonging. We long for a stable notion of self and home in a society that continues to view us as perpetual foreigners, this othering amplified by a global crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Williams et al.). But to embrace cosmopolitanism as an Asian American can be a reclamation of one's roots and an act of staking wider cultural space within American society, simultaneously strengthening our minority community by celebrating the differences that constitute our lived realities. While some may cling onto the chimera of American monoculturalism for survival, many Asian Americans nowadays conversely embrace hybridity, reinvention, and ludic transnationality as they wade through a whirlpool of global culture energized by the force of East Asian cultural forms. These so-called advertent cultural cosmopolitans of Asian America are not simply in it for the clout, though some may indeed share characteristics with the contemporary social media influencer. Rather, the practice of transmuting contemporary East Asia into one's own professional or creative life is a mediation of one's own diasporic identity, an assertion of space and power in spite of one's minority status, and a means to bridge the gap between different worlds. In the transpacific elsewhere, East Asia is a cosmopolitan ideal instead of an alien realm. We traverse this city

by subway or motorbike, eat at its noodle joints and drink in its cocktail bars. Our faces are illuminated by the endless neon signs flanking the street. Around the corner is our favorite bookstore, coffee shop, or bubble tea parlor. The people strolling around us are speaking Japanese or Mandarin, or perhaps English. A pop song blares in the distance, a crowd erupts into cheers. Our clothes billow in a gust of wind as a train roars across an overpass ahead. An automatic door slides open as we walk by a convenience store, the smell of asphalt, street food, car exhaust, and cigarette smoke mingling with a vague waft of sweet and savory prepackaged food and cool air. The night is young. This city is ours.

Preamble: Departures and Arrivals

Let's begin in the airport, a space charged with potentiality, that site of quintessential modernity where stories ceaselessly entwine or unravel. At the dawn of the Jet Age, the romance and intrigue of international travel in Asia was perhaps heralded most brilliantly by Yi Wen's *Air Hostess* (1959), starring the iconic actress and singer Grace Chang. In the role of the vivacious stewardess Lin Ke-ping, Chang croons and dances her way through Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and other locales with glamorous ease and a pep in her step. Some three-and-a-half decades later, Wong Kar-wai would inject a sense of wistful longing in the figure of the flight attendant through the girlfriend of Tony Leung Chiu-wai in *Chungking Express* (1994). Despite a visceral scene of seduction set to the velvety voice of Dinah Washington singing "What a Difference a Day Makes," Leung's girlfriend ultimately deserts him for new horizons and consigns him to a solitude wherein he has no outlet but to speak to inanimate objects in his cramped flat.

Within the same movie, Wong stages a tense scene in the departure hall of Kai Tak Airport with Brigitte Lin as a mystery woman in a blonde wig. Having gone to the airport with a South Asian family in tow to serve as her drug mules, Lin loses sight of them and soon begins to scour the city for their whereabouts. Both of these films by Yi and Wong celebrate the easy cosmopolitanism of Hong Kong, a place where people are constantly coming and going. Subtextually, Yi's Mandarin-speaking stewardesses can be read as recent exiles from the Communist mainland, but they remain remarkably buoyant as they flit around Southeast Asia and flex their linguistic muscles in service of the airline's international clientele. Wong's cast is casually transnational, as well: Lin and Taiwanese-Japanese actor Takeshi Kaneshiro speak Mandarin in the first half of *Chungking Express*, while Tony Leung eventually romances the manic pixie dream girl played by Beijing-born, Hong Kong-bred Faye Wong. At the end of the movie, Faye Wong's character, also named Faye, spurns Leung's Cop 663 to become a flight attendant herself. After bobbling to "California Dreamin'" by the Mamas & the Papas many a time while serving up sandwiches at the Midnight Express deli, Faye decides that her yearning to see the real California takes precedence over all else. She returns to the deli a year later, fully decked out in a flight attendant uniform, and discovers that Cop 663 now owns the sandwich shop where they first crossed paths. Cue a final meet-cute: perhaps the beginning of the story, rather than the end, as Faye Wong's Cantopop rendition of "Dreams" by the Cranberries fades in. *Chungking Express* ultimately celebrates both the glory and mystique of travel through its twined narratives, the airport and the flight attendant representing fantasies of a transpacific elsewhere, potent as ever. For Grace Chang and her compatriots in *Air Hostess*, Hong Kong was perhaps already that elsewhere, their homeland of China rendered inaccessible by the Communist revolution. Every generation locates its yearnings for freedom and adventure against the upheavals and unique malaise that define their formative years. It is only fitting

that this chain of longing has come full circle with Asian Americans, from California or elsewhere, reaching a hand back in the other direction.

In the mid-1990s, Kai Tak Airport was stretched beyond capacity and handling up to 29.5 million passengers annually (“About Us”). When the airport closed in 1998, the mantle of Hong Kong International Airport was transferred seamlessly to new facilities on the island of Chek Lap Kok. Hong Kong remains an important transit hub for the Asia-Pacific region, connecting the countries of East and Southeast Asia with the Americas, Oceania, Europe, and Africa. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the sheer mobility of human civilization could be seen in the aviation industry’s record-breaking numbers. The International Civil Aviation Organization estimated that 4.5 billion passengers traveled on commercial airlines in 2019, a 3.6% increase on 2018 (“The World of Air Transport in 2019”). This number would drop precipitously in 2020 by an astounding 65.9% according to the International Air Transport Association in their bulletin entitled “The Worst Year in History for Air Travel Demand.” Indeed, not only was leisure travel more difficult than ever in the early days of the pandemic, working professionals, students, transnational spouses, and many more found themselves unable to move abroad despite their legitimate reasons to do so. The transpacific ethnoscape, for a time, was all but frozen.

But air travel itself has not always been so ubiquitous as one might be conditioned to believe in the modern era, COVID-19 notwithstanding. In 1994, the year *Chungking Express* was released, a mere 1.23 billion passengers traveled by commercial airplane, according to the World Bank (“Air transport, passengers carried”). This figure would nearly quadruple by 2019, just a quarter-century later. The impact of travel via commercial airline can be corroborated by the tourism industry. According to the JTB Tourism Research & Consulting Company, the number of inbound overseas tourists to Japan exploded from 3.2 million visitors in 1990 to 31.9 million in 2019 (“Japan-bound Statistics”), a near tenfold increase.

Similar trends are noted in China, South Korea, and Taiwan. Citing data from the China Tourism Academy and China's National Bureau of Statistics, the state-run media organization CGTN shows annual inbound tourism increasing from 38 million in 1992 to nearly 140 million in 2017—an additional 100 million visitors per year (She). The World Bank's record of international tourism to South Korea indicates 3.7 million annual visitors in 1995, swelling to almost five times as many in 2019, with 17.5 million inbound tourists (“International tourism, number of arrivals - Korea, Rep.”). Meanwhile, in Taiwan, a relative peak of 2 million annual visitors in 1989 (Kuan-Chou Chen 17) soared to 11.9 million by 2019 (*Annual Report on Tourism 2019 Taiwan*). But these enormous gains were wiped out almost immediately, with international travel plummeting by 72% in the first ten months of 2020. This effectively reset tourism metrics back to where they had been decades prior, per the World Tourism Organization (“Tourism Back to 1990 Levels”).

I cite these numbers not for their statistical infallibility, but to paint a picture in broad strokes of human civilization's astounding mobility in recent history. These figures make clear that the overall trend from the 1990s up until 2020 was a steady increase in overseas voyages. For the East Asian region, this meant that hundreds of millions more people were visiting per annum on a short-term basis: trying out the food, staying in hotels, watching local television, hearing the languages, connecting or reconnecting with friends and family, and so on. These astronomical numbers don't even account for long-term residents, working professionals, exchange students, and other groups, all with their own specialized visas. However, through the lens of tourism alone, we gain one view onto the transpacific ethnoscape of our modern era, a constantly shifting terrain constructed by billions of individual impressions accumulated over the years. Before things screeched to a halt with the COVID-19 pandemic, the ease of international travel had reached a fervid intensity unprecedented in human history. No longer did one have to rely on secondary sources to feed

one's imagination of what another country might look like or taste like, how its cities thrum with energy, who walks the streets or rides the train there. It was all within reach. Each journey, like untold billions of other journeys, began at the airport: the gateway to the transpacific elsewhere.

Cosmopolitanism from Below as Phantasmagoric Potentiality

To be human today is to embrace the thrilling chaos of an enhanced sensorium. With a few taps of our fingers, we can conjure up images and voices of the living and the dead; summon nourishment from unseen spaces both distant and near; or acquire new adornments for our bodies and living spaces. We mediate our movements through the physical world through all manner of screens and signs. Digital interfaces allow us to find employment, housing, and sexual or romantic partners. Our minds are saturated with real world information and white noise alike as we consume content, attend to necessary tasks, respond to stimuli, or simply wander through the endless corridors of the internet.

Culture is more porous and pliant than ever in the helix of globalization and late capitalism. Instantaneous transmission of any screed, song, or story means a potential audience of billions. Conversely, power lies with the individual to craft his own reality from a dizzying array of possibilities. In this sense, human experience has become a phantasmagoria: dreamlike and deeply idiosyncratic, a place where the real and the imaginary become entwined. To understand the nature of contemporary civilization, Appadurai declares that one must direct attention to "*the relationship between the forms of circulation and the circulation of forms*" (*Future* 64; emphasis in original). I contend that the transpacific elsewhere is born from this very relationship, beginning with the notions of "East Asia" that are circulated and

constructed via visual media, lived experience, and banal cosmopolitan practice, among other routes. Meanwhile, established forms like the feature film, the novel, and the restaurant menu retain their signifying power, but newer forms of communication and connection are also increasingly part of the discourse, if one considers relatively newfangled containers of culture like the Instagram reel or TikTok video, the viral tweet, the pop-up store.

It is in this context that I carry out my investigations of East Asia's intersections with Asian America, and how the hybrid aesthetic, aura, or ideology that emerges from this encounter underpins a dreamland of Asian century urbanism beyond the borders of any nation-state. In spite of limitations on physical mobility during the pandemic, cultural connectivity and circulation remain high in this wired and wireless world. The potentiality of online communities and algorithmic curation alike have made it easier than ever for the average American to adopt or develop a cosmopolitan outlook or predilections for cultural commodities from all over the world, including East Asia. At the same time, the burgeoning popularity of specific images or narratives of East Asianness does not negate the incredible tensions that continue to fester in local, regional, and global politics and impact individual lives of the Asian American minority.

I propose that this duality is, in fact, symptomatic of a protracted evolution or restructuring in the world order. Perhaps, as Appadurai implies, the form of the nation-state itself is in the process of transformation through its encounter with forms of technology that inflect new meaning in human experience, at the very least, if not outright diminish the primacy of the "deep, horizontal comradeship" (7) that Benedict Anderson saw as the power of the imagined community. On paper, America has enjoyed almost unchallenged hegemony in the cultural, economic, and military spheres for close to eight decades. Washington's alliances in the Asia-Pacific region seem to all but encircle an ascendant China. But the transpacific dynamic is much more complex and multifaceted than one would be led to

believe simply by reading the news. East Asia itself also operates from many layers of interconnection, in spite of longstanding disputes or rivalries between its member states. Among the ingredients that combine into a perfect and heady fusion cocktail are the availability of sensory experiences in new and traditional forms; the reemergence of panethnic solidarity in Asian minority identity in America, in spite of skepticism from some critics; the increasing speed by which images or ideas gain traction or find audiences worldwide; the mutual advocacy, or perhaps cultural evangelism, of Asian American creatives across a broad social spectrum; and the possibility of international travel and all that it entails for the individual, whether rekindling a pride in one's heritage, reorienting one's relationship to the world, or reinventing the self entirely.

In the next chapters, I will take a cartographical approach to exploring the transpacific elsewhere, cataloging the spaces of work or leisure that constitute this urban imaginary and chronicling the people who construct, influence, or patronize these venues. Each locale is, at once, an abstraction and a real place. By presenting an account of how each space has manifested in the real world, I also chart the invisible flows of cultural forms and the goods themselves that are being consumed; the transpacific journeys of cultural agents, who shape public knowledge and popular opinion through their professional and creative work; and the complex interplay of identity politics, minority representation, and cosmopolitan yearning embedded in these settings, which serve as mundane gateways to new worlds. In other words, the physical spaces themselves are the platforms, or *forms of circulation*, where specific communities of people are able to activate, amplify, and disseminate the resonance of East Asia in an American context. The construction, presentation, consumption of cultural works themselves—and their subsequent refashioning and reinterpretation by cultural agents—are part of the *circulation of forms* that Appadurai theorized.

Ultimately, what I hope to demonstrate is that the appetite for myriad forms of East Asian culture remains robust in America and other countries. Simplistic and orientalist notions endure, but the range of accessible commodities is no longer limited to mere baubles, flat pictures, and esoteric chinoiseries at the yard sale. Asian food has colonized the Western palate. Asian faces and Asian media flicker across tablets and smartphones, as well as the silver screen. Asian literature in translation is gaining new audiences, while the subcultures and fandoms around certain music genres have all but exploded into worldwide consciousness. Asianness is inflected on multiple registers in the tactile world of fashion and its proliferation of visual symbols. East Asia is consumed and experienced through all the senses. And this desire to consume, these tendencies and tastes, bespeak trends that are shaping the world to come.

In America, however, this newfound visibility and prominence of Asianness has arisen on roughly the same timeline as ideological tensions with China. Globalization, transnationality, and the constant flux of the transpacific ethnoscape may be felt keenly and perhaps even celebrated in the metropolis. Conversely, these same phenomena, among others, feed into the anxiety of the majority, whose unchallenged dominance in a white ethnostate is no longer a reality. The right-wing faction of this group stokes the nativist rhetoric of politicians like Donald Trump, and he theirs, in a feedback loop that cultivates xenophobia at best, warmongering at worst, a cesspool of sentiment that translates readily into social unrest or violence. Appadurai read this trend as the “anxiety of incompleteness” (*Future* 91) almost a decade earlier, well before Trump’s ascent to power. The American right craves this kind of purity and espouses a nationalist, self-serving myopia as its credo. Asian Americans who do not support these reactionary stances are among the parts of the populace that they seek to excise, expel, or divest of power.

But there is yet hope. Cosmopolitanism, though long critiqued for its elitist connotations, manifests in other forms that are pluralist and unifying, glimmering with social potency, as Appadurai demonstrates through his case study of Mumbai housing activists who navigate the multilingual and multicultural landscape of their home city in their mission to support the marginalized. Mumbai is a cosmopolis where incredible wealth and poverty are concentrated, a city preceded by its image in the entertainment industries, in the style of New York or Los Angeles. Its mind-bogglingly diverse citizenry hails from many layers of ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups who maintain various forms of kinship and connection to other parts of India and the South Asian region, in the manner of Asian Americans who may have ties to Hong Kong, Manila, Tokyo, or Bangkok, by blood or by birth. Vernacular cosmopolitanism, or cosmopolitanism from below, has tremendous force when harnessed:

This is a variety of cosmopolitanism that begins close to home and builds on the practices of the local, the everyday, and the familiar, but is imbued with a politics of hope that requires the stretching of the boundaries of the everyday in a variety of political directions. It builds toward *global affinities and solidarities* through an irregular assortment of near and distant experiences and neither assumes nor denies the value of its universality. Its aim is to produce *a preferred geography of the global by the strategic extension of local cultural horizons*, not in order to dissolve or deny the intimacies of the local, but in order to combat its indignities and exclusions. It is thus closely tied to the politics of hope and the promise of democracy as a space of dignity as well as of equality. It is indeed correct to call this style of life cosmopolitan, but it is *cosmopolitanism driven by the exigencies of exclusion* rather than by the privileges (and ennui) of inclusion. (Appadurai 198; emphasis added)

These are foundationally the ethics that have propelled Asian America to embrace popular culture forms circulating from overseas, particularly those originating in the broadly conceptualized Pacific region of one's ancestry—however distant (in some cases, so as to be practically mythological) this filiation may be. The Asia-Pacific region, as discussed previously, is itself an indeterminate subject that has been constantly forged and reformed in the discourse of military and politics, reluctantly reified by expansionist powers over the course of centuries. In recent decades, the cultural industries of Greater China, Japan, and South Korea have excelled in certain niche domains and collectively transmitted notions of contemporary urban identity through visual media, music and spectacle, various forms of storytelling, and gastronomic encounters. Saturating all the senses, these cultural forms lie at the core of a vernacular cosmopolitanism that expresses the yearnings of Asian Americans for a home that is unquestionably our own. Though the transpacific elsewhere exists in abstraction, the cultural power it wields goes far beyond the imagination and exerts influence on the real world.

Now that we've arrived at the airport, passed through immigration, and picked up our luggage, let's take the train into the city and go grab a late night meal. A feast of sensation awaits.

Chapter 1: The Noodle Shop

In 2005, the food critic Peter Meehan wrote about a newly opened restaurant in New York's East Village with almost paternal pride. The chef and owner of this venture was a young Korean American who offered an idiosyncratic take on not only Japanese ramen, but also Korean rice cakes, Chinese steamed buns, and other standard fare from East Asian cuisines, among other lineages. Meehan called the restaurant a "plywood-walled diamond in the rough," but clearly he saw glittering potential in both the establishment itself and the man behind its affective power ("At a Noodle Bar"). Nearly twenty years later, Momofuku Noodle Bar is one of ten restaurants operated by its media-savvy founder. To call David Chang simply a celebrity chef undercuts the significant business acumen he has demonstrated in opening a string of restaurants in New York, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, and Toronto. Yet to speak only of his entrepreneurial skill also elides the cultural power he wields as an influencer, in the truest sense, of the urban American palate. Chang is undoubtedly successful in navigating the realms of food business and media, as demonstrated by the numerous TV shows to which he has been attached. Beyond the superficial gleam, however, he wields significant power as a figurehead for the Asian American community and as a cultural agent who has shaped the narrative of East Asian gastronomy in 21st century America.

In this chapter, I look at the careers of two professional chefs, Chang and Lucas Sin, who occupy the same constellation in the culinary cosmos while appealing to slightly different demographics by virtue of their generational backgrounds and engagement with various digital platforms. I integrate this narrative with that of Tokyo-based food writer Kee Byung-keun to uncover multiple layers of the starchy fare that has become all but

synonymous with East Asian cosmopolitan cool.⁶ The Noodle Shop is our first stop in the transpacific elsewhere. Take a look around. The clientele is young and hip, shooting the breeze over their bowls of steaming broth or prodding absentmindedly at appetizers: gyoza, a kimchi pancake, or perhaps some Sichuan-style mouth-watering chicken. There are craft beers on tap, along with a formidable cocktail list (but we'll get to that later, in Chapter 3). Put aside your complaints or skepticism over authenticity in this restaurant. The noodles, be they ramen or otherwise, are definitely East Asian in provenance, but the myriad ingredients by which the soup base is concocted or the array of toppings available are decidedly modern, a jolt for the palate. People convene here at all hours of day, every day of the week. This is the perfect place to end or begin an evening. Though the average noodle joint in Japan may be a hole in the wall compared to this, you can't help but feel a spiritual affinity to Tokyo while eating here. Swelling in your heart is the romance and loneliness of a late night meal in a city where no one knows you.

“Asians in the United States have long been associated . . . with images and practices regarding food,” contend Robert Ji-Song Ku et al. in the introduction to their 2013 edited volume (3). Historically, discourses around Asian cuisine have been deployed to marginalize or exoticize the diasporic subject, even while white American consumers have demonstrated a hearty appetite for such fare. Leland Tabares writes that Asian cuisines were further estranged and devalued as unskilled and unprofessional, in contrast to the European cuisines that were favored and elevated with the advent of culinary schools in the 1970s—institutions that became a pipeline into the food industry. Half a century later, a veritable pantheon of

⁶ The mediascape of Asian noodles in the American imagination can be said to contain films such as Juzo Itami's iconic ramen western *Tampopo* (1985); the epicurean exploits of influencers and travel industry moonlighters like Shotaro Mizuno (Instagram's @ramenguidejapan); images of memorable meals from Studio Ghibli's *Ponyo* (2008) and other films; streaming docu-series on Netflix and Hulu; and, last but not least, the constantly refreshed listicles of top noodle joints in New York and Los Angeles. This is a partial list that is not meant to be comprehensive by any means. I invoke this assortment of media (Appadurai's "forms of circulation") and specific content ("the circulation of forms") in order to provide a snapshot of what I perceive as the most salient nodes in the construction of the image of East Asian noodles for American audiences.

Asian American chefs have ascended to culinary fame via conventional and unconventional means. Consciously or not, David Chang and the likes of Roy Choi, Danny Bowien, Dale Talde, Kris Yenbamroong, and others have played a role in “[making] Asianness legible to Western sensibilities” (Tabares 117) through their restaurants, entrepreneurial activities, and even public personae. Though harsh stereotypes and unsavory attitudes may remain, Asian cuisine in the American metropole now basks in an aura of urbanity and aspirational gourmandise. Among the menu items leading the cultural shift, ramen punches well above its weight.

Beloved by the Japanese and globally popular to a degree where the name has become a veritable stand-in for Japanese cuisine itself, ramen traces its origins to Chinese-style noodles that arrived in Japan in the 19th century (Okumura 67). These inexpensive noodle stalls began to flourish in the wake of the First Sino-Japanese War, when impoverished Chinese students began to migrate to Japan en masse. By the mid-20th century, what became known as ramen was ubiquitous and dependable for a cheap, filling meal across Japan. The combination of strong flavors was originally a culture shock in itself, reminiscences Okumura Ayao about tasting his first bowl of ramen as a teenager in 1953. But nevertheless, “I imagined myself growing bigger and stronger from eating this concoction,” Okumura says. “And it was an entirely new taste, different from anything I had ever tasted before” (68).

Food acquires not only different flavor profiles, but whole new cultural significations when it travels from place to place. Though ramen remains one of the most affordable comfort foods in Japan, the noodles bask in an elite connotation in the American context, where a number of highly successful enterprises have been launched from localizing and stylizing ramen afresh. “Ramen is hip, cool,” notes Merry White, “a product of Japan’s Gross National Cool or its Soft or Savoury Power, and rising to the top of culinary connoisseurship” (116). White names David Chang among several other American tastemakers who have used

ramen as a springboard into their culinary careers. Chang studied traditional techniques for making soba and ramen in Japan before returning to launch his own venture in Momofuku Noodle Bar. Rather than fixate on the agonizing and perhaps ultimately unattainable virtue of authenticity, Chang decided that he would take a meticulous approach to making ramen broth, as he was taught, while allowing himself to experiment and innovate in other aspects of the recipe. It might be said that this journey of transmission and adaptation—or transgression—emblemizes the fashion by which culture circulates to, from, and within the transpacific elsewhere: the local history and context that produce a place like the ramen stall, or a product like the ramen noodles themselves, interweaving with American narratives, images, and ideologies until a wholly new cultural form is born. In the American metropole, the noodle shop is not simply a purveyor of ramen or other starchy victuals, but also a vehicle for and invitation to casual cosmopolitanism in the 21st century.

American Appetites for Asia

Mark Padoongpatt offers a pithy snapshot of the rise of Asian American cuisine in the period immediately following World War II, when Chinese restaurants served up exotic fare for the white customer through hybrid dishes such as the infamous chop suey, “a stir-fried dish of meat, eggs, bean sprouts, cabbage, and celery in a thickened sauce” (189). The Asia-Pacific region was one conglomerate reverie of tropical drinks and invented palates masquerading otherness, but this cheery conflation of places and spaces proved to be a hit, with restaurants such as Trader Vic’s attracting a steady clientele over the decades. As Americans themselves were able to travel afield, a number of white women ultimately became the spokespeople for the cuisines of the Far East and their unfamiliar flavors. Under

this superficially cosmopolitan orientation, Padoongpatt points out, lurked attitudes and ideologies that were undoubtedly colonialist. These women's fascination with so-called "Oriental" food was part and parcel of American expansionism in the postwar era, which drove a desire for both knowledge and subjugation of the Asian palate.

Asian cuisines were certainly not always welcomed with open arms. Though Chinese restaurants were already ubiquitous in the United States in the early 20th century, they were often viewed with suspicion or disdain by white Americans and catered primarily to those of Chinese descent. The novel dish of chop suey, an economical usage of leftover vegetables and scraps of meat, was the surprise hit that first captivated the Western majority, inspiring "young white businessmen and professionals to venture into 'unsavory and dangerous' urban Chinatowns for a firsthand taste" (Jung 141). Soon the patronage of Chinese restaurants became part of the cultural vernacular of adventurous eaters and self-styled bohemians alike, though the media and business communities continued to criticize these establishments and stoke fears about these spaces serving as a breeding ground for immoral behavior. Though the globalization of culture and cultural practices would not reach its peak until the end of the century, this early craze was indeed a symbol of an expanding gastronomic palate in response to the confluence of people in the modern American ethnoscape. The menu of a Chinese restaurant was essentially a vehicle to "articulate both place and movement—and, through those, identity and identification" (Bell and Valentine 191).

Decades later, Asian gastronomy came to signify a different type of cultural cachet as yuppie consumers embraced fusion cuisine in global metropolises like New York and London. In contrast to the cheap "ethnic" fare that had long been available to the working class, hybridized dishes served up at splashy restaurants in the 1970s and 1980s caught the attention of a "highbrow clientele" by combining Chinese or Japanese ingredients with European or Latin American influences (Lio and Bott 194). The rapid ascent of Asian fusion restaurants

run by celebrity chefs like Wolfgang Puck, Nobuyuki Matsuhisa, and Ming Tsai was followed by a cultural backlash, in the early 2000s, over their supposed lack of authenticity. Then, in 2012, *New York Magazine* declared that “Asian hipster cuisine” had become the successor to the fusion trend of yesteryear, naming a number of chefs as part of a lineage that “[shared] inspiration, ingredients, and attitude” with forerunner David Chang (Weedman).

As for ramen, the food first entered the American imagination in the early 1970s through Nissin Foods’ Top Ramen brand and remained relatively inconspicuous until restaurants like Momofuku burst onto the scene in the 21st century. No longer the province of college students and pennypinchers, the popularity of this “trendy, young ethnic food associated with a cool and economically unthreatening Japan rather than China” skyrocketed in cities like New York and Los Angeles (Solt 163). George Solt points out that the conditions were ripe for ramen to gain a fan base in the early 2000s, given the neutralization of Japan as an economic competitor and the deluge of Japanese cultural forms from anime to fast fashion that had swept through America in the previous decade. Young American diners, including Asian Americans, were all too keen to embrace this newfound noodle culture as a marker of hip and worldly inclinations, one more node of Cool Japan stretching from the cult film *Tampopo* to the urban ennui of Sofia Coppola’s *Lost in Translation* (2003), narratives jointly invoked by food critic Jonathan Gold in his 2004 review of the ramen shop Daikokuya in Little Tokyo, downtown Los Angeles (“Lost in *Tampopo*”). On the other side of the continental United States, David Chang drew ramen further into the cultural mainstream with Momofuku Noodle Bar, “the first American-style ramen shop using bacon, ham hocks, dark chicken meat, roasted pork bones, and sake in the soup base” (Solt 194).

Chang indeed occupies an outsized role in elevating, and perhaps even revolutionizing, Asian cuisine in America. As Shoon Lio and Megan Bott argue, so-called Asian “hipster” restaurants like Momofuku are a site of performance in which chefs and

patrons alike “construct their cosmopolitan identities and acquire cultural capital and status through their food practices” (191). This urban ethos is further bolstered and validated by the mediascapes of food television and online discourse. Chang, in particular, is a cultural agent par excellence in the gastronomic sector of the transpacific elsewhere, and not simply for the casual crossovers or transgressions he encourages between high and low, Asia and America, in the kitchen and on the dining table. Certainly Chang’s circulating forms of street food, with their bold spices, adventurous cuts of meat, or innovative flavor profiles, lie at the foundation of his success with Momofuku Noodle Bar, which enabled him to expand his business with diverse menus riffing on Vietnamese, Middle Eastern, Italian, and Korean fare. But I contend that Chang has become among the most visible Asian American chefs also because of his ventures outside of the kitchen, the erstwhile magazine *Lucky Peach* and his numerous food documentary TV series weaving together an intertextual narrative that allows him to evangelize and amplify his gourmandise across multiple media domains.

Lucky Peach was a quarterly magazine Chang cofounded with food writers Peter Meehan and Chris Ying in 2011. Despite its print medium in an era of the digital norm, the platform attracted considerable attention over its six years and 25 issues, with 30,000 subscribers by the time of its demise in 2017 (Rao). The magazine’s title was a nod to the literal meaning of “Momofuku,” a homonym of and homage to the given name of Taiwanese-Japanese businessman Ando Momofuku, inventor of instant noodles. Asian cuisine, in and of itself, was never the exclusive focus of the publication, but it was certainly a regular component of the magazine’s discourse on cultural and culinary identities of American cosmopolitanism. To wit: the first issue centered on ramen as a theme, and quickly became a collector’s item fetching upwards of \$300 eBay (Solt 201).

The magazine’s immediate and explosive popularity made waves, with Meehan extolling the cultural significance of ramen in Japan to outlets like NPR and proudly

vouching for the hands-on experience of his cofounder, “New York noodle impresario David Chang” (“Lucky Peach”). Former chef and culinary enfant terrible Anthony Bourdain further contributed to Chang’s aura in the magazine, mythologizing the latter’s awakening to ramen by way of *Tampopo*, thus elevating him beyond mere editor to become “the magazine’s semi-fictional protagonist . . . a cumulative symbol tasked with representing the entire food culture he has had some hand in creating” (Blackmore). In its penultimate year, *Lucky Peach* swept up multiple prestigious awards in the food industry, including a National Magazine Award for General Excellence (C. Crowley). In its six years of operation, the platform also provided an outlet for emerging writers like Kee Byung-keun, whose work I explore later in this chapter, to eulogize the specific urban chic of East Asian food cultures. Helen Rosner of *Eater* bemoaned the loss of this “expansive, well-lit space for writerly experimentation and muscle-stretching,” even with its somewhat oppressive masculinist energies. Upon the release of a *Lucky Peach*-branded cookbook called *101 Easy Asian Recipes*, Meehan declared in an interview that “important and encouraging” transformations had taken place, with Asian food moving into the mainstream and allowing Chang and other chefs like him a space to flourish (Kayal).

As *Lucky Peach* was just starting up, Chang was swiftly expanding into other domains of gastronomic storytelling. He hosted the first season of the PBS television series *The Mind of a Chef*, which was executive produced by Anthony Bourdain. Like *Lucky Peach*, the show kicked off with an episode dedicated to noodles—and ramen, at that, doubling as a travelogue of Chang and Peter Meehan in Japan. “The noodle that rules over all others is ramen,” declares the voiceover within the first few minutes of the show. *The Mind of a Chef* is thus inaugurated by a visit to Tokyo to explore the history of tsukemen, with pilgrimages to local restaurants and a noodle factory interwoven with a science lesson on alkaline’s role in producing the texture of ramen, a backstage peek at how Momofuku’s broth is made, and

Chang's demonstration of his lowbrow cacio e pepe recipe using instant noodles. In other words, the show serves as the platform, or form of circulation, for Americans to familiarize themselves with Japanese culture and food history, guided by the reassuring brotherly dynamic of Chang and Meehan. Meanwhile, the circulation of forms can be seen in ramen itself as a kind of vehicle, which Chang amply underscores with his noodle customizations, wryly noting that this type of innovation is commonplace in Japan and yet somehow raises eyebrows when done elsewhere.

Chang has gone on to produce and star in many more food-based streaming documentary series, including *Ugly Delicious* (2018) and *Breakfast, Lunch & Dinner* (2019), both on Netflix, and *The Next Thing You Eat* (2021) on Hulu. Travel frequently features in these shows, Chang zipping from coast to coast or going farther afield to places like Morocco, Cambodia, and Italy with various interlocutors or celebrity companions. Similar to the pages of *Lucky Peach*, Asian food is never Chang's sole realm of interest, but he noticeably returns again and again to highlight certain places, spaces, or themes: the lineage of Japanese and other East Asian dishes, from ramen to pork buns to xiaolongbao; permutations of Asian cookery in contemporary America, including local adaptations and inventions; and ultimately, food as communion and celebration, a nod to both heritage and gastronomic adventurism.

Chang's continued success and evolution as restaurateur, editor, and media personality evidences a cultural shift that Meehan and others have noted regarding American diners' robust interest in Asian cuisines and newfound desire for culinary education, or at least awareness, compared with the gaudy cultural appropriations or bastardizations of the past. *Lucky Peach*'s untimely dissolution in 2017 was widely mourned in the epicurean and journalistic communities and did not appear to arise from commercial viability so much as "creative differences among its partners, as well as differences in financial strategy" (Rao).

Years later, in 2020, Meehan departed from his next role as food editor for the *Los Angeles Times* due to allegations of sexual misconduct that extended as far back as his tenure at *Lucky Peach* (McCarron). Chang has steered clear of such ignominy and remains a figurehead of the Asian culinary community in America, his career perhaps a synecdoche for the gastronomical phenomenon of the transpacific elsewhere.

Vernacular cosmopolitanism has thus manifested in the noodle shop, and the East Asian palate at large, the heady outcome of “a mixture of nostalgia and resilience,” as Ligaya Mishan recounts (“Asian-American”). For many Asian American chefs themselves grew up with a sense of shame about what was packed in their school lunchboxes, the “farty-smelling food” that drew derision and othered them from their peers. Now the same cuisines are part of a contemporary wave of “‘Asianization’ of the American and European diets,” as James Farrer observes (34). Postwar cultural imperialism has dwindled with the rise of Asian economies, while a renewed interest in indigenous culinary histories has burgeoned through the menus of American-bred chefs like Chang, who have staked out significant roles in urban America. These victuals serve a dual purpose: they invite the average diner to expand their gastronomic horizons through individual experience, while telegraphing a story about America’s relationship to East Asia. The Asian American cultural agent thus offers a bridge between worlds, leveraging a cachet premised on the transpacific hipness of an imagined Tokyo (and perhaps other cities in the fuzzier background) and introducing bold new flavors, forms, and even names that white Americans may have bristled at in previous generations. It’s a win-win transaction in the end, the normalization or beatification of Asian cuisine in exchange for the conferral of cosmopolitan distinction to the individual diner.

Against Authenticity; Finding Flourish in Japan

“An izakaya menu,” declares Kee Byung-keun, “is not a list of choices; it is a list of opportunities” (“Izakaya”). Hailing from Louisiana, the Tokyo-based Korean adoptee food writer has cultivated a modest fanbase since being commissioned by Peter Meehan to write for the first issue of *Lucky Peach*. He has since published pieces in *Bon Appetit*, *Eater*, and other venues, but perhaps writes most prolifically through the lyrical captions on his Instagram account @abathingegg, where he boasts close to 8,000 followers. Urban Japan features heavily in Kee’s social media aesthetic, which is dominated by nocturnal panoramas and street scenes as much as saturated snapshots of broths, burgers, and heaps of meat over rice or noodles. Tokyo has become a refuge for him, an in-between cultural space of relative anonymity compared with his upbringing in a predominantly white community or the psychological weight of his South Korean origins. Whether rhapsodizing about the izakaya or dreaming up a gourmand’s itinerary for navigating the capital city’s “endless abundance and variety” (“Perfect Day”), he embraces the lifeworld of urban Asia through a physical homebase in Japan and occasional excursions abroad.

Social media platforms play an outsized role in the cultivation and performance of identities in the 21st century. The sheer magnitude of available content facilitates a certain kind of cosmopolitanism from below, with algorithms delivering an endlessly refreshed stream of moving and still images to entice the beholder. The cultural domain where food-based television, celebrity chefs, and print media once set trends and wielded the most power has been matched, if not overtaken, by a horde of digitally savvy influencers who have seamlessly built huge followings on Instagram and TikTok—“with lightning fucking speed,” Kee Byung-keun noted in an April 2022 interview.

The brightest stars in this space are often backed by real-world credentials, of course, as in the case of Lucas Sin, the chef behind fast-casual Chinese restaurant chain Junzi

Kitchen, and Eric Kim, a cooking columnist for *The New York Times* who I explore in further depth in the next chapter. But they also join a veritable constellation of other professionals, amateurs, and passersby in shaping public perception of food cultures, offering recipes, cooking tips, and history lessons. Given the central role occupied by internet culture in today's world, it may be unsurprising that influencers have taken to social media spaces to publicly discuss “issues like love, racism, familial trauma and heartbreak” (B. Kaur 2022) while sharing, say, their best vegan Korean cookery. Some of them have parlayed their hundreds of thousands of followers into further projects like pop-up shops and cookbooks. The immediacy and intimacy of a platform like TikTok have the potential not only to capture an audience of millions, but to carry or shift whole cultural conversations.

It's not just the internet that has set these Asian food evangelists apart from their predecessors. They have also come of age “in a chaotically globalized and now mid-pandemic world” (Gu). Vicky Gu's profile of Lucas Sin reveals the young chef's enthusiastic acknowledgment of the potentiality inherent in gastronomic hybridity, as well as the impact of his having grown up in the casually cosmopolitan environment of Hong Kong. “I'm not Asian American,” Sin declares, “and it makes talking about Asian food easier.” I read this statement as Sin being a provocateur more than taking a political stance. Regardless of how he identifies, Sin's business and cultural ventures are all stateside for now. His declared detachment from Asian American identity suggests the inherent freedom he has to invent and innovate without the burden of childhood memories centered on self-conscious shame over that ubiquitous trope of “stinky lunchboxes,” per Gu. Sin's Instagram following has ballooned to over 97,000 since Gu's write-up in 2021. Beyond the brick-and-mortar of the fast casual Chinese restaurant Junzi Kitchen, Sin has produced a chili oil gift box sold via The Metropolitan Museum of Art (“The Met Celebration Chili Oil”); launched a pop-up dinner series called SHY*BOYZCLUB (@shyboyzclub on Instagram); appeared on *The*

Today Show (“Chef Lucas Sin”); and received accolades from publications including *Food & Wine* and *Forbes* (Shah; Sorvino and Stoller). These activities are all in parallel to his social media presence, of course, where he is hyper-visible and hip: as a chef straddling the Millennial and Gen Z demographics, and as a socially conscious urbanite bringing attention to intersectional crises of the restaurant business or violence against Asians in the United States.

“He’s so damn smart and he’s so damn thorough in how he tells these stories,” observes Kee Byung-keun, of Sin (Interview). “He’s not didactic.” Unfettered by any desire to assert or gatekeep authenticity, Sin is playful in his approach to gastronomy whether he’s making a mapo lasagna in the kitchen or admiring cheeseburger egg rolls at Disney World. He explains at length in an interview with New York’s Museum at Eldridge Street that, contrary to popular opinion, “Chinese American food is real Chinese food” and the novel techniques of Chinese cookery in America, along with the diversity of regional Chinese cuisines, are “worth celebrating, worth investigating and learning from” (Dowell). That he hails from Hong Kong and has only recently catapulted into the cultural consciousness of Asian America exemplifies the transnationality of this social fabric. Sin, in this respect, is an exemplary citizen and tastemaker of the transpacific elsewhere.

Though they occupy the same gastronomic sphere in contemporary American society, Sin is fifteen years—or half a generation—younger than David Chang. It could be said that they originate from opposite ends of the cosmopolitan current and meet in the central churn of things. Chang hails from Virginia; Sin grew up in Hong Kong. Sin famously opened his first restaurant in an abandoned newspaper factory at age sixteen, a factoid that is most always included in his bios for public speaking engagements or profiles. Chang, on the other hand, entered the restaurant industry through the French Culinary Institute, which he joined

following a stint in finance (Bertoni). After realizing that haute cuisine was not the world for him, Chang found his footing by way of the noodle.

Chang and Sin both offer a kaleidoscopic array of modern Asian cuisine, but noodles have been a primary vehicle for their careers. They share a penchant for what some may call lowbrow foods, a light disdain for the notion of authenticity, and an intimate connection to Japan that propelled their careers in different ways. Chang's paternal grandfather grew up in Korea under Japanese colonization as a member of the elite class who received a fitting cultural education. "I was introduced to Japanese food at a very early age through [my grandfather]," Chang reminisced in a 2020 interview on NPR's *Fresh Air*. "And I think it's a main reason why I have such an affinity for Japanese food." Chang himself taught English in Japan as an adult (Bertoni), but it was during a later stint in Japan that he drew inspiration to forge the menu at Momofuku. In Japan, Chang recounted to NPR's Terry Gross, "the fervor for ramen was like pizza and barbecue and hamburgers combined" ("Chef David Chang"). Decrying authenticity as "stifling" and "dangerous," Chang went on to muse that "everything is sort of fusion anyways" in food nowadays.

Japan was also a major influence for Lucas Sin, who spent several summers backpacking through the country and eventually cooked at a Michelin-starred kaiseki restaurant in Kyoto called Kikunoi Honten (Zhang). In his younger days, Sin subscribed to the notion that "Japanese cuisine is the best cuisine in the world." While working in Kyoto, the chef of Kikunoi Honten inspired him with a story about coming to embrace the cuisine of his heritage only after studying French culinary techniques in France. It was then that Sin realized he ought to look toward his cultural heritage. "My Japan was his France," he realized, immediately followed by another epiphany: "Maybe I should start thinking about Chinese food."

He soon had the opportunity to do just that through Junzi Kitchen, which was established by graduate students at Yale, where Sin was a college student, and incubated at the Yale Entrepreneurial Institute. The Chinese food scene nowadays is dramatically different from “the Americanized food served by hole-in-the-wall neighborhood takeout spots or old-fashioned dim sum parlors of years past,” notes Jenny G. Zhang in *Eater*. Many “stylish restaurants [in cities like New York] are built around hyper-specific genres or regions of Chinese cuisine,” including Junzi Kitchen, among other players. Zhang observes that Sin is leery of authenticity while keenly attuned to the storytelling potential of food. Indeed, in a 2015 interview with the *Yale Daily News*, Sin cites his holistic undergraduate education in English and philosophy, alongside cognitive science, as an influence on his cooking ethos (Kipnis).

As a daily necessity, food is perhaps a most apropos and mundane site for the formation of vernacular cosmopolitanism. Sin and Chang demonstrate an array of “global affinities and solidarities” (Appadurai 168) in their stories and journeys that crisscross Asia and emerge as novel figurations in their American restaurants and kitchens, as well as on the plates of their patrons. Japan is a transversal line that intersects with Chang’s family history and lived experience, the source of his acknowledgment of the noodle shop’s potentiality, and with Sin’s proto-worldview and early professional career, a serendipitous interaction pushing him to look back at his own Chinese heritage. Like the marginalized groups of Mumbai that Appadurai describes, Chang and Sin necessarily inhabit a minority cultural space in America and leverage cosmopolitanism from below to fight against the exclusions and injustices of society at large. In Chang’s case, as told to NPR, his career is a reconciliation and reclamation after experiencing that all-too-familiar Asian American shame over how “the foods they ate [in childhood] and . . . their kitchen smelled different from the kitchens of his friends’ families.” Sin, meanwhile, has been a supporter of the #EnoughIsEnough movement,

posting on Instagram in February 2021 to fundraise and “raise awareness on the recent surge in hate crimes against the Asian American community.” Both men fashion Asian identity in America as a source of pride and power, contrary to existing narratives of the meek model minority. They are emphatically part of the relatively new “transnationally Asian” subjectivity that E. Tammy Kim wrote about in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, a notable shift in how this anglophone minority positions itself in the world.

For previous generations of Asian Americans, “Asia was a distant, historical place” that simply wasn’t pertinent to the lifeworld of American society. As waves of immigrants from a wide range of countries have diversified the ranks of this demographic category, a new hunger has emerged—among younger generations especially—for multilingual and multimodal perspectives on political and cultural issues, whether related to the COVID-19 pandemic, social movements, or bilateral diplomacy. Kim highlights the role of independent magazines *New Naratif*, *New Bloom*, and *Lausan* in contemporary anglophone discourse by Asian diasporic writers based around the world, but who channel their energies into “anti-nationalist, activist” platforms that resonate with Asian Americans, among other groups. For further discussion of the Asian American literary sphere, see Chapters 7 through 9.

