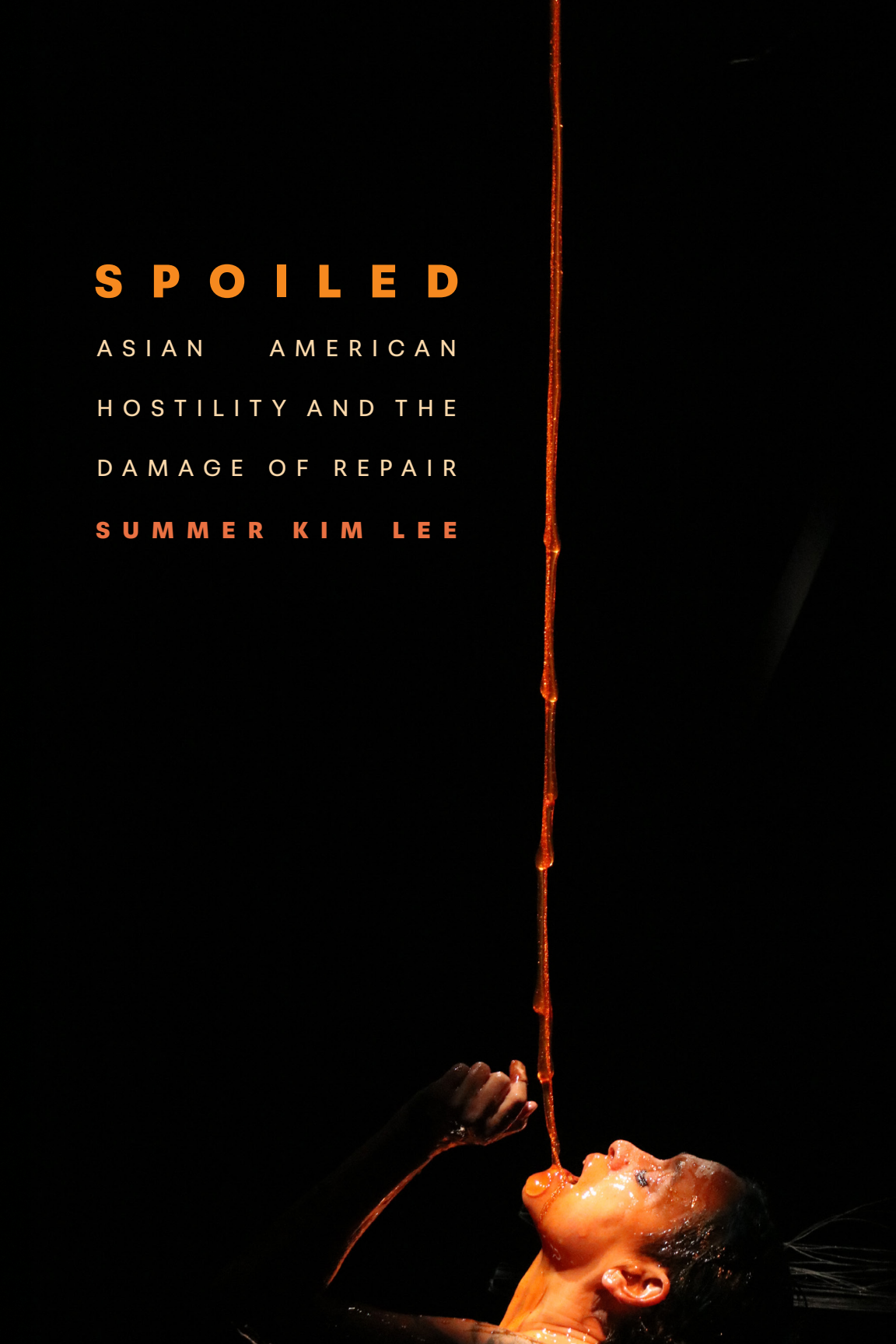
SPOILED

ASIAN AMERICAN HOSTILITY AND THE DAMAGE OF REPAIR

SUMMER KIM LEE

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For Mom and Hamii

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In my dissertation, I included a quotation from Clarice Lispector's dedication to her 1977 novel *The Hour of the Star*, translated by Benjamin Moser, which I think about from time to time. She dedicates the novel to her blood, "to the gnomes, dwarfs, sylphs, and nymphs who inhabit my life," as well as to composers like Schumann, Beethoven, and Stravinsky. She writes, "To all those who reached the most alarmingly unsuspected regions within me, all those prophets of the present and who have foretold me to myself until in that instant I exploded into: I. This I that is all of you since I can't stand being just me, I need others in order to get by, fool that I am, I all askew." I hope this conveys, if only partially, the need and gratitude I have for family and friends who, comparable to Lispector's composers and fantastical beings, have taught me about myself, have made me aware of what I have yet to know and want to learn, and have provided a forecast of what a life as a person, a writer, a teacher, and a student could be. I have felt grounded and full—not *too* self-serious or anxious—because of the people named here.

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I think I'm a lot like my Hamii. She had a dry sense of humor, and she was shy and reserved yet also tough and discerning. She needed her alone time for reading or watching Korean soap operas, and she was clear about when she liked something and when she really didn't. She used to tease me and call me spoiled, as did my mom and Adolfo. I was "the spoiled child." I truly feel spoiled with their love and all that they made possible for me. In part, their joke—both the warmth and the bite behind it—prompted me to think about what spoiling can do. I readily offer up this book to them, as proof of how they spoiled me.

INTRODUCTION

RIPE FOR SPOILING

An arm reaches out, not helpless so much as irritated, pissed. Hand-carved from wood, the arm cranes awkwardly to the side, giving in at the elbow. It bends at the wrist, hand twisting, palm exposed, fingers flexed. The contorted limb gesticulates from Cato Ouyang's sculpture, *Kicked Madonna (Crystal)* (2022), peeking out from a light blue pleated skirt misfitted around an amorphous mass of epoxy clay, hydrocal, gypsum, papier-mâché, and beeswax. Oyster shells are fastened to the curves of the sculpture's surface like brooches, and a bleached white pelvic bone of a mustang juts out from the top, all shrouded in a tangle of brown horsehair. Streams of gnarled fabric in shades of white and cream are tucked and enfolded in the skirt, trailing behind like wisps of ocean foam, or a torn dress or veil, perhaps offering evidence of a bride's violation, escape, or both.

To encounter Ouyang's *Kicked Madonna* is to feel Ouyang's touch. It is a touch that spoils. As Ouyang carves and chips away at wood, cuts and tears fabric, plasters and pastes objects, they make work with disfiguring details and disjointed associations that elude linear narratives of violence and ruin, harm and healing. Has *Kicked Madonna* been abandoned and left to decompose, or has it been laid to rest? Does it writhe in pain, crawling toward refuge, or has it made peace with its place, accepting its lot? Does the arm extend in need of our assistance or push us away? Here is a figure that struggles to cohere, or

derives pleasure in offending us with its obscure form. A body abstracted, bent out of shape, becomes a suggestion, or a trap. We might want to endow the work with personhood, with intention and motive, interiority and feeling, which I find myself doing now. We might want to rescue or resuscitate it, to find its missing limbs, its castaway bones. But Ouyang does not turn an object into a subject, nor a thing into a body. They do not return a wounded part to a mended whole.

With *Kicked Madonna*, everything seems in an odd place, wedged in, protruding, or punctured. The work sits in wrongness, unamenable to the possibility of its own repair while nevertheless inviting the possibility of its beauty, its own satisfaction gleaned from its hostile form.[1] In confronting and constructing the forms that violence, pain, and injury make, Ouyang approaches their practice as one of indulgent betrayal: a betrayal of those who encounter their work and wish to feel whole and healed in the process, as well as a betrayal of themself, as the artist who risks getting corrupted by their own work and taken in by its suffering.[2] *Kicked Madonna* spoils itself, as well as Ouyang and us, by asserting its hostile form. It lures us in with the suspicion that there is a body to be found, only to then rob us of clear aesthetic judgment, disturbing a sense of integrity, bodily or otherwise, in its degradation and ruin.

In her poem "In Excelsis," Anne Sexton writes of "confronting the ocean," hoping that she might walk into it "like a dream."[3] She stands at the shore with Barbara Schwartz, her therapist during the last nine months of her life, leading up to her death by suicide in 1974. It is a scene where the therapeutic converges with the sublime. Of the ocean, Sexton writes,

> Its mouth is open very wide,
> and it has dug up its green,
> throwing it, throwing it at the shore.
> You say it is angry.
> I say it is like a kicked Madonna.
> Its womb collapses, drunk with its fever.
> We breathe in its fury.[4]

Like the ocean, from which it derives its name, Ouyang's sculpture has been spoiled by its raging appetite. *Kicked Madonna* is intoxicated with itself, caving inward with the pull of the tide and fuming outward with the crest of a wave. It devours itself, then spits itself back out again: a miracle and perversion of conception received on the shore, as a waterlogged, wrecked form. Its shreds of dress and veil cover the sacred, devotional figure of the Madonna as a "still unravish'd bride" remade into the profane.[5] As a damaged, feminized object—thrown,

kicked, collapsed, furious—Ouyang's sculpture recalls unknowable harms through spoiled acts of ravishment, ornamentation, and assemblage that create by way of destruction.

Spoiled attends to the ways contemporary Asian American artists challenge the expectation that their work should provide ameliorative sites of repair. Rather than reject repair, they make use of its destructive capacities and the damage it risks and invites. The artists in this book take up what I call the spoiled: the racialized, gendered Asiatic body, and all that it consumes, imposes, expels, and destroys in its vulnerability and volatility, indulgently and with desire, but also under conditions of constraint. The spoiled is the gratuitous excess and derivative waste produced through embodied processes of Asian racialization that make the Asiatic body legible as such.[6] More broadly, the spoiled aggravates categorizable identities and recognizable subject positions in the preoccupation with the body's sensation, matter, and form. Through the spoiled, the artists here insist on the deidealized, deforming aspects of Asian racialization that critically irritate cathartic, affirming representations of Asian American subjectivity and social life, which promise one can and will arrive at a self that feels whole by way of claims to a legibly minor, resistant, radical Asian American subjecthood.

When something is spoiled, it has become rotten or contaminated, fallen out of use and into disrepair, near worthless. At the same time, spoils can be valuable materials ruthlessly and enviously seized by force, as evidence of an unfair trade or power imbalance, in the wake of extractive violence or received in return for an opportunistic favor. When someone is spoiled, they, too, have gone bad. They might be a person with what Erving Goffman called a "spoiled identity": a result of the failure to fulfill one's allotted social role due to the stigma of one's "undesired differentness."[7] Such spoilage can be a repository of bad feelings, bred from the experience of disqualification and exclusion.[8] On the other hand, someone spoiled might not be interested in what is appropriate to their social role. They might realize that the social roles they have been expected to play were already spoiled in the first place.

The spoiled, perceived as stigma, is vulgar and abrasive. Like Roald Dahl's Veruca Salt, screaming about what she wants *now*, and like the band that adopted her name, turning the character's obnoxious entitlement into unruly irreverence, the spoiled is girly, bratty, needy.[9] To be spoiled is to rebuff the virtues of self-correction and self-control, to taunt a politics of respectability that would moralize and pathologize racialized, gendered sexuality and loud, flashy expressions or enactments of sex and desire.[10] The spoiled is encapsulated in the figure of the polymorphously perverse girl, seeking pleasure and

gratification from inappropriate or unlikely places, without regard for convention or restraint.[11] A "bad egg" with a temper, a "snarl-toothed Seether," she takes and consumes in willful, belligerent play, imperiling those around her—and herself.[12]

To confront the spoiled is to realize that one's own body and self are susceptible to spoilage. To spoil and be spoiled entails forms of indulgence that cannot secure a subject's autonomy and sense of self.[13] Yet such spoilage does not inevitably lead to self-injury and self-destruction, to the annihilation of the self and its removal from the social, shattered, turned away, or cast out. This is because the spoiled covets too much of who and what surrounds it. It wants to stay in the midst of things, not disappear in them. Given this, the spoiled devours but it also leaks; it cannot hold all that it wants to consume and contain. The spoiled can get pretty filthy, capable of delighting in the mess it has made.[14]

The spoiled can get so full of itself that it is always poised to seduce and ready to brag. Like funk, which L. H. Stallings theorizes as nonvisual sensation, mood, and embodied movement within Black sexual cultures, the spoiled takes pleasure in telling stories about itself—producing fictions of the self in lieu of truths—"as a con and joke" made at the expense of so-called civilized sensorial regimes.[15] These spoiled stories get around, taking on an erotic and social life of their own. In the vein of good gossip, the spoiled never lacks for embellishment, drama, and exaggeration. As a concept, elbowing its way into different disciplines and fields of study, the spoiled compromises its own reputation, associating itself with too many different people, places, and things. The spoiled assists in constructing deidealizing theories of the social; specifically, it illuminates the fact that hostility is not antagonistic to the social but an integral part of it and the kinds of relations we seek and desire within it.[16]

The spoiled names what comes from outside the body and the self and is taken inward, like the consumption of a decadent meal or the demand for and ready acceptance of gifts. It also names what comes from inside the body and the self and gets transmitted outward, like a temper tantrum, or spit, blood, sweat, and vomit. This ambiguity around the origins of the spoiled—the question of whether it comes from within or without—is one of its most defining qualities. The spoiled refuses to offer a clear delineation of where it begins and ends, only of the psychic, social, and bodily boundaries it overwhelms. The spoiled works against the consolidation of the subject and the identities the subject tries to fit into. It clutters tidy, liberal fantasies of autonomy, sovereignty, and self-possession. As an impediment to utility and productivity, to a clear sense of moral rightness and moderation, the spoiled consists of awkward mishandlings, bulky proportions, and overambitious appetites.

