Creating from the Margins: Exploring the Role of Art in Asian American Activism

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Creating from the Margins:

Exploring the Role of Art in Asian American Activism

Allyson Ang

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I. Preface

When I was around twelve years old, I began writing poetry. It was mediocre at best—I mostly wrote about nature because I lacked any meaningful life experiences and I relied heavily on overused cliches—but I was hooked on the possibilities that poetry offered as a means of self-expression. When I entered high school and began to realize the implications of being a woman of color in a predominantly White community, I continued writing poetry, shifting the focus of my writing to myself and my struggles with my identity. As a young queer mixed race Asian American coming to terms with my identity and becoming conscious of my position in the systems of oppression that govern our society, poetry was essential to shaping my sense of self and making sense of the injustice in the world. This was also when I began to become deeply invested in issues of social justice such as combatting racism, sexism, homophobia, and capitalism.

Also essential to my identity formation and political consciousness was reading the work of other Asian American poets, including the ones whom I will write about in this thesis. I was struck by how powerfully and fearlessly they wrote about things like the intersections of queerness and Asian Americanness, intergenerational trauma, diasporic identity, and other topics that I myself was grappling with. Although I had been an avid reader since I was very young, I had never seen myself or my experiences represented in the literary world until I began to read Asian American writers.

When I began thinking about what I wanted to write about for my senior thesis, I kept coming back to the subject that was dearest to my heart: Asian American activist art. After doing some preliminary research on the subject, I realized that there was very little literature written about Asian American activist art, especially in the present moment. That’s why I decided I wanted my guiding research question to be “How are contemporary Asian Americans using art as a form of...
activism?” This question is a very large one to answer, especially in terms of what the scope of my project allows, but in this thesis, I will look at the work of four contemporary Asian American artists who create what I consider to be activist art. These artists work in a variety of media, including written and spoken word poetry, public art, screenwriting, film, and illustration. In examining their work, I find that Asian Americans are using activist art in a variety of ways, including as a means to create positive representations of themselves and their communities, as a way to resist White supremacy, as a healing space, and as a way to raise awareness of issues and to build community.

Throughout the process I was guided by the words of my Black Feminist Philosophy professor, Dr. Lindsey Stewart, who explained one day that as a Black woman in the historically White- and male-dominated field of philosophy, “I took what I knew and I forced the discipline to make room for me.” That is what I aim to do in this thesis. Although I veer away from traditional quantitative sociological methods, I am making room for myself and my experiences within a discipline that has historically excluded me. In doing so, I hope to make sociological research even slightly more accessible to and inclusive of people like myself.
II. Introduction

A. Historical Background

On January 11, 1969, around 900 Asian Americans gathered at the University of California, Berkeley to learn about Asian American history and to discuss the need for pan-ethnic solidarity among Asian Americans. This gathering was called the “Asian American Experience in America—Yellow Identity” conference, and it was the first of its kind (Wei 1993:45). The conference, which soon evolved into a political debate as students from San Francisco State College urged attendees to support the Third World strike at their university, marked the beginning of an era of Asian American activism that became known as the Asian American Movement (Wei 1993:45-6).

Participants in the Asian American Movement, many of whom were university students fighting for Asian American Studies and Ethnic Studies at major west coast universities, also advocated for the development of a pan-ethnic Asian American identity and culture. In her book *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities* (1992), Yen Le Espiritu explains that the concept of an Asian American identity was born only in the 1960s when Asian American activism truly began to take hold. Prior to the Asian American Movement, most immigrants from Asia aligned themselves with other people of their own ethnicity rather than identifying as Asian American. They did not consider themselves to have much in common with Asian immigrants of other ethnicities, viewing these groups as politically and culturally distinct. Yet despite their differences, both the law and societal attitudes treated Asians as one homogenous group: “For the most part, outsiders accorded to Asian peoples certain common characteristics and traits that were essentially supranational…Indeed, the exclusion acts and quotas limiting Asian immigration to the United States relied upon racialist constructions of Asians as homogenous” (Espiritu 1992:19).
Because of this, Asian immigrants often carefully distanced themselves from immigrants of other Asian ethnicities, eager to disassociate themselves from whichever group was currently the target of discrimination and negative stereotypes: for example, Japanese immigrants in the late nineteenth century often denounced Chinese American laborers, who were barred from entering the United States by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882; just decades later, other Asian groups disassociated themselves from Japanese Americans during World War II and Japanese internment (Espiritu 1992:20-1). This strategy rarely worked in any Asian immigrant group’s favor, as White Americans continued to view them as a monolith and they were all marginalized under White supremacy.

Meanwhile, second-generation Asian immigrants faced the double ostracization of being too “other” for White America while simultaneously being disconnected from their Asian heritage, and were therefore invested in the construction of an Asian American identity and culture (Wei 1993:47). Subsequently, it was this younger generation of Asian Americans who spearheaded the Asian American Movement, although Asian Americans of all ages and ethnicities took part in the political activism of the 1960s and 1970s. This new era of post-Civil Rights activism witnessed the rise of collective political consciousness by people of color in the United States. Espiritu writes:

Critical to [the Asian American Movement’s] development was the mobilization of American blacks. Besides offering tactical lessons, the civil rights and the Black Power movements had a profound impact on the consciousness of Asian Americans, sensitizing them to racial issues…The anticolonial nationalist movements in Asia also stirred racial and cultural pride and provided a context for the emergence of the Yellow Power movement (Espiritu 1992:25).
In addition to the influence of Black activism on Asian Americans, Espiritu explains that there were other circumstances that contributed to the rise of Asian American activism in the 1960s (as opposed to earlier), including language barriers among foreign-born Asians and a lack of interethnic contact (Espiritu 1992:25). All of these conditions created the perfect historical moment for the birth of Asian American activism, which coincided with the formation of the Third World Liberation Front.

The Third World Liberation Front was an interracial coalition of student organizations at the University of California, Berkeley, that called for campus reform for students of color. It consisted of the Black Students Union, the Latin American Students Organization, the Pilipino American Collegiate Endeavor, the Filipino-American Students Organization, the Asian American Political Alliance, and El Renacimiento. When the Third World Liberation Front strikes began in 1968 at UC Berkeley, student activism had already been taking place for many months. In the book *Samurai among Panthers: Richard Aoki on Race, Resistance, and a Paradoxical Life* by Diane C. Fujino (2012), noted Black Panther leader (and possible FBI informant) Richard Aoki describes the political climate at UC Berkeley in the months leading up to the strike:

> The African American students had been negotiating for almost a year for a Black Studies program. The Latinos were pushing the university to boycott grapes, in support of the farmworkers’ struggles. At the time, there were many Filipino farmworkers working alongside Chicanos in the fields of California…[The Asian American Political Alliance] too had been negotiating with the university for its first ever Asian American Studies Class (Fujino 2012: 187).
These conditions and the similar struggles of different minority groups on campus led to the formation of an interracial coalition known as the Third World Liberation Front who organized some of the longest student strikes in the history of the United States during the 1968-1969 school year. Although all of these protests were nonviolent, the police responded with brutality and arrested the demonstrators en masse. These strikes marked the beginning of modern Asian American activism, but they were most notable for their emphasis on interracial and interethnic solidarity.

In addition to the student activism at universities, Asian Americans across the country also united in protest against the Vietnam War in the late 1960s through the 1970s. One of the first interethnic Asian American protests was the May 1972 rally against the Vietnam War in San Francisco, organized by the newly formed Bay Area Asian Coalition Against the War (BAACAW) (Maeda 2009:97). Over five hundred people attended, and Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, and Vietnamese leaders spoke out against U.S. imperialism and the slaughter of fellow Asians abroad:

“While Asian American radicals protested against the war along with their white, black, brown, and red comrades, doing so had the singular effect of strengthening their own multiethnic racial identity” (Maeda 2009:99). By relating the plight of Vietnamese people abroad to the Asian American struggle in the United States, Asian Americans were able to conceptualize a panethnic identity and recognize the similarities in the experiences of all Asian people.

One of the most important results of this wave of Asian American activism was the institutionalization of Asian American Studies that established it as a legitimate academic discipline (Wei 1993:16). However, this was not the only goal or consequence of the protests. Arguably more significant than the establishment of Asian American Studies was the precedent of Asian American

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1 Groups by this name were formed at both UC Berkeley and San Francisco State University.
panethnicity and solidarity between different racial groups that arose from the Third World Liberation Front strikes. William Wei writes,

> Probably more than any other single event, the Third World strike at San Francisco State symbolized the potential of Asian American activism. On the basis of a shared identity and history, the students coalesced into an inter-Asian coalition that in turn became part of a still larger student-of-color coalition...Doing so was an empowering experience, one that convinced many Asian American activists that they could collectively change themselves and their communities through direct action. But...the next major challenge was to ensure that the changes at State and at other campuses, and in the Asian ethnic communities lasted (Wei 1992:20).

Indeed, after the initial fervor of the Third World Liberation Front strikes died down, Asian American activism faced a transitory period. The future of the Movement was uncertain as activists grappled with changing from an informal movement based on initial fervor and passion to one that was more lasting and sustainable.

After the strikes at UC Berkeley and San Francisco State University ended, that type of radical student activism and protest declined as well. In “From Revolution to Apathy: American Student Activism in the 1970s,” Philip G. Altbach (1979) explains why the next generation of students in the 1970s lacked the level of political engagement of their predecessors: “The lack of a clearly threatening foreign policy issue, economic problems, disillusionment with past politics and other factors have all contributed to the political climate of the seventies” (Altbach 1979:609). Altbach also points to the lack of student political organizations, the shift in focus of student-run newspapers and journals, and the dwindling numbers of demonstrators on university campuses as evidence of the apathy of the students in the 1970s (Altbach 1979:615-7). He does acknowledge that
the lack of media attention given to student activism in the 1970s (especially in comparison to the 1960s) may contribute to the perception of these students as less active than the generation before them. However, his overall conclusion is that students in the post-Third World Liberation Front era were much less involved and more apathetic than before, until the end of the 1970s.

Altbach has his critics. In the same issue of *Higher Education*, Arthur Levine and Keith R. Wilson (1979) offered a different and broader perspective, explaining the waves of student activism in the United States:

There have been three periods of relatively widespread student dissent in this country: in the decade or so before World War I; during the social and economic upheavals of the 1930s; and during the 1960s…In each episode, student activism seemed to end with surprising abruptness. The early period came to a halt when President Wilson and the Congress declared war in 1917; the widespread student dissent of the 1930s similarly ended with the start of World War II; the student movement of the 1960s collapsed almost as quickly and unexpectedly as it began (Levine and Wilson 1979:628).

The decline of student activism in the 1960s did not signal the end of student activism as a whole. Rather, Levine and Wilson argue that the 1970s ushered in a new attitude in the nation and on university campuses as well. Unlike in the 1960s, when Americans were hopeful about the future of the nation and their ability to enact change, the 1970s marked a new low in Americans’ confidence in major social institutions. Rather than a sense of apathy, Levine and Wilson believe that the decline in student activism was a result of frustration at the state of political affairs and a subsequent rise in individualism among students (Levine and Wilson 1979:633). They also make the point that although activism may have declined in comparison from the militant and prolific protests
of the late 1960s, it did not completely disappear: sporadic protests continued to take place throughout the 1970s. Most importantly, Levine and Wilson use the context of previous waves of student activism to prove that activist movements are periodic and very much dependent upon political and social conditions of a particular time.

Neither of these perspectives on activism in the post-1960s era explicitly reference the Asian American Movement, but Asian American activists are implicitly included in these discussions due to their significant participation in the wave of 1960s student activism. Although the 1960s marked the true beginning of the Asian American Movement and is considered by many to be the pinnacle of Asian American activism, it was by no means its end. Asian American activists continued to mobilize around different issues facing their community, both within and outside of university campuses. Some causes that Asian American activists addressed in the post-1960s era include U.S. imperialism in the Philippines, gentrification (especially in ethnic enclaves such as Chinatowns), women’s rights and domestic violence, immigrants’ rights, and government corruption (Aguirre and Lio 2008:3). In addition, many Asian American social justice grassroots organizations have been founded over the last several decades to address different issues facing the Asian American community, including CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities, API Equality, Khmer Girls in Action, Chinese Progressive Association, Asian Pacific Environmental Network, and many more.

Though the Asian American Movement is possibly best known for direct action such as strikes and protests, less well known are the ways that this political history was represented or driven forward by through the creative work of Asian American artists who captured, reflected, and rearticulated the goals of the Movement. The contributions of Asian American artists to the Movement cannot be ignored, especially today. Beginning with protest art in the 1960s and
continuing into the present day, Asian Americans have produced a rich tradition of political and activist art. One example of this is the following poster, created by Leland Wong:

This poster, created in 1971, is a powerful example of early Asian American activist art from the Vietnam War era. Depicting a group of Asian American men, women, and children armed for battle and standing over a pile of dead police officers with pig heads clutching bags of money, the poster offers a scathing critique of police brutality, capitalist greed, American imperialism in Vietnam, and the relationship between all of these events. Many of these themes, especially police brutality, are taken up in later examples of Asian American activist art, including in the work of the artists whom I will write about in this thesis. This image also plays off the fact that 1971 was the year
of the pig in the Chinese zodiac: the poster, captioned “Year of the People / Off the Pigs” draws upon Chinese culture to support an anti-Vietnam War message, which further emphasizes the pan-ethnic Asian American identity that had emerged just a decade earlier. Finally, this image pushes back against the model minority myth, representing Asian Americans as fierce, powerful, and ready to fight for what they believe in. While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to map the entire history of Asian American activist art that began in the Civil Rights era, there is no doubt that in a post-9/11 era, Asian American activist art has firmly established itself as a vibrant political form of protest, testimony, and critique that now combines a range of pop cultural forms of expression from print to spoken word. In the following chapters, I will explore what Asian American activist art looks like today.

Today, Asian American activist art takes many forms, but there is a particularly strong tradition of Asian American poetry (especially spoken word and slam poetry) and visual art that continues to have a vital presence. Although the earliest examples of Asian American activist art (like the one I mentioned above) are protest posters that share many similarities with Black and Latinx protest posters, Asian American activist art has evolved over the past five decades to include many other forms of media as well.

One of the forms of art that is particularly popular among Asian Americans today is spoken word poetry. Although slam poetry has deep ties to hip-hop and Black American culture and is associated today with people of color, Susan B. A. Somers-Willett’s 2009 book The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry explains that slam poetry actually has European origins. The first American slam venue was the Get Me High Lounge in Chicago, which was frequented mostly by White, working class people, and the initial iterations of slam poetry had roots in European cabaret and Dadaist
performance art (Somers-Willett 2009:97). However, spoken word and slam poetry have evolved far beyond these roots and are often associated today with working class people of color, especially Black people. In fact, as Somers-Willett points out, “The image of the African American spoken word poet in popular culture emerged particularly in contrast to that of the gangsta rapper…The popularity of this image owes a debt to the gangsta of the early 1990s for, although it is distinct from and often challenges the rapper’s lifestyle and attitudes, the image of the black spoken word poet grows out of, and thereby often is iterated in reference to, the rapper’s image” (Somers-Willett 2009:101-3). The image of the Black spoken word poet was also brought into the mainstream media consciousness through HBO’s Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry and films like Slam (1998).

Just as the question of who has claims to spoken word is difficult to answer, even the terms “slam” and “spoken word” themselves are fraught and difficult to define. Somers-Willett writes, “The term spoken word poetry connotes several different kinds of work—beat poetry, hip-hop lyrics, coffeehouse musings, avant-garde performance literature—but I use it here quite specifically to indicate performance poetry that has strong associations with commercial media. Since today a poem’s life as ‘spoken word poetry’ is highly dependent on context, slam poetry can easily slide between the slam and spoken word camps…” (Somers-Willett 2009:99). Because there is such a blurred line between slam poetry and spoken word, I use “slam poetry” to refer specifically to performance poetry at the competitive level, whereas I use “spoken word” to refer to any poetry that is performed for an audience, including slam poetry.

Over the past decade or so, spoken word poetry has continued to gain popularity, especially among young queer people of color (including Asian Americans), who use spoken word as a means through which to express themselves when their voices are normally silenced. This has also led to
the phenomenon of spoken word poets, especially those who are queer, people of color, or otherwise marginalized, “performing their identity” for audiences in the form of what Somers-Willett refers to as an “identity poem” (Somers-Willett 2009:69). She writes, “This highly subjective stance resonates with the poetry slam’s rejection of a New Critical objectivity or academic universality. Poets’ proclamations of marginalized identities on the slam stage are articulations of diversity performed in resistance to the (somewhat exaggerated) homogeneity of official verse culture” (Somers-Willett 2009:69). For this reason, spoken word and slam poetry hold particular appeal for those who hold marginalized identities: spoken word allows oppressed people to push back against the culture of objectivity and rationality in academic writing by not only discussing, but proudly proclaiming their marginalized identities. In a similar vein, spoken word poetry allows marginalized people to talk explicitly about systems of oppression and to raise awareness and build community around social justice issues that affect them personally. Whereas more conventional forms of literature and poetry are largely dominated by White male literary tradition, spoken word allows for much more freedom and is often more accessible to youth of color than other forms of expression. Thus, many young Asian Americans have turned to spoken word and slam poetry in the past decade as a platform of self-expression and social justice, including the artists whom I will profile in the following chapters of my thesis.

One example of this is when a young Korean American woman named Franny Choi took the stage at the 2016 Women of the World Poetry Slam and performed a poem titled “For Peter Liang.” This poem, based on the fatal 2014 shooting of unarmed Black man Akai Gurley by Chinese American NYPD officer Peter Liang, urges the Asian American community to engage in solidarity
with the Black community rather than rallying in support of Liang, as many Chinese Americans did in the wake of his indictment. In one particularly moving passage, Choi addresses Liang:

You, who thought that keeping your darker brothers shackled in place would be a good job. You, who forgot that there is only ever one enemy, though he wears many faces, and the same God who put Akai into those projects is the same God who hammered at our accents until our mouths were clean and Biblical as stale bread, until we fit into the cogs of this pyramid scheme long enough to climb onto the backs of Others, and so reach our scraps, our good jobs, and our decent houses with locks on all the doors to keep out bad people (Choi 2016).

In this passage, Choi subtly interrogates the model minority myth and the complicity of many Asian Americans in systemic anti-Black racism. She argues that both Black and Asian people are marginalized by forces of racism and White supremacy, and that rather than using their status as the “model minority” to try to attain the benefits of Whiteness, Asian Americans should ally themselves with their Black siblings to dismantle White supremacy. Choi ends the poem with a call to action for Liang and her fellow Asian Americans:

So call in your people, Peter. Call in the crowds, tell them to come home, to take down their signs. Tell them that we have work to do. Tell them if there is a second victim, it is not you, it is what was lost between two communities in pain, but unlike the first victim, this one can be brought back (Choi 2016).

This poem is an example of the type of Asian American activist art that I will be looking at in my research. I am looking at art because I feel that it is a powerful political tool, particularly in the Asian American community. I believe that activist art plays a unique role in the Asian American community because of the unique issues that Asian Americans face, including intergenerational trauma from war and the prevalence of controlling images such as the Yellow Peril and the model
minority. I am choosing to focus on art as opposed to other methods of protest for several reasons. First, art as activism offers many possibilities that other forms of protest do not. Because art relies so heavily upon imagination and it is not necessarily confined to what is possible or practical, it allows artists to imagine alternatives to current oppressive systems in a way that other forms of activism and protest cannot. Art also provides a means of creative expression that can be healing or therapeutic to marginalized people who may not otherwise have a means of discussing or processing their experiences with oppression. Finally, art provides a way to build community and solidarity with people who have similar experiences, as well as allowing people who do not share these experiences to understand and empathize with them. I am also writing about this subject because not enough research has been done about art in the Asian American community, as I will explain further in my literature review.

In this thesis, I aim to explore the ways in which contemporary Asian American writers and artists are using art as a tool of activism. In order to do this, I will be looking at the art of four different Asian American women—Franny Choi, Fatimah Asghar, Jess X. Chen, and Cathy Linh Che—in order to examine the role of art in contemporary Asian American activism and how it fits into the context of the Asian American Movement as a whole.

