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**Encountering Windows and Mirrors in the Diaspora**

**Using Young Adult literature to explore the stories and counterstories of  
Asian American and British ESEA young people**

By Natalie Naihuei Hsieh

B.S., M.Ed., PGCert

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

School of Education

College of Social Sciences

University of Glasgow

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## Abstract

Historically, stories have often been used to marginalize and misrepresent the Other and to disseminate stereotypes in society (Said, 2003; Adichie, 2009; Ramdarshan Bold, 2019a). This is particularly harmful for BIPOC young people who rarely see themselves represented in stories, as the lack of representation creates a version of reality which excludes them entirely (Saha, 2021). Thus, it is crucial for stories to include both ‘windows’ and ‘mirrors’ which can truthfully capture the complexity and diversity of the world in which we live (Bishop, 1990). Young Adult literature can provide some of these necessary ‘windows’ and ‘mirrors,’ especially for young people who are seeking stories that are relevant, relatable, and can provide counterstories that work against the deficit messages of society (Alsup, 2003; Cart, 2008; Hughes-Hassell, 2013; Ramdarshan Bold and Phillips, 2019).

However, the field of YA is still lacking when it comes to nuanced representation, especially regarding Asian American and British ESEA (East and Southeast Asian) stories. British ESEA stories are particularly invisible, even when compared to Asian American stories, with British Chinese stories making up only 0.3% of children’s fiction in 2020 and 2021 (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, 2021, 2022). This is partly due to the historical differences between Asian American and British ESEA communities, as the Asian American community has a far longer tradition of community-building, political organising, and pan-ethnic coalitions (Benton and Gomez, 2008; Lee, 2015). The impact of these historical divergences can not only be seen in YA but also in Asian American and British ESEA young people themselves, especially in their perceptions of their own diasporic, hybrid identities and the knowledge (or lack thereof) of their communal histories in the US and the UK.

This thesis sits at the centre of these theoretical threads, pulling them together in the form of an asynchronous, online book club for Asian American and British ESEA young people where they discussed representative YA from the US and the UK. Several insights were generated over the course of the book club, as participants wrestled with difficult topics such as intergenerational and intercultural family relationships, feelings of ‘identity flux,’ ESEA stereotypes, the insidious ‘single story,’ and whether it is possible to create a better world. There were also striking differences between the US and the UK participants that became clear, which I attempted to contextualise within the disparate histories of each community. In the end, several important findings emerged from this study regarding the importance of representation (and the harm of misrepresentation) across the diaspora, as well as the power of YA to create a space for young people to explore and understand their identities and the identities of others.

It is crucial to note that this book club did not reveal any absolute truths about Asian American and British ESEA young people; rather, it only provided a safe space for a multiplicity of opinions, identities, and stories to be honestly discussed and exchanged. Ultimately, this study has highlighted the need for more such spaces for Asian American and British ESEA young people, where they can negotiate their hybrid identities and have the chance to define themselves.

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## **Dedication**

To all my former students, teachers, and colleagues who inspired me to take this next step - may we all continue to fight for better stories and a better world.

## **Author's Declaration**

“I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.”

Printed Name: Natalie Hsieh

Signature:

## **Definitions/Abbreviations**

ESEA - East and Southeast Asian

BIPOC - Black, Indigenous, and Person of Colour

YA - Young Adult literature

# Chapter One: Introduction

The truth about stories is that that's all we are.

King (2003)

Throughout history, people have turned to stories to help explain the world and imbue it with meaning. As these stories are told and re-told over time, they become the theories that shape the world in a process that Erasga (2010) calls “narrative thinking” (p. 23). In this respect, this research project sits at the intersection of many such intertwined narratives about identity, community, and storytelling itself. For example, this study could be framed as a story about representation and the power of literature, specifically Young Adult literature (YA), to hold up ‘mirrors’ for young people who rarely see themselves in stories and offer ‘windows’ into new and different peoples, cultures, and ways of living (Bishop, 1990; Hughes-Hassell, 2013; Thomas, 2019). It could also be presented as a story about the importance of books and book clubs as ‘safe spaces’ for young people to explore their worlds through conversation and discussion with each other (Kornfeld and Prothro, 2005; Falter and Kerkhoff, 2013). This project might even be constructed as a story about the East Asian diaspora and the formation of hybrid identities (Gilroy, 1987; Clifford, 1994; Bhabha, 2004; Hall, 2021b), or a story that attempts to make visible the histories and narratives of Asian American and British ESEA (East and Southeast Asian)<sup>1</sup> communities in the US and the UK (Benton and Gomez, 2008; Lee, 2015). In the end, this study incorporates all these narrative threads to tell its own story about a group of Asian American and British ESEA young people who came together to read and discuss representative YA online, reflecting on what was created in this time spent with one another.

Though this research project spans countries and continents, its inspiration grew from quite a personal place. And so, in the next section I offer three stories of myself as a reader, a teacher, and a researcher, sharing a personal account of how this work has been shaped through my experiences and by each progressive stage of my own shifting identities, before proceeding to an overview of the

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<sup>1</sup> Though my research deals primarily with East Asian identities, I will continue to use Asian American and ESEA/British ESEA going forward as this is the terminology currently used by activists, academics, and interest groups in the US and UK.

study. Ultimately, I hope to show how the intersections of context, theory, and my personal experience at each moment in time ultimately came together to form the foundation of an international research study about representation, identity, and YA.

## **As a reader**

I have loved stories for as long as I can remember. Even before I could read, I used to drag stacks of picture books into my bedroom closet and force my long-suffering grandmother to sit on the floor and read them to me. Unbeknownst to me, my Taiwanese grandmother could not read English, so she simply made up a tale based on the illustrations and used Mandarin Chinese to narrate whatever fantastic adventures the characters were going on that day. I could never get enough of her stories, and we would sit on the floor for hours, lost in our own world.

Once I grew older and learned to read, I discovered the joy of having a library card of my own. Trips to and from the public library quickly became an exercise in negotiation with my parents - how many books would I be allowed to bring home? Which books would I be willing to leave behind? I loved fantasy books the most, and I devoured authors like Tamora Pierce, Brian Jacques, Madeleine L'Engle, and C.S. Lewis. These authors and their books left an indelible impression on my imagination. I remember sitting in my bedroom closet (yes, the same one I used to drag my grandmother into), squeezing my eyes shut and reaching out my hands, hoping that I would feel the wintry leaves of a Narnian forest. And yet, even though all I wanted was for a grand adventure to come and sweep me away, there was always a tiny, persistent doubt in the back of my mind: could kids like me have adventures? Kids who spoke in Chinglish<sup>2</sup> at home, who spent their summers (prime adventure season) with distant relatives on a humid island, and who ate decidedly non-adventure-friendly foods like sweet buns filled with red bean paste? Not once, in all the countless stories that I consumed, had I seen a character or family like me and mine.

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<sup>2</sup> Chinese and English



The first time I really saw such a character was in Disney's 1998 animated film *Mulan*. My parents took us to the cinema to see it, which was a rare treat. And it was a treat indeed to finally see someone who looked like me as the centre of her own story, brave and self-sacrificing and *so cool*. But as cool as she was, she was just one character, and it was not enough by the time I entered high school where shows like *One Tree Hill* and *Gossip Girl* reigned supreme. I could never really get into these shows, partly because I hated the petty drama and partly because there were, again, no characters with whom I could identify. I felt an unbridgeable gulf between me and the likes of Serena van der Woodsen, blonde princess of the Upper East Side.

Thomas (2019) calls this the 'imagination gap,' which is what happens when there is such a scarcity of diverse representation that BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and Person of Colour) children cannot even begin to imagine themselves as the main character (or, for children within dominant culture, to make it impossible to imagine a protagonist who *does not* look like them). This is exactly what happened during my senior year when my school counsellor Mrs. Kiang-Spray asked me to participate in NaNoWriMo (National Novel Writing Month), an organisation that challenges budding authors to write 50,000 words in the month of November. I took up the challenge, churning out a story about a white college student who adopts her younger white stepsister. I was so trapped in the imagination gap that I wrote the only Asian character in the supporting role of 'best friend.' Thankfully, I've done a lot of learning and growing since then in a process Thomas (2019) describes as "decolonizing our fantasies and our dreams [and] liberating magic itself" (p.169).

## **As a teacher**

However, the imagination gap does not apply only to me as an individual; society itself has fallen victim to the imagination gap in a way that makes it nearly impossible to have "common dreams" of more inclusive stories (Thomas, 2019, p. 106). This was made clear to me when I was placed as a student intern with the (all-white) English department of an affluent high school. The year was 2013 and *Game of Thrones* fever was at a high, so when Halloween rolled around the English department decided we all had to dress as part of a *Game of Thrones* ensemble. I did not watch the show, and the other teachers told me my options

were slim - there were no Asian characters on the show, so I could only be enslaved-person-turned-interpreter Missandei (played by mixed-heritage actress Nathalie Emmanuel) or a direwolf. None of those veteran teachers considered those options to be problematic, and I did not have the language at the time to express my unease. Ultimately, I had to be the direwolf, a voiceless animal amidst knights, priestesses, and royalty.

The message was clear: someone like me really has no place in a story like that. And this same message is repeated each time there is outcry over decisions that put BIPOC people at the centre of stories - for example, the recent controversy over the casting of Leah Jeffries as a Black Annabeth in the revamp of the *Percy Jackson* series, or Francesca Amewudah-Rivers as a Black Juliet opposite Tom Holland's Romeo on the West End stage (Riordan, 2022; Khomami, 2024). It is a vicious loop - non-inclusive stories foster non-inclusive imaginations, which leads to cries of 'inauthenticity' and 'unrelatability' when we try to write ourselves into new and more complex storylines. Author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie expressed this eloquently when she argued, "The single story creates stereotypes. And the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story" (*The danger of a single story*, 2009).

When I was a secondary school teacher in the US, I saw these 'single stories' play out repeatedly in the classroom. For example, the 6th grade (Year 7) curriculum was organised into four themed units, each with an approved book list; units 2 and 3 were titled *Adventure* and *Challenges and Barriers*. The *Adventure* unit included exciting novels like *Around the World in 80 Days* by Jules Verne, *Peter Pan* by J.M. Barrie, and *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* by C.S. Lewis, all written by white, European men. The creators of the curriculum likely thought very little about assigning these books as required reading, as they are all well-reputed classics that belong to the canon of great Western literature. However, grouping these books in this way unintentionally created a 'single story' about the type of children who can go on adventures - they must be white, European, and relatively privileged. In stark contrast, the *Challenges and Barriers* unit included books like *Roll of Thunder, Hear my Cry* by Mildred D. Taylor, *Esperanza Rising* by Pam Muñoz Ryan, and *Miracle's Boys* by Jacqueline

Woodson. These novels were all written by BIPOC women and focus on the lives of BIPOC children. Again, the curriculum creators probably thought they were increasing the diversity of the curriculum by including these highly acclaimed novels, but grouping these novels created a ‘single story’ that the lives of BIPOC children revolve around challenges, hardships, and deprivation. I could see the impact that these stories had on my students, slowly diminishing their ability to imagine themselves outside of these restrictive narratives, as well as their belief that joyful stories featuring characters like them were not worthy of study in an academic setting.

Tellingly, the books that students chose to read in their own time were very different from the ones they were forced to read for English class. They gravitated towards books that were generally recent publications, and many of them actively sought out books that spoke to the current sociopolitical issues of the day. For example, there was a moment in time where *The Hate U Give* by Angie Stone was being passed all around school; I had two students approach me to ask why we could not analyse this novel instead of *Roll of Thunder, Hear my Cry*, which also dealt with issues of race but was published in 1977. They wanted to discuss the novel and its contemporary themes of police brutality in the safe space of a classroom, especially at a moment where the US seemed poised to tear itself apart along racial lines. I had to inform them that the book was not approved for use in schools due to its ‘graphic’ content, but I found myself thinking that the school district had failed to understand that it was this precise content that the students desperately wanted to make sense of, using the lens of literature as a safe way to share their thoughts.

In yet another example of the disconnect between the curriculum and what students were actually reading, I remember a student approaching me excitedly clutching a copy of *Renegades* by Marissa Meyer, a YA science fiction novel about a group of young superheroes. She asked me if I had read it (I had not) and then enthusiastically said, “The main character is Asian!” She further specified that Nova, the main character, was half-Filipino and half-Italian, a detail which initially surprised, and then thrilled her as half-Filipino herself. She confessed that this was the first time that she had ever seen a ‘mirror’ of a Filipino main character in a story, and she could not wait to tell me about it so that I could

read it too (Bishop, 1990). I was equal parts charmed and horrified by her excitement; it was phenomenal that she had finally encountered a character she could identify with, but why had it taken so long?

These were only two of the many examples that I witnessed of students feeling unheard and unrepresented. Though I was their teacher, I also felt powerless and bound by strict rules about what I could and could not have them read in the classroom. Ultimately, the cumulative effect of these experiences created a growing desire to leave the classroom and pursue research that would work to restore a “balance of stories” in the world and amplify the voices of young people (Bacon, 2000). And now, with authors like Grace Lin, Joanna Ho, Maisie Chan, and Cynthia So slowly adding to this balance, I am hopeful that it might not be such a stretch anymore to think that there might be little Asian American or British ESEA girls out there who know they can be the hero, the adventurer, the love interest, and the main character in their own stories.

## **As an Asian American researcher in the UK**

My initial plans for my research did not involve such a close focus on Asian American and British ESEA identity. However, moving from the US to the UK thrust me into a new culture and forced me to educate myself on a completely unfamiliar history of hybrid Asian networks and communities. As part of this self-education process, I began looking for examples of British ESEA representation in film, TV shows, and movies, only to come up empty again and again. I started to wonder if there were even any examples of British ESEA representation out there, and if not, what might be the impact of this lack on ESEA young people? This gap in representation was what ultimately inspired me to change the direction of my research to focus more closely on British ESEA young people and their identities, creating a project that would investigate the impact of reading representative literature with other ESEA young people. I was also keen to bring Asian Americans into the conversation, as I believed that a comparative approach could generate invaluable insights into the similarities and difference in identity formation between the two groups. Indeed, there were many fruitful insights which I further discuss in Chapter 9.

As I dove into the research, the need for a project such as this one became increasingly clear. The importance of seeing oneself represented has become increasingly well-documented and hard to dispute, especially for children and young adults (Bishop, 1990; Hughes-Hassell, 2013; Boyd, Causey and Galda, 2015; Chetty, 2016; Ramdarshan Bold, 2019a; Ramdarshan Bold and Phillips, 2019; Thomas, 2019, 2022). But despite the strides being made in acknowledging the importance of representation, there is still a gap in the knowledge regarding Asian American and British ESEA young adults and the representation and recognition of their hybrid identities in YA. Furthermore, there is a lack of research regarding how these young adults respond to representative YA as “cultural insiders,” particularly when the label ‘Asian’ covers a multitude of nationalities, ethnicities, cultures, and diasporas (Rodríguez and Kim, 2018, p. 26). For example, in the US the term ‘Asian’ is usually understood to reference East Asians, resulting in “the omission of Southeast and South Asian Americans and their unique histories and experiences” (Iftikar and Museus, 2018; Rodríguez, 2020b, p. 158). The opposite is true in the UK, where ‘Asian’ is taken to mean South Asian communities, relegating the East and Southeast Asian communities to “an anonymous part of British culture” (Lee, 2022, p. 3). Thus, a study on Asian American and British ESEA YA and the hybrid experiences of these young people seemed long overdue.

The UK context also introduced me to the important concepts of ‘hybridity’ and ‘diaspora,’ especially after reading scholars such as Gilroy (1987), Bhabha (2004), and Hall (2021), whose work I discuss in-depth in Chapter 4. I had not encountered these terms in my past life as a teacher, and they helped me to clarify some of my own personal feelings about growing up as a Taiwanese American firmly in the “‘beyond’ of culture [and inhabiting] an intervening space” (Bhabha, 2013, p. 108). These scholars also made me aware of the lack of conversation regarding hybrid British ESEA identities, particularly in academic spaces. In contrast to US universities, which often include Departments of Ethnic Studies that feature courses on hybrid American identities and experiences (including Asian American), UK institutions still only have academic departments and courses of study about Asia and its peoples and histories outside of the UK. Indeed, SOAS University in London still includes the term ‘Oriental’ in its name - The School of Oriental and African Studies - which is an offensive and outdated

label in the US. Very little consideration is given to the fact that there are ESEAS *within* the UK that might identify with multiple cultures, and there is shockingly little information about the history of the various ESEA communities in the UK (which I discuss in Chapter 3). This gap in academia, coupled with the gap in popular representation, cemented the direction and purpose of my research.

## Overview of the Research Structure

As I explain in Chapter 5, I decided to make a comparative framework the crux of the study, with the intention of bringing together Asian American and British ESEA young people in a book club to generate conversation about East Asian representation found in YA. My hope was that the books would also be a vehicle for the participants to share parts of their own lives and identities with one another, providing ‘windows’ and ‘mirrors’ into the wide range of Asian American and British ESEA experiences (Bishop, 1990). These were the guiding research questions:

1. How do Asian American and British ESEA young people respond to East Asian representation in a YA-focused book club?
2. How can YA help Asian American and British ESEA young people to interrogate and understand their own identities, as well as the identities of other Asian American/British ESEA young people?
3. How have the divergences in Asian American and British ESEA community development shaped the identities of young people in these communities?

After an incredible amount of initial difficulty with finding British ESEA participants, which I outline in Chapter 5, I finally began the project with three Asian American participants and four British ESEA participants, all aged 17-18 and recruited from across the US and UK. They were asked to read two books in sections - *If You Still Recognise Me* by Cynthia So (UK author) and *The Silence that Binds Us* by Joanna Ho (US author) - and to use the online note-making tool Padlet to asynchronously share their thoughts, reflections, and questions with the other participants. I also intended to use Zoom to facilitate two synchronous

discussion sessions, but I discovered that the multiple time zones made such synchronous discussion essentially impossible and so I continued to use Padlet, albeit with some modifications. Initially, I gave very little guidance to the participants in terms of discussion questions for the novels, hoping that this would create a participant-led space where they felt free to discuss what struck them as significant. However, this openness only overwhelmed them and necessitated a mid-study restructuring of the book club format. As a result, I truly learned the importance of staying flexible and allowing oneself to engage with the research process, adjusting as needed in what Given (2008) calls “emergent” research design. This reflexivity during the project echoed the slow and reflective process of finalising the initial direction of my research and underscored the importance and the necessity of creative adaptivity and flexibility in research, particularly when working with young people who have many demands on their time.

## **Overview of the Thesis**

Although I have already made several references to the contents of certain upcoming chapters, I will now give a more specific summary of each chapter as a ‘roadmap’ of the thesis to come:

### **Chapter Two: Stories, Counterstories, and Young Adult Literature**

This chapter is the first of three separate literature reviews. In it, I establish how stories have often been used as historical tools of oppression, with the intent of Othering and marginalising those without the power to speak for themselves. I then introduce the concept of ‘counterstories,’ which is a term taken from Critical Race Theory and emphasises the power of unearthing and telling the stories that have been erased and silenced throughout history. Finally, I situate the field of Young Adult literature within this tradition of harmful v. life-giving stories, analysing its history and impact in both the US and the UK and arguing for the benefits of reading YA for young people. I end with a brief analysis of Asian American and British ESEA representation in YA.

### **Chapter Three: Asian American and British ESEA Diasporic Communities in the United States and the United Kingdom**

Next, this literature review seeks to make visible the histories of different East Asian groups in the US and the UK to demonstrate the non-monolithic nature of the diaspora and to provide important context for some of the similarities and differences between participants that emerged from the study. The chapter begins with the East Asian diaspora in the US, starting from the 1850s and recounting significant events for different Asian American communities. When the overview reaches the present day, I then present the stereotypes common to Asian Americans, analysing how they developed throughout history. Next, I turn my attention to the East Asian diaspora in the UK, focusing on the British Chinese as information about other East Asian groups is severely lacking. Beginning from the 1840s and ending in the present day, I trace the development of British Chinese communities and end with a similar section on the stereotypes unique to this community.

### **Chapter Four: Diaspora and Hybridity**

This final literature review defines the key concepts of ‘diaspora’ and ‘hybridity’ that underpin much of the theoretical framework of this study. I begin by teasing out the shifting definitions of ‘diaspora,’ starting from a heavy emphasis on the ‘homeland’ to more postcolonial characterisations of the diaspora as defined by change and difference. I then connect these concepts of ‘diaspora’ to the related concept of ‘hybridity,’ emphasising how the negotiations and ever-changing nature of identity work to disrupt fixed stereotypes. Lastly, I analyse how this very flexibility threatens insular notions of nation and citizenship.

### **Chapter Five: Methodology**

This chapter is separated into two parts. In the first part, I describe the research design for this project in detail, reiterating the research context and justifying the choices I made regarding the age group, book selection, asynchronous usage of Padlet, and relatively open-ended discussion. In the second part, I reflect on



how the actual research study quickly diverged from my intended plan, necessitating an adjustment between the first and second novels. This second section details and justifies the changes to the original book club format, as well as describing how participants responded to these changes. I end this chapter with a reflection on my experience facilitating this asynchronous book club, offering some hindsight speculation into why it did not all go to plan.

### **Chapter Six: Introduction to the Participants**

This is the first chapter to present participant responses, as I describe their answers to my four introductory questions regarding their perceptions of representation, identity, and community. As I analyse their responses to each question, a broad picture begins to emerge of the participants as individuals, as well as some initial differences along US/UK lines.