In this book, I encounter a range of aesthetic practices of spoilage by contemporary Asian American artists who poke and prod at the limits of our desire for processes of restoration and repair, at the limits of our relations with others. They prefer to stay in instead of go out; they are too into themselves to be sociable; they use people and speak as another; they turn cold, giving up or letting themselves go to waste; and they inflict injuries to see what forms of relation emerge from open wounds. These artists do not assert mastery and dominance in an aesthetic or relational register; they do not aspire to omnipotence. In the vein of what Avgi Saketopoulou calls "exigent sadism," they take pleasure in their harsh, sometimes ruthless aesthetic practices of spoilage, but they put themselves in harm's way too, letting what they create transform them in ways beyond their control.[17]

The work of these artists does not offer relatable, comfortingly linear narratives of healing and repair that culminate in formations of Asian American subjecthood adherent to liberal ideals of autonomous, contained, discrete individuality. They have relinquished this subject position for themselves. For them, the damage of spoilage is intrinsic to processes of repair that Asian Americans seek in their aesthetic encounters, political commitments, and social and psychic lives. They know that in spoiling and being spoiled, they might get dragged down into the havoc they have wrought, not unscathed but there for whatever comes, belly up, hand out.

On Wonder

In 2022, the gallery Jeffrey Deitch showed some of Ouyang's work in a group exhibition called *Wonder Women*.[18] Presented at the gallery's New York and Los Angeles locations, the exhibition consisted of paintings, sculptures, and installations centering the figure of the Asian American woman as a site of wonder, whether as a mythological, heroic being not of this world or as the protagonist of her own story in the ordinary world we know. Walking through the exhibition on its opening day in Los Angeles, I saw Asian American women transformed into fantastical creatures like mermaids or depicted through self-portraiture as introspective subjects in their day-to-day lives.

The exhibition's title is inspired by Genny Lim's poem "Wonder Woman," published in Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's 1981 anthology of women of color feminist writers, *This Bridge Called My Back*. "Sometimes I stare longingly at women who I will never know," Lim writes.[19] She sees "Chinese grandmothers," "Japanese women tourists," "Young wives," "Lesbian women," "Smiling debutantes," "Giddy teenage girls," and "Widows."[20] "I look in their eyes and

wonder if / They share my dreams," she muses.[21] She wants to know if she can see parts of herself in them, in the same way that she can "see reflections on bits of glass on sidewalks."[22] Across differences in race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and geography, Lim asks, "Why must woman stand divided? / Building the walls that tear them down?"[23] Her singular "woman" is tasked with holding a multiplicity that the word cannot carry. By way of its plenitude, the *Wonder Women* exhibition aimed to carry out the wishes of the poem's singular "Wonder Woman," resulting in a tension between the production and affirmation of the Asian American woman's figure and that figure's impossibility and negation.

Perhaps this is why I was initially wary of the exhibition.[24] It seemed to align with the ways that, as Vivian Huang writes, "invisibility has become such a common grammar of Asian America that visibility has become the telos of Asian American public life."[25] If Asian Americans are always understood as not-yet-visible subjects, who must become visible as a political necessity and inevitability, then such subjects are simultaneously subject to what Huang calls the "trope of violent disappearance."[26] The force of this trope pressed itself upon the reception and exigency of the exhibition. By the time of its opening, Donald Trump had made repeated references to the "Chinese virus" and "kung-flu virus," six Asian women had been murdered in shootings at three Atlanta spas in March 2021, and security footage of the harassment and violence of Asian women and elders in New York City and other US cities had led to nationwide calls to "Stop AAPI Hate." As the exhibition's curator, Kathy Huang, states in *Wonder Women*'s press release, "The increasing violence against Asian Americans, particularly against Asian women and the elderly, emphasizes the need to tell our own stories. Figuration allows the artists to present themselves, their communities, and their histories on their own terms."[27] The representation of Asian American women felt necessary to the moment, providing an urgent site of agency, resistance, and care for figures subject to violent disappearance. In the exhibition, there was no singular, definitive style in which the figures of Asian American women appear. Lim's "Wonder Woman" became more than one, as a way of making amends for whom the term "Asian American woman" might otherwise overlook or exclude. Altogether, these figures, as sites of inclusion and empowerment, became a collective means of recovery, where a subject can reclaim her own image and means of self-representation.

Wonder Women, then, seemed to position "Asian American woman" as a positive term of recognition, inclusion, and celebration. This is a familiar move, and one that somewhat frustratingly overlooks the fact that, as Laura Hyun Yi Kang reminds us, "Asian American woman" is not a preexisting identity to be made whole but a "political and syntactical formulation" that emerged at the

intersections of feminist, antiracist, and anti-imperialist social movements in the late 1960s and '70s.[28] Yet what I found while walking through the exhibition was not the restoration of the figure of the Asian American woman but its destruction by way of spoilage, which is also to say that for me, it produced an experience of *being spoiled* with too much. What I saw was not the ideal of an abundance of representation so much as that ideal's ruin in excess. I encountered figures estranged and defamiliarized, figures bristling against the cozy coherence of the term "Asian American woman." Wonder did strike, perhaps just not in the way the exhibition had intended. As I experienced it, wonder—the feeling evoked by contact with the curious, awe-inspiring, not easily grasped—served to short-circuit the idealization of "Asian American women," sullying forms and figures of knowledge riding on the presumption of the term's knowability. I felt wonder in encountering what Mila Zuo describes as an "overperform[ed] narcissistic self-love" that comes with a near crushing commitment to undo the self it promises to restore and represent in the first place.[29] *Wonder Women* overwhelmed the recognizability of figures corralled under its name. There, in the gallery, the wondrous spoiled me.

Ouyang's work touches on the forms that pain makes, yet it does not resolve or "work through" trauma, nor does it express resignation in trauma's face. Ouyang attaches themself to the memory of painful experience in ways that read as more sadistic than masochistic; they probe their pain for what it holds and creates when worn down and built back up into something new. As Saketopoulou might put it, Ouyang recalls the ways people have violated them, disappointed them, or let them down, and makes these experiences "circulate": spreading them around, letting them spoil whatever or whoever lies within their reach.[30] Their work ensures that the difficulty of pain—felt and inflicted on another—is not passed over, that pain is not rendered into something from which one can be rescued or cured.[31]

Importantly, the hostility that pervades Ouyang's work is not a form of punishment the artist brings down on themself or another. It is not a means of exercising their power over others via ressentiment and its claims to a higher moral ground. Instead, this hostility brings both artist and viewer down into the matter of who and what hurts and irreversibly changes us, dislodging an impermeable sense of self. We cannot always know what we might be capable of in the face of what harms us. This is another source of wonder: the ways that difficult, painful experiences can spoil us, not inspiring resilience and tolerance so much as necessitating the manifestation of new relations, new forms. These new manifestations speak to how we are sometimes damaged in our encounters with difference that lies both in and outside of ourselves.

In the *Wonder Women* exhibition, I noticed another kind of wonder, too, one attached to repeated intimations of Asian American women's sleepy, dreamy interior worlds we could not see. In Livien Yin's *Dreaming Host* (2022), an oil painting of soft lavenders, yellows, greens, and blues, a woman rests with her eyes closed, head tilted to the side, with fingers interlaced. The image is based on the sleeping "Chinese Beauty" shown at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, but it is also a likeness of Yin's friend.[32] Tidawhitney Lek's oil, acrylic, and pastel painting *Napping* (2022) shows a woman sleeping on her side on a living room couch, hands cradling her head and knees tucked in, surrounded by the deep purples and yellows of dusk peeking through a front door left ajar. These scenes appear interested in the affordances of rest and respite, located in the solitude of private psychic or physical space. They suggest that to move through the exhaustion of everyday life, exposed to the danger and damage of an antagonistic world, is wondrous in and of itself. Relief from such onslaught becomes a form of resistance and refusal, a means of survival and care.

Though not representative of the exhibition writ large, these works caught my eye because they seemed to express a political desire for a kind of therapeutic aesthetic encounter that resounds within contemporary Asian American culture. Healing, care, and repair have emerged as throughlines in recent discussions of Asian American mental health, wellness, and disability. Scholars, writers, and activists have asked: How do Asian Americans care for themselves and their communities, in the midst or in the afterlives of war, immigration, intergenerational conflict, and a global pandemic, or in the face of illness, ableism, and the enduring figure of the model minority? What practices of healing and care can Asian Americans foster, especially when, as the model minority, they are often assumed to be high-functioning and self-sufficient?

A few avenues of thought have been particularly helpful in apprehending these questions. One is a psychoanalytic approach taken by scholar David Eng and psychotherapist Shinhee Han in response to widespread complacency around Asian American mental health struggles, and specifically the struggles of Asian American students on college campuses. In their collaborative work, Eng and Han identify "racial melancholia" and "racial dissociation" as psychic processes through which Asian Americans and other people of color are simultaneously assimilated into and excluded from social and political life under neoliberalism, wherein past and ongoing racial violences are repressed in service to the celebratory affirmation of difference.[33] Eng and Han, along with other Asian Americanists and critical race and ethnic studies scholars working with psychoanalytic theory, insist on the dynamic particularity—as opposed to the static universality—of the racialized, gendered psychoanalytic subject,

articulating psychic processes not as individual and pathological, but collective and structural.[34]

Another approach to questions of care in Asian American life has taken disability as its starting point. In this vein, Mimi Khúc has developed what she calls a "pedagogy of unwellness," which takes into account that "we are all differentially unwell," and as such, "need differential care at all times."[35] Khúc's pedagogy rejects the idea that we can or should transcend what hurts us, instead offering to teach the reader how to live outside the violent ideology of cure that maintains an impossible ideal of a nondisabled original state of being.[36] Along similar lines, James Kyung-Jin Lee proposes a "pedagogy of woundedness" to conceive of nonableist modes of "Asian American embodiment beyond the model minority" that take into account failure, disability, illness, and death.[37] Lee attunes us to our vulnerability and dependency, in both our living and dying.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, rising anti-Asian discrimination and violence, as well as the need for mutual aid and support for essential workers—doctors and nurses, but also in-home caretakers, grocers, cooks, and delivery workers—intensified considerations of care within Asian communities. In the spring of 2020, for instance, a group of writers, scholars, and activists created A/P/A Voices: A COVID-19 Public Memory Project, building an oral history archive and developing a collective writing practice committed to "dwelling in unwellness . . . from a place of unending rupture, anxiety, and depression, as well as anger and urgency."[38] To dwell in unwellness enacts the "refusal to 'adjust' and 'return' to business-as-usual."[39] The emerging body of work on Asian American unwellness and woundedness refuses what it identifies as a racist, ableist idealization of the Asian American body and mind. It refuses the expectation that Asian American subjects can stand on their own, without support, without the acceptance that, as Johanna Hedva writes, "we can't tell how we will die—and that we're already doing it all the time."[40]

I write with an indebtedness to these scholars' and writers' refusals of unobtainable ideals of health and wellness, insofar as these ideals shore up the image of the good, productive, assimilated model minority and citizen subject.[41] Alongside Khúc, Lee, and the members of A/P/A Voices, I stay with the rage, sorrow, frustration, and exhaustion that shapes the ways we live with our pain and the pain of others, with the fact of our own finitude. What they describe is not so unlike the hostility I consider here, especially given their refusal of wellness and repair. Where *Spoiled* differs, and resonates more with the work of Eng and Han, is in its engagement with psychoanalytic frameworks, which begin from the premise that there are always parts of the self that it cannot

consciously know and communicate to itself or to others. In contrast, projects on unwellness work with the notion that the self has a privileged, transparent knowledge of its own unwellness, and can use this knowledge to fuel a cathartic, empowering shift from injury to affirmation. I want to spoil the idealized self that lives in this account—or rather, I hope to show how such a self is already spoiled, in ways that we cannot always recognize or clearly convey, whether to ourselves or to others. As Eng and Han remind us, "Psychoanalysis thus alerts us to the fact that our agency is compromised and our will is limited from the beginning, that we are pregiven to and dependent on others."[42] The spoiled is the material, psychic, affective trace of such compromise and limitation. It is the stuff of unwellness, yet by its very nature it cannot be conscripted into giving us a full, adequate account of the self as such, as whole.