An Elsewhere for Survival

In the spring of 2014, Kee Byeung-keun moved to Tokyo from the United States. “It wasn’t about reconnecting to my roots,” he reflected in an Instagram post marking seven years in Japan. “I don’t have any here (or anywhere). As I have said many times before, it was an act of survival. Perhaps even self-defense” (“Today marks”). Adopted from Seoul and sent to Louisiana in 1984, Kee writes poignantly about his longing for an illusory notion of

home or familial attachment on social media. Only in Tokyo could he reclaim his birth name and remake an identity separate from that of the ill-fitting English name by which he had been known all his life. Recounting his estrangement in a 2019 essay “You Can’t Go Home Again,” he writes at length about the identity crisis and invisibility of his Korean subjectivity in a white American context:

It was as if every mirror I had ever stood in front of refused to reflect me. How can you know who you are if you cannot even see yourself? You live this life long enough, and you begin to ask whether or not you are even real. Am I a ghost? Am I an illusion? Among the many fictions that have burned across the surface of my life, is it possible that my own body is also an invented reality? You wonder and wonder and wonder, and then one day you look up and the mirror breaks.

Ultimately, Kee’s first visit to Seoul as an adult is a painful reminder of the rupture that marked his early life, including his abandonment in infancy at a train station and his being processed through the adoption system of South Korea. Despite his yearning for kinship and intimacy, the city comes to emblemize “the ache of almost” and he has no choice but to accept that “[there] was no home to go back to.” Tokyo would offer some measure of consolation, specifically the gastronomic splendors afforded by a city that safely remains beyond the boundaries of emotional expectation. And niboshi ramen would be his choice of first meal after moving here, as he recounts in *Lucky Peach*, a meal fittingly intense for the major life reset he sought: “I needed something big and heavy and overwhelming. Something satisfying in a way that would soften the wear and tear of transoceanic travel” (“Where to Get Fishy Ramen”). Effectively Tokyo is the transpacific elsewhere for Kee, a

city situated comfortably in its liminality, defined neither by the hegemonic oppression of American society nor the existential weight of Seoul.

His essays for *Lucky Peach* demonstrate his passionate embrace and skillful mediation of Japan's urban food culture, catering to anglophone readers with transpacific appetites. And ramen, surprisingly or not, occupies a central role in Kee's reinvented subjectivity that is finely tuned to the rhythms of an East Asian ethnoscape over an American one. Through a "revelatory" experience at a Japanese restaurant in Seoul, the mundane meal of instant noodles he knew as a child effects a full transformation and sets the contours for a new life. "My culinary identity pivoted on that meal," he writes. "The arc of my life, which had been contorted until then, began to straighten out, slowly, too slowly, towards Japan" ("There and Back Again"). Kee's writing provides a highly individual and idiosyncratic entryway into a formidable mediascape by which Tokyo is constructed in the American imaginary. Apart from *Tampopo* and the aforementioned shows involving David Chang, an ongoing global conversation about Japanese cuisine has been sustained through feature films and documentaries such as *The Ramen Girl* (2008), *Jiro Dreams of Sushi* (2011), *Ramen Heads* (2017), and *Ramen Teh* (2018), not to mention the near-endless supply of food-focused Japanese television series that have found their way to Western shores by way of Netflix or other streaming platforms: *Bullet Train Bistro* (Izakaya Shinkansen), *Midnight Diner* (Shinya shokudo), *Samurai Gourmet* (Nobushi no gurume), *Solitary Gourmet* (Kodoku no gurume), *The Way of the Hot and Spicy* (Gekikarado), *What Did You Eat Yesterday?* (Kino nani tabeta?), and so on. These are just the narratives of Japan, of course, which I have used as a fulcrum in this chapter to pivot between Chang, Kee, and Sin. Chinese and Korean cuisines each have their own illustrious mediascapes and concomitant histories, converging with Japanese gastronomy at various nodes around the Pacific Rim that represent the human capacity for reinvention. Indeed, Chang, Kee, and Sin can each be said to bring their own

emotional relationships to other parts of East Asia, in addition to Japan, to bear on their engagement with every meal.

The Noodle Shop of the transpacific elsewhere is a textured space. You can feel the thickness of the stories contained here, whether among the patrons chatting breezily over bowls of ramen, in the kitchen between the grunts and jibes of the cooks and dishwashers, or in the aura of the food being served—each dish a history in miniature, someone’s erstwhile dream made reality. Food is history and family, at once a connection to other worlds and an assertion of one’s own reality. This pithy wisdom is often drowned out by the noise of so many words or forgotten in the infinite scroll of tantalizing images or short videos. The Noodle Shop is not simply a purveyor of noodles. It’s a space where the tension of conflicting or overlapping identities melts away and people from all walks of life can take pleasure in a hearty meal. Shirking all notions of authenticity, the Noodle Shop telegraphs that you, the patron, are already the best version that you can be: caught in that singular in-betweenness, owing allegiance to no one country or lineage. This is a space that serves up delicious and photogenic fare that attracts travelers from the world over. It’s not the only establishment of its kind, but all signs point to likely longevity in the fickle world of the restaurant business—in no small part due to the charisma of its owner. At any rate, there’s an ever-growing pantheon of cooks and culinary mavericks who are chomping at the bit to go even further. What was once derided or maligned as food of the immigrant other has come roaring back with a vengeance. You will eat here, the Noodle Shop says, and you will like it.

Chapter 2: The Grocery Store

The story of the Korean supermarket Han Ah Reum, better known as H Mart, is illustrative of broader trends in the American palate and a burgeoning consciousness of Asian cuisine in American society. After the first H Mart opened in the Queens borough of New York in 1982, the 1990s saw a gradual expansion across the East Coast until there were eight branches in operation. The number of H Marts vaulted to 34 by the end of the aughts and doubled again within the next decade (“History”), numbering 77 stores across fourteen states at the time of this writing (“Our Stores”). This trajectory of explosive growth runs parallel to the transformation of South Korea from a dictatorship to democracy on the cusp of the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul; a near-fourfold increase in Korean nationals in the United States during roughly the same period (Esterline and Batalova); the emergence of Hallyu and K-pop, in particular, as cultural juggernauts in the 21st century; and several generations of American-born children of immigrants or mixed race families, some of whom have come of age and now play the role of mediators and cultural agents, balancing eclectic conceptions of Korean heritage and Asian identity against the tides of white hegemony.

While the Noodle Shop and other restaurants are important places in the transpacific elsewhere, gastronomy neither begins nor ends with the service industry. The Grocery Store is also a site of casual cosmopolitanism, with the diverse food products of different cultures and cuisines arrayed in the same space or available just one aisle over. Here you can find all manner of fresh fruit and vegetables that may be less commonly consumed in America, but staples on the other side of the Pacific: chrysanthemum greens, maitake, daikon, Chinese broccoli, Asian pears. Of course, that’s just scratching the surface. Sauces, spices, and other packaged goods are available in abundance, whether it’s a dazzling wall of instant noodles

from all around the Pacific Rim or fermented goodies that are instrumental to the kitchens of Seoul, Tokyo, and Shanghai, the wide selection of gochujang, miso paste, bean curd. No one here wrinkles their nose at a pungent jar of kimchi or a thousand-year-old egg. In this space, the delirious potentiality of Asian flavor combinations reigns supreme.

I continue the gustatory expedition through the transpacific elsewhere with a deeper dive into the mental space occupied by Asian groceries and Asian home cooking in America. Using two key figures and their core culinary texts as my focus, I delineate the ever-expanding borders of American households' appetite for East Asia and highlight the role of cultural agents of varied creative backgrounds who guide the way. In one corner looms Michelle Zauner, a musician also known by her stage name Japanese Breakfast, and her 2021 memoir *Crying in H Mart* that received tremendous acclaim, generating a lively discourse about heritage and home cooking. Building upon the eponymous 2018 essay for *The New Yorker*, Zauner recounts her mother's untimely passing from stomach cancer through a meditation on Koreanness, belonging, and gastronomic tradition. Elsewhere, the more traditional form of the cookbook is transmuted into another medium for personal narrative in Eric Kim's *Korean American*, which "doubles as a memoir and touching tribute to his mom" (Thompson, "Why Eric Kim"), the parent-child dynamic a fulcrum for exploring heritage cuisine, as in Zauner's writing.

Both Kim and Zauner are young Asian Americans whose activities and social lives cross borders and have intersectional resonance. Kim is not just a chef, but a queer man and columnist for *The New York Times* who joins Korean culinary tradition with the foods of the American South, where he was born and raised. With her Korean mother and white American father, Zauner is part of a fast-growing multiracial Asian American population that has

inspired discourse and drawn attention in the popular media.⁷ As an accomplished musician, she further insinuates the permeability of creative boundaries in Asian America today. What links the two of them together and connects them to the broader community is none other than H Mart, which I deploy here as a synecdoche for the Asian grocery store in America at large. Once a province for the adventurous home chef only, H Mart and similar stores have become such a cultural force that they are even able to influence the mainstream, as seen in the trend of other supermarket chains beginning to offer in-store dining experiences (Shuman). North of the border, H Mart's expansion into Canada has moved at a slower pace, but with significant intentions to globalize and make an impact with the size of their facilities (Kwon). Indeed, the "ethnic" or international supermarket sector in America alone is estimated to be worth USD \$49.5 billion and continues to grow ("Ethnic Supermarkets"). These supermarkets and the narratives that swirl in, through, and around them are a transpacific bridge, inviting Americans to remake their image of Asia with an armful of groceries, one meal at a time.

Mothers and Memory

"Ever since my mom died, I cry in H Mart," Michelle Zauner confesses in her 2018 essay for *The New Yorker* ("Crying in H Mart"). The grocery store is far more than a place to procure ingredients, but a hotbed of memory and a conduit to Korean cultural identity for Zauner. Her grief is activated alongside olfactory and gustatory stimulations of the supermarket. She observes the people around her, the wizened matriarchs and immigrant

⁷ I do not mean to imply that this attention is always positive, or even most of the time. Andrea Long Chu's "The Mixed Asian Metaphor" is a deep dive into the way literary characters of mixed Asian descent, whether real or fictional, become vectors for Asian American anxiety.

mothers or young couples on dates. “Am I even Korean anymore,” she anguishes, “if there’s no one left in my life to call and ask which brand of seaweed we used to buy?”

This essay would go on to land Zauner a literary agent and a book deal, a full-length memoir of the same name that hit the shelves in spring 2021 to near universal acclaim. Food and especially home cooking lie at the core of the narrative, which explores Zauner’s understanding of her Koreanness from childhood pilgrimages to Seoul alongside her mother Chongmi; the complex and oftentimes fraught dynamic the pair navigate during Zauner’s teenage years; Chongmi’s sudden illness and deterioration, which Zauner helplessly tries to remedy or mollify with her own cooking; and the aftermath of Chongmi’s death, which ultimately allows Zauner to tap into an emotional depth that would propel her into the limelight of the music world. Zauner is a gifted writer who applies her lyricism to mouthwatering passages about Korean food and the indignities of terminal illness alike. While the book follows her crisscrossed journey in the United States, from childhood in the Pacific Northwest to adulthood in Philadelphia and New York, Seoul remains a constant, reassuring presence in spite of its opacity and Zauner’s professed clumsiness with Korean language. “I loved the humidity and the smell of the city,” she recalls, “even when my mother told me it was just garbage and pollution” (24). At night, when jetlag drives her and her mother to the kitchen of her grandmother’s flat, they share intimate moments scouring the refrigerator and pantry for homemade banchan and snacks, or even “ganjang gejang . . . sucking salty, rich, custardy raw crab from its shell, prodding the meat from its crevices with our tongues, licking our soy sauce-stained fingers” (26-27).

Crying in H Mart spent sixty weeks on the hardcover bestseller list of *The New York Times* (“Hardcover Nonfiction”). “The memoir is woven with motifs of an almost musical nature,” gushed one reviewer in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, astutely noting that Zauner purposefully avoids italicizing Korean words in the book, thus rejecting the implicit otherness

of foods or phrases for anglophone readers while establishing a narrative world that “feels true to a childhood in which a mix of Korean and English words ricocheted between family members during the same conversation” (Daniels). The *New York Times Magazine* praised the memoir as “artfully observed and emotionally rich . . . a surprise runaway best seller” (Marchese). The *Chicago Review of Books* similarly hailed the book as “exquisitely detailed and wonderfully layered,” carefully avoiding overly laborious explanations of Korean culture or food to the lay reader (Praseed).

Other reviews offer cautious notes of criticism or self-reflection. Mayukh Sen points out in the *Atlantic* that some of Zauner’s descriptions of food “have a flimsy connection to the narrative spine” and become a showcase of Korean gastronomy for its own sake. The Asian American cultural magazine *Hyphen* carried a review that expressed no small amount of skepticism about Zauner’s choice to construct a memoir that threaded together food, mothers, and motherlands, a clichéd genre that the writer found “disempowering and flattening,” something that could almost be conceived of as “a trap” (Jasmine Liu). The same reviewer concedes that the memoir is “poignantly dignified” and Zauner ultimately succeeded in crafting a new kind of “fermentation” in her thematic explorations. Elsewhere, *Marie Claire* featured the memoir in their virtual book club and offered a round-up of Instagram commentary afterward. One Korean American reader described Zauner’s spotlight on food as “both comforting and exposing,” with sections that made her feel “uneasy” for attempting to explain a classic Korean stew to an American readership (Yoon). Others expressed the emotional resonance they felt with Zauner’s honest portrayal of her vacillating relationship to Korean heritage, sorrow over losing a parent, or willingness to be vulnerable. A slew of reviewers describe her food writing as sumptuous, immersive, vibrant—“I could almost taste it” (Epstein).

The sustained discourse that Zauner has drawn with the publication of her memoir demonstrates her skill as a writer, but also telegraphs the currency of Asian cosmopolitanism in America, especially when this debut work of literature is considered in relation to her broader creative career. Some reviewers of *Crying in H Mart* knew Zauner already as a musician performing under the moniker Japanese Breakfast. In a podcast conversation with fellow Korean American creative Kogonada (director of the 2021 Asian futurist film *After Yang*), Zauner describes her arbitrary selection of this name after coming across an online image of an actual Japanese breakfast, which for her evoked a pleasant feeling of nourishment. She goes on to confess that “my entire life I’ve been assumed to be either Chinese or Japanese, and Korea wasn’t even a country in American comprehension” (“Fine Ingredients”). In the same interview, while discussing her music videos as Japanese Breakfast, Zauner notes offhand that her top visual and narrative influences include Agnès Varda, Hirokazu Kore-eda, and “an obvious one”—Wong Kar-wai. I discuss Wong’s preeminence and transcendent cultural power in Chapter 5: The Museum.

Zauner’s omnivorous consumption of East Asian cultural forms and her redeployment of a pastiche and porous Asianness is emblematic of the attitudes of the Asian American cultural agents and communities I am documenting. Despite her linguistic limitations in Korean, the familial intimacy and gastronomic indulgences of Seoul are a through line that carry the narrative of *Crying in H Mart* well past the death of her mother. While Japanese Breakfast is by and large an anglophone American indie pop band, Zauner’s debut as a writer excavates cultural identity through her relationship with Chongmi and her ongoing recalibrations of selfhood vis-à-vis Korean cuisine. “I’m allowed to be a main character for the first time in the world,” Zauner muses when asked about her literary success. “And this book has universal themes about mothers and daughters and grief and food and memory. This doesn’t have to be a specifically Asian American story. This is a story, and I happen to be

Asian American” (Marchese). *Crying in H Mart* indeed constructs a narrative of universal empathy while celebrating the cultural specificities of Korean cuisine and even the urban glamor of Seoul. As protagonist, Zauner’s simultaneous affection for and estrangement from Seoul, and all that it represents, strikes a relatable note for the anglophone American reader who may also feel some measure of cautious familiarity with the city, regardless of their ethnic background. In the book’s final chapter, Zauner’s rising profile as frontwoman of Japanese Breakfast paves the way for a two-week tour of East Asia, culminating in a final show in the South Korean capital. True to form, she documents gastronomic adventures in brief across Taipei, Beijing, Shanghai, Tokyo, and Osaka before returning to Seoul at last. Food is the fount of culture, her writing suggests, a direct link to the thrumming lifeworld of each city she visits. Her commercial success as a musician is a bittersweet achievement, as her first album is ostensibly a record of her grief; even the cover of her debut album *Psychopomp* is a photo of Zauner’s mother in her younger days. Playing in front of a packed house in her mother’s homeland, Zauner comes full circle at last, and also projects a wistful romance as an embodiment of the transpacific elsewhere: straddling two worlds yet floating beyond both, an artist with polyphonic connections to and claims over the contemporary cityscapes of East Asia.

Immigrant Time Warp

The vector of motherhood, culinary tradition, and cultural identity manifests again in another book centered on Korean cookery, Eric Kim’s *Korean American*. Whereas Michelle Zauner offers a heartrending autobiographical narrative in *Crying in H Mart* through the prose memoir as an orthodox container (or form of circulation, per Appadurai), Kim’s

rumination on family ties unfolds via the interstitial passages and anecdotes connected to recipes in an actual cookbook with step-by-step instructions for his hybridized cuisine. In a few opening essays, Kim sketches out an equivocal relationship to Korean identity as someone who “[straddles] two nations . . . at once both and neither, and something else entirely” (12). That “something else” is indeed the name of his book, which encapsulates a specific subjectivity of Asian America and also describes the type of cuisine pioneered and popularized by this community. Meanwhile, the quality of being both and neither recalls Andre Aciman’s musings on cosmopolitan identity (see Introduction), as well as the actor Steven Yeun’s embrace of his own liminality in shaping his craft (see Chapter 4: The Movie Theater).

In Kim’s eyes, Korean American cooking is inextricably linked to the specific cultural era when his parents migrated to the United States and began to make do with the ingredients available in their new homeland. He calls it the “immigrant time warp” (17), attributing this phrase to the YouTube influencer Maangchi, also known as Emily Kim (no relation). Of course, Eric Kim is careful to point out that each person’s take on their heritage cuisine is highly idiosyncratic, varying from family to family, region to region. Similar to David Chang and Lucas Sin (see Chapter 1: The Noodle Shop), the notion of authenticity itself is anathema to Kim, who prefers to highlight the multiplicity and open-endedness of how Asian minority identity can manifest in a country like the United States.

The publication of *Korean American* was widely praised by food media and cultural platforms alike. *The Wall Street Journal* highlighted Kim’s tome in a round-up of twelve cookbooks, quoting a professional chef’s endorsement that Kim’s essays, in particular, “[foster] a particular sense of bonding with Korean culture in a way that no history books or geopolitical thesis could ever do” (Izon). Columbia University, Kim’s alma mater, featured the publication in its alumni magazine and described the book as a “testament to the way that

cooking can knit two cultures together” (Shapiro). *Saveur* lauded the fact that the mother-son relationship at the core of *Korean American* endowed the writer with “the freedom and creativity to create a cuisine all his own” (Kemper). Venues as disparate as NPR, *Time*, and *Wired* praised the book not just for its recipes, but the personal frame through which Kim introduces Korean American cuisine (Ulaby; Dockterman; J. Ray).

Kim is a queer young media darling and bestselling author with over 187,000 followers on Instagram, as of October 2023. Coming from a stint at *Saveur*, he now regularly contributes food writing and recipes to the highly visible platforms of *The New York Times* and *The New York Times Magazine* (“Eric Kim”). His dishes often tell a story about migration and identity, whether it’s Korean-inflected bucatini, American-style ramen, or a hybridized take on a non-noodle medium entirely. Long before his book was released, Kim articulated how his relationship to his mother and food also served as a focal point for his queer identity and coming-out story. In a heartfelt essay for *Food52*, Kim relates the awkwardness of his confession to his churchgoing immigrant parents (“When I Came Out”). Their stunned and stilted reactions at a sushi restaurant in suburban Atlanta gradually give way to questions and conversations—then food and reconciliation. A late night meal of kimchi fried rice, whipped up by Kim’s mother Jean, becomes the first olive branch of many on their journey to mutual understanding. Unsurprisingly, Jean’s voice and experience are central to her son’s cookbook. Within these pages and among their shared recipes are the echoes of a transpacific journey; as one reviewer observes, the book is a showcase of “Korean staples transformed with American ingredients his mother used to adapt her dishes . . . when she and Kim’s father immigrated to the U.S. in the early 1980s” (Mims).

As with Michelle Zauner, a mother’s home cooking serves initially as a vital link for Eric Kim to understand himself and his Korean heritage, and later transforms into a tool for self-empowerment and the creation of a hybrid identity that dwells comfortably in duality.

Korean American opens with an introduction and two short essays that set up the author's narrative and culinary ethos, then moves into a section entitled "That Boring Pantry Section in Every Cookbook, but More Fun" (21). Kim approaches this more as a nonfiction writing exercise than a glossary cut and dried. His conversational tone guides the reader through the terminologies for integral components of Korean gastronomy, from familiar names (kimchi, doenjang, toasted sesame oil) to the arguably more obscure (dasima, maesil chong, saeujeot). One imagines that all these foodstuffs could easily be procured at a supermarket like H Mart. Kim himself writes about the opening of an H Mart in Georgia as "a sign that Korean immigrants had truly arrived" ("The Best Things"). Viewed alongside the explosive popularity of Shin Ramyun and K-pop, or the accolades and influence accorded to Korean American entertainers like Sandra Oh and Jenny Han,⁸ Kim reads this constellation of "cultural moments" as an indication of the positive mainstreamization of Korean culture.

It may be unsurprising that the physical space of H Mart is often referenced in online media that addresses Kim's book (Lee and Schneider; Rodbard; Wexler). Given their thematic cohesion and proximity of publication dates, Michelle Zauner's *Crying in H Mart* has also been yoked to Kim's cookbook by readers and cultural venues alike. Zauner and Kim participated in a virtual event together, focused on the former's memoir and organized by the Cambridge Public Library in October 2021 ("Crying in H Mart"). The Barnes & Noble podcast *Poured Over* referenced not only Zauner's book, but novels by Korean American authors Lyla Lee and Min Jin Lee, on an episode featuring Eric Kim (Messer). One newsletter writer who observed connections between Kim and Zauner had a more apprehensive take on the commercial success of *Korean American*: "It will likely become a

⁸ Oh, of course, was invoked in the very first paragraph of my introductory chapter, and is a familiar face to American audiences through her work in the popular medical drama *Grey's Anatomy* and, more recently, the thriller cum black comedy *Killing Eve*. She also had a starring role in *Sideways* (2004), directed by Alexander Payne. Jenny Han is an author of young-adult fiction and is most well known for her *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* franchise, which has been adapted into several dramatic series on Netflix.

poster child for what a cookbook by first and second generation immigrants can be—for better and for worse” (Meredith).

Kim and Zauner have become friends and allies in the public eye. From their respective creative professions that privilege the gastronomic and the sonic, they meet in the middle ground of the written word and weave together a new narrative of Koreanness in America that is cosmopolitan rather than prescriptive. Minority food culture and experience is made accessible and emotionally resonant through their books. What one consumes is not only the universal story of a mother-child relationship, but an ode to cultural heritage and idiosyncratic assertion of Asian identity in America. “Reading ‘Crying in H Mart’ made me realize how much I’ve gone my whole life without seeing Korean food represented in a very honest, raw, unfiltered, un-whitewashed way,” Kim recounted to *The Boston Globe* in an article on Zauner (Hernandez). The importance of visibility and representation in all domains of American society are a common refrain, perhaps even more so for minorities in the creative industries. Among the Korean cookbooks recommended by Zauner in the same article, she does not neglect to mention Kim’s publication and lauds his work as “very beautiful,” the writer himself “a really poetic soul.” At the nexus of multiple domains, they come together as chef and musician, writers and cultural influencers, in a show of solidarity that characterizes both the spirit of the transpacific elsewhere and the sprawling, cross-pollinated landscape of Asian America in the 2020s.

Maangchi the Matriarch

The centrality of the Korean mother to Eric Kim and Michelle Zauner finds expression in a surrogate figure whose influence in the American gastronomic imagination of

Korea cannot be understated. The explosively popular YouTuber known as Maangchi, whose internet handle has a literal meaning of “hammer,” plays an important role in the careers of Kim and Zauner and their respective texts. Described as the “Korean Julia Child” by *The New York Times*, Maangchi is a Korean American immigrant of the same generation as the mothers of Kim and Zauner (Moskin, “Maangchi”). Her unlikely path to becoming an internet sensation began when her adult children, worried about her addiction to online gaming, persuaded her to find another outlet by making cooking videos in 2007. At the time of Julia Moskin’s write-up in 2015, Maangchi had more than half a million subscribers to her YouTube channel. That number has increased more than twelvefold as of 2023.

Playful, maternal, and wholesome, Maangchi describes the focus of her YouTube channel as “cooking, eating, and enjoying Korean cuisine with your family and friends” (“Maangchi - YouTube”). The staple of kimchi is integral to Korean food and has become Maangchi’s calling card, with endless instructional videos available on her channel. If David Chang and Lucas Sin can be considered noodle evangelists and champions of Asian hipster gastronomy in the metropole, Maangchi and Eric Kim are nurturers and enablers of demystified DIY approachability for Korean cookery. “I can say with confidence that kimchi is at the soul of my Koreanness,” Kim writes in his cookbook (63). “As long as there’s kimchi in the house, there’s always something to eat.” To wit, he devotes a whole section of forty pages to recipes that prominently feature kimchi, made in the style that his mother Jean taught him. Similarly, Maangchi’s YouTube videos include multiple iterations of making kimchi, and over the span of her career as a Korean home cooking sensation, she has also significantly helped many of the younger generations “come closer to their Korean identity” (Park, “The joy”).

Among the people that Maangchi has impacted is Michelle Zauner. *Crying in H Mart* dedicates an entire chapter to Zauner’s emotional convalescence by way of Maangchi’s

cooking videos after her mother's passing. "Every dish I cooked exhumed a memory," Zauner recollects (212). Maangchi's motions in the kitchen mirror those of Zauner's mother, whether in peeling fruit or cutting noodles with "a specifically Korean ambidextrous precision" (213). Zauner had been comforted by her initial discovery of Maangchi while searching for a Korean comfort food recipe online, taking solace in the YouTuber's proximity in age to her recently deceased mother and even in her accent. Zauner quotes at length from the video descriptions and narration, noting that the detail with which Maangchi offers instruction also reminded her of her mother. During her mother's terminal illness, Zauner had felt that she wasn't "Korean enough" for her inability to make *jatjuk*, or pine nut porridge, among other traditional dishes that could soothe. Maangchi bestowed upon her the knowledge and wherewithal to produce these recipes on her own, a gift that made Zauner feel "[grateful] and indebted" (Park, "The joy"). In the acknowledgments to *Crying in H Mart*, Zauner addresses Maangchi directly: "You are a light that has guided so many in search of connection and meaning. I'm grateful for your warmth and generosity" (242).

Indeed, Brian Park's *Los Angeles Times* write-up of Maangchi reveals the impact she has had on not just Zauner, but Kristen Kish, a South Korean-born adoptee raised in Michigan and professional chef. Having grown up with a better understanding of Polish cuisine than Korean, Kish came together with Maangchi on the PBS cooking show *Lucky Chow* to learn more from the matriarch of Korean gastronomy herself. These multiple engagements with Korean diasporic creatives of younger generations, both within and outside the food industry, demonstrate Maangchi's cultural force and widespread appeal. As a nurturing matriarchal figure, Maangchi endows her subscribers, fans, and anyone with even a passing interest in Korean food with the agency to make their own. Thus arises a kind of cosmopolitanism that I prefer to describe as casual and accessible, rather than banal.

Banal cosmopolitanism is the term coined by Ulrich Beck to describe the phenomena of quotidian cultural consumption under globalization, perhaps most vividly manifested in the “the huge array of foodstuffs and cuisines routinely available in many towns and cities across the world” (Urry ix). The diverse assemblage of ingredients, processes, and indeed people involved in producing a cultural form like gastronomy nowadays is almost taken for granted in the swirling crosscurrents of contemporary civilization. Asian food in the American metropole has not only become a mainstream success story in the public sector, but skilled chefs and tastemakers like Maangchi and Eric Kim have also helped Korean cuisine move from the fringes of American dining into everyday kitchens. Korean restaurants long resisted the “cultural pressures” of American society on other Asian cuisines, such as Thai, to produce dishes that were friendlier to local palates (Surico). But the emergence of enclaves like Midtown Manhattan’s Koreatown began to draw interest from culinary cosmopolitans and late night revelers in search of a meal, a succinct demonstration of the observation by Shoon Lio and Megan Bott that “[foodie] or hipster culture has played a major role in reorganizing urban spaces” (208). As such, the physical spaces of Koreatowns in cities like Los Angeles, Atlanta, and Houston began to serve as new frontiers for the American diner. Viewed another way, they became gateways into the transpacific elsewhere right around the time Korean soft power was emerging into global consciousness, in tandem with the developed trends of Cool Japan and budding interest in specific Chinese cultural industries like the cinema. Naturally, these Koreatowns also came to house grocery stores like H Mart.

Banality implies stasis, stagnation, and triviality. I prefer the notion of casual cosmopolitanism or even cultural accessibility to describe how gastronomic practices in the home or in urban environments can nurture an affinity towards nations or societies beyond that of one’s everyday lived experience. Kim and Maangchi are ambassadors of two generations of the Asian diaspora in America, perhaps even oppositional—but not mutually

antagonizing—in their representation and curation of Korean gastronomy for English-language audiences. Maangchi offers a maternal, traditionalist take on a cuisine with which she spent most of her life, deconstructing and demystifying it to a degree for mass audiences to enjoy. Her unlikely pedigree as an online gamer is but a footnote now in her broad appeal on the ubiquitous platform that is YouTube. Her age and aura of cultural authority, too, has given her the capacity to encourage and bolster the confidence of younger Korean Americans like Kristen Kish and Michelle Zauner. As mentioned previously, Eric Kim’s culinary ethos aligns more closely with the restaurateurs and food professionals of the previous chapter. Unlike Maangchi, who grew up in Korea, Kim’s experience of Korean cuisine was hybridized from the start, reared as he was in the “time warp” of his parents’ immigration to the States, which necessitated embracing a specific style of cooking already localized for the American context.

Both Maangchi and Kim coalesce a sense of community and empowerment through their unflinching embrace of immigrant roots as much as their actual cooking. Food is unsurprisingly a common tool for many immigrants to maintain or reinvent a relationship to the lands of their ancestry. “It was my first experience with love,” recalls a mixed-race Korean chef of her grandmother’s cooking (Park, “Redefining”). Other artists, performers, and musicians in the article described their own evocative memories of food in connection to their cultural identity. The rapper Jonathan Park cited hip-hop as his own inspiration for centering and celebrating an “unapologetically Asian” subjectivity, while drag performer Kim Chi intentionally chose a name “as Korean as possible” to battle underrepresentation in mainstream culture. The array of artisans and cultural workers showcased in this article demonstrates the kaleidoscopic nature of Koreanness in America as it shifts over the course of generations and across the porous boundaries of race. Asian America, after all, is far from

monolithic. It is a florid and idiosyncratic outer adornment of an identity marker in the complex field of race relations in America today.

Eric Kim's *Korean American* perhaps most elegantly illustrates how cultural encounters can produce something altogether new and special. In addition to so-called traditional cuisine, the book includes recipes birthed from cultural encounters like budae jjigae—also known as “army stew” for its usage of Spam and origins in the Korean War (Maangchi, “Army Base Stew”)—and Kim's personal innovations, such as cheeseburger kimbap and a Korean spin on the quintessential Southern dish of shrimp and grits. This chapter presents Zauner, Kim, and Maangchi together as a case study of sorts, focusing on their intersections with and presentation of Korean cuisine in anglophone American society. Though they arrive on the stage of the transpacific elsewhere from singular stories and backgrounds, I would argue that their collective aura is not necessarily a unique phenomenon. This discussion of Asian Americans making heritage cuisine legible for American audiences could easily be extrapolated to adjacent areas, such as Cecilia Chiang's mid-20th century pioneering of traditional Chinese cuisine in the San Francisco Bay Area (Grimes); the reframing and renaissance of Taiwanese cuisine in recent years by a spate of emerging urban restaurateurs (Moskin, “New Generation”); and a similar wave of activity among “second- and third-generation descendants of [Japanese] immigrants” actively altering the perception of Japanese food in cities like Seattle and Austin, as much as New York and Los Angeles (Mishan, “New Generation”). As Ligaya Mishan writes of the latter group, the looseness and fluidity of cultural identity afforded by the immigrant experience in America has created space for gastronomic experimentation. Authenticity has been upended and redefined—with dynamic and delicious results.

But one need not visit a restaurant for a cosmopolitan culinary experience, as I have hopefully demonstrated in this chapter. All manner of textual and media-based vehicles,

including the memoir, cookbook, or YouTube video, are available to entice the curious eater and encourage him to explore new horizons—or rediscover his gastronomic heritage. The mundane site of the Grocery Store can be a space for “negotiating meanings of home, ethnicity, cultural belonging and exchange,” as Jean Duruz writes astutely of the food-centered establishments of ethnic enclaves in Sydney and London (105). A blurring of boundaries takes place here; the Western city recedes into the background or perhaps dissolves outright, as the Grocery Store of the transpacific elsewhere coalesces the “disruptive potential of dreaming, remembering and storytelling” (106). H Mart and other such supermarkets have become a spatial text and gateway to the cosmopolitanism of East Asian cookery. With such cultural agents as Eric Kim, Maangchi, and Michelle Zauner leading the way, one can easily find an intuitive and approachable path to creating or reestablishing an idiosyncratic relationship with a private Korea of the mind. It is a friendly and familiar place, recalling fragments of one’s own life and experiences, images of self transposed onto other; it offers far more casual comfort than banality.

Chapter 3: The Cocktail Bar

In this final phase of my gastronomic foray into the transpacific elsewhere, I propose to enter a space that is inextricably associated with cuisine and cookery while also transcending it to a degree. When it comes to the beverage sector of food studies, there are undoubtedly multiple points of entry by which one may analyze and interpret trends and commodities. The American cultural imaginary of East Asia could feasibly be examined through the boom of kombucha companies and bubble tea parlors or, conversely, the proliferation of American and American-style coffee brands in urban centers across the Pacific. Or one could look toward the importation of tea leaves, bottled beverages, probiotic drinks, and alcohol to get a sense of what's on the rise. Though the staid business of number-crunching will help me illustrate a point in part of this chapter, I anchor my narrative instead in a physical space endowed with signifying potential beyond the confines of its four walls: the Asian-style cocktail bar in the American city.

“Cocktails invite us to muse on their origins, their names, their ingredients, and their proportions,” observe Stephen Schneider and Craig N. Owens (4). Classic drinks like the martini and the old-fashioned have become a kind of shorthand in gender performance, class background, and even various ideologies associated with a culture or era, whether consumed by people around us or used as a kind of prop in popular narratives. Meanwhile, American cocktail culture has undergone a wholesale revival in the early 21st century thanks to trendsetting establishments in metropolitan centers from New York to Denver, as well as influential websites and publishers that both reflect on history and look towards the future (5).

Unlike the somewhat illicit aura of cocktails of yesteryear, today's drinks sit in tandem with an urban gastronomic culture that elevates and experiments. Cocktails are "postmodern pastiche" (8) in this way, transcending their mere components to become storytelling vehicles and cultural totems. As noted previously, my focus in this chapter is not on the cocktail itself and the specificities of its craft or the provenance of its ingredients, although some of this may certainly be part of the broader picture I am trying to paint. I propose instead to look at a distinct type of cocktail bar that serves as a conduit between America and East Asia by way of its accoutrements, self-aware posturing, target clientele, and usage of Asian cultural signifiers, which are oftentimes cinematic in provenance. As such, the bar and its liquid trappings can be viewed as part of what Tammi Jonas calls "vernacular foodways," or "social, economic and cultural practices" that coalesce around an ethnocultural group's approach to cuisine and manifest anew in different contexts around the world (119). It behooves me to note here that Jonas primarily describes food with this concept, but I will demonstrate how the notion of the vernacular remains relevant to styles of drinking, as much as the libations themselves.

Elsewhere, Katie Dickson and Nathaniel A. Rivers focus on the term "influence" in describing the production and consumption of alcohol, and the effect of such consumption, in relation to rhetoric. "People in a pub are poured into a pub as the pub is poured into them," they lyricize. "A public house is not a container filled with drunks but an aggregate of ingredients already contaminated by *the ideas of the public house* and *the patterns of consumption* it suggests" (29; emphasis added). To be influenced by or "under the influence" of a person, place, or thing is a tidy notion to add to my discussion of cultural agents who curate and convey ideas of contemporary Asianness to the American public, as well as the spaces that allow such ideas to ferment into bold new flavors. As for patterns of consumption and production, I will locate the Cocktail Bar as one site in a broader chain of cosmopolitan

yearning, drawing its affective power from not just influential forebears and business contemporaries in urban America, but film directors and narratives from across the Pacific that have found rapt audiences stateside. I conclude this chapter on a suggestive hinge that allows me to move steadily into the next section of my dissertation, which focuses on the cinematic interchanges between America and East Asia.

Step into the Cocktail Bar of the transpacific elsewhere. It's a sleek, well-appointed space that makes for a perfect continuation of your night after a meal at the Noodle Shop. The music here isn't necessarily Asian; you're just as likely to hear Britpop, classic rock, or mid-century jazz as Faye Wong or Utada Hikaru. It all depends on whoever's behind the bar tonight. On the menu are an array of options, from classic gimlets and Manhattans to cocktails with a bit of flair: a shiso leaf here, a smattering of Sichuan peppercorns there. There's a neon sign against the window that casts a dramatic light on the patrons sitting on that side of the room. A plate of snacks is presented to every group of customers, an assortment of nuts, a heap of pickles, or even a bowlful of Japanese potato salad. It may be raining tonight. It always seems to be raining when you're at this bar, lending a melancholic romance to the ambience. When you stop to think about it, the entire bar is suffused in a kind of *déjà vu*, recalling fragments of movie scenes or maybe even a novel you read long ago. The bartender's face is familiar when he turns to ask what you'd like. Maybe you'd seen this place in a dream. Maybe this place is still just a dream.

An Angel Takes Flight

For roughly three decades, the speakeasy Angel's Share in New York's East Village served as a key portal to the transpacific elsewhere. Accessible through an unmarked door

just past the second floor entrance of an izakaya called Village Yokochō, the bar telegraphed a subdued, suave urbanity that was often at odds with the raucous cheer of the restaurant outside of it. I remember the small delight of feeling I was in on a little secret when I first stepped through those doors in 2009, a grad student in my early twenties. The bar was packed to the brim as always, but mostly in the waiting area; a dutiful attendant made sure there was a seat for every customer. And the sleek atmosphere, with its jazz soundtrack and tall windows overlooking St. Mark's Place, somehow gave the impression that we were not in New York at all, actually, but a rarefied drinking establishment in Tokyo.

Angel's Share was but one node in a network of Japanese establishments in the area that came to be known informally as New York's Little Tokyo. This stretch of restaurants and other stores on and around St. Mark's Place is almost laughably small and informally organized compared to the coalescence of community and business interests in the Little Tokyo of downtown Los Angeles or San Francisco's Japantown. Both of these Japanese enclaves in urban California have much longer histories: the former traces its origins to the 19th century, with its development overseen by a business association since 1959 ("About LTBA"), while the latter similarly emerged in 1906 and now has an entity called Japantown Task Force, Inc. coordinating its resources ("History"). What's remarkable about the de facto Little Tokyo of New York is not just its relatively recent emergence on the cultural radar, but that a good swath of it can be traced to the efforts of a single man named Tony Yoshida.

"Tadao Yoshida, known as Tony, the mystery mogul of the East Village," rhapsodized *The New York Times* on the occasion of Angel's Share's closure in 2022, "has built a food-and-drink empire that few of his generation can rival" (Simonson, "The Mysterious Man"). A spate of public interest in Yoshida only mushroomed as Angel's Share prepared to close during the COVID-19 pandemic, ironically. But the influence of both Yoshida as a businessman and the pocket of Japanese culture on St. Mark's Place in New

York was aptly and succinctly conveyed through tweets of longing, as much as profiles and interviews. Yoshida, after all, was the man responsible for “[teaching] New York it couldn’t live without an authentic izakaya.” The quest for and premium placed upon culinary authenticity is a fundamentally othering practice, as Tammi Jonas notes, citing Appadurai. Yet there is undeniably a productive dimension at play, as well. For the cosmopolitan subject, the recognition of the authentic allows him to “achieve social distinction” above others, while a self-essentializing project enables “migrants to strategically [mobilize] their own ethnic identities . . . to accrue economic capital” (132).

The social distinction and economic capital of Asianness and Japaneseness in cuisine have not always been greeted with open arms, as I recounted in Chapter 1: The Noodle Shop. Japanese restaurants in California were the target of boycotts and violence in the early 20th century (Hess et al. 71-72), while their expansion and partial corporatization in the postwar decades took place amid a world of ideological tension: the Cold War between America and the Soviet Union, an economically dormant China in various periods of social tumult, and a thriving, newly prosperous Japan that loomed large in the Western imagination for its threat of an Asian-dominated future. I have argued that the 21st century narrative of the transpacific elsewhere has been formed largely by cultural agents, that is, the people of the broadly defined Asian diaspora as they carve out careers and identities between the metropolises of America and Greater China, Japan, and South Korea. Many of these cultural agents grew up primarily or exclusively in the United States, as in the case of David Chang or Michelle Zauner, before they forged their connections to and in East Asia in adulthood. Others, like Maangchi or Yoshida, migrated from South Korea and Japan as adults and established new identities on the other side of the Pacific by happenstance. Chang, Zauner, and Maangchi are all public figures who have spoken at length, via various outlets, about their personal connections to Japanese or Korean food and, in turn, become legitimized and canonized in

the American imaginary. By contrast, Tony Yoshida is a self-effacing man whose influence has been limited to New York, rather than a global or even national audience. But the depth of his ties to America's largest city and demonstrable impact on its urban culture continue to ripple outward and make waves elsewhere, as the second half of this chapter will explore.

A native of Niigata, Yoshida moved to New York in 1969 at age twenty-four (Simonson, "The Mysterious Man"). He began his journey in the culinary industry in the next decade, initially through a part-time gig at an ice cream shop, and then by establishing his own vegetarian-friendly Japanese restaurant called Dojo that would be a local mainstay for the next decades. The carrot ginger salad dressing ubiquitous in New York's Japanese restaurants is rumored to have been Yoshida's invention. Angel's Share would be perhaps his most successful venture, which he was inspired to open after seeing the Tom Cruise film *Cocktail* (1988, dir. Roger Donaldson). Leery of New York's raucous bar scene, Yoshida "sought to recreate the Japanese bar model of precision and decorum" in his new establishment, this finesse earning him the loyalty of multiple generations of patrons.

In 2022, when *New York Times* reporter Alex Vadukul tweeted about the bar's closure over a lease dispute, the news was shared over six hundred times along with a litany of lamentations and nostalgic anecdotes. *Eater* called Angel's Share "a trailblazer for bringing the sensibilities and training of a Tokyo-style cocktail bar to [New York City]" (Yakas). The same article included many individual reflections upon the space as a semi-secret invitation to exploring mixology and a portal to a "different world . . . [with] a very curated atmosphere." The bar happened to be part of a whole ecosystem of Japanese establishments in the East Village, with Yoshida himself helming the grocery store Sunrise Mart, the bakery Panya, and the izakaya Village Yokochō, in which the entrance to Angel's Share was hidden (Simonson, "The Mysterious Man"). This cluster of businesses in Manhattan offered "a traditional, retro sort of 'Japanesque' that echoes with Western people's vision of Asia,"

observed a Japanese writer (Lev-Tov). Meanwhile, newer communities of boutiques in Brooklyn, particularly in the Greenpoint neighborhood, are offering a generational update and newer take on “Japanese chic.” While this contemporary cultural revival is most certainly germane to the transpacific elsewhere, I propose to set aside this trend for now to focus on the gastronomic realm. For it is Yoshida’s pioneering activities as both businessman and aesthete that have proven long-lasting and influential, given that Angel’s Share originated a particular ambience based on Japanese cocktail culture that has now become “default mode” for similar bars in New York (A. Crowley). In other words, the mood created by the physical space of the bar was so affecting that it became vernacularized, allowing “extant cosmopolitan subjects” to perform “their openness to the Other” (Jonas 133).

Steeping in the atmosphere of Angel’s Share was a rite of passage for not only customers eager to impress a date, but also any number of Asian diasporic bartenders who have struck out for new territories while transforming and adapting Yoshida’s legacy to their own ends. Take, for example, the Taiwanese-owned bar Double Chicken Please that was opened in November 2020 by Angel’s Share alum GN Chan and Faye Chen, who worked previously at Shanghai’s Speak Low, brainchild of Japanese cocktail entrepreneur Shingo Gokan (Janzen).⁹ Chan and Chen’s outpost in New York’s Lower East Side offers “industrial chic vibes” and a menu that is the handiwork of Taiwanese American chef Mark Chou, who highlights “Asian elements” in the eclectic lineup of food and drinks. A signature cocktail called the Mango Sticky Rice might be considered a case in point, counting pu’er tea and wakame among its ingredients. Shigefumi Kabashima, another former Angel’s Share bartender, now slings drinks at a cocktail bar that also serves Korean-style tapas in Midtown

⁹ Gokan could perhaps be thought of as the David Chang of the Asian cocktail scene, with his sprawl of eight businesses across Shanghai, Tokyo, and Okinawa (“SG Group”). He presents another fascinating vector of manifesting contemporary East Asian urban culture via mixology, especially given the international-facing clientele of his various establishments. Since the scope of my dissertation is on cultural currents between America and East Asia, however, I intentionally exclude Gokan for now, with the hopes of returning to examine this topic in another format eventually.