### **Chapter Seven: *If You Still Recognise Me***

In this chapter, I first briefly present the main topics of conversation that emerged from participant responses in the first novel discussion for *If You Still Recognise Me*. I then conduct an in-depth analysis of the data produced from these participants conversations, using a combination of inductive and deductive coding to identify the important themes and sub-themes emerged from the discussion data, situating them within the literature.

### **Chapter Eight: *The Silence that Binds Us***

The structure of this chapter imitates the one previous, as I briefly present the participant discussion topics for *The Silence that Binds Us* and then end with an in-depth analysis of the themes and sub-themes.

### **Chapter Nine: UK and US Perspectives**

After the analysis of participant responses and emergent themes, this chapter focuses on a comparison between the responses of US and UK participants, highlighting moments in the discussion where there were clear divergences along US/UK lines. I then contextualise these differences by offering several possible

reasons for the differences in responses, beginning with a macro-level analysis of historical differences between Asian Americans and British ESEAs and ending with a micro-level exploration of how these contexts might have shaped the participants themselves. Within this analysis, I also revisit some of their introductory statements, using their own words to illuminate some of the differences.

## **Chapter Ten: Conclusion**

Finally, this last chapter ties together the disparate threads of the study as I revisit the research questions and present my findings. I also identify the key contributions of this research project to existing knowledge, as well as some of its limitations and the key areas that could form the basis for future studies into these fields. I conclude with my hopes that this research never lost sight of its very personal beginnings, and that participants felt as encouraged and uplifted by the discussions as I did.

As the brief overview demonstrates, this study incorporates pieces from various disciplines (education, YA, postcolonialism, and sociology, to name a few), acknowledging their various influences on the direction of the research. In the next few chapters, I will present a review of this literature to create a picture of the interlinking contexts in which this study is situated.

## Chapter Two: Stories, Counterstories, and Young Adult Literature

### Literature Review

In this chapter, I draw out the connections between stories, counterstories, and the field of YA. First, I analyse the connection between power and stories throughout history, focusing on how marginalised groups have often found themselves rendered voiceless by those in power who (re)write their histories. Next, I introduce the concept of counterstories, a practice rooted in elevating the stories of the underrepresented and silenced, and its own relationship with power and dominant society. And finally, I situate the field of YA within this tradition of stories and counterstories, examining how YA has sometimes contributed to Othering but also how it can be a powerful tool towards rectifying the balance of stories in the world. I also include a brief overview of YA which features ESEA stories and characters, mapping out the state of the field in both the US and the UK.

### Why Do Stories Matter?

In her now well-known 2009 TED Talk, *The Danger of a Single Story*, author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie states, “Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity” (*The danger of a single story*, 2009).

History itself attests to the truth of Adichie’s words. Since prehistoric times, stories are how humans have made sense of the world; the sheer volume of mythologies and legends produced by civilizations over the years is a testament to how societies have turned, again and again, to stories to explain the unknowable (Bierlein, 1999; Skerrett, 2009; Erasga, 2010; Brockman, 2013; Cajete, 2017). And perhaps even more significantly than explanations, stories also “act to invest our lives - our existence - with meaning” (Bierlein, 1999, p. 6). This meaning comes from the power that stories hold to assure us of our place in the universe and to create a picture of who we are within our overlapping social contexts. Thomas (2019) describes this as a “myth-making

process... [which] forms metanarratives that shape society, culture, and ultimately, the imagination” (p. 18). Thus, it can be concluded that regardless of truth or completeness, stories have the power to produce social realities that ripple through time and space.

These stories reflect the values of the peoples and communities that create them. And most crucially, they do not emerge out of thin air. They are, both unintentionally and maliciously, crafted and repeated by people and societies until they become ‘true,’ in a process visible not only on a personal level, but at the national level as well. For example, Bierlein (1999) writes that “nationality and nationhood are complex matrices of belief, symbols, ‘magic’ words, that provide us individually and collectively with identity, the meaning of our nation, and the mythic dimensions of its past that direct our future” (p. 2). And ultimately, these matrices are codified, handed down, and disseminated by constructing stories about who we are and what we value as a collective group.

### **Stories and power**

One notable example of this power is Anderson’s (2006) argument that the proliferation of written texts and printing presses directly contributed to the rise of nationalism and national identity. Anderson claims that a nation is “a community imagined through language” - for example, a national anthem creates a sense of striving together in unison, and written histories create a fixed connection to the past (p. 146). However, the dark side of this “imagined community” is that often, a community needs something outside of itself to which it is opposed; this intensifies the feelings of inclusion and belonging among the community at the cost of exclusion against everyone else (p. 46). For example, Anderson argues that racism can be a side-effect of these community-oriented texts, some of which include racist epithets and conjure up a picture of “eternal contaminations” to describe who is not welcome in the community (p. 149).

Saha (2021) also points out how this narrative power is at work today through the media, arguing that, for better or worse, the representation of minorities in the media inevitably shapes society’s perception of minority ethnic groups and communities. He writes, “Rather than media as merely misrepresenting or

distorting the realities of minorities, the representation of race is better understood as a form of power/knowledge that constitutes *what we understand as real*" (p. 21, my emphasis). In other words, the stories created and disseminated by the media construct a representation of minority and diasporic groups that then becomes dominant in society when widely believed and accepted. Anderson and Saha's examples of the double-edged nature of stories emphasize the complex relationship between storytelling and power, especially when the subjects of the stories are given no voice within the narrative. Within the postcolonial context, this imbalance of power often leads to the Othering of those who are incomprehensible to the people who write the narrative, thus leading to stereotypes.

Dyer (1999) argues that stereotypes, in a sense, are necessary for a functioning society, as they allow for societies to "make sense of themselves, and hence actually make and reproduce themselves" (p. 2). However, he also warns that this does not mean stereotypes are unproblematic; society's very need to 'make sense' of itself often creates "a belief in the absoluteness and certainty of any particular order [and] a refusal to recognize its limitations and partiality," leading to the inability to adapt or acknowledge peoples, cultures, and traditions that fall outside of the norm (p. 2). Furthermore, the ability to decide what is the 'norm' is dictated by those who hold the power in society. It is as Kawai (2005) argues: "People are not equal in deciding boundaries; a certain dominant group has more power to do so, and the meaning (stereotype) that the group creates tends to win consensus" (p. 118). The stereotypes created through this imbalance of power become accepted as 'real,' erasing other perspectives that do not fit with the dominant narrative of the Other. This echoes Adichie's explanation of the "single story," which is when a single narrative about a group of people takes precedence over all other accounts. She states, "The single story creates stereotypes. And the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story" (*The danger of a single story*, 2009).

Hall (2013) reiterates Adichie's assertion, stating even more strongly:

Stereotypes get *hold* of the few 'simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized' characteristics of a person, *reduce* everything about the

person to those traits, *exaggerate* and *simplify* them... Stereotyping reduces, essentializes, naturalizes, and fixes 'difference.' (Hall, Evans and Nixon, 2013, p. 247)

For Hall, stereotypes do indeed create a 'single' story, but they also "reduce," "exaggerate," and "simplify" this story into a flattened, stilted version of reality. Not only are stereotypes incomplete, as Adichie argues, but the practice of stereotyping is used strategically to "[divide] the normal and the acceptable from the abnormal and the unacceptable... [and] then [*exclude*] or [*expel*] everything which does not fit, which is different" (p. 247). The result is an Othering and stigmatising of those who are marked as 'different,' permanently located on the outside of society and its subjective ordering.

### **'Orientalism'**

This Othering is exemplified in Said's (2003) groundbreaking work *Orientalism*, where he establishes how scholars and academics over the years have created a binary concept of the Occident and the Orient as 'us' and 'them.' He writes, "Orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, 'us') and the strange (the Orient, the East, 'them')" (p. 43). Because the idea of the 'Orient' is constructed in opposition to the 'West,' a false sense is created that the two are irreconcilably opposed to each other. The 'Orient' becomes something that is unknowable and Other, which produces (and reproduces) the idea that there is a clearly defined break between us and them. Said is clear that this division is not predicated on any truth about the 'Oriental,' but is rather "a *willed* human work" created by academics and scholars (p. 15, my emphasis). Significantly, this demonstrates how these stories were fabricated to serve a political purpose, severely problematising the conclusions drawn about the subjects of these works.

Stories played a huge part in creating this willed work: there were countless travelogues, histories, mythologies, and imagined geographies created by so-called Oriental experts that exoticized and ultimately claimed to speak authoritatively for all the East. Moreover, this sense of opposition and Otherness is undeniably grounded on the dominating nature of power relations between the

West and the East, with Europe holding the upper hand. Thus, the West is able to not only paint a picture of the Orient as the Other, but also as “irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, [and] ‘different’” in comparison with the “normal” nature of Europe (Said, 2003, p. 40). Said’s explanation of Orientalism exemplifies Hall’s (2013) assertion that such an imbalance of power always results in stereotypes that create a “symbolic frontier between the ‘normal’ and the ‘deviant,’ the ‘normal’ and the ‘pathological’, the ‘acceptable’ and the ‘unacceptable’, what ‘belongs’ and what does not or is ‘Other’, between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’, Us and Them” (p. 248). These delineations, though arbitrarily constructed, allow the West to view themselves as fundamentally different from and better than the ‘Orientals’ who are forever fixed in opposition to everything valued by the West.

### **Adventure, fantasy, and science fiction**

Tuhiwai Smith (2021) argues that this has happened with Indigenous peoples all over the world as well, specifically through the genre of “adventure” writing:

One particular genre of travellers’ tales relates to the ‘adventures’ experienced in the new world, in Indian country, or Maoriland, or some other similarly named territory. These adventures were recounted with some relish; they told stories of survival under adversity and recorded eye witness accounts of fabulous, horrible, secret, never-seen-before-by-a-European ceremonies, rituals or events. (Tuhiwai Smith, 2021, p. 91)

When these adventurers returned to Europe with their stories, their personal adventures and opinions soon became a basis for scholarly discussion, with their limited first-hand experience turning them into an authority on Indigenous peoples and cultures. Furthermore, to justify future exploitation and colonisation, they not only portrayed their subjects as barbaric but also equated their Otherness with an evil that ‘civilized’ European nations must subjugate (Xie, 2000).

A strong underlying message within these adventure stories is that the Others at the centre of the narrative are somehow more primitive and uncivilized than European society, which is the standard. They are portrayed as savages and foreigners with incomprehensible (and often grotesque) traditions. And, as

Fabian explains in his text *Time and the Other* (2014), this type of narrative reveals the unconscious Western attitude that the Other somehow does not exist in the same modern time as they do. Degerando (1969) describes this attitude, writing, “The philosophical traveler, sailing to the ends of the earth, is in fact travelling in time; he is exploring the past; every step he makes is the passage of an age” (cited in Fabian, 2014, p. 7). This phenomenon, which Fabian names the “denial of coevalness,” serves to intensify the distance between ‘us’ and ‘them’ to an impassable degree (p. 31).

Additionally, Tuhiwai Smith (2021) brings up the problem of imperfect translation and the limitations of language in these texts. For example, she argues that Western languages such as English and French have gendered hierarchies fixed within them, and so it is “impossible to translate or interpret [Indigenous] societies...without making gendered distinctions” (p. 53). This has very real consequences for Indigenous women, as they become Othered in ways that strip them of agency and objectify them. One pointed illustration of this is how Māori women chieftains were not recognised under colonial rule because in the English language, only men can be chiefs.

Beyond adventure stories and travelogues, which are presumably rooted in history and realism, Thomas (2019) contends that this Othering also occurs in the genres of fantasy and science fiction. Even though these stories supposedly take place in fantastical worlds separate from our reality, Thomas argues that echoes of real-world racism and Othering are present not only in the scarcity of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour) characters, but in the dissonance BIPOC readers feel when they realise “that the characters [they] are rooting for are not positioned like [them] in the real world, and the characters that are positioned like [them] are not the team to root for” (p. 19). Thomas describes this devastating realisation, writing:

The implicit message that readers, hearers, and viewers of color receive as they read these texts is that *we are the villains. We are the horde. We are the enemies. We are the monster...* After all, in fairy tales, it was *you* who terrorized the hapless villagers, who kidnapped the fair princess, who dared wage war against the dashing hero. You are the jealous darker sister who wishes to steal the fair maiden’s pedestal for yourself. (Thomas, 2019, p. 24)



Tragically, these stories inevitably end in the defeat of these Othered characters, sending a clear message about who is allowed to be a hero, both in fiction and in real life.

To further prove this analysis, Thomas points to the uproar often caused by putting BIPOC characters in the main character role in fantasy or science fiction stories, upending the unspoken agreement that only white people should be in the spotlight. Two recent examples of this outrage include the criticism of African American singer/actress Halle Bailey when she was cast as Ariel in the live-action adaptation of *The Little Mermaid*, and the brutal backlash against Vietnamese American actress Kelly Marie Tran for playing the first Asian character in the entire *Star Wars* universe (Chiu, 2019). It seems clear that the societal expectations for fantasy and science fiction stories are so deeply ingrained within us that they “[demand] the positioning of the Dark Other as an antagonist” (Thomas, 2019, p. 28). Tran herself put it powerfully in an op-ed written for *The New York Times*, writing, “The same society that taught some people they were heroes, saviors, inheritors of the Manifest Destiny ideal, taught me I existed only in the background of their stories, doing their nails, diagnosing their illnesses, supporting their love interests...” (Tran, 2018). Ultimately, these examples demonstrate that Othering has historically occurred in all genres of storytelling, as those with more power (typically white men) marginalise communities by silencing them and twisting their stories.

## **Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding Glass Doors**

It is clear that stories, both in their content and the way they are told, play a crucial role in shaping how we think about ourselves and relate to others; this is especially true for those we perceive as different from us. Thus, literature must strive to represent the world in all its diversity to paint a truthful and inclusive picture of society. Bishop (1990) uses the metaphor of ‘windows’ and ‘mirrors’ to expand on this point, further arguing for the necessity of representative literature, particularly for children and young people. She writes:

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever

world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. (Bishop, 1990, p. 1)

Expounding on the transformative potential of literature, Bishop first praises books for their ability to let readers peer into unfamiliar ‘windows’ of experience. For minority readers, this is nothing special, as the unrepresented are always seeing ‘windows’ in stories that do not feature their experiences; consequently, the concept of ‘windows’ is especially important for readers that are a part of the majority culture. For those who are used to always seeing themselves in the books they read, ‘windows’ are necessary to help them realise that there are so many cultures, communities, and peoples unlike themselves. And for unrepresented readers, Bishop emphasises the necessity of having books that can act as ‘mirrors’ that reflect their own “lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience,” validating and affirming their identities and larger communities (p. 1). Consequently, stories and literature must portray the full spectrum of human experience; it is crucial for all readers, both represented and unrepresented, to have both ‘windows’ and ‘mirrors’ in the stories that they read. For this study, Bishop’s metaphor of books as ‘sliding glass doors’ was slightly less relevant and was not the focus of the book club, as I specifically framed parts of the study for participants as an exercise in identifying ‘windows’ and ‘mirrors’ in the texts (see Chapter Five for more details).

## **Reclaiming the Narrative**

Scholars, teachers, and activists have always been at the forefront of movements calling for a balance of ‘windows’ and ‘mirrors.’ One of the most important of these movements is Critical Race Theory (CRT), which emerged in 1970s America as a continuation of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. One of the founders, Richard Delgado, broadly described the movement as “a collection of activists and scholars engaged in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power” (Stefancic and Delgado, 2017, p. 3). More specifically, there are four main tenets of CRT: the ‘normal’ nature of racism, the process of material determinism (i.e. racism advances the interest of

those in power), the social construction of race, and the importance of BIPOC voices (Stefancic and Delgado, 2017). Though all these strands are essential in the fight to elevate marginalised people and communities, the fourth tenet regarding the significance of BIPOC voices is the most concerned with the problem of unequal ‘windows’ and ‘mirrors,’ leading to the concept of counterstorytelling.

### **What is counterstorytelling?**

Put simply, counterstorytelling is the practice of elevating the stories and voices that have historically been silenced (Delgado, 1989; Solórzano and Yosso, 2002; Stefancic and Delgado, 2017; Iftikar and Museus, 2018; Martinez, 2020). These stories, drawn from the lived experiences of marginalised peoples and communities, hold incredible emancipatory power. For example, the telling of these stories can speak against the official narratives and systems that “create and sustain ‘otherness’ and maintain marginality,” ascribing dignity and meaning to the lives that are usually disregarded and othered (Mutua, 2008, p. 2). Thus, these stories take on a life larger than themselves, “[strengthening] traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance” (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002, p. 32). Counterstorytelling can also provide a shared language for talking about discriminatory experiences, empowering people with the knowledge that they are not alone in their experiences of prejudice or bias. As Stefancic and Delgado (2017) posit, “Once named, it can be combated” (p. 51).

Researchers argue that counterstorytelling can be a powerful method to centre the experiences of underrepresented groups, highlighting the power of multicultural literature, written records, and creative practices such as zine-making to enable individuals in speaking or writing back against harmful stereotypes and assumptions (Hughes-Hassell, 2013; Thomas and Stornaiuolo, 2016; Hernandez, Torres and Glenn, 2020; Rodríguez, 2020b; Soriaga Veloso, 2020). Additionally, scholars posit that counterstorytelling can also function as a methodology to combat majoritarian stories that silence the voices of underrepresented groups, focusing instead on research rooted in these experiences (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002; Iftikar and Museus, 2018; Martinez, 2020). Solórzano and Yosso (2002) describe the importance of such a counterstorytelling methodology, writing, “If methodologies have been used to

silence and marginalize people of color, then methodologies can also give voice and turn the margins into places of transformative resistance” (p. 37).

Ultimately, counterstorytelling as both method and methodology can empower minority persons to tell their own stories and create their own parameters for transformative research on and in their own communities.

### **(Counter)stories and power**

The beginning of this chapter discussed the power of stories, focusing on the negative ramifications throughout history of people with power writing the stories of the Other. Consequently, counterstories can be powerful tools to combat the historical Othering of minority groups through biased stories and literature. As Delgado (1989) eloquently argues:

Stories humanize us. They emphasize our differences in ways that can ultimately bring us closer together. They allow us to see how the world looks from behind someone else's spectacles. They challenge us to wipe off our own lenses and ask, "Could I have been overlooking something all along?" (Delgado, 1989, p. 2440)

Delgado contends that stories can be a powerful antidote to the rampant Othering of marginalised communities, as stories can break through barriers to foster empathy and understanding. This is emphasised by Smith (2004), who writes, “The attempts of the dominant culture to close and patrol its hegemonic account are threatened by *the return of minority stories and histories*, and by strategies of appropriation and revaluation” (p. 252, my emphasis). The war-like language employed by Smith echoes and upends the rhetoric of attack and invasion often used to describe minority groups and immigrants, with one famous example being Enoch Powell’s “Rivers of Blood” speech where he railed against immigration and warned of dire consequences for the UK - a direct foreshadowing of the similar anti-immigrant rhetoric surrounding Brexit (Zgonjanin, 2022; Sandbrook, 2023). Consequently, Smith’s (2004) co-opting of this language points to the power of counterstories to forcefully threaten and disrupt harmful and exclusionary narratives.

Thus, in a mirror reflection of Anderson's (2006) argument that stories created a unified national identity, Bhabha argues that stories may now serve the opposite, disruptive, function:

Where, once, the transmission of national traditions was the major theme of a world literature, perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees - these border and frontier conditions - may be the terrains of world literature. The centre of such a study would neither be the 'sovereignty' of national cultures, nor the universalism of human culture, but a focus on those 'freak social and cultural displacements'... (Bhabha, 2004, p. 17)

In direct contrast to the previously mentioned examples of literature that were (and are) written about the Other, claiming to be authoritative and comprehensive accounts, Bhabha draws attention to the writers creating from the places of "freak social and cultural displacements" that shape their lives. These lived experiences of displacement are what imbue these writers with the authority to tell their stories and histories, reclaiming them from omission and stereotypes. And in the tradition of counterstorytelling, these stories are not created only as a reaction to the dominant narrative; rather, they seek to "reposition both the dominant and the marginalized on the stage of cultural discourse, and to challenge static borders of national and cultural identity" (Smith, 2004, p. 253). This crucial distinction demonstrates that counterstories are created for many reasons and need not be burdened with the responsibility of always responding to existing stories of Otherness.

Brah (1996) adds to Bhabha's case for displacement as the new centre of world literature, arguing that the many lived experiences of minority peoples and groups can build on top of each other to create a one larger story. She posits that identity and community are formed "within the crucible of the materiality of everyday life; in the everyday stories we tell ourselves individually and collectively" (p. 183). It is this daily process of storytelling that forms the lived narratives and counterstories of resistance. Author Salman Rushdie echoed this sentiment in a speech at the *PEN America Emergency World Voices Congress of Writers*, commenting on the current environment of racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia: "Above all we must understand that stories are at

the heart of what's happening... So we must work to overturn the false narratives of tyrants, populists, and fools by telling better stories than they do, stories in which people want to live" (Rushdie, 2022). This call for better stories speaks again to Bishop's (1990) 'windows' and 'mirrors' in literature, emphasising how counterstories can be both a powerful tool to help the marginalised reclaim their voices.