To clarify the limits and stakes of this critique, I want to underscore the material urgency of concerns around Asian American mental health and wellness, and the dire importance of establishing liberatory, sustained models of care. The questions I am raising lie elsewhere, taking issue with the fact that Asian American art and culture is valued and prioritized when and if it is deemed to be healing—in other words, when it is experienced as ameliorative and affirming. The spoiled teaches us that what we hope might heal can also hurt us, leading to conflict, shock, pain, and disappointment. In the poem "Wonder Woman," the spoiled shows up in Lim's wonder at the women around her, at how they cannot fit together as a whole despite her desire for wholeness. The women she recognizes and hopes to care for, including herself, are broken up, like shards of glass on the sidewalk. Perhaps Lim broke them herself in dividing and naming difference with each line she wrote. What Lim sees in her poem, and what the poem offers its reader, are partial, fractured images of the self and others—images that can also cut, especially if one is not paying attention, not treading carefully. Lim does not suture the cut of difference; she does not try to salvage the glass on the ground. Instead, she remains in wonder of how it shatters.

The Shorn Parts of Repair

> What survives once the model of reparative relation is forced to share space with all sorts of negativity or when it starts to open onto a negativity of its own?
> —Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (2013)

Wonder can be the source of dreams and, in waking life, what Barbara Johnson calls "the surprise of otherness"—"that moment when a new form of ignorance is suddenly activated as an imperative."[43] In Lek's *Napping*, and in some of her

other paintings of domestic scenes, this surprise of otherness takes the form of a hand with brown or green skin and long pink nails. Hands encroach upon their setting and upon us as the viewer, creeping from behind a couch or on the other side of a door to turn a lock, hovering inside a closet, or peeking out from a pan on a stove. Who does the hand belong to? We cannot know. These hands interrupt otherwise realist depictions of the everyday, and like the hand in Ouyang's *Kicked Madonna*, they hold themselves out in distress, desire, or both. As a surprise, they bring to the fore "an imperative that changes the very nature of what I think I know," which is also what I think I know of my capacity to respond, and what I think I have to give to, or hide from, an outstretched hand.[44] The surprise of otherness comes from someone else's hand, but also from one's self in the moment of encountering it.

As Eve Sedgwick writes, surprise is anathema to practices of paranoid reading driven by a "hermeneutics of suspicion."[45] This critical style plumbs the hidden depths of the world with a "terrible alertness" that anticipates the discovery and exposure of a secret truth.[46] In a paranoid reading, there can be no surprises. Everything must be known in advance; wonder is not welcomed. In her famous essay "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is about You," Sedgwick takes issue with the ways paranoid reading became the dominant mode for critiquing structural violence. Writing in the mid-1990s during the AIDS epidemic, in the midst of devastating loss and state negligence, Sedgwick questions the usefulness of critiquing and responding to such violence from a paranoid position, which assumes that unveiling the truth of oppression, pain, or suffering—whether one's own or another's—is the same as transforming it. She suggests that we take seriously a reparative mode of reading the world and its objects. Reparative reading practices are inclined toward surprise, receptive to the wonder of the unknowable from unlikely if not outright inhospitable objects remade into forms of sustenance and care. For Sedgwick, paranoid and reparative reading practices are dynamic and nonhierarchical in relation to each other, and are necessary to each other's functioning.[47]

Sedgwick's argument draws on Melanie Klein's distinction between paranoid/schizoid and depressive positions. Unlike Freudian "stages" that impose linear narratives of development, one can oscillate between these positions, just as one can oscillate between paranoid and reparative modes of reading. Klein's paranoid position is aligned with negative affects like "hatred, envy, and anxiety," which one simultaneously disavows and directs toward idealized objects that one "defensively projects into, carves out of, and ingests from the world around one."[48] But in realizing the damage one can cause, even if only

in phantasy, one can experience feelings of guilt, and the paranoid position can give way to the depressive position. From the depressive position arises the wish to "make good" the damage inflicted in phantasy, to repair such destruction by assembling an object's fragmented parts into a deidealized, complex, nonoriginary whole within one's psychic, interior world.[49] This process of repair attempts to reinstate the whole object by integrating its good and bad qualities—accepting what is loved with what is hated, what is desired with what is scorned. "Once assembled to one's specifications," Sedgwick continues, "the more satisfying object is available both to be identified with and to offer one nourishment and comfort in turn."[50]

As many have pointed out, the title of Sedgwick's essay that directly addresses "you" as the reader is a callout as much as it is an invitation.[51] Sedgwick elicits the paranoia she critiques, and to make her argument, she separates, not without hostility, the reparative from the paranoid. Such a separation belies the necessity of destruction and negativity to the reparative, drawing attention not only to what must be amassed for repair but also to what must be cut out. The ongoing process of repair, then, is "additive and accretive," but in its relation to the aggression of paranoia and the destructiveness of hate, it is subtractive and corrosive, too.[52] For if the reinstatement of an object must bring together separated, divided parts into a whole, then some parts must also be, to use Eng and Han's phrasing, "shorn away."[53] These shorn parts, discarded for the sake of repair, constitute the spoiled work of the artists discussed in this book, as materials that recall the destructive, violent aspects of reinstating and integrating an object. The spoiled is *of* processes of repair, just not what is repaired itself.

For Klein, the process of repair can also be called love, and love does not always feel good. If the reparative offers a language for thinking about love as that which can temper the forces of the death drive, it is a deidealized love that comes with dissatisfaction, failure, and anger. Scholars have shed light on such deidealization by way of the reparative's destruction, aggression, and hostility both in Klein's work and in Sedgwick's reading of it.[54] Elizabeth Wilson reminds us that the reparative can lead to further destruction, precisely in the attempt to make good on the damage one has caused. One cannot fully know what one is capable of doing to a loved object, or what that loved object is capable of doing to oneself. One always has the potential to harm who and what one loves, even while trying to care for them. The reparative, Wilson writes, requires "the recognition that sadistic attacks are inevitable, that they can originate from me, and that while their viciousness can be down-regulated,

such attacks cannot be eradicated."[55] In their varying practices, the artists here explore their own capacity to attack what they love, not to unconditionally open the floodgates of cruelty and make excuses for bad behavior, nor to cultivate a toughened response to pain. They want to learn how this capacity for hostility and harm shapes the forms of relation they, and we, desire and pursue.

The spoiled does not shy away from more recent critiques of the reparative as a political and psychoanalytic concept, and the basis of a reading practice. The spoiled offers a means of addressing how repair, and the love it makes possible, is shaped by what it has destroyed, and also made. In Eng's reading of Klein—who, as he notes, was writing on love and repair in the wake of World War I, a period of broad disillusionment with European civilization on the brink of fascism—he argues that the reparative enables "the continuous psychic and political consolidation of a European liberal human subject embedded in a long history of colonial relations."[56] Through the reparative, objects are affectively divided between those of love and hate, of "good *liberal*" objects worth repairing, and "bad *colonial* objects" that are not.[57] For Patricia Stuelke, the reparative, particularly by way of Sedgwick's readings of Klein, has become an ahistorical mode of critique that enables neoliberal forms of governance by accepting an "earnest commitment to making room for pleasure and amelioration" as a substitute for structural change.[58] "The widespread commitment to the reparative," she writes, "can sometimes seem to stave off the difficult work of imagining possible worlds that break definitively with this one; instead, allegiance to the methods people use to survive things as they are becomes a form of solidarity."[59] Through the reparative, "feeling good" becomes the grounds for forms of solidarity, as if tantamount to collective resistance and liberation.[60] In part, the problem with contemporary iterations of the reparative is the role that affect plays in securing rather than undoing the boundedness of the liberal subject. Through the reparative, the liberal subject is one whose guilt ensures that they feel the right way about the right things with the right people, and feel that that is enough.

This book stays with the destructive capacities of repair, attending to, but not resolving, the affective division between good and bad objects. As the shorn parts of loved and hated objects, the spoiled reminds us of what can neither be fully recuperated nor forgotten—what cannot be assessed for means of redress but cannot be dismissed as unworthy of it either. In his critique of reparation, Eng turns to forgiveness, relaying Jacques Derrida's belief that "the only thing truly worth forgiving is the unforgivable"—what lies beyond the pale, the near

insurmountable, and what, for the "I" in the position of offering forgiveness, comes at an unknowable cost.[61] Forgiveness is not world-making so much as world-shattering, a gesture, unbidden, that disrupts business as usual, any sense of scale or proportion. Forgiveness, Eng writes, "cannot be tendered through an economy of equivalence, reciprocity, or commensurability."[62] While a focus on the reparative is oriented around the one who has inflicted injury on another, an engagement with forgiveness is aligned with the one who has experienced injury at the hands of another. The spoiled cannot be said to take either side in all this, nor, I think, is Eng proposing that we do so. But the spoiled, produced by repair's destruction, does bring us—if not drag us—to moments when we encounter such nonequivalence, nonreciprocity, and incommensurability. These are moments when we are met with harm and injury—our own and another's for which we might be responsible—and presented with the question of what to do next given that there is no clear way to calculate what can earn and warrant repair or forgiveness.

If processes of repair are acts of love that mitigate love's more negative, unwieldy qualities, such processes can also involve a feeling like envy. Klein defines envy as the impulse to possess a desirable object that someone else has and to "spoil it" by putting the "bad parts of the self" into it, thereby destroying it.[63] Envy is a hindrance to repair, as a feeling that can overpower guilt. It is for this reason that I am interested in envy and its modes of destruction: they hover in the vicinity of the capacity for love, ready to spoil it. To spoil an object—to enviously desire it and destroy it—is to bestow one's unwanted parts upon it as excessive, uninvited gifts, thus ruining the object for everyone. Generally, envy is discouraged and dismissed. It is, as Sianne Ngai writes, a catty, "petty," feminized feeling, morally devalued, reduced to a subject's insecurity around what they lack ("penis envy") and ressentiment.[64] Alternatively, Ngai suggests that we view envy as the expression of "an ability to recognize, and antagonistically respond to, potentially real and institutionalized forms of inequality."[65] I keep in mind how envy's destructive impulse prompts the kinds of spoilage moving throughout this book. It is a hostile feeling which, by upsetting processes of repair, draws attention to the unequal, asymmetrical division of good and bad objects, between what must be repaired and what must be forgiven. Spoilage cannot ensure repair and it does not and cannot ask for forgiveness. I look to the damage that circles within repair's orbit by handling its shorn parts. Here, artists spoil an object, enviously indulging it with all their "bad parts," and arguably, I do the same. We do so without asking for forgiveness, without the assurance and consolation of repair.