**B. Methodology**

As I mentioned in the previous section, I am going to explore how Asian Americans are using art as a form of activism by looking at the work of Franny Choi, Jess X. Chen, Cathy Linh Che, and Fatimah Asghar. For each artist, I will analyze several examples of their work in detail in order to determine how the artist is using their work as a form of activism. I was also able to
participate in short dialogues with Choi, Chen, and Che over the past semester about their work and how they perceive the relationship between art and activism. Unfortunately, Asghar was too busy with the premiere of the Brown Girls webseries to talk with me, so I drew upon interviews that Asghar has done for magazines and websites in her chapter. In my dialogues with the other three artists, I allowed the conversation to flow freely, not adhering to a strict set of questions. I wanted to do this because I was trying to avoid the power dynamics present in most interviews, in which the interviewer/researcher is in a position of power over the interviewee/research subject. Since these women are my peers (and, in fact, people whom I look up to immensely), I wanted to frame our conversations as a dialogue among equals.

My research was largely informed by Patricia Hill Collins’ framework of Black feminist epistemology, of which there are four central tenets: lived experience as a criterion of meaning, the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, the ethics of caring, and the ethic of personal accountability (Collins 1990:251). In creating this framework to describe the ways in which Black women produce and validate knowledge, Collins aims to resist Eurocentric knowledge validation processes and Western academic hegemony that privileges the intellectual contributions of White men. I felt that this was an appropriate framework to use in my thesis because, like Black women, Asian American women are also a group whose voices have historically been excluded from academia, and their interpretation of the themes that I explore in this thesis (racism, queerness, trauma, feminism, etc.) can be thought of as “subjugated knowledge,” or knowledge that has historically been excluded from and devalued in academia (Collins 1990:251).

In the next chapter, I will provide a literature review about the role of art in activism in other marginalized groups and how this relates to its role in the Asian American community. Then, the
next four chapters will focus on the work of Franny Choi, Jess X. Chen, Cathy Linh Che, and Fatimah Asghar. Finally, in my conclusion, I will tie the work of these four artists together and answer the question of how Asian Americans are using art as a form of activism, and I will also explore the possibilities for the future of Asian American activist art.
III. Literature Review

Art in all its forms is a powerful tool of self-expression, and many writers and artists, including Audre Lorde and Virginia Woolf, have spoken in depth about the necessity of art in establishing one’s sense of self and as a tool of self-understanding. However, art is not only important as a means of creative expression, but also as a force for social change. In Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations (1994), notable Black feminist author bell hooks writes, “The function of art is to do more than tell it like it is--it’s to imagine what is possible” (hooks 1994:281). The revolutionary potential of art lies in its ability to explore alternatives to the current institutions and structures that disadvantage certain groups of people. Art has historically been used as a way to resist dominant oppressive cultures by increasing representation, building a collective consciousness, and educating the public about a certain movement or cause. This is especially true for marginalized groups such as women and people of color. My research deals specifically with contemporary Asian American activist art; however, there is very little literature written on the subject.

As I explained in my introduction, the construction of an Asian American identity is a relatively recent phenomenon, largely because so many different cultures and ethnicities fall under the category of “Asian.” Although Black, Latinx, and Native American identities are also made up of many different ethnicities and experiences, the formation of an Asian American identity is much more recent, only truly taking shape in the 1960s and 1970s with the birth of the Asian American Movement. (Wei 1993:47).

In addition to its recent formation as an identity, the Asian American experience is also unique due to the specific types of discrimination and prejudice that Asian Americans face. Ever since the first major wave of Asian migration to America in the 19th century, the prevailing binary
stereotypes of Asian Americans as either the “Yellow Peril” or the “model minority” have reflected a state of distrust and antagonism towards Asia and its people. Wei writes that Asian people have always been perceived as inherently different from “normal” (read: European) people: “Basically, racial stereotypes have portrayed Asians as a ‘special’ species—as subhumans, inhumans, even superhumans, but rarely as humans...Asians and Asian Americans have been considered fundamentally different from European Americans, who are of an indeterminate ethnicity and the standard against which people of color are measured and found wanting” (Wei 1993:48). One of the most enduring stereotypes that portrays Asians as inhuman is that of the Yellow Peril.

The idea of the Yellow Peril emerged at the beginning of the 20th century from a fear of political and economic domination by Asia as well as a fear of miscegenation, and it portrayed Asia and its people as heartless, dangerous, and unassimilable. One of the most iconic examples of the Yellow Peril in popular culture was Fu Manchu, the mustachioed supervillain of page and screen. Fu Manchu was especially frightening to White Americans because of his mission to control the world and steal White women. Fu Manchu is an example of how mainstream White culture used art to typecast Asian Americans in negative ways. However, the influence of the Yellow Peril trope extended far beyond pop culture: it also influenced anti-Asian legislation in the United States such as the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Immigration Act of 1924, and Japanese internment during World War II (Wei 1993:47-8). The idea of the Yellow Peril still persists today and is particularly evident in the ways that politicians talk about the fear of China “beating” the United States in economics, intelligence, technology, and other areas.
On the other side of the same coin is the model minority myth2. Although at first this stereotype may seem more positive than that of the Yellow Peril, it is insidiously harmful in its own way. The model minority is a prevailing racial stereotype of Asian Americans as a “good” racial group that places them directly in opposition to Black, Indigenous, and Latinx people and masks the racial oppression that Asian Americans do face. In Myth of the Model Minority: Asian Americans Facing Racism (2008), Rosalind S. Chou and Joe R. Feagin write, “[Asian Americans’] relatively high levels of educational attainment and household income, and their overrepresentation in professional occupations, make it seem as if they are doing better than other racial minorities or even some whites. However, the white-constructed label of ‘model minority’ awarded to Asian Americans does not protect them from prejudice and racism” (Chou and Feagin 2008:2). The authors argue that the model minority myth prevents people from recognizing that Asian Americans are indeed a marginalized racial group, and it places immense pressure on individual Asian Americans to be intellectually and economically successful. Furthermore, the model minority myth homogenizes the incredibly different cultures of people of Asian descent into one label: Asian American. Although this unification of different ethnicities under the label of Asian American is useful as a political act, it also obscures the unique challenges that certain Asian ethnic groups face. While Indian and Chinese Americans have relatively high levels of socioeconomic achievement, other groups such as Cambodian and Vietnamese Americans struggle due in part to their refugee status.

Because of the model minority myth, the idea of the Yellow Peril, and the different experiences and circumstances of migration, the “Asian American experience” (which, of course, encompasses so many different experiences in itself) is inherently different than the experiences of

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2 The term “model minority” was originally coined by William Peteren for the 1966 New York Times magazine article “Success Story: Japanese American Style.”
other people of color in America, whose experiences are also extremely varied and nuanced. For this reason, I anticipate that art (and specifically activist art) plays a different role in Asian American activism than in Black and Latinx activist movements. Asian American art deals with themes that are unique to Asian Americans, including the aforementioned stereotypes and controlling images, as well as intergenerational trauma from war and refugee experiences.

Because there is not as much research on Asian American activist art, I turn to research on Black, Latinx, and feminist art to ground my questions and to look for theoretical guidance because I believe that there are some similarities. Although there is not a significant amount of literature about Asian American activist art, there is a good deal of literature about Black, Latinx, and feminist activist art, and many of the ideas outlined in this literature review can be applied to Asian American art. Although the experiences of Black Americans and Asian Americans are different, both groups are marginalized and oppressed under White supremacy, both groups use art in their activism, and both groups have historically collaborated in activist movements. For this reason, I will be looking at writing about Black activist art as a way to understand Asian American activist art.

The art of the Black Panthers is perhaps the most analyzed and discussed of all activist art. Founded by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale in 1966, the Black Panther Party was a militant Black nationalist group that advocated for the end of police brutality; an end to poverty discrimination against Black people; access to housing, jobs, and education; and more (Harris 2001:412). Heavily influenced by the ideologies of communists such as Karl Marx and Mao Zedong, the Panthers also believed in the right of Black people to bear arms in self-defense (Harris 2001:413). Some of the biggest accomplishments of the Black Panthers were their community policing initiatives, their free breakfast program for underprivileged schoolchildren, and their organization of anti-war rallies in
protest of Black men’s involvement in the Vietnam War (Harris 2001:414). However, the Panthers are also known for their use of revolutionary activist art. On April 25th, 1967, the Black Panther Party began publishing *The Black Panther*, a newspaper that included political articles, art, and poetry. This newspaper became an extremely influential publication, and the poetry published therein marked a new generation of Black aesthetics that combined art and activism.

In her article “Poetry of the Black Panther Party: Metaphors of Militancy,” Regina Jennings (1988) describes how the Black Panther Party used poetry to spread their message and to incite people to action. According to Jennings, the main characteristics that distinguished the poetry of the Black Panthers from earlier Black poetic movements such as the Harlem Renaissance was that the 1960s poets rejected traditional poetic forms, and that their poetry dealt with new themes of rage, revolution, and war. These poets used new Black aesthetics to distinguish themselves from White American art and culture (Jennings 1988:107).

The writing of radical Black poets such as Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, and Haki Madhubuti mocked and criticized White supremacy and called their fellow Black people to political action. Baraka, for example, “encourages others to write active, personifying poems. In fact, he calls for ‘soldier poems’ to counter physical attacks by the law. Such poetry challenged the assault and affront of the police and other Whites who with impunity murdered Black men for centuries” (Jennings 1998:108). Jennings goes on to provide several examples of the Black Panthers using poetry to incite people to political action, including an instance when Black Panther Party co-founder Bobby Seale recited the poem “Uncle Sammy called Me Fulla Lucifer” from atop a car in San Francisco in 1960, and how several poets (including Alprentice “Bunchy” Carter) were known to recite poetry at Panther meetings and functions (Jennings 1998:110). However, despite the
influence that poetry had in the Black Panther movement in terms of self-expression and a political call-to-action, Jennings also points out that the poetry of the Black Panthers was often very male-centric and ignored the integral role of Black women to the movement (Jennings 1998:120). This exclusion of female voices—which is not unique to the Black Panthers—is one reason why I center women’s art in my thesis.

In addition to poetry, the Black Panthers also used visual art to communicate their message to a wide audience and to express their frustrations at the White supremacist system that marginalized them. Like the poetry of the Black Panthers, visual art was also distributed via The Black Panther newspaper. One notable Black Panther visual artist is Emory Douglas.

Before the 1960s and the rise of the Black Panthers, there was very little positive representation of working class and poor Black people in art, literature, and the media. Emory Douglas, a visual artist and the Minister of Culture for the Black Panther Party, changed this with his art, which depicted all types of Black people struggling but also overcoming adversity: “Douglas’s stylized illustrations of dark-skinned, full-lipped, broad-nosed Africanfeatured people visualized blackness in a way that was virtually absent from mainstream media in the 1960s” (Gaiter 2012:244). But Douglas’s art went beyond mere representation: it aimed to empower everyday Black people by representing them in powerful ways: “In line with the Panthers’ valorization of everyday people, Douglas made them heroes along with the highest leaders and revered martyrs of the party (Gaiter 2012:244). Douglas often represented his subjects with red rays of light emanating from their heads, signifying their beatification. He also incorporated political slogans and calls to action into his art so that his images would function as “performative instructions and a means of communicating ideas” (Gaiter 2012:245). Douglas’s art served multiple purposes: it portrayed Black people in a positive
and revolutionary light, and it also encouraged people to take political action and promoted the Black Panther Party agenda.

Gaiter also explains how Douglas used his role as the Black Panther Party’s Minister of Culture to expand the Party’s artistic image beyond just visual art. Douglas also directed the Panthers’ guerilla theater productions in Black communities that encouraged audience participation. These plays were meant to instruct and agitate audiences to participate in efforts for social change (Gaiter 2012:245). Through his visual art and his role as the Minister of Culture, Emory Douglas demonstrated the revolutionary capacity of Black art and changed the way that art was used as a tool of activism.

However, the Black Panther Party’s use of art as a force of social change went far beyond Emory Davis. The Black Panther Party was greatly influenced by Argentine revolutionary Che Guevara’s three fundamental conclusions about the Cuban revolution, especially his conclusion that “one does not necessarily have to wait for a revolutionary situation to arise; it can be created” (Ongiri 2010:31). Thus, the Black Panthers (including Huey Newton and Richard Pryor) used performative action as a form of theater to provoke the public into revolutionary action. Even the Panthers’ famous Community Police Patrols were strategically used in this way: “these patrols were intended more as guerilla theater than guerilla action, because the confrontation between the Panthers and the police was meant to instruct those who witnessed the confrontations that the police were not above reproach” (Ongiri 2010:44-5). Many of the Black Panthers’ actions of protest served as a symbolic staging of their ideology that could have a much greater impact than the act itself. By publicly staging many of their acts of protest, the Panthers presented revolution as a visible
and public affair rather than a covert operation. It was something possible and achievable. Public protest became a form of performance art.

The Black Panther Party also expertly cultivated their image by creating an association between themselves and several key symbols through many forms of visual art and media: “The film [Black Panther], which was created to showcase the Panther platform, established the party’s other key visual signifiers by cutting directly from Cleaver’s explanation of why the group chose confrontation with the police as their primary performative moment to images of uniformed Panther men and women marching in formation, fists upraised, groups of Panther women chanting the party’s slogans, and party members lining the steps of the Alameda courthouse” (Ongiri 2010:45). The Black Panther Party used accessible and visual symbolic imagery and art to allow their critiques of the American justice system and White supremacy to reach broader audiences.

Another prominent Black artist who proved the potential of art as a tool of activism was Amiri Baraka, a writer from New Jersey whose career spanned over 50 years. In one influential essay titled “Black Art,” Baraka writes about the role and responsibility of Black art as a revolutionary force. Baraka argues that what we think of as “universal,” art is, in fact, White European art and a manifestation of European consciousness. Therefore, Black artists have a responsibility to push back against the hegemonic Whiteness of the art world by creating their own revolutionary art. Baraka also criticized some Black artists whose art simply replicates dominant White European art, calling them “colonized Negroes” and urging them to instead create something new, their own revolutionary art. As Baraka defines it, revolutionary art is “an art that would fight [European hegemony], that would be a transformation of the Negro colonized culture into a revolutionary African culture...By revolutionary, we also meant that art had to be anti-racist; it had to be
anti-capitalist; it had to be anti-imperialist” (Baraka 1987:24). According to Baraka, Black artists have an obligation to create revolutionary art that will fight against systems of oppression and White supremacy that marginalize them. Finally, Baraka also writes that Black artists must create art that speaks to pan-Africanism, or the idea that all Black people are united in a global struggle and sense of community. For Baraka, art is much more than an expression of creativity: it is a powerful force through which Black people can (and must) spark a revolution.

The possibilities of art as a tool of activism that the Black Panthers demonstrated were also taken up by other activist groups. The Black Panthers’ use of visual art, film, and poetry in their activism set a powerful precedent that has influenced many other groups and social movements, including the Asian American Movement and the Chicanx Movement. Just as in Black communities and movements, art plays a significant role in Chicanx activism as well. In Creating Aztlan: Chicano Art, Indigenous Sovereignty, and Lowriding Across Turtle Island (2014), Dylan A. T. Miner defines the core principles of the Chicanx Movement as resistance to colonialism and the creation of a sovereign and unified community: “Functioning counter-hegemonically, the Movement was largely a critique of and opposition to U.S. settler-colonialism and its ongoing processes of colonialism, capitalism, and Manifest Destiny...the Chicano Movement was about the construction of Indigenous sovereignty and ‘cultural citizenship,’ in solidarity with global resistance movements” (Miner 2014:84). Miner also argues that art unifies and mobilizes people: “For Xicano and other Indigenous artists, art-making affirms and galvanizes Indigenous political, social, and intellectual sovereignty...Above and beyond culture, art builds community and, by extension, helps Indigenous nation-building” (Miner 2014:87). Like in the Black Power Movement, Chicanx and Indigenous artists use art as a
way to assert agency over their representation, to build community, to organize politically, and to resist oppression.

Miner also writes about murals as a specific form of Chicanx and Indigenous activist art that draws upon a long-standing tradition of mural painting among Indigenous peoples in Mexico, the American Southwest, and the Pacific Northwest. According to Miner, contemporary Chicanx and Indigenous artists began to use murals in the 1960s and 1970s not only as a form of creative expression, but also as a means of reclaiming space and connecting to their heritage: “The dialectic between sovereignty and U.S. citizenship was furthered through the centrality of mural painting as a tactic to reclaim colonized space...By working in this medium, contemporary Indigenous artists referenced their collective cultural past while establishing an entirely new aesthetic articulation” (Miner 2001:99). The significance of Chicanx and Indigenous mural art is not only in its subject matter, but in its creation of a new Indigenous aesthetic that fostered a sense of community and pride, something that contemporary Asian American artists are also doing by creating uniquely Asian American art.

Another example of the importance of activist art in marginalized communities is the role of poster art in the Chicanx Movement. In his book *American Studies in a Moment of Danger* (2001), George Lipsitz includes a chapter titled “Not Just Another Social Movement: Poster Art and the Movimiento Chicano” in which he describes the significance of Chicanx poster art. Lipsitz explains that the distinction between posters and other types of visual art such as paintings is important, because posters are specifically intended for reproduction and mass distribution. This means that posters can be a powerful tool of consciousness building, as they were and are for the Chicanx Movement, from the 1970s until the present day. Chicanx poster art was used for a wide variety of purposes, including
advertising art exhibitions, informing people of upcoming protests or meetings, and sustaining collective memory by representing important figures and events in Chicanx history (Lipsitz 2001:170). Because art galleries and museums in the 1970s were not displaying Chicanx art and these artists had very few venues for their work to be seen, they took matters into their own hands by producing and distributing political posters. Thus, posters became the medium of choice for Chicanx grassroots activists and artists to organize and reach a wide audience. The subject matter of these political posters is extremely varied, including immigration (Border Bingo/Loteria Fronteriza by Victor Ochoa), HIV/AIDS (Drug Abuse and AIDS: Don’t Play Lottery with Your Life by Herbert Siguenza), feminism (La Virgen de Guadalupe Defendiendo los Derechos de los Xicanos and La Ofrenda by Ester Hernandez), and commemoration of important events in Chicanx history (Celebracion de Independencia de 1810 by Rodolfo “Rudy” Cuellar) (Lipsitz 2001:170-3). However, what all of these posters share is that they depict aspects of the Chicanx experience. Chicanx poster art shows the versatility of activist art as a means of community building, consciousness raising, and political organizing. Asian Americans have used posters in a similar way, as I have discussed in my introduction with the poster by Leland Wong.

Feminists have also used art to promote their cause. Although the feminist movement (especially in its first and second waves) has historically been dominated by White women and excluded women of color, these feminist movement and racial justice movements are by no means separate because people’s intersecting identities necessitate overlap between these groups. Because these movements are all in conversation with each other, there are many similarities between them. This is why examining Black, Latinx, and feminist activist art is so useful in understanding the context for Asian American art: although the Asian American experience is by no means the same as
the Black American experience, for example, shared histories of marginalization and activism mean that we can learn about one movement by examining the others. When I discuss art in the feminist movement, I recognize the limitations of acting as though feminism is distinct from other activist movements, especially considering the important work Black feminists have done to advance women’s rights. However, in this section, I move away from the “mainstream” feminist movement that has historically excluded women who were not White, straight, and upper class.

In “Considering Feminist Activist Art” by Mary Jo Aagerstoun and Elissa Auther (2007), the authors attempt to characterize and define feminist activist art and its goals in a way that is less exclusionary than in previous eras of the feminist movement. Aagerstoun and Auther posit that feminist activist art is characterized by being simultaneously critical, progressive, and positive (2007:vii). They go on to explain this as follows:

By critical we mean work that seeks to expose underlying ideologies or existing structures that have a negative effect on women and their lives; by positive we mean work that takes a stand, expressing its maker’s faith in achieving results or positing alternatives; by progressive we mean a belief in the feminist tenets of equality and inclusiveness, a better world free of sexism, racism, homophobia, economic inequality, and violence (Aagerstoun and Auther 2007:vii).