## **Enter: Young Adult Literature**

Let us return for a moment to the quote from author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie which opened this chapter: "Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity" (*The danger of a single story*, 2009). This statement encapsulates the duality of storytelling/counterstorytelling, underscoring the immense power stories possess to both harm and heal. A responsible and reconstructive use of this power is especially important when it comes to stories for children and young people, as their identities are especially vulnerable to being shaped by the narratives and media they consume. But where can one find multicultural, diverse, engaging, well-written, and complex counterstories for young people? The field of young adult literature (YA), which Crowe (2002) broadly defines as "novels and nonfiction written specifically for teenagers," seems poised to answer this question (p. 114). Though YA is traditionally not considered a part of the literary 'canon,' there is now an increasing body of research regarding YA's literary value, its counterstorytelling potential, and its championing of social justice issues.

### **A brief history of YA in the US**

Pinpointing the beginning of Young Adult literature is a somewhat contentious endeavour; books aimed at young adults were being published as early as the 1930s and 40s in the US, as the emergence of a strong youth culture created a profitable new market for publishing houses (Cart, 2001, 2022; Coats, 2018). Officially, scholars might point to the formation of the Children's Literature Association (ChLA) in 1972 and the Adolescent Literature Assembly of NCTE (ALAN) in 1973 as the first organisations to recognise and champion YA (George,

2004; Malo-Juvera and Hill, 2020; Cart, 2022). And crucially, the creation of the new National Book Award category of “Young People’s Literature” in 1996 and the inaugural 1999 Michael L. Printz Award for excellence in YA solidified the status of YA as a reputable field of literature (Cart, 2001, 2022).

Historically, YA does not have a great track record of inclusion. According to Cart (2022), issues of race were nearly non-existent in American children’s and YA literature until the late 1960s, leading to Nancy Larrick’s scathing 1965 article “The All-White World of Children’s Books.” Analysing the 5,206 children’s books published in the US between 1962 and 1964, Larrick found that only 349 books (a depressing 6.7%) included any African American figures. Even worse, “only four-fifths of one percent” of these books were stories about the *current* African American experience (Larrick, 1965, p. 64). Indeed, it took another ten years for an African American author, Virginia Hamilton, to win the Newbery Medal in 1975 for her novel *M. C. Higgins, The Great*, and it was not until the 1970s and 80s that Asian American and Latinx authors began to be widely published and read (Cart, 2022).

In the 1990s, YA began to finally recognise the importance of representative literature, and the 1999 inaugural Printz Award was given to Walter Dean Myers for his young adult novel *Monster*, about an African American teenager on trial for murder. The shortlisted books that year were also notable, as they included *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson, a first-person narrative from a rape survivor, and *Hard Love* by Ellen Wittlinger, which featured LGBTQIA+ characters and themes (Cart, 2022; *Michael L. Printz Winners and Honor Books*, 2024). Finally, the most recent Cooperative Children’s Book Center study on racial and ethnic diversity in children’s books demonstrated that in 2023, books *by* BIPOC authors made up 47.78% of 3,203 titles and books *about* BIPOC people made up 40.06% (Cooperative Children’s Book Center, School of Education, 2024). These statistics reflect both the wonderful progress made but also the work still to be done.

### **A brief history of YA in the UK**

Compared to the US, the UK was slower to recognise the YA field; while the US established the National Book Award for “Young People’s Literature” in 1996, the first prize focused on YA from British or Irish authors, the YA Book Prize, was

only founded in 2014 (Young Adult Book Awards, 2023). Initially, most YA titles in the UK were imported from the US and represented the classic white American ‘coming-of-age’ story (Pearson, 2013; Sands-O’Connor, 2022). However, as the UK began to publish its own books for young people, class and the legacy of colonialism became two defining characteristics of early British children’s books (Chetty and Sands-O’Connor, 2018; Sands-O’Connor, 2022). As a result, the protagonists of these books were consistently white and middle-class, with a focus on creating a nebulous idea of exclusionary ‘Englishness’ through signifiers such as “tea drinking and country walks” (Knuth, 2012, p. 9). Consequently, between 1960 and 1980, Black and Asian British stories were tremendously underrepresented; if they were in a novel at all, it was invariably as Othered background characters supporting the white British protagonist.

Even today, publishers tend to “favour the ‘ordinary’ vision of nostalgia England [where] a non-white person in Britain was a mistake, an anomaly, or a force of evil” (Chetty and Sands-O’Connor, 2018, p. 15). Consequently, BIPOC authors often find themselves confined to writing ‘issue’ books that focus on race, ethnicity, and culture, and which are not marketed as ‘British’ fiction (Ramdarshan Bold, 2019a, 2024). But despite the many oppositional forces to diversifying YA, there are many authors and publishers fighting today for more inclusive stories. The latest “Reflecting Realities” survey shows that 30% of the 1,059 children’s books published in 2022 featured BIPOC characters, a significant increase from the mere 4% in 2017 (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, 2023). Again, like in the US, these numbers demonstrate both the encouraging advancements made and the need to continue this work.

Even with these improvements, data shows that YA in the UK is still dominated by “white, cisgendered, female authors” and stories (Ramdarshan Bold, 2018, p. 392). Furthermore, the number of BIPOC authors has actually *decreased* since 2008, with BIPOC men being particularly underrepresented in UK YA at only 1.4% of published titles in 2018 and 2.5% in 2021 (Ramdarshan Bold, 2018, 2022). Clearly, there is still a lot of work to be done to make the field of YA truly representative and inclusive for all readers.



## Moving forward with YA

Despite its checkered history, YA has demonstrated that it can still be a powerful force for inclusion, especially as the field continues to diversify and expand. YA has the potential to be a tremendous resource for young people undergoing the harrowing transition between childhood and adulthood through its literary value, relevance, counterstorytelling potential, and social justice content.

### YA as literature

Though YA is often stereotyped as low culture, superficial, and without substance, there is a growing movement arguing that these stereotypes are baseless and harmful (Cart, 2022). As Cart (2008) argues, “Young adult literature has, since the mid-1990’s, come of age as literature - literature that welcomes artistic innovation, experimentation, and risk-taking” (p. 1). For example, informal studies have shown that undergraduate and graduate students alike cannot confidently distinguish between passages from canonical texts and YA when all distinguishing markers are taken away. When presented with a selection of blind excerpts, students find that “the capacity of each of the texts to draw [them] into the rest of the fiction is equally compelling; the opening lines suggest engrossing possibilities; the flavor is equally stylistically sophisticated” (Soter and Connors, 2009, p. 65). Simply put, many books written for young adults are just as well-written and powerful as acclaimed adult literature. Indeed, Cart (2022) asserts that critics of YA often complain that these books are *too* complex, making them “uninviting or inaccessible to teen readers” (p. 99). Conversely, it is this complex and nuanced handling of difficult subjects that often makes YA so appealing to young people.

There are certainly still many examples of poorly written and shallow YA, but such is the case in any field of literature. This does not take away from the many powerful, eloquent books already in existence. In fact, Soter and Connors (2009) claim that YA can hold up to the same level of scrutiny and close reading as a canonical text. They write that YA’s “treatment of [relevant] subjects and themes reflects a level of sophistication that invites serious interrogation on the part of readers eager for a marriage of intellectual and affective engagement”

(p. 62). Consequently, YA is not only relevant to students' lives, but reading YA can also be a highly intellectual endeavour.

### **YA as relevant and reflective**

Another oft-cited justification of YA is that these books allow young adults to see themselves reflected in the 'mirrors' of stories, in terms of both age and unique life experiences (Bishop, 1990; Cart, 2008). Since YA is explicitly written for young adults, the characters are often experiencing the same growing pains and life lessons as the readers. As a result, readers are given heroes, villains, and characters that are recognizable and familiar, rather than characters that feel outdated and out of place in the modern world faced by today's teenagers. Furthermore, YA can offer "useful insights into common everyday [experiences]" for adolescents and young people, allowing them to question and explore the 'normal' constructions of their everyday lives (Waller and Dashwood, 2023, p. 2). And in a world that often dismisses adolescent concerns and voices, these stories are even more vital and necessary because they "[show] teenagers that their experiences have value... one of the most important reasons to have literature for and about young adults" (Crowe, 2002, p. 115). This speaks to the "tension" of being an adolescent; teenagers and young people desperately want to belong to a community whilst regarding themselves as tragically unique (Cart, 2008, p. 2).

Additionally, because of the relatability factor, YA often seems to appeal more to the young adults in schools than the books assigned by the curriculum. Librarians and media specialists are among the first to tout the value of YA, as they witness first-hand its popularity and power among the student population (Soter & Connors, 2009). Cart (2008) declares that this is because YA addresses "not only [young people's] needs but also their interests," acting as a doubly motivating force for young people to read YA (p. 2). And ultimately, the relevancy and reflectiveness of YA can help teenagers and young adults to navigate the isolating experience of growing up. As Alsup (2003) writes, "Above all, YA literature is something that adolescents want to read... Why do they want to read it? Perhaps because it helps them feel as if they are not alone" (p. 160). Consequently, YA can be a powerful reflection of personal identity, as well as a picture of worlds where these personal identities are valued and respected.

## YA as counterstory

But YA is not only relevant because of how it reflects the adolescent stage of life. In addition, there are many fantastic YA novels from underrepresented authors that depict the counterstories of teenagers who have typically been marginalised and silenced. As Hughes-Hassell (2013) posits, these counterstories in YA “[speak] to the power of the individual and the collective, it shows teens of color and indigenous peoples defining themselves and engaging in problem solving, and it emphasizes the importance of self-reliance and self-determination” (p. 226). These counterstories are especially important for adolescents who only see “a deficit-oriented stance” towards themselves and their communities in literature and media, where “their race, ethnicity, culture, and/or language [are] limitations” (Hughes-Hassell, 2013, p. 216). Subsequently, stories from authors with lived experiences that work against these deficit mindsets are crucial for underrepresented and misrepresented readers.

Though there is still a long way to go towards making the field of YA truly equitable and representative of diverse experiences, authors such as Angie Thomas (*The Hate U Give*, 2017), Jenny Han (*To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before*, 2014), Angeline Boulley (*Firekeeper’s Daughter*, 2021), Danielle Jawando (*When Our Worlds Collided*, 2022), and Patrice Lawrence (*Orangeboy*, 2016) are writing beautiful, challenging, and diverse tales that fight against Adichie’s ‘single story.’ Authors like these speak directly to the problem of “mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors,” drawing on their own lived experiences of inequality and invisibility to create more inclusive worlds (Bishop, 1990). Furthermore, such representation is usually intentionally created by the authors. For example, Ramdarshan Bold (2019) interviewed several British YA authors of colour and found that they actively included themes of political resistance and activism in their novels, using their works “as a vehicle to drive social commentary and challenge the normative white narratives” (p. 111). Ultimately, these authors understand that both ‘mirrors’ and ‘windows’ must be created to accurately portray the depth and complexity of the world in which they live and write.

## **YA as impetus for social justice and anti-racist action**

Finally, YA can be a powerful impetus for the social and political engagement of students. This is because YA often deals with current socio-political events and stresses in a manner that is accessible to young adults (Wolk, 2009; Ames, 2013; Waller and Dashwood, 2023). Glasgow (2001) describes this movement, asserting that “young adult literature provides a context for students to become conscious of their operating world view and to examine critically alternative ways of understanding the world and social relations” (p. 54). For example, Angie Thomas’s novel *The Hate U Give* quickly became an award-winning bestseller because it dealt with police brutality and the Black Lives Matter movement in a way that made these issues accessible to teenagers who were grappling with similar events on the news and in real life. Waller and Dashwood (2023) also found that reading YA during the Covid-19 pandemic helped young people grapple with the isolation, uncertainty, and conflict that resulted from the global lockdowns. These examples exemplify author Daniel José Older’s (2015) assertion that “literature’s job is not to protect young people from the ugly world; it is to arm them with a language to describe difficult truths they already know.”

Additionally, YA can be used in compelling ways to incite young adults towards social justice and anti-racist action. For example, Schieble (2012) argues that YA can be used as a powerful tool to interrogate the idea of “whiteness” and how it is complicit in building and maintaining systems of oppression (p. 212). Entire academic units can also be built around using selected YA texts to analyse forms of oppression and their impacts on the characters (Glasgow, 2001). And most crucially, YA can help readers to take the step from passive consumption of stories towards actively fighting for justice. Ramdarshan Bold and Phillips (2019) argue, “We contend that subverting norms in YA, that is books written by authors from diverse backgrounds and/or featuring inclusive and representative characters is a form of ‘imaginary’ activism that can, and does inspire, real-world change” (p. 6). Cart (2008) echoes the importance of such “imaginary activism,” arguing that it is a necessary precursor to help young readers “[assume] the rights and responsibilities of citizenship” (p. 2). In conclusion, though it seems like a stretch to say that stories can be so impactful, stories

shape people, who shape culture, which shapes society, which ultimately shapes the world.

## **YA and ESEA Representation**

Despite the recent efforts to diversify the field of YA, there is still quite a lot of work that needs to be done to increase East and Southeast Asian (ESEA) representation in US and UK YA. Neither the US nor the UK are doing particularly well in this regard; however, due to the efforts of Asian American activists and community organisations in the 1970s, the US has a better awareness of the lack of Asian American representation and a far more established tradition of Asian American literature (Takaki, 1998; Maeda, 2012; Lee, 2015).

### **Asian American YA**

Asian American children's literature in the US did not truly exist until the publication of *Dragonwings* in 1975 by Laurence Yep, and it took another two decades for any other East Asian groups to be represented in children's literature and YA (Cart, 2022). Furthermore, most southeast Asian groups are still invisible and unrepresented today (Rodríguez and Kim, 2018). But some progress is being made - according to the latest statistics from the Cooperative Children's Book Center on books published in the US in 2023, there were 586 books (out of 3,203) written by Asian authors and 381 book written about the Asian community (Cooperative Children's Book Center, School of Education, 2024). These percentages of 18.3% and 11.9%, respectively, mark an encouraging increase from the numbers of books published about Asian characters in previous decades (2.9% in 2002 and 2.1% in 2012).

However, there is still a long way to go before publishers truly reach a "balance of stories" that fairly and completely represent the Asian American community (Bacon, 2000). The few studies that have been done in the field of Asian American children's and YA fiction argue that the current body of literature often features stereotypical characters and drawings, focuses on historical events or 'exotic' ancient traditions and ceremonies, and encompasses mostly East Asian (Chinese and Japanese) stories while excluding other Asian countries (Yokota, 2009; Yoo-Lee *et al.*, 2014; Rodríguez and Kim, 2018; Zhang and Wang,

2021). Additionally, there has been an increase in historical fiction and immigrant stories, which “present a dominant narrative of Asian Americans as immigrant newcomers rather than citizens, which ignores the Asian American communities who have lived in the United States for generations and positions Asian Americans as decidedly more Asian than American” (Rodríguez and Kim, 2018, p. 19). Thus, though these stories about historical events and intergenerational immigrant experiences are valuable and representative, they still present a ‘single story’ of the Asian American experience and ignore the hybridity hidden within the monolithic label of ‘Asian American.’

Nonetheless, Asian American YA has persisted and begun to find its place within the American tradition, mostly due to the determination of Asian American scholars, activists, and authors who are refusing to let others define their identities or write their stories. Their efforts exemplify the practice of CRT counterstorytelling, which Asian American scholars have adapted into a specific Asian Critical Theory (AsianCrit) framework that concentrates on unique Asian American problems and experiences (Iftikar and Museus, 2018). The sixth tenet of AsianCrit - story, theory, and praxis - states a commitment to centre “Asian American experiences to offer an alternative epistemology that is represented through stories and can inform theories and praxis in meaningful ways” (Iftikar and Museus, 2018, p. 941). And as de Manuel and Davis (2006) argue, contemporary Asian American authors are taking this call to heart:

As adults looking back on their childhood selves, they write their own story rather than letting others write them out of it; they reposition themselves as central to the American experience rather than peripheral. More importantly, they present their narrative as an integral part of the multilayered tapestry of the ‘American’ experience, rather than as a belated addition. Refusing to remain an anecdotal subplot, colorful but peripheral, they weave themselves into the plot of the story of American childhood. (de Manuel and Davis, 2006, p. 3)

This statement from de Manuel and Davis captures how Asian American authors today are writing themselves into the story of America, not as side characters but as protagonists with hybrid identities and experiences that are “central to the American experience” (p. 3). These authors are creating ‘mirrors’ for

themselves and for the children and young people who might pick up their books.

As we look towards the future of Asian American YA, there are many opinions about where the field should go next. Loh-Hagan calls for even more attention to the multiple identities of today's young Asian Americans, as many of them no longer identify with the typical immigration narrative: "Today's youth are pan-Asian, multi-Asian, multi-racial, pan-sexual, etc. The YA literature of today and tomorrow needs to be more representative of various intersectionalities" (Loh-Hagan, quoted in Cart, 2022, p. 206). But Park Dahlen cautions against too quickly abandoning all notions of "Asianness": "It is important to continue publishing books that include Asian Americans of all generations whose Asianness is an important part of the story, particularly but not only because anti-Asian hate crimes have escalated since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic" (Park Dahlen, quoted in Cart, 2022, p. 205). These differing opinions are part of the diasporic experience; as there is no one right way to be Asian American, literature must continue to show the variety of 'mirrors' and 'windows' inherent in hybrid Asian American identity.

### **British ESEA YA**

Although there are very few content analyses of Asian American representation in YA and children's literature, there is increasing scholarship and promising advancements in representation. In contrast, the research is incredibly lacking when it comes to British ESEA YA and picture books, and there are no comprehensive analyses of British East Asian representation in children's and YA literature. The "Reflecting Realities" reports from 2020 and 2021 (the latest report for 2022 did not include data disaggregated by race/ethnicity) demonstrated that in both years, only 0.3% of children's fiction included any Chinese representation (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, 2021, 2022). When compared with representations of other ethnic minority groups, only Arab communities are more underrepresented at 0.2%. Additionally, the reports only collected data for Chinese representation, reflecting the category on the British census which ignores all other East Asian groups.

Moreover, it is incredibly difficult to even find British ESEA characters or authors; the 2022 BookTrust Report showed that ESEA authors made up only 7.2% of the total number of BIPOC authors in 2021 (Ramdarshan Bold, 2022). PP Wong was the first British-born Chinese fiction writer to be published, even though her book *The Life of a Banana* was published only a decade ago (Wong, 2014). The second published YA ESEA book was *Chinglish* by Sue Cheung (Cheung, 2019). Additionally, out of the 48 books listed in the 2023 Longlist for the Diverse Book Awards, an award which focuses on books published in the UK, there were only two ESEA authors included: Maisie Chan and Cynthia So (The Diverse Book Awards, 2023). This is a worse statistic than in 2022, which had three ESEA authors out of 36 (The Diverse Book Awards, 2022). As Maisie Chan writes mostly children's and middle-grade fiction, this leaves PP Wong, Sue Cheung, and Cynthia So as part of a very small group of British ESEA YA authors in the UK, with all three identifying as British Chinese. And with one novel each, this means that there are only three YA titles that currently feature contemporary and realistic British Chinese stories and protagonists - *The Life of a Banana* (2014), *Chinglish* (2019), and *If You Still Recognise Me* (2022). This also means that other British ESEA groups are still unrepresented in YA, pointing to the fact that British ESEAs are still battling invisibility in literature and wider culture; questions of hybridity and the 'single story' have barely even entered the conversation.

## Conclusion

Stories hold incredible power within society as they can shape public perception and build a narrative as "tools of love or tools of oppression" (Jewett, 2017, p. 93). Throughout history, stories have caused incredible destruction, but as revolutionary authors and scholars remind us, counterstories can work to heal the damage and to create new, emancipatory stories for the marginalised and voiceless. This emphasis on counterstories is especially important for the relatively new fields of Asian American and ESEA YA, especially in the UK where there are barely any literary 'windows' or 'mirrors' into the experience of being a young ESEA person. Ultimately, there is still quite a lot of work to be done regarding representative YA for East Asian communities in the US and the UK, but the current environment of awareness and activism is an encouraging sign that these communities will not be silenced again.



## **Chapter Three: Asian American and British ESEA Diasporic Communities in the United States and the United Kingdom**

### **Literature Review**

The purpose of this chapter is to give a (brief!) overview of the histories of the Asian American and British ESEA communities in the United States and the United Kingdom, focusing specifically on the various East Asian communities that have migrated and settled in both countries. Throughout this overview, I will primarily use the terms Asian American and British ESEA as these are terms currently used by each community at this time to describe themselves. This overview will trace how these communities have been shaped and formed over time, discussing histories of migration, landmark legislation, major historical events, as well as the challenges these communities face today. Finally, the sub-chapter will conclude with a brief analysis of how these communities have been stereotyped over time. This information is crucial to understanding the results of the study as it provides context for the current differences in diasporic US and UK communities, as well as enabling a deeper understanding of the study participants and results.

### **The Asian American Diaspora in the United States**

In her book *The Making of Asian America*, historian Erika Lee (2015) documents the histories of various Asian American ethnic groups in America, beginning with Filipino and Chinese seamen on Spanish ships in the 1500s and ending with the impact of contemporary movements such as #StopAsianHate and the Covid-19 pandemic. She divides this large span of centuries into notable eras for Asian Americans, such as the era of exclusion and world wars, showing how the diaspora is continually changing shape. I have borrowed pieces of this organising framework for my own overview, particularly her subdivisions of Asian American history.