In "United," Cathy Park Hong's opening essay in *Minor Feelings*, she describes an "imaginary" facial tic that emerged as a symptom of her depression.[66] She was sure that a tic in her right eyelid, which first appeared seven years prior as a result of a neuromuscular condition, had returned. But her husband told her he did not see it. "It was my mind threatening mutiny," she writes. "I was turning paranoid, obsessive."[67] Hong decided to seek out a therapist, specifically a Korean American one. "She'd look at me and just *know* where I was coming from," Hong was convinced.[68] After she met with one such therapist for an initial consultation, she felt "remarkably cleansed."[69]

A couple of days later, however, the therapist left Hong a voicemail saying she would not be able to take her on as a patient. Hong called the therapist repeatedly, wanting to know why, and—after a final, angry confrontation over the phone—Hong found herself grappling with what had felt unsayable. Was she turned down for the same reason she sought out this therapist in the first place? Was she sent away because she was a Korean American woman, just like her? What did it mean that Hong's appeal for recognition was met with rejection? Hong's paranoia was confirmed. Her tic might have been imagined, but what it symptomatized was not. Like other Asians, and like her tic, she lacked "presence," even for those with whom she shared a likeness.[70]

For Hong, this noncathartic failure of the therapeutic scene pointed to a set of dynamics surrounding "the self-hating Asian," a well-worn figure akin to the subject of "racist love."[71] Hong's feelings of rejection stung because she imagined this therapist would offer relief from what we could identify as the symptoms of racial melancholia.[72] Hong writes,

> Your only defense is to be hard on yourself, which becomes compulsive, and therefore a comfort, to peck yourself to death. You don't like how you look, how you sound. You think your Asian features are undefined, like God started pinching out your features and then abandoned you. You hate that there are as many Asians in the room. *Who let in all the Asians?* you rant in your head. Instead of solidarity, you feel that you are *less than* around other Asians, the boundaries of yourself no longer distinct but congealed into a horde.[73]

Anger and hatred—manifesting as acts of self-harm like pecks, imagined from on high as God's pinch—turn in on the self. Hong chips and hacks away at the self to become smaller, at the same time that she fears feeling "lesser than"

and disappearing into a horde. She wants to feel singular, different from other Asians, at the same time that she does not want to feel alienated from those around her, Asian or not. For Hong, this encapsulates the condition of being Asian American, in light of the fact that, generally, Asian Americanness remains hard to define. "The paint on the Asian American label has not dried," she explains. "The term is unwieldy, cumbersome, perched awkwardly upon my being," like a facial tic no one else can see, or the scene of a nonreciprocal therapeutic encounter.[74] What pulls at Hong's right eye, what pecks and pinches, are what she calls "minor feelings." Drawing from Ngai's work on "ugly feelings," Hong describes "minor feelings" as "the racialized range of emotions that are negative, dysphoric, and therefore untelegenic, built from the sediments of everyday racial experience and the irritant of having one's perception of reality constantly questioned or dismissed."[75] These feelings emerge when what one experiences as their reality, psychically and materially, is scrutinized, questioned, and disproven, over and over again. Minor feelings run against the grain of what and how someone is supposed to feel.

While Ngai characterizes ugly feelings as noncathartic and nontherapeutic in their duration, it seems that Hong's book became quite cathartic and therapeutic, particularly for Asian American readers. Many of these readers looked to Hong for advice as if she were a therapist like the one Hong herself had pursued, rather than a poet and writer. In Clio Chang's profile of Hong in *New York Magazine*, Chang shares a series of questions readers have asked Hong since the book's release, like "What should I say to someone who says, 'Where do you come from'?" or "My mother is super-toxic . . . I don't know how to make her understand my identity as a queer person. What do you think I should do?"[76] These questions speak to the desire for art to fix and repair, and the assumption that through an aesthetic encounter, the writer and reader, the artist and audience, can be healed and made whole.

In this context, the therapeutic becomes synonymous with what feels soothing, comforting, and good, with what can lead to the right answers regarding how to have affirming, nontoxic relationships. This narrow view does not account for how therapeutic encounters can feel exhausting and bad, provoking our hostility and aggression. One need only recall the times when, upon leaving a therapist's office, one feels spent, used up, unsure of what happens next. In this book, I take issue with flattened, impoverished understandings of the therapeutic in the contemporary popular imagination, more than with actual therapeutic practices and treatments. I contend that the artists in this book do the same. Like me, they are suspicious—in a somewhat paranoid fashion—of the tranquilizing therapeutic properties attributed to

"feeling Asian," and the kinds of self-possession and wholeness these feelings presume as its telos.[77]

Minor Feelings came out in 2020, and in the following years, the book became a touchstone for readers seeking to know more about Asian America—about how Asian Americans felt in the face of how others feel about them, and about the history of anti-Asian racism in the United States more broadly.[78] Many Asian Americans who read the book felt a recognition in knowing someone else felt the same way they did, and gave it a name. As Min Hyoung Song told Chang in their profile of Hong, "the affect fit."[79] Hong's writing gave others what her potential therapist could not give her. To claim "minor feelings" as one's own became healing and empowering, a means of taking back those parts of one's life that had until that point been ignored and disavowed. What had previously felt like it did not quite fit—the label, "Asian American"—now slipped on like a glove.

This is to say that while Asian Americans continue to interrogate what "Asian American" is—whether as a political identity or social demographic—it seems that Asian Americans do know what it *feels* like. In contemporary Asian American popular culture, some people and things, through their affective resonance and attunements to the world, feel Asian. To feel Asian forges relations intergenerationally and transnationally, through and across the space and time of diaspora and the differing waves of immigration and historical processes of Asian racialization. These feelings hold out the possibility that the ongoing debates around the need to properly account for the heterogeneity of "Asian American" might be resolved, not surpassed so much as held in productive tension, in difference.

To experience, express, and identify Asian feelings has become a meaningful part of contemporary Asian American culture that lets "Asian American" as a category stay diffuse, as an incoherence remade into possibility, imbued with potentiality. As Wen Liu points out, this is what makes "these excessive feelings" so efficacious: they "largely constitute the unresolved identity of Asian Americanness. They create emotional, prediscursive bonds that are hard to enunciate but can only be felt, coming together in what are understood as Asian American experiences across ethnicity and culture."[80] Liu critiques the ways that "feeling Asian American" affords "a sense of a collectivized history of racial injury, despite its categorical internal demographic and ideological heterogeneities."[81] I share this critique, except while Liu understands Hong's minor feelings to confront the "affective excess [that] challenges the authenticity and political legitimacy of one's racial injury," to my mind, Hong's work has legitimated such injury, now legible as the accumulative, banal, and everyday of

minor feelings, whether in the form of a facial tic or unanswered phone calls. Hong has expanded our language regarding such feelings, and it is precisely because such minor feelings are noncathartic and minor that healing and repair become necessary, as always yet to come, just on the horizon.

Recent discussions of feeling Asian are indebted to José Esteban Muñoz's theorizations of feeling brown, as a nonidentitarian attunement to minoritarian difference, to ways of feeling different in excess of the emotionally barren whiteness of a dominant national affect and liberal forms of recognition and inclusion. When one feels brown, one can feel down—such affective difference does not only feel good.[82] Muñoz thinks alongside W. E. B. Du Bois's famous query: "How does it feel to be a problem?"[83] For Muñoz, the bad feelings of the minoritized subject are structural, shaped by exclusion from social life and material conditions that can become the grounds for minoritarian recognition, survival, and social belonging. More broadly, scholars working at the convergence of affect theory and feminist and queer theory have produced a complex vocabulary to describe the ways that feelings like depression, "feeling down," "feeling backward," and feeling out of time and place are not individual and private, confined to one's interiority, or reducible to evidence of a minoritized subject's trauma and lack.[84] Feeling Asian, like feeling brown, fits into and promises to sharpen this critical perspective.

At the same time, it seems like the critical, collectively developed perspective afforded by feeling Asian has become diluted and oversaturated all at once. It has range. To feel Asian is to never feel settled, always indeterminate: to feel Asian is to feel desire and pleasure, to feel sad, angry, and burned out, like a model minority or a perpetual foreigner. Akin to what Lauren Berlant describes as women's culture, feeling Asian has come to base itself on "the cliché and the convention" of "insider knowledge" that constitutes an "intimate public."[85] Feeling Asian, like the public intimacy of women's culture, is an "achievement" of something special: "it flourishes as a porous, affective scene of identification among strangers that promises a certain experience of belonging and provides a complex of consolation, confirmation, discipline, and discussion about how to live as an *x*"—in this case, how to live as an Asian American.[86] That is, if you know, you know, but if you do not know, you could, because feeling Asian has become relatable, as well as marketable.

I do not aim to evacuate Asian feelings of meaning or difference, but it would be a mistake to overlook how mobile and flexible they have become. Asians are "crying in H Mart," "turning red" with anger and desire, brushing up against a longing for past lives within the diaspora, and giving in to road rage.[87] As stated in the marketing copy for *Feeling Asian*, a podcast created by comedians

Youngmi Mayer and Brian Park that ran from 2019 to 2022, "feeling Asian" affords "a healthy and compassionate space for Asians, Asian Americans, and Asians in America to be themselves without feeling as if their time is a fleeting moment."[88] For Mayer and Park, feeling Asian provides "a catharsis that is, well, pretty Asian!"[89] The release of the 2022 film *Everything Everywhere All at Once*—wherein the relationships between a Chinese immigrant mother, her husband, and their queer daughter are resolved across and within the multiverse—prompted a batch of articles explaining how the film had healed its actors' and viewers' intergenerational trauma.[90] The film fueled conversations around how art "hold[s] space for trauma and offer[s] catharsis."[91] The film's quixotic multiverse offered what Michael Dango might call a "style [that] provides a fantasy of reparation," insofar as it made it possible for its audience to momentarily displace the crisis of the contemporary moment, and the crisis of Asian America, through narratives of redemption, coming out, and familial acceptance.[92] Whatever Asians feel, they are feeling Asian while doing it, and when recognized as such, it is deemed healing, not just for Asians but for other people, too.

Within the bounds of this discourse, feeling Asian might sometimes feel bad, but it can also feel restorative, as if by feeling bad, one is becoming one's true(r) self. What has previously felt inaccessible about oneself, to oneself, can now be freed and made freeing by one's ability to feel a particular way, which is to say, Asian. While the turn to racialized affect has made important interventions into nonidentitarian theorizations of difference and of minoritarian aesthetics, it has also ironically brought about a set of aesthetic expectations for healing that enable and affirm new claims to identity. These expectations run counter to Muñoz's articulations of feeling brown, wherein brownness does not affirm identity but negates it. "Brownness," he argues, "is a value through negation."[93] This negation is projected from a racist public sphere that turns brownness into a problem, but it also reflects the ways that Latinx, as an identity, has become a problem for those it is supposed to represent, across lines of racial, ethnic, class, national, and language difference. Feeling brown entails "owning the negation": owning the ways feeling brown does not fix or compensate for these problems, whether they come from a racist public sphere or from those with whom one feels in common (or not).[94] Feeling brown is a mode of recognition and belonging made possible by what it cannot resolve. We would do well to remember this when encountering Asian American cultural production with the hopes of feeling seen and healed. Rather than affirm an identity, we might own its negation instead.

Hong defines minor feelings as affective modes imperceptible to the therapeutic encounter, and yet what feels minor has now veered into the major. To

enter into the difficulty of a therapeutic scene comes with the affective expectation of purification and release, and to read what hurts is to enter into a painful encounter for the sake of being healed. But even in *Minor Feelings*, Hong comes up against her own hostility—moments of psychic obstruction, resistance, and difficulty—directed inward toward herself as well as outward toward others in her line of fire.[95] These instances of aggression are not solely projections, the symptoms of a self-hating Asian in need of healing. To take a cue from D. W. Winnicott's writing on aggression, such "symptoms" can also function as a means of coming to know the world as nonretaliatory, external to oneself and beyond one's control.[96] Aggression does not dissolve distinctions between what is the self and what is not. It shapes them. Aggression presents the opportunity to figure out what we want "feeling Asian" to do in our relations with other people, with objects external to the self. It pushes us to consider what we construct *and* destroy in our affective claims to and about Asian Americanness, through the racial injuries that have come to define it as such, as well as through the processes of repair that we hope might heal them and let us feel better.

It cannot be assumed that feeling Asian is in and of itself liberatory and resistant, paving the way for a good, healing relation to the self as Asian American. I do not negate the importance of certain kinds of recognition and relation (and pleasure) that feeling Asian affords. Yet I remain cautious and skeptical of the idea that feeling Asian is an act of self-healing, and hold back from idealizing the appearance of this feeling, in its various guises, within Asian American cultural production. In doing so, I align myself with scholars such as Kelly Chung, Vivian Huang, Christina León, Lilian Mengesha, Lakshmi Padmanabhan, Tina Post, and Xine Yao, whose rich theorizations of inaction, inscrutability, refusal, opacity, the deadpan, and disaffection within performance, literature, art, and film show how such suspicion and wariness harbor neither a disavowal of feeling (Asian) nor a rejection of the social.[97] For these scholars, and for myself, what is otherwise deemed a negative turn away from relation offers a means of critiquing the demands placed on minoritized subjects to make themselves sympathetic, expressive, and transparent through the authenticity of biographical detail, proper displays of affect, and productive, legible forms of sociality.