This is not the only working definition of feminist activist art; however, it is one that is widely accepted and includes such famous works as Suzanne Lacy’s *Three Weeks in May* (1977), performance art and activist groups like the Guerrilla Girls, and music such as the Black Cuban hip-hop group Las Krudas (Aagerstoun and Auther 2007:x-xi). Although feminist activist art may seem separate from the Black revolutionary art that the Black Panthers and Amiri Baraka described, the goals of
the two are strikingly similar. Like Black revolutionary artists, feminist activist artists were also
known for using audience participation, collaboration, and empowerment through
consciousness-raising. Feminist activist art is another form of art that blurs the lines between
creative expression and social movements.

However, despite its prominence, feminist art (and feminist activist art in particular) is often
dismissed as a form of legitimate art. In “Feminist Art and the Political Imagination,” Amy Mullin
(2003) discusses the criticisms of feminist activist art by both artists and activists. Mullin argues that
both the political and artistic aspects of feminist activist art are misunderstood and devalued by
critics, and that it is often reduced to either being solely aesthetic or solely political. Mullin explains
that art critics and theorists who respond to feminist activist art usually fall into one of two camps:

The first camp believes that art and politics should not be combined in ways that involve artists making
art about politics, artists working in their art toward political change, and artists working with activists in
their art-making. The second camp finds these combinations of art and politics to be unproblematic,
but its members’ focus in their analysis and discussion of such works almost entirely on their activist
features, paying little attention to the artistic dimension of the works or to the interaction of art and politics in
a given work (Mullin 2003:192).

Mullin outlines her issues with both of these schools of thought, arguing that even those in the
second camp--such as bell hooks (1995) and Georg Lukács (1992)--are guilty of promoting a
reductive view of feminist activist art by ignoring its artistic and aesthetic value in favor of its
political message. Mullin also criticizes those in the first camp, such as professor and drama critic
Robert Brustein (1995), who believes that culture should not “do the work” of politics. However,
Mullin points out that this argument is simply an excuse for Brustein’s fear that “in the attempt to
combine culture and politics, increased attention to African, Asian, and Hispanic cultures has minimized the importance of a European cultural heritage” (Mullin 2003:192).

As a response to both of these camps, Mullin argues that we need an “enriched conception of the imagination” if we are to understand what it means to combine activism and art (Mullin 2003:196). By this, Mullin means that we can use our imaginations to reconcile ideas that are seen as unable to coexist, such as art and politics. She also posits that “collaborative work with communities, sociopolitical research, and reflection upon the political dimension of one’s life can stimulate and enrich the artist’s imagination,” effectively claiming that collaborative activist art can not only serve a political agenda, but can also broaden one’s artistic vision and ability (Mullin 2003:205). Against its critics, Mullin argues that feminist activist art is legitimate both as a form of activism and as a form of art. This emphasis on the importance of collaborative activist art can be seen in the Asian American artists whose work I will examine in the following chapters of this thesis.

It is important to note that discussing Black revolutionary art and feminist activist art as though they are completely separate ignores the existence of many prolific Black women artists. In *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (1995), bell hooks provides a Black feminist perspective of art and its political value. hooks claims that art has historically been seen as superfluous to the Black struggle, as a luxury rather than as a necessity. She writes, “Taking cues from mainstream white culture, black folks have tended to see art as completely unimportant in the struggle for survival...Hence, black leaders have rarely included in their visions of black liberation the necessity to affirm in a sustained manner creative expression and freedom in the visual arts” (hooks 1995:3). However, like Baraka, Agerstoun & Author, and many of the Black Panthers mentioned above, hooks believes that art is not only conducive, but necessary to the Black liberation struggle. She posits that art must occupy a
central role within the revolution, arguing that a necessary step is “reenvisioning black revolution in such a way that we create collective awareness of the radical place that art occupies within the freedom struggle and of the way in which experiencing art can enhance our understanding of what it means to live as free subjects in an unfree world” (hooks 1995:9). According to hooks, art can create a collective consciousness among marginalized people that will spark them to revolution.

Unlike some of the other authors discussed in this paper, hooks looks at art through a specifically racialized and gendered lens. Throughout Art on My Mind (1995), hooks writes about the importance of art as a means of both Black revolution and feminist revolution, arguing that women need spaces in which they can deeply explore their relationship to artistic production (hooks 1995:131). hooks describes the responsibility of women artists as follows:

As women artists expressing solidarity across differences, we must forge ahead, creating spaces where our work can be seen and evaluated according to standards that reflect our sense of artistic merit. As we strive to enter the mainstream art world, we must feel empowered to vigilantly guard the representation of the woman as artist so that it is never again devalued. Fundamentally, we must create the space for feminist intervention without surrendering our primary concern, which is a devotion to making art, a devotion intense and rewarding enough that it is the path leading to our freedom and fulfillment (hooks 1995:132).

However, even though hooks believes that art is a powerful tool for the oppressed, she acknowledges that it is often dismissed by dominant groups unless it is explicitly “revolutionary,” i.e., angry: “Significantly, this insistence on ‘revolt’ as the quintessential marker that distinguishes works of art produced by artists from marginal groups, especially people of color, is a standpoint rooted in the politics of domination. Often it is only the anger and rage expressed by marginal groups that is ‘seen’ by white folks, that can garner their attention” (hooks 1995:103). In the work by
Asian American artists that I explore in the following chapters of this thesis, anger and frustration at oppression and injustice are certainly expressed, but radical love and joy are also treated as powerful tools of activism. To argue that the only forms of activist art are those that express anger and rage is to reinforce the silencing of other types of art by marginalized groups that hooks discusses.

While there is a good deal of literature on activist and revolutionary Black and feminist art, there is much less literature available on Asian American activist art. This is significant because although Asian American activism and art has been influenced by the traditions of other activist movements, as we can see from the origins of the Asian American Movement, Asian Americans are racialized differently from other minority groups in the United States and face a different set of challenges, including the model minority myth, Orientalism, and inherited trauma from wars that have created refugees. By looking at the relationship between art and politics among Asian Americans, I believe that we will gain a fuller understanding of the relationship between art and politics in general. I believe that this research will also push back against the stereotype of Asian Americans as politically apathetic and disengaged by helping us understand the different ways in which Asian Americans choose to participate in activism and politics.

While in comparison to the other communities that I have discussed, there is relatively little research on the Asian American experience, there is still some work that I can build upon, including Margo Machida’s *Unsettled Visions* (2008). Although the book deals with broader themes of Asian American art in general, several parts specifically discuss the relationship between art and activism. Machida takes on the challenge of defining what Asian American art is—is it simply made by a person of Asian descent living in America, or must the work deal specifically with Asian American issues or experiences? Although she does not offer a definitive answer, Machida seems to agree
more with the latter, although she acknowledges that determining whether or not a work of art deals with Asian American issues is very subjective (Machida 2008:26). However, one common theme throughout a great deal of Asian American art is trauma: Machida explains, “Although it can be problematic to use a term like trauma, with its pathologizing overtones, as an organizing theme for a discussion of Asian American artwork, it is nonetheless evident that shared traumatic situations and their pernicious effects are indeed formative, even emblematic, in the memory and imagination of some groups” (Machida 2008:126-7). Themes such as war, colonization, migration, diasporic identity, and genocide pervade Asian American artwork, although these are by no means the only subjects that Asian American artists deal with in their work.

Another important theme in Asian American art is self-determination and agency. In discussing the work of Asian American artist Tomie Arai, Machida writes, “Recognizing the impact on Asian American communities of a past marked by exclusion, discrimination, and often-blatant racism, [Arai] puts forward alternative images that bear witness to their fortitude and survival...In framing a response to fragmentation and disruption in Asian American communities, she constructs affirmative images intended to articulate and valorize a pan-Asian sense of wholeness and connection that links Asians of different backgrounds and generations together” (Machida 2008:101). Like Emory Douglas and the Black Panther artists before them, many Asian American artists push back against a history of otherizing and Orientalist images by representing themselves in three-dimensional, empowering ways.

Machida also explains some of the history of Asian American activist art, beginning with the student protests in the 1960s and 1970s. During this time, Asian American students began to form a variety of grassroots organizations such as the Basement Workshop in New York, the Kearny Street
Workshop in San Francisco, and the Japantown Art and Media Workshop, also in San Francisco. These organizations were made up of artists, writers, college students, and activist, and they played a highly influential role in founding the Asian American community arts movement. Their mission, in part, was to create a pan-Asian American culture by combining community-based activism with a broader social and cultural agenda. Each of these groups strongly emphasized visual arts in their work (Machida 2008:27-9). The Asian American student artists and activists of the 1960s and 1970s began a long-standing legacy of Asian American activist and revolutionary art that continues into the present day.

In War Baby/Love Child: Mixed Race Asian American Art (2013), Laura Kina and Wei Ming Dariotis explore Asian American art in a similar way, with a focus on how mixed race Asian American identity plays a role in artwork. Like Machida, Kina and Dariotis cites the 1960s Asian American activism prompted by the Vietnam War and the Third World Liberation movement as the first time “Asian American art” began to take shape as a concept, explaining that “Asian American artists joined together as ‘Asian Americans’ in order to publicly decry racist media imagery and participate in the community arts movement within which to create their own positive, empowered, and corrective imagery en mass” (Kina and Dariotis 2013:7). For a group that has constantly been subjected to marginalization, fetishization, Orientalism, and othering, art is a way of asserting agency and the right to self-determination. This is especially true for mixed race Asian Americans, whose identities are under even more intense scrutiny because of their perceived racial ambiguity. However, mixed race Asian American artists, filmmakers, and activists only began to construct visual images of themselves in the 1990s and 2000s, when mixed race identities and issues gained more visibility in conversations of race and ethnicity (Kina and Dariotis 2013:11). Today, mixed race Asian American
artists continue to make art that explores their unique identities and how these identities are viewed by society, dealing with popular tropes such as the “war baby,” the “love child,” and the “Happy Hapa” (Kina and Dariotis 2013:11). However, while mixed race Asian American artists are creating art that speaks to their complex identities and their marginalization by mainstream American society, Kina and Dariotis do not discuss the role of specifically activist art (as defined by Aagerstoun and Author) amongst mixed race Asian Americans.

In sum, activist art has long played a major role in social movements for marginalized groups such as women and people of color. The role of activist art is especially evident in the feminist movement, the Chicanx Movement and the Black liberation movement; however, art plays an important role in Asian American activism as well. While some has been written about the role of art in Asian American activism, this is a subject that is still largely unexplored, especially in a contemporary context. My research aims to fill this gap by looking at how contemporary Asian American writers and visual artists use their art as a form of activism. I use interviews and my analyses of their work to make my case. By doing this, I hope to understand how Asian American activism and art is similar and different to that of other marginalized groups, how the unique experiences of Asian Americans shape their relationship to activist art, how Asian Americans choose to engage with politics and activism, and how art can be used as an effective tool of social change more broadly. In the following chapters, I turn to first Franny Choi, then Jess X. Chen, Cathy Linh Che, and Fatimah Asghar, in order to provide examples of contemporary Asian American artists and how they envision the relationship between art and activism.
IV. Franny Choi

Franny Choi is a queer Korean American writer, performer, and teaching artist. A graduate of Brown University, Choi is currently pursuing her MFA in the University of Michigan’s Helen Zell Writers’ Program and is also a Kundiman fellow. She is one of the few poets to have been named a finalist in three of the most competitive poetry slams in the world: the National Poetry Slam, the Individual World Poetry Slam, and the Women of the World Poetry Slam, and was also the former co-director of the highly-regarded Providence Poetry Slam. Her written work has been published in journals such as *Poetry Magazine*, *The Journal*, and *The Indiana Review*, and her first book, *Floating, Brilliant, Gone*, was published in 2014 by Write Bloody Publications. Choi is also a founding member of the multiracial, multi-genre Dark Noise Collective.

I chose to write about Franny Choi in my thesis for several reasons. First, I wanted to write about a variety of Asian American identities and perspectives, including someone who speaks to the queer Korean American experience. Another reason is because Franny Choi is a prominent and influential figure in the East Coast poetry slam community whose work deals with themes of racial justice, abolition, gender, queerness, and diaspora. Finally, I wanted to write about Franny Choi because of her work with the Dark Noise Collective, which is an interesting and radical example of multiracial collaboration in the arts and poetry world and an effort to integrate arts and social justice.

Art collectives have existed for many decades, as far back as the beginning of the Asian American Movement, although they are not exclusive to a particular group or demographic. The purpose of art collectives are to allow groups of artists to work together (usually under their own direction) towards shared political or ideological aims.
The Dark Noise Collective is made up of Franny Choi, Fatimah Asghar (whom I will also be writing about in a later chapter of my thesis), Nate Marshall, Aaron Samuels, Danez Smith, and Jamila Woods. These six artists come from a variety of racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds, and their work covers a diverse array of subjects. Although all are spoken word poets, their work focuses on a variety of different themes including race, gender, religion, queerness, hip-hop, and more. In addition to spoken word performances, the Dark Noise Collective also leads workshops and performs in venues across continents. This collaboration between poets and artists of different races harkens back to the Third World Liberation Front and to the early collaboration between Black, Asian, and Latinx students during the student protests at UC Berkeley and San Francisco State University in the late 1960s. Each of the members of the Dark Noise Collective also has experience with activism and organizing, and they use these shared experiences to build a multiracial artistic collaboration that also integrates an activist and social justice lens. On the “about” section of their Facebook page, the Dark Noise Collective writes, “Our artists bring a wealth of collective experience as organizers and educators who have worked to establish spoken word as a tool for critical engagement and entertainment.” Both in their collective endeavors and individually, one of the aims of the Dark Noise Collective and its members is to integrate activism and spoken word.

The Dark Noise Collective is also a radical project in terms of its emphasis on community, collaboration, and love between people of color in the face of White supremacy, which aims to pit marginalized people against each other. When asked about her experience with the Dark Noise Collective, Choi said, “Dark Noise is an experiment with radical, intentional, democratic, POC love in a world that values competition and whiteness...Capitalism teaches us we need to be brutal and self-serving in order to survive; heteropatriarchy tells us the only real relationships are with blood
family or heterosexual, monogamous life partners. I think much of our time in Dark Noise has been unlearning those myths by turning, fully, to each other.” While the model minority myth and other negative racial projects encourage antipathy between different marginalized racial groups by distinguishing between “good minorities” (Asian Americans, excluding those who are Muslim) and “bad minorities” (Black, Indigenous, and non-White Latinx people), the Dark Noise Collective directly challenges this by emphasizing love, artistic collaboration, and organizing in solidarity with one another.

Here I analyze three of Choi’s solo works: “Field Trip to the Museum of Natural History,” “Choi Jeong Min,” and “For Peter Liang.” I chose these three poems because they each serve a different function as tools of activism. “Field Trip to the Museum of Natural History” deals with the issue of police and prison abolition, and it is a prime example of how poetry can be a means through which to explore the radical imaginary. “Choi Jeong Min” deals with immigrant identity and racial discrimination, and it demonstrates the power of poetry as a healing space. Finally, “For Peter Liang” deals with the issues of police brutality and anti-Blackness among Asian Americans, and it is a call to action from Choi to her fellow Asian Americans.

One major theme in Franny Choi’s work is poetry as a tool of radical imagination. Although imagination is often seen as being in opposition to action and political reality, especially since Western intellectual thought places such a heavy emphasis on an objective truth, imagination can be a powerful tool that allows marginalized people in particular to see the world differently and to envision alternate, less oppressive realities. In “Feminism and the Radical Imagination,” Desiree Lewis (2007) writes about how Third World feminists challenge Western claims to universal truths by using imagination as a new, subversive mode of thinking. Lewis argues that women of color
artists, poets, musicians, and filmmakers are disrupting and challenging oppressive structures by using radical imagination in their work:

Both the forms and the content of their expression are shocking, disruptive, dislocating, and they comprehensively challenge authoritarian systems and thought to gesture towards new cognitive and political domains. This kind of cultural production is not simply supportive of action. It straddles imaginative thought and action, so that action is embodied in thought and vice versa. Forms and media expressing kinds of knowledge and cultural expression, especially the kinds of non-scholarly genres neglected in the academy, have tremendous potential to contribute to knowledge that allows us to transcend our oppressive realities (Lewis 2007:30).

Lewis explains that while the radical work that marginalized women of color are creating may not be valued in academia, it has not only theoretical potential, but potential to allow marginalized people to imagine and create a future beyond the reality of the oppression that they face. The theory of radical imagination posits that if we cannot imagine a better world, then we cannot create it.

Choi's poem "Field Trip to the Museum of Natural History" is an example of the type of imaginative work that Lewis writes about in. This poem, which has a distinctly abolitionist message, imagines a world in which police are a barbaric relic of ancient history. The poem takes place at some unspecified point in the future, long after the police and prisons have been abolished, and describes a scene in which a group of young students are visiting the Museum of Natural History on a school trip. They come across a new exhibit that displays artifacts from a past in which police were arbiters of justice, and they gaze upon nightsticks, fingerprint scanners, and handcuffs with horror. The poem ends when the visibly shaken children “threw open the doors to the museum, / shedding

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3 Full text of “Field Trip to the Museum of Natural History” by Franny Choi can be found in Appendix A.
its nightmares on the marble steps, / and bounded into the sun, toward the school buses, / or
toward home, or the forests, or the fields, / or wherever our good legs could roam” (Choi 2015).
Able to leave the horrors of the past that they had just seen behind, the children enjoy the freedom
of this new era, where they can roam without fear.

In discussions about abolishing the police or the prison system, there are two main
counter-arguments to abolitionists: how is it possible to get rid of these institutions, and what will
replace them? These questions dominate much of the debate around abolition and prevent society
from taking many significant steps towards abolition, because it is seen as too dangerous and
impractical (Davis 2003). Choi’s poem allows us to look past these two questions that lead us to
label abolition as unrealistic by creating a world in which it is already a reality. Choi is not concerned
with answering the question of what will replace the police, making only a passing reference to
"modern-day accountability practices" that have assumed the role that police once held. Instead of
writing a poem that is a blueprint of alternatives (which many Black feminists, including Angela
Davis, have already done), she focuses on the positive effects of abolition and the brutality of the
police system that necessitates its abolition.

One of the reasons why people are so opposed to abolishing the police and prisons is
because they are used to seeing the police as integral to society, as protectors of order, as necessary
to the well-being of the people. This is especially true for White people, who are able to see the
police as their allies, while Black people and other people of color see them as a source of
state-sanctioned violence. However, even for people of color, the existence of police and prisons is
so normalized that it is almost impossible to imagine a world without them. By removing these
systems from their normalized context and calling them into question, Choi forces us to look at the
police and prisons through a different lens, leading us to see them as strange and barbaric. The scene in which Choi describes the tools that the police routinely use defamiliarizes them and paints them in a chilling light: "Dry-mouthed, we came upon a contraption / of chain and bolt, an ancient torture instrument / the guide called ‘handcuffs.’ We stared / at the diagrams and almost felt the cold metal / licking our wrists, almost tasted dirt, / almost heard the siren and slammed door" (Choi 2015). By emphasizing the almost medieval brutality of the mechanisms of policing, Choi urges the reader to question their definition of justice, punishment, and cruelty. By asking the reader to envision a world without police, Choi makes abolition seem not only possible, but necessary.

The second poem that I am looking at, “Choi Jeong Min,”\(^4\) serves a slightly different purpose. Rather than imagining a different future free of oppressive structures, this poem describes Choi’s own experience with racism and serves as a way to create a healing space for herself and people who have shared similar experiences. In this poem, Choi discusses her identity as a Korean American through the lens of her Korean name, Choi Jeong Min. She writes: “at seven years old, / i already knew the exhaustion of hearing my name / butchered by hammerhead tongues. already knew / to let my salty gook name drag behind me / in the sand, safely out of sight” (Choi 2016). This experience of having her Korean name mispronounced and mocked by Americans is one that Choi shares with many Asian Americans with “foreign-sounding” names. Although it may seem like an innocent mistake to mispronounce a person’s name, studies have shown that mispronouncing a child’s name can have a lasting negative impact on their self-esteem (Kohli and Solorzano 2012:441-62). The act of mispronouncing one’s name is a common racial microaggression that Asian

\(^4\) Full text of “Choi Jeong Min” by Franny Choi can be found in Appendix B.
Americans and other people of color face, and it is indicative of a larger pattern of disrespect for people of color’s cultures and identities.