## The era of ‘mass migration and Asian exclusion’: 1850s-1940s

### Chinese

Spanning roughly from the mid-1850s to World War I, the era of “mass migration” saw hundreds of thousands of East Asian immigrants making their way to the United States (Lee, 2015, p. 57). Chinese male workers made up the largest number of these immigrants, the first wave of whom were attracted by rumours of gold in California. As the myth of *Gam Saan*<sup>3</sup> spread, Chinese settlers flocked to the West Coast, hoping not only to find physical gold but also a wealth of opportunities in America (Takaki, 1998, p. 192). Lee (2015) estimates that “by 1870, there were 63,000 Chinese in the United States, most of them (77 percent) in California” (p. 59). Around the same time, Chinese workers were also being recruited as cheap labour to construct the Transcontinental Railroad, with sources estimating that there were between 15,000 to 20,000 Chinese labourers over the course of the railroad’s construction (Kennedy, 2022). These Chinese workers were paid a fraction of what their white counterparts made, and they were tasked with the most backbreaking and hazardous jobs; it is estimated that more than 1,200 Chinese railroad workers died in the arduous process of constructing the railroad (Lee, 2015). And in a final humiliation, Chinese workers were not permitted to be in the commemorative photo taken at Promontory Point, Utah, where the last railroad spike was laid to finally complete the Transcontinental Railroad.

As opportunities from the gold rush and railroad began to die out, Chinese immigrants turned to agriculture, factory work, and small businesses such as restaurants and laundries to support themselves (Takaki, 1998; Lee, 2015). Takaki (1998) describes these businesses as a response to “‘ethnic antagonism’ [which] forced thousands of Chinese into self-employment” (p. 201). The clustering of these businesses gave rise to the first Chinatowns, especially in cities such as San Francisco and New York City which boasted large Chinese populations (Lou, 2007; Lee, 2015). However, popular opinion continued to turn against the Chinese and incidents of racially motivated violence against Chinese

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<sup>3</sup> Cantonese for ‘Gold Mountain’

communities increased dramatically; by the 1880s, thousands of Chinese had been forced to leave their homes, a forced exodus that ultimately became codified into law with the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 (Takaki, 1998; Lee, 2015; History.com, 2022a). The Exclusion Act was the first immigration law to target a specific ethnic group, banning the entry of Chinese workers for ten years and making it impossible for any Chinese to become American citizens. Ultimately, the Act was made permanent in 1904 and was not repealed until World War II.

## **Japanese**

Thousands of young Japanese men also immigrated to America during this period, most landing in Hawaii to become manual labourers on sugar plantations. In contrast to Chinese immigrants, the Japanese were part of a sponsored emigration by the Japanese government, which began sending its poor and lower-class citizens abroad to ease the economic pressure of a rapid population increase (Lee, 2015). Official emigration companies were established, with the aim of recruiting poor young men who could not pay the high government taxes or wanted to avoid military service. The Japanese were in a relatively more privileged position than the Chinese, as the backing of the Japanese government allowed them to mostly escape the threat of exclusion or forced deportation. In fact, once the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed, many Japanese made their way to the mainland to take over the jobs the Chinese left behind; in the year 1900 alone, 12,000 Japanese immigrants were recorded (Iwata, 1962). So many Japanese were settling in the US that the Gentlemen's Agreement of 1908 was passed restricting further immigration of Japanese labourers (Lee, 2015; History.com, 2022b).

While initially working as manual labourers, the Japanese eventually found great success in the agricultural industry (Iwata, 1962; Lee, 2015). Lee (2015) writes, "By 1910, Japanese had 1,816 farms with a total acreage of 99,254" (p. 117). As the Japanese began to profit from their agricultural endeavours, there was an influx of 'picture brides' - young women who made the journey to America to marry Japanese men based on a picture (Nagae, 2012; Lee, 2015; History.com, 2022b). Because the Gentlemen's Agreement allowed for the continued entry of the family of those who were already in the US, these picture brides were a

legal means of entry for women who were seeking a way out of Japan. There were 20,000 picture brides between 1908 to 1920, making up most of the Japanese seeking entry to the US (Lee, 2015). However, this period of immigration came to an end as the Japanese fell victim to the ‘yellow peril’ narrative. As fears of Japan’s growing power stoked xenophobia in America, the 1924 Immigration Act was passed, leading to the end of mass migration.

### **Korean**

Korean immigrants occupied a precarious place as immigrants to the US. They were a more diverse group, including not only farmers but also students, clergy, and soldiers (Lee, 2015). On the one hand, they were attracted by the opportunities in America and took on many of the same jobs as Chinese and Japanese immigrants; on the other hand, many were fleeing the Japanese takeover of their country and resented their status as a colonised people (Lee, 2015). Some even arrived as refugees from Japanese occupation, helping to shape the firmly pro-Korean independence community in America. Korean women played a much larger role in the community than their Chinese and Japanese counterparts, taking on crucial responsibilities in the independence movement by keeping Korean customs and traditions alive in their homes and churches (Nagae, 2012; Lee, 2015). But despite their own efforts to distinguish themselves from the Japanese, Koreans were lumped together with other Asian ethnic groups and faced similar racial harassment. When the Alien Land Laws were passed to make it impossible for non-citizens to own land, Korean landowners were forced out of the agricultural industry (Lee, 2015).

### **Undocumented Immigrants**

Because of the anti-Asian exclusionary laws that were put in place between 1882 and 1943 (for example, the Chinese Exclusion Act and the Gentlemen’s Agreement), Asians were the first undocumented immigrants to the US (Chan, 2013; Lee, 2015; Lew-Williams, 2021). Records estimate that between 1910-1920, “not fewer than 7,150 Chinamen and 9,400 Japanese entered illegally... [the] minimum of 16,500 Asiatics who must have been smuggled in, is equivalent to one-eighth of all those in the country” (Fry, 1928, p. 174).

For Chinese immigrants who sought to enter the US, the practice of claiming to be *paper sons* (or *paper daughters*) became popular; this was a strategy to claim US citizenship by either claiming to have been born on US soil or by pretending to be the child of a US citizen (Ngai, 1998; Wong, 2005; Lew-Williams, 2021). As Wong (2005) explains, “The ‘parents’ would have someone draw up false papers documenting the lives and identities of these children, and the papers would be sold to people in China who could pass for the children” (p. 9). Both Chinese and Japanese immigrants also made use of vast smuggling networks that passed through Mexico or Canada, with perhaps 17,300 undocumented immigrants entering from the Mexican border between 1882 and 1920 (Lee, 2015). These networks comprised of drug smugglers, desert guides, railroad workers, and sometimes regular people living in border towns who were looking to make a profit; they also were built on unique interracial relationships between Mexicans, Chinese, Japanese, African Americans, and Indigenous peoples who worked together to bring immigrants into the country (Lee, 2015).

## **The era of war: 1941-1964**

### **Japanese and Japanese Americans in WWII**

The US entered into World War II on December 7, 1941, when the Japanese launched a devastating attack on the military base at Pearl Harbor. This attack marked a shift in American attitudes towards Asian groups, both for the better and for the worse. For the Japanese American community, this was the beginning of a great atrocity - the internment of 120,000 Japanese, two-thirds of whom held American citizenship but were incarcerated anyway (Takaki, 1998; Lee, 2015; Nagata, Kim and Wu, 2019). Through this act, the American government asserted that Japanese ancestry was more important than current citizenship - as Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt put it, “It makes no difference whether he is an American citizen, he is still a Japanese... A Jap is a Jap” (Lee, 2015, p. 217). The internees were given an identification number, transported to detainment facilities, and kept there without due process for years. The facilities were bleak, with whole families crammed into one room, insufficient medical supplies, bad food and poor weather, and surrounded by barbed wire (Nagata, Kim and Wu, 2019; History.com, 2021).

The confinement deeply divided the Japanese community; some Japanese Americans sought to prove their ‘Americanness’ beyond any doubt, while others angrily denounced their country for betraying them (Hayashi, 2004). This conflict reached a head over two questions on a questionnaire designed to test loyalty:

Question 27: “Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty, wherever ordered?”

Question 28: “Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance to the Japanese emperor, or any other foreign government, power, or organization?” (‘The so-called “Loyalty Questionnaire”’, 2023)

All Japanese males of military age had a choice to make - would they answer ‘yes, yes’ or ‘no, no’? Most answered ‘yes’ to both questions, for a variety of reasons. Some thought this would be their way out of the camps or simply did not want to face further hardships. Others were still eager to prove their loyalty to America by signing up to fight in the war (Wu, 2014; Maloney, 2017). Those who joined the army were put into two segregated units, both of which were infamous for bravery at the cost of heavy casualties (Lee, 2015; Nagata, Kim and Wu, 2019).

Around 10-15% of internees could not bring themselves to declare loyalty and fight for a country that had horribly mistreated them. They answered ‘no’ and were called the “no-no boys” (Lee, 2015, p. 239). They were punished for their alleged disloyalty and transferred to Tule Lake, a maximum-security prison camp where they remained imprisoned until March 28, 1946, years after WWII had ended (Tule Lake Committee, 2023). As many as 5,500 of these Japanese Americans gave up their US citizenship in anger, and 1,300 were deported back to Japan (Lee, 2015). Most eventually applied to reverse this decision, recognising it was made under coercion, but it took 14 years before all citizenship was recognised and restored.

## The ‘Good Asians’ of WWII

After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, it became necessary for America to distinguish between ‘good’ Asians, like their Chinese allies, and the Japanese enemy (Lee, 2015). Thus, WWII became the impetus for abolishing the Chinese Exclusion Act on December 17, 1943 (Lee, 2015; History.com, 2022a). Even though this opened avenues of immigration to only 105 individuals a year, Chinese immigrants could finally begin the process to become American citizens. Many Chinese Americans also enlisted in the war effort, eager to prove themselves as loyal citizens and to take part in the patriotism sweeping the country. Chinese women took jobs at shipping yards, formed social clubs, and two women, Maggie Gee and Hazel Ah Ying Lee, surpassed countless obstacles to become the only two Chinese women in the Women Airforce Service Pilots (Wong, 2005; Nagae, 2012; Lee, 2015). Additionally, 12,000 to 15,000 Chinese men enlisted in the military, eager to prove their American-ness and perform their duty to their country (Wong, 2005). These men and women “helped shape a new image of Chinese Americans” and “returned home with a newfound confidence and a strengthened sense of belonging in America” (Wong, 2005, p. 69).

However, the spectre of racism was still hanging over the ‘good’ Asians, as the country struggled to distinguish the Chinese from the Japanese. Some Chinese people wore labels identifying themselves as Chinese, and *Time* magazine published an article titled “How to Tell Your Friends from the Japs” with dubious distinctions:

Some Chinese are tall (average: 5 ft. 5 in.). Virtually all Japanese are short (average: 5 ft. 2-½ in.). Japanese are likely to be stockier and broader-hipped than short Chinese. Japanese – except for wrestlers – are seldom fat; they often dry up and grow lean as they age. The Chinese often put on weight, particularly if they are prosperous (in China, with its frequent famines, being fat is esteemed as a sign of being a solid citizen). Chinese, not as hairy as Japanese, seldom grow an impressive mustache. Most Chinese avoid horn-rimmed spectacles. Although both have the typical epicanthic fold of the upper eyelid (which makes them look almond-eyed), Japanese eyes are usually set closer together. Those who know them best often rely on facial expression to tell them

apart: the Chinese expression is likely to be more placid, kindly, open; the Japanese more positive, dogmatic, arrogant. (TIME Magazine, 1941)

Clearly, these arbitrary rules were not a great help. They also left no room for Asian Americans who were neither Chinese or Japanese, such as Koreans, Filipinos, and Indians. Koreans had a particularly difficult time, as their status as a Japanese-occupied country led them to be classified as “enemy aliens,” just like the Japanese, even though most Koreans vehemently denied these ties and were fighting for an independent Korea (Lee, 2015, p. 261).

### **Communism and the Cold War**

America’s favour quickly began turning from Chinese Americans when China became embroiled in a Civil War of its own. After the Communist Party won and exiled the democratic Kuomintang Party to Taiwan, “almost overnight the prevailing images of Chinese in the [US] public eye...metamorphosed from friendly (if weak) Pacific allies to formidable, threatening foes” (Wu, 2014, p. 112). In fear of persecution, Chinese Americans began identifying themselves as ‘Overseas Chinese’ who were connected to the US and to the Kuomintang Party, *not* to Communist China (Wu, 2014). US officials returned to exclusion-era rhetoric, claiming that undocumented *paper sons* were embedded within unsuspecting American communities as Communist spies (Ngai, 1998). To combat these supposed spies, the Confession Program was created in 1956. This program promised that if undocumented citizens came forward and admitted their lack of papers (and the status of all their paper descendants), the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) would help them achieve citizenship in return (Ngai, 1998; Wu, 2014; Lee, 2015). Even though many Chinese were suspicious, they were able to take advantage of the terms of the program to embark on naturalisation processes and largely leave the shadow of the exclusion era behind.

## **The era of activism and globalism: 1965-present**

### **Activism and protest movements**

1965 was a crucial year for the African American Civil Rights movement, as leaders began calling for non-violent protests and rallies to fight for equal rights.



History has memorialised names such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, but there were also several Asian American activists such as Yuri Kochiyama and Grace Lee Boggs who crossed racial and ethnic boundaries in their struggles to transform America (Lee, 2015). However, it was 1968 that truly shaped the Asian American movement, when Yuji Ichioka founded the Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA) at UC Berkeley to bring together like-minded Asians across all ethnic groups (Maeda, 2012). In fact, this was the origin of the term ‘Asian American,’ used to describe an organisation “envisioned as a multiethnic group for all Asians” (Maeda, 2012, p. 10). This marked a turning point in the attitude of Asian Americans; the old ways of assimilation into White America had not resulted in their unconditional acceptance as Americans and so they turned their efforts to making an identity for themselves, “to invent it, claim it, assert it, and fight for it over and over in the decade to come” (Lee, 2018).

Another important organisation in this fight was the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF), a multiracial coalition that brought the AAPA alongside Black, Latin American, Mexican American, Chinese American and Filipino American student organisations to spearhead a five-month long strike at San Francisco State College (Courturier, 2001; Maeda, 2012; Lee, 2015). The purpose of the strike was to call for a representative Ethnic Studies program to be established at the college, and it met with strong resistance from the administration and severe police violence. A similar strike occurred at UC Berkeley soon after, with both strikes finally ending in March 1969 with the creation of the first Ethnic Studies program at SF State and an Ethnic Studies department at UC Berkeley. Though this was a huge achievement for the Asian American movement, the struggle for the “self-determination” of education was (and is) still an ongoing issue in colleges and universities (Maeda, 2012, p. 28).

While the Civil Rights Movement was undoubtedly an inspiration for the burgeoning Asian American movement, the new activists and organisations were also influenced by the Vietnam War protests raging across the US (Aguirre Jr. and Lio, 2008). Many Asian Americans began protesting the war, realising that they were lumped in with the ‘foreign’ enemy and Othered; this was a particularly painful revelation for Asian American soldiers who faced anti-Asian racism and discrimination from their fellow white American recruits (Courturier,

2001). Ultimately, this spurred Asian American activists to form their own protest groups, leading to greater pan-Asian solidarity as the movement slowly spread from universities into more spheres of society. The Asian American movements of the 60s and 70s demonstrated what Dufoix (2008) calls the movement towards an “oxymoronic diaspora,” capturing the tension felt by activists who were attempting to make an identity that was uniquely Asian American, refusing to be constrained by ‘foreign’ origin or efforts at assimilation into America (p. 24).

### **Legacy of the Hart-Cellar Act**

1965 also marked another important turning point in the formation of Asian America: the passing of the Immigration and Nationality Act, otherwise known as the Hart-Cellar Act. This act abolished previously established immigration quotas, allowing for an unprecedented number of immigrants to enter the country. Significantly, most of these new immigrants did not come from Europe; by the 1980s, 80% of immigrants were coming from Asia and Latin America (Lee, 2015). The Hart-Cellar Act also emphasised “family reunification” and “professional skills” as priorities for immigration, which worked in favour of Asian immigrants who had family members in the US and enabled the entry of thousands of highly skilled immigrants (Lee, 2015, p. 286).

Most crucially, the Hart-Cellar Act laid the framework for what Zhou and Lee (2017) call “positive immigrant selectivity,” which is when the immigrants that are selected for entry into the US are more highly educated than the national average in their country of origin (p. 8). For example, Zhou and Lee cite statistics showing that at the time of publishing, 26% of Vietnamese immigrants to the US had college degrees, compared to the national average of 5% of college graduates in Vietnam. This is contrasted with the “negative selectivity” of Mexican immigrants: only 5% of Mexican immigrants have degrees in higher education, while 17% of adults in Mexico have a college education (p. 9). Positive selectivity is seen even more clearly in the case of Chinese immigrants, who are not only more highly educated than the typical Chinese adult but also more educated than the typical American adult. Zhou and Lee call this phenomenon “hyper-selectivity”:

Among Chinese immigrants, 51% had graduated from college, compared with only 4% of adults in China, meaning that Chinese immigrants in the United States are *more than 12 times* as likely to have graduated from college as Chinese adults who did not immigrate. While both [Chinese and Vietnamese groups] are highly selected, Chinese are hyper-selected, as they are also more highly educated than the general U.S. population (51% vs. 28%). (Zhou and Lee, 2017, p. 8, my emphasis)

Because of both positive and hyper-selectivity, new Asian immigrants to the US appeared to consistently be the highest-performing minority group, leading to the rise of the model minority myth (more on this later). However, this label ignores the many advantages that this group already has, leading to false conclusions about why Asian Americans are so successful.

### **Being Asian American in the 21st century**

The struggle to define Asian American identity continues today, especially as we begin to see how the Asian American movement has started to diverge from the historical activism of the 1960s. As new waves of Asian immigrants continue to make their way to the US, the activists of the 60s and 70s have largely been forgotten by these new arrivals who have no knowledge of, and are unaffected by, their historical struggle. Recently, this divide within Asian America became very clear as the community found itself split on the issue of affirmative action, a debate which culminated in a controversial 2023 Supreme Court case (Balingit, 2023; Chang, 2023; Dirks, 2023; Grossman *et al.*, 2023; Nadal, 2023). On the one hand, a vocal part of the Asian American community (made up of mostly first- and second-generation immigrants) argued that affirmative action quotas based on race were harming Asian and Asian American students' acceptance rates at elite colleges; they believed that without affirmative action, more deserving Asian Americans would be accepted at schools like Harvard and Princeton because there would not be a limit imposed on Asian students. The subtext was that less deserving minority groups (African Americans and Latinx Americans) were taking the spots that should have been going to Asian Americans (Balingit, 2023).

On the other hand, Asian Americans activists with longer memories tried to educate newer groups on how affirmative action was a necessary tool that had

helped to vastly increase the numbers of Asian Americans admitted to historically white universities. As Chang (2023) writes, “As early as the 1950s, after the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans, Asian Americans called for affirmative action programs for racially excluded minorities [and] helped force higher education open for excluded communities of color and benefited from affirmative action programs.” Asian Americans in this group also urged against anti-Black and anti-Latinx sentiments, pointing instead to data that demonstrated that legacy students, the vast majority of whom are white, were the true reason why minority applicants were getting rejected (Grossman *et al.*, 2023). Many activists reminded the public of how the multiracial coalitions in the 1960s were a main reason why Asian Americans could even be accepted and represented in higher education. Despite all these efforts, the Supreme Court struck down affirmative action as unconstitutional (Rios and Stein, 2023).

Finally, as the world becomes smaller and increasingly interconnected, technology has made it easier to stay connected with one’s roots in other countries. Kuah-Pearce (2006) explains, “What we are witnessing is the emergence of a circulatory migration chain in which the movement could be unilinear, multilinear and/or circulatorily multilinear in scope [where] the original ‘self’... has become transnational” (p. 223). Thus, there truly is no longer any ‘right’ way to be Asian American. One’s identity is personal and increasingly hybrid, a “matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’” and “[belonging] to the future as much as to the past” (Hall, 2021b, p. 225). Truly, it is in this struggle between the future and the past that contemporary Asian American identities are being formed.

## **Stereotypes and Single Stories**

As seen in this very brief overview, the East Asian diaspora has taken many forms throughout the centuries, shaped by the different forces of emigration and immigration in America and Asia. But a common thread within each iteration of the diaspora is the unassimilability and foreignness of the Asian community. These ideas can be connected back to Said’s (2003) concept of Orientalism, which asserts that scholars have constructed an impassable division between the Occident and the Orient by emphasising the Orient’s alien Otherness and incomprehensibility. Current Asian American scholars have expanded on this

concept, arguing that Said's Orientalism is still present in current Asian American stereotypes, albeit in evolved and updated forms (Iftikar and Museus, 2018). For example, threads of Orientalism can be found in the two most common stereotypes for Asian Americans: the 'yellow peril' and the 'model minority.'

### **Yellow Peril**

The yellow peril stereotype gained popularity in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries when Asian immigrants began to travel to America in increasing numbers to find work. Because of Orientalist rhetoric, immigrants were viewed as a threat to the (white) American way of life and seen as "inassimilable foreigners" who were taking what 'rightfully' belonged to the White community (Kawai, 2005, p. 112). These fears stoked extreme anti-Asian sentiments, culminating in discriminatory government policies like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which restricted Chinese immigration and denied citizenship to immigrants already in the country for a ten-year period of time; this initial period of ineligibility continued to be extended until it was made permanent in 1902 (Lee, 2015; Iftikar and Museus, 2018; History.com, 2022a). As Nomura (1994) asserts:

Asians were a necessary "Other" in defining who was an American. The idea of assimilability was utilized. Europeans were assimilable. Asians were declared unassimilable... The anti-Asian movement culminated in the total exclusion of Asian immigration and prohibition of naturalization. This movement portrayed the Asian in America as un-American and led to the enactment of anti-Asian laws, which enshrined this assumption of the Asian as alien. (Nomura, 1994, p. 75)

Nomura links Orientalism and the yellow peril, contending that the fear of the un-American Other found its target in the Asian community. Her argument also echoes Anderson's (2006) construction of nation through a common enemy.