A therapeutic encounter might provoke our aggression; it might be quite "irksome."[98] This is not because we are doomed to feel terrible forever or because therapy does not work (that would be sad news for us all), but because the therapeutic encounter, whether in culture or in the clinic, cannot ensure that we will come to feel "remarkably cleansed," as if this were the primary motive of our lives, the stories we tell, and our construction, destruction, and di-

vision of objects we love and hate. Asian feelings should not be the only aim, desire, and capacity of and for Asian American cultural production. The artists in this book do not hold out for such feelings as a cleanse or a cure; they know that processes of repair, like learning, and like analysis, are wayward and "interminable."[99]

The Bitter Therapeutics of Asian America, in the Classroom and Elsewhere

This book proceeds from the assertion that the desire for "narrative plenitude," for more Asian American stories and representations, has spoiled.[100] In the post-1965 era of Asian racialization, in the midst of increased visibility and representation in popular culture and the institutionalization of the field of Asian American studies, we—Asian Americanist scholars, Asian American writers, critics, and artists—have spoiled and been spoiled by this desire. I do not mean we have had too much representation and that we should stop wanting more. I mean that we have put too much emphasis on the pursuit of representation—not only, per a familiar critique, as that which can afford us the cozy comforts of "feel-good entertainment," but also as that which can account for the ambivalence the term "Asian American" has provoked since its emergence in the late 1960s and '70s, whether as the grounds of a social movement, an identity, a field of study, or all of the above.[101]

Implicit in the call for plenitude is the belief that it could, in some way, make up for—or make good—a formation of "Asian American" that has been lost or fallen apart. There is a hope that a plenitude of representation, and the feelings it inspires, might restore or recover a minor form or sense of Asian Americanness, irreducible to DEI initiatives and the institutions that manage them, and immune to the model minority pursuit of capital.[102] But what if the restoration and recovery of "Asian American" as an ideal—as the good, right, and minor—is not possible? How has "Asian American" become damaged, not just at the hands of others, but also because of our own repeated attempts to repair it, protect it, and preserve it?

Negative affects and uneasy feelings stick to the term "Asian American," in Asian American studies and more generally in the US cultural and political imaginary. Asian Americanness is marked by what Kandice Chuh calls a "constitutive ambivalence," which she rightly describes as by now "axiomatic."[103] Such ambivalence can be attributed to the ways that those whom the term includes shifted and grew after 1965 with the Immigration and Nationality Act, contributing to what the Pew Research Center described in 2012 as the "Rise of

Asian Americans": "the highest-income, best-educated and fastest-growing racial group in the United States."[104] As Chuh and many other Asian Americanist scholars remind us, declaring that Asian Americans are on the "rise" as the model minority overlooks how globalization, wars between the United States and Asian nations, and post-1965 immigration policies prioritizing familial relationships and educated or skilled migrants have contributed to the uneven growth and transformation of the Asian American population.[105]

The model minority is not a role afforded to all Asian Americans. Yet those who can (quite literally) afford it "have enthusiastically identified *as* the model minority," as "active agents of racial capitalism and the U.S. nation," Chuh writes.[106] This has unsettled a version of Asian American studies organized around Asian American subjects as historically minor and marginalized; it has made Asian American studies ambivalent about its own project. To point this out is not to make any claim about historical or contemporary Asian American experiences of racial discrimination and violence. Rather, with Chuh, I am contending with the contradictions that allow and compel some Asian Americans to strategically "identif[y] as a racial minority in order to further majoritarian ends"—by claiming, for instance, that affirmative action policies are discriminatory toward Asian American students.[107] Under these circumstances, we would do well to realize that our critical, political investments in a particular notion of Asian Americanness—one fixedly oriented toward the minor and marginalized—have, over time, spoiled.

In efforts to position Asian American studies decidedly not on the side of the complicit, assimilated model minority, Asian Americanist scholars have turned to the model minority's ostensible opposite, which Viet Thanh Nguyen, Susan Koshy, and Christopher Lee refer to as, respectively, "the bad subject," "the resistant Asian American subject," and the "ideal critical subject."[108] These "bad," "resistant," and "critical" Asian American subjects have allowed Asian American studies to pursue forms and feelings of "Asian American" that are liberatory, antiassimilative, and anti-imperialist. Like Nguyen, Koshy, and Lee, I am skeptical of the extent to which the substitution of one subject for another can preserve—or unspoil—Asian American studies, let alone the politics of one racial group as a whole. The spoiled consists of what has been disowned, cut, and cast out in reparative processes of alteration, if not quite substitution. It does not offer up a better Asian American subject to be represented in politics and popular culture or centered in Asian American studies. Instead, the spoiled is that which has been disposed of in efforts to locate and construct this idealized subject.[109] In continuing to think with Chuh, the spoiled is the stuff of "subject-

less discourse," but insofar as it betrays the desire for Asian American subjecthood—by which I mean that it discloses that desire to then double cross it.[110]

I propose that we take up the spoils of Asian Americanness and processes of Asian racialization to grapple with what about "Asian American" has deviated from our idealizations of the term's formation and then been shorn away. We might have a better idea of what we want "Asian American" to do for us in the present once we acknowledge that the term must continue to bear our negativity, our capacity for aggression and destruction, especially in our attempts to repair it. I am not asking if we have done irreversible damage to the ideals of love, solidarity, and collectivity that "Asian American" has been asked to hold. Damage has already been done. My question is: Now what? What happens when we start from the supposition that in the pursuit of our ideals, we risk ruining them—and ourselves and others—in the process? In other words, what else becomes possible when we acknowledge that what we wreck cannot be fixed, and instead takes other different, hostile forms? To handle the spoiled is to confront the misalignments, frustrations, and annoyances that come from repeated, by now familiar, confrontations with the impasses that "Asian American" creates, as an identitarian category and the grounds of a field.

I hope my approach to thinking with the artists in this book makes clear how the cruel notion of rightness—of the right subject or right object of study—is itself deserving of our hostility and destruction. These artists are not exemplary figures who consistently identify themselves or their work as Asian American; they are not selected because they encapsulate what is happening within contemporary Asian American art. They are not ideal subjects of Asian America, they are spoiled ones. Their work is not always "about" Asian Americanness in ways that assume a transparent relation between form and identitarian categories of difference, but they do intrude upon that relation and tamper with it.[111] Susette Min writes that the naming of Asian American art as a means of institutional recognition and formal inclusion "threatens to fix Asian American art as a site of reconciliation and containment, a filter and point of entry for select artists to enter into the art market or an exhaustive repository that absorbs those artists who are on the threshold of fading into obscurity."[112] These artists do not reject the naming of their work as "Asian American," nor do they dissociate themselves from an Asian American identity and the communities forged through it. Instead, they critically navigate the ways that naming oneself and one's art as such can affect the curation, acquisition, circulation, and interpretation of one's work within various institutional spaces. They know that in the era of neoliberal multiculturalism, representations of "feeling Asian" have

led to greater Asian American visibility, and that this has affected how the art world, the publishing and music industries, and the academy encounter and engage with their work. This is not an individual issue of an artist "selling out" or compromising their principles, but a structural one that speaks to the ways artists of color are habitually required to promote their work by identifying themselves, in some way, within it and alongside it.

I understand these artists' work in the context of the broader history of Asian American art—not to neatly lump all of the artists together as descendants of a singular lineage but to trace the ways their work either follows or interrupts previous aesthetic expectations, political demands, and institutional constraints that have shaped the emergence of what can be loosely be called Asian American art. Members of the Asian American community arts movement in the late 1960s and '70s viewed their art as a form of radical resistance from the margins of mainstream culture that shed light on the history and lived experience of Asian American communities in pursuit of recognition and social change.[113] The artists who followed—particularly the Generation X cohort that Min Hyoung Song calls "the children of 1965"—were typically understood to be less burdened than their predecessors by the need to represent a collective Asian American identity, thus having more freedom to experiment in their practice.[114] In the wake of 1965, and during the 1990s, which saw a surge in the production and celebration of Asian American fiction, these artists showed their work in community spaces, but they also began to receive wider recognition once their work entered gallery and museum spaces, particularly in the context of race- or ethnic-specific group exhibitions.[115] For this generation of artists, success has resulted in tenured faculty positions at universities, bringing the art world and the academy together, such that the structural precarities of one promise to offset the structural precarities of the other.

The younger millennial generation of artists who are the main (but not only) focus of this book have also interfaced with institutions. While making their work, they navigate their entanglement with institutional spaces like museums, galleries, art schools with prestigious MFA programs, and universities with Asian American studies initiatives, institutes, programs, or departments. Often, they are students under the guidance and mentorship of artists from previous generations—a relationship that is formalized and partially shaped by the institutions both of them move through. The former generation came to know their work as Asian American once they had come into contact with institutions.[116] Alternately, these artists, from early on in their careers, have had to learn to move through the terms and conditions of their visibility and inclusion within these spaces, which often come with the ex-

pectation that to some extent, they will become familiar with Asian American studies scholarship as that which shapes the ways their work will be read, and how it will be received. Given the growing presence of Asian American studies on college campuses across the United States, this means finding their way through a field that, as Mark Chiang reminds us, has become a site of cultural capital and thus a source of authenticity, legibility, and stability for scholars and artists alike.[117]

These variations of (post-)post-1965 generational differences are not meant to be prescriptive or diagnostic, let alone accusatory. No generation is better than another, or capable of better, more politically radical or meaningful art. However, it is worth noting that a younger generation of Asian Americans (of which, to be clear, I am a part) has come to know itself as Asian American via the marked presence of Asian American representation in popular culture, the institutionalization of Asian American art and Asian American studies, and what the term "Asian American" has become. These artists and I are spoiled insofar as we have come of age in a moment when "narrative plenitude" has presented itself as a possibility and could, in turn, become a source of our embarrassment, if not ire. I write this book from this position, which is to say, *after* the acknowledgment of Asian American ambivalence, after the damage has been done and the question of what happens next remains as open as an oozing wound, as indefinite as the term of a tantrum.

Alongside Eng and Han's case studies of Asian American students is the hope that Asian American studies can offer a Winnicottian "holding environment" able to address and alleviate pain by reflecting the growing population of Asian American students on US college campuses.[118] This perspective has been instrumental to the fight for Asian American studies programs, course offerings, and faculty at universities throughout the United States.[119] Nor is it unfounded: students do look to courses in Asian American studies in search of a vital kind of recognition and readiness to learn, as I did, and this does speak to the necessity of Asian American studies in the classroom. Yet it is often overlooked that, as Eng and Han write, a holding environment does not just validate and maintain one's sense of self but also facilitates the emergence of a self that can "tolerate paradoxes—an ability to listen, to play, and to (be)hold multiple narratives not only for their similarities but also their contradictions."[120] It is these paradoxes and contradictions that have been glossed over and consolidated into a singular narrative of healing the self and making it whole, present not only in the classroom but also in popular culture.

Courses in Asian American studies, as well as ethnic studies, gender and sexuality studies, and queer studies, are a vital resource for students. As a student,

I eagerly threw myself into class readings and discussions, ready to learn something new, sometimes in relation to myself, and I would not begrudge that experience to others. But that experience was not wholly one of validation—it was not all warm and fuzzy feelings. It also held moments of antagonism and defensiveness, of being jolted out of my ideas about the world and my place in it. In these moments, the classroom can and does provoke hostility and aggression, and we should not merely attribute this to irresolvable generational differences and sensitivities. We should take it as a sign that sometimes the recognition afforded in the classroom cannot always feel good in the way we anticipate and imagine. The classroom, including the Asian American studies classroom, cannot and should not guarantee that we will feel grounded and affirmed, because sometimes we will walk away unmoored, but—crucially and hopefully—with the feeling that there is more to learn.

Trying to uphold this impossible guarantee, both in and outside the classroom, often relies on autobiography and its confessional modes as sources of catharsis and relief. As Michel Foucault tells us, confession is not a practice of freedom, but a coercive effect of power that "Western man" as a "confessing animal" believes can uncover the truth of the self, as a secret to set free.[121] While Foucault primarily considers the function of confession within older forms of disciplinary society and its institutions, contemporary forms of autobiography—often made legible through identitarian categories—have altered the confessional models he examines and the selves produced therein. As Rey Chow writes, confession is experiencing a "prolific, mediatized afterlife" in which twenty-first-century subjects readily and gladly offer their selves to a broad public on the internet and elsewhere.[122] "If giving an account of oneself (to the authorities) in Foucault's narrative is synonymous with self-devaluation and self-destruction," Chow writes, "in late capitalist society giving an account of oneself (in public) promises rather a way *out of* self-devaluation and self-destruction."[123] The confessing self becomes a "*complainant*" ready to share the secrets of their injury, in the hope it will be recognized by another. This recognition, if achieved, opens up "a passage to freedom" that we could also think of as healing, insofar as the complainant can now reclaim and empower themself.[124] Crucially, as Chow makes clear, the complainant's presentation of grievance—their act of "voicing bitterness"—is an entrepreneurial endeavor that takes the guise of a therapeutic one.[125] The process draws value from experiences of devaluation by repackaging them into neoliberal narratives of self-growth as self-optimization.