Manhattan, the connection to Yoshida's erstwhile establishment named prominently in a recent review headline (Maida). This confluence of food industry businesspeople and workers who easily engage culinary lineages and craft menu items of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese and pan-Asian provenance illustrates the cosmopolitanism from below that forms the bedrock of the transpacific elsewhere. No single entity or organization calls for them to find dialogue or commonality, yet this crossing over happens so regularly and naturally. Applying Appadurai's alternate term of vernacular cosmopolitanism in this context, one sees that the career of a man like Tony Yoshida has indeed supplied the language that younger generations of restaurateurs, such as those mentioned above, now borrow in their own stylings and ventures.

Indeed, Manhattan might even appear to be overrun with protégés and spinoffs of Angel's Share. Shortly after the bar shuttered for good in spring 2022, head bartender Takuma Watanabe launched his own business in the form of Martiny's, a three-floor cocktail bar in the Gramercy neighborhood where *omotenashi*, the singular approach to hospitality cultivated by the Japanese service industry, is the focus (Odell). Angel's Share is also named in the headline of the *Eater* article announcing Martiny's arrival, cementing its status as a cultural referent for American urbanites in the know. Watanabe's vision is for his establishment to retain the "hyper detail-oriented nature of proper Ginza bars" while creating an atmosphere infused with American casualness. Martiny's other details include warm towels distributed to customers upon arrival, luxury glassware by Japanese brand Kimura, an extensive Japanese whiskey menu, and even Japanese architectural design elements.

The enormous amount of time and resources poured into constructing Watanabe's new business is suggestive of two things. First is the significant development of Japan in the American imaginary in the decades following Tony Yoshida's arrival in New York in 1969. In lieu of easy tropes and names that all but scream Japan—Dojo, for instance—Watanabe is

comfortable paying homage to French American sculptor Philip Martiny while taking the service standard set by Yoshida to ever higher levels. The Japanese cocktail bar, in and of itself, is no longer a novelty. It can be inferred that Watanabe assumes there are enough Americans who not only know of Japan, but admire its service culture, for a businessman like him to strive to deliver such an experience stateside. Second is the premium that American customers are comfortable paying for not just a Japanese cocktail, but omotenashi, craftsmanship, and the range of accoutrements and ambience offered by the bar. With a minimum price point of \$20 per cocktail, and some Japanese whiskeys running \$300 a pour, Watanabe and his business partners are betting big on the belief that Tokyo chic will draw a crowd. Judging from the Google reviews and assorted write-ups of Martiny's as of now, they certainly seem to be on the right track.

Angel's Share more or less operated as an open secret throughout its existence as a speakeasy on St. Mark's Place, the unmarked door inside a second-floor Japanese restaurant telegraphing a journey to elsewhere. One imagines that it had even more cachet before the internet became part and parcel of the food and dining industry, when local gastronomy was to be discovered by word of mouth alone. It perhaps comes as no surprise that the Yoshida family operated a second secret bar that served as an "annex" to the original Angel's Share, located down the street on the second floor of another Japanese restaurant, fittingly enough (Dai). New York's cocktail enthusiasts, Japanophiles, and cultural conspirators mourned the closure of Angel's Share in spring 2022, but this would not be the end of the story. Tony Yoshida's daughter Erina took the reins and reopened the bar as a popup in Midtown's Hotel Eventi, vowing to continue her father's work in "[spreading] the craft of cocktails through Japanese techniques and skills" (Gould).

Less than a year later, Angel's Share permanently relocated to Greenwich Village in a larger space with a kitchen, with Erina officially stepping in to carry on its legacy (Simonson,

“Angel’s Share”). Her aspiration to take forth what one reporter called a “Japanese-inspired fairyland” (Gould) into the next generation is but one of her family’s many business activities that package a nominal notion of Japaneseness to sell to the urban American consumer. Beyond the buttoned-up drinking halls of Manhattan, the Yoshida family opened the huge complex called Japan Village in Brooklyn’s Industry City in 2019. It is worth noting that, alongside Angel’s Share, Yoshida had been operating not just a slew of restaurants, but also a chain of Japanese grocery stores in New York called Sunrise Mart. In this manner, he can be considered the cultural agent par excellence in the gastronomic sector of the transpacific elsewhere, deploying his business savvy and opening cultural channels through many a noodle shop, grocery store, and cocktail bar.

Billed as a “one-stop Japanese culinary destination,” Japan Village would allow Yoshida to expand his already substantial empire by a measure of 20,000 square feet (Fabricant). It was envisioned as a destination for Japanese food and drink, housewares, and clothing, in addition to serving as a cultural hub offering classes and events. Within several years of operation, the pandemic notwithstanding, Japan Village became the main attraction of the entire Industry City operation and astutely draws comparisons to Eataly and Mercado Little Spain, all of them food halls designed around the “concept [of] a single culture and cuisine” (Schwartz). Yoshida’s massive undertaking has only continued to gain traction and expand further, doubling its footprint with the opening of the second-floor Loft space, which houses the Japanese chain stores Daiso and Book Off, as well as boutiques specializing in Japanese skincare and pottery (Weaver). An inaugural food fair at the time of its opening in February 2022 also shone a spotlight on Japanese regional cuisine.

“We have aimed to create a culture of ‘omotenashi,’” explained Erina Yoshida of Japan Village as an enterprise, preempting the same comment from Takuma Watanabe on the opening of his massive new bar. From the modest restaurants and speakeasy that launched

Tony Yoshida's career, the spinoff drinking establishments of his erstwhile employees in Manhattan and the sprawling complex of Japan Village co-owned by his daughter in Brooklyn demonstrate that Americans continue to thirst for not only Japanese cocktails, but a distinct cultural experience that a diasporic cultural agent is well-equipped to deliver. That omotenashi has been publicly put forth as an organizing principle by both Yoshida's daughter Erina and protégé Watanabe speaks to their confidence in the respect that the American public might accord to this term. "Omotenashi is hard to define in English because to understand it is to experience Japan in-person," explains the official website of the Japan National Tourism Organization, locating the roots of this cultural concept in the tea ceremony and touting its ubiquity in everything from retail to public transport ("Omotenashi"). In recent years, the Japanese service industry has also taken steps to elevate this term by offering official accreditation through the branding of OMOTENASHI Selection ("OMOTENASHI Selection").¹⁰ A tourism industry scholar proposes that the etymology of omotenashi can be understood to denote "'truthful contact with others' and 'establishing/creating better human relations'" (Morishita 157). Unlike the Western concept of hospitality, omotenashi places business owners and customers on equal footing and therefore stems from an earnest desire to convey a quality of experience beyond monetary motivations. In the context of the Yoshida family's operation of Japan Village or Watanabe's crafting of his bar Martiny's, omotenashi becomes a way for the American patron to retain a level of agency while consuming Japanese products and images of Japan alike. In other words, Japan Village and Martiny's are not static, hermetic enterprises unto themselves; they invite and encourage the customer to not just explore other Japanese-run establishments in New York, but eventually make a transpacific voyage to experience Japanese culture at its source. During the COVID-19

¹⁰ Perhaps it should be no surprise that the term has even been co-opted by JAXA, the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency, for the name of its lunar interorbital module: OMOTENASHI, otherwise known as Outstanding MOon exploration TEchnologies demonstrated by NANO Semi-Hard Impactor ("The Challenge of OMOTENASHI").

pandemic of the early 2020s, Japan implemented draconian policies that effectively cut off the flow of tourists for several years. After the travel ban was lifted in October 2022, the number of foreign visitors immediately surged to nearly one million in November, although this figure was still far from the level that helped Japan achieve a record 31.8 million annual visitors in 2019 (Swift).

Though Tony Yoshida arrived in New York more than half a century ago, his kaleidoscopic career across all manner of business ventures has only recently reached its zenith. That a younger generation carries on his legacy, amplifying and diversifying these cultural constructions of Japan far beyond carrot ginger salad dressing, demonstrates the staying power of the transpacific elsewhere and its responsive evolution to American consumers with increasingly global tastes. Commenting to a local news outlet during Asian/Pacific American Heritage Month in 2021, Erina Yoshida described her hope that Japan Village could not only “spread awareness of Japanese culture,” but also “bring the community together through food”—with special attention to the AAPI community during a time of increasing racialized violence (“Japan Village”). For further commentary on contemporary Asian America’s grapplings with hate crimes of the early 2020s, see Chapter 10.

Asian Spirits, American Shores

“Sake Is Booming in America,” declared the *New York Times* headline in February 2023 (Asimov). This article identifies the relatively nascent trend among American drinkers by way of export trends in the ten-year period between 2012 and 2022, the opening of ambitiously scaled sake breweries, and anecdotes from Japanese business owners from

California to New York. The rising interest in Japanese alcohol coincides with a greater than twofold increase in American tourists to Japan in roughly the same period, underscoring the power of individual mobility in shaping cultural palates and instilling a desire for cosmopolitan consumption. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Tony Yoshida is named as a driving force for sake subculture in New York by way of his former empire on St. Mark's Place. Younger cultural agents like Shinobu Kato, owner of Kato Sake Works in Brooklyn's Bushwick neighborhood, and Yoko Kumano and Kayoko Akabori, co-proprietors of Umami Mart in Oakland, California, have also responded to and encouraged the nascent cultural consciousness of sake in America.

Sake is not the only Asian alcohol that is finding new outlets of expression stateside. In 2013, the Korean distiller Jinro sought to capitalize on the burgeoning popularity of K-pop, riding the wave of PSY's mega-hit "Gangnam Style," to increase its footprint in the United States (Dreisbach). This segment on NPR's *All Things Considered* noted that Jinro soju was perennially the top-selling alcohol in the world by a large margin, and yet its market share in the U.S. remained relatively minuscule. As such, the company was attempting to reach beyond Korean American consumers by partnering with the likes of PSY and the Los Angeles Dodgers. A decade later, soju has made significant inroads on a number of fronts. Operating under the aegis of Hite-Jinro, after a merger with Korea's largest beer producer (Lee and Lee), Jinro's soju sales were up over 107.4% year-on-year in the first half of 2022 and its flavored products were carried at seventeen Costco megastores in the United States ("Hite Jinro's flavored soju").

More than a heavyweight corporate sponsor or glossy veneer, perhaps a well-crafted story or human connection might be able to boost soju's staying power, as the trajectory of sake demonstrates. Korean American entrepreneurs have entered the arena to localize, customize, and evangelize a new kind of soju product and experience for consumers

stateside. The brand Yobo, for instance, was founded by lawyer and mother Carolyn Kim, offering soju made from grapes from the Finger Lakes region of New York and a carbonated canned version called Hunni that seeks to capitalize on the hard seltzer craze inspired by White Claw and similar brands (Thompson, “Canned Soju”). Yobo is not the only venture to bring soju to the hard seltzer space; Jumo and Sool are two other Korean women-owned businesses with similar products, the latter also attempting to update the unfiltered rice beer known as makgeolli to appeal to younger consumers.

In October 2022, Yobo also announced a collaboration with Korean adoptee chef Kristen Kish—one of Maangchi’s influencees, as mentioned in Chapter 2: The Grocery Store—to create “a new range of modern aperitifs inspired by an evolving Korean American identity” (“Asian American Spirits House”). This line called Yobo_Kish is prominently featured on Yobo’s website, where the brand identity of Kim’s venture declares itself to be “as much Korean as it is American,” an embrace of cultural heritage led by the children of immigrant parents (“Welcome”). Indeed, Asian American identity in the 2020s seems to be an ongoing adaptation and hybridization of cultural practices, rather than a flattening or erasure. Similar to Yobo’s assertion of duality, which also echoes the ethos of Eric Kim’s cookbook-memoir in the previous chapter, many Asian Americans have come around to form their own gastronomic and cultural practices around important holidays like Lunar New Year. A *New York Times* feature on younger Asian Americans celebrating the holiday with their own communities, leaning on memories of their parents or grandparents in some instances, creating new traditions in others, showcases not only the many-faceted nature of cultural identity, but the centrality of food and drink to minority subjectivities in America (Kwun).

The campaign to bring Asian alcohol to American consumers has not been limited to vendors of Japanese and Korean heritage, of course. On the one hand, non-Asian business owners and cultural agents have long been part of this interchange, introducing customers to

their own palates and predilections honed through personal and professional experience. The presence of individuals from outside of the Asian diaspora who traverse and transit the transpacific elsewhere is undeniable. My omission of their roles across this entire project is not to undersell or negate their impact; instead, this intentionally narrow focus allows me to identify planes of adjacency between East Asia and Asian America in the realms of gastronomy, cinema, and literature and ultimately move towards my prognosis for Asian American subjectivity in Chapter 10. As James Farrer and David L. Wank observe, the restaurant space of today is no less than an “intersection of . . . mobilities, imaginaries, and politics” constructed by diverse actors to serve a dining public with global tastes (328). By extension, the alcohol menu of a restaurant and the cocktail bar as a standalone establishment also exemplify these cosmopolitan flows and become sites of cultural production.

I would be remiss to mention sake and soju and not address baijiu, a sorghum-based Chinese liquor that has been described as the most “challenging” of Asian alcohols for Western consumption, given its notes of “stinky cheese, anise, pineapples, musk and gasoline” (Risen). For roughly a decade, newspapers and publications have heralded the arrival of baijiu on American shores, but its trajectory has been faltering at best. “Baijiu isn’t about to take over the bar, but over the last year it has established a solid beachhead,” commented *The New York Times* in December 2015. “Bartenders in New York, Washington and Los Angeles have taken it on with the same sense of challenge they once brought to similarly aggressive spirits like overproof whiskey and mezcal” (Risen). The restaurateurs and mixologists who commented in this article were mostly men who offered colorful descriptions of the drink as a “knife fight” and “old sweat sock.” In the same month, *Vogue* ran an article with similar ambivalence on baijiu’s flavor nuances while highlighting its availability in a new high-end restaurant located in New York’s famed Waldorf Astoria hotel, as well as at a number of bars across urban America (Conrad).

The *Los Angeles Times* noted in January 2016 that baijiu's recent emergence on the cultural radar was due not only to purveyors of Chinese cuisine in America, but "global liquor companies with Chinese interests," and that its palate could be considered "polarizing" (Bolden). Nonetheless, cultural agents like Andrew Chiu, co-owner of the downtown gastropub Peking Tavern, and Shawn Shih, general manager of the wholesaler CNS Imports, were aware of not only the barriers to wider baijiu consumption in the U.S., but also the contemporary trends and shifting perception of the liquor in China. A beverage director at a Hollywood restaurant commented diplomatically that the city was perhaps "simply not ready for all that intensity of flavor and aroma." The cautious and curious reportage about baijiu making inroads in America continued in the next years, with articles in *Nikkei Asia* (Tepper), *Time* (Gunia), and *Food & Wine* (Parks) covering the activities of various food industry connoisseurs and entrepreneurs in localizing (or offering disclaimers for) baijiu. Though the stodgy aura of baijiu was swiftly being rebranded for youth consumers, at least one consultant declared the beverage would "likely . . . remain niche for a long time" (Gunia). Nonetheless, that hasn't stymied ongoing efforts to popularize the drink, whether through labels like Ming River or the Vietnamese-Chinese family-owned Vinn Distillery, based in Portland (Lanyon).

I propose to view the relatively recent forays of America-based restaurateurs promoting sake, soju, and baijiu in tandem with the hyper-local narrative of Tony Yoshida's decades-long trajectory as a mogul of Japaneseness in New York. Together they constitute a much fuller ideoscape of East Asian gastronomic practice beyond what food can achieve by itself. After all, alcohol places the drinker under its influence and softens the borders of the surrounding space. When one consumes a cocktail made with an East Asian liquor base, or served in an ambience replete with omotenashi, the experience is quietly transporting. A single drink echoes the countless more that are being poured and imbibed on the other side of

the world. The act of lifting the glass and taking a sip is mirrored by the customers crowding in an izakaya in Osaka, a club in Taipei. For a moment, the planes of two worlds collapse in this nowhere space, this elsewhere space. The body remains in America, the head and heart in Asia. A concatenation of images from popular culture floods the brain: salarymen quaffing beer, young folks wailing at a karaoke parlor, breakup binges and celebratory banquets. The slick ease of transpacific nightlife cascades over the drinker. Once the glass is drained, only one question remains: how about another?

Nostalgias and Yearnings

Tony Yoshida's business empire in New York City succinctly captures the sweep of these first three chapters, in which I have mapped how Americans literally and figuratively consume East Asia in the noodle shop, grocery store, and cocktail bar. Though Yoshida and his family have an expansive array of activities in more than one borough of New York City, the spiritual center of these activities is the now-defunct original location of Angel's Share. Perched inconspicuously over St. Mark's Place, the bar served as a haphazard entry point for more than one patron into the slick world of the transpacific elsewhere: an otherness made familiar, fastidiously crafted cocktails heightened in a space of glamorous alienation.

In recent years, a number of newer Asian-style cocktail bars and dining establishments have made their own mark on urban consumers. Consider Reception on New York's Lower East Side, a Korean American-owned establishment that offers house-infused soju and mocktails known as "wellness elixirs" (Upadhyaya). Katie Rue, proprietress of Reception, declared that the bar is a rumination of her own Asian American experience, a chance to show "respect and love for [the immigrant experience]" while inviting others into

the glow of Korean hospitality. The physical space was even designed to pay homage to a classic Korean garden. “I didn’t want to exoticize my own culture or exploit it in any way,” Rue commented several years later, in an article that detailed the difficulties she faced during the pandemic. “I needed to ensure that what set me apart was my love of being Korean American” (Proschan). The rise of overt racism and ubiquitous threat of violence in the early 2020s became a defining feature of Asian America, as I explore in Chapter 10.

On the other side of the country, the neon-soaked Viridian opened in Oakland, California as an Asian American-helmed enterprise taking overt inspiration from the cinema of Wong Kar-wai, with a number of other touches intended to evoke Hong Kong nightlife and food culture (Tsai). But Viridian’s menu of inventive craft cocktails like the Tomato Beef and White Rabbit, in addition to various bar snacks and confections, are tributes to the local Chinatown community, its array of nostalgic flavors designed “to engineer Proustian flashbacks with every bite” (Ho). The bar eventually developed a new menu that seemed to “encompass a wider, but also a very particular, Asian American experience,” with cosmopolitan ingredients playfully and expertly deployed by food industry veteran Kevin Tang: instant noodle flavor packets, shio-koji, black bean paste, and so on. With a pastiche mash-up of both Asian American and broadly East Asian flavor palates, Viridian goes several steps farther than the buttoned-up omotenashi and austere elegance of Angel’s Share or Martiny’s; the bar’s aesthetic and modus operandi is a veritable celebration of transpacific potentiality in all its messy, hybrid glory.

A love of Wong Kar-wai, whose arthouse cinema of longing resonates globally in the image-saturated world of today, has become almost a shibboleth for Asian American creative communities. It should be no surprise then that an array of establishments back in New York have also appropriated signifiers from Wong’s films in their construction of cocktail menus or atmospheric vibes. The Michelin-starred Café China arrived on the scene in the early

2010s, suffused in nostalgia of a different breed than the kind offered up by Viridian. Rather, with its “chandeliers of hobnail milk glass, and the robin’s-egg-blue walls . . . hung with images of Shanghai starlets from the 1930s,” this restaurant seemed to take a page right out of Wong’s seminal film *In the Mood for Love* (Wells). Almost all of Café China’s cocktail names (“Menu”) are allusions to classic literature (The Golden Plum, Journey to the West) and sinophone filmmakers like Ang Lee (*Lust Caution*), Hou Hsiao-Hsien (*Flowers of Shanghai*), and, of course, Wong Kar-wai (*2046*, *Fallen Angels*, *In the Mood for Love*).

One borough over, a short-lived Williamsburg bar called Snacky seemed to encapsulate the ethos and eclecticism of the transpacific elsewhere, its owner born in Seoul to Chinese parents, the establishment filled with tchotchkes like Japanese action figures and Buddhist charms. Besides offering “unpretentious pan-Asian small plates,” Snacky also served cocktails called Chungking Express and *In the Mood for Love* (Licursi). And over in Bushwick, Brooklyn, the queer-friendly Mood Ring is “unabashedly inspired by Wong’s filmography,” touting the owners’ tastes through cocktail names and signage alike (Ang), the neon-soaked setting a precursor to the Bay Area’s Viridian and a visual paean to Asian America’s cinematic longings.

Perhaps this is a most opportune moment, then, to finish our drinks and move on to explore other areas of this transpacific elsewhere, now that our refrigerators are stocked, bellies full, and hearts singing from a cocktail or two. For I hope it has become apparent through our gastronomy-focused perambulations that the culture contained in and created by this liminal metropolis reaches far beyond the creature comforts of a good meal, no matter how satiating it can be. Food and beverage are merely one point of entry into the story of Asian America, sitting alongside other visual and textual forms that are part of the ever-shifting discourse of identity and belonging. Let’s continue for now, while holding onto the

reassurance that there will always be more to eat and explore in this city situated at the crosscurrents of global history and culture.

Chapter 4: The Movie Theater

In February 2020, *Parasite* (2019) made history as the first non-English language film to win the Academy Award for Best Picture, adding this prize to the many other vaunted accolades it garnered in the months preceding.¹¹ Directed by Bong Joon-ho, the South Korean black comedy seemed to tap into a vein of economic anxiety that transcended boundaries of nation and culture. The “yawning gulf between the rich and poor,” noted Christopher Ingraham in *The Washington Post*, was not a uniquely Korean condition by any means; American wealth disparity was already many times more extreme than that of the society lambasted by Bong. Meanwhile, the French periodical *Diplomatie* drew a parallel from South Korea’s economic development (“unimaginable several decades ago”) to its contemporary prowess in soft power, as demonstrated by *Parasite*, K-pop, and other cultural inflections that have found worldwide success (Courmont).

Asian and Asian American cinemas have enjoyed a swell of cultural interest from American society, with a spate of films in the late 2010s capturing the public imagination and inciting an array of discourses. This era was perhaps initiated by Jon M. Chu’s *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018)—the first Hollywood film to feature an all-Asian cast since *The Joy Luck Club* (1993)—and went on to include, besides the work of Bong, Lee Chang-dong’s *Burning* (2018), Hirokazu Kore-eda’s *Shoplifters* (2018), Lulu Wang’s *The Farewell* (2019), Lee Isaac Chung’s *Minari* (2020), Ryusuke Hamaguchi’s *Drive My Car* (2021), and Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert’s *Everything Everywhere All At Once* (2022). At first glance, this assortment of films and filmmakers from Japan, South Korea, and the United States may

¹¹ An article in *Screen Daily* by Jeremy Kay notes that *Parasite*’s multiple Oscar wins came after the film had already earned the Palme d’Or at Cannes in the previous year, among other top awards from organizations such as the Writers Guild of America, the Screen Actors Guild, BAFTA, the Golden Globes, and the National Board of Review.

seem like an unlikely lineup to discuss en masse. But their critical and commercial success bespeak particular trends playing out in America: a resurgent desire for multifaceted Asian American representation that also claims, or perhaps subsumes, global Asianness; a burgeoning mainstream interest in narratives of and from Asia; and the overt positionality of actors, directors, and even characters who are transnationally fluid or situated at the nexus between cultures.¹²

We have arrived at the Movie Theater of the transpacific elsewhere. The exterior façade is a nod to Grauman’s Chinese Theatre in Hollywood, but unlike the Orientalist artifice of yesteryear, this building is the handiwork of a transnational team of Asian and Asian American architects. Step inside and you’ll recognize instantly that no mega-corporation could be behind this thoughtfully designed and culturally specific venue. It’s more like New York City’s Metrograph or Film Forum, indie establishments that curate for and cater to a clientele with cosmopolitan tastes. The Movie Theater screens the latest commercial and arthouse fare from all around the Pacific, as well as retrospectives of filmmakers from Wayne Wang to Wong Kar-wai, or actors like Anna May Wong and Sessue Hayakawa. It’s a space lovingly organized by devoted cinéastes who have located a sense of self in unlikely lineages, recognizing their individual and idiosyncratic longing for the bygone histories of Hong Kong, Tokyo, or Taipei.

Asian American identity has never existed in a vacuum. It cannot detach itself from the complex and ever-changing dynamics of diasporic migration, media representation, or cultural politics. But in the age of social media solidarity and transpacific mobility—the

¹² It bears mentioning that Chinese art cinema has also captivated the attention of moviegoers and critics in urban America, such as Hu Bo’s *An Elephant Sitting Still* (2018), Bi Gan’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night* (2018), and Jia Zhangke’s latest works, including *Mountains May Depart* (2015) and *Ash is Purest White* (2018). Compared to the other films I invoke, however, they are perhaps less resonant with the American public and I have thus chosen to exclude them from this chapter’s analysis. I omit, for the same reason, smaller scale Asian American independent films such as Alan Yang’s *Tigertail* (2020) and Alice Wu’s *The Half of It* (2020). While Chloé Zhao is another significant Chinese filmmaker active in Hollywood, the subject matter of her critically acclaimed *Nomadland* (2020) and superhero blockbuster *Eternals* (2021) also set her apart from the discussion at hand.

COVID-19 pandemic notwithstanding—Asian minority subjectivity is far less bound by geography or solely dependent upon the limited offerings of domestic media. On the one hand, Asian faces are no longer a rarity in the Hollywood blockbuster, as exemplified by Disney’s *Mulan* (2020) starring Yifei Liu or Marvel Studios’ *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021) headlined by Simu Liu, both films featuring a cast of Asian screen icons like Gong Li, Tony Leung, and Michelle Yeoh. In parallel, the mainstream success of contemporary Asian American narrative dramas like *The Farewell* or *Minari* are premised upon actors who embody and exhibit a particular transpacific duality, while Japanese and Korean directors like Kore-eda and Bong have similarly expanded their careers and reputations with coproductions and storylines that criss-cross the world. In the following chapter, I offer brief case studies of cultural fluidity in the film industry to demonstrate how liminal identities or in-betweenness have defined the cinematic offerings that comprise the transpacific elsewhere. In situating these stories of the film industry in proximity to one another, I show how the Movie Theater has functioned as a primary site of encounter between Asian and Asian American subjectivities, and argue that the convergence of the two are a hallmark of a cosmopolitan minority identity in contemporary American society: that is, the state of belonging to two sides at once, or perhaps none at all, depending on who you ask.

Man with No Country

South Korean-born Steven Yeun is perhaps one of the most recognizable Asian faces in American entertainment today. He rose to prominence as a regular cast member of the zombie apocalypse AMC drama *The Walking Dead*, which ran from 2010 to 2016, and has gone on to star in a number of critically successful feature films. His leading role in *Minari*,

directed by Lee Isaac Chung, as the patriarch of a Korean family newly relocated to rural Arkansas earned him numerous award nominations, including Academy Award for Best Actor. Significantly, however, Yeun has also built a career in tandem with acclaimed South Korean directors Bong Joon-ho and Lee Chang-dong, starring in the former's environmental action film *Okja* (2017) and the latter's *Burning*, an adaptation of a Haruki Murakami short story.

Yeun's character in *Burning* seethes with quiet malevolence masked by an easy smile, a resident of Seoul who speaks in a kind of elevated diction and "seems to exist in a cosmopolitan, aggressively Western layer of the Korean elite" (J. Kang, "Many Lives"). Opposite the baby-faced writer played by Yoo Ah-in, Yeun's Ben is an eerily disarming playboy shrouded in wealth and mystery. Though he is the ostensible villain in this psychological drama, Ben's very existence telegraphs the worldliness of certain demographics in the Asian metropole. "The five months Yeun spent shooting the film in Seoul allowed him to imagine what life would be like if his parents had never immigrated to North America," recounts Jay Caspian Kang in a *New York Times Magazine* profile. Yeun was born in South Korea and immigrated to the U.S. at age five. In spite of his Korean background, he remained all too aware of his inherent limitations and otherness while shooting the film in Seoul, where he felt he lacked the same cultural or historical foundation as his contemporaries and colleagues. He proclaimed himself "a man with no country" to *The Independent* and declared this liminality his modus operandi as an actor (Stolworthy). "Ambiguity is only really poignant and potent when there's something behind it," Yeun mused to *The Hollywood Reporter*, ostensibly describing the process of inhabiting the persona of his character Ben (Sun, "Why"). Years later, he would again point to his own liminality or duality, or the state of being "caught between places, just trying to be [myself]," as the driving force behind his creative career—the typical Asian American childhood

anxiety over one's sense of belonging transformed into "source of [his] own truth and power" (Hoad). Indeed, Yeun's antagonist in *Burning* overlaps spiritually with his articulations of cultural identity at a time when Asians on screen and in the quotidian fabric of American society were beginning to embrace the potentiality of transnational figurations in an intensely mobile ethnoscape.

As Stuart Hall has pointed out, media representation of minority subjects often falls into the trap of binary representation, which reduces the messy perplexity of the world to "either/or extremes" ("Spectacle" 235). In contrast to the so-called model minority archetype, the inverse trope of the "perpetual foreigner" exemplifies the pernicious way in which Asian Americans, regardless of gender, class, and sexuality, are cast as irredeemable outsiders in popular culture. Yan Hai and Haibin Dong identify iterations of this otherness and its associated "impulsive, capricious, and inscrutable" qualities in film characters played by Lucy Liu and Sandra Oh, although I disagree with their particular analyses.¹³ The COVID-19 pandemic amplified this stereotype to a further degree, fear of the coronavirus and its Chinese origins stoking negative views of Asian Americans (Daley et al.). Psychological studies have also found that self-awareness of this xenophobic perception is conducive to negative emotional states, including depression (Huynh et al.). It could be argued that this othering attitude and perception arise from sheer ignorance. For example, more than half of Americans who participated in a 2022 survey were unable to name a single prominent Asian American figure; of those who could offer a response, Jackie Chan and Bruce Lee were the most

¹³ While the descriptions that Hai and Dong offer of the Asian-American-woman-as-perpetual-foreigner ring true, I do not believe they have chosen the best examples to demonstrate this stereotype. They focus unduly on the physical aggression that Liu and Oh demonstrate in *Chicago* and *Sideways*, respectively, ignoring the fact that these behaviors are not bound to the characters' ethnic background and simply serve to advance the movie plot. Especially since Liu and Oh are both actresses who speak flawless American English, a point which is not compromised in these films, the argument of this particular article falls flat, in my opinion.

commonly cited names, both of which point to an egregious disconnect from the contemporary world (Jennifer Liu).¹⁴

Steven Yeun and his cinematic contemporaries may be in the midst of reinventing an Asian American cultural mainstream through characters and stories that eschew easy categorization, deeply entrenched stereotypes, and Hall's "either/or extremes." Yeun's collaborations with acclaimed Korean filmmakers Bong and Lee represent one current in the transpacific flow of global Asian identities, running parallel to other actors and directors whose collective oeuvres brim with potentiality. Yeun may be a man with no country, but it could be said that other Asians in the entertainment industry are now comfortable claiming ownership over two or more national or cultural lineages. *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) is perhaps the most visible demonstration of this fluidity, as the splashiest pop-cultural narrative to dominate Asian diasporic discourse since Wayne Wang's *The Joy Luck Club*, adapted from the eponymous bestselling novel by Amy Tan. While Wang and Tan served as mediators of the somber traumas of Chinese American immigrants for a previous generation, director Jon M. Chu crafts a story about the jetset class of Singapore designed to titillate. Protagonist Rachel Chu, played by Taiwanese American actress Constance Wu, serves as the audience's cultural anchor as the film whisks her away to Singapore for a romantic-comedic romp through the privileged worlds of the Southeast Asian elite. The eclectic cast includes actors hailing from Malaysia (Michelle Yeoh), the United Kingdom (Gemma Chan, Henry Golding, Sonoya Mizuno), and the United States (Awkwafina, Ken Jeong) of Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Malaysian, and mixed Asian and white ethnicities.¹⁵ Perhaps unsurprisingly, the film attracted a whole spectrum of critical responses "from anger and

¹⁴ Chan is a Hong Kong actor and not Asian American, per se, in spite of his long career in Hollywood. Lee, on the other hand, has been dead for about half a century.

¹⁵ It bears mentioning that while *The Joy Luck Club* is exclusively about Chinese immigrant identity and experience, the cast members included several actresses of other ethnicities who nonetheless played Chinese characters: Kieu Chinh, France Nuyen, and Tamlyn Tomita.

betrayal at the casting choices to deep joy at seeing self-representation on this scale” (Khoo, “Writing about” 75).

Olivia Khoo rightfully identifies the film’s symbolic significance as a transnational, Asian-led Hollywood film and a reflection of the globalized world. Its rom-com blockbuster status aside, *Crazy Rich Asians* offers complex negotiations of cultural encounters as a contemporary film text that conjoins multiple overlapping tensions from the real world, or what Kuan-Yi Chen reads as “the shifting meaning of Asianness in the ongoing reshuffling of global economic and political orders” (232). In her analysis, Chen deploys the theoretical writings of Aihwa Ong on transnational multiplicities and mobilities that “enable a more dynamic look at the politics of belonging and subject-making [taking] shape within a broader regional and global geopolitical and economic context” (233). Critically, although the surface conflict of the film lies in the culture clash between subjectivities that are ostensibly American and Singaporean, or perhaps broadly Southeast Asian, all the major characters are in fact members of the Chinese diaspora who have landed in different socioeconomic strata in their respective parts of the world.

Protagonist Rachel’s love interest in the film is Nick Young (Henry Golding), the scion of an ultra-rich ethnic Chinese clan in Singapore. Chen asserts that the Youngs are exemplary of Aihwa Ong’s notion of family biopolitics, as demonstrated by the socioeconomic power and consumerist lifestyles wielded by this globally dispersed but insular network. Rachel is at odds with the Young family, especially matriarch Eleanor (Michelle Yeoh), not only for her American individualism but also her inability to perform the cosmopolitan Chineseness expected by the elite. Chen’s astute critique of *Crazy Rich Asians* hinges on the film’s superficial celebration of Rachel’s hard-won intergenerational mobility in American society, supposedly as a counterpoint to the prodigalities of her lover’s affluent family. Yet this feel-good frame ultimately diminishes the heterogeneous realities of

the Asian American experience and overlooks the shifting “regimes of power” (235) that Chineseness can manifest in an increasingly globalized and transnational world. The latter point, if extended to encompass the Asian diaspora more broadly, is what I take to be the bedrock of the transpacific elsewhere, namely the notion that the signifying power of Asianness in today’s world is more permeable and adaptable than ever before. A production like *Crazy Rich Asians* offers a superficial glimpse of this cosmopolitan ideal, hyperbolized in the framework of a Hollywood narrative. Nonetheless, the film’s multinational cast includes a number of supporting actors who have occupied significant roles in the contemporary constellation of Asian screen representation, one of whom I will analyze in the next section.

Chameleonic Characters in the Multiverse

If Steven Yeun is a man with no country who constructs a debonair image for Asian America at large, Malaysian actress Michelle Yeoh might be said to be his counterpoint, counterpart, and complement all at once: a symbol of global Asian cosmopolitanism who has seamlessly traversed generations and genres, blazing across screens from Hollywood to Hong Kong. Yeoh is more than two decades Yeun’s senior and began her career in Hong Kong action films of the 1980s. In the decades since, she has embodied a sprawling assortment of characters including influential Shanghainese businesswoman Soong Ai-ling (*The Soong Sisters*); an itinerant warrior in Qing dynasty China (*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*); an esteemed geisha in Kyoto’s Gion district (*Memoirs of a Geisha*); a biologist-astronaut on a doomed space mission (*Sunshine*); Burmese political leader Aung San Suu Kyi (*The Lady*);

and matriarch of a wealthy Singaporean clan (*Crazy Rich Asians*), among many other roles in both live-action and animated film and television.

Yeoh's recent turn as a laundromat owner and unwilling pilgrim jouncing through the space-time continuum in *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022) merits particular attention. Not only did the film garner praise for its well-executed absurdist storyline, many critics were quick to canonize it as the latest, and perhaps most flamboyant, work in the Asian American cultural lexicon of the early 21st century. In the face of so-called Asian-pessimism, a kind of cultural mood that has taken root in the pandemic years, per Anne Anlin Cheng, *Everything Everywhere's* fractured philosophical ruminations and comedic unpredictability become a "metaphor for the immigrant Asian American experience, or a convenient parable for the dislocations and personality splits suffered by hyphenate . . . citizens." Yeoh's role as Evelyn Wang, especially against the context of her storied career as a transnational film star, offers a remarkable array of narrative and intertextual resonances with the denizens of the transpacific elsewhere. Her character's fantastical journey could be said to embody that of the transpacific Asian American subject today, dwelling in between multiple realities and attempting to tap the wild potentiality of all of them.

Not all critics were equally fond of *Everything Everywhere*. Richard Brody of *The New Yorker* bemoaned what he saw as the film's hollowness and the superficial construction of the alternate realities that Evelyn becomes able to access. As such, the fatal flaw lies in the viewer's ability to see mere "rapid-fire flashes of alternate lives, but not the pathos of feeling one of them slip away" ("Everything Everywhere"). In terms of broader trends, *Everything Everywhere* appears to have materialized amidst an early 2020s zeitgeist of what can only be called multiverse films, or stories "that [contain] all possible stories" (Nussbaum). Superhero blockbusters and streaming platform limited series from Marvel Studios successively hit the big and small screen, perhaps extending as far back as 2018's *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-*

Verse. Such films rely on preexisting knowledge, in many cases, or at least intertextual cues to titillate the viewer, including *Everything Everywhere*'s nods to works as eclectic as *The Matrix*, *Ratatouille*, and *In the Mood for Love*. In the words of Abigail Nussbaum, the multiverse trope allows filmmakers to appropriate “pop culture as a metaphor for the life we dream of having.” This interpretation fits snugly with the connection drawn by Anne Anlin Cheng from *Everything Everywhere*'s emergence to the contemporary Asian American condition. Cheng declares that the crux and conflict of the film—essentially the nihilism embodied by Evelyn's daughter Joy (Stephanie Hsu), who is alternately and simultaneously a malevolent entity known as Jobu Tupaki—can be summed up by the notion that “‘nothing matters’ in the face of pain and exclusion,” a sentiment keenly felt by Asian minority subjects who struggle for belonging, or even freedom from fear and violence, in a homeland that perpetually ostracizes them or worse.

Among the possible lives that Evelyn could have lived is that of a movie star not unlike Michelle Yeoh herself. A recent profile of the actress recounts her circuitous route to a full-time career in the entertainment industry after twists of fate led her from aspiring dancer to beauty pageant queen to Hong Kong movie sidekick (Nicholson). Yeoh's early films were credited under a different moniker, Michelle Khan, that distributors deployed for the ease of Western audiences, whom they feared would stumble over her birth name of Yeoh Choo Kheng. After a serious stunt injury in the 1990s, Yeoh intended to retire from acting entirely. But personal encouragement from Quentin Tarantino, an early fan of her work, led her to reconsider; shortly thereafter, she signed on for what would become her international breakthrough in the James Bond film *Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997). In spite of her Malaysian roots, Yeoh became a symbol of the so-called “Hong Kong action woman” that Lisa Funnell describes as a transnational mediator with the subversive potency to “[free] her body from white male sexual conquest” (171). Funnell argues that Yeoh's rise in 1980s Hong Kong was

a direct result of the city's yearning for cultural globalism in the wake of 1984's Sino-British Joint Declaration, which set a timeline for reintegration with the People's Republic of China. Yeoh was among a small cohort of women, including others from Taiwan, Japan, Australia, and the United States, who were offered highly visible film roles in Hong Kong as part of an industry quest to articulate a cosmopolitan image for the city. This origin story alone serves as an apt synecdoche: Yeoh was able to progress in her career because of her outsider status, while her Asian face and eventual mastery of martial-arts choreography allowed her to catapult to fame as a veritable "[emblem] of transnational Hong Kong identity" (175). From the beginning, it seems, Yeoh has not only embodied this kind of either-or, neither-nor status, but embraced and leveraged her in-betweenness to its greatest potential.

If Steven Yeun's immigrant experience and career trajectory could be visualized as a back-and-forth zigzag across the Pacific between South Korea and the United States, Michelle Yeoh's multigenerational and multinational appeal would best be represented by a transversal line that originates in Malaysia, intersects with Hong Kong and Hollywood, and refracts outward into the omnidirectional continuum of global culture. Yeun is a man with no country, a poster child for Asian America even while shying away from the burden of such expectations. Yeoh is a woman of many countries, able to perform chameleonic Chineseness in settings both native (*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*) and diasporic (*Crazy Rich Asians*). Her power in action films lies in her sheer physicality that resists Orientalist notions of Asian femininity. In dramatic narratives, Yeoh leverages her English fluency and cosmopolitan aura to portray a new model of transnational Asianness that is oftentimes interpreted as a mediation between the diverse national and cultural backgrounds of other characters.¹⁶ It somehow befits the instability of Asian American identity that Yeoh, who has no personal

¹⁶ Funnell describes several of Yeoh's roles in the 2000s as that of the "self-sacrificing Asian mother" (179) who represents a kind of wisdom and protectiveness, while resisting the typical racial hierarchy that foregrounds white cast members—a concession made possible only by the actor's star power and previous commercial success.

familial linkages to America, per se, has become the latest figure to bear the weight of the community's aspirations and sorrows through *Everything Everywhere All at Once*—a film that Jeff Yang likens to the “cultural collage” of Asian America itself, an invented category of ethnic identity reified by its political necessity. Or as the writer and scholar Viet Thanh Nguyen has proclaimed, “We willed ourselves into being” (“Beautiful, Flawed Fiction”).

Nguyen argues that the chimera of Asian American identity arose as a political response to and substitute for Westerners' racist and sexist fantasies of the Orient. Yet our very existence cannot help but incite complex discourses of national and cultural loyalties; we are corporeal reminders of past military conflicts and perhaps surrogates for those that are as of yet unfolding. Loath to put up with the erasures of the model minority stereotype any longer, Asian Americans are throwing their support behind cinematic representations and industry icons that look farther afield to interrogate the age-old question of who we are, where we come from. There are many paths that lead to the spotlight, as Michelle Yeoh and Steven Yeun demonstrate with their respective cultural lineages and professional trajectories. Yet part of the appeal of these actors and the roles they have played lies in their multiple belongings—nations, cultures, and perhaps universes beyond America entirely. This fluidity of the self is mirrored, too, in the works of certain filmmakers from Asia who have crossed into a broader public consciousness. I recount one such narrative in the next section as another example of in-betweenness that flourishes in the liminal space of the transpacific elsewhere.

Blurring Boundaries

While Wayne Wang's *The Joy Luck Club* and Jon M. Chu's *Crazy Rich Asians* bookend a quarter-century in which mainstream Asian American screen representation was lackluster at best, this same period saw the rise of a veritable pantheon of East Asian filmmakers whose works have been canonized for their urban disaffection and idiosyncratic style. Responding to myriad national and regional conditions, as well as the globalization of the quotidian via technology, directors like Edward Yang, Wong Kar-wai, Park Chan-wook, and Jia Zhangke, among others, have shaped worldwide audiences' perceptions of the East Asian city and its discontents from roughly the 1990s onward. In the same year that *The Joy Luck Club* was released to commercial fanfare, American filmgoers flocked to see Zhang Yimou's historical epic *Farewell My Concubine* in what one journalist identified as a common fervor for Chinese stories, be they from domestic or foreign producers. Or in the words of a studio executive: "More people want to discover the Asian experience through movies" (Book). Roughly two decades later, Kate E. Taylor-Jones noted that East Asian cinema's broad appeal and cultural influence could be seen in the number of big-budget Hollywood remakes of films from Japan and Hong Kong, such as *The Ring* (2002) and *The Departed* (2006), respectively.¹⁷

Perhaps no cinematic oeuvre embodies transpacific duality more than that of Taiwanese American director Ang Lee. Lee's early feature films were ruminations on the age-old theme of tradition versus modernity in the United States and Taiwan, as mediated through the patriarch figures portrayed by Sihung Lung in *Pushing Hands* (1991), *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), and *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994). With the notable exceptions of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) and *Lust, Caution* (2007), Lee's other films have been anglophone blockbusters made for mainstream American and international audiences.