Choi writes about her tumultuous relationship with her Korean name, how she asked her parents to go by the English name Frances in school, how her parents chose English names for themselves as well, and her childhood desire to shed her Korean name so that she could more easily assimilate into White American culture. Describing her family’s English names, she writes, “these are shields for the names we speak in the dark / to remember our darkness. savage death rites / we still practice in the new world. myths we whisper / to each other to keep warm” (Choi 2016). This marks a turning point in the poem, where Choi begins to take pride in her Korean name and her Korean identity. Whereas up until these lines, Choi had expressed a desire to lose her Korean name and become “paper thin & raceless,” this is where she begins to acknowledge the value in her identity. By using the words “darkness” and “savage death rites,” Choi calls upon old imperialist and Orientalist tropes of the backwardness of Eastern cultures, and the dichotomy of the “Old World” versus the “New World.” Yet Choi subverts these negative images by following them with “myths we whisper / to each other to keep warm,” showing the power of reclaiming one’s marginalized identity as a means of survival. Rather than shameful evidence of her otherness, her Korean name becomes a way for her and her parents to keep themselves warm in a cold world.

Choi then further subverts the image of the savage East by portraying America as a dark and violent land and her Korean culture as warm and familiar:

my korean name / is the star my mother cooks into the jjigae / to follow home when i am lost, which is always / in this gray country, this violent foster home / whose streets are paved with shame, this factory yard / riddled with bullies ready to steal your skin / & sell it back to your mother for profit, / land where they stuff our throats with soil / & accuse us of gluttony when we
learn to swallow it (Choi 2016).

In this passage, Choi emphasizes the pain and oppression that is inherent in being a person of color in America, and how White supremacy alienates people of color. Yet throughout the hardship that she faces, Choi has learned to view her Korean name as a way to ground herself and remember her culture in a society that encourages Whitewashing and assimilation. Though she describes many negative aspects of being a person of color in America, Choi ends the poem on a hopeful note as she vows to herself, her parents, and her ancestors: “i promise: / i’ll never stop stealing back what’s mine. / i promise: i won’t forget again” (Choi 2016). In these lines, Choi expresses her acceptance of herself and her Korean American identity and her determination not to lose that part of herself again.

This poem is important because it demonstrates the power of poetry to provide a healing space for marginalized people. Collins (1990) writes about the importance of both physical and intellectual spaces for Black women to engage in self-definition and self-expression. Collins refers to these as “safe spaces,” and argues that these are a “necessary condition for Black women’s resistance” (Collins 1990:100). Collins gives three examples of safe spaces: Black women’s relationships with each other, the Black women’s blues tradition, and the voices of Black women writers. Collins writes, “In [these safe spaces] Black women intellectuals could construct ideas and experiences that infused daily life with new meaning. These new meanings offered African-American women potentially powerful tools to resist the controlling images of Black womanhood” (Collins 1990:112). This holds true for Asian American women as well: poetry offers writers such as Franny Choi a means through which she is able to push back against harmful stereotypes of Asian women.
and reclaim and rename her identity, which is exactly what she does in “Choi Jeong Min.” This poem serves as a safe space for Franny Choi and those who have faced similar experiences to heal.

The last poem of Choi’s that I examine is one that I touched upon at the end of my introduction: “For Peter Liang.” On November 20, 2014, a 28-year-old unarmed Black man named Akai Gurley was fatally shot in a Brooklyn, New York stairwell by a New York City Police Department Officer named Peter Liang. Liang, a 27-year-old immigrant from Hong Kong, was convicted of manslaughter and official misconduct in February 2016 (Nir 2016). This incident, which took place in the wake of the murder of another unarmed Black man, Eric Garner, by a White police officer, differed from many previous instances of police brutality in that the officer in question was Asian—and some defenders of Liang argued that this was why he was convicted while many White officers who kill unarmed Black people face no punishment. Because of this, hundreds of Asian American protestors took to the streets after Liang’s conviction, claiming that it resulted from anti-Asian racism (Kang 2016).

Choi’s poem is an open message to Peter Liang and the Asian Americans who showed up in support of him. In this poem, Choi challenges the idea that Liang and Gurley were both victims of this tragedy, condemning Liang for his role in a White supremacist power structure that enacts systematic violence against Black people. She goes on to remind Liang (and, by extension, all Asian Americans) that White supremacy oppresses all people of color, and that trying to appeal to Whiteness by participating in racist institutions only serves to pit people of color against one another. She writes, “They would rather see us hunched over and suicidal at an iPhone factory, or begging for pleasure at a white man’s feet, or not see us at all, but none of that makes you a victim

5 Full text of “For Peter Liang” by Franny Choi, as well as a link to a video of Choi performing this poem, can be found in Appendix C.
today, Peter. It only makes you a disposable knife, a tyrant’s tool, and I will not mourn that justice was served to you. I will only keep demanding that the white versions of you get what you got” (Choi 2016). Justice, argues Choi, does not look like an Asian police officer being able to murder Black men with impunity; rather, it looks like all police officers being held accountable for the violence they inflict upon communities of color.

Choi ends the poem by urging Liang and the Asian American community as a whole to truly demonstrate solidarity with Black people and to acknowledge and unlearn their complicity in anti-Black racism. She writes, “In the pictures, you could be my brother...But that’s the thing about family, isn’t it? That when one of your own acts up it’s your job to call him in. So call in your people, Peter. Call in the crowds, tell them to come home, to take down their signs. Tell them we have work to do” (Choi 2016). This poem differs from the two I discussed earlier because it is calls upon the Asian American community to act. By writing this poem, Choi is addressing her people and asking them to build community and coalition with Black people rather than aiding in their oppression.

“For Peter Liang” serves as a form of activism because its purpose is to incite Asian Americans to political action.

Although I believe that Franny Choi’s art is a form of activism because it provides a safe healing space, it is a tool of radical imagination, and it calls for action, Choi herself does not necessarily agree. When asked about the relationship between poetry and activism in her own work, Choi responded that although she used to consider herself an activist just for writing poetry that was aligned with radical politics and critiqued oppressive power structures, this changed when she started organizing Southeast Asian youth to be social justice leaders with the Providence Youth Student Movement. She explained, “I learned pretty quickly that being a writer with great political analysis
could never be a substitution for the hard, mostly unglamorous work of organizing a community.” Choi believes that art alone is not enough to be considered activism; however, she believes that art and activism are symbiotic and interact in important ways. Choi summarized her views succinctly when she said, “No poem can make shit move the way people power can. But I think poems are distinctly suited to create spaces for the fighters to heal, draw strength, and envision radical new futures.”

Despite her disavowal of the label of “activist,” I believe that the act of creating space that Choi describes is in itself a form of activism, because those spaces are essential to sustain any social or political movement. Just as Patricia Hill Collins argues that the ability of Black women to create a safe space through writing is essential to their resistance, I argue that the same idea applies to Asian American women. Asian American women creating healing spaces through their art and poetry is a radical act, and one that allows for their resistance and their survival.

Looking back to the tradition of activist art in the Black Panther Party as outlined by Amiri Baraka and Regina Jennings helps us to understand the role of Franny Choi’s poetry in the movement for racial justice. In his essay “Black Art,” Baraka (1987) argues that Black artists have a responsibility to create revolutionary art that challenges White hegemony in the sphere of art and literature, and that Black artists must also create art that speaks to pan-Africanism to unify Black people and incite them to action. Baraka also writes about the need for Black artists to create a distinct Black aesthetic in art, because non-Western and non-White art has historically been devalued by art critics and historians. These actions, Baraka argues, are revolutionary and necessary for the Black Power Movement (Baraka 1987). In “Poetry of the Black Panther Party: Metaphors of Militancy,” Regina Jennings (1998) writes about how the Black Panthers read poetry at meetings,
protests, and demonstrations to incite people to action. She also writes about how Black Panther artists such as Emory Douglas created and distributed art that critiqued White supremacy and again, aimed to incite people to action. In poems such as “For Peter Liang,” Franny Choi’s work serves a similar purpose by urging members of their respective communities to take action. In poems such as “Choi Jeong Min,” Choi is contributing to the development of a uniquely Asian American literary aesthetic by writing poetry that is for and by Asian Americans, and that speaks to the Asian American experience.

Although she does not necessarily consider herself an activist just by virtue of writing poetry with a political message, Choi’s poetry can be situated in contemporary Asian American activism in a similar way that poetry and visual art was in the Black Panther Party. Her work is significant as a form of activism because it provides a safe space of self-definition, it encourages its readers to imagine radical alternatives to current oppressive structures, and it urges the Asian American community to engage in political action and to resist White supremacy and anti-Blackness.
V. Jess X. Chen

On March 23, 2016, noted literary journal The Offing posted two micro poems by Jess X. Chen. The first, entitled “The Resistance of the Angler Fish,” consisted simply of seven lines: “The resistance / of the angler fish / is to end / a billion years / of darkness / by crowning itself / with its own star” (Chen 2016). Accompanied by an illustration also done by Chen called “Angler Fish,” the poem is a testament to the resilience of nature in the face of darkness and human oppression. This poem and illustration are prime examples of the type of work done by artist-activist Jess X. Chen.
Jess X. Chen, otherwise known as “Jess. X. Snow,” is a queer Asian American multimedia public artist, poet, and filmmaker. Born in 1992 to Chinese immigrant parents, Chen holds a BFA from the Rhode Island School of Design. She is also a teaching artist who works with previously incarcerated families as well as migrant and Indigenous youth communities. Her murals appear on indoor and outdoor walls throughout the United States, and her artwork has been featured in *The Los Angeles Times, The Huffington Post,* and the UN Human Rights Council. As a poet, her work has been nominated for the prestigious Pushcart Prize and has appeared in journals including *The Offing, Nepantla, The Blueshift Journal,* and *The Margins.* Describing her own work on her website, Chen writes that her work “exposes narratives of time travel, diaspora, intimacy and collective protest by connecting the queer & colored body with the body of the Earth.” Chen’s work is mainly concerned with the relationship between the oppression of queer people of color and the conquest and destruction of the Earth.

Like Franny Choi, Jess X. Chen is also involved in a multiracial group of artists who collaborate across genres to incite political and social change through their art: the Justseeds Artists’ Co-operative. Founded in 1998, the Co-operative is a decentralized network of approximately 30 artists from the United States, Mexico, and Canada who are committed to social, environmental, and political engagement. Their mission statement as written on their website states, “We believe in the transformative power of personal expression in concert with collective action. To this end, we produce collective portfolios, contribute graphics to grassroots struggles for justice, work collaboratively both in- and outside the co-op, build large sculptural installations in galleries, and wheatpaste on the streets--all while offering each other daily support as allies and friends.”
I chose to look at Jess X. Chen’s work for several reasons. First, I wanted to focus on Chen’s work because she works in three different types of media (visual art, film, and poetry), and I wanted to see what impact (if any) the choice of media has on the role of art in Asian American activism. I also wanted to see how these three types of media work in conversation with one another, and whether certain media are more effective than others in effecting social and political change. I am particularly interested in Chen’s work as a muralist and her self-described role as a “public artist.” I also wanted to write about her work because of her focus on eco-feminism and environmental justice. None of the other artists I’m looking at in this thesis focus on either of those subjects, so in looking at Jess X. Chen’s work, I hope to place eco-feminism and environmental justice in the context of Asian American activism and to make sure that these issues are incorporated into the conversation.

In this chapter, I will examine four pieces by Jess X. Chen: a poem entitled “Hunger Drives the Body into Imagination,” a mural entitled “We Will Always Have Wings,” an image created in response to President Trump’s executive order restricting immigration from several predominantly Muslim countries entitled “We Are Irreplaceable,” and a protest banner designed for the Women’s March on Washington entitled “Long Live Our Mother.” I am looking at these particular pieces for several reasons: as I mentioned, I am interested in how different types of media combine to inspire activism, which is why I chose one poem, one mural, and two illustrations. I also wanted to choose pieces that were specifically activist in intent and function. Finally, I wanted to focus on Chen’s role as a self-described “public artist.” Is there a dichotomy between public art versus private art? What does it mean to be a public artist? How does this distinction relate to an artist’s role within social movements? These are all questions that I will address in this chapter.
“We Will All Have Wings” is a permanent community mural project located in on the 75-foot wall of the Miguel Contreras Learning Complex in downtown Los Angeles. Sponsored by the Center for Biological Diversity\(^6\) as part of the Endangered Species Mural Project, the mural depicts several endangered Yellow-Billed Cuckoo birds in migration, as well as portraits of fifteen young migrant girls whose parents came to the United States from Latin America. The mural also features El Segundo Blue Butterflies, another endangered species that is Indigenous to Los Angeles.

About this mural, Jess X. Chen explained, “The creation of this project questions why birds, seeds, animals and wind are permitted to cross borders while humans are not.”

Although the mural was designed by Jess X. Chen, it was a collaborative endeavor, and the girls whose portraits are depicted in the mural participated in stenciling and spray painting their own images. As part of the creation of “We Will All Have Wings,” each of the fifteen Chicana/o girls also participated in a series of poetry exercises, stencil workshops, education about the Yellow-Billed Cuckoo and the El Segundo Blue Butterfly, and sharing of migration stories. By the time the project was completed, the girls had not only taken part in the creation of a magnificent work of art, but they had also learned to take pride in their immigrant and diasporic identities.

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\(^6\) The Center for Biological Diversity is a national organization that uses science, law, and creative media to advocate for the protection of endangered species and environments. More information can be found at their website, www.biologicaldiversity.org.
Murals are a very notable example of public art in that they are situated in public spaces (often on government-owned buildings) and they take up space in a way that can be perceived as disruptive and difficult to ignore. Because of this, there is a long tradition of using murals as a form of protest and activism that came to prominence with the Chicanx Movement. The use of murals in the Chicanx Movement beginning in the 1960s (at around the same time as the rise of the Asian American Movement) was inspired by prominent Mexican muralists in the 1920s and 1930s, including Diego Rivera and David Alfaro, who used their murals to depict the plights of the poor and the working class (Reed 2005:106).

But even before Rivera and Alfaro rose to prominence, early murals played a significant role in Chicanx culture in the form of pulquería art, or paintings on the exterior walls of public buildings in Mexican and American barrios. This tradition of pulquería art familiarized people in these areas
with public art, making them more receptive to the idea once activists began using murals to convey radical political messages during the 1960s (Reed 2005:106). Reed argues that in addition to being deeply rooted in tradition, murals played an important role in the Chicanx Movement because they are a celebration of cultural heritage, they are accessible to the public, they belong to the community, and they are often the results of collaborative artistic efforts.

For similar reasons, murals are an effective medium in Asian American activism as well, and “We Will All Have Wings” is a prime example of this. It is especially noteworthy that this mural is located in downtown Los Angeles on the wall of the Miguel Contreras Learning Center at 322 S. Lucas Avenue because Los Angeles has such a rich history of activism and a significant immigrant, low-income, people of color population. In particular, the neighborhood in which “We Will All Have Wings” is located is also home to a low-income housing project called Skyline Village, inhabited by mainly Latinx residents. Because it is located in a neighborhood comprised largely of low-income Black and Latinx people and immigrants, those are the people who view and interact with the mural most frequently. Due to its size and location, the mural is difficult to ignore, forcing more privileged viewers to confront the issues of immigration and environmental justice that the mural deals with, while low-income immigrant people of color who view it are empowered by its positive portrayal of people who look like them.

“We Will All Have Wings” is also radical because it gives immigrant girls of color a large public space for their images and their narratives to be represented when their stories are so often silenced, especially when they are undocumented. When I asked Chen about the process of creating murals such as “We Will All Have Wings,” she explained,

Many of my public murals are unpaid, but when I participate in mural festivals, the festival provides the materials. Basically, you just need to find a public
art organization or a festival who is down to work with you to create a political statement out of a wall. ‘We Will All Have Wings’ was paid for by the school [that the fifteen migrant girls attended]. I like to represent people who live in a certain city in that city, especially people of color and migrants. A lot of it is inspired by the animals who make the same migration journey as those depicted [in the murals].

Although Chen does not normally get compensated for her public art such as “We Will All Have Wings,” she partners with institutions and community organizations to help her create works of art in public spaces that uplift the narratives of marginalized people. By having the fifteen migrant girls participate in the creation of the mural and painting their own portraits, Jess X. Chen has incorporated their voices and helped them assert agency over their own representation, which is subversive considering the Western colonial representations of women of color in art and media. Each of these girls was featured in the art section of the Los Angeles Times upon its completion. Having these girls take control over their images by allowing them to stencil and paint their portraits on the mural is an act of resistance against White cultural hegemony.

The mural was also accompanied by a short documentary film by Tani Ikeda and ImMEDIAte Justice called “We Always Had Wings.” The documentary depicts the process of creating the mural and features a voice-over by one of the migrant girls who participated in the project, who says, “There’s always a spotlight, and it’s never shined on the rest of us. I felt like we were finally being recognized. People see us; they’re going to see us, and they know that migration is happening and it’s a part of everybody’s life.” The visibility of the mural is directly related to the visibility of these young girls and their stories, as well as that of the endangered species depicted in the mural. By featuring the migration of endangered butterflies and birds alongside the migration of young Latinx girls, the mural serves the double purpose of portraying immigration as natural by
comparing it to migration of birds, and of raising awareness for endangered species. This mural is important because of its representation of marginalized people, but it is also a call to action for immigration legislation reform and conservation of endangered species.

Similarly to “We Will All Have Wings,” Chen’s series of images titled “We Are Irreplaceable” is intended to confront viewers with a political message in a public space. Although I asked her about the creation of this series and how she was able to place the images in public spaces around New York, she told me that she was unable to answer my questions about this process and did not explain why. However, the “We Are Irreplaceable” series appears to be part of a larger project called “Art in Ad Places,” organized by artist Caroline Caldwell, writer RJ Rushmore, and photographer Luna Park (Dunne 2017). This project aims to combat the prevalence of advertisements that encourage consumers to feel inadequate and self-conscious by replacing them with empowering works of art. The “Art in Ad Places” campaign has installed new work by different artists in a space formerly occupied by an advertisement (mostly in payphone kiosks) each week, and will continue to do so for the rest of the year (Dunne 2017).

The “We Are Irreplaceable” series, created in protest of President Trump’s immigration ban, depicts Jordan Alam, a queer Muslim writer and activist, alongside many flying birds and a group of water buffalo. “We Are Irreplaceable” was created in collaboration with Alam and is intended to demonstrate the importance of Muslims to American society. Images from the series have been displayed in several prominent locations around New York City, namely on the sides of payphone kiosks. Chen also made these images available for download on her website, and several other organizations, including the Justseeds Artists’ Co-operative and The Amplifier Foundation, have followed suit.
Like “We Will All Have Wings,” the images in the “We Are Irreplaceable” series are displayed in public spaces where many people pass by each day, thus forcing viewers to confront the issue of Islamophobia and the increasing restriction of immigration to the United States. Again, Chen compares the migration of humans to that of animals (specifically, birds and water buffalo) in order to emphasize the fact that human migration is natural and should not be restricted. This series of images is also important because of how it represents queer Muslim women. Usually, when Muslim women are represented by Western media, they are either portrayed as being oppressed and in need of saving, or as being possible accomplices to Muslim men’s terrorism. As Dina M. Siddiqi (2014) writes in her article “Solidarity, Sexuality, and Saving Muslim Women in Neoliberal Times,” “It is worth remembering that the project of liberating women is central to contemporary discourses of liberal feminism, secular democracy, and imperialism...Postcolonial scholars have noted that humanitarian projects and human rights discourses tend to rely on stereotyped constructions of
Muslim women” (Siddiqi 2014:297). Chen’s portrayal of Jordan Alam in “We Are Irreplaceable” represents her as a queer Muslim in a way that pushes back against this stereotypical image of the oppressed Muslim woman. By placing Alam in the center of the image, looking upwards and outwards with a confident, hopeful expression, Chen provides an empowering, humanizing representation of queer Muslim women in protest of the recent executive order that seeks to demonize and silence Muslim immigrants. The image also features the hashtag #NoBanNoWall, which was created in late January in protest of President Trump’s executive order to begin the construction of a wall along the border of the United States and Mexico. The inclusion of this hashtag in the images makes it clear that the images are responding to this wave of anti-immigrant legislation, and encouraging viewers to follow the hashtag to learn more about the issue or to act.