Chow's exemplary complainants are two women: Princess Diana and Oprah. The complainant who makes it her business to give an account of her

injury in order to heal is a woman who utters, as Berlant calls it, the "female complaint."[126] While Chow speaks of confession as voicing bitterness, Berlant notes that "in the contemporary world of U.S. women's culture the bitter vigilance of the intimately disappointed takes up a lot of space."[127] Bitterness becomes the spoiled sensation of femininity—watchful and self-referential, vengeful and envious—made to submit to a hostile world. For Berlant, the intimate public of women's culture is not grounded in the individual confession of the self, but in the presumption of a shared, collective experience of disappointment. Ultimately, though, Chow's theory of confession and Berlant's understanding of the intimate public's shared story describe two dimensions of the same therapeutic encounter in which the sharing of grievance produces a healing site of belonging. Together, they speak to the therapeutic properties of feeling Asian within Asian American culture, where the intimacies granted by the comforts of narrative and genre convention are cathartic and, as such, good (unfinished) business.

The burden of the therapeutic—as curative and lucrative—has been placed on fields like Asian American studies, as well as critical race and ethnic studies and gender and sexuality studies, which are, at times, included within the university as a corrective to bias, a form of sensitivity training, or a contingency plan that will make the university more diverse, equitable, and inclusive. These fields, as Chow writes, are meant to rehearse a "*reparative* logic whereby some kinds of knowledge carry the service function of delivering (or at least bringing us closer to) social justice and whose presence supposedly attests to a neoliberal academy's compassion, atonement, and capacity for 'self-culpabilization.'"[128] Here, the reparative adheres to a moralizing narrative about becoming better and feeling better, too. By the conventions of this narrative, a field like Asian American studies should shore up and reflect a clear image of the Asian American subject, and proffer a narrative of the university and its progress.

The pursuit of an ideal can guide us to the classroom. However, as Muñoz writes, the task of the teacher of minoritarian knowledge might be to "playfully call attention to the sense of abandonment that shadows that endeavor."[129] Pedagogy is founded on the "failure and incompleteness" of the teacher who must remain accountable to the student in light of a spoiled ideal.[130] The artists here develop a pedagogy that can spill out in bitterness, yet in doing so, they teach us that we can and should desire more from our encounters with Asian American studies and Asian American culture than cathartic confession.

To take up the spoiled involves handling the matter of the Asiatic body, which in the United States has been predominantly perceived as and associated with the ethnically Chinese body. This body is viewed as ornamental and inorganic, like Afong Moy, the "Chinese Lady" exhibited throughout the United States in the early nineteenth century.[131] It is diseased and contagious, like the figures of the predatory Chinese bachelor and Chinese prostitute that threatened to seep out of the depraved, unhygienic opium dens of Chinatowns in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[132] It is a viral body, imagined as the carrier of COVID-19 and other public health threats that make their way into the United States and infect its healthy citizen subjects. It is a body impervious to pain; it is inscrutable, submissive, alien, and robotic with nimble parts, like the cheap migrant laborers arriving throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the communist spy during the Cold War, but also the self-sufficient model minority of the latter half of the twentieth century into the present.[133] It is also the provenance of the perverse, the femininized, the queer, the emasculated, the bottom, where, as Richard Fung writes, "Asian and anus are conflated," or where the Asiatic body becomes a hyper(hetero)sexualized fetish object of white fantasy and indulgence.[134]

The artists here take up these various iterations of the Asiatic body—bound to East Asianness and Chineseness—to see what can be made with these lasting wounds. They fume and seethe within the aesthetic, political, material incoherence between bodies and things, subjects and objects. They do not rescue the Asiatic body from the harms of history on behalf of an Asian American subject in need of healing. They are invested in what forms injury makes for a subject marked by difference. Such investments were on display in the *Wonder Women* exhibition, where the proliferation of the Asian American woman's figure became something that felt (more than it actually looked) vulgar, excessive, and wasteful rather than respectable, modest, and useful. Perhaps, then, the figures in Yin's *Dreaming Host* and Lek's *Napping* are not just portraits of rest as resistance and self-care, but also portraits of irritable figures full, taut, and glutted. They are not quite comfortable and content, so much as overdone, bursting at the seams, with hostility brewing just underneath a seemingly serene surface.

I am guided by this affective, embodied sense of irritation. What has drawn me to write about the artists in this book is not how they refuse a good Asian American politics or the moral authority of cathartic autobiographical narratives of healing and repair, but how they *irritate* them. Irritation is an inflammatory,

durational feeling where the boundaries of the body start to blur, when physical and psychic states become difficult to separate from each other. It can feel like a fragile, edgy temper, but also like a skin rash or sunburn. The irritability of the spoiled belies the self's affectability. When someone or something is irritated, it cannot masquerade as unbothered. Something on the surface of the body or in one's disposition gives it away. As Ngai writes, to be irritable is to be perceived as rash and careless, either as too sensitive or not sensitive enough.[135] Following this (il)logic, the chapters of this book attend to what is irritating about its objects of study. Indeed, they, or I, might irritate you.

Guided by the sensation of irritation, I am in keeping with the methods of queer studies scholars working on aesthetic form who—as Kadji Amin, Amber Musser, and Roy Pérez write—place "unlikely" objects in relation "to think together concepts and works of art that might appear inconsonant according to the strictures of historical period, genre, medium, or perceived cultural context, but whose relevance and discursive imbrication become visible through the activity of the queer critic."[136] Amin, Musser, and Pérez speak to many of us who have long followed Sedgwick's suggestion that "ideally life, loves, and ideas might then sit freely, for a while, on the palm of the open hand."[137] The image Sedgwick offers is a tactile one. For her, touching people and things, from friends to textiles, attune us to "the middle ranges of agency," where we make sense of our relations through who and what resists or softens, gives or takes.[138] Such queer methods are in line with Sedgwick's articulations of reparative reading, wherein "life, loves, and ideas" are incommensurable: there are no equivalences, no symmetrical relations. Instead, there are "strange affinities" between varying forms of difference.[139] In my chapters, performance, music, poetry, literature, film, and visual art are placed beside each other to incite aggravating moments of friction and heat, as well as frigidity and coldness. People and things repel each other, bump up against each other, rub each other the wrong way, bringing out the other's hostility as an invitation and challenge to respond, to engage, even if it is annoying and tedious to do so. I am aware of how I, as the author, am present throughout the text, as spoiled as the objects with which I engage. My hand that holds the objects in this book, like the hand of Ouyang's *Kicked Madonna* and the hand in Lek's paintings, cannot be trusted to always stay open. At times, it might want to hold onto its objects too closely, so much so that it may destroy them. My readings inhabit that moment between the open hand and a closed fist.

Although irritation is felt in and on one's own body, it is structural, fleshing out relations of power and producing "theories in the flesh."[140] Irritation is a resource for theorizing, able to signal and hold varying embodied psychic

contradictions and material differences that neither cede to abstract universalist theories of personhood nor guarantee narratives of repair in the face of power. For Ngai, irritability presents the problem of an excess or deficiency of anger, particularly in the face of racist violence. Like envy, it is disproportionate to the social scene where it emerges. As a misfitting feeling, irritation makes possible a critique of how minoritized subjects are expected to respond and react to the harm they endure. "In other words," Ngai writes, "it is irritation's radical inadequacy—its stubborn 'offishness' or incommensurateness with respect to objects . . . —that calls attention to a symbolic violence in the principle of commensurability itself, when there is an underlying assumption that an appropriate emotional response to racist violence exists, and that the burden lies on the racialized subject to produce that appropriate response legibly, unambiguously, and immediately."[141] Irritation troubles the notion that in the face of racist violence, there is a right response commensurable to the hurt, pain, and damage inflicted. This does not mean that there is no escape or relief from violence. Rather, the "offishness" of irritation makes palpable how racist violence is followed by another kind of violence, borne from the expectation that there could possibly be an appropriate and proportionate response to such violence—as if there were a way to measure the pain, harm, and injury caused, and that once things are even, such violence will be absolved, forgotten, or irrelevant. We might say that by valorizing Asian American cultural objects for being soothing, as opposed to irritating, we slide into the assumption that they provide that right response to injury, thus enabling adequate processes of redress and repair. Therefore, throughout these chapters, I remain committed to the incommensurability of the irritable and how it chafes, nags, tugs, and rubs raw.

To spoil is to deidealize and deform. These two processes organize the progression of chapters in this book. Through these processes, the spoiled inflames the line between the sensible and the nonsensible—between the sensus communis of a dominant social order as described by Jacques Rancière,[142] and what Chuh calls "illiberal, uncommon sensibilities" disavowed and excluded from that social order, barred from the realm of reason or good taste, proprietary to the idealized, universal, modern liberal subject.[143] The first two chapters focus on deidealizations of the Asian American subject's relatability, healing, and care. In the wake of this deidealization, the subject of the remaining two chapters is not one of preservation but of deformation; here, form does not disappear or become formless, but it does shift into something unsettling and aggressively unfamiliar. Taking all four chapters together, the rest of this book proceeds from the figure, as seen in the work included in the *Wonder Women*

exhibition, then moves to its gradual disfigurement and decomposition that necessitate a different kind of reading, another kind of relating.

Deidealization is the process of relinquishing one's fantasies of control and omnipotence. For Kadji Amin, "deidealization is not the wholesale destruction of cherished ideals, but a form of the reparative that acknowledges messiness and damage."[144] Amin critiques, in particular, the valorization of deviance in queer studies and argues for "spoilage of the ideal": the ideal objects of study, but also the frictionless relations and politics we want these same objects to activate and afford.[145] The artists here take up forms of hostility in order to account for the nonideal violence, harm, and vulnerability of "living with damage in a damaged world."[146] They spoil our ideals and our desire for a good politics, as well as for a contained, affirmed sense of self. After all, as Heather Love notes, some ideals are "ripe for spoiling."[147]

The first chapter, "Staying In," engages with the work of poet and writer Ocean Vuong, singer-songwriter Mitski, and the earlier works of artist Patty Chang, which direct us toward autoerotic forms of asociality through the act of staying in. Staying in spoils the ideality of sociality and world-making often espoused in scholarship on the intimacies of queer performance and the publics they make possible. By disidentifying with the stereotype of the awkward Asian American recluse, Vuong's, Mitski's, and Chang's acts of staying in redraw the boundaries of what constitutes desirable, legible forms of sociality. Rather than reduce these acts to relatable lessons on self-care, I argue that the notable earnestness of their work discloses an awkward truth: the need to relate to other people in spite of oneself can be perversely embarrassing.

In the second chapter, "Using Quotations," artist Wu Tsang pushes relatability to the extreme in her performance practice of "full body quotation," wherein she recites the speech others, as an embodied practice of taking and giving. By turning the words of others into material for her own performance, Tsang's work betrays idealized notions of reciprocity and equivalent exchange. Such notions are often invoked not only with respect to our relationships with other people, but also to our scholarship and aesthetic practices—and Tsang's determination to flout them has provoked discussion, if not outright accusations, of appropriation. Without denying or dismissing such charges, I understand Tsang's practice of full body quotation to mine the uneasy, destructive dynamics of encounter, of using people and being open to being used by them too, through the transmission and contamination of quotation.

While the first two chapters deidealize the self-possessed Asian American subject, the next two are guided by the dispossessed, by the contaminated or

contaminating Asiatic body—not removed from the social but in the wake of trying to stay committed to it. I follow Brent Hayes Edwards's reading of Georges Bataille, who defines "*informe*" as that which undoes binary oppositions between categories and classifications of difference, like form and formlessness, or form and matter.[148] *Informe*, Edwards writes, is the name given to "what is allowed no *right* to form."[149] As such, it can be what Kyla Wazana Tompkins calls "crude."[150] *Informe* "insults what it designates, brings it down, by rudely asserting that everything has a form *but you*," Edwards writes.[151] *Informe* is "vulgar," "crass," "unrefined or uncivilized," "rough, rude, and blunt."[152] It singles you out by calling you out. These remaining chapters pursue such moments of insult.

The third chapter, "Cold Leftovers," moves toward the Asiatic body's undoing as it is consumed, decomposes, lets go, and gives up. I revisit David Henry Hwang's 1988 play *M. Butterfly* as a canonical object of study that, while seeming to have gone cold over time, offers a materialization of Asiatic femininity via skin cold to the touch. Alongside the play, scholar and filmmaker Mila Zuo's 2016 short film *Carnal Orient* depicts Asiatic femininity as food unfit for consumption, the spoils of cold leftovers. Meanwhile, in her installation, performance, and video work with gelatin, artist Alison Kuo sacrifices herself to the goopy substance, making herself fit for consumption through its touch, thereby giving herself up to waste.