¹⁷ Gore Verbinski adapted *The Ring*, starring up-and-comer Naomi Watts, from the Japanese horror film *Ringu* (1998), while Martin Scorsese's rendition of *The Departed* was a remake of seminal Hong Kong action thriller *Infernal Affairs* (2002).

His long list of collaborators include Hollywood actors such as Jake Gyllenhaal, Heath Ledger, Will Smith, Kate Winslet, and Elijah Wood. In view of titles as diverse as *The Ice Storm* (1997), *Hulk* (2003), and *Gemini Man* (2019), it could be said that no one quality defines Lee's career save for eclecticism itself. Wei Ming Dariotis and Eileen Fung argue that Lee's films are fundamentally a depiction of "the struggles of individuals within and between cultures" (187), a plight that is all too resonant with Asian American communities.

Dariotis and Fung pose a question about how to "label" Ang Lee as a filmmaker and whether the notion of identity itself—of the filmmaker, as well as his characters—hinges on sameness or difference, self-recognition or disparity. They examine his triptych of early '90s films about contemporary Taiwanese families and declare that critical interpretations of these narratives have been largely reductive, reading them simply as a confrontation between Western modernity and the monolithic past as represented by Chinese tradition. If one raises the same question of identity in the context of *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), a straightforward adaptation of the eponymous Jane Austen novel, the implications of Lee's directorship become more complex and confounding in light of the wholly non-Asian subject matter. Lee eludes easy categorization while calling attention to the fundamental instability of these black-and-white notions of personhood. His very existence is an indicator of "the dissolution of national boundaries that Hollywood has been so fundamental in maintaining" (216-7).

In February 2018, Lee assumed leadership of the executive committee of Taiwan's Golden Horse Film Awards and held this role for four years (Strong). Initial hopes were high that Lee's stature as a globally acclaimed director would bring more visibility to the so-called Chinese-language Oscars, given his remarkable box office successes and savvy navigation of Asian and Western themes alike in his directorial work (Jennings). In reality, the first ceremony over which Lee presided became a flashpoint for political tensions between the mainland Chinese and Taiwanese film communities over comments made by several award

recipients (Davis). This incident provides an illuminating counterexample to the transnational cosmopolitanism I have hereto examined and also reveals some tensions that are productive to unpack and discuss.

A venue like the Golden Horse Film Awards is inherently unlike the broad and inclusive community envisaged in the transpacific elsewhere, that is, the American imaginary of an Asian cosmopolis. Originating in Taiwan, this award program has been held annually since 1962 and highlights and celebrates the achievements of the Chinese-language film industry. The multiple political realities within and across the Sinosphere, and their evolution over time, simultaneously exert pressure on and render ambivalent the notion of Chinese cinemas to begin with, as Carol Chih-Ju Lin notes. The festival was inaugurated under the authoritarian rule of Chiang Kai-shek and was intended to promote Taiwan's image as "Free China," an ally of Hong Kong and foe to the Communist-controlled mainland at the height of the Cold War. Decades later, when mainland Chinese films finally became eligible to participate in the competition, the management of the awards naturally shifted to a spirit of "collaborative transnationalism [in order to bridge] the sensitive political circumstances among Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China" (24).

Like the notional identity of the Asian American community, the Chineseness promulgated by the Golden Horse Awards has always been politically charged and essentially unstable. The Awards' longevity, however, proves that it can exist as a self-contained ecosystem while operating within the larger global and multilingual network of the film industry, dominant though English may be. Asian America, on the other hand, cannot be detached from its minority subjectivity in principle; one's Asianness is necessarily defined in opposition to the white majority and an indelible mark of otherness and elsewhere. At the Golden Horse Awards, Ang Lee may be seen as either a filmmaker from Taiwan or a transnational Chinese-language filmmaker active in Hollywood, or better yet, simply a

filmmaker. In the United States context, the fact of his Asianness simply cannot be elided no matter the social realm he depicts, whether homosexual cowboys, British nobility, or Chinese warrior women. But his versatility across these domains makes him yet another cultural agent in the style of Michelle Yeoh and Steven Yeun, the chameleonic stories they embody speaking of an Asian American multiplicity and transnationality. This contrasts with the narrowness of the Golden Horse platform, beset with its Cold War-era origins and political provenance that ultimately “reinforce the symbolic capital of the national cinema in Taiwan” (Lin 25). This uneasiness with transnational communion is demonstrated by the public questioning, by some Taiwanese people, of the Awards’ consideration of cinematic works from China and Hong Kong at all, particularly when such films take home top prizes.

In spite of the nominal aims of the Awards to bridge these gaps, the fractured state of Chinese-language political identities around the world preclude solidarity and exhume complex histories of colonization, competition, and conflict. As such, the Golden Horse Awards are certainly no example of cosmopolitanism from below, originating in multiple structures of political and cultural power, most salient of which is the authoritarian rule of Chiang Kai-shek and his promotion of a “legitimate” Chinese society without communism. By contrast, Asian America is a cultural space that coalesces against a common hegemon, that of white political power that has long sought to marginalize and disenfranchise the other. The constituents of this category may find that some of their alignments falter along national, religious, linguistic, economic, and sociopolitical lines—and yet I would argue that this is the very reason why and how the transpacific elsewhere has taken shape, as a liminal ground of communion.

The Unbearable Whiteness of Being

On the opposite shores of the Pacific, the Academy Awards ran afoul of their own politically charged controversy in 2016. The social media campaign #OscarsSoWhite was perhaps the first major collective grievance from the public against an egregious lack of diversity in the film industry's most vaunted accolades. Even as the Awards that year proceeded with self-deprecating humor, if not contrition, several jokes by program host Chris Rock at the expense of the Asian community drew renewed outrage and underscored the marginalization of Asians and Asian Americans in the anglo-American world (Abad-Santos; Ryzik). The years immediately following saw a number of Asian and Asian American films and filmmakers win top prizes at the Oscars, including Bong Joon-ho's sweep of awards with *Parasite* (2019) and a stunning seven awards lavished on *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022), including Best Actress for Michelle Yeoh, Best Director for Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert, and Best Original Screenplay. Beyond the Academy, filmmakers from Japan's Ryusuke Hamaguchi to America's Lulu Wang have received other prestigious nominations and international awards, while the latest commercial fare like *Shang-Chi, Mulan*, and *Turning Red* have become box office hits. These developments, note Rebecca Sun, are not simply happenstance but the result of concentrated efforts by "interdisciplinary coalition of Asian Americans behind the scenes who are finding strength in numbers and making their collective voice heard" ("From Punchline").

Sun identifies the off-color jokes of the 2016 Awards as the inciting incident that led Asian American film industry veterans to band together for mutual empowerment, beginning with a joint letter issued by Asian American members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences themselves, including high-profile directors like Ang Lee and actors Sandra Oh and George Takei (Feinberg). Since that time, entertainment media executives have reforged alliances and set up new ventures to support Asian American and Pacific Islander

representation. Money talks. Take, for example, the #GoldOpen campaign operated by the recently established nonprofit Gold House, dedicated to supporting Asian and Pacific Islander representation, an initiative that has boosted the box office revenue and visibility of films like *Crazy Rich Asians*, *The Farewell*, *Parasite*, and *Shang-Chi* by organizing crowd-funded theater buyouts in cities like New York and Los Angeles (Del Rosario). This initiative is unmistakably a statement of pan-Asian and Asian American solidarity in promoting films set in Singapore, China both real (*The Farewell*) and mythical (*Shang-Chi*), and South Korea, helmed by Asian and Asian American filmmakers. For more on Gold House, see Chapter 6: The Nonprofit.

In sum, border-crossing directors and actors who bring transnationality and pan-Asian cosmopolitanism to the movie theater are among the most vaunted cultural agents in the construction of contemporary Asian American subjectivity: Steven Yeun, with his starring roles in *Burning* and *Minari*; Michelle Yeoh embodying transnational matriarchy (*Crazy Rich Asians*) and cosmic multiplicity (*Everything Everywhere*); and Ang Lee's Chinese, Taiwanese, and American stylings from 1930s Shanghai (*Lust, Caution*) to 1990s New York (*The Wedding Banquet*). Beyond American cinemas, the transnational coproductions and translingual narratives of East Asian filmmakers in the 21st century have also exhibited both the mobility of film industry capital and the fluidity of the global cinematic ethnoscape. Hong Kong auteur Wong Kar-wai's *2046* (2004) and *My Blueberry Nights* (2007) featured prominent Japanese and American actors, for example, the latter being set exclusively in the social and cultural milieu of the American South. After his commercial success with *Shoplifters* (2018), Hirokazu Kore-eda's recent feature films have been set in France (*The Truth*) and South Korea (*Broker*) and showcased local screen icons such as Catherine Deneuve, Juliette Binoche, and Song Kang-ho (a lead actor in *Parasite*, among other iconic South Korean fare). A core part of Ryusuke Hamaguchi's *Drive My Car* centers on the

multinational, multilingual cast of a Russian play that the protagonist directs in Hiroshima, with actors speaking their lines in English, Japanese, Korean, Mandarin, and Tagalog.

The above examples are just a few prominent cases of how cosmopolitanism and transnationality are shaping cinematic discourses of Asianness, and become refracted into a beam of even more intense light when transmitted through the prism of Asian America. As Felicia Chan has argued, cosmopolitanism is “often first experienced as a mode of consumption” before the consumer can digest and internalize cultural signifiers, eventually subsuming them within “an outlook, a disposition, a mode of cultural practice, and a way of experiencing the world” (250). The name recognition and industry accolades of directors like Hamaguchi, Kore-eda, Lee, and Wong, among other directors from East Asia, signify the broad resonance that their film narratives have found among critical and public audiences in America. The consumption of such narratives leads into the same cultural churn where the works of predominantly anglophone Asian directors and actors, including those of Jon M. Chu, Daniel Kwan, Michelle Yeoh, and Steven Yeun, are located.¹⁸ What emerges from their coalescence is an increasingly transnational tendency in constructing the Asian American self, especially in the context of a shifting ethnoscape where individuals and communities are able to travel beyond the confines of the quotidian with considerable ease. Perhaps a single country or lineage has never been enough to encompass the complexities of Asianness in America. Only a psychical space of the in-between such as the transpacific elsewhere can give free reign to artists and storytellers grappling with questions of truth, identity, and belonging amid the layered tensions of human civilization today.

¹⁸ This simple enumeration of the directors and actors I have already cited in this chapter demonstrates the porousness and complexity of identity as a fixed category. I want to note here that I recognize the ambiguities and tensions in these two sentences alone, given that Wong Kar-wai and Ang Lee have made films fully in English, yet are most likely thought of as Asian directors from Hong Kong and Taiwan, respectively. On the flip side, Michelle Yeoh may be a predominantly anglophone actress nowadays, but this somehow elides her long career in the Hong Kong film industry in the late 20th century, not to mention her other multilingual roles in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *The Lady*.

Chapter 5: The Museum

Museums have become a significant platform, or form of circulation, in the mediascape of contemporary Asianness. Films and filmmakers featured in museum spaces are given context by the labor of the curatorial staff, who impart a more nuanced knowledge of how to view and understand the work to the cultural class of the audience. The contemporary filmmaker will oftentimes be invited to partake in a public program himself, creating additional streams of dialogue and discourse between the museum, the public, and tertiary fields represented by the attendees: news media, academia, the arts, and so on. This arrangement may seem a matter of course if one acknowledges that the cinema entails far more than the moving image texts themselves, and comprises “archaeology, technologies, cinephilia, auditoriums, festivals, archives and libraries, art and cultural heritage” (Cere 1). As museum studies scholars have grappled with whether to conceptualize this institutional space as a type of media itself, the intersection of museums and cinema has proven to be a most fruitful epistemological domain.

In the past decades, a broad vision of East Asian cinemas has been formed by the activities of major institutions like the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA) and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), as well as those of smaller regional cultural centers like the Portland Museum of Art and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. My aim is not to offer an exhaustive history of the cinematic curation of East Asia in America, but rather to trace the broader narrative between specific sets of programs and cultural moments, and interpret their reception in new and traditional media outlets. In particular, the preeminent Hong Kong filmmaker Wong Kar-wai—whose aesthetic has been celebrated by transnational Asian and Asian American creative communities, as mentioned in Chapter 3:

The Cocktail Bar—becomes a central node in my investigation as a figure that towers above all others, his oeuvre disseminated through retrospective programs or the man himself actively partaking in special museum initiatives. I analyze his participation in the 2015 exhibition *China: Through the Looking Glass* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York as a watershed moment, shining a spotlight on the cinematic imagery of sinophone directors while celebrating Western designers' riffs on Chineseness as a form of aesthetic cosmopolitanism. The tripartite dimensions of frame, rhythm, and imaginary described by Dario Verderame in the aesthetic experience are an apt structure to approach Wong's stature in American society, and its broader implications for the reading of Asianness at large.

“Never . . . had *sad* looked so *good* and felt so relatable,” Madelyne Xiao writes of her first encounter with *In the Mood for Love* in high school (emphasis in original). Her narrative of self-recognition via Wong's cinema is all too familiar, finding affinity and resonance in his “small moods” and “atmospheric everything” that evoke the unknown and unseen lives of our forebears and family members in some small way. Indeed, I felt a similar stirring when I watched *In the Mood for Love* for the first time in 2004. A sophomore in college, I'd plopped myself into the cinema library on a whim one spring day and chosen this film that I'd heard of, but knew nothing about. As the iconic waltz of “Yumeji's Theme” played, accompanying a slow-motion scene of cheongsam-clad women liting around a mahjong table, a wistfulness took hold of me. *In the Mood for Love* is set in 1960s Hong Kong, a time and place that have next to nothing to do with my family and our staunchly mainland roots. Yet Wong's mise-en-scène and elevation of Chineseness to this kind of lush beauty was nothing short of a revelation. In Xiao's article, she interviews Bowen Goh, co-owner of the bar Mood Ring that borrows heavily from Wong's aesthetic (see Chapter 3). He, too, notes that the world of Wong's narratives is relatable in spite of his own parents' provenance in Guangzhou, providing an intimate reflection onto his heritage and even

allowing him to imagine “what it could’ve been like for me.” But one doesn’t need to be Chinese, or even Asian, to fall under Wong’s spell. The writer Kyle Chayka has described Wong’s aesthetic and far-reaching influence as no less than “era-defining” in *The New Yorker*:

You could call it an atmosphere, a vibe, or just an essence of style. It’s made up of a collection of ingredients: humid alleyways in dense cities, neon lights cutting through darkness, quietly flashy fashion, nostalgic music, tragic romanticism, and the smoke of many, many cigarettes. It evokes glamour with a streak of grittiness, and the *feeling of being adrift*. It partakes of Golden Age Hollywood but is more *international, modern, and self-aware*. (emphasis added)

Chayka traces Wong’s influence, specifically via *In the Mood for Love*, across a myriad of cultural spaces, including works of films and television, interior design, fashion, and, of course, social media. In this chapter, I argue that Wong’s power, as channeled by the specific institution of the museum, has magnified and popularized a transnational and cosmopolitan vision of contemporary Asianness. The “feeling of being adrift” that Chayka refers to here is, in my opinion, none other than the liminality of the Asian subject in a psychical space detached from the nation-state.

The museum in the 21st century is a shifting terrain, “a venue of exchange where objects are invested with multiple meanings, introducing the possibility of various interpretations and viewpoints, including those of the visitors” (Mandelli 73). This physical establishment is but one node in what Daniel Fairfax has termed a “grand mutation in visual culture” from the 1980s to the present, by which human engagement with large and small screens has become “dispersed, pluralised, atomised, *and* absorbed into an omnipresent, all-

embracing, deadeningly homogeneous digital panopticon” (emphasis in original). As part of this transformation, the cultural spaces of the cinema, especially as a purveyor of mass entertainment, and the museum, with its elitist history as a repository of high culture, have merged into one stream—or at least parallel streams with significant points of convergence. The notion of conserving the “fragile” materiality of film and its concomitant documentarian value via the museum institution has existed since the advent of cinema itself. The first to advocate for this was a Polish photographer and cinematographer named Boleslaw Matuszewski, who worked with the Lumière brothers (Cere 9). Cere carefully describes the artificial binary of “institutions for the dissemination of cinema” and “museum-based exhibitions of cinematographic apparatuses” that emerged in the early 20th century, mostly due to the split between conservationist or museological impulses among those with resources and influence (15). It bears mentioning that the majority of museums that I invoke in this chapter—including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which is a crucial backdrop for my main analysis of Wong—are not specifically dedicated to the cinema; their organization of film screenings is part of the wholesale absorption of global culture into the realm of the visual, as noted by Fairfax.¹⁹ On the other hand, while an institution like the Museum of Modern Art does not have cinema as a primary *modus operandi*, it nonetheless comprises the historically significant Film and Video Library and has helped ease the public into viewing films as cultural artifacts, if not outright art, in the American institutional context (Cere 18). Dario Verderame cites Georg Simmel’s conception of the frame as an integral part of the aesthetic experience. As with a picture frame, I contend that the physical boundary of a space like the museum can delimit one’s understanding of an artistic or cultural work, at once providing critical distance and directing the gaze to a specific field. Viewing a film within a

¹⁹ The exceptions are the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, the Museum of the Moving Image, and the UCLA Film and Television Archive, where Wong and other filmmakers have been engaged.

museum, or an exhibition designed to convey a cinematic experience, “distinguishes it and keeps it separate . . . thus focusing the observer’s attention inward” (73).

Step into the Museum of the transpacific elsewhere, where an inspiring array of Asian and Asian American art is collected and displayed, everything from prehistoric sculpture to contemporary video art, the cultural zeniths of dynastic rule side by side with border-crossing interrogations of the modern self by transnational artists and craftspeople. While the Museum’s permanent collections and rotating exhibitions are a fascinating subject matter unto themselves, we are not concerned with them (for now). We move straight from the lobby into another area adjacent to the main galleries. There is a spacious screening room here, inside which are several hundred comfortable seats that face an ample stage. Though no program is in progress at the moment, it’s easy to pick up on the rarefied atmosphere of this area, a hallowed ground for film fanatics who flock here to not only see their favorite Wong Kar-wai or Hong Sang-soo, but catch the director in person for a Q&A session. One glance at this space is enough to make clear that the Museum is indeed a vehicle for the cinematic narrative, circulating images and tropes of Asianness while platforming filmmakers whose work appeals to global audiences.

Ascendant China as Aesthetic

In 1995, the centennial of the birth of cinema, identified here as the Lumière brothers’ pioneering work, marked a cultural moment when films and filmmakers could ascend to the ranks of fine arts more commonly found at museums: painting, sculpture, and the like. Major breakthroughs included early 21st century exhibitions dedicated to Alfred Hitchcock at museums in Montréal and Paris, and to Stanley Kubrick in Frankfurt, the latter going on to

tour almost two dozen venues in Latin America, Australia, and Europe (Bickerton). Both Emilie Bickerton and Daniel Fairfax note that the asymptotic convergence of the cinema and museum institutions could be partially attributed to the rapid advancement and fragmentation of visual culture in the past decades. A number of prominent contemporary filmmakers, including Thai director Apichatpong Weerasethakul, even benefit from a “pluralist mindset” and demonstrate equal comfort in producing works fit for either the movie theater and the museum (Fairfax).

Wong Kar-wai has gained a steady global following over the course of several decades, his moody missives of missed connections and sentimental yearning striking the hearts of audiences around the world. Before he reached his contemporary levels of fame, however, it was Wong’s longtime collaborator Christopher Doyle who first caught the attention of a cultural institution stateside. In November 1998, the UCLA Film and Television Archive presented an inaugural American retrospective entitled *The Days of Being Doyle*, which featured Doyle’s work as director of photography in films from across the sinosphere by Wong, Chen Kaige, Stanley Kwan, Stan Lai, and Edward Yang (“UCLA Film and Television Archive”). The series coincided with exhibitions of Doyle’s photography at several art galleries in Los Angeles.

Awarded the vaunted Best Director prize at the Cannes Film Festival for *Happy Together* (1997), Wong went on to offer several more iconic works to 21st century audiences, including the timeless *In the Mood for Love* (2000) and the operatic *Grandmaster* (2013). The French film director Olivier Assayas described Wong’s characters as “beings haunted by the nostalgia of what they have not known” (Ehrlich). In late 2020, the distributor Janus Films kicked off a global tour to celebrate and publicize 4K restorations of Wong’s films. Aptly entitled *World of Wong Kar Wai*, the series ricocheted from New York to Nashville to San Francisco, among many other American cities (Johnson; N. Smith; Soriano), playing in

physical movie theaters and available to stream via online platforms alike. The venues that organized the retrospectives included many traditional cinemas, but quite a few museums were also involved: the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA); the Honolulu Museum of Art; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City; the Oklahoma City Museum of Art; the Portland Museum of Art in Oregon; and the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.

What factors underpin this coast-to-coast celebration of a Hong Kong auteur in the United States? Certainly Wong is no stranger to the movie theater or the museum by this era, even though his last feature film is already a decade behind us. Prior to this nationwide extravaganza, Wong appeared to have cultivated close relationships with several institutions in particular. The Museum of the Moving Image in Queens, New York hosted him for live events in 2008 and 2013 to commemorate the respective releases of *My Blueberry Nights*, his oft overlooked English-language offering starring Jude Law and Norah Jones, and *The Grandmaster* (“Wong Kar-wai” 2008; “Wong Kar-wai” 2013). Manhattan’s Museum of Modern Art also organized a public program in May 2016 to commemorate the launch of the Rizzoli volume *WKW: The Cinema of Wong Kar Wai* authored by Wong and John Powers, lauding the filmmaker as one of “the greatest living auteurs” (“An Evening with Wong Kar Wai”).

While arthouse cinema is necessarily a separate domain from fine arts, and Wong has not demonstrated the avant-garde leanings of a filmmaker like aforementioned Apichatpong Weerasethakul, his ascent has coincided with that of contemporary Chinese art on the global stage, as well as a nonpartisan curatorial openness to sinophone cinemas, broadly speaking. It wasn’t until 2001 that an institution like New York’s Asia Society, a global nonprofit with an eponymous regional focus (expansive and unwieldy though it may be), even hired its first curator of contemporary Asian and Asian American art, “the only position of its kind in the

United States” at the time (Shattuck). Chinese Australian curator Melissa Chiu filled this role and began a yearslong effort to cultivate American public consciousness of this domain through marquee exhibitions featuring major contemporary artists like Cai Guo-Qiang and Zhang Huan. China accounted for less than 1% of the global market of art sales at the turn of the century, but vaulted to the top position by 2011, while contemporary art burgeoned, in spite of state repression, through private museums and art hubs across Shanghai, Beijing, and other major metropolises (Merelli). This aura and buzz surrounding Chinese art offer some measure of context to understand not only the reception of Wong Kar-wai’s filmmaking, but also his role as creative director for the China-themed 2015 Met Gala, which I outline in more detail in the next section. Though it may seem out of context to juxtapose the trajectory of the Chinese art industry with the ascent of Wong or other sinophone filmmakers, I contend that the consumption of Chinese cultural forms and aesthetics—artistic, cinematic, sartorial, or otherwise—in the museum space is a shared frame that harmonizes their discrepancies. As Anne Krebs and Franck Mermier describe with regard to the opening of the Louvre Abu Dhabi, a museum is one venue in which individuals can earn cosmopolitan capital that reflects “cultural tastes and transnational mobilities” and nurtures a sense of urban elitism (296). Verderame’s notion of the rhythm of aesthetic experience applies here, as well. Borrowing the ideas of Émile Durkheim, Verderame describes the “tumultuous, convulsive feeling” of experiencing a cultural work in a group setting where one not only responds to an object, but absorbs the reaction of surrounding people who create a kind of “ritual effervescence” (75-76). In other words, a curated view of China or Chineseness in the museum frame creates the conditions for cultural osmosis through the rhythms of other patrons who share that physical space.

A brief survey of sinophone film retrospectives organized by American museums reveals two distinct tendencies in highlighting the Greater China region’s cinematic output: a

broad historical lens that often encompasses both Chinese filmmaking from the Republican era (1911–1949) and its subsequent splintering into Hong Kong and Taiwan-based industries; and a much narrower view onto one contemporary auteur as a guide for understanding sinophone societies. In 1998, the Guggenheim Museum organized the film retrospective *Dawn: Early Chinese Cinema* to accompany a museum-wide exhibition entitled *China: 5,000 Years* (“Dawn”). The program included major works by Republican Chinese filmmakers from the 1920s to ‘40s, such as the iconic films *New Women* and *The Goddess*, both starring Ruan Lingyu. A similar series called *Bright Stars, Big City: Chinese Cinema’s First Golden Era, 1922–1937* appeared at the Museum of Modern Art in 2005 (“Bright Stars”). This latter retrospective also heralded a collaboration between MoMA’s film curator Jytte Jensen with Zhang Zhen, assistant professor in cinema studies at New York University, and William Phuan, program associate with the nonprofit organization Asian CineVision (see Chapter 6: The Nonprofit).

In the 21st century, the Sixth Generation director Jia Zhangke rapidly came into prominence, with his collective works touted by BAMPFA as the key to “understand China’s vast changes during the last decade” in the 2008 retrospective *Unknown Pleasures: The Films of Jia Zhangke* (“Unknown Pleasures”). Jia’s centrality in the world of Chinese film was highlighted by New York’s MoMA in 2010 (“Jia Zhangke”) and as part of an Asia Society series that same year (“China’s Past”). He was honored again in a 2019 joint retrospective organized by BAMPFA and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), where the local premiere of his latest film *Ash is Purest White* was held (“Internationally Renowned”). The 2010s were indeed a most prolific period for Jia, who released three narrative films and one documentary feature, all of which garnered worldwide attention and accolades.

During the same period, American museums demonstrated a persistent interest in the cinema of China's pre-Communist past and sinophone diaspora, with such series as *GODDESS: Chinese Women on Screen* at Asia Society in 2012 ("GODDESS") and *A Century of Chinese Cinema* at the UCLA Film and Television Archive in 2013 (Colvin). But contemporary art and experimental film drew equal curatorial attention, as exhibited by the Guggenheim's documentary series *Turn It On: China On Film, 2000–2017* ("Guggenheim Museum Presents") and the Smithsonian Institution's "crash course" on contemporary Chinese film offered via both physical screenings and online streaming (Vick). Elsewhere in the sinophone world, Taiwanese directors Hou Hsiao-hsien and Tsai Ming-liang have been accorded institutional attention by the Museum of the Moving Image in 2014 (Brody, "The Memory Maker") and the Museum of Modern Art in 2022 (Schindel), respectively. Hou's series also played at the Smithsonian, with a press release touting his influence on contemporary filmmakers like Olivier Assayas and Hirokazu Kore-eda ("Freer and Sackler").

The sinophone region's cinematic production has thus been amply represented by major American museums in the 21st century, as exhibited by the programmatic features spanning China's storied film history to a contemporary constellation of auteurs from the mainland, Taiwan, and Hong Kong; the juxtaposition of narrative films, on a spectrum between commercial and arthouse, with more avant-garde or conceptual fare, sometimes even in the same space ("On the Extreme Margins"); and the geographical range represented by the museums that have curated and organized such programs, extending beyond New York and Los Angeles to include such cities as Portland, Houston, Washington, D.C., Oklahoma City, and Kansas City.

I provide this brief chronicle to underscore the cultural buzz around Chinese language cinemas that has long been in the making, and perhaps crystallizes most succinctly and elegantly in the preeminence of Wong Kar-wai. Though Wong is not a diasporic cultural

agent in the same capacity as the other figures I have described in previous chapters, it is clear that he has created an outsized role for himself in the psychical space of global Asianness, an aesthetic that reaches beyond the cinematic realm and influences everyday spaces like the Cocktail Bar of Chapter 3. Aside from neon lights, drink names, and perhaps a glamorous pathos, what else has Wong contributed to the American imaginary of East Asia? How has he leveraged his unique sensibilities—in the space of the Museum, in particular—to craft a cultural narrative with resounding impact? The answer to both questions can be found in the ostentation and euphoria surrounding one of the most sensational projects of Wong’s career: his creative direction of the 2015 Met Gala under the theme *China: Through the Looking Glass*.

Asianized Extravagance

“When we look into a mirror, we only see ourselves,” Wong Kar-wai writes in his introductory note to the hefty tome that was published as accompaniment to the *China: Through the Looking Glass* exhibition. “But when the mirror turns into a window, we see the world around us” (Bolton 10). In this brief greeting, Wong expresses his hope that the art, film, and fashion coalescing in the Met Gala will allow visitors to both gain a sense of Chinese aesthetics and understand their impact on the Western world, particularly in the realms of design and visual culture. This mirror-window metaphor also serves as an apt description of the gaze by which most Westerners or Americans perceive foreign cultures, particularly those rendered exotic or inscrutable by a long-entrenched Orientalist imaginary: from a distance, through a divide, on a flattened plane; and oftentimes reflecting the viewer’s own prejudices and assumptions, knowingly or not. For the cultural agent, the mirror-window

transforms into a door. Or perhaps they are the ones who enact this transformation to begin with, facilitating passage to and from both sides.

A brief history of the Met Gala is necessary in order to situate the significance of Wong's endeavor. Officially organized as the Costume Institute Benefit, the event was initiated in 1948 in order to support the sartorial collection of New York's iconic Metropolitan Museum of Art and became a magnet for socialites and celebrities in the 1970s and '80s. Starting in 1995, the fashion industry heavyweight Anna Wintour, editor-in-chief of *Vogue* magazine, came to oversee the Gala's organization and execution. Her efforts have fortuitously coincided with not just the advent of the internet, but the rise of Web 2.0, social media, and the smartphone, conditions that have led to a visually saturated world and global pop culture audience. It should be no surprise then that the Met Gala of the 21st century is "one of the most visible and successful fundraisers in the world, drawing guests from the worlds of fashion, film, society, sports, business, and music" (Chilton).

Some of the most luminous entertainers and musicians of the contemporary era joined the fray in the 2010s, drawing legions of fans and media outlets hungry for clicks to scrutinize, analyze, dissect, and rhapsodize about their elaborate ensembles for this fashion extravaganza. With single ticket prices costing \$25,000 by 2016, the event that has come to be dubbed "Fashion's Biggest Night" purportedly brings in millions of dollars for the Costume Institute every year (Widjojo). This hyperbolic convergence of celebrity and visual adornment became a most public platform for Wong Kar-wai to extend his influence to fans of Rihanna, Beyoncé, the Kardashians, Madonna, and the like. Andrew Bolton, curator of the Costume Institute, offered the notion of "China . . . as a collective fantasy" as the organizing principle of *China: Through the Looking Glass*, with its plethora of beautiful gowns and sartorial artifacts based on Orientalist stereotypes and antiquated notions of Asianness (Flora). *Jing Daily's* Liz Flora struck a hopeful tone that the caricatures of the exhibition

would soon be a thing of the past, not only due to the political correctness, but the economic clout of Chinese consumers. Nonetheless, the cinematic portrayals of yesteryear, like those of Anna May Wong, the first Chinese American film star, formed a significant part of the mythology of Chineseness in Western eyes. As counterpoint and complement, modern screen icons of the sinophone world were also prominently featured in the exhibition: Gong Li as co-chair of the event; film clips from the oeuvre of Wong, Chen Kaige, Ang Lee, and Zhang Yimou; and couture by designers Guo Pei, Vivienne Tam, and Laurence Xu.

Contemporary reviews of the exhibition struck a ruminative, quietly reverential tone, with even a mildly academic register in some articles. “When Chinese silks arrived in ancient Rome, they caused a double-edged sensation,” reported *The New York Times*. “They were taken as a sensuous wonder, evidence of a distant culture marvelous beyond imagining. But they were also viewed as a form of imported decadence, carrying a virus of effeminacy that would weaken Rome’s imperial muscle” (Cotter). This ambivalence, a simultaneous fixation and repulsion, would echo throughout time, finding expression or justification in a slew of impressive sartorial statements, whether the “louche” villainesses portrayed by Anna May Wong in early Hollywood or the striking uniformity of Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution. With the involvement of Wong Kar-wai and other luminaries of Chinese heritage, however, the exhibition seemed to preemptively signal its self-awareness and sidestep accusations of perpetuating an Orientalist imaginary.

Wong directly acknowledged that many early cinematic representations of China were unsavory, but the exhibition “did not shy away from these images because they are historic fact” (Holpuch). In another show of cross-cultural collaboration, some of the sartorial displays were borrowed from the Palace Museum in Beijing. Meanwhile, the exhibition was designed to inflect a certain cinematic quality in its organization and presentation, which was arguably already omnipresent in the various garments that took inspiration from screen

depictions of China. Considering Tom Ford's final collection for Yves Saint-Laurent, *Vogue* noted that a yellow silk satin gown was the product of the designer's interpretation of the visual language of films like Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* and Wong Kar-wai's very own *In the Mood for Love* (Camhi). "I watched that film over and over again," Ford said of the latter, attesting to the hold that Wong has wielded over the global imaginary of Chineseness.

The admiration and friendly reception of *China: Through the Looking Glass* evidenced a skillful execution of a delicate theme that could have gone awry in any number of ways. Nonetheless, one Chinese American reviewer called the fashion industry's contemporary desire for Chinese-inspired aesthetics "beautiful, lovely, spine-tingling stuff" while bemoaning its elitist superficiality (C. Wang). Since the announcement of the exhibition in the fall of the previous year, Andrew Bolton had consistently described the core of the endeavor as a "virtual China" premised on anachronistic elements and pastiche. Originally, however, the exhibition bore the very different name of *Chinese Whispers: Tales of the East in Art, Film and Fashion*, based on the British appellation of a parlor game known more commonly as "telephone" in North America (Karimzadeh). Influential cultural platforms like *Jezebel* and *Bustle* collectively rolled their eyes at this announcement. "I'm sure more than one person will roll up in a Japanese kimono," groaned one writer, "and you already know someone is going to cite *Mulan* as their creative inspiration" (Brown). Another half-Korean writer described her stomach dropping and reflexively cringing in anticipation, despite the potential positive outcomes of this spotlight on Asian-inspired fashions. It may have been a natural reaction to the North American world's "long history of celebrities appropriating Asian culture in the name of fashion," the author citing musicians Avril Lavigne and Katy Perry among the offenders (Builder). For more on cultural appropriation, see my analysis in Chapter 10.

Days before the gala, several fashion professionals and a media studies professor issued words of caution on what not to wear, to spare oneself excoriation by culturally sensitive internet audiences (Mau). To the credit of the Costume Institute's organizing directive, the gala seemed to avoid any major controversy in practice. As usual, hordes of celebrities descended on New York's Upper East Side in their evening finery and stirred up a minor media frenzy along the way. Most wore tasteful outfits that conservatively riffed on the theme, but two opted for maximalist ensembles to rather different effect. On one end of the spectrum, there was Barbadian pop star Rihanna in an ornate and prodigious gown by Chinese designer Guo Pei, punctuated by its sweeping golden train that draped languidly on the red carpet, a look about which one culture columnist sighed, "Children will be studying it for centuries to come" (Duboff). Then there was the actress Sarah Jessica Parker, best known for her starring role in the *Sex and the City* franchise. Rather than any distinct nod to China or Chinese-inspired aesthetics, she wore a gown of her own creation and "basically . . . an internet meme on her head" (Kedmey). A creation by Irish designer Philip Treacy, the hat was a riot of flame-like twists and curves in red and silver, bestowing her with the uncanny aura of a Disney villain. The looking glass, in this case, turned out to be no more than a distorting mirror.

The Orientalist Kaleidoscope

Asian representation on the American screen has long faced the pernicious double-edged sword of yellowface and whitewashing. This brief exploration of sinophone film retrospectives in the 21st century and the tangle of self-aware sartorial Orientalism at the 2015 Met Gala (and its associated exhibition) are not meant to suggest that the American

public fully embraces the visual signifiers of Chineseness or Chinese identity.

Cosmopolitanism itself is a conflicted and contradictory space, as Felicia Chan points out. It is an ideal that “signals openness to difference,” though one must forcibly transcend the world of images alone to “contend with border conflicts, xenophobia and parochialism” (249). The fundamental asymmetry of global culture can be read in these contemporary instances of China being imaged and imagined by and for United States audiences. Whether a Wong Kar-wai or Jia Zhangke retrospective, or a celebration of Western couture’s appropriation of “Chinese” aesthetics, it could be said that these cinematic and dramatic indulgences encapsulate the scopophilia that Laura Mulvey wrote about decades earlier.

In her classic essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Mulvey invokes Freud to propose that scopophilia, or the pleasure of looking, is one of the most primal and fundamental attractions of the cinema. In watching a film, a spectator gains the “illusion of looking in on a private world” and thus derives visceral satisfaction from what he witnesses (9). She further develops this theory into a gendered interpretation of the participants in scopophilic display, and the spectator’s ego identification with the actors seen on screen. The social and cultural dichotomies of male/female and active/passive are further reified in the cinema wherein the appearance of the woman and her intrinsic to-be-looked-at-ness draw power and command attention or, per Mulvey, “erotic contemplation” (11). Indeed, in considering the sweep of sinophone film history, women are by and large the dominant figures in this grand narrative of fractured eras and geopolitics. Male actors, no matter how charismatic, have simply paled in comparison to luminous icons like Ruan Lingyu, from the golden age of Shanghai silent film, or the slew of contemporary actresses immortalized in the work of directors such as Wong Kar-wai, Jia Zhangke, Zhang Yimou, et al.: Maggie Cheung and her dazzling qipao wardrobe in *In the Mood for Love*; Zhao Tao as the chameleonic face in Jia’s fables of rapid urbanization; the inimitable Gong Li as symbol of woman’s

determination in rural China, or perhaps antiquity. In the end, it's no wonder that New York's Asia Society chose to organize a Chinese film series with the conceit and headline of *GODDESS*.

Scopophilia is also core to the practice of public consumption of the Met Gala. Furthermore, there are at least several more distinct layers of cultural signifiers and implications in the 2015 extravaganza in which Wong Kar-wai was involved. Firstly, though my project does not seek to analyze or conceptualize the role of fashion, much less haute couture, in global culture, I also cannot neglect the obvious centrality of the gaze inherent in the manner by which modern humans wear clothes. The rapid development of media and visual culture in contemporary times has culminated in "an almost nausea-inducing seesawing process of narcissism and scopophilia," as one fashion scholar states bluntly (Edwards 67). What complicates the dynamic for *China: Through the Looking Glass* is the exhibition's sartorial subject matter of a mythic Orient, which is refracted in the garments of celebrities and public figures, then dissected and critiqued again by print and online media.²⁰ In essence, the continuum of gazes here constitutes neither a window nor a mirror, but perhaps a kaleidoscope or periscope: an image made symmetric and comprehensible by sleight of hand, a distant world come into view.

While Mulvey has been roundly critiqued for her narrow and heteronormative conception of scopophilia, as Tim Edwards succinctly summarizes (74), her original framing of the male gaze and woman's to-be-looked-at-ness fits neatly with the Orientalist binaries that Edward Said introduced in the same decade. Both theoretical conceits converge in the 2015 Met Gala and its associated exhibition, as well as ancillary products that were born of

²⁰ I would like to note once more that the physical exhibition at the Met included not only garments, but representative film clips by sinophone directors. The exhibition's spatial organization itself was said to be cinematically inspired.

this cultural moment: a lavish book as keepsake, a behind-the-scenes documentary (Kenny).²¹ Andrew Bolton, Anna Wintour, and Wong Kar-wai undoubtedly oversaw the project with a considerable degree of self-awareness, even when the exhibition title was still *Chinese Whispers*. The fictive China of the Western fashion designer's imagination is necessarily feminized, finding form in the female muse, cinematic or otherwise, demonstrating Euro-American tendencies for "dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said 3). On the runway and on the silver screen, women move and perform to be looked at and remain ever conscious of their to-be-looked-at-ness, especially those with faces deemed exotic or other by white audiences—destined for consumption as symbol more than flesh.

"The whole show was entirely self-aware," exclaimed one relieved cultural commentator about the exhibition in the Met. To the organizers' credit, it was clearly conveyed that "they were commenting on Orientalism, not just repeating it" (Grinspan and Rubin). Even the star-studded red carpet event seemed to skate free of controversy, snarky takes on individual fashion choices aside. Several months later, as the exhibition prepared to close, it was declared a triumph by *The New York Times*, noting that its cumulative ticket sales of 735,000 had already surpassed the previous record for attendance at a Costume Institute show. Though "the subject itself was ripe for criticism," the exhibition tactfully managed to avoid egregious missteps. Foot traffic was boosted by word of mouth and a considerable inflow of international visitors, who accounted for 40% of ticket sales; and among the foreign guests, 14% were from China, "one of the most lucrative markets for Western fashion designers" (Friedman).

Ultimately, the 2015 Met Gala achieves and demonstrates the third dimension of aesthetic experience as proposed by Verderame. The museum itself and the infrastructure of

²¹ Glenn Kenny's review of the documentary *The First Monday in May* is short and dismissive, describing its approach as "sloppy." Though the exhibition and gala generally avoided major controversy, Kenny implies this was by luck, rather than design, through an anecdote of Wong Kar-wai suggesting to Andrew Bolton that "he might not want to place an image of Mao in a room otherwise occupied by Buddha sculptures."

the exhibit provide the physical frame for Western ideas of Chineseness to be viewed and admired. The temporal frame lies in both the extravagant, fleeting spectacle of musicians, actors, designers, and other celebrities descending on the space, and the limited run of *China: Through the Looking Glass* over a period of months. The rhythm of the experience, of course, is apparent in the endless buzz surrounding the program, from press releases and culturally sensitive handwringing to the empirical reality of the event itself, followed by the countless postmortems, analyses, reviews, and social media hot takes. Given such a frame and rhythm, and especially in light of the theme of the gala and associated exhibition, the third dimension of the imaginary is ever salient. Verderame calls the imaginary “the creation of a fictional world” and invokes the work of scholars such as Arnold Berleant and Thomas Leddy to discuss how cosmopolitan encounters with cultural forms produce an entire mental landscape for the individual (76). This conceptual triptych corresponds with my proposal of the transpacific elsewhere if we simply take a moment to reexamine the terminologies. The frame of aesthetic experience is none other than the platform, space, or form of circulation around which I have constructed each of my chapters, discrete locations wherein a curated view of East Asia is animated and given signifying potency. Cultural agents like Wong Kar-wai, or the actors and directors mentioned in Chapter 4, provide the melody, but American audiences create the rhythm as they receive the work—in this case, cinematically inflected images of Chineseness—and influence each other’s opinions in ritualistic discourse, whether carried out in person or online. Finally, the imaginary that clinches the experience of aesthetic cosmopolitanism is the transpacific elsewhere itself, a cosmopolitan ethnoscape that simultaneously traffics in and arises from Asian signifiers. This fictional world is a rediscovery and intensification of that which already exists—namely, the cultures and societies of East Asia. As such, the imaginary of the elsewhere is necessarily a duplication or doubling, as Verderame suggests. Or perhaps this is simply the result of our gazing upon the

looking glass and seeing not a window to China of the mind, but a mirror onto the fictive Chinas that already exist in our global cultural crosscurrents.

Our tour of the Museum of the transpacific elsewhere stops here. We end in a dimly lit corridor that appears to stretch onward to preposterous lengths, until you look closer and recognize it for what it is: a hall of mirrors. The exhibition today has taken a cue from the infamous *China: Through the Looking Glass*, presenting artifacts from the liminal space of the artistic imagination alongside still or moving images. In the Museum, handicraft is elevated to the status of symbol, garment becomes poetry, and above all the pleasures of cinema beckon the viewer to enter a world of sublime beauty or unspeakable melancholy. Maybe Wong Kar-wai is too busy to get involved with the creative direction for another exhibition, but surely there are other directors with suitable sensibilities to fill this role, someone with the same transnational pizzazz: Kore-eda perhaps, with his forays into French and Korean-language filmmaking; Tsai Ming-liang with his Malaysian roots and idiosyncratic gaze on Southeast Asia. We can accept for a given that the Museum's gift shop is already primed with merchandise. Limited edition tomes, designer jewelry, collaborations with local artisans, tote bags and shirts; these are among the capitalist wares that are peddled to the masses by an esteemed cultural institution such as this. Don't try to resist. After all, we have demonstrated an eagerness for consumption simply by coming here today.