The “We Are Irreplaceable” images are not the only images that Chen has created for people to use and distribute at will. She recently created an image, entitled “Long Live Our 4 Billion Year-Old Mother,” specifically intended to be a protest banner for the Women’s March on Washington on January 21, 2017, and for subsequent use at other protests and marches. The image depicts a woman’s face made up of trees, roots, and flowers, and the accompanying caption on Chen’s website reads: “If the Earth has been brown, black, multi-colored, queer and woman and indigenous and abloom for 4.5 billion years then what does that mean for this thousand year old infant white patriarchal empire?”
Like the previous images that I have discussed in this chapter, “Long Live Our 4 Billion Year-Old Mother” connects the plight of the Earth to that of women, queer people, people of color and other marginalized groups. Many people posted photos of themselves on social media holding signs with the image on them at the Women’s March on Washington.
Because she makes visual art that is meant to be used at protests or as a form of protest, Chen’s art has a very clear connection to activism. Chen creates much of her visual art to be used as part of on-the-ground work such as marches and demonstrations, but she also designs it to be a form of protest on its own by situating her work in public spaces and giving it a political message. In allowing the images themselves to migrate and be used in a variety of settings, Chen gives them life even beyond her own control, imbuing them with meaning and significance in different ways than she may have originally intended. Chen’s visual art encourages her audience to be not only viewers, but participants as well. By doing this, she provides audiences with a point of entry into activism--if
the idea of making a sign for a protest is intimidating for someone, Chen makes her own protest art readily available for use.

Jess X. Chen’s poetry, like her visual art, also has a strong connection to her activism, although it reaches a slightly different audience. “Hunger Drives the Body into Imagination,” written by Jess X. Chen and first published in the Summer 2016 issue of The Blueshift Journal, deals with similar themes as her visual art: namely, that of immigration. The Blueshift Journal, in which “Hunger Drives the Body into Imagination” was first published, is an international literary magazine of poetry, art, and prose. It has featured contemporary writers such as Safia Elhillo, Kaveh Akbar, Joshua Jennifer Espinoza, and Tiana Clark, and it is well-known in the literary community, though it is not widely disseminated beyond that community.

In addition to sharing similarities with Chen’s visual art, “Hunger Drives the Body into Imagination” shares some commonalities with Franny Choi’s poem “Field Trip to the Museum of Natural History” in that it also explores the power of poetry as a tool of radical imagination. In this poem, Chen compares immigration to imagination and suggests that hunger and necessity force people to imagine new and better futures, which then compels them to immigrate. She asks, “So what then--is immigration if not imagination given / a destination? A magic so powerful it must be banned?” By comparing immigration to imagination, Chen is humanizing immigration and portraying it not only as justifiable, but as magical. Chen also urges her readers to imagine a world in which migration is seen as a natural, mystical, and ancient part of life. She writes, “Long before the wilderness was ever fenced, / we have known the crossing of borders; / a dance so familiar--every step points towards heaven.” Throughout this poem, Chen draws upon imagery of the spiritual and

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7 Full text of “Hunger Drives the Body into Imagination” can be found in Appendix D.
the mystical in order to emphasize the importance and necessity of immigration. Just like in “We Will Always Have Wings” and “We Are Irreplaceable,” Chen’s poem also uses imagery of nature and migratory animals (“What the journey cannot kill, they shred with hands: / they chop off our wings, & carpet their empire / with our feathers”) to compare migration of humans with that of birds, compelling the reader to question why one is restricted and the other is allowed to migrate freely. This poem encourages the reader to imagine a different world, one in which immigrants are not criminalized and immigration is a free and unrestricted act.

Chen’s poetry and her visual art deal with similar themes but are different in terms of audience and what they hope to achieve. While all of Chen’s work has to do with political and social issues such as immigration, racism, feminism, and environmental justice, her poems reach a different audience than her visual art (especially public art such as murals) because her public art is visible to anyone who passes by it, whereas poetry generally reaches those who seek it out and choose to engage with it. However, this is not always true of poetry as a tool of activism: for example, the Black Panthers read poems aloud at meetings and demonstrations, and contemporary poets and activists, including Franny Choi, do the same thing today (Jennings 1998:110). Chen frequently reads her work at open mics and poetry events around the East Coast (especially in New York and Boston), and she has read her poetry for Ted Talks, conferences, and universities as well. However, even though Chen tries to share her poetry with a fairly wide audience, it is still much easier to reach people with a mural (which is in a public space) than with poetry. On the other hand, poetry is also much easier to create than murals from a logistical standpoint. A poem can be created alone, without many resources, while murals require collaboration, permission from the government, and the acquisition of space. For these reasons, both poetry and public art are effective tools of activism and
can incite people to action. By working in several media, Chen ensures that her message reaches a wider audience than it would have if she just worked with poetry or visual art alone.

Jess X. Chen’s activist work is interesting in that it does not deal with issues just concerning Asian Americans. While Franny Choi’s poetry specifically addresses the Asian American community and speaks to her own experiences as a queer Korean American woman, Chen’s work is broader in scope. Environmental justice and immigration, the two themes that figure most centrally in her work, are not specific to any race, although immigration restrictions impact people of color most severely. With the exception of her poetry, Chen’s work is almost entirely collaborative, from her work with the Justseeds Artists’ Co-operative to her murals to her illustrations such as the “We Are Irreplaceable” series. She has collaborated with artists, writers, and activists of many different races and ethnicities. This allows her work to transcend the limits of being just “Asian American art” while still maintaining a distinctly Asian American voice, as much of her work also explores intergenerational trauma from war and colonialism and her family’s experiences during China’s Cultural Revolution. Without this collaboration in her work, much of Chen’s larger pieces like her murals would not be possible. Her work speaks to the power of interracial collaboration in activist art, as collaboration is what allows Chen’s work to reach a larger audience and address more diverse issues.

Chen’s work has clear roots in the artistic trends of previous activist movements, especially the Black Panther Party and the Chicanx Movement. Murals as a form of protest art have deep roots in Chicanx culture and the Chicanx Movement of the 1960s, while the Black Panthers included poetry and visual art in their widely distributed newspaper, and often read poetry at demonstrations.
and meetings. Protest art was also used in the early Asian American Movement as well, especially in demonstrations against the Vietnam War.

However, one important distinction between the art of these movements and that of Jess X. Chen is that Chen’s work is incorporates a great deal of interracial collaboration, and the art of these previous movements interacted with each other much less directly. Although Chen does not explicitly state that interracial collaboration is one of the main goals of her work, her emphasis on working with Black, Latinx, and Indigenous people is deliberate. With the exception of the Third World Liberation Front, many twentieth century racial justice movements were separated by race and focused on addressing the issues faced by one racial group in particular, even if people of other races participated in these movements (for example, Yuri Kochiyama’s role in the Black Power Movement). However, movements today are becoming more collaborative, and interracial solidarity is becoming a more relevant topic than ever. Jess X. Chen’s work shows that Asian American artists and activists today are continuing to draw upon the work of these previous activist movements and adapting them to be even more effective by collaborating with artists of different backgrounds and experiences.

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8 For more on the topic of interracial solidarity in current activist movements, see “Black Lives Matter Allies in Change” by Alex Tom, Margi Clarke, Preeti Shekar, Karina Muñiz, Megan Swoboda, Felicia Gustin and Devonté Jackson from Vol. 20, No. 2 of Race, Poverty & the Environment.
VI. Cathy Linh Che

In a review of Cathy Linh Che’s debut poetry collection *Split, Publishers Weekly* writes, “To be a daughter, a survivor, and a poet are all aligned in the need to ‘rewrite everything,’ a need that Che navigates with brutality and tenderness, devastation and irrepressible endurance.” This act of rewriting is one that haunts the work of Vietnamese American poet Cathy Linh Che. I wanted to explore Cathy Linh Che’s work in my thesis in part because she is Vietnamese American and the child of refugees, which is a perspective that is different from any of the other artists I am writing about in this thesis. While all of the artists I am looking at are either first- or second-generation immigrants, Che is the only one whose parents were refugees, and this chapter will explore how that history affects both her work and her relationship to art and activism. I also chose to look at Che’s work because she uniquely incorporates and connects both feminist issues and Asian American issues in her work by comparing her parents’ experiences as refugees to her own experiences with sexual assault and the legacies of trauma that stem from both. Finally, Che speaks a great deal about the power of poetry in combatting erasure and aims to use her writing to fill in gaps in history, and I wanted to explore how this is also a form of activism.

Cathy Linh Che is a Vietnamese American poet from Los Angeles and Long Beach, California. She currently holds a BA from Reed College and an MFA from New York University. Che is the founder of the online journal *Paperbag* and the executive director of Kundiman, a program that awards fellowships to emerging Asian American poets and fiction writers and sponsors an annual writing retreat. Che’s first collection of poetry, *Split*, was published by Alice James Books in 2014 and was the winner of the Kundiman Poetry Prize. Her work has also been published in *The

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9 http://www.publishersweekly.com/978-1-938584-05-3
Margins (a literary journal hosted by the Asian American Writers’ Workshop), Hyphen Magazine, The Journal, and elsewhere. She is Sierra Nevada College’s 2016-2017 Distinguished Visiting Professor and Writer in Residence. Che’s work deals mainly with themes of intergenerational trauma, her family history and her parents’ immigration from Vietnam, and her experience with being sexually violated as a child. She is personally and professionally associated with other prominent Asian American poets such as Ocean Vuong, Eugenia Leigh, and Sally Wen Mao.

In this chapter, I will be looking at three poems and one essay by Cathy Linh Che: “Pera Kucha,” “In what way does the room map out violence?” “Language Came to the Door for Me,” and “Notes on Anti-Erasure.” I chose these poems because they are representative of the themes that are most prevalent in Che’s work. “Pera Kucha” connects the trauma wrought by sexual violence with the trauma from the Vietnam War, and it also speaks to the relationship between visual art and poetry. “In what way does the room map out violence?” also compares the effects of war and sexual assault on Asian American mental health, and it brings up the idea of reclaiming memory as a radical act. “Language Came to the Door for Me” problematizes English as a medium for radical and activist work, and confronts the question of how to reconcile English as a tool of expression with English as a tool of imperialism. It also deals with the common experience of second-generation Asian American immigrants have of losing their mother tongues. Finally, Che’s “Notes on Anti-Erasure” is an essay, but it reads more as poetic prose. I want to look at this piece because it argues that writing as a form of anti-erasure is activism because war, trauma, racism, and sexual assault are commonly erased from memory, history, and narrative. I will close with this piece by exploring how Che’s prose is similar or different to her poetry, and how the two media serve different purposes.
“Pera Kucha,” published in *Hyperallergic* in November 2015, is, in many ways, Cathy Linh Che’s attempt at writing a record of her family history. When Che began writing poetry, her main goal and interest was to record her parents’ stories of the Vietnam War, partially because she did not see their stories adequately represented in American poetry and literature, and partially because she wanted to use writing to help her understand her own history and her relationship to her past. When I asked her about the influences in her writing, she explained, “Much of my interest [in writing poetry] was to define my past, my history, my identity, my connection to [Vietnam] that had taken on some mythological significance...It felt necessary for me to understand my past in order to understand my present.”

In the chapter “Refugee Remembering--and Remembrance” from her book *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refugees*, Yen Le Espiritu (2014) writes about how Vietnamese Americans relate to the act of remembering and how this informs her own work: “In this chapter, I also write more about my family experiences with the war than in the rest of the book. This is so because the public erasure of Vietnamese American history necessitates a different methodology, one deploying personal affect, in order to expose and reclaim ‘the something else’ that resides at the intersection between private loss and public commemoration” (Espiritu 2014:107-108). Espiritu argues that because Vietnamese Americans and their trauma are so often silenced and erased from American history, studying their experiences requires alternative methodologies that center the use of remembering as a radical and subversive act. This is exactly what Che does in her poetry as she

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10 Full text of “Pera Kucha” by Cathy Linh Che can be found in Appendix E.
documents the experiences of her refugee parents and her own inherited trauma, and what many
other Vietnamese American writers and artists do as well\(^\text{11}\).

In “Pera Kucha,” Che begins the poem with her own childhood and then traces her family
history backwards and forwards through time. In the first stanza, she writes: “I was once a child who
wore a star / on my forehead. I held my mother’s hand / in a new country, the chaparral dry, / a
landscape dusty and barren. I wore white / socks and brown-strapped sandals, imagined / Vietnam
a country of belonging” (Che 2015). By representing her childhood and Vietnam as mystical settings,
Che captures the perspective she had of these events as a child and mythologizes her past and her
family’s immigration story. Che also reinforces this mythologization by drawing upon ancient Greek
literature, writing: “My mother sewed me a sail / and said, Go into the wind. / She like Penelope
weaving, / unraveling, biding time. I / like Odysseus, bewitched / by the maddening call, / the wail”
(Che 2015). In this reference to The Odyssey, Che compares herself to the legendary hero Odysseus,
who took ten years to return home after the Trojan War. In doing so, Che emphasizes the difficulty
of her journey to find her home, in the same way that Odysseus’s journey home was fraught with
obstacles and hardship. Still, Che is “bewitched by the maddening call” of the idea of home and of
the mythical version of Vietnam that she has constructed for herself.

The form of “Pera Kucha” is a series of loosely related stanzas, each presenting a snapshot
of Che’s history. With the frank, matter-of-fact perspective of a child, Che writes about different
aspects of her family history, including pieces that are usually silenced and left unacknowledged. She

\(^{11}\) Two examples of this are Hai-Dang Phan, whose poem “A Brief History of Reenactment” deals with the
implications of Vietnam War reenactments, and An-My Le, a photographer whose work attempts to reconcile
her memories of Vietnam as a child with her experiences returning to Vietnam as an adult. The work of Le
and Phan goes beyond the scope of this thesis, but should be noted for their powerful treatment of the
themes seen in Che’s work.
writes, “My sister was born in Vietnam. / She died three hours later. I don’t / know her name,” and
two stanzas later, she writes, “In a family of men, only one / has not threatened, choked, / or
molested me in a bathroom” (Che 2016). Several stanzas later, Che writes, “Say, one escape attempt
became two. / Say, my mother, petrified, died at sea. / She and her garland of mourning” (Che
2016). By juxtaposing these three different types of trauma—of death, of sexual violence, and of
forced migration—Che shows how they are connected and ensures that they are not silenced or
erased from her family’s history. When asked about her view of poetry as activism, Che replied, “We
need to ask, what are the lives around us that haven’t been represented, and how do we do it in a
way that honors all the complexities of that life? We have so little representation in the media of
Asian Americans, or just people of color having complex relationships, so that feels like an activist
act. Creating something is active.” By writing her family history in poems such as “Pera Kucha,” Che
is actively working against the silencing of narratives of war, trauma, and violence, which is an
activist act.

“Pera Kucha” is also interesting because of its epigraph, which states, “after photographs in
the Peabody Essex Museum” (Che 2016). Although Che does not state which photographs she is
referring to, the image included with the poem is “Japanese Junk” by T. Enami (ca. 1898). This
photograph depicts two boats on a river, a Japanese man in each boat, silhouetted by the setting sun
in the background. The connection between this particular photograph and Che’s poem is unclear;
however, by including this epigraph and photograph alongside “Pera Kucha,” Che demonstrates
how poetry, like photography, can be used to preserve memory and to represent stories that are not
often told—namely, the stories of refugees and abuse survivors.12

In a similar vein to “Pera Kucha,” Che’s poem “In what way does the room map out violence?” is also written from the disjointed perspective of the poet as a child and connects the violence and trauma that she has personally experienced with that of the Vietnam War. The first section of the poem, narrated by Che and addressed to someone she calls “Doc,” begins with a series of short, seemingly unrelated images and phrases that leave the reader feeling disoriented and unsettled. Che writes: “Internal weather rain pings like nails on cement /...That muck. /...Rain, an emotion skidding” (Che 2016). These images paint a scene that is dark and ominous, setting the tone of the poem. The next three sections describe Che’s assailant, her cousin, and how he violated her: “He ate French bread with butter and sugar. / He ate soft-boiled eggs. / He kissed me and took off my pants. / He apologized and kissed me again” (Che 2016). Che presents these lines in a blunt, matter-of-fact tone, which is juxtaposed against the brutality of what she is actually describing.

In the next section, Che moves back in time to describe her cousin’s past; specifically, the fact that he was an illegitimate child and his experiences as a refugee: “He wore cotton / to wick away sweat… / spoke English broken / and baritoned, / lived in a refugee camp / and waited for a sponsor” (Che 2016). Although she has every right to do so, Che resists villainizing her assailant. Instead, she portrays him with complexity and compares the way that she was victimized by him to the way that he was victimized by the Vietnam War and the trauma of forced migration. Che also connects the ways in which the silencing of trauma and the erasure of violence from history has affected both her cousin and herself. Che describes how her mother silenced her when she tried to speak out against the abuse that she suffered at the hands of her cousin (“My mother whispered,

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13 Full text of “In what way does the room map out violence?” by Cathy Linh Che can be found in Appendix F. 
14 Another Vietnamese American artist who uses these same themes and forms is Tan-Hoang Nguyen, a scholar and filmmaker. See his short film “Pirated” (2006).
She’s afraid of ghosts. / She said, He’s just playing with you / and stroked my forehead”) and then goes on to describe how her cousin’s illegitimacy is erased from the family narrative: “My girl-cousin from the old country / whispered, Bastard. / A family secret / ending in shhh” (Che 2016). By “exposing” both of these family secrets in a poem, Che is pushing back against the pattern of silence and erasure that only serves to perpetuate cycles of violence and abuse by not giving people the space to deal with their trauma.

Whether intentionally or unintentionally, this poem also draws upon a discourse that represents the nation of Vietnam as feminine and portrays the assault on Vietnam during the Vietnam War as a gendered assault. While there is much literature about the violence and atrocities committed during the Vietnam War, the rampant sexual assault of Vietnamese women and girls has been erased and largely ignored (Turse 2013). By considering Che’s poem “In what way does the room map out violence?” within the context of this gendered discourse, the poem resonates both with her personal experiences with sexual assault and violation, and the assault and violation of the land of her ancestry.

Both “Pera Kucha” and “In what way does the room map out violence?” focus on memory and the importance of remembering one’s history in order to understand how trauma informs the present. Both poems are also written in an abstract, disjointed form without a singular linear narrative to follow. Rather, Che writes these poems as a series of images about her and her family’s lives that jump back and forth through time and blur the lines between myth and history. By writing in this confusing style, Che reflects the difficulty of tracing and documenting her personal history, due largely to the shame and silence that accompanies trauma.
“Language Came to the Door for Me” also deals with memory, but addresses it in a slightly different way. This poem focuses specifically on the loss of one’s mother tongue and how that relates to a loss of identity for assimilated immigrant children. The loss of one’s mother tongue is a common phenomenon for second- and third-generation immigrants of all nationalities. A 1998 study by Alejandro Portes and Lingxin Hao titled “E Pluribus Unum: Bilingualism and Loss of Language in the Second Generation” found that among most immigrant nationalities, nearly all second-generation immigrants knew and preferred English, and only a minority were fluent in their parents’ native languages (Portes and Hao 1998:269). The study also found that 79.3 percent of second-generation Vietnamese Americans knew English well, whereas only 29.1 percent knew Vietnamese well and only 14.3 percent knew Vietnamese very well. Furthermore, 51.1 percent of second-generation Vietnamese Americans expressed a preference for English over Vietnamese (Portes and Hao 1998:274). The experience that Che describes in “Language Came to the Door for Me” of losing her fluency in Vietnamese and fearing that she is also losing her connection to her Vietnamese identity is one shared by many second-generation immigrants everywhere. Not being able to speak the language of their community and their parents leaves many children of immigrants feeling even more alienated from their homelands.