In the last chapter, "Injured Enough," artists TJ Shin and Jes Fan experiment with what the Asiatic body creates in its injury. Shin and Fan damage objects and nonhuman forms of life rendered analogous to the Asiatic body through processes of contamination, cutting, casting, and injection. They do not try to evoke sympathy by showing the Asiatic body in pain; instead, they make use of the fact that the recognizability of Asian American injury depends on such injury's analogous relation and comparability to the injury of racialized others. Their work thus interrogates what is understood in Asian American studies and in Asian American politics as a dependence on others, a dependence that is at times spoiled because of how it can lead to a neediness that encroaches upon others.

This book begins with bitterness, and it ends with the sweetness of Julie Tolentino's durational performance *HONEY*. Over the course of several hours, Tolentino eats honey fed to her by her collaborator and lover, Stosh Fila, also known as Pigpen. The performance waffles between a scene of nourishment and one of spoilage, between what the body needs, what the body wants, and what the body can endure. The performance presents a scene of love constituted by the harm of honey, a material excess that envelops Tolentino's body, capacity,

appetite, and desire. Between Tolentino and Pigpen, the threshold of care is traced and transgressed by the drip of honey into Tolentino's mouth.

Throughout this book, the spoiled does not refuse repair. The spoiled loosens fixations on affirmation and wholeness—it is concerned with what processes of repair can damage and leave behind. The spoiled is the hard, bitter pill to swallow (or chew or choke on). In a moment of spoilage, we must ask: What becomes possible in our relation to another once we know that we are capable not only of experiencing harm at the hands of another, but also of causing such harm ourselves? What might be destructive about our desires for repair, healing, and care, and what does such destruction make and leave for us to find? This book invites you to scavenge among the spoils of such destruction. These spoils are what I hold in my hand, now extended out to you.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. On beauty as that which we turn to in order to make sense of and move through crisis and catastrophe, see Nguyen, *Promise of Beauty*.

2. I am thinking with Cato Ouyang's single-channel video *THREE BETRAYALS* (2021), which was a part of their exhibition of the same name that included *Scorn of God* and *Kicked Madonna*, shown at No Place Gallery in Columbus, Ohio, January 15, 2021–March 5, 2022. In their press release for their exhibition *forgive everything* at Night Gallery in Los Angeles, November 12, 2022–January 21, 2023, which they describe as a sequel to *THREE BETRAYALS*, Ouyang invites us to think of betrayal "not only as a violation of trust, but as a generative act that passes forth and thus preserves information." Ouyang, *THREE BETRAYALS*, 2021; Ouyang, *forgive everything*, 2023.

3. Sexton, "In Excelsis."

4. Sexton, "In Excelsis."

5. Barbara Johnson reads this well-known line from John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" as pointing to the aesthetic value ascribed to a woman whose illegible yet seductive muteness renders her violation indistinguishable from her pleasure. See Johnson, "Muteness Envy."

6. I am thinking of Jillian Hernandez's work on the aesthetics of excess, as that which adorns the racialized, gendered bodies of Black and Latina women. Hernandez, *Aesthetics of Excess*.

7. Goffman, *Stigma*, 5. Also see Heather Love on midcentury sociology's study of deviance and queer theory. Love, *Underdogs*.

8. See Love, "Spoiled Identity," in *Feeling Backward*.

9. I am thinking of Veruca's appearance in the 1971 film *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (dir. Mel Stuart), adapted from Roald Dahl's 1964 children's novel. Played by Julie Dawn Cole, Veruca sings the musical number "I Want It Now."

10. Evelyn Hammonds argues that Black feminist theorists need to reclaim Black women's bodies and Black women's sexuality via a "politics of articulation" in the face of what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham describes as a "politics of silence" and what Darlene Clark Hines calls a "culture of dissemblance." In the nineteenth century, strategies of silence and dissemblance offered a means of combating negative stereotypes as well as claiming Black women's dignity and personhood. However, as Hammonds writes, both sedimented in the twentieth century into a heteronormative respectability politics that has limited Black women's expression as desiring sexual subjects. See Hammonds, "Black (W)holes"; Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History"; Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives."

11. For Freud, "the polymorphously perverse disposition" is that of the child's, whose "mental dams against sexual excesses—shame, disgust and morality—have either not yet been constructed at all or are only in course of construction, according to the age of the child." He continues, "In this respect children behave in the same kind of way as an average uncultivated woman in whom the same polymorphously perverse disposition persists" (57). Freud, *Three Essays*, 57.

12. In the film *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, Veruca's musical number ends with her falling down a garbage chute—"Where all the other bad eggs go," Willy Wonka explains. In the tradition of bad eggs, the band Veruca Salt's first 1994 single, "Seether," personifies an uncontrollable temper as a girl you cannot fight or see "till I'm foaming at the mouth."

13. In J M de Leon's dissertation "'Let Me Listen to Me,'" self-indulgence is a survival strategy for non-normative subjects, in which value is conferred on the subject in the face of its devaluation within regulatory structures of power. Here I am interested in forms of indulgence that trouble affirmations of the subject, to the extent that the subject cannot be sure of what it can call proper to itself. De Leon, "'Let Me Listen to Me.'"

14. Manalansan, "'Stuff' of Archives"; Vargas, "Ruminations on Lo Sucio."

15. Stallings, *Funk the Erotic*, xii.

16. On queer negativity, see Bersani, *Homos*; Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave?*; Edelman, *No Future*.

17. Saketopoulou, *Sexuality Beyond Consent*, 180–83.

18. The exhibition included Ouyang's installation, *otherwise, spite: 1. whores at the end of the world / 2. from every drop of his blood another demon arose (1829–1840)* (2020), inspired by a nineteenth-century colonial sketch of an attack on travelers by Indian "Thugs," as well as their series *Terrarium* (2017), consisting of sculptures imagining the lotus foot of their great-grandmother hand-carved from varieties of stone like alabaster and soapstone. Ouyang and I talk about *otherwise, spite* in an interview published in April 2023. Kim Lee, "Finding One Another in Recognition."

19. Lim, "Wonder Woman," 25.

20. Lim, "Wonder Woman," 25.

21. Lim, "Wonder Woman," 25.

22. Lim, "Wonder Woman," 25.

23. Lim, "Wonder Woman," 26.

24. My skepticism around *Wonder Women* does not mark the first time a group exhibition of Asian American artists has received scrutiny or critique from Asian American and non–Asian American viewers alike. Susette Min offers a historical account of the curation, organization, and reception of group exhibitions of Asian American artists at major art institutions in the United States throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. She documents how these exhibitions spoke to the shifting, contradictory interests and investments of museums, curators, artists, critics, and viewers over time. The exhibitions, and the artists they included, make evident the differences between generations of Asian American artists, which I address in this introduction. See Min, "Unnamable Encounters," in *Unnamable*.

25. Huang, *Surface Relations*, 28. I am also thinking of Laura Hyun Yi Kang's critical reading of Mitsuye Yamada's essay "Invisibility Is an Unnatural Disaster." See Kang, *Compositional Subjects*; Yamada, "Invisibility Is an Unnatural Disaster."

26. Huang, *Surface Relations*, 28.

27. Press release for *Wonder Women* at Jeffrey Deitch New York, May 7–June 25, 2022, https://deitch.com/new-york/exhibitions/wonder-women-curated-by-kathy-huang.

28. Kang, *Compositional Subjects*, 5. Kang writes that "Asian American woman" and "Asian woman" have become objects of knowledge that lend authority to academic disciplines, as well as to modes of regulation, surveillance, protection, and adjudication in US foreign policy, immigration laws, and intergovernmental organizations. Also see Kang, *Traffic in Asian Women*.

29. Zuo, *Vulgar Beauty*, 17.

30. Saketopoulou, *Sexuality Beyond Consent*, 2. I am also referring to the way Freud's theorizations of the unconscious changed over time. As Saketopoulou points out, Freud initially understood the unconscious as the container for repressed memories of trauma, which, through treatment—the "working through" of traumatic memory—could be cured. Later, Freud came to believe—as he posited in his writing about transference between analysand and analyst—that the unconscious cannot be done away with but instead always resurfaces. Saketopoulou, *Sexuality Beyond Consent*, 4–5. Also see Freud, "Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through"; Freud, "Observations on Transference-Love."

31. Doyle, *Hold It Against Me*.

32. Livien Yin (@livienyin), "'Dreaming Host' was on view at Wonder Women."

33. Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation*. Elsewhere, erin Khuê Ninh has mined the psychic and social pressures of the immigrant nuclear Asian American family and the model minority myth. While the former paradigmatically produces the docile, hardworking daughter driven to madness, bitterness, and even suicide due to her feelings of indebtedness and inadequacy, the latter drives some Asian Americans college students, as impostors, to violence. See Ninh, *Ingratitude*; Ninh, *Passing for Perfect*.

34. See Shimakawa, *National Abjection*; Eng, *Racial Castration*; Cheng, *Melancholy of Race*.

35. Khúc, *dear elia*, 5. Mimi Khúc also edited a collaborative hybrid art project, curated by erin Khuê Ninh, Eliza Noh, Tamara Ho, and Long Bui, titled "Open in Emergency: A Special Issue on Asian American Health," and published through the *Asian American Literary Review* in 2016. An expanded second edition followed in 2019. See Khúc, "Open in Emergency."

36. On anticure politics, see Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*. Also see Kim, *Curative Violence*.

37. Lee, *Pedagogies of Woundedness*, 8. See also Chen et al., "Work Will Not Save Us."

38. Baik et al., "To Write in Unwellness," 494.

39. Baik et al., "To Write in Unwellness," 495.

40. Hedva, *How to Tell When We Will Die*, 29.

41. See Rivera, *Model Minority Masochism*.

42. Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation*, 19.

43. Johnson, "Nothing Fails Like Success," 16.

44. Johnson, "Nothing Fails Like Success," 16.

45. Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading," in *Touching Feeling*, 128.

46. Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading," 128.

47. Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading," 128.

48. Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading," 128.

49. Klein, "Love, Guilt and Reparation," 312.

50. Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading," 128.

51. See Wilson, *Gut Feminism*; Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*; Love, "Truth and Consequences," 236.

52. Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading," 149.

53. Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation*, 58.

54. See Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation*; Love, "Truth and Consequences"; Chambers-Letson, "Homegrown Terror"; Wilson, *Gut Feminism*; Chambers-Letson, "Reparative Feminisms"; Diaz, "Melancholic Maladies."

55. Wilson, *Gut Feminism*, 71.

56. Eng, "Colonial Object Relations," 11.

57. Eng, "Colonial Object Relations," 11.

58. Stuelke, *Ruse of Repair*, 17.

59. Stuelke, *Ruse of Repair*, 17.

60. Stuelke, *Ruse of Repair*, 4.

61. Eng, "Reparations and the Human," 582. See Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*. Eng also turns to Judith Butler's work on forgiveness; see Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*.

62. Eng, "Reparations and the Human," 583.

63. Klein, "Study of Envy and Gratitude," 212, 213.

64. Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 128.

65. Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 129.

66. Hong, *Minor Feelings*, 3.

67. Hong, *Minor Feelings*, 4.

68. Hong, *Minor Feelings*, 5.

69. Hong, *Minor Feelings*, 6.

70. Hong, *Minor Feelings*, 7.

71. Chin and Chan, "Racist Love"; Rivera, *Model Minority Masochism*, xxv.

72. Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation*, 3.

73. Hong, *Minor Feelings*, 9–10.

74. Hong, *Minor Feelings*, 29.

75. Hong, *Minor Feelings*, 55; see also Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*.

76. Chang, "Poet Pundit."

77. In *The Protestant Ethnic*, Rey Chow critiques Georg Lukács's argument that modernist narratives of violence posit a binary relation between captivity and emancipation in which humanity, at first held captive under a primitive barbarism, progresses toward an emancipatory modern civilization. Chow writes, "If captivity itself is a historical, discursive construct—in what may be termed a modernist imaginary—then the idea of resistance that is hitherto considered such a natural and logical, because 'human,' response to captivity would also need to be rehistoricized as a modernist invention" (39). Chow, *Protestant Ethnic*.

78. As an alternative to understanding racial feeling as the provenance of racialized subjects, Jeffrey Santa Ana turns to the ways Euro-American or white feelings of happiness that bolster ideals of liberal personhood and individualism are contingent on the denigration, use, and objectification of Asian Americans, as figures who represent capital accumulation and labor abstraction. See Santa Ana, *Racial Feelings*.