Chapter 6: The Nonprofit

America is abundant in nonprofit organizations that serve as gathering grounds for civic interests, cultural communities, and activist undertakings. As of 2014, there were nearly 1.6 million such organizations in the United States, beyond which existed tens of thousands more “unregistered groups, clubs, churches, associations, coalitions, and initiatives” (LeRoux and Feeney 4). Around 40% of this total is comprised of churches, schools, and foundations, while a mere 7% are “museums, arts groups, and other cultural and humanities nonprofits” (“How Many Nonprofits”). Indeed, the wide range of social objectives and heterogeneous *raison d’être* make the nonprofit sector a somewhat elusive object of study. It is simultaneously “one of the most important components of American life . . . [and] one of the least understood” (Salamon 6). Though the Museum in Chapter 5 would technically fall under the broad category of the nonprofit, I believe that it deserves a separate analysis for its specific cultural aura and the ease with which the public engages its output. Similarly, I discuss the University in Chapter 9 as a standalone entity for the confluence of factors that find expression in its current state, especially in relation to the fields of Asian and Asian American studies and literature.

What, then, is the nonprofit that serves as the core focus of this chapter? To wit, I propose to examine how the American imaginary of East Asian cinemas is discursively constructed through the activities of two categories of nonprofit organizations: those that represent, to varying degrees of opacity or transparency, business communities and bilateral policy interests; and others that have risen as grassroots expressions of Asian minority subjectivities, especially in the realm of media. Both categories fulfill specific organizational functions that Lester M. Salamon has identified as the quintessence of the nonprofit: service,

advocacy, expression, community-building, and value stewardship. These functions are further shaped and nuanced by what Salamon calls “four partially conflicting impulses”: voluntarism, professionalism, civic activism, and commercialism (14). I argue that an influential array of nonprofits have helped craft the American public’s understanding of Asian and Asian American cinemas, as crystallized in the public programs of these organizations. And New York, the largest city and premier cultural hub in the United States, is necessarily the vector through which many of these activities take shape. I begin with a survey of a triptych of New York nonprofits that create bridges and enact dialogues with their counterpart communities in East Asia: China Institute, Japan Society, and Korea Society. I trace their histories and present a brief narrative of their curation of national cinemas for local audiences. Next, I look at several Asian American nonprofits that operate in an adjacent space of the nonprofit sector with a rather different agenda. I explore the origins of Asian CineVision, the organization behind the Asian American International Film Festival, and consider its cultural impact in tandem with that of Gold House, a relatively young nonprofit that coalesces financial and public relations support for both Asian and Asian American projects, cinematic and otherwise.

The Nonprofit of the transpacific elsewhere is an unassuming place. Compared to the Museum, its physical facilities may be on a much smaller scale, with only a single gallery and modest screening room open to the public, while the rest of the space is occupied by administrative offices. In spite of appearances, the Nonprofit has long been active in the domain of social interests and enjoys the backing of significant philanthropists who quietly push agendas and platform certain politics and ethos. Like the Museum, the Nonprofit is adept at crafting its own narrative, a necessary tool for the sake of the fundraising on which it relies. Public programs bolster this narrative and serve the broader mission around which the Nonprofit was formed: to build community in the transpacific elsewhere by presenting the

works of contemporary storytellers; to create cultural dialogues and promote mutual understanding. And cinema is merely one domain through which the Nonprofit exercises its power and fulfills its organizational mandate.

The Mundane and the Extraordinary

Among the three New York-based nonprofits that declare their connections to East Asian countries with minimalist, emphatic names, Japan Society is the oldest, having been established in May 1907 by two “heroes of the Russo-Japanese War” who quickly congregated a hundred members of the local community to form a business association for the promotion of bilateral ties (“Mission & History”). Among the initial American members were leaders of the legal, banking, and publishing industries. The stewardship of Japan Society by John D. Rockefeller III from 1952 to 1978 solidified the nonprofit’s cultural standing following World War II. The organization has occupied a landmark building near the United Nations since 1971, significant itself for being the first New York City designed by prominent Japanese architect Junzo Yoshimura. Nowadays, Japan Society has a theater accommodating 260 people, as well as a language center, library, and a lobby featuring Japanese cultural elements.

China Institute dates back to 1926, the joint effort of American educators John Dewey and Paul Monroe with Chinese diplomats Hu Shi and Kuo Ping-wen (“China Institute - Mission & History”). Since 1944, it has offered courses on Chinese language and culture under a charter by the Board of Regents of the University of the State of New York. In commemoration of the institute’s fortieth anniversary, the China House Gallery was inaugurated with its first exhibition (“China Institute - About Us”). Similar to Japan Society,

China Institute's public profile also took shape through the involvement of significant American philanthropists such as the Luce family: in 1944, Henry R. Luce offered the Midtown East building that the Institute would occupy for over seventy years, while his son Henry Luce III was elected Chairman of the Board of the Trustees in 1976. In 2015, the Institute relocated to a massive 41,000 square-foot space in Manhattan's Financial District where its primary operations currently comprise a school, a gallery, and a culinary center.

As for Korea Society, the organization was established in 1957 and has a stark connection to military experience, its inaugural leader General James A. Van Fleet "who commanded the U.S. armed forces in the final phase of the Korean War" ("About-Us"). The nonprofit's present incarnation appears to have absorbed other U.S.-based organs promoting bilateral ties, including a former foundation based in Washington, DC. Its board is currently chaired by Kathleen Stephens, a former American ambassador to South Korea, retaining the geopolitical and diplomatic tone from the time of its founding. Salamon's conceptualization of the voluntarism and professionalism that underlie nonprofit organizations is most evident in each of these three organizations. Voluntarism in this context refers to the nonprofit's operation for the "common good," which I tacitly understand as the normalized political and economic relations between America and Japan, China, and South Korea, values championed by the organizations' leadership, both historical and present-day. Professionalism, on the other hand, refers to "specialized, subject-matter knowledge gained through formal training and delivered by paid experts" (16). This dimension of the nonprofits' activities is apparent in their film programs, which I will address in a moment, as well as other ongoing lectures, roundtables, panel discussions, and conferences that seek to make legible East Asian cultures and societies for an urbanite American audience.

In a doctoral project that emphasizes the Asian diasporic cultural agents responsible for shaping American notions of East Asia, I must note that the leaders of all three of these

nonprofits are currently white men. Japan Society, China Institute, and Korea Society are led by Joshua Walker, James Heimowitz, and Thomas Byrne, respectively. Among them, Walker is the only who spent the bulk of his childhood in East Asia; he grew up in Hokkaido until the age of eighteen and considers himself “culturally half Japanese and half American” (Abe). Before taking the reins at Japan Society, he worked for Eurasia Group, the political risk consultancy, on global strategy. Heimowitz became president of China Institute in 2014 after a career in “finance, management consulting and public relations,” which included significant work in media for the 2008 Beijing Olympics (“China Institute Appoints”). Similarly, Byrne held senior roles at Moody’s Investors Service and previously worked as an economist, nurturing a connection to South Korea since an early three-year stint as a Peace Corps volunteer (“Thomas J. Byrne Joins”).

Perhaps it should be no surprise that the leadership of these nonprofits accord to such a stereotypical profile. My goal here is not to condone or condemn such an entrenched practice, but it would be remiss not to address the elephant in the room, especially in an era that places great importance on the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Indeed, the topic of diversity (or lack thereof) in American nonprofit leadership has been bubbling up for years already. As of 2019, nearly nine out of ten nonprofit CEOs and eight out of ten board members were white, grossly disproportionate with Black and Latino Americans and people of color who account for roughly 40% of the population of the United States (Keogh). Though an outlier like Joshua Walker may steward Japan Society with more nuance, given his upbringing in Japan, a sector-wide leadership represented by “mostly white men will inherently blinker . . . [perspectives],” as one Chinese nonprofit CEO articulated grimly (Xu).²²

²² My research into the history of these nonprofits revealed that their successive leaders of the 21st century have all been white men or women, with one exception: Motoatsu Sakurai, a former ambassador, who was appointed to the top role at Japan Society in 2009 (Pogrebin) and served for a decade (“Japan Society Announces”).

This predicament recalls Aihwa Ong's evocation of the term *transaction* in her conception of transnationality. The organizations I have highlighted thus far are nonprofit structures established to promote economic and cultural ties between America and the countries of East Asia; though they exist beyond the strictures of governmental diplomacy, per se, they are not fully extricated from such pressures. The leaders of these organizations are necessarily beholden to business interests on both sides, and especially the transnational, transpacific communities that are most invested, literally and spiritually, in the advancement of mutual prosperity. At the same time, the hiring of these figureheads is transactional insofar as their careers in finance and consulting appease a key constituent demographic that may be more inclined to trust people who look like them. Indeed, Walker, Heimowitz, Byrne, and their like could be said to represent the "class stratification linked to global systems of production" that Ong critiqued as an oversight of Appadurai's theories of cultural globalization (11). The mobility of privileged classes ultimately results from capitalist inequities. Though a deep dive into the biographies of these nonprofit CEOs is beyond the purview of this project, their socioeconomic context is salient evidence of the larger structures that undergird contemporary cultural flows. Their placement in these roles also demonstrates the reality that Asian diasporic cultural agents do not have sole authority in constructing the transpacific elsewhere.

Given the cinematic theme of this section of my dissertation, I want to examine the film programming that Japan Society, China Institute, and Korea Society offer to the New York public. These screenings could also be viewed from a transactional lens, a service rendered by the nonprofit to patrons and paying customers for their cultural edification and to nurture their aesthetic cosmopolitan palates. I will focus on Japan Society in particular, which

Though Sakurai was indeed the first person of Japanese nationality to hold this position, his pedigree in business and diplomacy was similar to that of his predecessors and successors.

has arguably curated the most robust film series among the three nonprofits. Among the most recent annual reports issued by these organizations, Japan Society is the only one to list film programming as its own discrete line, accounting for close to \$400,000 in operating expenses in the 2020-21 fiscal year (36) and nearly \$350,000 in 2021-22 (34). The report also acknowledges a significant number of cosponsors and supporters of the film program, including the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs and Japan Airlines (33).

The breadth and depth of cinematic offerings at Japan Society are the culmination of nearly half a century of program development. Following the success of Donald Richie's curated retrospective of Japanese film at the Museum of Modern Art in 1970, Japan Society moved to establish its own program "aimed at cultivating a deep appreciation and understanding of Japanese film culture" and launched these activities in 1979. The year 2007 saw the inaugural Japan Cuts festival, a showcase of contemporary film that continues to this day. Samuel Jamier, a coordinator of events and public programming at Korea Society, joined Japan Society in 2009 and ran the festival for several seasons, bringing his unique sensibilities as a Korean-French filmmaker to bear on Japanese cinema ("AMP Interviews"; Gabardi). "Japanese cinema is still both a prestigious and cool brand," Jamier noted in a 2013 interview, alluding to the renown of directors like Akira Kurosawa and Yasujiro Ozu (Mueller). In spite of this aura, "Americans still think of Japanese films as weird or difficult," creating a barrier to popular acceptance of contemporary works. Jamier's work through the vehicle of Japan Cuts and the hosting organization of Japan Society, then, could be viewed as a means to nurture the casual American viewer's receptiveness to newer cultural narratives.

Indeed, the dynamic was pithily described by *The New York Times* in 2008 when it lauded the Japan Cuts festival as "a chance to see the *mainstream* Japanese filmmaking that American distributors tend to ignore in favor of the *classics* or *creepy-bloody genre* blowouts" (Hale; emphasis added). It could be said that the festival promoted an alternate

vision of Japan centered on narratives of the everyday, highlighting the mundane and making Japanese stories feel at once more approachable and relatable to the American audience. Ordinary though these cinematic works may have been, they still diverged from what Samuel Jamier alluded to in his comment about preconceived images of Japanese film—that the storytellers of the 21st century either remained in the shadow of the titans of yesteryear, or their works were simply eclipsed by the more eccentric tendencies of their contemporaries. The 2008 write-up shines a light on the prevalence of Japanese film programming across the city, however. Besides Japan Cuts, a veritable barrage of Japanese films were screening across the city in this one week in early summer: a retrospective of the actor Tatsuya Nakadai at the downtown independent movie theater Film Forum; classic works by Ozu playing at East Village’s Anthology Film Archives; a series dedicated to animator Satoshi Kon at Midtown’s Lincoln Center; and a number of one-off Japanese features at the New York Asian Film Festival. The cosmopolitan appetites of New Yorkers for Japanese film is both mundane and extraordinary, in hindsight.

Following Samuel Jamier, Aiko Masubuchi succeeded as senior film programmer at Japan Society. During her five-year tenure, she organized a number of important programs that also pushed the boundaries and broadened horizons for the Japanese cinema scene in New York. One interviewer wryly noted that an organization like Japan Society might be expected to lean relatively conservative in its cultural programming, naming, once again, Ozu and Kurosawa (“maybe throw in a Miyazaki flick for the kids”) as the most vaunted filmmakers who would be an easy sell (Brandman). But Masubuchi took the enterprise into whole different directions in her work, introducing splashy but lesser known works such as the films of Kadokawa Studio in the 1980s.

A native of Tokyo, Masubuchi received a bilingual education in Japanese and English in international schools. She spoke earnestly of her commitment to Japan Society’s mission to

foster “dialogue between cultures” in this 2016 interview, while noting that its status as a nonprofit and nongovernmental organization allowed her a certain curatorial freedom. To read widely and experience international cinema were important personal habits that helped her cultivate her curiosity, which she in turn was bringing to her professional role. She was also distinctly conscious of Japan Society’s audience demographics, which might include a significant proportion of people with personal affiliations to Japan, in choosing what kinds of films to program and how to introduce them.

I propose to frame Masubuchi’s activities in this role (and Jamier, in his time) as *translational*, referring back to Aihwa Ong. As a film programmer for an influential organization like Japan Society, her professional role was to curate and frame specific lineages of Japanese cinema for the New York clientele of the nonprofit. Masubuchi is not only bilingual but bicultural, in view of her upbringing in Tokyo and subsequent studies at New York University and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (“Aiko Masubuchi”). In an American social context, she translates and presents Japaneseness by way of cinema as a cultural agent of the transpacific elsewhere, facilitating the arrival of new Japanese directors on American shores or packaging new sets of older stories to entice cosmopolitan moviegoers. Masubuchi has translated and interpreted Japanese, as well, for such cultural luminaries as Ryusuke Hamaguchi, Kirin Kiki, Haruki Murakami, and Joe Odagiri (“Bio”). In other words, she has offered her voice as a vehicle to convey messages and ideas by artists of international renown from her native Japan.

Masubuchi’s five-year stint at Japan Society is a remarkable demonstration of the means by which an East Asian culture was transmitted and enacted within a set of nested structures. Though Japan Society may have been born of business interests and has been steered by representatives of the global finance community, its film programs have demonstrated responsiveness to the tastes of New York’s cinephiles while shaping those very

tastes in turn. This latter dynamic is the symbiotic relationship upon which “East Asia” more broadly manifests nowadays. Meanwhile, the fundamental functions of the nonprofit organization, per Salamon, are fulfilled by Japan Society’s provision of a cinematic platform for public consumption. Such film screenings are inarguably a service to the cultural class of the moviegoing public in New York. While film entertainment may not be overt advocacy, individuals are nonetheless invited into the physical space of a nonprofit that espouses certain subtextual values about another country and culture. Artistic expression and community-building are part and parcel of such cinematic experiences. As for value stewardship, or “the value guardian function,” per Salamon, the patronization of a film program ultimately supports the mission of a nonprofit that promotes mutual understanding between nations and societies. Some of these functions, along with the four impulses that constitute and shape the nonprofit, take on a different tenor elsewhere within the same sector. In the next section, I will examine another type of nonprofit organization that is more rigorous in its dedication to the cinema and collapses the boundaries between Asian and Asian American storytelling.

Nonprofit Evolutions

The organization known as Asian CineVision traces its roots back to 1975, when a group of activists banded together to establish a television channel to promote “sociocultural awareness to the experiences and history of Asian Americans” (“History”). Initially focused on Chinese language content, Chinese Cable TV (CCTV), as it was known, quickly pivoted to a broader scope and reoriented its mission to produce film and video portrayals of both Asian and Asian American communities. Since 1978, the organization has run the Asian American International Film Festival (AAIFF). Participating films have come from over forty

countries, representing the entirety of East Asia, a significant swath of South and Southeast Asia, and many other regions.²³ Significantly, the AAIFF has served as a venue for the debut works of iconic directors such as Wayne Wang (*The Joy Luck Club*) and Ang Lee (*The Wedding Banquet*). Its organizational mythology extends to the physical space of its founding, a loft that was purportedly occupied by Hong Kong director Tsui Hark at the time.

“A prime reason Asians are making films in this country is to destroy stereotypes,” declared Michael Chu, festival coordinator of the AAIFF for its fifth cycle in 1982 (Fraser). This early reportage on the film festival mentions New York University as one of the screening venues, intimating a connection between the cinematically driven nonprofit and the university, a nonprofit of a different nature whose role in crafting the transpacific elsewhere I address in Chapter 9. As for the AAIFF, its border-crossing nature and coalescence or conflation of Asia with Asian America was already apparent over four decades ago. The 1982 lineup included screenings of Wayne Wang’s *Chan is Missing*; several early Hollywood features starring the pioneering Japanese actor Sessue Hayakawa; contemporary documentaries about Southeast Asian refugees and Chinese literary titans; and experimental works by Yoshiko Chuma, a Japanese filmmaker based in New York. Given its focus on identity politics and discrete platform of a film festival, I contend that Asian CineVision typifies the impulses of civic activism and commercialism that Salamon sees undergirding the American nonprofit. This activism does not hinge on the rectification of specific social ills, per se, but rather the broadening and nuancing of media representation for the Asian American minority subject. I note that “unequal access to opportunities” (17), suggested by Salamon as an inciting factor for civic activism, could ostensibly refer to structural imbalances in the film industry that historically hindered directors or actors of Asian descent.

²³ Per the ACV history webpage, all East Asian nation-states, with the exception of North Korea, have been represented by the filmmakers at the AAIFF; even Tibet is mentioned separately in the list.

As for commercialism, this is apparent in the container of the film festival—a form of circulation, per Appadurai—and its highly public, outward-facing nature that seeks to draw audiences and attract attention by its very nature. Unlike the rather staid “subject-matter professionalism” of a public program on economic development or regional security at China Institute, Japan Society, or Korea Society, an organization like Asian CineVision funnels the professionalism impulse through its commercial vehicle to serve its founding principles.

As Marisa Hicks-Alcaraz and Eve Oishi summarize, the film festival can be conceptualized as an imagined community and public sphere where global and local intersect. So-called identity-based festivals have been critiqued for their neoliberal underpinnings while also lauded as sites of community-building potentiality. Drawing upon their personal experiences as curators, Hicks-Alcaraz and Oishi acknowledge the validity of both arguments as a paradoxical reality that nonetheless does not preclude the significance and lasting influence of the festival as an activist space. Indeed, AAIFF was born in the 1970s when the civil rights furor of the previous decade was still fresh and Asian CineVision, its parent nonprofit, was in the business of providing video workshops for budding storytellers. In its 2022 lineup, the festival hearkened back to its activist roots with a spate of politically driven films that drew increased public interest due to the recent acts of violence perpetrated against the Asian American community. “Racism is mitigated by empathy,” one manager of the AAIFF waxed quixotically, “and films have the power to provide that” (Havis).

Festivals are not simply recording history, of course, but also actively inscribing their own narratives and cultural memories onto the moviegoing community. In addition, festivals incite cross-border movements of the films themselves and the filmmakers, thus weaving a web of creative interchanges that recall both Aihwa Ong and Arjun Appadurai. Ong’s notion of the transversal is an apt visualization, the storyteller and his cinematic work a single line that intersects with the manifold lines of audience members or communities worldwide. With

the film festival casting multiple lines forward, the image that emerges of these parallel transversals is a matrix or fine mesh: still tenuous perhaps but surprisingly durable, endowed with shape and substance. The nonprofit and its associated film festival are constructing imagined worlds ordered on their own logic, whether Japan Society with Japan Cuts or Asian CineVision with the Asian American International Film Festival. Incited to travel by these occasions, film festival participants are very much another mobile demographic of the contemporary transpacific ethnoscape, a broad group that encompasses filmmakers, actors, producers, media representatives, and journalists, not to mention programmers, curators, businesspeople, students, and so on. The development of filmmaking by digital video over the past decades feeds into Appadurai's notion of the uneven technoscape, quietly emergent in America while unleashing a whole generation of Chinese creativity.²⁴

Finally, the festival itself is both mediascape and ideoscape insofar as the collected films become a repertoire of "images, narratives, and ethnoscapings" (35) destined for consumption by a global audience, to be digested and understood as part of a discrete imagined world and, in the case of identity-based vehicles like Japan Cuts or AAIFF, serving as the purveyor of a grassroots ideology that furthers the aims of the nonprofit. Appadurai identifies the ideoscape as a "concatenation of images" (36), and I can think of no more pertinent example than the various cinematic narratives of the film festival, represented by one frame each, spliced into cohesion and presented as a showcase of a particular culture or community.

As Appadurai notes, the understanding of such ideology is heavily dependent on the context in which it is received. A festival like Japan Cuts may enjoy enduring popularity due

²⁴ The phenomenon of emergent Chinese filmmakers' relationship to digital video is somewhat incidental to my project, but it bears mentioning that this topic has been explored at length in scholarly works such as Zhang Zhen's edited volume *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century* (Duke UP, 2007). In addition, the New York-based film distribution company dGenerate Films boasts an exclusive catalog of works by contemporary Chinese filmmakers engaged in such practices and mediums.

to factors such as the remarkable passion that contemporary New Yorkers have shown towards Japanese cinema, as noted earlier, with Kurosawa, Miyazaki, and Ozu as the mainstream figureheads. I contend it also cannot be disentangled from the psychical space that Japan itself occupies in the 21st century. For the average American who is not deeply involved in the governmental sector, Japan is a political ally that poses no ideological or economic threat. As such, its cultural commodities can be enjoyed without compunction, the allure of Japaneseness easily indulged in everything from noodles (Chapter 1) and cocktail culture (Chapter 3) to literature (Chapter 8). These avenues of cultural interchange only become intensified when the American consumer is able to travel to Japan itself, whisked away to the other side of the transpacific ethnoscape for a full-on immersion in the dreamlike mediascape of tourism.

The Asian American International Film Festival, on the other hand, is more of a mosaic ideoscape, especially as it conjoins Asian and Asian American communities, as previously noted. AAIFF and Asian CineVision could be viewed as the East Coast counterpart of another Asian American nonprofit dating to the 1980s, the San Francisco-based Center for Asian American Media (CAAM), and its annual CAAMFest, formerly known as the San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival. CAAM was originally established as the National Asian American Telecommunications Association (NAATA), itself one of five “Minority Consortia” financed by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a primary backer of America’s storied Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). As noted by Erin Högerle, the nonprofit that would later be renamed CAAM and the film festival that it operates are mutually entwined, “augmenting each other in their purpose of encouraging *purposeful creation, circulation and transformation of memory*” (40, emphasis added). Högerle points to educational films screened at CAAMFest in the late 2010s as an example of how the festival sheds light on Asian American minority experience. This is

certainly echoed in the activities and positionality of AAIFF in the contemporary era. Among the five primary functions of the nonprofit identified by Salamon, an Asian American organization that produces a film festival undoubtedly serves as a vehicle for advocacy, expression, and community-building as recounted above. Asian CineVision and CAAM are also part of the massive sector of nonprofit arts and culture organizations in America that are “managed by full-time staff and produce or present artworks that meet professional standards for quality and attract paying audiences” (Toepler and Wyszomirski 230).

“[Cultural identity] is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture,” writes Stuart Hall. “Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power” (“Cultural Identity” 225). The “play” to which Hall refers could be construed as the manipulations of memory described by Högerle. As mentioned in my introductory chapter, the Asian American community itself has been scrutinized and critiqued for grouping millions of people of incredibly disparate racial, ethnic, national, and socioeconomic backgrounds under one uneasy identity category. The term “Asian American” itself was coined in the 1960s by activist and historian Yuji Ichioka and then inscribed onto a broadly envisioned collection of minority classes in the United States (K. Kang). More than half a century later, Asian American cultural identity has drawn much closer to the vector of Asianness itself, a result of the profuse traffic in people, images, and ideas that Appadurai found apparent in fin-de-siècle globalization. Nonprofit organizations are among the entities that attempt to bridge the gap between Asia and Asian America. The conflation or alignment of these communities, in my view, is powerful and necessary. Beyond mere optics or symbolism, it calls for Asian Americans to remember the histories of migration that led to

their existence today and creates new spaces of transnational exchange and dialogue to envision a self beyond the borders of the United States.

Money Matters; or, Going Gold

I want to conclude this chapter with a personal anecdote and brief overview of a newer nonprofit that has played an active role in shaping Asian America in recent years. In the late 2010s, while living in New York City, I received complimentary tickets to attend two film screenings that I had been interested in at the time: *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), directed by Jon M. Chu, and *Parasite* (2019), directed by Bong Joon-ho. Both were presented under the auspices of a social media campaign with the hashtag #GoldOpen. The latter screening was held at the IFC Center in Greenwich Village with an ordinary mixed crowd; not everyone had received a complimentary ticket, I surmised. The former took place at Regal Union Square and was packed with almost exclusively Asian or Asian American audience members. The film was even introduced by someone who'd helped orchestrate the buyout of the theater to celebrate the arrival of the first Hollywood film with an all-Asian cast since *The Joy Luck Club*.

#GoldOpen, as it turns out, is a project of Gold House, a self-described “premier nonprofit collective of Asian founders, creative voices, and leaders dedicated to unifying the world’s largest populace” (“About”). Among the nonprofit cultural agents in the cinematic construction of the transpacific elsewhere, Gold House could perhaps be considered to have the broadest base of all. Unlike Asian CineVision or CAAM, this organization is not exclusively focused on media and film, per se. Nor is Gold House aligned with the bilateral business communities associated with Japan Society and the like, nonprofits that also

organize film screenings as part of more extensive programs of cultural transmission. Gold House is instead headed by a group of wealthy Asian Americans with ties to the tech industry and an expansive mission to support Asian and Asian diasporic representation across all sectors of American life. It was founded in 2018 by Bing Chen, an investor who had formerly worked at Google and YouTube (Loizos). With the diversification of media portrayals of Asians as a top goal, Gold House's bread-and-butter income seems to come from its cultural consulting services for films and creative projects. Somewhat incongruously, the nonprofit seeks to remedy the proportionally low number of people of Asian descent serving in leadership roles in the corporate world. As such, Gold House is neither a grassroots arts and culture nonprofit like Asian CineVision, nor a foundation operating under a corporate mandate and framework like Japan Society. Instead, I see Gold House as a permutation of the nonprofit dedicated to civic participation and advocacy, a space for the sharing of social capital to "solve community problems, promote causes, and seek redress or change" (Boris and Maronick 394).

As of May 2023, the #GoldOpen campaign has boosted over twenty film openings in the United States, its lineup a comprehensive sweep of Asian American mainstream cinema in recent years ("Promote"). Apart from the previously mentioned works by Chu and Bong, both of which garnered significant attention, #GoldOpen has been deployed to support Asian American dramatic features like Aneesh Chaganty's *Searching* (2018), Lulu Wang's *The Farewell* (2019), Lee Isaac Chung's *Minari* (2021), Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert's *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022), and Adele Lim's *Joy Ride* (2023), as well as blockbusters and children's films like *Abominable* (2019), *Mulan* (2020), and *Eternals* (2021). Gold House's webpage touts a three-tier process of engagement strategy, influencer marketing, and grassroots activation to support the visibility and financial success of these titles. Ultimately, the campaign seems to be premised on brute capital, with an aim to boost

awareness and “guarantee success of these films through theater buyouts and increased individual and bulk ticket purchases” (Tangcay). Gold House has extended its efforts to support Latinx representation through a partnership with the National Association of Latino Independent Producers (NALIP) for the launch of *In the Heights* (2021), in addition to a “Black and Gold Open” campaign directed at the biopic *Just Mercy* (2019) with a leading Black cast. It bears noting that both of these films were directed by Asian American men: Jon M. Chu of *Crazy Rich Asians* fame and Destin Daniel Cretton, later to helm the Asian-led superhero flick *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021), respectively. *Shang-Chi* was also a #GoldOpen title, of course.

In recent months, Gold House has continued to make headlines by announcing major partnerships and projects that demonstrate its powerful connections to the top echelons of American industry. It launched the Gold House Creative Equity Fund “to identify, develop, produce and promote AAPI content” with the backing of major talent agency WME in May 2023 (Donnelly). The Gold Journalism Accelerator, in collaboration with companies such as *Forbes* and Rotten Tomatoes, was launched in August 2023 and aims to deepen a selected cohort’s fluency with the media industry and establish a “more inclusive and representative journalism landscape, where Asian Pacific writers play an integral role in shaping narratives that define our present and future” (“Gold House Launches”). The A100 List and Gold Gala, held in May, honored “Asian Pacific leaders impacting American culture and society” across a broad spectrum of domains, an eclectic roster that included Japanese baseball star Shohei Otani, Malaysian actress Michelle Yeoh (see Chapter 4: The Movie Theater), and Lee Sung Jin, Ali Wong, and Steven Yeun, the creative forces behind the acclaimed Netflix series *Beef*. Gold House’s leadership noted that this extravaganza sat alongside other milestones such as its initial public offering and the Oscars wins of *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (Tinoco). Though the latter is not the nonprofit’s own achievement by any means, Gold House’s

ongoing box office campaigns allow it to claim some credit, however marginal, for the mainstream, highly visible honors accorded by the Academy Awards.

Flush with money from the corporate world, the organization touts a sweeping, aspirational vision of Asian and Asian American equity, as evidenced by these latest public programs and initiatives. The nonprofit functions of service, advocacy, expression, community-building, and value stewardship, for Gold House, all center on creating opportunities for and enhancing the reputation of a transnational, transpacific Asian community and culture that apparently subsumes everything from YouTube to Pokemon, according to its founder, Bing Chen. Growing up between Shanghai and Tennessee, Chen was inspired by his bicultural background and transnational mobility to create a company that aims to “not just unify different continents but unify people to help build a better tomorrow.” His quixotic aims are echoed by those of his colleague Oscar Wong, and their company is now working towards extending its influence across the Pacific with a new hub of activity in Singapore (Goh).

Gold House originally surfaced in the late 2010s through its unabashed efforts to bolster the fiscal success of Asian and Asian American films. Given that many of the titles supported by #GoldOpen are major studio efforts by the likes of Disney, Marvel, and Warner Bros., it’s hard to know how much a series of theater buyouts made an impact. I can easily imagine, though, that this promotional campaign has been beneficial for independent features such as *The Farewell* and *Minari*. Fitting that Bing Chen and his colleagues have loftier goals for their nonprofit and seem intent on breaching the boundaries between industries, nations, and cultures, attesting to the omnivorous logic of global capital in the frenzied ethnoscape and mediascape of the 21st century. In this chapter, I have presented three clustered case studies of nonprofit organizations exerting energy and influence on the reception of Asian and Asian American cinemas. Though these organizations are remarkably different in history,

scale, and profile, they have all played an active role in increasing the accessibility of cinematic works that ultimately have the power to shape the American public's understanding of both East Asia and Asian America. The parallel mediascapes here demonstrate difference "in and alongside continuity" (Hall, "Cultural Identity" 227). It goes without saying that the Asian minority subject in America occupies a very different social position than the Asian who lives in Asia. Yet their films are presented together, borders collapsed or removed by festivals such as AAIFF and CAAMFest; or the narratives of another country, the transpacific elsewhere, are shaped by programmers of Asian descent at historic and influential organizations like Japan Society. Meanwhile, an upstart nonprofit like Gold House, with ample money, resources, and confidence, has also acknowledged the persistent primacy of the cinematic medium in the contemporary world. But its mission to augment Asian screen success is only one tier of its overarching goal to help Asian creatives and entrepreneurs claim positions of power. "People share ideas, mobilize around a cause, and create communities of interest" through the internet, observed Elizabeth T. Boris and Matthew Maronick in 2012, in their analysis of nonprofits centered on civic participation and advocacy (395). Clearly, Gold House's formation is a direct result of the cultural zeitgeist of Asian diasporic storytelling, while its continued activities and projects under development respond to other areas of perceived demand. These nonprofit organizations and the activities they undertake demonstrate the complex dynamics of cultural agents and the networks they create, uphold, or leverage in constructing a vision of a transpacific Asian America in the 21st century.

Chapter 7: The Bookstore

Asian American writers have stepped into the spotlight at last, proclaimed *The Guardian* in 2017, describing a small wave of novelists as “one of the hottest trends of the year” (M. Liu). Six years is an eternity in the contemporary world, and this article reads optimistic at best, facile at worst, for its proclamation that such narratives in the mainstream help the reading public “resist attacks on immigrants’ rights and . . . see refugees as individuals with unique stories.” I do not discount the contributions of writers and the real influence they wield, but believe that their status in American society is much more complex. I will address some of these nuances in the proceeding three chapters, the final section of my dissertation, by examining how Asian American writers engage with East Asia by way of their creative production and professional lives. Korean American novelist Min Jin Lee’s multigenerational family saga *Pachinko* is perhaps the most prominent recent example of contemporary Asian America’s literary mediation of heritage, identity, and representation by looking across the Pacific. Released in 2017, Lee’s novel charts the course of a Korean clan over the course of a century, from the eve of Japanese colonization near Busan and the tumult of the early 20th century to further diasporic journeys to New York, Nagano, and elsewhere. The book received numerous accolades upon its publication, with one commentator noting that “history itself is a character” (Krys Lee) and many others lauding Lee for drawing attention to the “relatively overlooked history of the large ethnic-Korean community in Japan” (Aw). Purportedly the result of two decades of research (Luo), *Pachinko* was subsequently adapted into a TV series and premiered on Apple TV+. In an interview with *The New Yorker*’s Michael Luo, Lee talked about the importance of Asian American visibility, discourse, and even disagreement in an era of social turbulence and discriminatory

violence.²⁵ Her engagement with the political in her fiction and through her social media platforms has thrust her into the spotlight, willingly or not, as ambassador of an Asian America that is neither isolated from its past or disconnected from its roots, but rather the opposite: finding empowerment in heritage and history, reaching across borders and back in time to locate oneself today.

The Bookstore of the transpacific elsewhere is a quiet but friendly establishment with a predominantly English-language selection. Here you'll find a repository of popular Asian American literature from Maxine Hong Kingston to Min Jin Lee; fiction and poetry translated from various Asian languages into English; works of nonfiction, like the oeuvre of Iris Chang, and cultural criticism, in the vein of Jiayang Fan, Hua Hsu, or Jay Caspian Kang; and many more tomes of history, philosophy, art, politics, and spirituality. Don't be fooled into thinking this is an uptight environment, though. Fans of Kevin Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asians* franchise can get their fix, as well as customers looking for something in the Young Adult category: *Loveboat, Taipei* by Abigail Hing Wen, *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* by Jenny Han, *These Violent Delights* by Chloe Gong. The bookstore also has a robust section dedicated to zines by artists and writers and independent anglophone magazines distributing content from and about Asia or Asian diasporas, including *FAR—NEAR*, *The Mekong Review*, *Monkey Business*, *The Shanghai Literary Review*, and *Sine Theta*.²⁶ With this rich array of merchandise, the Bookstore provides a kaleidoscopic lens onto Asian and Asian American literary narratives, broadly conceived, in a time when forces of globalization have created a whirlpool of transmedial influence that impacts readers across the world. As a physical hub of culture, the Bookstore also hosts regular events and public programs for those

²⁵ Luo's interview with Lee was published in February 2022. In October that year, he moderated a panel on "Identity and Craft" at the New Yorker Festival that included Lee and other Asian Americans from the creative sector, as I document in the introduction.

²⁶ For more on the Asian American indie magazine, see Fu, "Within and Beyond: Indie Magazines and the Asian Diasporic Subject," *Movable Type*, no. 15, forthcoming 2023.

residing in or simply visiting the transpacific elsewhere. Book launches and panel discussions energize and feed into the metropolitan discourse on the latest topical issues, while partnered events with the Movie Theater, the Cocktail Bar, or other venues make space for multiple communities to converge.

In this chapter, I examine two disparate articulations of Asian America's contemporary literary entanglement with East Asia. I use Min Jin Lee's *Pachinko* as an entry point into talking about Asian American fiction writers whose narratives grapple with Asian history or highlight the contemporary landscapes of urban East Asia for popular anglophone consumption. Then I look at the activities and publications of Asian diasporic translators, and the organizations that support them, in broadening and diversifying Asian literature in translation for a modern readership. Both of these strands of literary production meet in the Bookstore, an unassuming but significant site of the transpacific elsewhere that bridges discourses and reinforces vernacular cosmopolitanism in everyday practice. I depart for this exploration of the literary realm in the spirit of Stefan Helgesson et al., who contend that the current geopolitical world order and "the ubiquitous presence of digital media . . . weaken the explanatory value of the nation state and the national language as the privileged loci of the production and reading of literature" (ix). They propose a vernacular-cosmopolitan lens to address the object at hand, that is, literary analysis in the 2020s. The formation of this "methodological starting point" is the culmination of recent tensions between two broad streams of literary analysis in the academy: one that privileges the circulation of literary texts and relies on quantitative data and sociological frames to support its arguments, another that finds polyvalent and synecdochal significance in discrete literatures as both evidence of global processes and a key to understanding them. Importantly, the hyphenation of vernacular-cosmopolitan in this instance is indicative of a scale that situates these terms as opposite endpoints. Helgesson and his collaborators use this summary to introduce their

project on literary circulations to and from Sweden. They abstain from assigning weight to either the vernacular or the cosmopolitan, advocating instead for a case-by-case approach.

Here I would like to pause and return to Appadurai's notion of vernacular cosmopolitanism, as it provides a useful complement and contrast to the work of Helgesson and his collaborators. Appadurai presents vernacular cosmopolitanism not as a binary scale but a vantage point that he describes interchangeably as "cosmopolitanism from below." Certainly, this framework represents "a wish to connect with a wider world" and "resists the boundaries of class, neighborhood, and mother-tongue," but it is not necessarily situated or enacted against an imagined global community (198). Vernacular is used in this context as an adjective, not an antonym. It describes the motley makeup of a particular urban community in Mumbai for Appadurai, while cosmopolitanism is the disposition from which they find strength and solidarity beyond the individual. He later goes so far as to say that cosmopolitanism for the urban poor of Mumbai is not simply an ideal, but a compulsory instrument for overcoming structural inequalities. This is a provocative notion that I would like to use for my discussion of Asian America's engagement with contemporary fiction. Through these next three chapters, I will argue that a broad conception of the self that encompasses narratives from within the U.S. and across the Pacific has allowed for the formation of a pliant yet durable subjectivity in the face of contemporary social unrest. The vernacular inflection is staunchly American, but the cosmopolitan ideal is detached from the nation-state and decidedly transpacific in character. And perhaps there is no more accessible gathering ground for both readers and writers than the Bookstore, a place where stories and generations converge into thrumming potentiality and diffuse once more into colorful, kaleidoscopic brilliance, like fireworks in the sky.

History Redux

A long tradition exists of Western writers “producing and consuming the culture, people, flavors, sights, and sounds of Asia as an object of desire and fantasy,” but Asian American writers have been at the fore of subverting these tropes in the contemporary world, notes Denise Cruz. Cruz’s critical essay focuses on Korean American author Chang-rae Lee and also references the emergence of the Asian American studies field, both topics I address more thoroughly in Chapter 9. Notable, however, is the Asian cultural panorama she observes in urban gastronomy, cinema, literature, and music trends, which necessarily inform the contemporary consumer’s reception of these kaleidoscopic narratives. Min Jin Lee’s *Pachinko* has emerged as a cultural touchstone that has brought greater visibility to Korean and Japanese history, breaking new ground within a domain into which previous generations of Asian American writers had also ventured. *Pachinko* quietly echoes Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* and Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* as an exploration of historical forces that have propelled Asian diasporic journeys, with women characters as an organizing principle that brings into relief the trials and tribulations of migration. While Kingston invokes the legend of Mulan, the fate of a long-deceased aunt, and even her own mother’s past life in China as quasi-mythology, Lee’s fictional matriarch Sunja anchors the chronological narrative of *Pachinko* as it unfolds from the backstory of her parentage in the late 19th century to her later life in Japan in the 1980s. Tan’s debut novel is perhaps a more apt comparison, given its cultural impact and subsequent movie adaptation, as well as its thematic focus on the complex histories of geopolitical conflict and social upheaval that shape the lives of its protagonists.²⁷ One might even consider these three novels as intertexts,

²⁷ Not all Asian American fiction takes up the dramatic entanglements of history, of course. Celeste Ng is perhaps emblematic of another faction within the literary realm, one that focuses exclusively on American society and subjectivities with Asianness, when it does appear, relegated to social commentary. Like the work of Lee and Tan, *Little Fires Everywhere*, Ng’s second novel, found enough commercial success to be adapted for

per Yunte Huang, that together constitute an important foundation for an Asian American literary canon. Kingston, Lee, and Tan together perform a kind of translation of Chinese or Korean histories in which they subsume and bypass “the foreign linguistic features [of the source materials] . . . by producing a fluent style of narrative” for anglophone consumption (154). *Pachinko*, for example, was born from Lee’s experience of learning about Zainichi Koreans in college and her subsequent research into this sociocultural history conducted over the course of several decades, including a four-year stint in Tokyo (Stacks).

Huang is cynical about the performance and translation of such works, however. “What can be and is being accepted into the canon are mostly ethnic writings that conform to standard language practice,” he charges. “What hides behind these moves is, again, a positivistic assumption that there is a life experience (of immigrants and the white middle class alike) that can be represented in a universal language—in this case, standard English” (155). He goes on to critique Kingston’s visual description of Chinese characters in *The Woman Warrior* as an example of this linguistic flattening, later invoking Gertrude Stein for instrumentalizing the English language in service of the political. But I find this perspective somewhat frustrating for placing the burden on an already marginalized group to innovate its way into prominence. How else can or should minority identity be interpellated in fiction, if not in standard English? Certainly there have been some outliers that have exerted significant influence on the canon of American literature; Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee* comes to

TV, this time through the vehicle of a Hulu mini-series starring Reese Witherspoon and Kerry Washington. Notably, the novel does not address any part of the Asian American experience at all, focusing rather on strained race relations between Black and white families in suburban Ohio. Ng, unlike Lee, seems hesitant and even awkward when it comes to discussing race, even though her debut novel (*Everything I Never Told You*) and latest release (*Our Missing Hearts*) both feature Asian and white mixed-race families. When she came into the public spotlight through her debut work, media outlets began to cast her as an expert and talking head who could provide commentary on Asian American issues. “I guess I should say something worthwhile,” Ng recounts of her self-conscious equivocations during this time (Feldman). Nonetheless, Ng and writers like her deserve a place in the bookstore of the transpacific elsewhere. Their stories are a vital component of the literary discourse, regardless of their thematic choices.

mind.²⁸ In my opinion, popular literature certainly deserves critique and some degree of skepticism, but the translational power that Asian American and other minority writers wield is not to be discounted. The first line of Lee's *Pachinko* preempts this very discussion. "History has failed us, but no matter," she writes (5). It is the author herself who makes history, whether Korean, Japanese, East Asian, or Asian American, legible for the lay reader.

In this sense, Asian American fiction can be said to play into the vernacular-cosmopolitan spectrum of Edfeldt et al. in the first volume of the project introduced by Helgesson et al. While Appadurai's vernacular cosmopolitanism might be apt for envisaging the Asian American readership that resonates and identifies with such narratives as *Pachinko*, regardless of their own background, those involved in the production of the text itself oscillate between the tendencies to cosmopolitanize or vernacularize; in other words, to "[adapt] a text in a generalist way, playing down its source culture particularities" or to "[highlight] these very particularities" (Edfeldt et al. 2). Those who successfully tread this line widen the audience for the work, as seen in the case of film and TV adaptations of *The Joy Luck Club* and *Pachinko*.²⁹ Turning back to Amy Tan, it was her breakout work that created a "wave of intensive academic and popular interest in Asian American mother-daughter literature and brought Asian American women writers to a large readership" towards the end of the 20th century (Schultermandl, "Politics" 79). The psychical space occupied by China and Chinese history in Tan's debut work feels antiquated in some ways, the product of an era in which the People's Republic was still nascent on the world stage and the havoc of World War II relatively fresh. How quickly geopolitics have shifted course in the decades since the book's publication in 1989 and the release of the film in 1993. China

²⁸ See journal articles by Hyo K. Kim and Jennifer Gayoung Lee for a tiny sample of the academic works that analyze the formal and stylistic significance of *Diçtee*. I suspect that the morbid circumstances of her early demise are also a significant factor for her enduring legacy, but this is beyond the purview of my current project.