In this poem, Che contrasts her loss of fluency in Vietnamese to her familiarity with and ability to write poems in English, a violent and colonial language. She writes, “We’d sing in Latin, in Vietnamese, / one, a dead language, the other / dying in me. This is how I build / a poem: grapheme, phoneme, hieroglyph--/ the Roman alphabet evolved from images...I am becoming / my mother, and losing my mother tongue--” (Che 2014). While Che is fluent and able to create poetry in

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15 Full text of “Language Came to the Door for Me” by Cathy Linh Che can be found in Appendix G.
English, her parents struggle and are ridiculed for their broken English, and Che herself is losing her grasp of Vietnamese.  

Loss of language is closely related to the loss of memory, which Che also writes about in “Pera Kucha” and “In what way does the room map out violence?” For Che, poetry is an important tool for combatting the loss of memory and the loss of language that often accompanies trauma. “Language Came to the Door for Me” is Che’s acknowledgement of the way that language plays a role in her work and her relationship to her past. She ends the poem with a confession of her guilt over her loss of language: “I am orbiting away. I sing / into the confessional. / I say please and forgive. / The word is hot iron, / a brand--or a tattoo / I am filling in with ink” (Che 2014). Because she is losing her ability to speak Vietnamese, she feels like she is losing part of herself, and she feels the need to ask for forgiveness and to be absolved.

Loss of language is a common experience for children of immigrants, and this poem is important because it creates a safe space (Collins 1994:100) for immigrants and those who share the experience. However, this poem deals with more than that experience. When I asked her about the role of poetry in activism, Che talked about the political implications of the language that one chooses to write in: “Even the fact that I am writing in English is political, born of a history of U.S. empire and conquest. Beyond that, if I were to write in Vietnamese, the language as it’s written now was translated into a Romanized alphabet by missionaries. Missionary work is also a form of empire-building. Nobody writes outside of their context or time.” Because even the decision to write in English has political implications, Che argues, all poetry is inherently political. In writing “Language Came to the Door for Me,” Che is simultaneously problematizing her own use of

16 “Dictee,” an early avant-garde Korean American feminist poetic text by Theresa Cha also deals with similar themes of language, uprootings, and war.
English as a medium and claiming it as a way to amplify the narratives of those (like her parents) whom English marginalizes.

Like the other pieces I have looked at in this chapter, “Notes on Anti-Erasure”17 deals with trauma, memory, and the lack of representation that marginalized voices and narratives get in mainstream media and literature. However, this piece is different because it is written in the form of an essay, although it reads almost as poetic prose. Divided into eleven bullet points, Che explains how she sees writing as an act of anti-erasure, and therefore, as a radical form of activism. She writes, “Writing, to me, is an act of anti-erasure. It reaches for the unsayable. Anti-erasure is when the silenced or the marginalized object speaks. When it asks a reader to listen to what it has to say. And what it says is the evidence” (Che 2015). Che argues that writing allows marginalized people to reclaim their voices and to allow others to witness their pain and trauma that is so often silenced. She goes on to explain that reading increases one’s ability to feel empathy, and that writing from a marginalized perspective asks the reader to see the world from someone else’s point of view and to empathize with that person. Once people understand and empathize with someone else’s struggles, they may be moved to take action and to help fight the oppression that marginalizes them.

Che also writes that her poetry “attempts to define terms like war, rape, and molestation through my family’s and my own experiences, rather than allowing images from the news, film, or media to dictate what these terms ought to mean” (Che 2015). In doing so, Che’s work is an example of what Patricia Hill Collins refers to as self-definition. Collins argues that the oppression of Black women leads them to develop a dual consciousness, adapting to an oppressive society by familiarizing themselves with their oppressors’ language and behavior while simultaneously

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17 Full text of “Notes on Anti-Erasure” by Cathy Linh Che can be found in Appendix H.
cultivating a completely separate and self-defined standpoint (Collins 1990:97). Collins believes that self-definition is essential to Black women’s survival, and that “safe spaces” such as writing and music are spaces in which Black women are allowed to express their self-definitions. Without self-definition and safe spaces, Black women would not have a way to resist the controlling images and objectification that they face from the rest of society (Collins 1990:100). Although Collins is writing specifically about Black women, her theory can be applied to Asian women, who are also marginalized under White supremacy and are oppressed by controlling images such as the Lotus Blossom, the Dragon Lady, and the Tiger Mother. By emphasizing self-definition in her writing, Cathy Linh Che is participating in the same kind of resistance that Patricia Hill Collins describes in *Black Feminist Thought*.

“Notes on Anti-Erasure” deals with similar themes to Che’s poetry, but because it is written in essay format, it is able to deal with these themes in a more literal and straightforward way. In this essay, Che is also able to be self-reflexive and explain her use of poetry as a medium: “Sometimes I clamor for language. I clamor to fill in gaps, the unsayable. What is unsayable? Things that are socially impolite? Actual violence against a marginalized body? If violence can happen, then surely there must [be] a language there to document it” (Che 2015). Because it is an abstract medium that allows the writer to exercise creative and stylistic freedom, poetry allows a writer to convey the difficulties and complexities of saying the unsayable. While essays such as “Notes on Anti-Erasure” are useful for explaining with more depth and clarity some of the points that Che tries to convey in her work, poetry can more accurately represent the struggles of what Che aims to do in her writing—filling in the gaps in her and her family’s history.
In addition to a safe space and a tool of anti-erasure, Che (like Franny Choi and Jess X. Chen) believes that poetry can be a tool of radical imagination. Citing Claudia Rankine, Audre Lorde, and James Baldwin as examples of poet-activists who used poetry to urge their readers to imagine radical alternatives to oppressive systems, Che explains that even in this fraught political climate, “We must find spaces within ourselves for quietude, away from all that noise, to be able to immerse yourself in the world of literature. Literature provides alternatives and a way to imagine a more just and beautiful world.” Even this is a political act, Che explained, because it provides marginalized people with nourishment and strength to keep resisting and fighting.

Despite her belief that poetry is inherently political, Che also emphasized that she doesn’t believe that poets necessarily have to gear their art towards activism: “To me, writing about flowers isn’t necessarily erasure of the concerns of people dying in the streets...A person who is marginalized who speaks their truth or writes out their story with complexity...that to me is inherently an activist act, especially in this day, because of the way that the government seeks to flatten and erase the complexities of marginalized people.” Although Che herself creates specifically activist work by writing about political themes and speaking out against erasure of violence, she argues that any marginalized person who represents themselves and their community with complexity, even if they are not necessarily aiming to produce political work, is participating in activism by pushing back against dominant stereotypes and controlling images that are used to other and oppress marginalized people.

Che’s work is an example of the role that poetry plays in contemporary Asian American activism in several ways: her work actively seeks to combat erasure and silencing of Asian American history, it is an act of self-definition, it provides a healing space for herself and others with similar
experiences, and it portrays Asian Americans with complexity that is often not afforded to them in mainstream media and literature. Choi, Chen, and Che all aim to combat and heal from racism in their work by providing empowering representations of Asian Americans and their stories. In this way, Che proves that poetry can be a tool of resistance.
VII. Fatimah Asghar

In early 2017, a new web series, aptly titled “Brown Girls,” took the internet by storm. This series focuses on the friendship between two young women living in Chicago: Laila (played by Nabila Hossain), a South Asian Muslim writer coming to terms with her queer identity, and Patricia (played by Sonia Denis), a Black musician struggling to navigate her way through jobs and relationships. The first seven episodes of the series were released online in February 2017 to widespread critical acclaim from publications such as *Time, Elle, BET,* and *The Huffington Post.*

“Brown Girls” is directed by Sam Bailey and written by Fatimah Asghar, and it is based off of the real-life friendship between Asghar and poet-musician Jamila Woods, both of whom are members of the Dark Noise Collective, which also includes Franny Choi. Although she has received a great deal of praise and media attention for her work on “Brown Girls,” Asghar is primarily known for her work as a poet.

Fatimah Asghar is a queer Pakistani, Kashmiri, Muslim American poet, screenwriter, educator, and photographer. While on a Fulbright scholarship in 2011 to study theater in post-genocidal countries, Asghar created Bosnia and Herzegovnia’s first spoken word poetry group called REFLEKS. She is also a Kundiman Fellow and a member of the Dark Noise Collective, and her chapbook *After* was published by Yes Yes Books in 2015. In addition to co-creating and writing “Brown Girls,” Asghar is currently pursuing her MFA at the Helen Zell Writers’ program at the University of Michigan.

I chose Fatimah Asghar as the final artist whose work I am profiling in my thesis for several reasons. Because none of the other artists I’ve looked at are South Asian or Muslim, I wanted to include an artist whose work could speak to that experience, especially in the wake of anti-Muslim
violence and legislation that has taken place throughout the United States.\(^{18}\) Asghar is known for writing political poetry in response to the news and current events, so I will explore how this serves as a form of protest. I also wanted to look at Asghar’s work because she, like Franny Choi, is a member of the Dark Noise collective and her work is both collaborative and individual. I will examine her work in conversation with that of Choi. Finally, I chose to write about Fatimah Asghar because of her work as screenwriter of the “Brown Girls” web series, which is unlike what any of the previous artists I have profiled are doing. I will explore how writing this web series serves a similar or different political purpose or does different political work than Asghar’s poetry.

In this chapter, I will examine four examples of Fatimah Asghar’s work: three poems (“america,” “To the White Men Who Fear Everything,” and “If They Should Come for Us,”) and the “Brown Girls” web series. I have chosen these poems in particular because they are direct responses to the current political moment. “america” is a response to the debate over accepting refugees from countries such as Syria, “To the White Men Who Fear Everything” is a response to a poem entitled “Have They Run Out of Provinces Yet?” published in The New Yorker by Calvin Trillin, and “If They Should Come for Us” is a recent response to President Trump’s executive order banning immigration from several Muslim-majority countries. By looking at these three poems, I hope to explore how Asghar uses poetry written in response to current events as a form of protest. I also want to look at Asghar’s work on “Brown Girls” because screenwriting as activist cultural production is a medium that I have not yet discussed, and because the creation of “Brown

\(^{18}\) Although the term “Asian American” is meant to include all Asian ethnicities, the Asian American community has historically privileged East Asian voices at the expense of South and Southeast Asians, who face a variety of different issues. For example, South Asian Americans often experience colorism and Islamophobia (even if they are not Muslim), and Southeast Asian Americans have disproportionately high rates of poverty and incarceration compared to other Asian Americans. Therefore, I believe it is important to include Southeast and South Asian American perspectives in this thesis, which is partially why I am writing about Che and Asghar.
“Girls” is an act of representation of marginalized peoples like Cathy Linh Che talked about in her interview. Asghar, like Che, is a strong believer in the political power of poetry. When asked about how her poetry relates to the current political climate, Asghar explained:

I think poems are urgent. I think poems are necessary. I think there is too much shit happening in the world to turn a blind eye to political events and pretend that poems and art are above politics. Poems can save lives; they can change the way we see the world and the way we define ourselves. I’ve seen poems read at marches and rallies as a way to mobilize. I’ve seen poems read at funerals. Poems read at weddings. Poems passed between lovers. Poems that remind us we can be free. Poems that make us want to love harder, to be better, that give us courage to fight (Blueshift 2015).

Asghar’s poetry certainly embodies this philosophy--her poems are explicitly political and concerned with themes of racism, Islamophobia, sexism, homophobia, and other types of injustice. Her poems are also greatly concerned with the question of self-definition that we have seen in Collins (1990) as well as in the work of Franny Choi, Jess X. Chen, and Cathy Linh Che. Asghar’s remark about poetry “that remind[s] us we can be free” is also reminiscent of the idea of poetry as a tool of radical imagination that was explored in Franny Choi and Jess X. Chen’s work. Asghar’s work echoes many of the themes of political and activist art that were discussed in previous chapters.

“america,”19 first read by Fatimah Asghar at the Sunday Kind of Love reading series as part of Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here Festival in January 2016, asks the United States to recognize Asghar’s humanity in the face of racism and Islamophobia. In the first stanzas of the poem, Asghar asks, “am I not your baby? / brown & not allowed / my own language?” (Asghar 2016). By addressing this poem to America, Asghar uses an apostrophe, a literary device in which the author addresses an idea, a thing, or a person who is dead or absent. In doing this, Asghar puts herself

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19 Full text of “america” by Fatimah Asghar can be found in Appendix I.
directly in conversation with America, able to confront her country in a way that she would otherwise be unable to.

Asghar goes on to ask, “america, didn’t you raise me? / bomb the country of my fathers / & then tell me to go back to it? / didn’t you mold the men / who murder children in schools / who spit at my bare arms / & uncovered head?” (Asghar 2016). By highlighting the hypocrisy of America’s treatment of immigrants and refugees when the actions of the U.S. government is often what destabilized their home countries in the first place, Asghar asks the reader (and, by extension, America at large) to empathize with the plight of refugees. In using an apostrophe to speak of America in the second person, the reader is also asked to examine their position and complicity in perpetuating the racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia that Asghar describes. She ends the poem with this plea: “didn’t you make there no ‘back’ / for me to go back to? / america, am I not your refugee? / who do I call mother, if not you?” (Asghar 2016). The question, while rhetorical, is also addressed to her audience, asking them to consider the humanity of immigrants and refugees.

Although this poem was published in Split This Rock not long after it was read at the Sunday Kind of Love reading series in January 2016, it is significant that Ashgar wrote this poem to be read aloud as a spoken word piece. In an interview with PBS, Asghar spoke to the radical power of spoken word poetry, saying, “Unlike many forms of theater, in which there is a separation between playwright and actor, spoken word combines those roles to ‘empower people to be experts in their own stories...Everyone [is] required to be a writer in order to participate, and in that way, everyone [is] contributing their unique voice and perspective”” (Segal 2015). A spoken word poet is both a writer and a performer and they are able to maintain agency over their stories in a way that other types of media do not allow. The confrontational nature of this poem is emphasized by the fact that
it was written to be read directly to an audience. Because it is written in the second person, it feels as though Asghar is specifically speaking to that audience, demanding they confront the issues and internal biases that Asghar is talking about.

“america” was written at around the time when debate over the Syrian refugee crisis was gaining a good deal of attention in the U.S. media and anti-immigrant sentiment was on the rise. Asghar’s poem is a response to this sentiment, as well as to the presidential campaign of Donald Trump, whose platform and media strategy relied heavily on anti-immigrant, nationalist rhetoric. Asghar, who is herself a Muslim and a child of immigrants, uses this poem to highlight the fact that the U.S. government is directly or indirectly responsible for creating refugee crises in the Middle East and then further enacts violence against immigrants and refugees by restricting or banning immigration and by subjecting immigrants to discrimination. Asghar contradicts the myth of the violent immigrant (further perpetuated by actions such as Donald Trump’s executive order to publish a list of crimes committed by immigrants each week) by focusing instead on the ways that the government is violent towards immigrants. She writes, “america, wasn’t it you? / who makes & remakes / me orphan, who burns / my home, watches me rebuild / & burns it down again?” (Asghar 2016). By making America out to be a threat to immigrants rather than the other way around, Asghar resists harmful xenophobic narratives that are currently pervading American media and government at its highest level, and she urges her audience to examine their complicity therein.

“To the White Men Who Fear Everything”20 is another poem written in response to a particular social or political event. This poem is a direct response to a poem by Calvin Trillin titled “Have They Run Out of Provinces Yet?” The poem, published in *The New Yorker* on April 4, 2016,

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20 Full text of “To the White Men Who Fear Everything” by Fatimah Asghar can be found in Appendix J.
was met with a great deal of backlash because the White author was seen as mocking China’s many different provinces and, thus, its many different cuisines. In the last stanza of the poem, Trillín writes, “So we sometimes do miss, I confess, / Simple days of chow mein but no stress, / When we never were faced with the threat / Of more provinces we hadn’t met. / Is there one tucked away near Tibet? / Have they run out of provinces yet?” (Trillín 2016).

Playing off of this supposed “threat,” Asghar’s poem addresses the fears of Trillín and other White men who perpetuate these racist and Orientalist narratives. She begins the poem by describing some of the injustices that she and other Muslim and South Asian Americans have faced at the hands of White men who fear them: “It was your feet / & broken glass that followed me around the field / when I showed up too early to soccer practice, / you who reminded me no sidewalk or park / would ever be mine” (Asghar 2016). By highlighting the harmful consequences of White men’s fear of people of color, Asghar rejects the idea that White Americans are the victim of Muslim terrorists, instead demonstrating why the reverse is more often true. Asghar also writes of her experiences as an 11-year-old girl in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York City, and the racist and Islamophobic violence that she experienced as a result of her brown skin.

While the poem begins with a description of some of the prejudice and oppression that Asghar faces, the tone of the poem later shifts to one of hope and defiance. Asghar writes, “I know I must scare you, / white men, me with my heavy lidded eyes, loud / laugh & insistence on being here & heard. / Me, with my brown & fly until I die, me with my Islam / & tattoos & my uncle who changed his restaurant / to Afghani food the month after you threw bottles / against his window & wrote go home terrorists / across all the menus” (Asghar 2016). In this stanza, Asghar acknowledges
the racism that she and her community face as a result of White people’s fear, but she also emphasizes the resilience of her people who continue to dare to exist unapologetically, living and loving and taking up space. She goes on to write, “Look at my people live. Look at my / people love. Look at how you drone our cities / & murder our children & we still find floor to dance” (Asghar 2016).

These stanzas are an example of an important theme in Asghar’s work, which is that of radical joy. In an interview with The Huffington Post about the “Brown Girls” web series, Asghar explains, “I believe that joy can be our greatest weapon during tough political times. When I protest, when I fight against things that I don’t believe in, it’s all out of love. It’s based on my love for are affected by said issue or political turbulence” (Crum 2017). Asghar argues that while anger and fear can motivate a person to take political action, joy and love are just as powerful as driving forces behind acts of protest. This is a recurrent theme in her work, appearing not only in poems such as “To the White Men Who Fear Everything,” but also in the “Brown Girls” web series, particularly in the friendship between the two main characters.

Asghar is not the first person to write about the radical potential of love and joy. Many feminist scholars have espoused the importance of these emotions in resistance. One such scholar is Victoria Cunningham, whose article “Radical Love” (2004) discusses the potential of love in dismantling patriarchy. Cunningham writes, “Real love involves radical action, and practicing it is one crucial step toward the deconstruction of patriarchy...In real love, we choose to speak not in the language of competition and violence, but in that of cooperation and compassion” (Cunningham 2004:37). She argues that women should love and support one another and to continue practicing
joy in the face of oppression are radical acts, and that self-love and self-acceptance are the first steps
towards dismantling the patriarchy and other oppressive systems.

This concept applies not only to the patriarchy, but to White supremacy as well. “To the
White Men Who Fear Everything” is an example of this. This poem is not only a condemnation of
White supremacy and Islamophobia, but a celebration of Fatimah Asghar’s Muslim and South Asian
identities and a testament to the power of joy in the face of fear and intimidation. This poem is an
act of defiance and protest against a racist poem that reproduces tired Orientalist stereotypes that
have been leveraged against Asian Americans since the 1800s, and the social conditions that made
the publication of that poem acceptable. “To the White Men Who Fear Everything” is an example
of activist art because it is a powerful assertion of joy and self-determination in a society that tries to
deny those things to Muslims and people of color.