79. Song, quoted by Chang, "Poet Pundit."

80. Liu, *Feeling Asian American*, 6.

81. Liu, *Feeling Asian American*, 2–3.

82. See Muñoz, "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down."

83. Muñoz, "'Chico, What Does It Feel Like to Be a Problem?,'" in *Sense of Brown*, 36.

84. Scholarship on queer temporality in the early 2000s overlapped with the affective turn, addressing what it felt like to live out of time, behind the times, and in another time, in ways that felt dissonant, out of touch, and mismatched with one's present. See Cvetkovich, *Archive of Feelings*; Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*; Luciano, *Arranging Grief*; Love, *Feeling Backward*; Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*; Freeman, *Time Binds*; Dinshaw, *How Soon Is Now?*; Cvetkovich, *Depression*.

85. Berlant, *Female Complaint*, 20.

86. Berlant, *Female Complaint*, viii.

87. See Zauner, *Crying in H Mart*; Shi, *Turning Red*; Song, *Past Lives*; Sung Jin, *Beef*.

88. See Mayer and Park, *Feeling Asian*, https://www.feelingasian.com/about.

89. See Mayer and Park, *Feeling Asian*.

90. See Kwan and Scheinert, *Everything Everywhere All at Once*; Zornosa, "How 'Everything Everywhere All at Once' Helps"; Koul, "I Made My Mom."

91. Zornosa, "How 'Everything Everywhere All at Once' Helps." For some, the film also offered a meaningful representation of the experience of having ADHD. Fisher, "Everything Everywhere All at Once."

92. Dango, *Crisis Style*, 7.

93. Muñoz, "'Chico, What Does It Feel Like to Be a Problem?,'" 40.

94. Muñoz, "'Chico, What Does It Feel Like to Be a Problem?,'" 40.

95. Cathy Park Hong describes getting angry with a young Asian nail technician giving her a pedicure, who accidentally (but was it? Her paranoid mind races) burned her with hot water, clipped her toes, and tore her cuticles. Hong, *Minor Feelings*, 11–12.

96. See Winnicott, "The Roots of Aggression."

97. See León, "Forms of Opacity"; Mengesha and Padmanabhan, "Introduction to *Performing Refusal/Refusal to Perform*"; Chung, "Defiant Still Worker"; Léon, "Curious Entanglements"; Yao, *Disaffected*; Huang, *Surface Relations*; Post, *Deadpan*.

98. Winnicott, "Hate in the Counter-Transference," 350. Winnicott's essay addresses the need for analysts to become conscious of their own hatred in the treatment of patients.

99. I am referring to Shoshana Felman's reading of analytic pedagogy and didactic analysis as "the interminable task." See Felman, "Psychoanalysis and Education," 35.

100. Viet Thanh Nguyen describes an "economy of narrative plenitude" as the proliferation of Asian American stories and representations that would counter "the economy of narrative scarcity," wherein a film like *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), for example, could afford to be "mediocre," rather than a film that must be exceptionally good (or bad). This mediocrity, then, is a "luxury." Nguyen, "Asian-Americans Need More Movies, Even Mediocre Ones."

101. Nguyen, "Asian-Americans Need More Movies, Even Mediocre Ones."

102. On the ways insurgent modes of articulating minoritized difference have been incorporated into the university and the workplace by way of conditional inclusion, administration, and management, see Gordon, "Work of Corporate Culture"; Gordon and Newfield, *Mapping Multiculturalism*; Ahmed, *On Being Included*; Ferguson, *Reorder of Things*.

103. Chuh, "Asians Are the New . . . What?," 223.

104. Pew Research Center, "Rise of Asian Americans."

105. Chuh, "Asians Are the New . . . What?," 226. Relatedly, Takeo Rivera argues that the figure of the model minority cannot be dispelled as a myth because it has played a crucial role in forming Asian American subjectivities, whether embraced via a self-subjugating relation to capital and whiteness, or disavowed via self-punishment and an aspiration to an idealized blackness. Rivera, *Model Minority Masochism*.

106. Chuh, "Asians Are the New . . . What?," 222, 223.

107. Chuh, "Asians Are the New . . . What?," 224.

108. See Nguyen, *Race and Resistance*; Koshy, "Morphing Race into Ethnicity;" Lee, *Semblance of Identity*. It is worth also mentioning Nick Mitchell's critique of the figure of the critical intellectual, who bolsters ethnic studies' institutionalization within the university and is imagined as a radical figure pitted against the institution while securing that very institution's image of itself. Mitchell, "(Critical Ethnic Studies) Intellectual."

109. I have written elsewhere about how one's areas of study determine how one chooses their objects, and I have tried to see what might happen when one decides, from within one's own area of study, to choose someone else's object instead. See Kim Lee, "Introduction."

110. Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise*, 9.

111. For a critique of "aboutness," see Chuh, "It's Not About Anything."

112. Min, *Unnamable*, 3.

113. Susette Min notes that although the term "Asian American" can trace its origins to radical social movements in the late 1960s and '70s, intertwined with the field of Asian American studies, it was not until the late 1980s and '90s that "Asian American art" was named and exhibited as such in major art institutions. Min, *Unnamable*, 16. Before that, there was the Asian American community arts movement of the late 1960s and '70s, founded and influenced by the Basement Workshop in New York City (which included the folk band Yellow Pearl), the Kearney Street Workshop in San Francisco, and the Japantown Art and Media Workshop in San Francisco. In her catalog essay for *One Way or Another: Asian American Art Now*—a 2006 exhibition at the Asia Society in New York City cocurated by Min, Melissa Chiu, and Karin Higa—Min writes, "The naming or categorizing of art as Asian American began as a historical and sociopolitical project to challenge racial oppression, secure parity of representation, and represent the specificities and contributions of the Asian American experience." Min, "Last Asian American Exhibition," 35. Also see Machida, *Unsettled Visions*.

114. Song, *Children of 1965*, 8. This was noticeable in the framing around the group exhibition *One Way or Another: Asian American Art Now*, which featured artists representative of a new generation of Asian Americans born both in and outside the United States between 1966 and 1980. In her essay for the exhibition catalog, journalist Helen Zia writes that for the post-1965 generations of Asian Americans, "the social attitude is significantly more visible and affirmative to their Asian Americanness." Zia, "Asian American," 13. For Min, also in the exhibition catalog, "What characterizes much of their art, as distinguished from its predecessors in the 1990s, is a *freedom* to pick, choose, manipulate, and reinvent different kinds of languages and issues, both formal and political." Min, "Last Asian American Exhibition," 36.

115. On the post-1965 boom in Asian American literature, see Song, *Children of 1965*. In the 1990s, notable sites of Asian American artistic production included group exhibitions of Asian American artists. The group exhibition *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art*, at the Asia Society in 1994, preceded *One Way or Another: Asian American Art Now*, also at the Asia Society, in 2006. Additionally, there was the group exhibition *The Curio Shop* at Artists Space in New York City in 1993—organized by the Asian American art collective Godzilla, founded in New York City—and *Uncommon Traits: Re/Locating Asia* (1997–98) at the CEPA Gallery in Buffalo, New York. Throughout the 1990s, gender- and race-specific group exhibitions started appearing in major art institutions in the United States. These exhibitions overlapped with, and directly spoke to, artists and organizations forming coalitions and collectives putting pressure on art institutions, calling for more inclusivity in the art world. Exhibitions of note include: *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s* (1990) in New York City, presented at the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, the New Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Studio Museum in Harlem (1990), and the 1993 Whitney Biennial at the Whitney Museum in New York City. On the history of race- and ethnic-specific group exhibitions, particularly in relation to Asian American art

and its curation and reception, see Min, "Unnamable Encounters." On the art collective Godzilla and *The Curio Shop*, see Chen, *Godzilla*. On *Uncommon Traits*, see Marilyn Jung et al., *Uncommon Traits*.

116. In February 2024, I attended a panel at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, Los Angeles (ICA LA), with artists Patty Chang, Vishal Jugdeo, and Miljohn Ruperto, moderated by Anuradha Vikram. The panel was organized in conjunction with the group exhibition *Scratching at the Moon*, cocurated by artist Anna Sew Hoy and Anne Ellegood, described as "the first focused survey of Asian American artists in a major Los Angeles contemporary art museum." ICA LA, *Scratching at the Moon*, accessed February 20, 2025, https://www.theicala.org/en/exhibitions/133-scratching-at-the-moon. During the panel, the artists and the moderator acknowledged that they were a part of the same generation. (Although Hoy did not speak at this panel, she is also a part of the same generation.) When discussing their experience of making work in the 1990s, they recalled how their work was not initially read as Asian American art and how the naming of their work as such felt retroactive, and to some extent still did, at the panel itself. I did not read their conversation as a resistance to the moniker but more so an attempt to make sense of their experience as it converged and diverged from recent historicizations of Asian American art. See Ellegood and Hoy, *Scratching at the Moon*.

117. Chiang, *Cultural Capital*.

118. Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation*, 178.

119. As one example, an article in the *New York Times* from 2022 reported the efforts of faculty and students at Dartmouth College to build an Asian American studies program. To make a case for the field's relevancy and exigency, faculty and students addressed anti-Asian violence and discrimination while also communicating to the administration that, though Asian Americans' presence on college campuses continues to grow, Asian Americans are still a minority group. See Kambhampaty, "Fight for Asian American Studies."

120. Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation*, 179.

121. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 59.

122. Chow, *Face Drawn in Sand*, 145.

123. Chow, *Face Drawn in Sand*, 150.

124. Chow, *Face Drawn in Sand*, 150.

125. Chow, *Face Drawn in Sand*, 152. Here, "voicing bitterness" is Chow's translation of *suku*, "a kind of speech act that lowly peasants in Communist China were once encouraged actively to practice" (152).

126. Berlant, *Female Complaint*, vii.

127. Berlant, *Female Complaint*, 1.

128. Chow, *Face Drawn in Sand*, 19.

129. Muñoz, "Teaching, Minoritarian Knowledge, and Love," 119.

130. Muñoz, "Teaching, Minoritarian Knowledge, and Love," 119.

131. Cheng, *Ornamentalism*.

132. Cheng, *Ornamentalism*; Chen, *Animacies*; Shimakawa, *National Abjection*; Shah, *Contagious Divides*.

133. Huang, *Surface Relations*; Kang, *Compositional Subjects*; Hayot, *Hypothetical Mandarin*; Sohn, "Introduction."

134. Fung, "Looking for My Penis." Also see Huang, *Surface Relations*; Zuo, *Vulgar Beauty*; Cheng, *Ornamentalism*; Nguyen, *View from the Bottom*; Shimizu, *Hypersexuality of Race*; Eng, *Racial Castration*.

135. Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 182.

136. Amin et al., "Queer Form," 230.

137. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 3. Also quoted by Amin et al., "Queer Form," 230.

138. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 13.

139. Hong and Ferguson, "Introduction," 18. Additionally, Lisa Lowe attributes the limits of theorizing and thinking about "difference"—which, as she sees it, can sometimes feel like an exhausted and banal term—to comparative methods of analysis with origins in Max Weber's interpretative sociology that operated according to a preexisting "ideal type" of "rational action" within Western modern society, against which all else is measured. See Lowe, "Insufficient Difference," 410.

140. Musser, *Sensational Flesh*, 1; Moraga and Anzaldúa, "Entering the Lives of Others," 23.

141. Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 188.

142. Rancière, *Dissensus*.

143. Chuh, *Difference Aesthetics Makes*, 3.

144. Amin, *Disturbing Attachments*, 11.

145. Amin, *Disturbing Attachments*, 10.

146. Amin, *Disturbing Attachments*, 10.

147. Love, *Underdogs*, 17.

148. Edwards, "Ethnics of Surrealism," 96.

149. Edwards, "Ethnics of Surrealism," 96, 109.

150. Tompkins, "Crude Matter," 264.

151. Edwards, "Ethnics of Surrealism," 109. In his review of Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss's *Formless: A User's Guide*, Edwards distinguishes *informe* from Julia Kristeva's theorization of abjection. While abjection implies the return of what has been repressed and jettisoned from the self, *informe* names waste that is in excess of systems of meaning. Edwards, "Ethnics of Surrealism," 109. See also Krauss, "Destiny of the *Informe*."

152. Tompkins, "Crude Matter," 264–65.

CHAPTER 1. STAYING IN

A version of chapter 1 appeared in "Staying In: Mitski, Ocean Vuong, and Asian American Asociality," *Social Text* 37, no. 1 (2019): 27–50, https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-7286252.

1. Miyawaki, "Your Best American Girl."

2. Miyawaki, "Your Best American Girl."

3. On the confessional voice in singer-songwriter/popular music, see Dougher, "Authenticity, Gender, and Personal Voice."

4. Nersessian, *Keats's Odes*, 16.

5. Vuong, "Ode to Masturbation" (video).

6. Vuong, "Ode to Masturbation" (video).