²⁹ I do not wish to minimize Kingston's impact on the Asian American and American literary canon, but note that her work belongs to an earlier era and different ethos. For more on her career in the academy, see Chapter 9: The University.

nowadays reads quite differently for the average American, both in terms of its political and economic significance and the wide range of anxieties associated with its rise. Many contemporary writers have taken up the subject matter of China's brazen urbanism and cutthroat development through reportage, memoirs, short stories, and novels; Evan Osnos and Peter Hessler come to mind as journalists who have both contributed significantly nuanced narratives to Americans' understanding of the country. But I want to focus on Asian American storytellers once more and turn my lens onto An Yu, Te-Ping Chen, and Xuan Juliana Wang, young women writers who debuted within several years of each other and offer idiosyncratic tales of contemporary China informed by their own diasporic histories and eclectic interests.

Wang's short story collection *Home Remedies* ricochets between America, Europe, and China primarily through tales of the Chinese nouveau riche, and its endless supply of prodigal sons and party girls. Drawing upon the writer's own experience living in Beijing in her early twenties, the collection examines the way in which identities "seismically shift under the rapid forces of globalization" and also encapsulates the rapid development of Chinese society as it has leapfrogged from the staid socialism of the 1980s to the frenetic heyday of the present (Lange). "Her voice comes to us from the edge of a new world," writes the poet Carol Muske-Dukes, citing Wang's culturally fluid character studies and lyrical engagement with the Chinese language even whilst writing in English. Moving beyond the somber traumas of history, Wang's protagonists tend to be reckless youth drifting in Beijing, Paris, or New York, "imagining the future and unburdening the past" to offer wholly fresh perspectives on Chineseness in the globalized world (Wellford). In other words, Wang translates a new archetype of Chinese experience and identity for the anglophone reader. Gone are the tearjerking parables of swan feathers and the ruptures of history made nearly cliché by *The Joy Luck Club*'s very success. The characters and stories of *Home Remedies*

showcase the glitzy urbanism of Chinese cosmopolitanism, vernacularized by the steady hand of Wang: “We are the generation who awoke to consciousness listening to rock and roll and who fed ourselves milk, McDonald’s, and box sets of *Friends*. We are not our parents, with their loveless marriages and party-assigned jobs, and we are out to prove it” (22).

Asian American identity has long been shaped by “entry, reentry, expulsion, remigration, and movement across and between borders,” point out the editors of *Transnational Asian American Literature: Sites and Transits* (Lim et al. 1). Lim and her colleagues believe that, while grounded or “sited” in the empirical reality of the United States, Asian America nonetheless differs dramatically from other ethnically categorized minority cultures for lack of a unifying historical narrative, as in the African American experience, or a shared linguistic heritage, like that of the hispanophone diaspora. In other words, the fundamental incoherence of Asian America rears its ugly head once more. I agree with this general point, but also wish to counter the essentialism implied in the juxtaposition with other minority American communities. After all, the Black experience in America encompasses more diverse groups of recent migration, complicating the impulse to homogenize the entire population under the historical trauma of the transatlantic slave trade. Similarly, there surely exists a rich array of strata and substrata for Spanish-speaking Americans who may trace their origins to any number of countries around the world, each with its own set of unique political and economic divisions that don’t simply dissolve into harmony upon migration or displacement into the United States.

Silvia Schultermandl, who has written extensively on matrilineal themes in Asian American literature, including those in Amy Tan’s fiction, more recently coined the term “ambivalent transnational belonging” to describe a particular dimension of diasporic American writing today. Though transnational subjectivities may “exist between or outside national frameworks . . . [they] are nevertheless interpellated through the nation-state and

through particular myths about liberal, sentimental, or cosmopolitan subjects” (“Introduction” 2). While the writers I have discussed in this chapter come from diverse immigrant trajectories and write about characters who inhabit liminal cultural spaces themselves, their fiction nonetheless is produced in an anglophone American context. The triple lenses of liberalism, sentimentalism, and cosmopolitanism in transnational narratives do not suggest a utopian alternative to the nation-state, Schultermandl is careful to point out. Rather, they unearth “transnationalism’s own affinities with empire, and the racial biopolitics and gender ideals through which nation-states interpellate subjects” (16). One need only think of Min Jin Lee’s Korean characters maneuvering the cultural hostilities of their former imperial masters in Japan, or Xuan Juliana Wang’s tales of scandal-plagued scions adrift in Beijing or rural America, to understand how transnational migration itself is complicit with colonization, capitalism, and other hegemonic forces of our globalized present.

What of An Yu and Te-Ping Chen then? These two authors present yet another view onto the kaleidoscopic cosmopolitanism of China, mediated through the ambivalence of Asian American writing. Unlike the narratives of Wang or Lee, An and Chen present characters who inhabit China exclusively—the diasporic journey abroad simply isn’t part of the storylines there. It could be said that An is the most conspicuous outlier among this crop of contemporary literary fiction, as a Beijing native who moved to New York at the age of eighteen (“An Yu”). Her debut novel *Braised Pork* is also set primarily in Beijing, rather than the American metropole. “It’s the city Yu [sic] was born and raised in, and you can tell,” observes Karen Cheung in *The New York Times*. “[The] pages throb with the isolation of life in a metropolis.” Speaking of Southeast Asian anglophone literature and its diasporic American counterparts, Christopher B. Patterson fuses the political and cultural frameworks of K. S. Maniam and Lloyd Fernando to present what he calls transitive culture, or “a set of shifting cultural practices tactically mobilized in contexts where identity is defined as fixed

and authentic” (4). The anglophone Asian American community is essentially a transitive culture, a shifting terrain that is continually remade by individual and collective experiences of movement and estrangement and finds expression in myriad creative forms like the novel. Reviewers of An Yu’s *Braised Pork* were quietly enthralled by its generic pastiche and resonance as a modern day fable of sorts. In the words of Shahidha Bari, the novel is “part domestic noir and part esoteric folk myth . . . a story about a young woman finding her feet in modern metropolitan China.” Fairly or not, the book also drew multiple comparisons with Haruki Murakami for its surrealism and melancholia (Bari; Cummins; French; Goncharova; Heath). The remarkable eagerness of the literary establishment to highlight this connection speaks to both Murakami’s instant recognizability as a brand or style of literature and the aura of ambivalent transnationalism, per Schultermandl, of English narratives about Asia. Jia Jia, the protagonist of *Braised Pork*, is newly widowed in urban Beijing, but her social identity as a Chinese millennial is interpellated not through the Chinese state but the anglo-American worldview of a writer like An, who received her MFA from New York University.

By serendipity, An’s novel would be published on the cusp of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. It would be a stretch to point to any fundamentally political dimension in the narrative, even with story elements connected to Tibet. Instead, *Braised Pork* provides a textured portrayal of upper middle-class life in Beijing in the 2010s, including the pervasive sense of alienation that lingers even in the face of material comforts. This quality of modern life likely makes An’s fiction more recognizable and, by extension, readable for American audiences. The vast megalopolis is no longer simply the center of Chinese political power, a synecdoche for human rights abuses and economic or military ambition. Rather, the urban loneliness rendered by An Yu evokes instead the fiction of Murakami, while also resonating with the cinematic works that have come to define the transpacific elsewhere: the disaffection of Lee Chang-dong’s *Burning* (see Chapter 4: The

Movie Theater) or the wistful longings of any Wong Kar-wai flick (see Chapter 5: The Museum).

Chinese American writer Te-Ping Chen offers a series of counternarratives to An's novel through her own debut collection, *Land of Big Numbers*, published in 2021. Drawing upon her experience as a journalist for *The Wall Street Journal*, Chen's short stories offer a full sweep of contemporary Chinese society that center protagonists "from the settled middle-class to rural poverty, from blazing dissidents to Chinese Communist Party (CCP) loyalists" (Ahsan). Unlike the diffident, melancholic artist of An's novel, governmental authority and its myriad reverberations are ubiquitous for Chen's characters. She renders the enormous complexity of China through parables of the everyday. One reviewer was keen to point out that her stories aren't simply "an artful reimagining of a cool newspaper feature but instead something more imagistic and elemental, a reflection on how we all live" (Deuel). But China is nonetheless a unique and freewheeling place, in spite of its constraints, where the most implausible-seeming things can be cold hard truth, as contemporary writer Yan Lianke observes. In that case, posits Yuan Yang, "[Te-Ping] Chen's blend of factual social observations with a kind of magical realism perfectly illuminates China's contradictions."

Matt Schiavenza of New York's Asia Society points to dislocation, whether physical or spiritual, as a prominent theme across the stories in Chen's book. The loneliness that Chen ascribes to Chinese society is not unlike what An or Wang articulate in their respective fiction. But Chen is keen to point out community and family structures that undergird her stories, as well, resonant in this manner with the multigenerational epic journey of Min Jin Lee's *Pachinko* or even hearkening to Amy Tan. "Headlines, out of necessity, can be reductive," Chen observes in the same interview. Writing fiction was a natural outgrowth of the cumulative experiences of her journalistic career that lacked a proper outlet. Chen grew up in Oakland and had a Chinese American community in her upbringing, even attending a

bilingual school in San Francisco for a stint (Zack). In another interview with the PEN Foundation, she bemoans the incompleteness of the “common tropes” people often associate with China due to the predominance of the government and the Communist Party in popular imagination. While these images or ideas about the country are undoubtedly rooted in reality, fiction offers a more idiosyncratic angle on the conflicting truths of “a place that’s at once so infuriating and deeply lovable” (Riillo).

It is clear that Asian American writing wields a profound capacity to shape everyday ideas of the countries that comprise the other side of the Pacific, perhaps even more readily than literature in translation. Fiction has long been a circulating form that wields the potential to introduce readers to other worlds or worldviews. Narrative vehicles of culture, including film and literature, are now also further amplified through the connectivity of social media platforms; a penchant for more robust representation and, generally speaking, emphasis on identity politics in America; government-sponsored initiatives to highlight minority histories and subjectivities, like the designation of May as Asian/Pacific American Heritage Month; and nonprofit organizations with multimodal platforms for community and cultural production, such as the Asian American Writers’ Workshop. What is enacted through all of these organs and activities is a comprehensive interface for vernacular cosmopolitanism in America. The vernacular and the cosmopolitan can be interpreted as oppositional in some contexts, but they also suggest dual vectors of a type of “literary worldliness that may interact, merge or contest each other” (Helgesson 2). Helgesson likens the interplay between cosmopolitan and vernacular as an exchange, a mutually implicating if tenuous dynamic that is malleable for the needs of the scholar. Unlike other racial or ethnic categories, this exchange between the worldly and the local is apparent in the name of Asian America itself: an intimation of the transpacific elsewhere, a conflation of multiple geographies into a composite space of uneasy wonderment.

Found in Translation

Let's move on to browse the section of translated literature in the Bookstore. Haruki Murakami is unarguably the most famous Japanese writer in the world, a regular contender for top literary prizes and a singular storyteller whose works are available in translation in over fifty languages (Zielinska-Elliott 380). Murakami has been introduced to anglophone readers by way of four translators—Alfred Birnbaum, Philip Gabriel, Ted Goossen, and Jay Rubin—whose engagement with and editing of his fiction have undoubtedly shaped their market appeal, as David Karashima recounts at length in *Who We're Reading When We're Reading Murakami*. In the realm of East Asian literature, the figure of the white male translator has long been dominant. Many are lifelong devotees of a nation or culture, like the prolific Howard Goldblatt, who has been responsible for conveying the works of literary titans from both sides of the Taiwan Strait into English, including Nobel Prize winner Mo Yan. Other translators are deeply entrenched in the academy, like Gabriel at the University of Arizona and Rubin at Harvard University.

Only in recent years has there been a flowering of heritage translators of Asian languages, that is, translators with roots in the society or culture from which the literature is born. Their emergence in the anglophone literary realm has coincided with broader discourses about the whiteness of the publishing industry, from writers and translators to agents and editors, as well as its concomitant disparities in compensation. In 2020, a *New York Times* study of more than seven thousand books from major publishers over the course of nearly seven decades found an astounding 95% of the authors were white. While the proportions of minority authors did show a gradual increase, an overwhelming 89% of these

published authors were white even in the year 2018—the last year of data included in the study (So and Wezerek). This homogeneity is often reinforced by the top echelons of industry leadership, with the *Times* article citing anecdotes of publishing professionals’ experiences of white colleagues’ parochial views on books by Black writers.

The soul-searching and online debate around publishing were ultimately an offshoot of the conversation about racial inequities in America that mushroomed with the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent nationwide protests in spring and summer 2020. It was only a matter of course, then, for translators to get caught in the fray, in spite of their nominal role to mediate between and transcend cultures and languages. The controversy surrounding Amanda Gorman became a case in point. Gorman, a Black poet who was invited to give a recitation at the inauguration of Joe Biden in 2021, catapulted into the spotlight for the rousing social commentary of her craft. Months later, Dutch translator Marieke Lucas Rijneveld, a white woman, would back out of translating Gorman’s work out of sensitivity to the optics, while Catalan translator Victor Obiols was simply removed from his assignment (Pineda). Backlash against the backlash soon followed, with some white translators outraged over what they felt was unnecessarily restrictive policing and deleterious identity politics. “It is the victory of identity politics over creative freedom,” proclaimed Nuria Barrios, the Spanish translator of Gorman’s poem, decrying the narrowness of a world wherein translators must align with the racial or sexual identities of the authors they translate (Marshall).

Cue Anton Hur. In response to this outcry, Hur, a heritage translator of Korean into English, wrote a scathing piece for *Words Without Borders* entitled “The Great White Canceling.” This nonfiction satire imagines a worldwide conspiracy of nonwhite translators who coordinate efforts to systematically strip power from their white peers:

Oh, quit it, I say under the swaying pendant lamp, filing my nails, my boots up on the desk. You're white, and you dared to translate. Translate *littérature* no less. Which, for a white person, is a crime worse than murder. You knew all the colored people would come for you if you did what you did. Surely if you had any decency you would've just starved to death, but here we are.

The American Literary Translators Association stepped in with a forceful statement of its own, declaring that “the simplistic schema of identity matching” would be undeniably problematic for the field while demarcating the Gorman controversy as a separate issue arising from the lack of representation of “Black translators and other translators of color, a scarcity caused by long-term patterns of discrimination in education and publishing” (“ALTA Statement”). Among the initiatives that ALTA has taken to rectify such inequities is the establishment of the BIPOC Literary Translators Caucus, with an active membership of over 300 minority translators who share resources and build community over the messaging platform Slack.

In this section, I choose to highlight Anton Hur and Jeremy Tiang for their prolific contributions to anglophone fiction as literary translators of Korean and Chinese into English, respectively. It behooves me to note, however, that neither comes from an American background per se. Hur was born in Sweden and raised in Hong Kong, Ethiopia, Thailand, and South Korea (“About Anton”). Tiang hails from Singapore and currently resides in New York City (“Jeremy Tiang”). Tiang is perhaps more easily subsumed under the umbrella of Asian America, given his stateside residence and institutional affiliations with universities like Princeton and Columbia (“Program in Translation and Intercultural Communication [PTIC]”; Saldarriaga). While Hur's connections to America may be more tenuous, I believe that the spotlight on and amplification of his translation practice via the PEN/Heim

Translation Fund, Words Without Borders, and other literary organizations headquartered in New York make him an apt juxtaposition. Ultimately, translators are cultural agents par excellence, and the backgrounds of Hur and Tiang are at least complementary to and spiritually aligned with the narrative of Asian American cosmopolitanism, itself a shifting and inclusive terrain.

Hur may be the most visible face of Korean-English translation at present. Two of his recent works, *Cursed Bunny* by Bora Chung and *Love in the Big City* by Sang Young Park, were shortlisted and longlisted, respectively, for the 2022 Booker International Prize. Hur is also a co-translator of *Beyond the Story*, a surprise memoir released by Korean pop stars BTS that catapulted immediately into top sales ranks in July 2023 thanks to the musicians' intensely devoted global following (Madarang). His footprint is all the more astounding in light of the fact that his first book-length translation, *The Court Dancer* by Kyung-Sook Shin, only appeared in 2018. The renaissance of Korean literature in English translation may be in part spurred by the success of Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, translated by Deborah Smith, which won the Booker International Prize in 2016. Smith's translation of Han's work has since undergone scrutiny by many parties, given the former's relative inexperience with Korean language when she set out to undertake this project.³⁰ While the embellishments, creative liberties, and missteps sully the integrity of the English translation of *The Vegetarian* for some, Charse Yun astutely points out that "South Korea has been placed on the world's

³⁰ A *New York Review of Books* article describes how the hitherto "monolingual" Smith "chose Korean 'pragmatically,' because she had heard there was a lively literary scene in Korea and far fewer translators than for European languages" (Parks). It would be her first translated novel and ultimately launch her career, as well as the publishing house Tilted Axis Press that she would go on to cofound. *NYRB's* Parks, himself a novelist, approaches *The Vegetarian* with skepticism. The effusive praise accorded to Han's book and the commercial phenomenon it became bespeaks a trend in "global fiction," he claims, that dwells in the realm of superficial ideology. The "barrage of praise and prizes," rather than a solid endorsement of literary quality, becomes a "strait-jacket of conformity" for Parks, who parses a number of awkward passages in the text that can be alternately attributed to writer and translator. Professing not to know Korean and hence unable to judge the nuances of this literature, Parks's critique nonetheless presaged a wave of scrutiny on Smith's translation that revealed a not insignificant amount of technical errors. Following the Booker International Prize win, the discourse began to shift from pride to outrage in Korean-language media upon the discovery of numerous mistranslations in Smith's rendition of Han.

literary map, sales of both the original and the English version have exploded, and interest in Korean literary translation has soared” thanks to Smith’s translation.

“There’s a lot of racism in the [translation] industry,” notes Anton Hur in a recent interview, “because they expect an English translator to be white and preferably a man” (Choi). As a heritage translator of Korean, Hur both consciously asserts his international pedigree to his advantage and gestures toward diasporic solidarity, such as the support of his work by Korean American authors like Alexander Chee and R.O. Kwon. Hur is also a member of the collective Smoking Tigers, which positions itself as resource, network, and facilitator at once of Korean literature in translation, its website touting members receiving grants from the “Literary Translation Institute of Korea, the Daesan Foundation, the Korean Publication Industry Promotion Agency, English PEN, PEN America, GKL Ltd, and more.” Of the nine members of the collective, Korean heritage translators are the majority (“Translators”). As of October 2023, Hur boasts more than 16,100 followers on Twitter.

Jeremy Tiang occupies a similar role in the Chinese-English literary landscape as Hur with Korean-English. When Tiang’s translation of *Ninth Building* by Zou Jingzhi was longlisted for the 2023 International Booker Prize, *The Straits Times* lauded him for being the first Singaporean to receive this honor (Yong). His rendition of Yan Ge’s *Strange Beasts of China* won an English PEN award and was a runner-up for the Warwick Prize for Women in Translation and on the *New York Times Notable Books of 2021*. Tiang’s work is a “tremendous, fine-drawn translation,” lauded the *Washington Post* (Littlewood), while *Vulture* described the English book as “pitch-perfect” (Josefsson). In recent years, Tiang has translated other literary works by sinophone writers such as Liu Xinwu, Lo Yi-chin, Shuang Xuetao, and Zhang Yueran; he was also the translator of Jackie Chan’s autobiography *Never Grow Up*.

I would hereby like to return to the vernacular-cosmopolitan scale as proposed by Helgesson et al. and consider the unique position occupied by literary translators and their works. One could feasibly conceptualize the translation of East Asian books into English as a bidirectional process, insofar as literary works are vernacularized into the global lingua franca for popular consumption while new readers are, in turn, cosmopolitanized through their engagement with these narratives. Translation is not a product, declares Mary Helen McMurrin, but rather “mediations enabled by agents, and as itself an agent in the connectivity of literatures” (68). Borrowing Bruno Latour’s Actor Network Theory, McMurrin locates power in the ensemble of human actors (the “cultural agents” of this project), as well as abstract structures that occupy a commensurate role in the production of translated literature—not least of which is the notion of literary translation at large as “a category or class of individual translations” (76), that is, discrete books that each represent a creative act executed by a singular translator, but collectively become part of something that can be conceived of as world literature. In this context, Hur and Tiang are cultural agents whose prolific output is a demonstration of their ability to navigate the anglophone publishing industry, and who have garnered recognition from the literary prize industrial complex represented by the Booker Prize and the like. They produce new English iterations of Korean and Chinese-language narratives that not only contribute to a global literary cosmopolis, but influence how South Korea and China (or other sinophone societies) are viewed. The critical success of Tiang and Hur has also given them platforms from which they can advocate for the wider community of translators and the act of translation.

“Everyone should translate,” Tiang declared to the Booker Prize committee (“Jeremy Tiang interview”). Heeding the call of Jennifer Croft, the translator of Nobel Prize winner Olga Tokarczuk, Tiang has been a vocal proponent of giving translators due credit on the covers of the books they translate, as well as fairer contracts and working arrangements

("Now They See Us"). He was also one of five "notable translators" featured in a *New York Times* roundtable on the art of translation (Barbassa). "The translator is often the only person who can see both sides," he noted with regard to the oftentimes challenging dynamic of mediating between publishing industries. Tiang went on to describe his creative practice as "one of the few things that allow me the fluidity to explore all the areas of who I am, and not have to choose one identity or another." The fluidity of language and identity and the importance of translation to global society are among the precepts that Tiang and Hur both share through and enact by way of their careers. They are at the forefront of crafting literary notions of East Asia through their curation, translation, and advocacy of Chinese and Korean literatures, which sit in dialogue with the works of Asian American writers like An Yu, Te-Ping Chen, Min Jin Lee, and Xuan Juliana Wang.

This is an apt moment to return to Appadurai's vernacular cosmopolitanism, a cosmopolitanism from below constructed by person-to-person connections that transcend the boundaries of race, class, and language. This web of connections coalesce into sturdiness against the grinding forces of late capitalism, with its concomitant social and economic inequities. Viewed in this context, the Bookstore of the transpacific elsewhere may look something like Yu and Me Books in Manhattan's Chinatown, the first New York City bookstore owned by an Asian American woman. Proprietress Lucy Yu pivoted from a career in chemical engineering and the food supply chain to create a space where the stories of Asian and Asian American writers alike could be highlighted, alongside the work of other immigrants and people of color. When asked in an interview if she had a dream business collaborator, Yu spoke earnestly of her admiration for Lao Gan Ma Spicy Chili Crisp, the Chinese condiment from which an entire business empire was born, a slick demonstration of gastronomic and literary intersections in the imaginary of East Asia. Even as the owner, Yu has found continuous inspiration in the bookstore itself through the range of materials she has

been able to discover and give home to. “By creating space for the complications of our identities,” Yu notes, “we are able to figure out ways to understand each other deeper as individuals.” The physical space has also helped foster a community where people can feel comfortable “just trying to figure it out together at different stages” (G. Chan). Fittingly enough, the BIPOC Literary Translators Caucus of the American Literary Translators Association convened for a reading at Yu and Me in October 2022. Among the featured readers was none other than Jeremy Tiang. These intricately nested narratives conjoin and become something much more powerful. From the individual translator or writer producing his literary vision to the wider group of readers or audience members who may encounter their work through the Bookstore, these nodes become part of the global mediascape of East Asia and are reinforced by the legitimacy conferred by institutions like the literary prize committee or the University (see Chapter 9). But bookstores are not the only place where readerships are created and maintained. My next chapter explores yet another space where literary notions of East Asia are manifested and manipulated in the fast-paced global society of today.

Chapter 8: The Café

Our next stop on this tour of the literary landscape of the transpacific elsewhere is the Café. The Café owes its existence to the coffee trade, a longstanding fixture of human society that arose in the Muslim world around the 16th century (Haine 3). Hundreds of years later, café culture would reach its arguable zenith in the Saint-Germain-des-Prés district of Paris, where the creators and consumers of modern cultural forms could find rapturous communion or simply a stroke of inspiration (9). The American writer Ernest Hemingway famously trawled this neighborhood and wrote a paean to its creative spirit in his memoir *A Moveable Feast*. Around the same era, Hemingway's compatriot Gertrude Stein also regularly hosted the transnational intelligentsia of Paris at her residence in what would later become the stuff of literary legend (Baxter). She fraternized with European artists, including the likes of Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso, and hosted many a novelist visiting from across the Atlantic, such as Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

“One often imagines the goldenlit café terraces of the Boulevard du Montparnasse brimming with a colourful cosmopolitan crowd,” writes Leon Betsworth of the birth of modernism, “all abuzz with the excited chatter of new ideas, campaigns, philosophies, and politics” (3). W. Scott Haine argues that the European café as a cultural and intellectual space declined in the postwar period. Indeed, creative communities have not demonstrably centered their activities of intellectual exchange in the physical space of the café since the Jazz Age and the zeitgeist of Hemingway, Stein, and their ilk. The cafés that are most visible in major urban centers nowadays tend to be global brands like Starbucks and Blue Bottle, or in the case of Japan, Doutor and Caffe Veloce. In Tokyo, one is more likely to find a row of students and salarymen working silently alongside one another than a raucous debate about

aesthetics or artistic philosophies. Of course, the *kissaten* in Japan is a whole other social realm which cannot be overlooked, with associations that are secondary to one of the cultural agents I will discuss in the pages forthcoming. During the postwar period, *kissaten* flourished as sites of cultural exchange for a burgeoning international music scene, particularly centered around jazz, and have been revived more recently as community spaces suffused in retro nostalgia (Gottlieb).

The narrative I would like to offer here is similar in spirit to all of my preceding chapters. While I am not writing about the physical construction of the Café or the place it occupies in the urban landscape, *per se*, I cannot neglect the storied history of this establishment and its signifying power. I will interweave this context with the more abstract, perhaps illusory, and yet evocative proposal that digital space serves social needs nowadays, and functions as the Café of our age. To wit, I propose that the café and the salon of yesteryear have been collapsed into one, the vibrant discourse and sense of intellectual community that they once coalesced available and ever-expanding in the powerful, intangible space of social media. In addition, a quick glance at the social media profiles of the cultural agents who center my chapter reveal the prevalence of café spaces in their visual presentation of literary works: a perfectly placed cup of coffee next to a pile of books, the warm and inviting atmosphere of a space where one can read unbothered for stretches of time.

Our stopover at the Bookstore of the transpacific elsewhere yielded some good finds, the latest works of Asian American writers or Asian literature in English translation. It looks like the weather has taken a turn, the tentative sunshine of early morning now fading into a cover of clouds. Now is the perfect time to head down the block and into the Café. The aroma of roasted coffee beans wafts over to us in greeting the moment we open the door. This café has a wooden interior painted in light colors, with evenly spaced small tables and a few well-stuffed couches along the walls. There may be a person or two working on their laptop, but

what's striking is that the majority of the clientele here seems to be reading. Everyone has their nose buried in a book, and moreover, physical copies are more prevalent than e-readers. Someone is diligently handwriting notes for a class, or perhaps it's their diary. Another person is scooting a slice of cake around the table, trying to attain the perfect composition for the photo they want to take. A slice of cake, a cup of coffee, a good book: these three things make a perfectly cozy visit to the Café. The mind can go on distant journeys while the body stays rooted and relaxed. In the Café of the present, we don't *hear* any impassioned debates about the value of literature or the joy of storytelling. But that's because they're happening online.

The Age of Bookstagram

Bookstagram is one behemoth of a digital café for the literarily inclined, even without any notable infrastructure, physical or otherwise. Referring to the cluster of bibliophiles and bystanders who coalesce around the Instagram hashtag #bookstagram, as well as the posts they regularly share, the movement had already attracted more than 35 million posts as of 2019, with popular user accounts gaining over 100,000 followers (Pope). As a point of comparison to this latter figure, *The New York Times*'s book section had only around 69,000 followers at the time. The preferred aesthetic of Bookstagram is almost immediately recognizable nowadays, oftentimes heavily staged or filtered "photographs of novels lying open on white sheets or glimpsed in a cafe" (Rahim). The colloquial tone of the posts and the inevitable superficial sheen of Instagram as a social media platform, however, do not detract from Bookstagram's demonstrable contribution to the publishing market, driving sales through viral posts and creating yet another subset of the influencer cottage industry. One

woman active on Bookstagram was even offered a job by Penguin Random House to curate an official account dedicated to Black literature (Silver).

The participants tend to be young women who share earnest reactions and reviews in the captions of their posts and invite others to join the conversation. “Clicking through the captions can feel deceptively *like reading a friend’s thoughts* on a new novel,” writes Zamira Rahim. “The posts lack the nuance of considered criticism, but the brevity is part of the allure” (emphasis added). Indeed, this deliberate intimacy, manufactured though it may be, plays a role in establishing new streams of dialogue for consumers of contemporary literature. One scholarly case study of an Australian Bookstagram influencer describes her enactment of the “practices of micro-celebrity to create an emotional connection with her audience” (Dezuanni et al. 363). A cynic might conclude that participation in Bookstagram is driven by the desire to grow one’s follower base, achieve influencer status, and eventually monetize one’s social media account. Early coverage of Bookstagram from 2019 noted that free books were the only demonstrable perk of such influencer status at the time, with one Bookstagrammer receiving so many complimentary copies that she was donating up to fifty books each month (Pope). Stepping away from the more generic or mainstream corners of the Bookstagram world, though, can reframe this trend and the power of social media in a more positive and productive light.

Yuki Tejima is a Tokyo-based Japanese American translator and manager of the Instagram account @booknerdtokyo, which has more than 12,000 followers as of September 2023. A quick glance at her social media page confirms that her aesthetic fits nearly perfectly with the previous description of Bookstagram. The majority of photos shared on her account are well-framed snapshots of books in Japanese or English, usually with an artfully placed cup of coffee at the side. It is apparent that some images are taken in an actual café, telegraphing a sense of calm leisure, especially when paired with Tejima’s thoughtful

captions written in English and Japanese. Her generous and thought-provoking narratives offered through Bookstagram showcase her perspective as a bilingual and bicultural person, allowing her to build a transnational audience and casting her as a cultural agent of the transpacific elsewhere.

Take, for instance, @booknerdtokyo's post from April 2023 that features an image of a café table with a single cup of black coffee and two books, the English and Japanese versions of Sayaka Murata's *Life Ceremony*. "Do you sometimes read while you eat?" begins the caption. The caption is an essay in miniature that shares Tejima's visceral reaction to the corporeality evoked by Murata's work. In just over three hundred words, Tejima beckons the audience with an opening question, shares something of her own reading habits, praises the English rendition of the book as "impeccably translated," and even introduces a quasi-academic framing of her experience with *Life Ceremony*. "Murata's view of the world is full of things that crawl, grow, burst, ooze, and 'ugomeku'," she writes. "The Japanese word that appears in many of these stories . . . translates to something like squirm, writhe or wiggle." After a brief lesson on the kanji in *ugomeku*, she segues into a whole other caption in Japanese that is not simply a translation of the English text, but a set of adjacent thoughts on Murata's persistent literary preoccupations.

On this post, Tejima drew more than a dozen comments in both English and Japanese, many of which she responded to directly. "A single word and how it is translated can change the meaning of a story or a scene," observed @bookmarked.in.newyork, praising Tejima for her detailed explanation of the kanji and relating another anecdote about Murata's writing as conveyed by her translator, Ginny Tapley Takemori. The other commenters expressed admiration for Murata, excitement to read her new collection, or agreement with Tejima's comments on the book. Murata had already become a sensation in the anglophone publishing industry through her previous works in translation, *Convenience Store Woman* (2018) and

Earthlings (2020), both of which were also translated by Takemori. Her provocative themes and storylines have been recognized by American media outlets for the complex questions of morality and human experience that they raise for the reader (Hayes; Millet). But the book review tends to be a flat and one-sided medium, even when certain publications allow comments on these articles. What Tejima offers through @booknerdtokyo is an interactive and dialogic space where the cultural agent shares her expertise and interpretations while also engaging in asynchronous conversation with her kindred spirit bibliophiles from America, Japan, and elsewhere around the world. In sum, this dynamic clearly demonstrates why Bookstagram is the digital equivalent of the Café, a place where people can enjoy a cup of coffee, read or write at their own pace, and then join the friendly, free-flowing discussion if they wish, or simply linger and listen to what others have to say.

Indeed, a profile of Tejima in *The Japan Times* likened her reviews to just that: “chats over a cup of coffee with a bibliophile friend” (A. Smith). This interview sketches out the broad arc of her life and career, as well as her literary influences and inspirations. Tejima was born in Tokyo and raised in Los Angeles, and developed a love for Japanese literature by reading authors like Banana Yoshimoto (in the original Japanese) in her youth. She returned to live in Japan in 2014 while translating and interpreting in the media industry, but the @booknerdtokyo platform gave her the impetus to consider literary translation for the first time. What began as a means to document her exploration of the diverse bookstore scene in Tokyo has blossomed into a thriving, bilingual space of literary appreciation. “I didn’t expect people to care about my little outings or the books that I read,” Tejima reflected. “I think the interest really lies in Japanese literature: People want to know what’s out there and who we should be paying attention to.” And the *kissaten* culture of Japan, which Tejima finds nostalgic and comforting, is simply icing on the cake.

Of course, Japanese fiction is indisputably the preeminent literary export from East Asia, thanks to Haruki Murakami. Murakami's celebrity and enduring commercial success are the result of value systems, argues Gaston Franssen, that appear contradictory but are interwoven in a much more complex dynamic. The author himself is at the mercy of "narrative forces" shaped by domestic and international media, an imbricated series of images and stories that often clash or exist in tension (234). Murakami has long been the poster child of "cool, Japanese culture that is exported to the rest of the world," noted one academic interviewed by the BBC (Ng and Shiraishi). His ascent to international stardom following the collapse of the Japanese economy is no coincidence, but rather a symptom of Japan's shift to emphasize soft power or "Gross National Cool" over the exports of the preceding decades. With Japan no longer an economic threat or would-be hegemon, "the world was increasingly receptive to the notion that Japanese film, fashion, and food carried with them a kind of global cultural cachet," and Murakami arrived as the embodiment of Japanese culture as a "futuristic pop phenomenon" (Snyder).

Nowadays the field of Japanese literature in English is arguably more diverse. In 2020, the magazine *Granta* published a "20 for 2020" series of translations, originally organized to celebrate the Tokyo Olympics that were scheduled for that summer.³¹ Though the Olympics were postponed, the series went ahead and featured the likes of critically acclaimed women authors, including Murata and Mieko Kawakami, in addition to other writers of fiction and poetry who were lesser known to English audiences. Some Western media have pointed to the runaway success of Kawakami and Mieko as signs of a "new era of Japanese literature in translation." Japanese-English translator David Boyd recounted how

³¹ This series was a follow-up to *Granta* no. 127 in 2014, edited by Yuka Igarashi and centered on Japan, including works of literature in translation, essays, poetry, and art ("Granta 127: Japan").

publishers who once sought “the next Haruki Murakami” were instead hoping to duplicate *Convenience Store Woman* these days (“Readers in the West”).

“I began reading Japanese female writers as a way to learn more about myself, about where I came from and what traits I might share with these women,” recounted Tejima in a separate interview with *Tokyo Weekender* (Moor). “It thrills me that female writers are being recognized more, both in Japan and abroad.” Tejima bemoaned the patriarchal atmosphere of Japanese literature, in spite of some social progress, as well as the fixation of international publishers on the so-called quirky aspects of some novels, a trend that recalls preconceptions or expectations of Japanese cinema (see Chapter 6: The Nonprofit). She nonetheless remains passionate about championing Japanese women writers, including newly released translations such as Maru Ayase’s *The Forest Brims Over*, translated by Haydn Trowell (“So grateful to @counterpointpress”), or books that have yet to be translated, like Kanako Nishi’s *Kumo wo sagasu* (“It’s Golden Week in Japan”). In the *Tokyo Weekender* interview, Tejima described literature as a means to access the consciousness and sensibilities of others, allowing her a glimpse of “what really goes on in a Japanese person’s mind.”

The platform of @booknerdtokyo by itself constitutes a site of cosmopolitan exchange, where book lovers and Japanese literature aficionados can gather and trade reading recommendations or thoughts on the latest releases. As a budding literary translator of Japanese to English, Tejima is fast becoming another kind of cultural agent: a purveyor of the narrative of Japan, or perhaps East Asia more broadly, someone who produces new work for cosmopolitan consumption. Tejima had long been accustomed to ferrying words between languages, in fact, having done all manner of corporate translation for everything from “shampoo bottle labels [to] real estate brochures” (Austria). But she received her first substantive encouragement to take her skills towards the literary domain through the Japanese Literature Publishing Project, in which she received Second Prize in the 2020 competition

(“Results”). She has steadily built her practice through programmatic opportunities afforded by institutions from Japan, England, and the United States. In 2021, Tejima was awarded an Emerging Translator Mentorship from the Norwich-based National Centre for Writing (NCW) and worked under the tutelage of Juliet Winters Carpenter, translator of Kobo Abe, among other authors (“NCW Emerging”). She was selected for the Emerging Translator Mentorship Program of the American Literary Translators Association (ALTA) in 2023, continuing to refine her craft through dialogue with David Boyd, translator of Mieko Kawakami (“Meet the 2023”). In spring 2023, Tejima and others participated in a three-day workshop with Sayaka Murata and her translator, Ginny Tapley Takemori, at the Waseda International House of Literature, sponsored by the Tadashi Yanai Initiative for Globalizing Japanese Humanities at UCLA and Waseda University and the NCW, an experience she recounted for the NCW website (“Translating Sayaka Murata”).

Tejima’s intersections with this array of international institutions is demonstrative of the cultural flows of literature and literary translation in the contemporary world. Her activities and engagements highlight the role that nonprofit organizations like NCW and ALTA play in shaping cultural and literary production in their respective societies, which together conjoin in the mediascape of global anglophone publishing. Though these literary organizations are quite different from those that operate Asian and Asian American film festivals, as I outline in Chapter 6: The Nonprofit, they all create spaces for transnational exchange in a variety of storytelling media and simultaneously participate in the production of cultural narratives. The convergence of Tejima, Murata, and Takemori at Waseda University also exemplifies the potentiality inherent in the university as an institution, which I explore more in Chapter 9: The University.

Important as the nonprofit and the university may be, I contend that Tejima’s Bookstagram platform of @booknerdtokyo is still best understood as a virtual café for

gatherings of like-minded readers. While she does not operate a formal book club, per se, the spirit of free exchange and literary camaraderie, not to mention the continuous stream of artfully curated photos in actual café spaces, recall an intimate setting for stimulating dialogue about the latest tastemakers in Japanese literature. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Tejima also features her favorite independent bookstore finds on occasion, both stateside (“There’s a special kind of joy”) and in Japan (“Today was a national holiday”), cementing the physical establishment I discuss in Chapter 7: The Bookstore as another primary site for the exploration and discovery of literature. Another notable transmedial connection here is her sporadic posting about Japanese film, such as the Japanese Film Festival Online 2022 to which she dedicated a series of synopses and reviews (“Thank you to those”). Given the broad themes of two-thirds of this dissertation project, the crossover between cinematic and literary storytelling is only par for the course.

I view all of Tejima’s public-facing activities and intersections as demonstrative of Appadurai’s mediascape, wherein segments of narratives are carefully layered, packaged, presented, and subsequently consumed by a global audience. The narratives in question are varied in nature, but carefully curated and defined by Tejima herself, as the cultural agent who has sole control of the platform. Through her engagement of Bookstagram and various institutions like NCW and ALTA, however, Tejima necessarily writes her own narrative as not just a voracious reader, but an astute critic, cultural clairvoyant, and emerging translator. The braiding of these narratives is made possible by not just the internet in general, but rather the specific social media platform of Instagram. “Digital media technology has not only multiplied but also diversified the number of media actors and possibilities,” asserts Sebastian Kaempf (100). The number of mobile phones was estimated to have surpassed the human population by the end of 2014, and humans’ visual documentation of their lives via social media has only continued to bloom, to the tune of billions of daily photo uploads.

Wading against the slipstream of this phenomenon is no easy task. Tejima is but one anchor in the currents of transpacific cultural flows.

Significant is the fact that she is not just a consumer of Japanese storytelling, but a mediator and active participant. In the Café of the transpacific elsewhere, figures like Tejima do far more than just organize communities and create space for conversation, gentle as they may appear to be. They propose their own narrative for what Japan or East Asia means to them, and in doing so tug at the edges of the audience's consciousness, becoming influencers in the truest sense. Furthermore, they draw connections across different narrative domains and highlight broader connections between the sets of stories that become available to readers and viewers. Lastly, at least in the case of Tejima, she has proven herself to be more than just a fan of Japanese writers like Sayaka Murata. She has literally sat at the same table as Murata and Takemori, her translator, gesturing at the importance of face-to-face communion in collaboratively producing global literature. "One quickly learns that literary translation is a community activity," Tejima wrote, reflecting on the NCW workshop at Waseda, "and communicating is as essential a skill as translating" ("Translating Sayaka Murata"). We should be so lucky that a platform like @booknerdtokyo exists to communicate and translate on behalf of Japanese writers and their ardent readerships.

Asian American Amalgamations

In the remaining section of this chapter, I will broaden my view onto adjacent discourses of Asian and Asian American literature conveyed by Bookstagram, then move outward even further to examine how other groups organized around literary consumption are also operating in the domain of diasporic identities. Similar to Yuki Tejima, Kristin Lee is a

Bookstagram influencer with nearly 4,000 followers on her @klee.writes account where she documents her omnivorous reading adventures and encourages discussion with ample captions on every post. A quick scroll through her page reveals a very familiar aesthetic that justifies the title of this chapter. Books abound in every square of her Instagram grid, but so too do caffeinated beverages, marble and wooden tabletops, a custom pastel-colored keyboard, and sometimes a handful of pens for good measure. In short, Lee's engagement with literature is very much premised on the styling and ambience of a cozy café.

Whereas Tejima invites her audience to engage with her content in an open-ended manner, Lee is notable for driving several campaigns to increase the readership and visibility of Asian American literature and Asian literature in translation through the hashtags #20BooksByAsianWomen, #20BooksByAsianAuthors, and #AsianClassicsReadAlong. Lee is also more of an overt evangelist for the Bookstagram community at large, highlighting fellow Bookstagrammers of Asian descent with fewer followers but voices that she found compelling ("This month, I want to highlight"). This post, shared towards the beginning of Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month in the United States, rounds up more than twenty other accounts with a focus on a range of identity, from Khmer to Asian diaspora to "Chinese lit with a focus on the environment." Judging by the dozens of enthusiastic comments on the post, Lee seems to have struck a chord of incredible solidarity and sympathy among her followers.

As a relatively new phenomenon, there has yet to be any book-length work dedicated to Bookstagram, but a spate of recent academic articles reports findings that resonate with my observations. Maarit Jaakkola, a Swedish scholar of journalism at the University of Gothenburg, describes those who participate in this online literary discourse as "initiator[s] of cultural and communicative processes" (93) characterized by their vernacular and dispersed quality. Sunggyung Jo identifies the alternating and contradictory impulses of presenting

“uniqueness, singularity, and idiosyncrasy” and yearning for “similarity, collectivity, and conformity” with the surrounding community as part and parcel of the online performance inherent in Bookstagram (7). Whereas Jo sees the act of reading as a liberation from the constraints of the quotidian, and oftentimes the burdens of individual identity, I believe the opposite phenomenon manifests for Asian Americans and other minority subjects who choose to engage with fellow bibliophiles in this manner. Importantly, the literature that they consume and discuss on Bookstagram tends to be written by authors who share a cultural background with them. The discourse that forms thus resolves the tension between these poles, allowing the reader and Instagram user to fully embrace the author (and the cultural product of the novel) for her totemic power, while also locating strength in collectivity and the amplification of underrepresented voices.

Kristin Lee is undoubtedly a voracious reader, and it may very well be that she has wide-ranging tastes that aren't publicly visible. However, the type of literature that @klee.writes promotes is pointedly, self-consciously, and unabashedly Asian and Asian American. Whereas Yuki Tejima's @booknerdtokyo presents a soft, almost ethereal sheen to her transnational literary tastes and casual movements between California, Japan, and other locales, Lee's page is maximalist in comparison with its bold colors, busy compositions, and swarm of props, from fresh flowers and foliage to clusters of pens. Unlike Tejima, Lee also creates digital collages of covers or showcases impressive stacks of books that are all the more remarkable for their exclusive representation of Asian American writers and Asian literature in translation. Lee overtly embraces her role as an influencer, mediator, and authority in this space, as demonstrated by her May 2023 post with multiple images, emblazoned with the title “A 10-Step Guided Reading Journey through Asian and Asian diaspora literature” (“As #AAPIHeritageMonth is drawing to a close”).