Asghar’s most recently published poem, “If They Should Come for Us,” takes on similar
themes. This poem, published in the March 2017 issue of Poetry Magazine, is also a response to the
recent debates over immigration in American politics and media; in particular, it is a response to
President Trump’s executive order suspending entry to the United States of people from Iran, Iraq,
Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen under the guise of “protecting the nation from foreign
terrorist entry into the United States.” Like “To the White Men Who Fear Everything,” “If They
Should Come for Us” emphasizes the power of community and standing in solidarity with those
who are facing persecution. In this poem, Asghar symbolically “claims” all of the Muslim and South
Asian Americans who are being targeted by the government and by society. She begins the poem by

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21 Full text of “If They Should Come for Us” by Fatimah Asghar can be found in Appendix K.
stating, “these are my people & I find / them on the street & shadow / through any wild all wild / my people my people” (Asghar 2017). In stating and restating that they are her people, Asghar makes clear that she stands with her community in a time of political turmoil and uncertainty. While many Americans (and even the U.S. government) are disavowing Muslim Americans and denying their Americanness, Asghar begins “If They Should Come for Us” by doing the opposite. Asghar then goes on to describe specific South Asian American and Muslim Americans in order to humanize them and represent them as complex people with rich stories: “the sikh uncle at the airport / who apologizes for the pat / down the muslim man who abandons / his car at the traffic light drops / to his knees at the call of the azan.../ a muslim teenager / snapback & high-tops gracing / the subway platform / mashallah I claim them all” (Asghar 2017). In these brief portraits of Muslim and South Asian Americans, Asghar resists stereotypical portrayals of Muslims (as either the terrorist man or the oppressed woman) and instead represents them as individual people who are all different. She concludes the poem by emphasizing the resilience of her people throughout a long history of racism and U.S. imperialism: “our names this country’s wood / for the fire my people my people / the long years we’ve survived the long / years yet to come” (Asghar 2017). “If They Should Come for Us” is a powerful declaration of solidarity with a marginalized community and a radical act of representation in a time when White America seeks to silence and erase Muslim Americans and their stories.

Asghar’s poetry is largely centered around her identities as a queer, second generation, Muslim, Pakistani, and Kashmiri woman, and she embraces the fact that her intersecting marginalized identities inform her work. In an interview with Bitch Media, Asghar explained, “My identity is in everything that I do, because it’s who I am...We’re seeing this really beautiful moment in
contemporary poetics in which a lot more stories from voices of color, marginalized voices, are being heard and put into the limelight. That's a really beautiful thing because for so long our voices, and our stories, and our narratives were excluded from mainstream poetic discourse” (Lam 2015). By representing her own stories and her community’s stories in her poetry like Choi, Chen, and Che, Asghar is also engaging in the radical act of self-definition and the creation of a safe space as outlined in Black Feminist Thought (Collins 1990:97). Asghar’s work pushes back against the erasure of queer Muslim narratives in poetry and in media in general, creating positive, multi-dimensional representations of them and their stories, an endeavor that Cathy Linh Che is also greatly concerned with in her work.

This act of creating representation for queer women of color is not only evident in Asghar’s poetry, but in her screenwriting as well. In writing the “Brown Girls” web series, Asghar’s aim was to represent queer women of color and their relationships with one another with a complexity that is rarely afforded to them in mainstream media. The show, which is a comedy, is unique and groundbreaking for many reasons--including, but not limited to, its mainly women of color cast and crew, its focus on the friendship between a Black woman and a South Asian woman, and its frank, multidimensional treatment of queerness that de-centers Whiteness. In her interview with The Huffington Post, Asghar explained, “That’s what I hoped the show would be—a love letter for the different communities of color that I am a part of, and a joyous celebration of friendship and identity. If this show, or other comedic projects, provide spaces of joy and resistance during a political upheaval, I think that is amazing” (Crum 2017). Like “To the White Men Who Fear Everything,” “Brown Girls” is a testament to the power of radical joy and love, which can be just as mobilizing and impactful as anger in creating change.
Screenwriting as a medium offers different possibilities and challenges than poetry. Arguably the most marked difference between screenwriting and poetry is that screenwriting is just one step in the production of a web series like “Brown Girls,” which is necessarily a collaborative effort.

Asghar’s main collaborator in the creation of “Brown Girls” is director Sam Bailey, a Black filmmaker and actor who is also known for her work on her debut series, “You’re So Talented.” However, the series’ creation was also dependent on many other collaborative artistic relationships, including Asghar’s friendship with singer, poet, and fellow member of Dark Noise Collective Jamila Woods (upon which the friendship between the two main characters was based). It is also significant that Asghar’s relationships with Black women are central to the creation of “Brown Girls,” because it speaks to the power of interracial artistic collaboration. Without the involvement of women of different races (specifically Black and South Asian), “Brown Girls” would likely have been unable to portray its Black and South Asian characters with as much nuance and honesty. This collaboration is especially important within the context of White supremacy, which seeks to divide people of color through harmful stereotypes such as the model minority myth. Because of this, interracial collaboration is also an act of resistance and radical love in a capitalist, White supremacist society that values competition rather than community and solidarity.

As a member of the Dark Noise Collective (along with Franny Choi, Jamila Woods, Aaron Samuels, Danez Smith, and Nate Marshall), Asghar’s work also depends upon collaboration with other artists and activists of color. Although Asghar writes her poems by herself, she and the other members of the Dark Noise Collective support and inspire each other in their creative endeavors. In her interview with The Blueshift Journal, Asghar speaks to the necessity of collaborating with other people of color in the White-dominated fields of poetry and television: “Dark Noise was...born out
of a need...[Aaron Samuels and I] talked about how it was difficult and demoralizing to negotiate the professional writer world as a poet of color...We wanted to assemble a bunch of amazing emerging writers of color together and fellowship. We wanted to create a group that operated like a family, with love at its center, and see what happened” (Blueshift 2015). Asghar’s work is an example of the way in which many Asian American artists and activists are using interracial collaboration to produce more far-reaching, complex, and impactful political art.

Asghar’s work touches on many of the same themes as the other artists I have profiled in my thesis: the need for representation of marginalized voices and stories, the power of self-definition, radical love and imagination, poetry as a space of healing, and the ability of art to be a form of protest. Fatimah Asghar’s work also deals with themes unique to her experience, most notably that of Islamophobia, which is more relevant than ever in the current political climate. By creating positive and nuanced representations of queer people, people of color, Muslims, and women of color, Fatimah Asghar is actively pushing back against dominant narratives that seek to erase and flatten the experiences of these groups.
VIII. Conclusion

When she was growing up, Jess X. Chen was one of the only women of color in her community. On top of being a queer first generation Chinese American immigrant, Chen had a stutter that caused other students to ridicule her, ignore her, and finish her sentences for her. Because of this, Chen was afraid to speak for most of her childhood. Only when she discovered poetry was she able to find a voice, express herself, and build a community of other migrant people of color. Poetry and art gave Chen the tools to articulate her experiences as a queer migrant of color when society tried to render her voiceless, and she has continued to use these tools to fight against all forms of injustice. For Chen, art has been invaluable as a site of resistance. Explaining how she perceives the relationship between art and migration, Chen said,

Even as we are made invisible by a heteronormative, White supremacist, and xenophobic culture, we refuse to be silent...When this nation illegalizes our boundless imagination, our migration, and the survival that follows, then becomes an act of creative resistance...The similarity between art and migration is the fearless imagination that drives them. For me, to be a political artist is ceaselessly entwined with continuing the imagination that my ancestors once started. When the narrative of migration and art combines, a movement can be born, a living community that lives, soars, and imagines together until we are all free.

Jess X. Chen is just one example of an Asian American who has found personal and political power in art and poetry. In this thesis, I have explored the work of Chen and three other Asian Americans who are doing similar types of work: Franny Choi, Fatimah Asghar, and Cathy Linh Che. By analyzing their work, I have attempted to paint a picture of Asian American activism in the contemporary moment, and how art factors into it.
My primary goal for this research was to answer three main questions. The first question was whether or not art in itself can be considered activism. When I began this research, I was operating under the assumption that art was, in fact, a form of activism, but as I started to write my literature review and conduct my interviews, I began to realize that that I was assuming many things. Like Franny Choi told me during our interview, art can never replace direct actions such as protesting and rallying, advocating for changes in legislation, or creating programs to serve marginalized populations. Some people also believe that there is no time or place for art when people are facing violence and discrimination on a daily basis--how can creating art be important when people are dying in the streets?

I argue that the function that art plays in activist movements is also essential and necessary for activism to be sustained. Choi, Che, Asghar, and Chen all spoke about the capacity of art to represent and magnify voices, to build community and to raise awareness about important issues, and to imagine different and better futures. These women are not alone in their belief that art is a powerful tool for activism: in her essay “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” Audre Lorde writes that for women and other marginalized groups, poetry is an essential means of processing and imagining alternatives to their oppression. She explains, “For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought” (Lorde 1984:37). Lorde argues that the ability to create poetry and art is the first step to creating societal change. Both art and direct action are vital to activist movements.
The second question I wanted to answer in my thesis is how contemporary Asian Americans are using art in their activism. Among the four artists whose work I looked at, examples of activist art included poetry (written and spoken word), illustrations, screenwriting, and murals. The artists use these different media to represent themselves and their communities in a positive and complex way, to radically imagine alternative futures, and to raise awareness about a particular issue. The diversity of media used in contemporary Asian American activist art demonstrates the variety of possibilities that art offers as a form of activism. Each of these different forms of art has particular advantages and audiences: murals are a reclamation of public space by marginalized people\(^{23}\) and an opportunity for collaboration and community-building; poetry can provide a platform for radical imagination and combat the lack of marginalized voices in the literary world; screenwriting provides important media representation of underrepresented groups; and all of these forms can provide spaces for marginalized groups to heal from trauma and oppression. Of course, there are many possibilities for activist art beyond the forms of media that have been discussed in this thesis as well, but these are just some examples of the ways in which Asian Americans are using art in their activism.

Finally, I wanted to place this current iteration of Asian American activism as reflected by these four artists in the broader context of the history of Asian American activism. This contemporary Asian American activism shares many of the same goals as the original Asian American Movement, including fighting racism, U.S. imperialism, and the rights of immigrants. However, contemporary activists are also concerning themselves with new and different issues, including queerness and how it intersects with Asian Americaanness, anti-Blackness, environmental

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\(^{23}\) It is important to acknowledge that this often takes place on stolen Indigenous land by non-Indigenous people.
justice, police brutality, and intergenerational trauma. These contemporary artists are also working in
the particular political contexts of the Obama and Trump administrations. In addition, three of the
artists I profiled (Jess X. Chen, Fatimah Asghar, and Franny Choi) work collaboratively across racial
and ethnic lines, either as part of a collective (like the Dark Noise Collective or the Justseeds Artists’
Co-operative) or on projects such as murals. This trend of interracial collaboration has its roots in
early Asian American activism, including the Third World Liberation Front, which was a coalition of
Black, Latinx, and Asian American university students. Although the relationship between Asian
Americans and other racial minorities has often been rocky, the interracial artistic collaboration
employed by Chen, Asghar, Choi, and other Asian American artist-activists is an example of the
ongoing interracial solidarity that people of color have employed in activist movements. This shows
that contemporary Asian American artists and activists are building off of the activist work that
previous Asian American activists have done, while adapting it to suit the current needs of the Asian
American community.

However, arguably the most important question of all is why people--especially those who
are not invested in Asian American issues and activism--should care about this research. One simple
reason is that Asian American issues are American issues. A 2016 report by NBC News found that
Asian Americans are currently the fastest-growing racial group in the United States, with the
population growing 3.4 percent between 2014 and 2015, totaling 21 million as of June 2016. Asian
Americans are too significant a population for their issues and the ways in which they address
them to be ignored. Beyond this, the current political climate and presidential administration have

21 Lam, Charles and Associated Press. 2016. “Asians Remain Fastest-Growing US Group as Pacific Islanders,
rendered activist art more relevant than ever. In 2015, the Los Angeles Human Relations Commission reported that hate crimes against Asian Americans had tripled. After the inauguration of President Donald Trump in January 2017, 16 out of the 20 members of the President’s Advisory Commission on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) resigned in protest, and the White House website no longer mentions the White House Initiative on AAPI (Ahn 2017).

The issues that Asian American artist-activists are addressing in their work, such as police brutality, immigration, and homophobia, have dominated mainstream media in the wake of new legislation and executive orders that have targeted immigrants and other marginalized groups. Although direct actions such as the Women’s March on Washington and Black Lives Matter marches in protest of police brutality have received a decent amount of coverage in mainstream media, Asian American activist art gets very little media attention because it is inherently a smaller-scale endeavor and the cultural productions of marginalized people are erased and devalued. Still, it is important to recognize all the ways that marginalized people are resisting their oppression, because protests and marches are not the only tools of resistance. Looking at Asian American activist art is important, especially in this political moment, because it is a valuable way to learn more about how Asian Americans understand and push back against oppression and injustice.

While I was able to explore the answers to these questions, this study has several obvious limitations. First of all, I only looked at the work of four contemporary Asian American artists, and even though I tried to select artists who come from a variety of different backgrounds and experiences in terms of ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and more, my selection of artists could not possibly be representative of all Asian American artists and activists, even if I had looked at many more artists’ work. My research has neglected to include the work of, for example, mixed race,
disabled, transgender, adopted, undocumented, or male Asian American artists, even though these artists are producing valuable and important work as well. Therefore, I am not going to attempt to generalize my analysis of these four artists’ work to that of Asian American artists and activists as a whole. Rather, I only take these observations as an example of the kind of artistic and activist work that Asian Americans are creating in this contemporary moment.

Another important note is that I chose to write about four women artists, three of whom are openly queer. Thus, these examples of Asian American art also come from a queer and feminist perspective. This choice seemed only natural to me, given how much I rely on the traditions of Black feminist thought. The work of Choi, Chen, Che, and Asghar would not have been possible without the work of other Asian American feminist poets, including the community of West Coast Asian American feminist poets in the 1970s and 1980s that includes Nellie Wong, Merle Wool, and Mitsuye Yamada. Although I am analyzing these works as Asian American art, they are also examples of queer and feminist art, and as a queer Asian American woman, I feel as though these identities are inseparable. However, by centering female and queer voices in a discussion of Asian American art, I aim to decenter masculinity and heterosexuality as the default or the norm.

Readers may notice that even though my thesis focuses on Asian American art and activism, I have drawn heavily upon the work of Black feminist writers and academics such as Patricia Hill Collins, Audre Lorde, and bell hooks. This is because Black feminists have laid the groundwork for Asian American academic work and activism, as well as for my research personally. Unsurprisingly,

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25 If you are interested in exploring the work of other Asian American artist-activists who write about identities and experiences not discussed in this thesis, consider looking at the work of Chrysanthemum Tran, Thenmozhi Soundararajan, Sonja John, Kay Ulanday Barrett, Mia Mingus, Ocean Vuong, Alok Vaid-Menon, and Janani Balasubramanian.

one of the biggest methodological influences in my work is *Black Feminist Thought* by Patricia Hill Collins (1990); in particular, the chapter titled “Black Feminist Epistemology” was my main resource in doing this research. In “Black Feminist Epistemology,” Collins argues that since Black women have been historically excluded from academia, they have developed alternative ways of producing and validating knowledge that do not necessarily adhere to traditional methodologies. Collins separates this Black feminist epistemology into four categories: lived experience as a criterion of meaning, the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, the ethics of caring, and the ethic of personal accountability (Collins 1990:257-265). To discount these methods of knowledge production, Collins explains, is perpetuating the systematic devaluation of Black women’s contributions and the privileging of Western, male-centric methodologies.

In this thesis, I have drawn heavily upon these tenets of Black feminist epistemology; most significantly, lived experience as a criterion of meaning, the ethics of caring, and the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims. My research was inspired and informed by my own experiences as an Asian American poet and someone who is invested in social justice issues, which is the lens through which I analyzed the work of the four artist-activists in my thesis. Rather than attempting to maintain a sense of detachment for the sake of objectivity, which is favored in academic work, I am embracing my role within the subject that I am studying. The issues that I discussed in this work, including racism, diaspora, queerness, and immigration, are ones that are very personal to me; therefore, I feel unable to separate my emotional connection to this work from the work itself. Similarly, the ethics of caring refers to the fact that emotions and empathy are, in fact, essential to the knowledge validation process. The ethics of caring also places great emphasis on individual human uniqueness and expression, which is very relevant to my work since this thesis relies heavily
upon looking at examples of individual forms of expression as unique parts that make up an Asian American aesthetic. Finally, I incorporated the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims in the conversations I had with each of the artists. Rather than viewing these conversations as interviews wherein I was the subject and my interviewee was the object, I approached these conversations as dialogues in which both parties were equal participants and contributors.

Even though these methods were developed in order to address the unique ways that Black women produce knowledge, they are also relevant to other marginalized groups that have also been historically excluded from academia, including Asian Americans. While Asian Americans do not necessarily have a specific Asian American epistemology and their methods of knowledge production are undoubtedly different from those of Black women, the need for alternative methodologies is the same, and Collins’ Black feminist epistemology was crucial to the work that I did in this thesis.

The issues that these artist-activists are trying to address with their work—including racial justice, immigrants’ rights, police brutality, environmental justice, and homophobia—cannot be solved through the use of art alone, but I believe that art is necessary for building and sustaining activism. Art provides marginalized people with a way to express themselves and to create representations of themselves that push back against harmful stereotypes and controlling images. It is a way for marginalized people to assert agency over their self-identification and control over their narratives. Art can also raise awareness and consciousness around social and political issues, and it can inspire people to learn more, to become involved with a particular cause, or to participate in direct action to support that cause. Finally, art allows marginalized people to imagine a future
without the systems that oppress them without being confined to the realm of rationality or even possibility.

Like the generations of activists that preceded them, contemporary Asian Americans are using their art to imagine radical futures and a different, more just world. Their work demonstrates how art can be a weapon in the centuries-long fight against oppression and the silencing of marginalized voices. Although these are dark times for many marginalized people, Asian Americans are continuing to use art to bring about change and build communities. As Jess X. Chen said, art allows us to live, soar, and imagine together until we are all free.
IX. References


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Tom, Alex, Margi Clarke, Preeti Shekar, Karina Muñiz, Megan Swoboda, Felicia Gustin and


Appendix A

Full text of “Field Trip to the Museum of Natural History” by Franny Choi, first published on PBS.org:

Field Trip to the Museum of Human History

Everyone had been talking about the new exhibit, recently unearthed artifacts from a time

no living hands remember. What twelve year old doesn’t love a good scary story? Doesn’t thrill

at rumors of her own darkness whispering

from the canyon? We shuffled in the dim light

and gaped at the secrets buried

in clay, reborn as warning signs:

a “nightstick,” so called for its use

in extinguishing the lights in one’s eyes.

A machine used for scanning fingerprints

like cattle ears, grain shipments. We shuddered,

shoved our fingers in our pockets, acted tough.

Pretended not to listen as the guide said,

*Ancient American society was built on competition*

*and maintained through domination and control.*

*In place of modern-day accountability practices,*

*the institution known as “police” kept order*

*using intimidation, punishment, and force.*

We pressed our noses to the glass,

strained to imagine strangers running into our homes,

pointing guns in our faces because we’d hoarded

too much of the wrong kind of property.

Jadera asked something about redistribution

and the guide spoke of safes, evidence rooms,

more profit. Marian asked about raiding the rich,

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and the guide said, *In America, there were no greater protections from police than wealth and whiteness.*

Finally, Zaki asked what we were all wondering: *But what if you didn’t want to?*

and the walls snickered and said, *steel, padlock, stripsearch, hardstop.*

Dry-mouthed, we came upon a contraption of chain and bolt, an ancient torture instrument

the guide called “handcuffs.” We stared at the diagrams and almost felt the cold metal licking our wrists, almost tasted dirt, almost heard the siren and slammed door,

the cold-blooded click of the cocked-back pistol, and our palms were slick with some old recognition,

as if in some forgotten dream we did live this way, in submission, in fear, assuming positions of power were earned, or at least carved in steel, that they couldn’t be torn down like musty curtains, an old house cleared of its dust and obsolete artifacts. We threw open the doors to the museum,

shedding its nightmares on the marble steps, and bounded into the sun, toward the school buses

or toward home, or the forests, or the fields, or wherever our good legs could roam.
Appendix B

Full text of “Choi Jeong Min” by Franny Choi, first published in *Poetry Magazine*.