The Exclusion Act was finally repealed in 1943, but yellow peril propaganda immediately found its next target in the Japanese American community, as they were accused of being spies and allies of Japan after the bombing of Pearl Harbor (Volpp, 2005; Iftikar and Museus, 2018; Rodríguez, 2020a). Approximately 120,000 Japanese and Japanese Americans were incarcerated in prison-like

camps, even though the majority of those who were interned were American citizens (Lee, 2015; Nagata, Kim and Wu, 2019; Rodríguez, 2020a). American citizenship did not protect the Chinese American community either, when fears of a Communist China led to a revival of yellow peril rhetoric targeted at Chinese communities. Volpp (2005) uses the term “alien citizenship” to explain this, writing, “Although literal citizens, through naturalization, or through birth, and thus Americans in terms of formal legal citizenship, Asian Americans have historically not been considered Americans in terms of kinship, or *belonging*” (p. 1617, my emphasis). In other words, holding legal American citizenship was not enough to combat fears of difference and Otherness.

These are only a few examples of how the yellow peril stereotype has affected (and continues to affect) the Asian American community. These two examples also, contradictorily, mark the beginnings of the shift to the model minority stereotype, which Kim and Shah (2020) describe as depicting Asian Americans as “problem free, hardworking, successful, wealthy, while being apolitical, quiet, and keeping their heads down in order to fit in and succeed at work and in society” (p. 607). This change began in the 1940s, as World War II forced America to differentiate between the Japanese (the enemy) and the Chinese (an ally) (Wu, 2014). These changing world politics were behind the logic that led America to finally repeal the Exclusion Act even as the Japanese were simultaneously being interned. Additionally, Wu (2014) argues that the government justified the internment by claiming that it would “[refashion] ethnic Japanese into model *Americans*,” making assimilation the goal for both Chinese and Japanese Americans (p. 14).

### **Model Minority**

As previously mentioned, thousands of educated and highly skilled immigrants came to the US after the Hart-Cellar Act in order to attend graduate school and/or work in the developing fields of science and technology. Thus, the national attitude concerning Asian Americans began to change towards the ‘model minority’ rhetoric, based on a new perception of Asian immigrants as hard-working and successful. Lee (2015) states that in the 1980s, several newspapers wrote articles about how Asian Americans were consistently obtaining top scores in maths and attending all the best schools; *Fortune*

magazine even flatly proclaimed, “Asian Americans...are smarter than the rest of us” (p. 374). As these narratives became widely accepted, Asian Americans began to be seen as a ‘good’ minority; however, none of these analyses by writers and journalists accounted for the “structural roots of immigrant selectivity” which gave Asian Americans (and their children) a significant educational advantage compared to the rest of the country (Zhou and Lee, 2017, p. 14).

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s also played a role in cementing the model minority narrative. As African Americans fought to dismantle the systems of white supremacy, liberals and conservatives alike held up the success of Asian Americans as a denial of institutional racism and a defence of assimilation, pitting the two minority groups against each other (Kawai, 2005; Wu, 2014). Asian Americans were applauded for being “well assimilated, upwardly mobile, politically nonthreatening, and *definitively not-black*” (Wu, 2014, p. 4). Consequently, the seemingly positive connotations of this image mask how it is used to uphold White supremacy: the stereotype emphasises Asian Otherness and uses Asian American success to deny claims of racism and condemn other marginalised groups for not reaching similar achievements (Kawai, 2005; Iftikar and Museus, 2018). Even worse, Asian American success is only applauded by White society until it becomes threatening - Asian Americans are lauded as hardworking and industrious, but consistently passed over for promotions in the job market because of a perceived lack of leadership capabilities and social skills (Lee, 2015; Zhou and Lee, 2017).

This myth also turns the many different cultures, ethnicities, and nationalities of Asia into a monolithic group, obscuring Asian Americans that are actually struggling (Pang, Han and Pang, 2011; Chan, 2013; Rodríguez, 2020b; Au, 2023). In fact, in direct contrast to the model minority myth, Asian Americans are overrepresented at *both* ends of the socioeconomic spectrum. Statistics show that while 49% of Asian Americans have college degrees (compared to the US average of 28%), 8% of Asian Americans only reached a 9<sup>th</sup> grade education (compared to 6% of the rest of the US population) (Lee, 2015). Courturier (2001) echoes this irony, writing, “The Model Minority myth became a nationally renowned ‘trademark’ for Asian Americans while, at the same time, many of

them were living in poverty and being discriminated against in the employment sector” (p. 89).

Another invisible group within the monolith of Asian America is the large population of undocumented immigrants, accounting for between 12-16% of the undocumented population in the US (Chan, 2013; Ramakrishnan and Shah, 2017; Buenavista, 2018). Kim and Yellow Horse (2018) cite the following statistics:

Asians are the fastest growing undocumented racial group in the United States, with a six-fold increase since 1990. The Asian American Center for Advancing Justice estimates that nearly one in every seven Asian immigrants was undocumented in 2015, and the Center for Migration Studies estimates that the share of Asian Americans among all undocumented immigrants rose from 7% to nearly 16% in the same year. (Kim and Yellow Horse, 2018, p. 1)

These undocumented Asian immigrants are erased by the model minority myth, limiting the resources and opportunities they can access. Buenavista (2018) argues that many of them also internalise the model minority rhetoric, leading to a “good immigrant/bad immigrant” mindset that pits them against undocumented Latinos instead of working together to enact reforms (p. 82). Even more devastatingly, the myth obscures the little-known fact that Asian Americans between the ages of 15-24 commit suicide at rates higher than any other race or ethnic group (National Vital Statistics System, 2018; Heron, 2021). Asian Americans are also more susceptible to depression and social anxiety than other groups (Au, 2023). These terrible statistics cannot fully be reckoned with and researched until the narrative concerning Asian Americans expands beyond the model minority.

### **The Other**

Ultimately, it can be argued that the labels of yellow peril and model minority are both extremely harmful to the Asian American community, and in fact are two faces of the same Orientalist coin. Though the model minority stereotype appears to be a favourable generalisation and a vast improvement from yellow peril, they are both rooted in the inexplicable and undeniable Otherness of the Asian community. As Volpp (2005) succinctly writes, “The Asian is the quintessential alien...utterly foreign to American national identity” (p. 1616).



Kawai (2005) also points out that this Otherness takes different forms to fit different contexts: “People of Asian descent become the model minority when they are depicted to do better than other racial minority groups, whereas they become the yellow peril when they are described to outdo White Americans” (p. 115). Consequently, Asian Americans occupy a precarious place in American society. This can be seen in how American attitudes shifted towards the Asian American community in accordance with whatever war was being fought at the moment. For example, Japanese Americans were the enemy during WWII while the Chinese were allies, and then Chinese Americans again became the enemy in the Cold War.

This precarity was also recently demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic, as Asian Americans experienced a 339% increase in hate crimes between 2020 and 2021 due to claims that the Chinese were to blame for the spread of the virus (Li and Nicholson, 2021; Yam, 2022). The organisation Stop AAPI Hate, which was founded in the early days of the pandemic in response to anti-Asian rhetoric, has documented nearly 11,500 incidents of hate crimes between March 2020 and March 2022 (Stop AAPI Hate, 2022). Additionally, Donald Trump, the president at the time, exacerbated the violence with echoes of yellow peril rhetoric, repeatedly using inflammatory terms such as “Kung-flu” and the China Virus (Kim and Shah, 2020). These are the devastating consequences of Otherness and foreignness for the Asian American community, as “the perception of the model minority [turns] rather quickly to the perception of a foreign threat of invasion and harm...when it is normative to centre White culture and well-being in system-level narratives” (Kim and Shah, 2020, p. 607).

## **The ESEA Diaspora in the United Kingdom**

In comparison to the scholarship on the Asian American diaspora, the British ESEA diaspora is vastly under-researched. One reason for this is a gap in data concerning different ESEA groups. As explained in a report compiled by academics, researchers, politicians, and organisations:

There is a severe lack of data in the UK for ESEA people as ethnicity data is too narrow and limiting, as ESEA people either have to choose ‘Chinese’, ‘Asian’ (which merges ESEA people with other South Asian groups) or ‘Other’ when

completing surveys. This is a symptom of wider systematic discrimination and under-representation of ESEA people in the UK. It assumes that all groups within the ESEA community are homogenous and experience the same levels of discrimination. (*Response to the Call for Evidence on Ethnic Disparities and Inequality in the UK*, 2021)

The report rightly points out that ‘Asian’ and ‘Chinese’ are two separate categories; this has resulted in the Chinese being the most visible ESEA group in the UK. Accordingly, due to the present lack of historical data on other ESEA groups, the following overview will focus only on the Chinese diaspora in Britain, which can roughly be divided into three main eras.

## **The era of shipping and trade: 1840-1945**

### **Sailors and sojourners**

The temporary exhibit *Chinese and British* at the British Library stated that Shen Fuzong was the first Chinese person to travel to the UK in 1687 (Loh *et al.*, 2023). There are also records of William Macao living in Scotland in the 1770s, and John Antony becoming the first Chinese person to be naturalised as a British citizen in 1805 (Loh *et al.*, 2023). However, the first wave of Chinese immigration did not truly begin until the 1840s, after China lost the Anglo-Chinese War<sup>4</sup> to the British. It was this loss that resulted in the Treaty of Nanking<sup>5</sup> in 1842, which became known as the first of many “unequal treaties” that would be made between China and the West (Wong, 2018, p. 321). Among many other indignities, this treaty was what allowed the British to seize Hong Kong as a colony, with future treaties further enlarging the size of the claimed area (Chan and Chan, 1997; Wong, 2018).

The Treaty of Nanking also opened trade avenues between China and the UK for the first time, resulting in many Chinese sailors being recruited by the British East India Company (Jones, 1979; Shang, 1984; Benton and Gomez, 2008; Hsiao, 2020). Both Benton and Gomez (2008) and Shang (1984) describe this first influx of Chinese as ‘sojourners’ who did not intend on settling permanently in the UK.

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<sup>4</sup> Also known as The First Opium War

<sup>5</sup> or Nanjing

Unlike their counterparts in America at the time who travelled there to labour on the transcontinental railroad or with hopes of striking rich in the gold rush, these early Chinese in Britain were sailors who saw seafaring as a way to gain wealth and status before returning home to China.

### **The first Chinatowns: Limehouse and Liverpool**

Even though they regarded themselves as temporary sojourners, more and more Chinese sailors began to congregate at the ports of Liverpool and London when they disembarked from their sea voyages. Reports indicate that as early as the 1880s, there were already enough Chinese seamen at these docks to begin forming the UK's first Chinatowns (Jones, 1979; Shang, 1984; Benton and Gomez, 2008; Hsiao, 2020). London's first Chinatown was in the Limehouse district, centred on Limehouse Causeway next to the docks of the West India Company. Shang (1984) describes the Limehouse Chinatown as having "Chinese grocery stores, eating houses and meeting places or fongs," affording a crucial sense of community to the Chinese within London (p. 9). A similar Chinese community was also forming on Pitt Street in Liverpool (Jones, 1979). By 1911, there were 668 Chinese living in London (102 of whom were located in Limehouse) and 502 Chinese in Liverpool (Jones, 1979; Shang, 1984). The Chinese population was growing exponentially; it is estimated that by 1912, there were 1,751 Chinese sailors at the Liverpool docks and 1,130 spread across the docks in London (Jones, 1979).

Most of the residents of the Chinatowns in London and Liverpool continued to work as sailors, but a few individuals and families began venturing into the laundry trade. The first Chinese laundry opened in 1901, and within the next ten years there were 30 more in London and 49 in Liverpool (Jones, 1979). Laundries were a logical choice for the Chinese community as they required very little capital to establish; they had also heard of this same tactic working in America, where Chinese immigrants had established similar laundries to great success (Benton, 2003; Hsiao, 2020).

However, these laundries were not without anti-Chinese opposition; for example, animosity between Welsh sailors and the Chinese population in Cardiff culminated in 30 laundries being destroyed during a seamen's strike in 1911 (*The*

*Advertiser*, 1911; *Press*, 1911; Jones, 1979; Benton and Gomez, 2008). A newspaper article from 1911 describes this event, stating:

During the day the strikers got completely out of hand. They wrecked the Chinese laundries and badly handled some foreign seamen. Marching in separate detachments, the seamen and dock workers took the police by surprise and the Chinese laundries were easily captured. The men smashed the windows, forced open the doors, and dismantled the houses... The most exciting incident of the day was a surprise dash, to convey into the docks a quantity of luggage belonging to Chinese sailors, who had been signed on in place of union men. (*Press*, 1911)

As the article indicates, the violence stemmed from the fact that Chinese sailors were being hired to replace Welsh sailors on strike, enraging labour organisers and stoking fears that the Chinese would permanently replace the Welsh workers and make them redundant. This scapegoating of the Chinese population mirrors the 'yellow peril' narrative that the Chinese also faced in America, which ultimately allowed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 to be passed. Though similar laws specifically targeting the Chinese population were not passed in the UK, the underlying attitudes of exclusion and paranoia remained the same.

## **World War I**

The advent of World War I brought both a fresh influx of Chinese war-time labourers and complications to immigration. As war broke out, the Aliens Restriction Act of 1914 was passed to restrict the movements of enemy nationals, with many being arrested and interned (Pearsall, 2017). Though this legislation was mainly aimed at Germans living in the UK, it affected all other foreign nationals, including the growing Chinese communities in London and Liverpool, bringing an end to the first wave of Chinese immigration (Jones, 1979). Simultaneously, thousands of Chinese sailors and labourers were recruited into the British merchant fleet (Benton and Gomez, 2008). Despite this, when the Aliens Restriction Act was extended in 1919 into peacetime, Chinese sailors could no longer easily settle in UK port cities and the Liverpool and Limehouse Chinatowns fell into decline. Many sojourners returned to China due to both government deportation efforts and the shipping slump during the recession (Shang, 1984; Benton and Gomez, 2008).

## The era of war and business: 1945-1980

### World War II and the catering trade

Like in World War I, the start of World War II saw thousands of Chinese sailors once again recruited as labourers, with Benton and Gomez (2008) estimating that there were as many as 20,000 Chinese seamen recruited to fight on Britain's western fronts. Many stayed in Liverpool during the war, revitalising the economy of Chinatown. However, the end of WWII demonstrated the same WWI pattern of "recruitment followed by repudiation," as the British government sought to remove the Chinese after they were no longer useful to the war effort (Benton and Gomez, 2008, p. 30). Crucially, those who were able to remain behind began to form the beginnings of the Chinese as a permanent community in the UK (Shang, 1984; Hsiao, 2020).

At the end of WWII, this new Chinese community abandoned seafaring and travel in favour of the catering trade, deftly filling a new market niche in a country that was emerging from the deprivations of war rationing with more disposable income and a taste for 'exotic' foods (Jones, 1979; Benton and Gomez, 2008; Hsiao, 2020). Shang (1984) describes the context for the restaurant boom:

The restaurant 'revolution' was novel in one respect. Previously, the early Chinatown restaurants catered for Chinese ship crews and students. But now, changing diets and conventions about eating-out in Britain increased the demand for Chinese food from the host community itself. Compared with some of the 'up-market' eating establishments at the time, Chinese restaurants were places where most people could afford to eat. (Shang, 1984, p. 14)

The success of the new Chinese restaurants and takeaways began to attract new Chinese immigrants to the UK, as they were introduced to the restaurant business through a network of community contacts forming "an informal system of chain migration" (Shang, 1984, p. 17).

By the 1970s, Chinese takeaways were quickly expanding across Britain, with Benton and Gomez (2008) reporting that they were "growing at the rate of three a week" (p. 121). This was made possible because of a few different factors. First, takeaways did not require a large space or great location to be successful,

and thus they did not need to spend significant money on rent, mortgage payments, or décor (Benton and Gomez, 2008). Furthermore, with the arrival of wives and children between 1963-1973, takeaways were able to be family-operated; parents and children worked in the kitchen and at the counter to cut down on personnel costs (Shang, 1984). The strong family presence also indicated that the Chinese community was truly beginning to settle down in the UK.

### **Illegal deportations**

At the end of WWII, the British government was looking for ways to remove thousands of Chinese sailors. Instead of going through legal channels, the Home Office created a secret program titled “Compulsory repatriation of undesirable Chinese seamen” (Hancox, 2021). The purpose of this program was to illegally deport Chinese sailors back to China, usually by force. As Hancox (2021) writes, “The secret repatriation campaign was not a placid or cooperative affair. Written records suggest that it was conducted as a manhunt. The phrase ‘roundup’ is used repeatedly in official correspondence.” Up to 2,000 men were forcibly deported and most of them were never able to return to the UK, leaving their families to believe that they had been abandoned by their husbands, fathers, and sons (Hancox, 2021; Haq, 2022; Loh *et al.*, 2023). Many of the left-behind children did not learn the truth until the 2000s, when the government program files were declassified and first-hand testimonies began appearing about the abductions and deportations (Hancox, 2021). The UK government finally acknowledged these forced deportations in 2022 (Haq, 2022).

## **The era of sovereignty and independence: 1980-present**

### **Hong Kong**

Hong Kong’s status as a British colony ended in 1997 when sovereignty was transferred back to China. Currently Hong Kong is a Special Administrative Region of China, and both UK and Chinese governments agreed in 1984 “that Hong Kong’s status as a free port, exchange market and international financial centre would be retained” for 50 years (Chan and Chan, 1997, p. 123). However, just a few years later in 1989, the violent anti-democracy actions taken by the Chinese government at Tiananmen Square led to the deaths of hundreds to

thousands of protesters; the actual number is still unknown due to heavy censoring by the Chinese government (History.com, 2022c). After the massacre, many Hongkongers expressed doubt that the Chinese government would abide by their agreement to honour the autonomy of Hong Kong. In response to their concerns, the British Nationality (Hong Kong) Act was passed in 1990, granting British citizenship to 50,000 Hong Kong residents (Chan and Chan, 1997; Benton and Gomez, 2008).

Even more recently, the Hong Kong British Nationals (Overseas) Welcome Programme was established in 2021, “providing British National (Overseas) (BN(O)) status holders from Hong Kong and their eligible dependants with the opportunity to come to the UK to live, study and work, on a pathway to citizenship” (Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022). It is reported that over 100,000 Hong Kong residents have applied for residency under this government scheme, with 105,200 Hongkongers arriving in the UK by the end of 2022 (Hawkins and James, 2023; Loh *et al.*, 2023). *The Guardian* calls this “one of the biggest waves of non-EU migration to the UK in postwar history” (Hawkins and James, 2023). Additionally, there are a number of Hongkongers who are ineligible for the BN(O) residency scheme but have fled the anti-democracy crackdown by claiming asylum in the UK. This is a far more precarious route than the BN(O) Programme, as “asylum seekers can expect to wait more than six months for a decision, with a refusal rate for Hongkongers of about 15%” (Hawkins and James, 2023).

### **Being British Chinese in the 21st century**

Despite the geographic scattering and isolation of the British Chinese community in the UK, the rise of the Internet created new opportunities for British Chinese people to ‘gather’ with one another in online spaces. Parker and Song (2007, 2009) highlight two websites which were particularly groundbreaking at this moment in time: The British Chinese Online and Dim Sum websites. These websites were mainly geared towards second-generation and British-born Chinese people, with multiple threads, chats, and debates that provided a “forum for deliberation connecting a group who would otherwise find it difficult to engage with one another” (Parker and Song, 2006, p. 197). For many individuals, these websites were their first opportunities to connect with other

British Chinese and share their experiences of racialisation in the UK, becoming an “important source of emotional support” and cathartic discussions (Parker and Song, 2006, p. 186).

Beyond emotional support, these websites also offered a new and unique platform for discussions about British Chinese identity, citizenship, and living in a multicultural society, making visible the negotiations of complex, hybrid identities. As Parker and Song (2007) argue:

Because of their geographical dispersal, the British Chinese have had more to gain from the adoption of the Internet as a communicative tool. Participation on the British Chinese Online and Dimsum sites has stimulated new forms of self-expression, collective identity formation and social action which have hitherto been largely absent. (Parker and Song, 2007, p. 1048)

Excitingly, the long-distance connections enabled by the Internet allowed for the British Chinese community to share and discuss their British Chinese-ness and thoughts on subjects such as community, racism, and growing in the UK. For some individuals, this marked the first time that they were able to ‘meet’ with other British Chinese and chat about these shared experiences (Parker and Song, 2007). Additionally, researchers noticed new identity orientations in these discussions, as a new generation of British Chinese began to concern themselves with the intricacies of “forging a long-term place in British society” rather than focusing only on the Chinese ‘homeland’ (Parker and Song, 2009, p. 600).

Unfortunately, both of these websites are no longer in existence, confirming Parker and Song’s (2009) hypothesis that it would be incredibly difficult to convert the momentum from these online ‘gatherings’ into long-term change and visibility for the British Chinese community, aptly arguing that “posting opinions on a message board is far easier than instituting a formal campaigning organization for British Chinese people” (p. 598).