Her tone is prescriptive but well-meaning, fueled by a passion to share the books and authors that have inspired her most. The images within this post cover an enormous swath of genres and experiences and present some interesting juxtapositions. Translations appear in several categories, but are named as a “subgenre” of historical fiction, placing the translated works of Han Kang, Kevin Chen, and Kim Thúy alongside anglophone writers from Singapore, Canada, and the United States. Stories of modern migration and mobility form another category, while Asian America’s long history is presented through two novels of early Chinese Americans by C Pam Zhang (*How Much of These Hills is Gold*) and Jenny Tinghui Zhang (*Four Treasures of the Sky*) next to nonfiction books by the scholars Erika Lee (*The Making of Asian America*) and Catherine Ceniza Choy (*Asian American Histories of the United States*). Cixin Liu’s *The Three-Body Problem* appears in the speculative fiction category sandwiched between the work of his translator Ken Liu and Korean American author Jinwoo Chong. The slim category of poetry precedes a rather obtuse grouping under the rubric “Know our joy.” All roads converge in *Babel*, the historical epic by the young Chinese American speculative fiction writer R.F. Kuang, the only book to appear by itself under the declaration, “Tie it all together.” As usual, the comment section of this post is filled with gushing enthusiasm and additional contributions to the list. In her caption text, Lee does acknowledge that she has not included works by Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander writers as she professes not as well-versed in this domain. Yet the umbrella of AAPI Heritage Month appears to be a suitable framework for the wide-ranging content that she highlights in this post.

The loose borders of Asian (American) identity can also be seen in Lee’s campaign to motivate social media users to read #20BooksByAsianWomen or simply #20BooksByAsianAuthors. “Originally, the challenge started to support Asian women authors,” she explained in a January 2023 post, “but readers have been asking to broaden it,

so let's give Asian men and non-binary authors some love" ("I'm thrilled that #20BooksByAsianWomen has taken off"). Lee acknowledges that there may be some ambivalence in determining what "Asian" even denotes. As a response to this frequently asked question, she simply says that "the guiding principle is inclusivity while also respecting how an individual author might identify." Indeed the parameters of Asian identity, and Asian America by extension, are nebulous at best, the subject of perennial discussions under the political and social frameworks of the Western world. As mentioned previously in this dissertation, the subjectivity of the Asian American was more or less invented by activists during the fervor of the 1960s civil rights movement. In the contemporary world, the term is often extended into the even longer and more amorphous appellation of Asian American and Pacific Islander—a dynamic that one Korean American comedian jokingly described as forcing colonized people to share the limelight with their colonizers (@ymmayer).

Indeed, a whole slew of acronyms have cropped up to acknowledge the place of Native Hawaiians, Pacific Islanders, and people with origins from not just East Asia, but Central, South, and Southeast Asia in the United States. Some have critiqued the way in which "Asian American" is often used as shorthand for those of East Asian descent in particular, thereby "obscuring their own realities and experiences" (H. Kaur). But despite these ambiguities, the label still retains a certain degree of practical power for navigating American institutional structures and accessing resources. In the American literary imagination, Asia and Asian America draw ever closer, as I have argued, works in English translation placed alongside native anglophone narratives by writers of broadly conceptualized Asian descent. Sometimes, in the case of @booknerdtokyo, books that are not (yet) available in English are featured by bilingual cultural agents. Bookstagram influencers like Yuki Tejima and Kristen Lee each emphasize a different aspect of the global literary sphere, but their platforms undoubtedly serve an anglophone readership with their lengthy

reflections and lively discussions. Tejima positions herself as a curator of Japanese literature, showcasing books in both the original language and English translation and sharing her literary sensibilities with her followers. Lee's account features Asian anglophone writers or Asian writers in translation almost exclusively, quietly encouraging the confluence of these domains.

The activities of these two influencers in the great digital café of Bookstagram recall Stuart Hall's bifurcated notion of minority cultural identity. Their ongoing public contemplations and performances, as well as the audiences they invite, are idiosyncratic acts centered on literary consumption, but in fact they are producing Japaneseness or Asianness anew in their textured representation of and response to these books. Insofar as they both inhabit or inflect an American context, Tejima and Lee transmit cultural identity by way of their discoveries, excavations, and expressions of Japanese and Asian American literature, which become sites of resistance against the homogenizing forces of white anglophone publishing. But, as Hall observed, "Difference . . . persists—in and alongside continuity" ("Cultural Identity" 227). Japanese fiction written by authors in Japan comes from an altogether different lineage than Korean or Chinese American writers in New York and Los Angeles, no matter how fervently an (Asian) American readership may engage all sets of these narratives. How can we reconcile these seemingly oppositional facets of cultural identity? Does the key reside with cosmopolitanism in part, or are there fundamental barriers to any type of pan-ethnic utopianism in late capitalism?

Kristen Lee (@klee.writes), her digital campaigns that conflate Asian and Asian American literary production, and the enthusiastic engagement of her followers point to a facile yet hopeful vernacular cosmopolitanism that also resonates with some real-world platforms, activities, and initiatives that I have referenced, such as the modus operandi of Gold House (Chapter 6) or Yu and Me Books (Chapter 7). This particular mentality arises in

direct response to the abysmal proportion of minority representation in the publishing industry, whether one looks at trends among major publishers (So and Wezerek) or the miniscule numbers of translated titles that the anglophone industry produces on an annual basis (Post). Yuki Tejima (@booknerdtokyo), on the other hand, emblemizes a cosmopolitan cultural agent of the contemporary world, someone who transits seamlessly between languages and nations in her construction and performance of identities. She is at once Japanese and American, reader and writer, literal (literary) and figurative translator of worlds. She dwells in the ethnoscape of the transpacific elsewhere, perpetually in dialogue with both sides. Lee vernacularizes with an inclusive rubric that corrals the work of diverse anglophone authors and translators; Tejima cosmopolitanizes by way of her bilingual musings and taps into an American yearning for Japan, her platform premised upon “communicative practices that extend [the] cultural horizons” of her followers (Appadurai 213). I explore the tensions and confluences of cosmopolitanism further in my next and final chapter, before offering holistic assessments and critiques in the conclusion of my dissertation.

Chapter 9: The University

At last we arrive at the University. Or perhaps we have been there all along, mentally guided by the invisible frames and structures of this organization, our intellect and ethos shaped by its politics. Like many of its peer institutions in America, the University of the transpacific elsewhere is a bastion of progressive ideology. It is a place where the students and faculty are engaged in rigorous academic inquiry, a place that amplifies or crystallizes certain social and cultural forces, providing space for their emergence or backing them with bureaucratic power. In the literary imagination of Asian America, universities have played a significant role and provided platforms upon which writers, translators, and scholars have been able to cultivate their influential careers. This final chapter examines the trajectories of several Asian American literary icons and their ongoing engagements with the academy, as well as the role of the academy in facilitating their cultural production.

Pioneering Chinese American writer Maxine Hong Kingston has held the title of professor emerita at the University of California, Berkeley, since her retirement in 2011 (Guthrie). Her 1976 debut work *The Woman Warrior* “could be said to have launched the field [of Asian American literature] itself,” declared her fellow English professor Colleen Lye, upon the occasion of Kingston receiving the National Medal of Arts from President Barack Obama in 2014 (“Maxine Hong Kingston”). Elsewhere in the Bay Area, Chang-rae Lee serves as the Ward W. and Priscilla B. Woods Professor of English at Stanford University, his academic career running parallel to his ever-expanding body of work since his debut with *Native Speaker* (1995). Lee had previously taught creative writing at Princeton University and joined Stanford in 2016, where he spoke quixotically about how the pursuit of literature and the humanities “de-ossifies us, and broadens our natures” (Jabbar). On the

opposite coast, Japanese American novelist, filmmaker, and Zen Buddhist priest Ruth Ozeki holds the endowed title of Grace Jarcho Ross 1933 Professor of Humanities at her alma mater, Smith College. Her industry-spanning career has been a platform for her to internalize and rearticulate aspects of Japanese culture and heritage in a number of fascinating ways, such as her likening of Zen meditation to the practice of writing (Suchodolski).

I have intentionally chosen these three established Asian American authors from a previous generation to contrast with the younger set of writers who produce new narratives of China in Chapter 7: The Bookstore, for several reasons. Though Kingston is the oldest, all of them have enjoyed decades-long literary careers during which they have released multiple novels while working as professors of creative writing at notable American institutions. Kingston, Lee, and Ozeki could be said to belong to an Asian American literary canon, as evidenced by the considerable scholarship available on their oeuvres.³² Their fictional works and professional activities have become not only a conduit for Asian minority identities in the United States, but part of a transpacific ethnoscape of American writers who shape the imaginary of East Asia and Asianness in academic and literary discourse alike. They hold prestigious professorial titles in notable universities, primarily in the domain of creative writing, allowing them to interface and intersect with students who are aspiring writers, including younger Asian Americans. In this chapter, I examine the growth of American creative writing programs in the 20th century for further context, including recent critiques of their inhospitality for minority writers. But Asian American fiction of the past decades must

³² Owing to her longevity, Kingston is arguably the most central and seminal figure among the three, with multiple academic treatises devoted to her work including *Maxine Hong Kingston* by Diane Simmons (Twayne, 1998); *Critical Essays on Maxine Hong Kingston* edited by Laura E. Skandera-Trombley (Prentice Hall, 1998); *Maxine Hong Kingston: A Critical Companion* by E. D. Huntley (Greenwood, 2001); *Maxine Hong Kingston* by Helen Grice (Manchester UP, 2006); and *Understanding Maxine Hong Kingston* by Julia H. Lee (University of South Carolina Press, 2018). Lee is the subject of *Understanding Chang-rae Lee* by Amanda Page, which I reference throughout this chapter. While there is not yet a book-length work on Ozeki, scholars have analyzed and dissected her fiction in numerous journal articles. Kingston, Lee, and Ozeki are also frequently named in broader surveys of the field of Asian American literature, such as *The Cambridge History of Asian American Literature* (Cambridge UP, 2016).

necessarily be understood in parallel to the rise of Asian American studies as a field, itself a direct consequence of the 1960s civil rights movement. As Rajini Sikranth and Min Hyoung Song remark, the notion of Asian American literature that emerged from this period was revolutionary, in and of itself, for “its refusal to view literature as a set of formal properties defined outside the flow of social concerns” (3). In other words, literature has been an essential tool for this minority community to define and understand itself in a changing social and national context. How have writers like Kingston, Lee, and Ozeki been nurtured and supported to develop their creative work and contribute idiosyncratic narratives of cultural identity through the university institution? How is contemporary Asian America made legible by the duality of faculty members who serve as active cultural agents in the teaching of creative writing, while also being the object of study in Asian American studies programs? What yearnings are expressed by the evolution of Asian American literary production *and* literary studies since their inception in the 20th century? I touch upon these questions in this final chapter that synthesizes some of my earlier reflections from the Bookstore and the Café, and ultimately allows me to segue into the conclusion of my dissertation.

The University of the transpacific elsewhere is a large public institution that enjoys significant governmental support. In this idealized configuration of academia, situated within a metropolitan utopia between America and East Asia, I propose we imagine all the most energizing aspects of higher education and its potentiality without the social inequities and fiscal pressures. Picture a well-resourced university that serves as a bastion of liberal thought, allowing for intellectual debate without giving platform to right-wing ideologues and forces of social malaise. There is a creative writing track within the department of English, where respected storytellers and scholars alike convene. The University is savvy enough to break down internal barriers and allow for cross-pollination between the fields of literature, global studies, and cultural studies. Film, food, and fiction are investigated through all manner of

methodological tools and stripes of social inquiry. And the greater city of the transpacific elsewhere, too, participates in this dynamic, helping to create a two-way street between the University and the industries it studies or supports. The University is not an ivory tower in this day and age. It simply cannot be, for the urgency that is upon us.

A Poem Turned into a Sword

Maxine Hong Kingston was born Ting Ting Hong in Stockton, California in 1940, the first child of immigrant parents who'd left China in the decades prior ("Maxine Hong Kingston"). Since the publication of *The Woman Warrior* in 1976, Kingston has cemented herself as a fiery, iconoclastic voice of Asian American experience, standing at the intersection of womanhood, Chineseness, and Americanness all at once. Upon the release of a 2022 volume of Kingston's collected works by the prestigious Library of America series, NPR lauded her as "[one] of those rare figures who shifted American culture, and who keeps on being relevant" and declared that she stands alongside other major literary figures like James Baldwin, Joan Didion, and Kurt Vonnegut (Powers). Indeed, she has proven her staying power in American consciousness over nearly half a century through her self-reflexive works themselves, as well as her influence on younger generations of writers.

Kingston was born at a moment when America had not yet entered the Pacific War, and while the repercussions of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Immigration Act of 1924 were still exerting influence on demographics and social dynamics. Following the Empire of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, American leaders finally recognized the strategic value of promoting China's participation as a Great Power in global geopolitics. Though this shift signaled the beginning of multilateral cooperation for the war effort, it did nothing to

change the policy-driven racial tensions and antipathy on American shores (Ma 42). Two decades later, Kingston herself came of age during the civil rights era when images of another Asia-based conflict, this time in Vietnam, came to dominate the psychological space and impassioned discourse of progressive, pacifist Americans. In the early '70s, she and her husband Earl Kingston were planning to spend time in Japan to escape “the sense of drift that had lingered after the sixties” (Hsu, “Maxine Hong Kingston’s”). By chance they ended up in Hawaii instead, where she began writing the series of essays and genre-bending narratives that would later become *The Woman Warrior*.

I offer this early biographical sketch as context for the themes of Kingston’s writing that formed an early image of China and Chineseness to the American reader. Full of dreamy mysticism, Kingston’s first book recounts family lore and cultural figures like Mulan—long before she became a mainstream icon through the eponymous Disney cartoon—through the lens of a young woman yearning to make sense of her own lineage and ground her identity in the Western world. “Ten years ago they bewildered us and we ignored them,” a contemporaneous reviewer wrote of Americans’ general ignorance of China and the Cultural Revolution that tore through Chinese society in the late 1960s (Kramer). Though Chinese immigrants in America were, by then, “part of our new rhetoric . . . they are still anonymous.” Yet thankfully there was a book like Kingston’s that could “[shock] us out of our facile rhetoric, past the clichés of our obtuseness, back to the mystery of a stubbornly, utterly foreign sensibility.” The China that Kingston crystallizes so beautifully and hauntingly in *The Woman Warrior* would perhaps be unrecognizable to a modern audience, steeped in not only the time of her writing, but the author’s inherited matrilineal trauma stretching back to the dynastic period. “Kingston underscores a cruel truth about traditional Chinese culture,” John Powers wrote in 2022 about the prevalent thread of female oppression in these stories. Though she locates power and autonomy in the fable of Mulan decades before Disney would

bring the heroine to popular consciousness, Kingston was bitterly critiqued by fellow Chinese American author Frank Chin for being a “race traitor” (Cheng, “I’d Rather Be”).

Regardless of her detractors, Kingston’s seminal work has resonated deeply with American readers over the course of generations. “There is no one more qualified to teach English and creative writing,” concludes another breathless 1976 review of *The Woman Warrior* (Leonard). The book is described in superlative terms as “dizzying, elemental, a poem turned into a sword.” Several generations later, Barack Obama would tell Kingston on the occasion of awarding her the National Medal of Arts that he turned to her work for inspiration when penning his best-selling memoir *Dreams from My Father* (Hsu, “Maxine Hong Kingston’s”). The University of California, Berkeley has been a through line in her writing life from the very beginning, nurturing her craft in her youth and then providing a platform for her to share this work with others. It was Berkeley that awarded her a writing prize at the age of sixteen in a journalism contest, according to a 2007 profile of Kingston on the Bill Moyers Journal on *PBS*. She matriculated as an undergraduate with the intention to major in engineering, but changed course and graduated with an English degree in 1962 (Hsu, “Maxie Hong Kingston’s”). She would join the faculty in 1990 as a lecturer in creative writing (“Maxine Hong Kingston wins”), retiring in 2006 (Ulin).

Berkeley is not only where Kingston met her husband Earl, but significant for shaping their activist sensibilities during the heyday of the 1960s. Berkeley and San Francisco State University were also the first higher education organizations to establish an ethnic studies program in response to activist demands, as William Wei has documented thoroughly in his cultural history *The Asian American Movement*. Following the Black Panthers’ rallying cry for the liberation of oppressed peoples from American imperialism, Asian American activists went on strike to call out racism at the individual and institutional level and demand curricula that would allow space for social inquiry and self-examination.

The development of the Asian American studies field at Berkeley in the 1970s was effectively a compromise from the activists' vision of an "authentic 'community college,'" reconciling with the reality that it was, in fact, still an "elite research university" (145). But this watershed moment would eventually lead to the first doctoral program in the field, also administered by Berkeley, and the formation of the Association for Asian American Studies in 1979.

A generation later, in the early '90s, Berkeley became the site where Kingston carried on the spirit of social justice by organizing writing workshops for veterans (Hsu, "Maxine Hong Kingston's"). The Association for Asian American Studies (AAAS) continues its mission through the publication of the *Journal of Asian American Studies*, as well as its annual conferences. And ethnic studies has received a renewed urgency in the culture wars of the American present, with the right wing railing against so-called wokeism while minorities and marginalized subjects suffer physical and figurative violence. It would appear that, in some measure, society has returned to the fractious debates of the 1960s, this time without the unifying ethos crystallized in resistance to the Vietnam War, but rather under the fragmented and digitized experience of the 21st century—with ever more acrimonious rifts.

In her eighties, Maxine Hong Kingston has kept a more gentle pace with her literary production, last publishing *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life* in 2011, a memoir in the guise of a "sprawling, globe-hopping long poem" (Desai) that revives her character Wittman Ah Sing, protagonist of her novel *Tripmaster Monkey* (1989), and sends him on a journey to China. The China of the American present is worlds removed from the mythic land of *A Woman Warrior* or Kingston's childhood remembrances of tragic family members. In the half-century since Kingston appeared as the emblem of radical Asian American womanhood, China has emerged from reclusive authoritarianism to embrace frenzied urbanization and capitalist development, only to slide once more towards draconian rule under Xi Jinping.

Meanwhile, ethnic studies programs have come under fire in California, its place of origin, as conservative groups have fomented a backlash to a new state law that requires “all high school students to take a semester-long course” in the field (Tucker). The stakes of education have never been higher. The culture of an institution like Berkeley clearly left a lasting impact on Kingston and became part of her own professional narrative as she developed her career as both a teacher and writer. In spite, or precisely because, of the added social and economic pressures that face the American university as an institution today, it has become a battleground of ideologies and site of even greater potential—to find community and solidarity amid a nation that is sorely lacking in both.

Becoming Native

In this next section, I braid the trajectories of Chang-rae Lee and Ruth Ozeki in order to triangulate their differences, placing their stories in dialogue with that of Kingston, who comes from a generation before them. Together, these three writers and their intersections with the university offer a most textured view of Asian American literature and its grapplings with Asianness and Americanness at once. Similar to Kingston, Chang-rae Lee became a cultural sensation following the publication of his debut novel *Native Speaker* in 1995. Born in South Korea in 1965, Lee immigrated to the United States with his family as a child, eventually settling in upstate New York (Page 1). The Hart-Celler Act, mentioned in the introduction of my dissertation, is the undeniable subtext for the Lee family’s diasporic journey, enabling this transpacific migration and inadvertently sowing the seeds for a new generation of Asian American writers. On the other hand, Ruth Ozeki was born and raised in New Haven, Connecticut, the daughter of a white American father and a Japanese mother, an

anthropology professor and linguistics PhD alumna of Yale University, respectively. Ozeki has spoken of how her Asianness was essentially erased on paper through her birth name of Ruth Diana Lounsbury. Her mother, meanwhile, was unable to teach despite her doctoral degree and “joined the ranks of the Asian wives of white male anthropologists who filled the Yale department during that time” (E. Ray). Here it is apparent that the university has played a pivotal role for Ozeki, even preceding her birth. She is a mixed-race writer, unlike Kingston and Lee, and thus this additional layer of nuance informs her literary and creative work. If Kingston’s journey could be said to have been fostered by Berkeley, Ozeki’s academic and intellectual life began in a similar fashion with her undergraduate studies at Smith College, to which she has come full circle and returned as a professor. But Ozeki also has the distinction of pursuing a graduate degree at Nara Women’s University, where she studied classical Japanese literature, and teaching at Kyoto Sangyo University, both stints during Japan’s 1980s bubble era (“long bio”).

Lee’s career in academia began through his role as an assistant professor of creative writing at the University of Oregon, where he received his MFA. The success of *Native Speaker* allowed him to teach at Hunter College in New York City, followed by Princeton and Stanford Universities. He has also served multiple times as Shinhan Distinguished Visiting Professor at Seoul’s prestigious Yonsei University (Page 2). On the occasion of the retranslation of his debut novel into Korean, a Korean media profile of Lee connected his protagonist’s self-consciousness with that of the writer himself, who described himself as a person whose “temperature was a little off from that of the water” (Doo). Lee noted that the publishing industry has diversified somewhat since his emergence on the literary scene. Korean identity, meanwhile, remains at the foundation of his personhood, and he was striving to understand the country more as he grew older, likening the process to “getting to know a relative that you’d like to see more.”

Through their debut works in the 1990s, Lee and Ozeki both conveyed facets of Korean, Japanese, and mixed-race experience that ultimately resonated with an American readership, in a manner similar to Kingston with Chinese identity a generation earlier. Amanda Page describes how Lee was frequently marketed as the “first Korean American-authored book to be published” even though Korean American literature had, in fact, begun much earlier, with the work of Younghill Kang in the 1930s (2). Besides his fiction output, Lee has also written a number of autobiographical shorter works for *The New Yorker*, among other platforms, where he has mused on his relationship to Korean language as an immigrant, as well as the personal and cultural significance of Korean food in his household (7)—recalling once more how closely interlinked the domain of gastronomy is to literary vehicles of storytelling. His fourth novel, *The Surrendered* (2010), is centered on the Korean War and draws on the experiences of Lee’s father, who lost multiple family members while fleeing from Pyongyang, a story that Lee describes as having “haunted him” (Stacy Nguyen).

Ozeki’s first book was *My Year of Meats* (1998), which switches between the voices of two female protagonists: Akiko Ueno, a Japanese manga artist and freelance writer, and Jane Takagi-Little, a mixed-race Japanese American documentary filmmaker. Triangulated with them is the presence of Sei Shonagon, the Japanese literary figure known for penning *The Pillow Book*, “a hybrid miscellany of lists, poetry, and personal accounts” (Milne 464) that Jane reflects on. Akiko and Jane are also bound by the fictional TV show *My American Wife!*, a vehicle for the propagation of the American beef industry, as much as white, heteronormative American values; Akiko is forced to watch the show by her abusive husband, while Jane takes part in the production. *My Year of Meats* won the Kiriya Prize when it was published, a literary award that existed from 1996 to 2008 and recognized “outstanding books about the Pacific Rim and South Asia that encourage greater mutual understanding” (“Kiriya Prize”). Leah Milne reads this accolade as demonstrative of an

“increasingly cosmopolitan mindset in literature and beyond,” a fin-de-siècle phenomenon arising from both Asia’s economic ascent and American multiculturalism and pluralism (465-466). Other scholars have argued that the book is fundamentally a story about “two women pushing against a violently masculine, imperialist, and neoliberal world” (Shake 164). While transposing the authorial figure onto that of her protagonists may be reductive in some measure, it’s impossible not to layer the public persona of Ruth Ozeki with Akiko and especially Jane, given their similar racial and cultural background. *Native Speaker*’s Henry Park, too, is often treated as a “fictional extension of the author,” thus obligating Chang-rae Lee to “engage in respectability politics through his writing [about the Korean American experience]” (Page 12).

The danger, as Amanda Page points out, is an overdetermination of Asian American literature at large, simultaneously ascribing meaning to and demanding meaning from authors like Kingston, Lee, and Ozeki. As writers of critically acclaimed fiction, they necessarily come to symbolize not just the literature of a minority group—and, by extension, their countries of origin—but must perform the labor of the ideological construction of the Asian American subject. Be that as it may, I find it powerful and telling that each of these writers grapple with topics not only about American society, but the dislocated experiences of Asian minorities and the transpacific reverberations of China, Korea, and Japan across time and space. In other words, the countries of East Asia are not only sites of heritage, but palpable presences that have bearing on the diegetic present. That Kingston, Lee, and Ozeki have been professionally situated in the American university, and specifically in the domain of creative writing, may seem par for the course, but gains new resonance when the history of the American creative writing program as an institution is revisited. I will take up this subject in the next section and extrapolate some ideas from therein to conclude this chapter.

American Ideoscapes Anew

In America, creative writing as a discipline emerged as an ideological bulwark against communism in the years following World War II. Steeped in the “apocalyptic fears and redemptive hopes that galvanized the postwar atmosphere” (Bennett 4), the creative writing workshop became a means for universities to transmit the social and cultural values of the nation during a time when a new world order was taking shape. The establishment of the International Writers Program (IWP) at the University of Iowa in the 1960s was a means to reach the global literary class, but particularly to help those writers from East Asian societies that were “still emerging from the wreckage of World War II . . . attain higher levels of economic and social prosperity through the reception of technology and Western values” (So 500). In theory and practice, the cosmopolitanism that was constructed through IWP was an ideoscape of literary production, enabling Taiwanese writers like Nieh Hua-ling and Bai Xianyong, among others, to spend time in the American heartland while internalizing the modernist ideal of free indirect discourse in their writing practice.

I invoke Nieh and Bai simply as cultural and historical reference points, rather than to suggest they are comparable in any way to the Asian American writers of this chapter. Decades after the height of the Cold War, the number of creative writing programs has grown from around a dozen in the 1960s to over 500, based on institutional membership in the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (“Our History”). While the pitched battle between capitalism and communism is no longer as central to the discourse, I would argue that creative writing at the American university very much remains an ideoscape where concepts of significance to contemporary society are contained, carried, and crafted. The “chain of ideas, terms, and images” (Appadurai 36) that is most salient in this ideoscape now

no longer concerns the global battle for political hegemony—or, at least, this is not an overt *raison d'être* for the creative writing program. Rather, the writing workshop and the literary landscape of America have become a vector for a debate that is more national in scope nowadays: the importance of diversity and representation in all sectors of American society and culture.

In 2014, the Dominican American writer Junot Díaz penned a polemical piece for *The New Yorker* entitled “MFA vs. POC” that encapsulated many minority writers’ critique of the modern incarnation of the creative writing program. Díaz described his discomfort in attending an MFA program at Cornell University in the 1990s and named its source succinctly within the first few paragraphs: “That shit was *too white*” (emphasis in original). This whiteness extended not only to the student body, but also the faculty and the administration, privileging the perspective of the straight white male as a default for assessing literary production. Born in 1968, Díaz comes from roughly the same generation as Chang-rae Lee and Ruth Ozeki. Though one is inclined to imagine that the contemporary MFA program might be somewhat more serviceable, Díaz emphatically asserts that “a lot of shit remains more or less the same” based on his observations and experience.

Indeed, months later, NPR synthesized the perspectives of other minority writers in response to Díaz’s article, including similar experiences that were shared by Lan Samantha Chang, who studied at the University of Iowa’s vaunted creative writing program around the same time Díaz was at Cornell. As a student, Chang was told to write about other characters besides Chinese Americans in order to avoid being typecast. She chose not to follow this advice and found literary success nonetheless, becoming the first woman and non-white person to lead the very program in which she had been a student. In her leadership role, Chang has “made it a priority to attract more students and faculty from diverse backgrounds to her program” (Neary), exerting her individual and institutional influence on the ideoscape

of cultural pluralism, one person at a time. This is the foundational power of Asian American literary figures entrenched in the American university: the capacity for them to become beacons for younger generations of aspiring writers from the diaspora, and consequently allowing the larger literary landscape of Asian America to gradually coalesce its own discrete ideoscape that asserts multiple belongings rather than one of minority lack. Mentorship, after all, has long been a critical component of the creative writing program upon which its existence hinges.

Within the academic institution, this relationship of exchange “of writers teaching the next generation of writers propelled American letters to new levels of accomplishment and helped the United States to produce a literature as powerful and diverse as its people,” proposed the former executive director of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs, perhaps prematurely, in 2000 (Fenza). The year prior, in 1999, *The New York Times* noted that Asian American studies was flourishing in the American academy, doubling its number within a decade to 43 undergraduate programs across the country (Sengupta). This article attributed the growth, at least in part, to the increasing numbers of Asian American students pursuing higher education, an upward trend that was directly linked to previous generations immigrating to the U.S. following the Hart-Celler Act of 1965. Among the notable works cited was none other than Chang-rae Lee’s *Native Speaker*, which an undergraduate interviewee cited for its literary themes that struck a personal chord with him: “Dual identity, searching for who you are, conflicts of ethnicity.” Notably, the scholar David Palumbo-Liu described an intensifying porosity between the study of Asian America and Asia itself, given the surge of personal connections between both domains amid social transformations and globalization. In effect, “the forces that provoke immigration . . . work in both directions” and the mobility of people—the ethnoscape of which I have written at length—had already, at that early juncture, made a notable impact on everyday lives.

As of October 2023, there are 71 Asian American studies programs administered at colleges and universities around the United States, according to the Association for Asian American Studies (“Asian American Studies Programs & Centers”). As a discipline, of course, Asian American studies remains discrete from creative writing, but writers like Maxine Hong Kingston, Chang-rae Lee, and Ruth Ozeki necessarily occupy a liminal space, treading duality in the university as both subjects—that is, instructors in and purveyors of the craft of writing—and objects, insofar as their texts form an essential part of a canon and are actively being read and discussed in adjacent classrooms. As Kingston put it herself in a 2006 interview with a French scholarly journal, “My work is in anthropology classes, in sociology, history and ethnic studies classes, but it’s also in literature classes. I would feel more of a need to defend myself if it was just pigeonholed into one category . . . it seems that I have broken categories” (Zagne 104).

Nearly half a century after Kingston’s emergence with *The Woman Warrior*, the literary landscape of Asian America is more polyphonic than ever before. While many of these contemporary writers are free agents or have careers in other fields, a significant number of them are also embedded in the American university, and thus tacitly sanctioned by this institutional structure. It cannot be overlooked that they are products of the American university themselves. The scholar and novelist Viet Thanh Nguyen describes finding his “intellectual and political home” at Berkeley in the 1990s, where he studied under Maxine Hong Kingston, among others, and grappled with all manner of postcolonial and ethnic American literatures (“Pulitzer-winning writer”). Nguyen has also described his time at Berkeley as a “radicalizing experience” that provided him with “the language to understand and articulate his otherness” (Carson). After earning his PhD in English from Berkeley, he relocated to Los Angeles to begin teaching at the University of Southern California (V. Nguyen). Nguyen worked on a short story collection while simultaneously devoting his

energies to his academic career, publishing a scholarly tome that would eventually aid him in obtaining tenure. The short story collection in question was *The Refugees*, which came out two decades after Nguyen began teaching at USC; it was his second literary publication after his debut novel *The Sympathizer*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and brought him to national prominence. Nguyen is careful to note that the spate of accolades and attention accorded to him for these two books, alongside his academic monograph *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*, make him seem prolific and fast-paced, but each of them are the product of untold years of invisible labor. The passion and perseverance to produce each of them can be traced to his education at Berkeley, where he “took a risk in studying things that a good number of people might think are useless.”

If Nguyen can be said to represent the contingent of Asian Americans whose core values have been shaped and strengthened by academia, the poet Cathy Park Hong could be the poster child for another faction of writers who have had to unlearn and overcome the university’s shortcomings. Hong’s essay collection *Minor Feelings* (2020) tapped into the restive mood of Asian America at the turn of the decade and on the cusp of the COVID-19 pandemic, establishing her as both beacon and oracle for a community facing all manner of violence in contemporary society. (For a more thorough treatment of this topic, please see Chapter 10.) A graduate of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, Hong was diffident at best in her relationship to her ethnic identity during her time in the program; in other words, “you can be Asian, just don’t write about it” (Suphap). Years later, Hong’s mainstream success with *Minor Feelings* demonstrates that this was the very mentality that she needed to unshackle herself from all along. Though the MFA program in America has seemingly become more progressive since people like Hong and Junot Díaz were enrolled, identitarian tensions still bubble in the workshop space as minority writers continue to develop frames for exploring their subjectivity against the whiteness of American culture. As the demographics of the

country continue to shift, this is perhaps a more crucial conversation than ever before. And the creative writing workshop, the teachers who facilitate these spaces, and the wider landscape of the American university at large, have an ever larger role to play in the formation of cultural identities within and beyond the nation itself.

Viet Thanh Nguyen's introduction to his unreliable narrator in *The Sympathizer* perhaps succinctly encapsulates the mood of literary Asian America. "I am a spy, a sleeper, a spook, a man of two faces," he writes. "Perhaps not surprisingly, I am also a man of two minds. . . . I am simply able to see any issue from both sides." This opening monologue immediately recalls the double-consciousness that W. E. B. DuBois coined to describe the African American condition. The gradations of mistrust in Nguyen's first alliterative appellations suggest the stereotype of the perpetual foreigner that Asian minorities have consistently confronted in American society. Though the plight of Black Americans is fundamentally different from those of Asian American communities, largely populated by migrants and descendants of migrants who arrived in the late 20th century, I contend that both minority groups have been conditioned by a "peculiar sensation . . . this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (DuBois). Nguyen's protagonist is an operative and double agent of the Vietnam War who further straddles the boundary between both sides through his mixed French and Vietnamese heritage. He becomes a potent parable of dualities and contradictions in a manner not unlike writers of Asian descent in America whose texts lie in the ideoscape of American literature, but whose ethnic belongings also open new streams of dialogue and interpretation against images of the transpacific elsewhere. Though Asian America may have been invented out of political necessity, this multifarious community has become all too concrete and expansive in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Among the many platforms that reify and reinforce this demographic category, the University has been a powerful gathering ground and locus of cultural production. Asian

American stories have been written, told and retold, against a shifting social context. Perhaps the solution to escaping the bind of double-consciousness has been there all along: it lies in an emphatic cosmopolitanism that blurs borders so intensely that they almost dissolve entirely.

Chapter 10: Conclusions and Beginnings

I began this dissertation by invoking a hopeful scene, almost quixotic, one could say, with four Korean American powerhouses of media and storytelling speaking on how culture and identity have shaped their lives and careers. Across the three sections and nine chapters of my project, I have demonstrated how America's contemporary notions of East Asia have arisen from the stories presented by Asians and Asian Americans of the transpacific persuasion. That is, the intense permeability of the East Asian ethnoscape, barring several years lost to the COVID-19 pandemic, has fundamentally impacted the lives and experiences of individuals and communities alike, and this mundane mobility continues to influence how Greater China, Japan, and South Korea are perceived by Americans. Perhaps these societies will always remain in the domain of elsewhere, divided as they are from the continental United States by the fathomless stretch of the Pacific Ocean. But there are ever more people who traverse the distance and return to tell stories of themselves and others. These storytellers are the ones who collapse the boundary between the familiar and strange and offer a human dimension to everyday acts of aesthetic cosmopolitanism: eating a bowl of noodles, watching a movie, reading a novel.

The contemporary cultural landscape of America stands in stark contrast with the era in which the "Asian American" first manifested in the late 1960s. When this term was coined, the Hart-Celler Act had not yet remade the nation's demographics by way of millions upon millions of migrations and the subsequent generations that grew up knowing only America as a home. Young activists like Maxine Hong Kingston came of age with a minority subjectivity that is all but unimaginable now. One simply did not, could not travel so casually to the Far East, let alone Communist China of all places, mired as it was in the Cultural Revolution

while the civil rights movement raged in America. It is no surprise that Kingston's debut book consists of nested narratives and overheard stories, then. The China she knew might as well have been a fictive nation, an elsewhere belonging to her parents alone. Kingston visited for the first time in 1984 and recognized herself, or saw a reflection, in a rural woman doing laundry by the river (Hsu, "Maxine Hong Kingston's"). Kingston's China is a universe apart from the capitalist absurdities depicted by An Yu, Te-Ping Chen, and Xuan Juliana Wang in more recent years. Kingston was drawn to the dynastic past and the potentiality of myth; An, Chen, and Wang make parables of present realities. Conjoined to their texts is the translation oeuvre of Jeremy Tiang as he ferries stories by sinophone writers to global anglophone audiences, offering new narratives that nuance one's imagination of everyday lives in China, Taiwan, or Hong Kong.³³ This mediascape of fictional texts about China and Chinese-language societies sits parallel to the cinematic and the gastronomic cultural forms consumed by Americans, whether museum retrospectives of auteurs like Wong Kar-wai; the kaleidoscopic multitudes embodied by directors and actors like Ang Lee and Michelle Yeoh; the hip posturings of transnationally trained chef Lucas Sin; or the stylized aesthetics of bars and restaurants that reimagine Chinese urban chic.

Around the same time Maxine Hong Kingston was taking a stand at the University of California, Berkeley and participating in a movement that would birth the field of Asian American studies, a Japanese man several years her junior arrived in New York City. Tadao Yoshida would go on to adopt "Tony" as his English name and build a veritable empire on St. Mark's Place centered on Japanese gastronomy. Decades before Haruki Murakami became a household name, Yoshida was busy purveying Japaneseness to eager consumers through one business after another: a chain of grocery stores, a set of restaurants, and even a cocktail bar

³³ Tiang not only is a prolific translator of Chinese to English, but has worked across the spectrum of sinophone literary production. He has translated fiction from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, as well as Southeast Asia, evidence of a broadly cosmopolitan practice emerging from his America-based career.

that would come to emblemize the cultural cachet of omotenashi and a suave urbanity standing in for Tokyo nightlife. The aesthetic globalization of Japanese cuisine had begun in the late 19th century, and Yoshida was far from the first such restaurateur to venture into New York, which had boasted more than a dozen Japanese restaurants even before World War II (Vyletalova et al. 126). But he was able to ride the wave of successive trends and prove himself as a savvy cultural agent—or cultural “intermediary” in the parlance of Vyletalova et al.—as American palates came to embrace sukiyaki, teppanyaki, sushi, and other Japanese gastronomic forms throughout the 20th century.

Meanwhile, the nonprofit organization Japan Society had made steady inroads in the cultural sector with political elites like John D. Rockefeller III and John Foster Dulles at the helm. As Barbara Thornbury has shown, Japan Society was extremely effective at showcasing the sophistication of Japanese performing arts for American audiences and establishing “the aestheticized image of Japan that the [nonprofit organization] wished to convey” (81). By the 21st century, a robust film program curated by the likes of Samuel Jamier and Aiko Masubuchi were among the offerings that New York’s cosmopolitan cinephiles could partake in. One can easily imagine a night out in Manhattan consisting of dinner at one of David Chang’s Momofuku restaurants, a movie at Japan Society, and perhaps drinks at Angel’s Share, Tony Yoshida’s beloved speakeasy. In effect, the ethos of Cool Japan was being enacted by multiple players via an array of platforms, and one’s influence was not necessarily contingent upon Japanese ethnicity as attested by Chang—and to a smaller and more superficial degree, Michelle Zauner under her Japanese Breakfast moniker. The literary imagination of contemporary Japan may have flourished due to Murakami and kept momentum with a spate of more recent translations of Japanese women writers like Mieko Kawakami and Sayaka Murata, but this textured mediascape also subsumes the work of Ruth Ozeki, whose surrealist novel *A Tale for the Time Being* moves

between Tokyo and California, and Bookstagrammer and budding translator Yuki Tejima. Tejima's online audience via @booknerdtokyo is the literary equivalent of Kee Byung-keun's gastronomic diary in his @abathingegg account, both of them Asian Americans who have been drawn into the orbit of Tokyo and, having found some measure of solace and communion in Japan's urban cosmopolitanism, now reproduce this transpacific affect in online spaces.

Kee's engagement with the transpacific elsewhere come from a deep longing that originates in his severance, in infancy, from his birth country of South Korea. As an adoptee with uneasy cultural affiliations to both America and Korea, Japan furnishes the comfort of a liminal anonymity. Other Korean Americans like David Chang, Samuel Jamie, and Michelle Zauner have also drawn on Japanese cachet to lesser or greater degrees in their public personae; the filmmaker Kogonada (*After Yang*), briefly referenced in Chapter 2: The Grocery Store, bears mentioning for adopting his artist name from Kogo Noda, a screenwriter for many of Yasujiro Ozu's films (Buder). But plenty more also plumb the depths of Korean history and Korean American experience in their creative careers, including novelists Chang-rae Lee and Min Jin Lee and food writer Eric Joonho Kim. Translator Anton Hur is a leading cultural agent who has been steadily introducing contemporary Korean literature into English, not least of which is his work on the memoir by global K-pop superstars BTS. And actors like Steven Yeun emblemize the porous nature of the ethnoscape, transiting between Hollywood productions and the arthouse fare of Lee Chang-dong and Bong Joon-ho. Bong and Lee are among the East Asian filmmakers whose works have received mainstream attention and accolades in recent years. Together with Ryusuke Hamaguchi and Hirokazu Kore-eda, Jia Zhangke and Wong Kar-wai, they form a cosmopolitan catalog of East Asian narratives that the contemporary cinephile has at least a passing familiarity with. The asymptotic proximity of East Asia and Asian America has also been encouraged by nonprofit organizations like

Gold House, with its broad view onto Asian minority representation in media and industry, and influencers such as Katie Lee (@klee.writes) in the digital café space of Bookstagram.

By definition, an asymptote draws ever closer to a curve but continues onward into infinity without converging. It is also the name of a prominent journal of literary translation, which describes the image of this mathematical function as a line that “may tend toward, but never reach” (“About”). Despite the aesthetic cosmopolitanism that characterizes Asian American culture in the 2020s, particularly in its relationship to East Asian cultural forms, minority subjectivity in America is necessarily a singular experience that can never be commensurate with that of the urban lifeworld on the other side of the Pacific. Asian America has myriad struggles rooted in its own unique history that continue to be points of tension of outright conflict in the culture wars of American society today. For better or worse, we willed ourselves into existence with the invention of Asian American identity. And this rhetorical flourish, rooted in activism and social justice, has shadowed us for decades with its concomitant ambivalence and potentiality. In exploring and thinking about heritage and our transpacific connections, we are now imagining a different kind of self that can claim multiple affiliations and belongings. We do not simply long for the chimera of a fixed and unquestioned self. We have already long dwelled in a state of vernacular cosmopolitanism forged from the multiplicity of being that defines who we are.

Friction, Fallout, Fire

I have generally focused on the positive instances of vernacular cosmopolitanism in Asian America in these chapters, while occasionally alluding to the troubled reality that shadows the community in the form of xenophobic rhetoric and structural or physical

violence. By pivoting to negative or more contentious episodes of recent social discourse, it is not my intention to end this dissertation on a bleak note. Rather, I think it is important to consider how these incidents are understood and discussed by various actors, including cultural agents, contemporary media, and influential platforms that otherwise transmit notions of communion and solidarity in the mosaic of Asian minority subjectivity in America. To be Asian American is to embrace a cosmopolitanism from below wrought out of necessity. However, this inclusiveness is not without its boundaries. And generosity within a broad community does not always extend to others in adjacent marginalized spaces.

In the spirit of transpacific studies and Global Asias, I have looked across this phantasmic metropolis of an Asian elsewhere to identify the people who are producing these images in America and the infrastructures that support them in transmitting this ideoscape. But it is just important to identify the blockages and discontinuities in the circulations of global culture. As much as we may (want to) believe that human civilization and experience are an endless flow, there are enough moments of disjuncture and even stagnation to merit scrutiny, deliberation, and contemplation. The COVID-19 pandemic is a large-scale example of a disruption in mobilities that have shaped the transpacific ethnoscape in recent decades. Our notions of homelands and otherlands are so much influenced by the capacity to travel directly to those places, or at least vicariously consume this content via traditional or online media. When worldwide travel ground to a halt in 2020, we became sequestered in the places where we found ourselves at the moment, serendipitously or not. Cozy beliefs in cosmopolitan identity and belonging were no longer easy to reconcile. Pandemic management strategies, for better or worse, needed to be developed and implemented at the level of the nation-state and subsequently devolved onto regional and local government entities.

Japan was the last major economy in East Asia to lift border restrictions in October 2022. Its stringent policies were roundly criticized by pundits, diplomats, business groups, and foreign residents alike (Dujarric; Lewis; McNeill; Yamaguchi). The once outdated term of *sakoku*—literally “locked country,” an erstwhile description of the Tokugawa shogunate’s isolationist foreign policy—came back into common parlance, often embellished as “neo-*sakoku*” or “*sakoku* 2.0.” Gone was the global goodwill gained through decades of accumulated soft power. One American academic lambasted the policy as “a recipe for turning Japan into a provincial sideshow” (Dujarric). There has been a resurgence of tourism in the time since, but the geopolitical situation across East Asia remains brittle at best. China’s zero-COVID approach was even more draconian than Japan’s *sakoku*, shuttering not only the country from international travel but its own citizens within their communities and homes. Similar to the patchwork restrictions that had been implemented in the years prior, Shanghai endured a monthslong lockdown in early 2022, while the series of protests that became known as the A4 Revolution of the fall hastened the reversal and abrupt dismantling of the zero-COVID policy.