Choi Jeong Min
*For my parents, Choi Inyeong & Nam Songeun*

in the first grade i asked my mother permission
to go by frances at school. at seven years old,

i already knew the exhaustion of hearing my name
butchered by hammerhead tongues. already knew
to let my salty gook name drag behind me
in the sand, safely out of sight. in fourth grade

i wanted to be a writer & worried
about how to escape my surname — choi

is nothing if not korean, if not garlic breath,
if not seaweed & sesame & food stamps
during the lean years — could i go by f.j.c.? could i be
paper thin & raceless? dust jacket & coffee stain,

boneless rumor smoldering behind the curtain
& speaking through an ink-stained puppet?

my father ran through all his possible rechristenings —
ian, isaac, ivan — and we laughed at each one,

knowing his accent would always give him away.
you can hear the pride in my mother’s voice

when she answers the phone this is grace, & it is
some kind of strange grace she’s spun herself,

some lightning made of chain mail. grace is not
her pseudonym, though everyone in my family is a poet.

these are the shields for the names we speak in the dark
to remember our darkness. savage death rites

we still practice in the new world. myths we whisper
to each other to keep warm. my korean name
is the star my mother cooks into the jjigae
to follow home when i am lost, which is always

in this gray country, this violent foster home
whose streets are paved with shame, this factory yard

riddled with bullies ready to steal your skin
& sell it back to your mother for profit,

land where they stuff our throats with soil
& accuse us of gluttony when we learn to swallow it.

i confess. i am greedy. i think i deserve to be seen
for what i am: a boundless, burning wick.

a minor chord. i confess: if someone has looked
at my crooked spine and called it elmwood,

i've accepted. if someone has loved me more
for my gook name, for my saint name,

for my good vocabulary & bad joints,
i've welcomed them into this house.

i've cooked them each a meal with a star singing
at the bottom of the bowl, a secret ingredient

to follow home when we are lost:
sunflower oil, blood sausage, a name

given by your dead grandfather who eventually
forgot everything he’d touched. i promise:

i’ll never stop stealing back what’s mine.
i promise: i won’t forget again.
Appendix C

Full text of “For Peter Liang” by Franny Choi, transcribed from a recording:

Last month, Officer Peter Liang was convicted of killing Akai Gurley, an unarmed black man in a Brooklyn housing project. Since then, hundreds of Chinese Americans have marched in support of Officer Liang, many of them carrying signs that read, “One tragedy, two victims.”

If there is a second victim here, it is not you, Peter. If there is a second victim here, it might be Akai’s mother, who, like your mother, stayed up late sometimes worrying that he wouldn’t make it home. If there is a second victim here, it might be Akai’s sweetheart, who, unlike your sweetheart, had to watch her man drown in his body’s red unmaking, knowing that no help was on its way, never on its way in the neighbourhoods you patrol, Peter, never a friendly siren, only the iron lockstep of open prison guards like you, Peter.

You, who thought that keeping your darker brothers shackled in place would be a good job. You, who forgot that there is only ever one enemy, though he wears many faces, and the same God who put Akai into those projects is the same God who hammered at our accents until our mouths were clean and Biblical as stale bread, until we fit into the cogs of this pyramid scheme long enough to climb onto the backs of other Others, and so reach our scraps, our good jobs, and our decent houses with the locks on all the doors to keep out bad people.

And it’s true that no one wants to see us alive, either. They would rather see us hunched over and suicidal at an iPhone factory, or begging for pleasure at a white man’s feet, or not see us as all, but none of that makes you a victim today, Peter. It only makes you a disposable knife, a tyrant’s tool, and I will not mourn that justice was served to you. I will only keep demanding that the white versions of you get what you got.

I do not hate you, Peter. In the pictures, you could be my brother. You could be any boy at my church. But that’s the thing about family, isn’t it? That when one of your own acts up it’s your job to call him in. So call in your people, Peter. Call in the crowds, tell them to come home, to take down their signs. Tell them that we have work to do. Tell them if there is a second victim, it is not you, it is what was lost between two communities in pain, but unlike the first victim, this one can be brought back.
Appendix D

Full text of “Hunger Drives the Body into Imagination” by Jess X. Chen, originally published in The Blueshift Journal.

We are at the border, again. The border—a fence
so white it is ready for paint. Go ahead and jump.
Watch our shoulders spread into sails of ships
that will never face the direction of home
again. HOME is the muzzle of a gun
just in time. The barrel—casted we soared out from
where we worked the graveyard shift in the factory
may bloom in the safety so America
of another morning.
We are starving— you see—HUNGER drives
the body into imagination. Imagination is daring to love
what is not in front of us.
The second chance
we mythologize when they cut off our hands. The shelter
we construct around our children long before
we can afford each floorboard. The reincarnation
of ancestry when our homeland is reduced to ash.
So what then— is immigration if not imagination given
a destination? A magic so powerful it must be banned?
Dreaming is a crime they are beating out of us.
What the journey cannot kill, they shred with hands:
they chop off our wings, & carpet their empire
with our feathers. Yet even bones— separated from limb
do not forget the rhythm of their own flapping.
Long before the wilderness was ever fenced,
we have known the crossing of borders;
a dance so familiar—every step points toward heaven.
And if death finds us with our toes but a tripwire
away from AMERICA, then look at us—reborn
stardust country unbound by all borders.
Look up & witness—the warrior parade no one's prison
can ever extinguish. Our body is here to prove
migration—is a kind of magic. Of course they are afraid
of all who possess it; when it has returned to us—the WORLD.
Appendix E

Full text of “Pera Kucha” by Cathy Linh Che, originally published in *Hyperallergic*.

Pecha Kucha
— after photographs in the Peabody Essex Museum

I once was a child who wore a star
on my forehead. I held my mother’s hand
in a new country, the chaparral dry,
a landscape dusty and barren. I wore white
socks and brown-strapped sandals, imagined
Vietnam a country of belonging.
*
Then America was a heart-shaped
tattoo. My identity a checkbox.
My mother saying *tiên đàng*, my
father saying *sước quá*. My country
a silver headdress against a red backdrop.
*
One wore a hand-me-down waistcoat,
the other a vest burst open. *Smile.*
Say cheese. But my older brother
could only part his lips. My younger
grinned into a future of silver coins
jangling like keys in his pocket.
*
My mother tucks flowers
into her hair, nature objects
of a funeral. This one
for Freddie Gray,
10,000 more for the dead
in Nepal. In the mirror
she is crowned by fragility.
*
My sister was born in Vietnam.
She died three hours later. I don’t
know her name. My mother wears
a sackcloth dress in mourning.
My sister is another flower my mother
wears, this one pinned inside her dress,
its small white mouth suckling
at her breast.
A photographer strips a woman
of her top and sits her on a rock.
A garland interwoven with the long
metal shells of bullets hangs mid-breast,
as if she is a museum object,
donning war.
*
In a family of men, only one
has not threatened, choked,
or molested me in a bathroom.
My younger brother cried
elephant tears when chased
around the house by a terrifying
machine, a vacuum cleaner,
ghosts made audible.
*
A fight is a kind of dance.
My father advised my mother,
*To marry me is to suffer.*
Love called his bluff. It wasn’t
a bluff, turns out. He asked,
*You would leave me?* She answered
emphatically, *Yes,* and for a while
he quietly changed.
*
To show scale, a human
stands in front of a boulder.
Magma fiery, then cooled,
then heated again in a desert
where a figure in all black
blends into the shadows, into
the absence of light.
*
San Francisco is a porthole
into human history. The structures
gutted, the residents pushed out.
A boomtown, a place
for the wealthy, venture capitalists,
programmers in gleaming condos
with glass facades.
*
In the bay, sailboats, a galleon,
boats of leisure. My parents
escaped in a smaller vessel.
My father hooked fishing lines
 to the back. They ate rice
 and fish over small lit canisters
 of fuel.
*
Barely perceptible, the double
 lives of couples. Parallel trains.
 Say, one escape attempt became two.
 Say, my mother, petrified, died at sea.
 She and her garland of mourning.
 Her black bonnet. My father’s ghosted
 uniform, his severe hands,
 their tenderness like switchblades.
*
My mother’s sister wished me
 a happy birthday today. She told me,
 *Bring home a husband the next time
 you visit.* The one they loved I let go,
 inauspiciously. Today he texted me happiness.
 I am not the end of my maternal bloodline—
 but I could be, in America.
*
Some days I imagine home
 as a structure with thatched eaves.
 Some days home is a craftsman
 somewhere on the West Coast—
 in the dusty hills of Highland Park,
 in the polished damp of Seattle.
*
My mother sewed me a sail
 and said, *Go into the wind.*
 She like Penelope weaving,
 unraveling, biding time. I
 like Odysseus, bewitched
 by the maddening call,
 the wail.
*
Like a corona of light,
 a feathered headdress signifies
 flight and power.
 What is history
 but that which we make ourselves,
 together, as birds.
*
At a distance, a boomtown
is just a series of structures.
Interior spaces with windows
through which we glimpse
our worlds. The sun on the sea
a light which burns onto old paper
an imprint.
*
My mother has removed the flowers
from her hair, placed them on a station wagon
for my wedding day. She has removed her
veil. It is a plastic sheet protecting
a rusting car on the streets of Salem,
or Baltimore. It is a vehicle I may never climb into,
though the remnants I will collect as pictures
in my human document.
Appendix F


In what way does the room map out violence?

Internal weather rain pings like nails on cement.

    I pulled weeds with my ungloved hand,
    tore them whole from the ground.

The dark expanded like a shadow.

    The sky pressed down
    in a sheet of obsidian.

How I imagine an un-punctured universe--
We begin whole then slowly deflate.

    After the breakup,
    I feel pitted, but too full of him.

That muck.

    Drove past the windy bluffs of Los Angeles.
    The sagebrush seemed anchored to the cliffs.

Rain, an emotion skidding.

    I watched a seagull dip into the water
    and rise shimmering.

Doc, I felt him ebb in the endless summer.

    I want a self-actualized
    kind of weather.

* 

The plate glass window was cold against my forehead.

I don’t recall being sick.

    His hand brushed against my breasts
    as I passed in the hall.
I was ten, eleven.

The body’s disorderly circuitry.

The page flipped, and I saw a picture of myself
with a swollen eye.

It was a dream,
which signifies what.

His thumb was crooked--double-jointed rather, and it hurt--

Minus pleasure, what we experienced was, on one hand, a kind
of rape--

There is no other hand but the one he used to palm my
stomach--

Except with him, I wasn’t there--I was a border, and he
crossed--

I filled up with fog in the summer heat--

His eyes were cool and lanced right through me.

He ate French bread with butter and sugar.
He ate soft-boiled eggs.
He kissed me and took off my pants.
He apologized and kissed me again.
His tongue kept moving and I didn’t understand.
I punched and punched him.
He laughed even in my dreams.
In school I willed him away.
A cut penis severed into vanishing.
The image came back.
My mother whispered, She’s afraid of ghosts.
She said, He’s just playing with you
and stroked my forehead.

Not by force--just a shush in the dark--
no threat--just shush--
and sometimes I liked it--no injury no threat--
sent my brother to the kitchen to check the toast--

It was winter--my cousin lay on top--
my brother would not leave, watching
even as the toaster pinged--I was four--
    I was eight--I was twelve--

Then he married--and I was the flower girl
    at the wedding

*  
He wore cotton
to wick away sweat.

Wore the scent of pomade.
Preferred dry foods to soups,

spoke English broken
    and baritoned,

lived in a refugee camp
    and waited for a sponsor--

My father’s nephew, he lived
in my home for eight years, took me
to the Griffith Observatory,
to the Southwest Museum.

My girl-cousin from the old country
whispered, Bastard.

A family secret
ending in sbbh.

*  
He lifted his waistband and inserted my hand--
    his trembling fingers,
        his tentative tongue--

My body a punctured casing--
    men like galaxies
        and I like shredded lace--

As a girl, I stayed up
    with my ear by the radio.
        I listened to Loveline

and diagnosed myself--
    I was on the downward slope
of the sine wave of consent--

I skipped prom, declared celibacy,
    prayed forgiveness from the Virgin Mary--
    I swore to breaking patterns--

Yet, they continued
    to echo through
    the dark chamber--

While I slept, my cousin placed
his mother’s mask on me,
asked me if I loved him.

He wore wolf ears.
I willed him to hear the change
in atmosphere, the tilt of air

--no, no, no--

his finger slid
under the white
underwear.

The air was cool,
but my face was on fire.

I wore my woman’s mask.
Underneath,
I was ten years old.

When he kissed me, the edges
of our magnetic fields touched.
Inside, my heart compressed
into a black hole.

* 

She began as an object--

* 

A pattern

He began as a bastard.

His mother, a woman seduced--
On her deathbed, her face was smooth and plump.

She winked as if she knew.

You look like his mother.

A pattern, a pattern--

How do I forget the child

in the dim room

of the sleeping house?
Appendix G

Full text of “Language Came to the Door for Me” by Cathy Linh Che, originally published by Connotation Press.

Language Came to the Door for Me

This is how her language came to me:
through song. A ribbon from her chest,
the hymnal next to the crib, the vowels
rose in the alabaster
coolness of the church.
We'd sing in Latin, in Vietnamese,

one, a dead language, the other
dying in me. This is how I build
a poem: grapheme, phoneme, hieroglyph—

the Roman alphabet evolved from images;
in the mirror, I watch the face I must read.
My father's nose, rounded at the tip.

My mother's freckles rising from beneath
my skin. I am becoming
my mother, and losing my mother tongue—

they are syllables rusting
in a shed I have neglected
in California.

There the spiders spin their webs.
They tick the Morse Code.
SOS. Hello.

I lean over a desk
like a monk filling books
in English.

When my mother's voice calls out,
it is tinny and digital, not
the soft tongue of a mouth

which loved to sing.
I am orbiting away. I sing
into the confessional.
I say please and forgive.

The word is hot iron,
a brand—or a tattoo
I am filling in with ink.
Appendix H

Full text of “Notes on Anti-Erasure” by Cathy Linh Che, originally published by NPM Daily.

Notes on Anti-Erasure:

1. My poetry attempts to define terms like war, rape, and molestation through my family’s and my own experiences, rather than allowing images from the news, film, or media to dictate what these terms ought to mean.

2. Sometimes I clamor for language. I clamor to fill in gaps, the unsayable. What is unsayable? Things that are socially impolite? Actual violence against a marginalized body? If violence can happen, then surely there must a language there to document it.

3. I think about the struggle between erasure and anti-erasure. To me the act of speaking is anti-erasure. Writing, witnessing and documenting is anti-erasure. Writing down my mother’s story says that this matters. History matters. Trauma matters. The occurrences of her life and their implications matter.

4. It has been said that reading, and especially reading fiction, increases our ability to feel empathy. It expands our worlds and asks that we look through others’ subjectivities.

5. Whereas, rape is a form of object permanence. The memory of the event persists long after its occurrence. The victim or survivor is the object of the action, the recipient of someone else’s power. Coupled with silence, this person becomes, to the perpetrator or unempathetic reader, forever the object.

6. The title poem of my book “Split” shows how military decisions, large and small, can have deep and lasting impact.

7. The CIA backed a 1963 coup d'état ousting Ngo Dinh Diem. John F. Kennedy okayed it. Ngo Dinh Diem’s subsequent assassination meant unrest in my mother’s village in Central Viet Nam. It meant a surge of Viet Cong soldiers there. That year, a South Vietnamese soldier was shot in the stomach and bled slowly onto my mother’s bed. That year, the Viet Cong destroyed her school house, thus ending her formal education in the sixth grade.

8. In the coup’s aftermath, my mother’s family left their village in a forced exile from her childhood home. (The home was later leveled by an American tank.)

9. My mother woke sniffing the air, detected a burning smell. It was American soldiers sleeping in a ditch outside her home. Their scent of unbathed skin and mosquito repellent. They were there to keep her safe from Viet Cong. She was thirteen and beautiful and doing her daily chores. They approached her and asked to cut her hair. They pointed and gestured: her hair, the cut of scissors, their helmets, her hair. My grandmother smelled rape and sent her only child to live with family in the city.
10. Years later, my mother tells the story of a girl in a nearby village. She was my mother’s age. An American soldier raped her in a dried out gully. She was airlifted to a field hospital. She did not die but lived her life as the one who had been raped, and for the rest of her life, she could not marry.

11. Writing, to me, is an act of anti-erasure. It reaches for the unsayable. Anti-erasure is when the silenced or marginalized object speaks. When it asks a reader to listen to what it has to say. And what it says is the evidence.
Appendix I

Full text of “america” by Fatimah Asghar, originally published in *Split This Rock*.

america

am I not your baby?
brown & not allowed
my own language?
my teeth pulled
from mouth, tongue
bloated with corn syrup?
america, didn’t you raise me?
bomb the country of my fathers
& then tell me to go back to it?
didn’t you mold the men
who murder children in schools
who spit at my bare arms
& uncovered head?
america, wasn’t it you?
who makes & remakes
me orphan, who burns
my home, watches me rebuild
& burns it down again?
wasn’t it you, who uproots
& mangles the addresses
until there are none
until all I have are my own
hands & even those you’ve
told me not to trust? america
don’t turn your back on me.
am I not your baby?
brown & bred to hate
every inch of my skin?
didn’t you raise me?
didn’t you tell me bootstraps
& then steal my shoes?
didn’t you make there no ‘back’
for me to go back to?
america, am I not your refugee?
who do I call mother, if not you?
Appendix J

Full text of “To the White Men Who Fear Everything” by Fatimah Asghar.

To the White Men Who Fear Everything

& everyone. Including my 11 year old frame
a circle of empty surrounding me & my violin

on the crowded bus the weeks after the towers
fell & then you blamed my skin. It was your feet

& broken glass that followed me around the field
when I showed up too early for soccer practice,

you who reminded me no sidewalk or park
would ever be mine. Anything coming from

a country ending in –stan steamed terror, towelhead,
exotic words I’d never heard, but now all my name but not

now all my resume but not. I know I must scare you,
white men, me with my heavy lidded eyes, loud

laugh & insistence on being here & heard.
Me, with my brown & fly until I die, me with my Islam

& tattoos & my uncle who changed his restaurant
to Afghani food the month after you threw bottles

against his windows & wrote go home terrorists
across all the menus. This is who I come from.

A man who said let them hate us & painted turbaned
men dragging a dying goat across the walls.

This is where I come from. These provinces
you can’t name, the wars you keep starting

& can’t win. Look at my people live. Look at my
people love. Look at how you drone our cities

& murder our children & we still find floor to dance.
Look how many heavens we have, just for us.
The world is full of people like me you want
to dissect, you want a name for everything

or else it’s free & not yours. Freedom outside
of whiteness is terror, food outside of whiteness

is spectacle, land outside of whiteness doesn’t
exist. White men, I know I make you afraid.

Me, with my colored rice, me with my name
you can’t pronounce, me without any land

& no intention to steal or pay you for a home
you can snatch up. Or burn down. Or hold a mirror
to & try to convince me I want more.
Appendix K

Full text of “If They Should Come for Us” by Fatimah Asghar, originally published in Poetry Magazine.

If They Should Come for Us

these are my people & I find
them on the street & shadow
through any wild all wild
my people my people
a dance of strangers in my blood
the old woman’s sari dissolving to wind
bindi a new moon on her forehead
I claim her my kin & sew
the star of her to my breast
the toddler dangling from stroller
hair a fountain of dandelion seed
at the bakery I claim them too
the sikh uncle at the airport
who apologizes for the pat
down the muslim man who abandons
his car at the traffic light drops
to his knees at the call of the azan
& the muslim man who sips
good whiskey at the start of maghrib
the lone khala at the park
pairing her kurta with crocs
my people my people I can’t be lost
when I see you my compass
is brown & gold & blood
my compass a muslim teenager
snapback & high-tops gracing
the subway platform
mashallah I claim them all
my country is made
in my people’s image
if they come for you they
come for me too in the dead
of winter a flock of
aunties step out on the sand
their dupattas turn to ocean
a colony of uncles grind their palms
& a thousand jasmines bell the air
my people I follow you like constellations
we hear the glass smashing the street
& the nights opening their dark
our names this country’s wood
for the fire my people my people
the long years we’ve survived the long
years yet to come I see you map
my sky the light your lantern long
ahead & I follow I follow