Presently, the British Chinese community is a diverse group that includes students, working professionals, BNO-visa holders, asylum seekers, undocumented workers, and many more. Despite early Chinese presence in the UK, the British Chinese (and larger ESEA communities) are still not as well-



represented in research, politics, or popular culture as their Asian American counterparts. Shang (1984) argues that one reason for the difference in visibility can be traced back to the attitudes of the earliest Chinese sailors in the UK:

Despite the early history of the Chinese in Britain, it was only the post-war phase of migration which established the Chinese as a permanent community here. The early seamen saw themselves as 'sojourners' who, having saved enough money, would return to their home villages in southern China. Because of this lack of permanence, it took 100 years for Chinese associations to take root and proliferate in Britain. (Shang, 1984, p. 10)

But recently, the Covid-19 pandemic has directly influenced the creation of a new wave of more inclusive ESEA-interest organisations dedicated to raising awareness and combating the racism directed at ESEA people, and not just the Chinese (Yeh, 2020). The rise of these organisations points to an understanding that to truly speak against racialised violence like anti-Asian hate, the narrow label of 'Chinese' must be expanded to include "interethnic and interracial [organisations] that [transcend] the narrow politics of 'Chineseness'" (Yeh, 2020). Excitingly, the negotiations of British ESEA identities are happening right now across the UK.

### **The UK ESEA movement today**

Though there are now many existing organisations that claim the label ESEA, most of them were established within the last two or three years in response to the increase in anti-Asian hate during the Covid-19 epidemic, with a clear shift in mission as compared to some of the older organisations. While most of the older organisations, such as Hackney Chinese Community Services and the China Exchange, were dedicated to helping Chinese immigrants settle into life in the UK, the post-Covid community organisations are now dedicated to antiracism, representation, and the uplifting of a broader variety of ESEA voices and history.

Though each of these organisations have their own stated missions and goals, they have also formed networks and coalitions with one another when working on different initiatives, taking advantage of their extended grassroots networks to build momentum. For example, the UK's first ESEA Heritage Month took place

in September 2021, organised by the founders of Besea.n (Britain's East and Southeast Asian Network) and including a month-long programme that spotlighted several other ESEA organisations and small businesses. ESEA Heritage Month is currently still run by volunteers; it has not yet been officially recognised by the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Ng, 2021). However, its success speaks to the power of ESEA community organising, especially when compared to the US Asian Pacific Heritage Month which was first sponsored by politicians and endorsed by the president.

In addition to ESEA Heritage Month, there are also many other exciting ESEA initiatives currently in the works. For example, the brand-new ESEA Lit Fest began in September 2023, coinciding with ESEA Heritage Month. The ESEA Lit Fest was organised by the ESEA Publishing Network, another new community organisation formed by ESEA authors and publishers with the goal to “amplify the voices of east and south-east Asian writers and promote ESEA talent working across the UK publishing industry” (Shaffi, 2023). Yet another organisation, the ESEA Hub, is currently working with academics and scholars to create educational resources to teach university students about ESEA histories, also with the aim to coincide with ESEA Heritage Month in September (*ESEA Online Community Hub*, 2022). The ESEA Hub has also already worked with many other ESEA organisations on several different projects, with partnerships ranging from workshops investigating the impact of Covid-19 on ESEA communities to celebrating ESEA music and art. As Yeh, one of the founders, argues, these collaborations demonstrate that the term ESEA can allow for a pan-Asian cooperation that yields powerful results:

The mobilisation of “British East and Southeast Asian” as a form of identity-based politics can be an expansive force that opens up, rather than forestalls, solidarities across racial, gendered, sexual and ableist and other forms of oppression. ...This demonstrates further both the potential and challenges that a politics of love and care might have for building broader solidarities within and beyond British Chinese communities. (Yeh, 2021, p. 68)

It will be fascinating to see how the ESEA movement develops over time, especially as these organisations become more well-known and established. They

have the potential to shift the focus from the ‘British Chinese’ to a more inclusive conversation that includes all ESEA communities.

## **Stereotypes and Single Stories**

Historically, the British ESEA community has been subject to many of the same stereotypes as the Asian American community (i.e. the ‘yellow peril’ and the ‘model minority’). However, due to their different immigration timelines and the varying contexts of each country, there are specific stereotypes that have been applied to the British ESEAs: the ‘perpetual foreigner’ and the ‘dispensable commodity.’

### **Perpetual Foreigner (by Choice)**

In 1979 (the same decade where Asian Americans were forming pan-ethnic coalitions to fight for the inclusion of their history in university curriculums), Douglas Jones wrote an academic paper describing the origins of the Chinese in Britain (Jones, 1979). Though he accurately described the historical roots of the Chinese community, he made several sweeping assertions about the Chinese in the UK, describing their isolation and apparent refusals to acclimatise to British culture:

The Chinese in Britain were never concerned to develop social relationships outside their own closed communities and it is much the same today. Until recently they have regarded themselves as sojourners rather than settlers, resolutely maintaining their Chinese culture and continuing to identify with their kinsmen at home rather than with the host community... At present the Chinese are still not interested in assimilation: many do not even bother to learn English. (Jones, 1979, p. 398, 401)

Jones even goes so far as to claim that the goal of every Chinese person in the UK at the time was to make enough money to comfortably retire back home in China, calling the Chinese cemetery at Plaistow a “memorial to those who failed to achieve this ambition” (p. 398). This presumptuous claim to know the dreams of the deceased demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of how the British Chinese community had already changed from pre-WWII ‘sojourners’ to the established family restaurateurs of the 1970s and 80s. His conclusion that

the British Chinese community *chose* not to assimilate also simplifies the issue, ignoring a multitude of external factors that complicate this assessment.

The idea that the British Chinese simply chose not to integrate into UK society completely ignores the structural barriers that were in place to keep them from integrating and finding success outside of the Chinese community. For example, Pang and Lau (1998) contend that acknowledging structures such as stringent immigration laws in the 1960s and 70s are crucial to understanding the why the Chinese community seems to remain occupationally segregated to this day; one of the ways that the Chinese could continue migrating to the UK was by establishing “a ‘chain migration’...[or] an employment patronage system which served to channel new migrants directly into the Chinese catering industry” (Pang and Lau, 1998, p. 869). As newcomers faced a hostile new environment, they had to rely on the goodwill and support of those already established in the UK in order to survive. Thus, they entered “niche markets” such as laundry, catering, and takeaways out of necessity and availability, not choice (Pang and Lau, 1998, p. 868). The British Chinese community also faced disadvantages such as language gaps, the lack of political representation or power, and little to no resources outside of what the Chinese community provided.

### **“A dispensable commodity”**

The limited choices of the British Chinese have caused them to now be almost exclusively identified with the catering and takeaway industry. And as Chau and Yu (2001) argue, this may be contributing to the view that the British Chinese community exists to meet a market demand, and not as citizens with equal roles in society. Drawing on the history of British Chinese takeaways, Chau and Yu write, “Too much attention is given to them as a dispensable commodity, and this gives rise to difficulties in seeking recognition as normal members of the community” (p. 118). Moreover, they argue that Chinese restaurants and takeaways depend on Otherness to attract customers, which further complicates their ability to be seen as ‘normal’ citizens:

Visits to a Chinese restaurant and take-away are more than just for consumption of food; they are also a cultural adventure. As highlighted by Parker (1994: 624), the trade is based on ‘cultural difference’. The value for money of these visits is

measured not only by the quality of food, but also by how distinctive the experience is from the routine lunch or dinner. (Chau and Yu, 2001, p. 117)

These sentiments reflect, quite literally, hooks's (2015) arguments that commodity culture results in a process of 'eating the Other,' as "ethnicity becomes spice, [a] seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (p. 21). The danger with this attitude is that while it may seem like mainstream culture is seeking out, and even accepting, cross-cultural experiences, the commodification of Otherness enables a "consumer cannibalism" that devours the product without learning its history, effectively allowing the Other to be "eaten, consumed, and forgotten" (hooks, 2015, p. 31, 39). These cannibalistic practices allow Chinese food to be ubiquitously enjoyed while British Chinese history and culture are relegated to invisibility.

This commodity culture also contributes to the isolation of many British Chinese, especially when considering the context of the food industry. Researchers have noted that the Chinese population is especially widespread in the UK because they try to limit competition between restaurants and takeaways, resulting in a lack of community networks and support (Jones, 1979; Parker, 1994; Chau and Yu, 2001; Benton and Gomez, 2008; Yeh, 2014, 2018). This results in "double social exclusion," meaning that British Chinese "are not fully integrated into the social mainstream and (for financial reasons) maintain a distance from each other" (Chau and Yu, 2001, p. 120). Their geographical isolation makes it difficult to support each other and to form coalitions to break into British society.

Yeh (2014) also argues that the prevalence of the takeaway narrative has obscured aspects of the British Chinese community that do not fit with this stereotype, rendering them invisible. She writes that due to the overarching narrative of industry and takeaways, British Chinese are seen as having "a machine-like capacity for work but an inherent lack of creativity, which constructs them as essentially 'Other'" and excludes them from joining social and cultural arenas (Yeh, 2014, p. 1207). This again points to the systemic exclusion of British ESEAs from society, not only when they fit into the stereotypes but also when they try and disprove them. Furthermore, Saha (2021) explains that the media plays a large role in this exclusion by creating socially

constructed narratives that shape public beliefs about the ‘Other,’ writing, “Rather than [viewing] media as merely misrepresenting or distorting the realities of minorities, the representation of race is better understood as a form of power/knowledge that constitutes what we understand as *real*” (p. 21, my emphasis). Kam (2021) describes how this plays out on television in her essay “Beyond ‘Good’ Immigrants”:

Everyone I spoke to for this essay voiced annoyance or puzzlement at the lack of East Asians in British media who weren’t stereotypes. From illegal immigrants in *Casualty* to Triad members in *Sherlock*, hardly anyone writing for the British screen (or book) seems capable of imagining British East Asians as British. If we’re not villains à la Fu Manchu, we’re delicate women who need saving, usually by white men (Gemma Chan in *Sherlock*), or comedy material. (Kam, 2021, p. 95)

Thus, it becomes a vicious cycle: the stereotypes associated with British ESEAs (the takeaway narrative being a prominent example) are adopted and disseminated by the media, making the stereotypes even more immutable to the British public. These constructions of reality create ‘single stories’ that leave little room for new and updated narratives, highlighting the “structural inequalities” that enable dominant groups to dictate who gets to be British, and who does not (Yeh, 2018, p. 8).

### **Model Minority**

As previously mentioned in the American context, the model minority myth seems to be a positive portrayal of British ESEAs; however, it only serves to reinforce perceived difference and Otherness. In fact, Kam (2021) argues that the model minority label strips away the humanity of British ESEAs, reducing individuals to two-dimensional stereotypes: “We’re not seen as human, because we never get to be complex individuals. Our defining characteristic is generally our foreignness” (p. 95). This creates another vicious cycle: promising acceptance if one becomes a model minority, but instead alienating British ESEAs even further. This can be seen in how the model minority stereotype plays out in British schools, where British ESEAs are often considered to be ideal pupils (Archer and Francis, 2005b, 2005a; Mau, 2014; Yeh, 2014, 2018; Francis, Archer and Mau, 2017). In interviews with 30 teachers in London, Archer and Francis

(2005b) found that teachers overwhelmingly considered British Chinese pupils to be quiet, hard-working, and industrious. As one interviewee says about British Chinese boys, “They never go off the rails, so to speak, in the same way that boys of other ethnic groups do...” (p. 169). However, this perception of ESEA students emphasises their Otherness, as their success is often characterised as the ‘wrong’ way to achieve. Wong (2015) gives some examples of this contradiction: British ESEA students are hardworking, *but* they should engage more in class because they are too quiet. They have strong familial support, *but* their families pressure them too much to succeed. Their parents never have to be called on to correct misbehaviour, *but* they do not take enough of an interest in their child’s academics. The model minority stereotype also hides the racism and bullying that British ESEA students may face from other students, as well as the intense pressure and shame they may feel from not meeting high expectations (Archer and Francis, 2005b; Wong, 2015; Francis, Archer and Mau, 2017).

Furthermore, Mau (2014) interviewed 38 British Chinese young people (33 of whom were born in the UK) and found these students reported a high participation rate in extracurricular school activities and supportive parents that defied the “tiger mother” stereotype (p. 117). Additionally, many of them “confidently asserted their right to be and feel both British and Chinese,” pointing to their embracing of a hybrid identity that encompasses more than takeaways and academic excellence. However, Mau also stresses how these young people are still trapped by the model minority stereotype, which highlights their visible minority and labels them as the perpetual foreigner. For example, they report being asked to “perform their Otherness on demand” by speaking Chinese or being asked to be the spokesperson for various cultural events (p. 122). She concludes:

Racial stereotypes and racism, as well as simplistic, essentialised notions of Britishness and Chineseness tied to dominant discourses in ‘race’ and ‘culture’, continue to position these young people as racialised Others and perpetual outsiders, no matter how settled, ‘integrated’ and academically successful they have become. (Mau, 2014, p. 124)

Ultimately, just like in American society, the COVID-19 pandemic brought all these unconscious, conflicting narratives to the surface of British society. In 2020, the Home Office documented a 300% increase in anti-Asian hate crimes, with 267 attacks recorded between January and March (Mercer, 2020; Chong, 2021). And as Sarah Owens, the first British Chinese woman MP, has argued, the UK media added to this rise in anti-Asian attacks by continually including stock photos of ESEAs in their news reports, even when the stories were not about Asia. Owens asserts, “COVID is being given a face, and it’s the face of an East Asian person wearing a mask” (Phillips, 2020). Ultimately, these racist acts were an inevitable consequence of the model minority myth, which Kam (2021) describes as “code for being on perpetual probation” (p. 95). British ESEAs are held up as ‘good’ examples until the narrative flips to reveal that even becoming the model minority will not save you from being targeted for being ‘Other.’

## **Conclusion**

As demonstrated in this brief overview, the histories, contexts, and trajectories of the Asian American and British ESEA diasporic communities in the US and the UK are tremendously different. This has resulted in a wide variety of experiences, culminating in crucial differences in the individual and communal identities of young ESEA people in both countries. Despite this, certain stereotypes such as the ‘model minority’ can be seen in both the US and the UK, demonstrating an enduring and overarching narrative of Otherness regardless of country and context.



## Chapter Four: Diaspora and Hybridity

### Literature Review

Two key concepts emerged as crucial in constructing a theoretical framework for my research study about the identities of Asian American and British ESEA young people: diaspora and hybridity. Indeed, the participants themselves colloquially referenced these concepts many times in their research responses, necessitating an overview of these terms to situate their responses within the academic literature. Thus, in this chapter I explain both concepts and their shifting definitions, as well as their relevance in US and UK society today.

### Diaspora

According to Merriam-Webster, the term ‘diaspora’ has two main definitions. The first definition specifically refers to the dispersion of the Jewish people in both ancient and modern times. The term has since expanded into the second definition, which broadly includes:

- a. people settled far from their ancestral homelands
- b. the place where these people live
- c. the movement, migration, or scattering of a people away from an established or ancestral homeland (Definition of DIASPORA, 2023)

Most scholars would agree that the concept of ‘diaspora’ is different from ‘migration’ or ‘transnationalism,’ to name just a few other terms. However, there is less agreement on the actual definition or characteristics of a diaspora.

#### First definitions of diaspora

The first usage of the term ‘diaspora’ in an academic context was in John Armstrong’s 1976 paper “Mobilized and Proletarian Diasporas” (Armstrong, 1976). Realising that there were a growing number of diasporic examples that move beyond the archetypal Jewish diaspora, Armstrong attempts to create a typology of diasporas, focusing on how they exist within, and interact with,

multiethnic polities. He first identifies two types: the “proletarian diaspora” and the “mobilized diaspora” (Armstrong, 1976, p. 393). Armstrong claims that the “proletarian diaspora” is more disadvantaged than a “mobilized,” which benefits as a more sophisticated group that can engage in a mutually beneficial exchange system with the dominant groups of a country. Optimistically, Armstrong writes that this exchange system usually takes precedence over a “conflict model,” which only occurs on the rare occasion when dominant groups use force to oppress and coerce members of the diaspora (p. 394).

Armstrong also identifies two subtypes of diaspora, “the *archetypal diaspora*” and “the *situational diaspora*,” writing that the difference is the permanence of the first versus the temporariness of the second (p. 394). He uses the Jewish diaspora as an archetypal example, explaining the importance of how they use religion to maintain distinct boundaries as an ethnic group. This is contrasted with other groups such as the Chinese or Eastern European Germans, who are less attached to religion and therefore assimilate more easily into dominant cultures (p. 395).

### **Diaspora and homeland**

In contrast to Armstrong’s focus on religion and secularity as driving forces within a diaspora, Safran (1991) defines a diaspora through its relationship with its homeland:

they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a **specific original “center”** to two or more “peripheral,” or foreign, regions; 2) they retain a **collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland**—its physical location, history, and achievements; 3) they believe that they are not—and perhaps cannot be—fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; 4) **they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home** and as the place to which **they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return**—when conditions are appropriate; 5) they believe that they should, collectively, be **committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland** and to its safety and prosperity; and 6) they continue to **relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland** in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are

importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship. (Safran, 1991, pp. 83-84, my emphasis)

For Safran, a diaspora can never be free of its homeland. In this sense, a diaspora is only meant to be a temporary state of exile; its ultimate goal is always to return to the homeland, thereby dissolving itself in favour of re-joining the “original center” (p. 83). Safran argues that even in cases where return is largely impossible (i.e. the homeland no longer exists), the longing for return still functions as a unifying story for the diasporic community and “[makes] life more tolerable by holding out a utopia...that stands in contrast to the perceived dystopia in which actual life is lived” (p. 94). This definition of diaspora downplays the progress of diasporic communities as they move away (in distance and time) from the point of origin, instead emphasising the circularity of the diaspora narrative.

### **Diaspora, hybridity, and the non-centre**

While Safran stressed that the mythical homeland was the centre of the diaspora, a group of postcolonial scholars began to argue for a more expansive vision of the diaspora, stressing the importance of the ‘non-centre’ and cultural hybridity.

Hall (2021b) emphasises these concepts in his essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” arguing that diasporic identity cannot be limited to historical origins because identity, like history, is always changing. Rebutting Safran’s arguments about the homeland as the true diasporic home, Hall contends that a true return is impossible because both the homeland and the individual are irrevocably changed at the point of separation, with any relationship hereafter being a combination of “memory, fantasy, narrative and myth” (p. 226). Using the Caribbean diaspora as an example, Hall explains how this separation results in an unavoidable difference that is noticeable upon return:

Difference, therefore, persists - in and alongside continuity. To return to the Caribbean after any long absence is to experience again the shock of the ‘doubleness’ of similarity and difference... It is a profound difference of culture and history. And the difference *matters*. It positions Martiniquains and Jamaicans as *both* the same *and* different. Moreover, the boundaries of

difference are continually repositioned in relation to different points of reference. (Hall, 2021b, p. 227)

According to Hall, it is this positioning between both sameness and difference that defines the diasporic experience. It gives the diaspora a distinct identity, allowing for the inevitable changes that come with time and enabling a path forward instead of always looking back.

This stance of positioning also enables diasporic communities and individuals to reclaim some agency in how they choose to identify and be identified. Instead of letting history and homeland define the diaspora, Hall takes the view that “identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past,” thus leading to a conversation between diaspora and homeland as well as an interplay of defining and being defined (p. 225). It is here that Hall introduces the concept of hybridity to capture the relationship between simultaneous sameness and difference, countering essentialist ideas that diaspora identities must be unchanging and fixed:

The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. (Hall, 2021b, p. 235)

For Hall, being a part of the diaspora means that one can constantly change and position oneself anew. Thus, he argues that difference is not only important, but is in fact crucial to the process of developing diaspora identities.

Gilroy agrees that difference is a fundamental aspect of a diaspora but cautions against altogether dismissing the reality and importance of any lingering connections to the past. Moreover, he claims that pitting these two viewpoints against each other only results in them becoming “locked in a symbiotic and entirely fruitless relationship” (Gilroy, 1991, p. 124). Instead, he calls for a flexible understanding of how ideas of essentialism and difference work together

to form culture and identity, pointing particularly to how traditions can be a unifying force, even while being reinvented. Using African diaspora music as an example, he writes, “New ‘traditions’ are invented in the jaws of modern experience, and new conceptions of modernity are produced in the long shadow of our enduring traditions” (Gilroy, 1991, p. 126). Gilroy acknowledges that new traditions will inevitably develop with time; however, these new traditions will unavoidably be influenced by the “enduring traditions” of a past that bleeds into the present.

Gilroy also echoes Hall’s concept of hybrid diasporic identity, writing that diaspora identity is “creolized, syncretized, hybridized, and impure,” not easily sorted into categories or labelled (Gilroy, 1994, p. 211). Emphasising how the endless iterations of tradition across the diaspora create a “changing same,” he explains:

The same is retained without being reified. It is almost absolutely recombinant, ceaselessly re-processed in the glow of its own dying embers around which we cluster to warm our hands. It is maintained and modified in what becomes a determinedly non-traditional tradition, for this is not tradition as closed or simple repetition. Invariably promiscuous and unsystematically profane, diaspora challenges us to apprehend mutable itinerant culture. It suggests the complex, dynamic potency of living memory: more embodied than inscribed. (Gilroy, 1994, p. 212)

According to Gilroy, diaspora identity is nearly impossible to describe; it is an embodied and lived experience that is unique for each individual and larger community, thus defying concrete definitions and parameters. Time and repetition play a large role, as homeland traditions are repeated, recombined, and modified in infinite combinations. Ultimately, the only way to make sense of a diaspora identity is to live it “as a coherent (if not always stable) experiential sense of self” (Gilroy, 1991, p. 127). Any attempts to define this lived experience would limit a diaspora’s expansive potential.