As war rages on between Russia and Ukraine, many commentators have been observing or prophesizing what this conflict portends for China and Taiwan. A former U.S. Navy Admiral proclaimed that China has “a reluctance to conduct a full-on military intervention against Taiwan for at least the next three to five years” due to practical considerations (Stavridis). Yet there has been a marked increase in Chinese military activities near Taiwanese airspace recently (Buckley and Chien). The mantra “Ukraine today, Taiwan tomorrow” is oft repeated in Taiwan nowadays, underscoring a pervasive sense of unease toward the near future (Köckritz). South Korea, on the other hand, has remained relatively placid in spite of the ongoing existential threat of North Korea. The most recent major political event to make international headlines concerns the establishment of an annual

meeting to promote trilateral ties between South Korea, Japan, and the United States (Akiyama). I offer this narrow snapshot of contemporary East Asian societies as context for and contrast with developments in Asian American social discourse, which I address next. The focus of my project is not geopolitics, security, or international diplomacy, and even less so in the realm of East Asian area studies; however, these major stories of the pandemic era and beyond necessarily shape the way the American public understands the transpacific elsewhere that is East Asia, and have bearing on the cultural narratives that continue to unfold domestically within and around Asian American communities.

I have touted cosmopolitanism from below as a unifying principle for Asian America and a bulwark against the hegemonic whiteness of American society at large. I still believe that such a cosmopolitan ideal rooted in omnivorous cultural consumption and community solidarity is not only possible, but already salient among gourmands, cinephiles, and bibliophiles specifically, as I have outlined across nine chapters. That said, a July 2023 public opinion poll of Asian Americans released by the Pew Research Center shines a light on some harsher truths of the present (Ruiz et al.). A staggering 52% of respondents indicated a negative view of China, compared to *favorable* opinions reported by 68%, 62%, and 56% of the same survey group with regard to Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, respectively.³⁴ Interestingly enough, the poll also quantified the respondents' opinions on countries considered to be their own "ancestral homeland" compared to countries that were not. Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea were once again the most highly rated countries of the lot, with 95%, 92%, and 86% of Asian American respondents descended from such lineage reporting favorable opinions of those places. Contrast that to Chinese Americans' meager 41% favorable view of China.³⁵ What these numbers demonstrate is a broad ideological

³⁴ Opinions towards the Philippines, Vietnam, and India were also part of this poll, but given my focus on East Asia in this dissertation, I will omit these numbers from the present discussion.

³⁵ This chart also indicates the percentage of "All other Asian adults" that indicated a favorable view of each country, excluding the respondents of such heritage. An abysmal 14% of non-Chinese Asian Americans

antipathy toward China rooted in present political tensions. Concurrently, the high favorability of the other East Asian countries suggests that their soft power and cultural industries are effective indeed.

Asian America has also been divided on the domestic political spectrum when it comes to hot-button topics such as affirmative action. In Chapter 9, I looked into the formation of Asian American studies and creative writing as disciplines within the American university, and situated the careers of representative writers operating between these two domains. In recent months, Asian Americans have been at the center of the public discourse on higher education, but in relation to the Supreme Court's ban of affirmative action in the admissions process. This firestorm of controversy has revealed acrimonious debates within the community, as countless media outlets have highlighted. The idea that Asian American students were disadvantaged in the college admissions process effectively pitted this minority group against Black and Latino students who stood to gain from such policies. Conservative and progressive causes alike rallied Asian American advocates to speak on their behalf. A proponent of affirmative action decried the opposition for using Asian people as a "mask for white privilege," using their real experiences of racism to unfairly scapegoat other marginalized groups (Dirks). Others described Asian Americans as a "wedge group" that conservatives conveniently used to sow discord among minorities, a dynamic that would ultimately "[fail] to hold institutions accountable for discrimination." The spotlight on Asian American plaintiffs in the conservative legal actions against universities obscured the fact that more than two-thirds of the community actually support affirmative action and have a "nuanced view of racism and discrimination" (Li Zhou).

expressed a positive view of China, the lowest of all countries, while 67% of non-Japanese Asian Americans reported positive opinions towards Japan.

On the other side of the spectrum were plaintiffs like Calvin Yang, and organizations such as the Asian American Coalition for Education, who held that Asian Americans were fundamentally discriminated against by the mechanism of affirmative action and thus lauded the Supreme Court decision. Economic disparities within the Asian American community came to surface in media coverage and social discourse that essentially “exposed a rift inside the Asian American community.” Some nonprofit groups declared that those of Southeast Asian heritage were rendered “strategically invisible” in this conversation, despite the fact that affirmative action had historically benefited those of refugee or other disadvantaged backgrounds. In essence, the centering of specific demographics within the Asian American community to reject affirmative action was ignoring the fact that many other families come from “vastly different experiences and resources, and thus have vastly different outcomes when it comes to household income and education” (Balingit). Under these circumstances, cosmopolitanism from below feels less and less of a viable worldview, the stratification of the community writ large planting obstacles to solidarity that are all but insurmountable. The celebration of diversity, equity, and inclusion for Asian Americans in popular media that is trumpeted by organizations like Gold House (Chapter 6) or individual Bookstagram influencers (Chapter 8) seems ever more absurd, simply “a way of imposing an imaginary coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation” (Hall, “Cultural Identity” 224). Now that the Asian American subject has existed for more than half a century, this category of personhood has seemingly become incoherent from heterogeneity. Late 20th century immigrants from across the expanse of the Asian continent arrived on American shores with dreams of economic prosperity or to escape war and violence in their homelands that were often wrought by American foreign policy. Similar migrations continue to this day, but with more egregious incongruities: a veritable “flood of highly-skilled Asian workers” at odds with those seeking asylum from genocide, or more than 1.5 million who are undocumented.

The so-called Asian American ethnicity, charges a high school student's essay contest entry, is "the fastest growing, least homogeneous demographic in America, which means the term is only going to become less useful" (Khemka). Conversations about class and other inequities are paramount to the sustainability of the community at large, and yet these very issues are fomenting discord due to Asian Americans' polarized views on topics like affirmative action. The University, in this instance, is no beacon of harmony and cultural empowerment. The institution itself and its symbolic power are freighted with disenfranchisement, dissatisfaction, and disappointment, a dystopian failure rather than a portal to an idyllic elsewhere.

Chapter 5 of this dissertation viewed the Museum as another venue for the dissemination of Asian and Asian American narratives, creating ongoing opportunities for auteur filmmakers like Wong Kar-wai and the like to become known to American audiences. The Museum is often viewed as a repository of art and culture, but it is far from a neutral space, given the power that curators and administrators wield in crafting narratives. Fresh on the heels of the divisive debate on affirmative action, the Asian American community suffered an enormous blow at the hands of the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center when it canceled a literary festival that was long in the making. The SmithsonianAPA, as the institution is known colloquially, already presents an interesting case study by virtue of its being a "migratory museum" with no physical space, per se ("Smithsonian"). Instead it manifests through public programs and other initiatives, operating since 1997 under the legitimacy conferred by the Smithsonian name.

The event in question was the Asian American Literary Festival, which was launched in 2017 in a "communal, celebratory spirit" and featured everything from talks on Vietnamese diasporic literature to a poetry slam (Wu). The second edition of the festival took place in 2019, and 2023 was slated to be the third time that Asian American literary icons of

all stripes convened in Washington, DC for an intensive set of programs and community-building. Instead, the abrupt and unilateral cancellation of the festival in July—just one month shy of the proceedings—sent shockwaves through the Asian American community, drawing rancor from across the internet towards the SmithsonianAPA’s opaque motives. An opportunity to foster cosmopolitanism from below and cross-cultural solidarity was once more quashed by the very platform that had been positioned to facilitate such dialogue. A flurry of media investigations and denouncements on Twitter ensued.

The 2023 festival was ambitious in scope and encompassed more than just the Asian American literary community. A delegation of ten writers of Asian descent from Australia and New Zealand had been scheduled to attend, their governments contributing more than USD \$60,000 to support the program (Sophia Nguyen, “Smithsonian abruptly”). Smithsonian administrators claimed that the cancellation was due to logistical concerns, a supposed lack of preparation on the part of the festival organizers, and “unforeseen circumstances.” But it was revealed to the public that the institution had made this decision shortly after being informed of the festival’s “potentially sensitive” topics as part of a regularly scheduled programmatic review. The topics in question concerned book bans and queer and trans writers (Sophia Nguyen, “Smithsonian literary”). In response, the festival organizers penned a three-page open letter addressed to the Smithsonian, offering a detailed picture of the enormous financial costs incurred by the various individuals and companies that had been scheduled to take part. “The material losses resulting from this cancellation are significant,” the letter stated, “but the losses to our spirit are just as meaningful.” More than 130 artists and writers had been slated to participate in the festival. The organizers issued six demands as a baseline requirement to move towards any modicum of reconciliation, and attracted more than two thousand signatories beyond those immediately involved with the festival planning (“Open Letter”).

In this instance, though the Museum deployed its institutional power to stymie the communion of the transnational Asian diasporic community, other platforms and actors quickly moved to throw their support behind the cause of vernacular cosmopolitanism: the University and the Bookstore. The Association for Asian American Studies (AAAS) released a statement that described the “incalculable” harm of the cancellation, the entwined history of the AAAS and the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center, and the undermined credibility of the Smithsonian given their decision in the current cultural climate (“On the Smithsonian’s”). As a national network for the field of Asian American studies founded in 1979, the AAAS represents the scholarly production of Asian America across multiple institutions, even if it does not wield the full heft of the University structures to which these academics belong. Such a statement of solidarity nonetheless demonstrates the intimate linkages between these domains. The organizers of the 2023 Asian American Literary Festival went on to host a smaller series of events in early August without Smithsonian involvement, advertising the activities under the sardonic banner of *Ghosted World: An Uncanceled LitFest*. The events were advertised on the Instagram account @aalfcollective and took place at several locations, including a hotel, a traditional bookstore, and the multipurpose venue Busboys and Poets, which serves as a “restaurant, bar, bookstore and community gathering place . . . where racial and cultural connections are consciously uplifted” (“Our Story”).

These contemporary episodes illustrate the difficult journey towards the cosmopolitan ideal that, at best, hampers a sense of togetherness or belonging in Asian America. On the one hand, the debate over affirmative action lays bare the intense political divide within the Asian American community. This discourse is further complicated by the culture wars of the United States, an all-encompassing miasma that sees progressive values derided as “wokeism” and right-wing demagogues insisting that no such systemic inequality exists, and

therefore any corrective action is an affront to the citizenry. Whether we voice our support or disapproval of affirmative action, Asian minorities are set up to lose: defending a long-entrenched policy that supports other marginalized communities incites the ire of the nativist and the Republican, further contributing to their contempt of Asian Americans as an untrustworthy element with murky cultural affiliations; siding with the conservative cause becomes fodder for minority coalitions to cast an accusatory finger and shake their heads with dismay at the shortsighted folly or outright racism of Asians in the United States. This issue is a lightning rod, and it is the Asian American, sadly, who stands there gripping it with furious resolve in the tempest of American society.

On the other hand, American political antipathy in the 2020s also has real bearing on the potentiality of vernacular cosmopolitanism in the Asian American community. The hostility in the United States towards transgender rights (Mulvihill) and the continued censorship of progressive books on gender and race (Meehan et al.), in spite of progressive activism against these movements, are among the suspected reasons for the cancellation of the Asian American Literary Festival (Peralta). As such, the intersection of marginalized sexual identities and minority subjectivity has been revealed to be a most perilous place indeed. The Smithsonian case demonstrates that one cannot always depend on institutional power to support or facilitate, let alone amplify, the plight of a disenfranchised community. Institutions like the Museum, the Nonprofit, and the University, in particular, are beholden to vested powers with political motivations or promises to uphold. Though I have attempted to highlight the more positive examples of how these spaces participate in cosmopolitan circulations in my dissertation, I would be remiss not to include some mention of the countercurrents.

Luckily, the Bookstore and other small businesses remain agile and amenable to the struggle. Though they do not wield the same degree of power, per se, they can nonetheless

help salvage the situation in times of dire need, as happened with the revival and rebranding of the Asian American Literary Festival. The grassroots view of the community at the level of the Bookstore can be heartening and optimistic, even in times of strife. Yu and Me Books in Manhattan's Chinatown, which I mentioned at the end of Chapter 7, is a prime example of resilience and camaraderie in the face of the odds. In July 2023, the building that housed the bookstore suffered a catastrophic fire that killed one tenant. Lucy Yu, the owner of the bookstore, suffered immense losses from this event and had no choice but to temporarily shutter her space. An outpouring of support led by Asian American writers and bibliophiles helped raise over \$350,000 to support Yu and Me Books through this transition. "It's just kindness at the core of it," remarked Yu, of fostering diversity and belonging within the diaspora (Chow). Beyond kindness, the material and fiscal aid that manifested during this crisis goes to show that cosmopolitanism from below, in spite of headwinds, is a real and powerful phenomenon.

Pandemic, Polemic, Pretension

"Most Americans know nothing about Asian Americans," charges Cathy Park Hong in the first chapter of her breakout essay collection *Minor Feelings*. "They think *Chinese* is synecdoche for *Asians* the way *Kleenex* is for *tissues*."

They don't understand we're this tenuous alliance of many nationalities. There are so many qualifications weighing the "we" in Asian America. Do I mean Southeast Asian, South Asian, East Asian, *and* Pacific Islander, queer *and* straight, Muslim *and*

non-Muslim, rich *and* poor? Are *all* Asians self-hating? What if my cannibalizing ego is not a racial phenomenon but my own damn problem? (19; emphasis in original)

Hong was already an established poet before this collection vaulted her into the limelight at a most delicate time in American and Asian American history. The book, after all, was released at the end of February 2020. The United States would enter a period of pandemic lockdown within a matter of weeks. *Minor Feelings* precedes the wave of anti-Asian violence that would darken the early 2020s and submerge the Asian American community in grief, fear, and outrage, but so many of Hong's observations and proclamations are all too prescient. She debunks the notion voiced by Jay Caspian Kang (see Introduction) and his ilk that Asians are in any way adjacent to whiteness, or poised to accept its hegemonic privileges. The minor feelings of her book title are those of "paranoia, shame, irritation, and melancholy" (45), all gradations of the self-awareness that is an integral part of the minority experience in America. Importantly, Hong does not identify this spectrum of gloom as a uniquely Asian American phenomenon, but rather a response to structural violence faced by many communities and a grim acknowledgement of the status quo. For minor feelings are, by nature, those that we yearn to dismiss, bothersome as they are. To externalize them risks not only their amplification, but the hegemon's displeasure at our ingratitude for all the advantages we supposedly enjoy in American society.

Over a period of roughly three years, from March 2020 to May 2023, more than 11,000 racially fueled incidents targeting Asian Americans were recorded by the nonprofit Stop AAPI Hate (Cho and Lee). One of the most lurid acts of violence was the murder of eight people, including six Asian women, in a Georgia spa, an expression of racialized hatred that could be directly tied not only to Donald Trump's incendiary rhetoric of the "Kung Flu," but America's "long history of anti-Asian, racist ideologies and acts" stretching back to the

19th century (Hoffman and Hanneman 125). This is the undeniable backdrop against which Asian America has continued to search for its identity as the population to grow and the suggestion of transpacific belongings alternates between a liberatory cosmopolitan ideal and a political or physical liability.

A number of the cultural agents I have discussed in this dissertation embrace their roles as figureheads or community leaders, using their platforms to fight against injustices and bring more visibility to the most pressing concerns for Asian America. Some use their social media platforms for fundraising campaigns or emotional condemnations of violent acts, such as chef Lucas Sin (Chapter 1) and musician Michelle Zauner (Chapter 2).³⁶ Others, like novelist Min Jin Lee, deploy their storytelling talents to make impassioned pleas through major media. “Asians and Asian Americans pay the price of nativist fear,” declared Lee in a March 2022 op-ed, going on to describe her physical features that may remind some of “lost wars, prostitutes, spies, refugees, poverty, disease, cheap labor, academic competition, cheaters, sexual competition, oligarchs, toxic parenting, industrialization or a sex or pornography addiction.” These associative images that are directly tied to American military exploits and social stereotypes inspire a litany of negative emotions that include “[distrust], defeat, uncleanness, humiliation, sickness, death, terror, envy, anxiety and contempt.” Asian Americans may be conditioned to stifle their own minor feelings, per Cathy Park Hong, but the outsized antipathy that they may provoke simply by their existence is far from inconsequential. Importantly, Lee conflates Asian and Asian Americans in this context, implying that physical appearance alone is enough to render one Other. It feels ridiculous to talk about how the Asian community enjoys structural or honorary whiteness when the empirical reality of our bodies can still inspire revulsion or rage in American society. Those

³⁶ See Chapter 1 for a brief narrative of Sin’s participation in the #EnoughisEnough campaign, in response to violence against elderly Asians in American cities. Zauner, responding to the Atlanta spa shootings, took to Twitter to express her rage and frustration (@Jbrekkie).

extreme reactions, after all, do not exist in a vacuum; they are the hyperbolic forms of quieter, more mundane, and perhaps more pernicious animus that is more easily concealed.

Such acts of violence or marginalization have the ironic effect of enforcing the necessity of cosmopolitanism from below as a survival strategy. Unlike Stuart Hall's assessment of the Black Caribbean diaspora, Asians in the United States do not share a common history of "transportation, slavery, colonisation" (228). Some communities, like Vietnamese Americans, do come from a history of forced displacement as a result of American imperialism. Many others migrated for economic opportunities, like countless Indians and Koreans in the late 20th century. In recent decades, America is oftentimes one of many Western playgrounds for Chinese nouveau riche, as detailed in the stories of Xuan Juliana Wang (Chapter 7), and their brethren worldwide. Amid this staggering scale of disparity and spectrum of difference, one nonetheless forcibly becomes part of the imagined community of the "Asian American" and must position oneself within the dominant regime of representation. For long years, one was simply an object to be delineated and manipulated by white storytellers like Pearl Buck, or rendered immaterial and atmospheric as in the work of Ridley Scott. But nowadays, Asian America manifests "by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*" (Hall, "Cultural Identity" 235; emphasis in original).

It is this hybridity that I have sought to emphasize in these chapters about Korean Americans who embrace Japanese cuisine, cosmopolitan Chineseness refracted and remixed by the museum, Asian American writing and Asian literature in translation brought together by Bookstagram. By tapping the rich array of contemporary cultural forms that originate in Asia but circulate globally, Asian Americans no longer have to default to a view of themselves from a position of lack or inferiority. We continue to temper and adjust our sense of affiliation to American society, the privilege of unquestioned belonging always out of

reach, the swing towards right-wing ethnonationalism ever more disquieting. Meanwhile, an amorphous and scintillating cosmopolis of East Asia—the transpacific elsewhere—beckons. The transpacific elsewhere itself could be described as an ideoscape, detached from the dour politics that dog the everyday realities and geopolitics of actual nation-states: acrimony over Japan’s whitewashing of history; patriarchal politics in South Korea; resentment and hostility in Hong Kong towards the Chinese state; Taiwan’s future an existential conundrum on the verge of fomenting another Pacific War; ongoing repression, censorship, and economic peril in China. Against this backdrop, the transpacific elsewhere still glimmers with blooming potentiality, the ideoscape of an Asian century utopia that is borderless, cosmopolitan, and multilingual, a font of cultural energy.

Writing in 1992, Yen Le Espiritu described Asian Americans as a “panethnic group” akin to Native Americans and Latinos in the United States, a category that corrals “diverse peoples who are nevertheless seen as homogeneous by outsiders” (2). Hers is a hopeful vision that offers unity and commonality as an organizing principle and political necessity. “While regional and national chauvinism organizes life within ethnic enclaves,” she observes, “movement into the mainstream necessitates a broadened scope of ethnic identity” (162). Consolidation of a panethnic community led to rejection of the term “Oriental” in favor of “Asian American,” an identity dreamt up from within, rather than imposed from without. Espiritu’s comment on pan-Asian unity in the face of anti-Asian violence, in particular, remains all too relevant. The 1982 murder of Vincent Chin, on the mistaken assumption of his Japanese ethnicity, that Espiritu recounts is grimly mirrored in contemporary incidents where perceived Chineseness stokes violence from strangers: the Japanese jazz pianist who was attacked on the New York City subway (Leland); a Korean couple spat on and assaulted in the street (B. Kaur 2023). “[If] racial hostilities against Asians escalate,” Espiritu writes, “pan-Asian organization will correspondingly increase” (164), presaging the formation of

nonprofit groups like Stop AAPI Hate and today's social media campaigns that respond to such violence. Her citation of a 1988 survey (174) echoes the 2023 report by Stop AAPI Hate (3), indicating that roughly half of Asian Americans have experienced discrimination despite the thirty-five-year lapse between these data points.

In spite of its circumstantial origins, panethnic identification can eventually become an autonomous and self-sustaining system. A panethnic culture is regenerated, consumed, and produced anew through "institutions, leaders, and networks" (164). Espiritu is most attentive to civic associations and politicians, but her overall interpretation remains applicable to my construction of the transpacific elsewhere via public spaces and the cultural agents who operate or influence them. She calls for the Asian American community to bridge its divides by examining heterogeneities and moving towards a better balance of power between different groups. Ethnicization is "not only reactive . . . but also creative" (176), presenting opportunities to refine and realign the minority status quo.

The physical sites of the transpacific elsewhere, a self-conscious alignment with East Asian cultural circulations, and conflation of Asian and Asian American identities and narratives: these spaces and gestures, when enacted or performed by Asian Americans themselves, represent the formation of a panethnic coalition and a community that is no longer imagined, but material and mundane. They are each examples of vernacular cosmopolitanism in practice, allowing the individual to unshackle himself from a stifling, singular expression of cultural identity that forever places him in a position of longing or lack, viewed against white American society. Panethnic identification means a Taiwanese American can embrace the cultural cachet of Koreanness, and perhaps even feel some pride in the second coming of Hallyu; a Japanese American can voraciously consume fiction by Chinese American writers and find common ground in their narratives, whether set in Asia or America; a Korean American can be a bubble tea aficionado and a diehard fan of Ryusuke

Hamaguchi, Han Sang-soo, and Wong Kar-wai in one fell swoop. Appreciation and acknowledgment of a broad spectrum of East Asian and Asian American cultures, attentive to their points of convergence but allowing for their disparities, is a defining feature of the Asian American subjectivity of the present. It may sound idealistic to state in such terms—and it is. But ideals are nonetheless valuable yearnings to hold close, especially when their realization is clouded by other complexities in reality.

As I have demonstrated, cosmopolitanism from below is an inclusive and hopeful strategy that bridges the Pacific and even allows for Asian Americans to transcend the historical and contemporary enmities between their countries of origin. However, I want to highlight three recent instances of white Americans impinging upon this transpacific ideal and flexible identification, in each case subverting and appropriating the notion of fluid identities in the contemporary world. “Cultural appropriation” is a loaded term that is perhaps too simplistic to deploy here to describe the controversies at hand. It has become a lightning rod itself for American social critics, who decry the “wokeism” of the present age and, ironically, what they see as the narrowmindedness of the progressive circles attentive to such matters. Though I do not have the capacity to offer a comprehensive treatment of the topic, as it would stray far from the core of this dissertation, I will synthesize some key issues by using potent examples from the past decade that have inspired intense discourse about Asianness in America, and the right to publicly claim it.

In January 2023, the musician and singer Gwen Stefani, frontwoman of the popular 1990s band No Doubt, incited a firestorm of internet discourse with her comments in an *Allure* profile (Calaor). The headline did no favors in softening the matter, emblazoning a quote in big, bold letters: “I Said, ‘My God, I’m Japanese.’” Stefani’s remark was made in the context of her father, who worked for the musical instrument corporation Yamaha, traveling often to Japan during her childhood, and sharing vivid impressions about

idiosyncratic street fashion in Tokyo's Harajuku neighborhood. She went on to call herself a "super fan" of Japanese culture, but did not back down from her original comment or bother to give it much more nuance. It was, ultimately, the perfect setup for Jesa Marie Calaor, the Filipina American interviewer, to call out Stefani's callousness and for the internet mobs to arrive with their figurative pitchforks. Calaor poignantly described recent experiences of racism and the threat of violence against Asians in pandemic-era United States, pivoting the profile to a consideration of cultural appropriation. "[White people] can put on those bits of culture sort of like a costume," bemoans an Asian American psychotherapist in the article, regarding the uneven power dynamic inherent in a comment claiming Japaneseness like so. Meanwhile, Calaor points out that Stefani, for all her professed affinity to Japanese culture, "has not publicly expressed outrage or made any statements of support during this cycle of anti-AAPI hate."

Stefani's brazen statement made her a trending topic on Twitter and became clickbait for media around the world (Bowen; Givens; Paul; Saad; M. Yang). It was the perfect opportunity to revive criticism of her other questionable practices, including her deployment of the Harajuku Girls, the ornamental Japanese backup dancers that she introduced two decades earlier, and her fragrance line Harajuku Lovers. Perhaps the only ambivalent response to the controversy came from *Nikkei Asia*, where a Tokyo-based white lawyer proposed that the backlash was overblown and the issue not as simplistic as it appeared. Despite Stefani being privileged with dominant group status, as the original profile pointed out, "a critical flaw in the interviewer's logic is the assumption that Japanese see themselves as an oppressed, marginalized culture" when governmental initiatives and the tourism industry are eager to sell Cool Japan and essentially encourage cultural appropriation (Givens). Meanwhile, the history of the cultural appropriation of Japaneseness in the United States, he goes on to say, is "at worst . . . an aesthetic failing, not a serious moral offense."

The absorption of Japanese signifiers into the motley space of Asian American, by his logic, is more untenable than a white woman making a hyperbolic statement.

I agree that internet discourse often leaves no room for nuance, and social media especially becomes a platform for virtue-signaling and outrage, which serves only to inspire a backlash against valid criticism. While Stephen Givens invokes relevant questions about context and transpacific cultural circulations more broadly, he also writes from the privileged position of an elite white expat in Tokyo that is fundamentally incommensurate with Asian minority experience in the United States. Stefani's superficial comment recalled for me relatively smaller debacles in the literary world and New York dining scene that stirred up similar levels of vehemence: the infamous cases of Yi-Fen Chou and Lucky Lee's. Chou was a poet whose work was selected for the 2015 edition of *The Best American Poetry*, while Lucky Lee's was a Chinese restaurant that opened near Union Square in 2019. While they represent different degrees of subterfuge, the common ground between these two incidents was the fact that white people had co-opted Asianness for personal gain.

"Chou" was the pseudonym of Michael Derrick Hudson, who admitted that he often submitted rejected poems under this Asianized name in the hopes of attracting more attention (Hsu, "When White Poets"). Lucky Lee's was opened by health coach Arielle Haspel, who felt no compunction about filling the eatery with Orientalist tropes while advertising that she served Chinese food that wouldn't leave the customer feeling "bloated and icky" (Otterman). Both Haspel and Hudson caused an uproar in the Asian American communities and the contextual environments of the poetry world and Manhattan dining scene when their masquerades came to light. Ken Chen, then executive director of the influential Asian American Writers' Workshop, connected the issue of Hudson to Rachel Dolezal, a white woman who had long obfuscated her racial identity while participating in Black activist circles. Hudson, Chen charged in an *NPR* segment, knew exactly how to leverage "the capital

of multicultural difference” with this sinicized name. “In New York, where almost 70 percent of New Yorkers are people of color,” he goes on, “all but 5 percent of writers reviewed in *The New York Times* are white.” A white man like Hudson still had the audacity to feign minority identity in order to seize what additional attention he could grasp on the grounds of diversity. Indeed, Sherman Alexie, the editor of the poetry anthology in question, admitted that Hudson’s poem was accorded slightly more attention because of Chou’s name. The poem was entitled “The Bees, the Flowers, Jesus, Ancient Tigers, Poseidon, Adam and Eve,” and thus inspired Alexie to ruminate on the kind of “Chinese American poet who would be compelled to write a poem with such overt and affectionate European classical and Christian imagery” and even imagine the cultural cosmopolitanism that such a person represented (Hsu, “When White Poets”).

In the case of Lucky Lee’s, Haspel did not operate under the guise of a Chinese person, but used loaded language in describing her offerings as a healthy or “clean” version of Chinese food. Asian American studies scholar Robert Ku lambasted the enterprise for deploying the pernicious stereotype of Chinese food in the United States as “unsanitary or grotesque.” Haspel, unlike Hudson, was more ignorant than calculating and somehow did not anticipate her restaurant being considered offensive. “We were never trying to do something against the Chinese community,” she said in response to public anger. But, as Ku pointed out, Lucky Lee’s marketing essentially signaled that it was a superior alternative to Chinese food by actual Chinese people, all while deploying Orientalist clichés as an aesthetic (“White New York restaurateur”). That “Lee” was a nod to Haspel’s husband did not exonerate her business from charges of racism, nor did it help her cause that two white celebrity chefs had also opened their own Chinese restaurants with “Lucky” in the name within the preceding year (P. Kim).

These three examples of Haspel, Hudson, and Stefani make for an interesting juxtaposition given their impingements on Asianness in the gastronomic, literary, and entertainment realms. What Stefani offers is not quite cinema, but the visual signifiers of Harajuku and *gyaru* culture that she co-opted long before this recent comment about her own supposed Japaneseness are perhaps a crude echo of the high fashion chinoiserie celebrated at the Met (Chapter 5). Stefani is the only one of the three perpetrators who personally lays claim to East Asian identity. Haspel, as mentioned, simply created an ambiguous façade with her restaurant name, while Hudson revealed his true identity to the poetry anthology editor after his work had been accepted under the guise of Yi-Fen Chou (Hsu, “When White Poets”). In other words, Haspel and Hudson strategically used Asianness to their advantage so long as it could serve their careers and goals, then summarily jettisoned this mask without a second thought. Stefani’s bizarre statement can be attributed to a recalcitrant attitude or social illiteracy, both of which can be easily assuaged by her fame and wealth. Her public declaration of spiritual affinity to, and thus ownership of, Japaneseness is not a pretension to further her career, but a thoughtless remark that she cannot understand or accept as problematic.

I would like to briefly set these controversies against the examples of panethnic fluidity described in my dissertation to identify key differences and offer some interpretations. For instance, media mogul and restaurateur David Chang is a Korean American man who operates a restaurant chain with a Japanese name, albeit derived from a Taiwanese man who grew up under colonial occupation. But Momofuku does not purport to offer a healthier alternative or contemporary update to Japanese cuisine; it made its name “drawing from multiple culinary traditions to deliver a subversive dining experience” (Cho). Chang’s culinary training in Japan and full-hearted engagement with ramen, as I describe in Chapter 1, legitimize his business and his passion for the food he serves. Haspel’s Lucky Lee

may have been intended as an homage to American Chinese food, but the restaurant's clunky messaging and her lack of demonstrable credentials were a disaster in the making.

As for Michael Derrick Hudson, there is no easy equivalence among the cultural agents in my three chapters about Asian American literary production. But that is not to say that this incident has gone unnoticed; far from it. In fact, Hudson's brazen act can be linked to two novels by Asian American women that have been published in subsequent years: *Disorientation* by Elaine Hsieh Chou and *Yellowface* by R. F. Kuang. A full treatment of this topic will be left aside for another time. Suffice to say that the plots of both books deal with white characters who masquerade as East Asian for personal gain, and that Hudson's ploy has been directly named by critics as a pertinent comparison, if not outright inspiration for Chou and Kuang (Cheuk; Hu). Panethnic identification, meanwhile, might be read in the passability of monikers like Japanese Breakfast and Kogonada for Korean American artists (Chapter 2), or the kaleidoscopic performance and production of transnational literary Asianness in the digital café of Bookstagram (Chapter 8). The comfortable fluidity of identities and transnational tendencies within Asian America are accepted and even celebrated in some measure. It is the intrusion of whiteness in this space, and the absorption and appropriation of Asian signifiers to bolster existing structures of hegemonic power, that invite criticism and outrage.

Gwen Stefani's claim of Japaneseness was baffling and familiar at once, inviting countless think pieces about cultural appropriation and overviews of the singer's sartorial or spiritual infringements on other cultures, whether African, Indian, Japanese, or Native American (Mendez). Perhaps her mode of presentation and purported sense of affinity to the Other is not so different from the work of the Western fashion designers featured in the Costume Institute's *China: Through the Looking Glass* exhibition, or the multi-hyphenate celebrities who eagerly sauntered down the red carpet at the encouragement of Anna Wintour

and Andrew Bolton, with the tacit blessing of Wong Kar-wai (Chapter 5). But the difference lies in the subtlety of the messaging, or lack thereof. None of the designers, actors, or musicians featured at the Met Gala claimed to *be* Chinese simply out of profound appreciation for culture or aesthetics. In fact, as Bolton and the organizers made sure, the self-aware posturing of designers engaged in dialogue with an imagined China was very much highlighted as the *raison d'être* of the show. Stefani likely intended her words as a throwaway comment—surely no one would expect that the blonde Italian American who rose to fame as a poster girl for southern California cool actually fantasized that she'd been born and bred on the streets of Harajuku, no matter how much she might appreciate its fashion. But her heavy-handed tone and refusal to back down from hyperbole ultimately incurred the wrath of the internet, especially among those most attuned to issues of racial representation and cultural sensitivity in 21st century American society.

The philosopher James O. Young, author of an entire treatise on the subject, declares that “there can be no blanket condemnation of cultural appropriation” in his introduction (28). He cites the uniqueness and artistic value of works by jazz musicians, Shakespeare, and modern Bengali literati as a few examples of appropriation becoming the engine of creative production. Cultural appropriation is perhaps too simplistic of a term to describe the various dynamics that I have invoked, which run the gamut of exaggerated affinities, deliberate obfuscation, and unwelcome borrowings and manipulations by white Americans of Asian minority identities. It is a loaded term that often becomes a vector into other rancorous debates of American society, particularly those that get magnified in the callout culture of social media. And where does one locate cultural appropriation in relation to cosmopolitanism? To answer this question and provide some measure of closure on this topic, albeit imperfect and incomplete, I offer one final example of ambiguous cultural representation in American popular media.

In 2005, the film adaptation of *Memoirs of a Geisha*, the bestselling book by Arthur Golden, was released worldwide. The production was notable for its perhaps unusual choice of casting three actresses of Chinese ethnicity—Zhang Ziyi, Gong Li, and Michelle Yeoh—in the leading roles. Gong, Yeoh, and Zhang were apparently chosen for their international appeal as actresses who had successfully bridged careers from Asia into Hollywood, and their participation was even supported by their Japanese colleagues (Khoo, “On No Longer” 66). Despite decent returns at the box office, the film nonetheless courted a degree of controversy for its cast. Viewed in retrospect nearly two decades later, the grumbles and complaints from media and other commentators seem rather subdued compared to the way that such a controversy might play out on social media today. Director Rob Marshall defended his choices by proclaiming that the actresses had been selected for their artistic talents, and pointed to the precedent of the actor Anthony Quinn playing the lead role in *Zorba the Greek* (1964) despite his Mexican and Italian heritage (“Geisha film-makers”).

Certainly, one could say that the representation of Japanese culture by ethnic Chinese actresses, regardless of their nationality, is less than ideal.³⁷ But, as in many cases, context is king. Golden’s novel in Japanese translation had already incurred the wrath of many readers, among them the real-life geisha on whom the story was based (Parry). His book was still a runaway hit, selling millions of copies in English as a fin-de-siècle milestone for the anglophone publishing industry and providing a lens onto Asian history, in a manner not unlike Min Jin Lee’s *Pachinko* in 2017. That the novel of a white American man would be adapted for the screen by a white American man and feature Chinese women playing Japanese characters can be critiqued for its facile and Orientalist framework, in spite of the participation of actors like Ken Watanabe, and factual or aesthetic inaccuracies that riddle the

³⁷ Michelle Yeoh hails from Malaysia, while Gong Li and Zhang Ziyi are from mainland China and became internationally famous for their collaborations with filmmakers such as Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou. Gong later became a citizen of Singapore in 2008 through her marriage to tycoon Ooi Hoe Seong.

material, as Golden's original interlocutor described. But the key difference, in my opinion, is that no one involved in the production of the film proclaimed or performed a personal affinity to Japaneseness, let alone use Japanese identity as a mask, to authenticate the material or improve their standing in the public's eye. *Memoirs of a Geisha* was an English-language Hollywood film made by a white man, reflecting the aesthetic values of his worldview through the expenditure of tens of millions of dollars. No matter how one might view such a production with distaste, the fact remains that dozens of cast and crew members collectively labored to create this work and offer it for mainstream consumption. *Geisha* was never touted as a Japanese film or propped up by false legitimacy on the part of its participants. In that sense, this Hollywood production was like a lavish and heavy-handed version of the self-aware chinoiserie that would descend upon the Met Gala a decade later, simply another glossy anglophone rendition of Asian history à la Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* (1987), with only a fraction of the nuance and charm.

“A work can have aesthetic virtues *precisely because it is not the work of an insider*,” states Young in his monograph on cultural appropriation. “The perspective of an outsider on a culture can be an advantage when it comes to producing works of art that provide insight into the culture” (61; emphasis added). *Memoirs of a Geisha*'s instructiveness lies in its reconfiguration of Japanese tropes and imagery for a global audience, demonstrating an early 21st century appetite for and receptiveness to narratives from the niche culture of the geisha. It does not claim ownership over Japaneseness like Stefani. While simplistic imagery may exist in the visual signifiers deployed by both Marshall and Stefani, the former at least uses it for world-building and in service of a prescribed plot arc. The Harajuku Girls, on the other hand, are mere window dressing and signify nothing but one woman's vapid dalliance with Tokyo street culture. The case of Michael Derrick Hudson is even more immaterial, a kind of textual yellowface with no linkage to or kinship with Chinese or Asian subjectivities. As for

Lucky Lee's, David Chang and his like prove that idiosyncratic takes on other cuisines can not only be accepted but celebrated, so long as the cultural agent knows to comport himself tactfully and respectfully. Ariel Haspel's pretensions to upgrade American Chinese food could perhaps be excused if she had not made a series of fatal missteps in marketing, denigrating the original cuisine that her business sought to capitalize upon. Rather than provide insight and innovation from an outsider perspective, she took a popular cuisine as blueprint and haphazardly imposed her own ideals on it while deliberately branding her restaurant with a name suggesting insider status.

I have used the idea of vernacular cosmopolitanism throughout my dissertation to describe the grassroots appropriation and absorption of wide-ranging signifiers of Asianness in the Asian American community. I would not go so far as to say that it is verboten for people with no blood ties to Asia to appreciate, rearticulate, inflect, or distill visual, gustatory, and narrative elements of Asian cultural forms in their own daily lives or commercial interests. It comes down to a matter of conscientious placement of the self in relation to these cultural forms, and having the capacity to describe one's positionality and locate oneself within a proper sociohistorical context. Admiration of cultures beyond one's own is part of the cosmopolitan condition, and can positively reinforce the ideals of diversity and difference in a multicultural society. One must remain aware of privileges and imbalances, however, and recognize that instinctive affinity or a desire to identify with the other and the elsewhere does not exonerate crass attitudes and behavior. Feelings of kinship and connection do not erase historical inequities and continued marginalization; to pretend otherwise is to perpetuate harm.

Voyaging Beyond the Elsewhere

I have chosen to title this chapter “Conclusions and Beginnings” to convey the notion of forward momentum as Asian America pushes onward with multitudinous avenues of cultural production. In the years since I began thinking about these issues from the vantage point of a newly relocated foreign student in Japan, countless more cultural works have emerged on the horizon and coalesced into the mediascape of the transpacific elsewhere. Some of these are micronarratives of new or established cultural agents whose personal articulations of identity speak to a certain fluidity; other stories represent the aspirations of a larger community, staking new cultural spaces and molding entirely new archetypes for Asian people in the United States. It would be impossible to acknowledge them all. I have attempted to include some of the most salient items of recent discourse in this chapter, relying heavily on the internet and social media to help me construct a narrative about the mood on the ground. But I feel that whatever conclusions I draw here are necessarily contingent and unripe, no matter how much time and energy I pour into the effort. The reason for this is that both Asian America and the transpacific elsewhere are in constant flux, as are the societies that enfold them, have bearing on them, diminish and contest them or nurture and sustain them. Accordingly, I would like to subvert the notion that the ideas contained within my doctoral research can reach, by any means, a pithy conclusion here, and propose instead that this is merely the beginning. That this has been an incredibly long prelude to a much more complex, exasperating, and fascinating research project that may take a lifetime or more to conduct.

I offer a few final anecdotes in closing with recent developments in the domains of gastronomy, cinema, and literature that illustrate the contemporary condition of Asian America. The film adaptation of Michelle Zauner’s *Crying in H Mart* is currently underway, with an open casting call for someone to play the lead role of Zauner herself circulating

online in the spring, along with news that Will Sharpe, known for his work in the second season of HBO drama *The White Lotus*, was attached to direct this project (Hussey). One can only surmise how much Zauner's own music will be featured in the final work, but that the film is even being made is a stunning example of Asian cosmopolitanism exerting its pull on the anglophone world. A mixed-race Korean American musician who performs under the name Japanese Breakfast has written a bestselling memoir about food and grief, an ode to her late mother and a transpacific culinary lineage. A rising actor of mixed English and Japanese ethnicity is stepping in to helm the production. Though Zauner's story is intensely grounded in an American cultural climate, Sharpe's involvement intuits that a certain dimension of *Crying in H Mart* speaks to transnational or hybrid Asianness, a subjectivity that exists at or beyond the boundaries of a singular place or state.

Two recent films centering the transnational entanglements of Asian Americans have also been released in 2023: *Past Lives*, directed by Celine Song, and *Joy Ride*, directed by Adele Lim. Song's film is about old friends who reconnect in New York City after a budding romance in their middle school years in Korea is cut short. Lim's, on the other hand, is a slapstick comedy that follows two girlfriends who journey to China for various personal and professional reasons. They are diametrically opposite narratives in terms of dramatic heft and overall ethos, yet both are directorial debuts by Asian women in Hollywood that depict the fluidity of the transpacific ethnoscape, their characters transiting between Seoul and New York, Beijing and Seattle. The cast and crew of these films also feature a veritable ecosystem of transnational Asian talent, including those who have been involved in marquee Asian blockbuster films like *Crazy Rich Asians* and *Everything Everywhere All at Once*.

Meanwhile, fiction writer Jade Song's short story "The Petting Zoo," published in August 2023, encapsulates a hyper-contemporary view on cultural identity within America. The story traces the friendship and eventual romance between two Asian American women

who meet at a Manhattan nightclub. Simply dubbed East Coast and West Coast at first, the women shed these stereotypes and monikers and come to know each other as Emily and Winnie. Among their urban exploits, they find themselves romping through “Bushwick bars populated with the international Asians who were supposed to be studying fine arts at full tuition, but were really just taking selfies in the soft red neon designed after old-school Hong Kong.” They dress up as the leads from *In the Mood for Love* for Halloween, cavort with fellow Asians cosplaying as anime characters or K-pop boy band members, and sing Taiwanese Mandopop at karaoke. When Winnie offers a maudlin comment on another night out, Emily rolls her eyes and says, “Okay, Wong Kar-wai.”

Perhaps these few examples are superficial at best, forgettable at worst, for their casual constructions of Asian minority identity that are, by turns, sentimental and raunchy, nuanced or irreverent. What I interpret in the pace by which these stories have come out, however, is an exponentially more heterogeneous collection of cultural representation that is nonetheless unified by a tendency toward the transnational and self-referential playfulness. And these are among many more instances of the transpacific elsewhere manifesting through the mundane spaces of the city, or the digital spaces of online publications and platforms. Perhaps it only makes sense that the metropolis has become a symbol and stand-in for transnational Asianness in the American imagination. For cities themselves are not unlike individual human beings: constantly in flux, evolving through an endless process of consumption and excretion. We think of ourselves and our cities as fixed sites of singular identities, but the truth is we can never know of the billions or trillions of interactions that constitute our every day. Cities, like humans, are composed of a vast quantity of smaller units that are in constant interaction, in various states of movement and becoming. It is not so much that we are transforming into the transpacific elsewhere as history marches on and the

fearsome unpredictability of civilization continues into the 21st century. The elsewhere has always existed within us. We are simply able to express it, at long last.

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