Clifford adds that a diasporic individual’s lived experiences are rooted in specific cultures, homelands, traditions, and histories (Clifford, 1994). Each person represents a personal diaspora that is unique to them and their own contexts.

Accordingly, Clifford asserts, “Thus historicized, diaspora cannot become a master trope or ‘figure’ for modern, complex, or positional identities, crosscut and displaced by race, sex, gender, class, and culture” (Clifford, 1994, p. 319). All diasporas have their origins in specific historical circumstances, and all members of the diaspora are shaped by the nuances in their identities; it is the intersection of all these different contexts and identities that makes circumscribing a diaspora so difficult. Therefore, Clifford argues that “identifications not identities [and] acts of relationship rather than pre-given forms” are a better way to characterise a diaspora and diasporic subjects (p. 321). His argument recalls Hall’s (2021b) concept of identity positioning itself in history; the significance is in how one positions and identifies oneself within the diaspora and in the relationships, past and present, that continue to shape diasporic networks and individuals.

Clifford also focuses on how diasporas are being expressed in their present locations outside of the homeland, contending that diasporas are no longer concerned with the ‘purity’ of the homeland ideal. Rather, diasporas are searching for ways to be both the same and different when it comes to nationality; to be *hybrid*. He describes how this contradiction plays out in the landscape of the Black British diaspora:

And the black diaspora culture currently being articulated in postcolonial Britain is concerned to struggle for different ways to be “British” - ways to stay and be different, to be British *and something else* complexly related to Africa and the Americas, to shared histories of enslavement, racist subordination, cultural survival, hybridization, resistance, and political rebellion. Thus the term *diaspora* is a signifier, not simply of transnationality and movement, but of political struggles to define the local, as distinctive community, in historical contexts of displacement. (Clifford, 1994, p. 308)

This struggle to define the local through the historical, and vice versa, calls for more inclusive notions of nationality and belonging, which can bring diasporic communities into conflict with traditionally conservative ideas of citizenship and nation.

And while Hall and Gilroy see this fluidity as a way to fully express multiple facets of identity while jumping between sameness and difference, Clifford posits that this hybridity is not so easily developed and is formed instead through struggle. He writes, “Diaspora cultures thus mediate, in a *lived tension*, the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place” (Clifford, 1994, p. 311, my emphasis). This “lived tension” describes a similar experience to Gilroy’s (1994) “changing same,” but emphasises the often-laborious work of reconciling diaspora identities (p. 212). Though Clifford does not idolise the ‘homeland’ ideal as much as Safran (1991) does, he does acknowledge its inevitable impact on diasporic development, especially when diaspora communities are fighting to maintain aspects of their distinct identities.

Dufoix (2008) takes the work of Hall, Gilroy, and Clifford and groups their ideas together in what he calls “oxymoronic definitions” of diaspora (p. 23). He describes the ‘oxymoronic’ diaspora as focusing on the paradoxes of identity and hybridity rather than fixed binaries such as “continuity/rupture [and] center/periphery” (p. 24). According to Dufoix, this category allows for an understanding that the diaspora can encompass a multitude of identities, viewpoints, and locations without contradictions.

### **‘Diaspora space’ and narrative**

Brah (1996) takes these ideas about hybridity, difference, and the struggle to define diaspora identities and forms them into an overarching concept she calls “diaspora space.” She writes, “Diaspora space is the point at which boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of ‘us’ and ‘them,’ are contested” (p. 209). This idea of ‘contestation’ is very much present in the previously discussed theories. However, what differentiates Brah’s concept is that this space is occupied by both those who have migrated *and* those who are already there; it is “the site where *the native is as much a diasporian as the diasporian is the native*” (p. 209). Thus, the struggle for diasporic definition encompasses both minority and majority groups in a process that changes them both. Additionally, Brah asserts that this change does not necessarily need to include dominant groups at all; minority groups can interact and shape each other within the diaspora space in a mutual transformation that excludes the

host society and its members. Using England as an example, Brah argues that it is a diaspora space where “African-Caribbean, Irish, Asian, Jewish and other diasporas intersect among themselves as well as with the entity constructed as ‘Englishness’, thoroughly re-inscribing it in the process” (p. 209). In other words, the place (and people) of destination is just as impacted by the migrant diasporic communities as minority communities are shaped by dominant culture, challenging the binary discourse of dominating/dominated groups.

Finally, Brah argues that narratives and storytelling are at the crux of these diasporic intersections of identity, as each person’s story contributes to a larger communal narrative that shapes and re-shapes itself. She describes this process of gathering and integrating stories as a crucial part of the diaspora, writing:

This means that these multiple journeys may configure into one journey via a *confluence of narratives* as it is lived and re-lived, produced, reproduced and transformed through individual as well as collective memory and re-memory. It is within this confluence of narrativity that ‘diasporic community’ is differently imagined under different historical circumstances. By this I mean that the identity of the diasporic imagined community is far from fixed or pre-given. It is constituted within the crucible of the materiality of everyday life; in the everyday stories we tell ourselves individually and collectively. (Brah, 1996, p. 183)

Thus, a diaspora is not only defined through lived experience and context, but also by how those living in the diaspora tell the stories of their experiences and journeys. For Brah, stories are one of the fundamental ways that diasporic individuals can position themselves within, as well as be positioned by, a larger historical narrative. They are part of the new traditions that Gilroy (1991) sees as a link between the past and the future, as “individual and collective memories collide, reassemble and reconfigure” in diaspora space (Brah, 1996, p. 193).

### **New constructions of diaspora**

Brubaker’s (2005) article “The ‘diaspora’ diaspora” reignited debate around how to categorise and define diasporas in the new century. Brubaker’s main argument was that the term ‘diaspora’ had become so inclusive and broad that



it now effectively described nothing. He argues, “If everyone is diasporic, then no one is distinctively so. The term loses its discriminating power - its ability to pick out phenomena, to make distinctions. The universalization of diaspora, paradoxically, means the disappearance of diaspora” (Brubaker, 2005, p. 3). He consequently identifies three components that a diaspora must include: dispersion (usually across state borders), continued orientation towards a homeland, and boundary-maintenance as a community within a larger host society. He acknowledges that this point of boundary-maintenance is at odds with earlier stances in the literature on hybridity and “boundary-erosion,” but maintains that it is important to question how unique diasporic communities can form if they are endlessly reinvented and hybridised (p. 6). Alternatively, he also questions how a diasporic entity can exist when entities such as ‘nation’ and ‘culture’ are increasingly subject to deconstruction (p. 12).

Ultimately, Brubaker contends that the thinking around diasporas should be reconfigured, arguing that ‘diaspora’ should be considered as a “category of practice” rather than a “category of analysis...[which] does not so much *describe* the world as seek to *remake* it” (p. 12). As there is usually not even agreement within a diaspora on how to define itself, Brubaker argues that it is in fact more accurate to use a diaspora as “category of practice” to analyse the struggles within diasporic communities. Subsequently, there would be no presupposition that the diaspora is already a coherent, bounded group that can be examined and defined. Instead, the significance would be found in the process and positioning of what it means to be a diaspora.

Alexander (2017) responds directly to this stance in her article “Beyond the ‘The ‘diaspora’ diaspora”: a response to Rogers Brubaker.” While acknowledging the importance of Brubaker’s stance, she also takes issue with his blanket conclusions about the diaspora “in practice.” First, Alexander argues that Brubaker prioritises the impact of the place of arrival on the diaspora while overlooking the implications of the diasporic point of origin, leading to several unanswered questions about the reasons why people leave their homes. Recognising that a complete understanding of diaspora must encompass both ends of the migratory process, she asks, “How might we build into diaspora theory a recognition that places of origin are not simple points of departure but

an integral part of the ongoing process of transformation that diaspora entails?” (Alexander, 2017, p. 1548). This echoes Brah’s (1996) discussion on the importance of context, as she asks, “The question is not simply about *who travels* but *when, how, and under what circumstances?*” (p. 182). The answers to this question can provide crucial insights into how and why diasporas are created, sustained, and transformed.

Alexander also critiques Brubaker’s lack of understanding of how the concept of diaspora might differ from other concepts such as migration, as well as his decontextualization of the diaspora. She emphasises the traumatic elements of “flight and enforced scattering” often included in current definitions of diaspora, arguing that complete conceptualisations of diaspora must include a reckoning with the invisible structures of inclusion and exclusion and power imbalances (p. 1550). Thus, Alexander reiterates the importance of recognising that all diasporic subjects are impacted and shaped by their specific historical and cultural contexts. Ultimately, she calls for future diaspora studies to focus on reconnecting “the complex engagements between ‘here’ and ‘there’, while recognizing that neither places of origin nor arrival remain unchanged through this process” (Alexander, 2017, p. 1553).

Berns-McGown (2008) echoes this sentiment, asserting that a diaspora is primarily an imaginary space of connections. She writes, “To be in the diaspora is to perceive oneself as linked to multiple places and to hold a complex identity that balances one’s understanding of those places and the way one fits into each of them” (Berns-McGown, 2008, p. 9). She identifies the two main connections as being to the ‘homeland’ or point of origin and to the wider society and community that the diasporic individual now calls home; she also emphasises that the nuance of these connections will inevitably change as people reconcile and integrate their multiple contexts together. She writes:

People combine a worldview, or framework for understanding themselves, their society, their culture, etc., that they held before they arrived with the worldview or framework for understanding self-and-society that they encounter when they arrive someplace new. It is a process, effectively, of *weaving two worldviews* together... One doesn’t lose one’s old culture or have it replaced by a new one; one combines cultures and world-views in ways that are,

unsurprisingly, complex and constantly shifting. (Berns-McGown, 2008, p. 16, my emphasis)

This process of “weaving two worldviews together” fits neatly into Dufoix’s (2008) category of an ‘oxymoronic’ diaspora which encourages and allows for hybridity and difference. Berns-McGown recognises the importance of both sides of the diasporic trajectory, not just as separate entities but as a powerful blend of frameworks and cultures created and expressed by the diaspora.

## **Hybridity**

The concept of hybridity has been mentioned several times already, as it is inextricably intertwined with diaspora. This section will further explore the different aspects of hybridity, as well as how hybridity is at work today.

### **Hybrid identities and liminality**

Bhabha (2004), a crucial thinker in this area, recognises both the dichotomies between the self and the collective as well as the constructed conflict between ‘us vs. them.’ His answer is the concept of hybridity, which he explains is “not a third term that resolves the tension between two cultures” but rather the openness to explore ever-changing representations and identities (p. 162). He makes it clear that hybridity itself is not a new definition or label but should be a flexible space between fixed representations, writing:

Hybridity is a gesture of translation that keeps open the question of [identity] - not open in the facile sense of there being “no closure” but in the revisionary sense that these questions of home, identity, belonging are always open to negotiation, to be posed again from elsewhere, to become iterative, interrogative processes rather than imperative, identitarian designations. (Bhabha, 1997, p. 3)

Bhabha’s emphasis on the “iterative, interrogative process” is crucial to this understanding of hybridity as a liminal state that captures the “experience of ambiguity and in-between-ness,” upsetting the border between assimilation and essentialism (Beech, 2011, p. 288). And in this liminal space, Beech (2011) argues that the individual can undergo identity work in three different ways:

experimentation (constructing and ‘testing’ an identity), reflection (questioning self-identity based on the views of others), and recognition (reacting to an externally projected identity). Accordingly, the power of hybridity lies in its ability to disrupt a seemingly resolute dichotomy and enter a space of identity construction (Ang, 2001; Bhabha, 2004, 2013).

Importantly, the postcolonial context also plays a fundamental role in establishing the openness of hybridity. Because of the increasingly interconnected nature of a postcolonial world, Bhabha asserts that there can no longer be no such thing as a pure cultural identity. Thus, hybridity and hybrid identities are necessary as a “complex, on-going *negotiation* that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation” (Bhabha, 2004, p. 3, my emphasis). This thinking is echoed in Hall’s (2021b) descriptions of diaspora and hybridity as mediation and change, describing cultural identity as so complex and intricate that it cannot be reduced to shared experiences or static references between people with common ancestry; it is “not an essence but a *positioning*” that is negotiated between history and future difference (p. 261). Gilroy (1987) agrees, arguing that culture is not “fixed and impermeable;” rather, it is always in the process of changing, developing, and dispersing as history progresses (p. 294).

In fact, Hall complicates the false dichotomy between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ not by highlighting similarities, but by further asserting difference *within* each group. He first establishes that the concept of cultural identity can no longer be defined through straightforward categories of nationality or race, as these are often based on the idea of a shared, unchanging history. This is evident within immigrant communities that share language, religion, and some social customs, but still have fluid experiences within different contexts and shifting realities (Bhabha, 2004; Holliday, 2010; Hall, 2021d). This difference is often most noticeable within different generations, though it is present everywhere. This mixed element is a crucial part of “diaspora identities,” which are hybrid identities “constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (Hall, 2021b). Accordingly, the language of openness, mediation, and change are foundational to the concept of hybridity.

## Hybridity and 'fixity'

This language of change and future difference speaks directly to Fabian's (2014) "denial of coevalness," which is a technique used in stories told about the Other to emphasise their archaic differences and stagnant nature (p. 31). When reading these stories, the reader infers that the Othered groups are locked into static roles, traditions, and behaviours and do not adapt as time moves on. Hybridity is directly opposed to this view, as it asserts that change and difference are both unavoidable and undefinable. Bhabha (2004) contends that this is why stereotypes fall flat and are incapable of a true portrayal, writing, "The stereotype...is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation" (p. 107). Thus, even though stereotypes can sometimes contain elements of truth, they can never fully capture the experiences of a growing individual or a changing community; they are the antithesis to hybrid identities. Mizutani (2013) makes this connection explicitly, stating, "The concept of hybridity can most aptly be characterized as challenging the 'temporal dimension' of colonial discourse: its logic of permanent presence, or of never-changing identity" (p. 36). This is a crucial point, as it allows for the possibility of evolution and adaptation as peoples and cultures come together, as well as for this change to be seen as a natural (and even beneficial) consequence of these overlapping experiences.

Building on Mizutani's argument, Drichel (2008) posits that the concept of hybridity not only challenges stereotypes fixed in time but is only made possible through temporality and the passage of itself. She argues that a hybridity without temporality quickly becomes a fixed ontological construct that is defined in a narrow and unchanging way, turning into its own form of stereotyping and limited representations. The solution, for Drichel, is *performative* hybridity, where agency is found through reclaimed and repeated performances of Otherness over time:

The gap between repetitions implicit in a temporal understanding of hybridity separates one idealizing act from the next and offers a 'temporal space' for a hesitation - a 'perhaps' - to take hold between affirming repetitions... Without the 'perhaps', ontological structures, like the stereotype, could be endlessly - and mechanically - repeated. (Drichel, 2008, p. 608)

This “perhaps,” composed of repetitions over time from hybrid communities, is what imbues hybridity with the enabling openness that allows for negotiation and change. Bhabha (2004) uses the metaphor of a stairwell to make this same point, writing, “The hither and thither of the stairwell, the *temporal movement* and passage it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities [and] opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity...” (p.5, my emphasis). Consequently, this “temporal movement” is key to keeping hybridity from becoming yet another permanent form of representation.

### **Hybridity and power dynamics**

Although hybridity’s emphasis on change and openness can be a very attractive alternative to essentialized identities or forced assimilation, there can also be a danger in its uncritical acceptance, especially without considering societal power dynamics. It is necessary to grapple with questions of how cultures come into contact to fully understand the dimensions of hybridity and to investigate who shapes these hybrid identities. As Shohat (1992) argues, “If not articulated in conjunction with questions of hegemony and neo-colonial power relations, [a celebration of hybridity] runs the risk of appearing to sanctify the fait accompli of colonial violence” (p. 109). Furthermore, the current conversation around hybridity rarely delves into the possibility of different forms of hybridity, like the literature differentiates between different forms of diaspora and diasporic thought. For example, the label of hybridity can refer to “forced assimilation, internalized self-rejection, political cooptation, social conformism, cultural mimicry, and creative transcendence,” in addition to the idealistic forms of self-determined and negotiated hybridity espoused by Bhabha (Shohat, 1992, p. 110). Because of these nuances, it can be harmful to indiscriminately apply the label of ‘hybrid’ on every example of cultural mixing, claiming that all modern cultures are already inevitably hybrid due to the interconnected nature of the world today. This attitude ignores the fact that historically, peoples and cultures have never been equal (Coombes, 1994; Ang, 2001).

Additionally, hybridity’s openness does not mean that cultures and communities, especially those which have been historically oppressed, can never look backwards to the past. Such an overemphasis on hybridity’s transformative nature can also be harmful if it prohibits any sort of backwards movement, as

referenced in Bhabha's stairwell metaphor. For communities impacted by violent colonisations and forced change, Shohat (1992) posits that the past is not a static stereotype but a necessary starting point from which to begin creating communal and hybrid identities and warns against an "anti-essentialist condescension" that looks down on the yearning to re-discover a shared past (p. 110). She asserts, "In such cases, the assertion of culture prior to conquest forms part of the fight against continuing forms of annihilation" (p. 110).

Consequently, theorists and critics fighting for the concept of hybridity must also interrogate their own biases against forms of hybridity that are strongly linked to the past, resisting the urge to define strict parameters for what it means to be 'truly' hybrid.

### **Hybridity as necessary**

This is why, in the face of conflict and division, society cannot simply emphasise the commonalities that bind humans together and the individuality of each person. Drichel (2008) contends that though this type of thinking appears to look beyond culture, ethnicity, gender, and other defining labels to find something universally human, it in fact uses the "white European middle-class male as its model for the construction of a universal notion of 'Man'" (p. 594). If our common humanity is in fact merely humanity defined by the dominant power, an emphasis on the individual cannot respond to discourses that are rooted within questions about collective identity. When the power structures behind these definitions are not interrogated, this can re-Other those in the minority when they do not fit into the pre-ascribed norms (Shohat, 1992; Coombes, 1994; Drichel, 2008). However, a pure emphasis on the collective also cannot fully capture the intricacies of how people express themselves differently within cultural and ethnic traditions, as this carries the danger of reducing everyone to essentialized stereotypes (Bhabha, 2004; Hall, 2021c, 2021a).

Thus, hybridity is a necessary practice for living in an interconnected world, in order to achieve Hall's (2021d) vision of "a common and, if possible, a just life together" amongst and between many different cultures, communities, histories, and contexts (p. 411). Ang (2001) echoes this call in her concept of "living together-in-difference" (p. 194). Acknowledging that this is neither a simple nor easy task, she nonetheless argues that "[hybridity's] very

ambivalence is a source of cultural permeability and vulnerability which... is a necessary condition for living together-in-difference” (p. 194). It is hybridity’s openness and flexibility which allows for the vital negotiations betwixt and between different communities. This form of critical hybridity, through a “process of boundary-blurring transculturation,” can be a powerful force to disrupt fixed dichotomies and unequal power dynamics (Ang, 2001, p. 198). Ultimately, as Bhabha (2004) says, the only way to form a truly international culture is to focus on a culture’s hybridity: “It is the ‘inter’ - the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *inbetween* space - that carries the burden of the meaning of culture” (p. 56).

## **Diaspora, hybridity, and national identity**

The temporal aspects of diaspora and hybridity come directly into conflict with the national myth-making practices discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, as national myths are often rooted in unchanging and shared history and tradition (Anderson, 2000). For instance, at larger societal and national levels, ideas such as ‘American’ or ‘British’ identity are becoming more complicated and diverse as the world becomes more interconnected and superdiverse. According to statistics from the 2021 UK Census:

- The number of UK residents identifying as “White” decreased by nearly 5%, from 86.0% in 2011 to 81.7% in 2021
- The “Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh” category had the largest increase in percentage from 2011, from 7.5% to 9.35%
- The percentage of mixed households (identifying as two or more ethnicities) increased from 8.7% in 2011 to 10.1% (Office for National Statistics, 2022)

Additionally, the census revealed that 52.9% of the total City of London population is born outside the UK and 33.1% of the City of London do not identify with UK national identity (a dramatic increase from 25.4% in 2011) (Office for National Statistics, 2023). But despite these changing demographics, it is still clear that there are large groups of people within dominant traditions that are



unwilling to accept a more inclusive, hybrid definition of national identity, vehemently defending an exclusive and singular idea of citizenship.

For example, Tuhiwai Smith (2021) points out that hybridities within Indigenous groups and cultures are often not welcome or accepted in mainstream society, as they do not fit into predetermined stereotypes and narratives. Reflecting on how claims of ‘authenticity’ are weaponised against Indigenous communities, she writes, “At the heart of such a view of authenticity is a belief that Indigenous cultures cannot change, cannot recreate themselves and still claim to be Indigenous. Nor can they be complicated, internally diverse or contradictory” (p. 84). Mizutani’s (2013) reflections on the experiences of mixed-race Eurasians in British-occupied India also question this idea of ‘authenticity,’ arguing that the hybrid Eurasian population subverted the myth of the all-powerful and pure Englishman, demonstrating the benefits of evolution in a new setting. Thus, despite the British Empire’s previous call for Englishmen to adapt to their new environments, British colonisers soon adopted the new myth that any kind of change from the norm demonstrated “the inevitability of degeneration” and resulted in weakness and regression (Mizutani, 2013, p. 32). This recalls Said’s (2003) critique of ‘us and them’ narratives as a historical example of how groups in power truly believed that they were so distinct from the Other that prolonged contact and mixing led to the deterioration of their own natures. Consequently, the multifaceted Other establishes a presence in ‘our’ spaces only through a process of struggle, often using stories of their own to powerfully contradict this myopic view of identity.

In the current UK context, there are many British authors such as Patrice Lawrence, Alex Wheatle, and Bali Rai who write expansive, inclusive stories that represent minority ethnic and hybrid experiences in the UK (Ramdarshan Bold, 2019a). However, these experiences can often be categorised as a niche ethnic experience, rather than as an example of hybrid national identity. As Rai explains, “In 2002, I saw copies of *(Un)arranged Marriage* in a Waterstones in Birmingham. However, I did not find them on the regular fiction shelves. They were only shelved under ‘Writing from Black and Asian Britain’” (Rai, quoted in Ramdarshan Bold, 2019, p. 113). Clearly, attempts to centre hybridity and hybrid experiences can lead to brutal backlash from those who cannot accept

deviations from the traditional narrative. Things are very much still the same as when Hall (2021d) once remarked about Paul Johnson's essay "In Praise of Being British," published in the Daily Mail in October 2000: "I note that it contained no black or Asian people. Big surprise!" (p. 416).

Another example of this defensiveness is the storm of media controversy over Pixar's 2022 movie *Turning Red*. Directed by Domee Shi, *Turning Red* tells the coming-of-age story of Meilin Lee, a Chinese Canadian girl who turns into a red panda when she gets too emotional. Throughout the movie, Shi skilfully uses elements of magical realism to explore themes of community, friendship, and the intergenerational trauma common to immigrant Asian families. Widely lauded by critics (and with a rating of 94% on Rotten Tomatoes), there were still several negative reviews that panned the movie for being unrelatable and insular. Reviewer Sean O'Connell of *CinemaBlend* stands out as especially dismissive:

I recognized the humor in the film, but connected with none of it. By rooting *Turning Red* very specifically in the Asian community of Toronto, the film legitimately feels like it was made for Domee Shi's friends and immediate family members. Which is fine...but also, a tad limiting in its scope... There's an audience out there for *Turning Red*. And when that audience finds the movie, I've no doubt they will celebrate it for the unique animal that it is. In my opinion, however, that audience is relatively small, and I'm not part of it. (O'Connell, 2021)

The article was met with widespread criticism and the website quickly recalled it and issued an apology. However, the message was clear: there are people that still believe that the characters, families, and communities like the ones portrayed in this movie are a niche minority experience and not a 'real' part of the culture and country.

## Conclusion

As demonstrated by Pixar's *Turning Red*, disputes over the concepts of diaspora and hybridity are still alive and well today, couched within national debates over nationality and belonging. As is often the case, we find the lines clearly drawn between 'us' and 'them,' with anything that is too Other deemed completely

unrecognisable and unrelatable. Clearly, there is still societal resistance to opening the national narrative to include hybrid identities and cultures. But despite these difficulties, diasporic and hybrid individuals and communities continue to strive to live “together-in-difference” and to make a better, more representative world (Ang, 2001, p. 194).

## Chapter Five: Methodology

### Part 1: The Plan

In the previous chapters, I discussed how the three interrelated fields of young adult literature, Asian American and British ESEA studies, and diaspora studies shaped my research study. I will now explain the methodology of the study, demonstrating how key concepts from the literature informed my methodological choices throughout. As the study progressed, I found it necessary to make several adjustments to the methodological processes for several reasons which will be discussed. Thus, this chapter will be structured in two main parts: the first half will outline my original plans for the book club and the second half will detail the changes made throughout and my reflections on why these changes were necessary.

In the first half of this chapter, I first discuss the context for the study and my positionality as a researcher. I then describe the methods of the study, justifying the choice to conduct research through an asynchronous book study with young people and detailing how I set up the study using online tools such as Padlet and Zoom. In the second half, I consider what worked well and what did not, describing how I made changes to the second half of the study to modify the study. The final section presents my overall reflections on the methods, the participants, and myself as a teacher/researcher.

### Context and Background

As detailed in Chapter 3, definitions of Asian American and British ESEA identities are incredibly complex and ever-changing, emphasising the vastness of a label which encompasses various ethnicities, languages, cultures, and histories. The differences in migration and diasporic community formation are also staggering, even when only comparing the communities in the US and the UK. Thus, because the label 'Asian' is so broad, I focused on the East Asian<sup>6</sup> diaspora (as opposed to South or Southeast Asian) because it is a tremendously

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<sup>6</sup> However, I will continue to use the terms Asian American and British ESEA (instead of only East Asian) as these are the terms that many activists and communities are using to describe their identities.

under-researched subject in the UK. It is difficult to find scholarship concerning the British ESEA population, especially concerning young persons who are not recent immigrants and who are growing up navigating the intersection of British and ESEA identities and cultures. These stories are also nearly absent from the field of British YA. And although there is a greater history of Asian American scholarship in the US, Asian American communities across the country are still fighting against the ‘model minority’ stereotype and being seen as an inassimilable Other (Said, 2003; Kawai, 2005; Wu, 2014; Kim and Shah, 2020). Thus, diasporic communities in both the UK and US are still fighting to make their voices heard.

By conducting a transatlantic comparison between the Asian American and British ESEA communities in the US and the UK, I hoped to amplify the nuances within the monolithic label of ‘Asian,’ especially to a wider society which places the same stereotypes on any persons who look East Asian. Additionally, I hoped to facilitate a meaning-making process between the participants themselves as they discussed aspects of their shared cultures, as well as parts of their identities that are completely unique to them. I hypothesised this exchange would not only flow between the US and the UK participants as they share more obvious culture differences, but also between participants from the same country as they discovered how their peers live and express their hybrid identities.

Ultimately, I was interested in how this book club might complicate definitions of ‘insider/outsider’ and act as an encounter between Asian American/British ESEA young adults from different countries who might simultaneously be both ‘insider’ and ‘outsider.’ I was also anticipating insights into what constitutes “mirrors” and “windows” in literature for these young people (Bishop, 1990, p. 1). I was hopeful that the results of this study would enhance the existing studies on representation in literature by contributing crucial understandings regarding young adults from the East Asian diaspora and how they respond to representations of East Asians in literature. Participant responses would also be a first-hand representation of how they see and understand themselves, which could illuminate gaps and misrepresentations in the wider culture and among those who work with these young people.

## Methodological Overview

I wanted the research questions to reflect the exploratory and qualitative nature of this study; thus, I deliberately created research questions that were quite broad and open:

1. How do Asian American and British ESEA young people respond to East Asian representation in a YA-focused book club?
2. How can YA help Asian American and British ESEA young people to interrogate and understand their own identities, as well as the identities of other Asian American/British ESEA young people?
3. How have the divergences in Asian American and British ESEA community development shaped the identities of young people in these communities?

## Research and Positionality

### Positionality Statement

I am a Taiwanese American woman who grew up in a suburb of Maryland, USA, right outside of Washington, D.C. I come from a history of displacement, diaspora, and hybrid identities - my maternal grandparents fled from China to Taiwan during the Communist Revolution, and both of my parents left Taiwan for the USA to attend graduate school. I have now continued this tradition of migration by moving from the US to London where I live with my Taiwanese British husband. When my whole family is together, it is not uncommon to hear bits and pieces of three different languages flying back and forth, mashed into a patois intelligible only to us.

As a child, I was a voracious reader, consuming countless stories and constantly pestering my parents to take me to the local library. However, as I grew older, I began to realise that so many realities of my world were not reflected at all in the stories that I was reading; not once can I remember ever seeing a character or family like me and mine in the stories that I read. Thus, there was always a tiny, persistent doubt in the back of my mind: could there be stories about kids like me? Ebony Elizabeth Thomas (2019) calls this the ‘imagination gap,’ which is

a direct result of the lack of diverse stories featuring BIPOC children as the main characters and protagonists. The imagination gap deeply impacts society, limiting our ability to visualise and conceptualise stories that reflect the diversity of the world. This not only harms BIPOC children by erasing them from narratives, but it also harms children that are a part of dominant culture by creating inaccurate pictures of their societies and leaving them unable to imagine anyone *not* like them in stories.

Later when I became a teacher, I saw how the ‘imagination gap’ was negatively shaping my students; both minority- and majority-culture students were impacted by the lack of representation in the books that we were reading and analysing, and the minority students were often disinterested in engaging with novels that had no perceived relevance to their lives. Even though I had no power to change the core texts assigned by the county, I endeavoured to include as many diverse short stories, poems, and excerpts as I could into our daily lessons, and I saw the powerful discussions that could be sparked with texts in which students could actually see themselves. I also appreciated how majority-culture students were challenged and stretched by these texts and conversations, as they grew to learn that the world was more expansive than their neighbourhoods and communities. However, I knew that it was unsustainable to place the burden on individual teachers to take on the extra work of including representative and multicultural materials in their classrooms, especially on top of all their other responsibilities. Systemic change was necessary.

I recognise that my personal experience has made it impossible to be unbiased when it comes to issues of diversity and representation in stories, particularly in children’s literature and YA. Furthermore, I am passionate about hybrid East Asian representation in stories *because* of my experiences, which is why I have chosen to focus my research on the impact of using contemporary YA centring hybrid East Asian narratives with Asian American and British ESEA adolescents themselves. There is a great need for ‘own voices’ scholars in the emerging field of ESEA studies, especially in the UK where most research still focuses on East Asian countries and cultures; there is little consideration of hybridity or the burgeoning ESEA cultures and contexts in the UK itself. As history shows, there

can be considerable damage done from outside researchers misrepresenting entire people groups or treating them as subjects of research rather than active participants in the process (Jones, 1979; Tuhiwai Smith, 2021).

At the same time, the more I learned about ESEA history in the UK, the more I realised that I could not truly call myself an ‘own voices’ scholar in this context, given my own newness to the country and my continued learning journey. The vast differences in histories of migration, community-building, and activism between the Asian American and UK ESEA communities have led to striking differences in how these communities organise and identify, and the more I learned, the more I discovered I did not know. Despite my attempts at educating myself through connecting with many grassroots ESEA organisations, attending lectures and roundtables, and reading a great number of books and articles, I still inevitably entered into this study with many areas of weaknesses and unawarenesses - some of which I became aware of through the research process, and some which I did not.

Thus, in searching for such participants from the US and the UK, I actively positioned myself as both insider and outsider, taking the view that identity is not just one fixed point but many; each person is simultaneously an insider and outsider based on many shifting identifiers (Deutsch, 1981; Mercer, 2007; Holmes and Gary, 2020; Tuhiwai Smith, 2021). As Mercer (2007) states:

If, however, we view insiderness in a more pluralistic way (accepting that human beings cannot be classified according to a single ascribed status), then we are likely to consider the two terms as poles of a continuum that is more or less fluid... The more we conceive of them as points on a continuum, the more we are likely to value them both, recognising their potential strengths and weaknesses, in all manner of contexts. (Mercer, 2007, p. 7)

I had many experiences in common with the participants, but there were also many aspects of their lives that were new and foreign to me. My ‘outsiderness’ may have had a negative impact when it came to recruiting UK participants, a long process which I further describe later in this chapter. While I was able to quickly connect with potential US participants due to a shared background and



cultural understanding, I lacked the resources and insider knowledge that might have better allowed me to access the spaces of young UK ESEAs.

Thus, because the research topic was so closely entangled with my own life, I engaged in a process of ongoing reflexivity throughout the study, writing notes in my study journal and noting how I moved from insider to outsider in different contexts (Dowling, 2006; Mercer, 2007; Berger, 2015). I tried to be very careful not to ask leading questions throughout the study, refraining from giving my own opinion and instead letting the participants take the lead. As data collection progressed, I also kept in mind that there were both advantages and disadvantages to working with participants that were like myself, making sure not to let myself get so close to the analysis as to fixate on preconceived conclusions to the data (Deutsch, 1981; Holmes and Gary, 2020; Tuhiwai Smith, 2021). Lastly, I stayed vigilant against making assumptions about the participants based on my own experiences as an Asian American, again recognising that Asian American or British ESEA identity expressed itself differently for each person involved in the study. Despite my best efforts, I still found myself surprised by participant responses at several points throughout the study; this revealed to me the persistence of my insider expectations, as well as their inaccuracy and incompleteness.

### **Philosophical Approach**

My positionality was directly connected to the qualitative and critical nature of this research project. Because I recognised the fluidity of identity and insider/outsider belonging, this study was designed according to an ontologically constructivist framework which honoured the idea that participants all construct and interpret the world around them in different, yet equally valid, ways (Costantino, 2008). As so much of the study was concerned with topics such as identity, culture, race, ethnicity, and nationality, I wanted the study design to acknowledge that all participants brought a range of personal and cultural constructions with them into the study, allowing for the differences that inevitably arose as they discussed and engaged with each other. In the novels themselves, this framework made space for the different representations of identity as the stories painted a diverse picture of what it means to be an Asian American or British ESEA young person. Lastly, the study used constructionist

epistemology to emphasise how knowledge would be created through an engagement and discussion of the texts (Moon and Blackman, 2014). This was appropriate for the study, as the aim was to understand the impact of using representative YA in a book club with Asian American and British ESEA young adults. How would they respond to narratives focused on the ESEA experience? How might it lead them to interrogate their own identities and the identities of the other participants?

A comparative approach was the foundation of the study, in both structure and content, as it highlighted different facets of the hybrid Asian American/British ESEA experience by comparing two novels with participants from two different countries. First, comparisons between the UK and US participants were crucial because Asians are still seen as a monolithic and unchanging group with the same experiences and backgrounds, despite being part of a far-flung diaspora that has shaped communities and individuals in vastly different ways. Dufoix (2008) calls this the “oxymoronic diaspora,” which, instead of clinging to the idea of a shared homeland and unchanging community across distance, emphasises “paradoxical identity, the noncenter, and hybridity [and] the joint presence of the Same and the Other, the local and the global” (p. 24). The comparative structure of the study made these differences visible as it brought together young people across the ESEA diaspora who are part of an increasingly multicultural and hybrid society.

Additionally, the comparative approach expanded upon Bishop’s (1990) concept of ‘windows’ and ‘mirrors’ by comparing a UK novel with a US novel containing very different content, themes, and settings, recognising that the multiplicity of ESEA cultures and identities cannot possibly be captured in just a few books (Botelho, 2021). The two YA novels used in the study were certainly not a definitive picture of the Asian American/British ESEA experience, but they could have been the impetus for participants to begin “looking through many of Bishop’s windows into many different ‘rooms’ of experience,” a process that took place not only through the solitary act of reading but also through sharing and discussion with each another (Tschida, Ryan and Ticknor, 2014, p. 31). And finally, the comparison of the Asian American and British ESEA diasporas themselves in Chapter 3 also lent crucial context to the discussions that emerged

from the book study, especially in contextualising the differences between US and UK responses (discussed in-depth in Chapter 9).

## **Ethics**

These various positionalities and philosophical approaches underpinned the eventual structure of the study, as I sought to give participants the space and freedom to respond to the novels and to one another. However, such freedom was not without its risks, as I intended to work with young people aged 16-18 in a completely online context while discussing potentially sensitive and triggering topics. Thus, I carefully considered the ethical implications of each aspect of the research design, evaluating each method in accordance with the British Educational Research Association (BERA) guidelines to ensure confidentiality, informed consent, and minimise the possibility of distress when discussing difficult texts (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2024). When recruiting participants, I created a clear Participant Information Sheet (Appendix A) which described the purpose of the study, summarised the novels and research process, detailed how participant information would stay confidential and anonymous throughout the research project, and assured them that participation was entirely voluntary with the option to withdraw at any time. I also provided participants with a list of organisations and websites they could visit if they found themselves distressed at any time by the content of the novels (Appendix B). Parental permission was sought in cases where participants were younger than 18, consent forms were signed, and ultimately ethical permission was obtained for this project (Appendix C).

## **Research Design and Data Collection**

### **The books**

When choosing the books for the study, I began with a wide focus on realistic YA fiction featuring protagonists from across the ESEA diaspora. I also knew that I wanted books that featured a contemporary setting (i.e. not *Joy Luck Club*) and reflected current events in society. I was able to find many US novels that fit these criteria, and so I narrowed my focus even further by looking for ‘counterstorytelling’ elements within the possible book options.

Ultimately, I chose to use *The Silence that Binds Us* by Joanna Ho for the US-based novel. First, I chose this novel because it touched on so many issues that have come to the forefront of American cultural consciousness, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic. As anti-Asian rhetoric was spewed by public figures such as then-president Trump, the Asian American community faced verbal and physical assaults at record highs - the organization Stop AAPI Hate counted 11,500 incidents in the first year of the pandemic (Stop AAPI Hate, 2022). And though the novel is not set during the pandemic, it uses the setting of a California community to illustrate the insidious racism that comes to the forefront when dominant groups feel threatened in any way. The story illustrates Kim and Shah's (2020) point that the significance of these incidents is not just "the complete reversal of the 'model minority' stereotype to the 'foreigner threat,' but instead the continued representations of Asian Americans as the other who are different..." (p. 607). Beyond its relevancy to current Asian American issues, it also touches upon themes of the power of 'counterstorytelling' and community organising for young people.

It took much longer to decide on a UK-based novel, as there were barely any British YA novels about ESEA young people. Currently, there are only two UK YA novels that discuss the contemporary British ESEA experience: *The Life of a Banana* by PP Wong (2014) and *If You Still Recognise Me* by Cynthia So (2022)<sup>7</sup>. This speaks to the utter scarcity of ESEA representation in UK YA; these stories have only just begun to be published within the last decade. I ended up choosing So's novel because it offered a more current and nuanced depiction of ESEA young people in the UK, as well as a deep dive into the intersectionality of LGBTQIA+ and ESEA issues. So's novel also provided an important complement to the social and political activism of Ho's novel as it describes how Asian and British ESEA communities engage (and disengage) with LGBTQIA+ issues and representation. Ultimately, I hoped this book could provide much-needed 'windows' and 'mirrors' for the ESEA young people in the study.

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<sup>7</sup> There are also a few YA fantasy novels written by British ESEA authors – for example, *Sorcerer to the Crown* by Zen Cho and *Hyo the Hellmaker* by Mina Ikemoto Ghosh – but I was searching specifically for realistic YA fiction to use for this research project.

Overall, the novels ended up pairing together quite well: they both feature protagonists in upper secondary school (Maybelline Chen is 17 and Elsie Lo is 18) with families representing different aspects of the ESEA diaspora (Maybelline's family is Chinese Taiwanese American, and Elsie's family is British Chinese with roots in Hong Kong). But there were also important differences which painted a broader picture of hybridity and difference within the diasporic experience, exemplifying AsianCrit's argument that intersectionality shapes experience (Iftikar and Museus, 2018). Maybelline's Asian American identity intersects with the systematic oppression of white supremacy and racism in the US, while Elsie's British ESEA identity intersects with her gender identity and sexual orientation; this resulted in two very different narratives and expressions of Asian identity. By focusing on intersectional differences within the monolithic Asian experience, the novels were able to create both 'windows' and 'mirrors' for the participants (Bishop, 1990; Bhabha, 2004; Tschida, Ryan and Ticknor, 2014; Botelho, 2021). Finally, both novels have elements of counterstories where the main characters 'speak back' and define themselves in their own terms.

The book study began with So's novel, and then Ho's novel came second. There were a few reasons for this specific order: firstly, So's novel is set in the summertime, which is when the book study began. Consequently, participants were reading and discussing this novel while also on their own summer holidays. The novel also focused on the liminal space between graduating sixth form and before beginning university, which mirrored the real-life circumstances of a few of the participants who were entering university in the autumn. In contrast, Ho's novel is set at the beginning of the school year, which I thought would be when the book club would be moving on to the next novel<sup>8</sup>. In this way, participants were able to read each book at roughly the appropriately corresponding time of the year, which added a layer of identification to each story. And finally, my decision to begin with Ho's book also factored in the content and themes of each book; *If You Still Recognise Me* was written in more of a light, romantic comedy style; it did not deal as directly with issues of systematic oppression and so was more ideal as an 'entry-level' book for participants who might have been still exploring these aspects of their identities. Because *The Silence that Binds Us*

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<sup>8</sup> In reality, it was much later (more on this in the post-study reflection later in the chapter).

dealt much more explicitly with racism, white supremacy, and racial power dynamics, it made sense for it to be the second book to be discussed, building on the discussion generated by So's novel.

### **Participants and sample size**

To form the book club, I recruited participants from both the US and the UK using the purposive sampling strategy of criterion sampling to find participants that self-identify as Asian American or British ESEA (Schreier, 2018). This was necessary because the aim of the study was to look more deeply at Asian American/British ESEA representation and responses to literature. However, this did not mean that the sample would be entirely homogeneous, as there were other elements of intersectional difference among participants, including nationality, nuances of ethnicity, gender, age, and sexual orientation; these differences were crucial to understanding how Asian Americans and British ESEAs are not a monolithic group (Iftikar and Museus, 2018).

Participants were between 17-18 years of age, which is within the age range of 12-18 targeted by YA (Cart, 2008). I chose to focus on participants at the upper range of this age limit because they were the same age as the protagonists of the novels in the book study who are aged 17 and 18. Additionally, the novels dealt with some potentially triggering content (for example: racism, suicide, homophobia, white supremacy) that may not have been suitable for younger readers. Even though I did not actively bring up any of these sensitive topics, resources were provided regarding organisations fighting against anti-Asian hate and homophobia so that participants could access these resources if they became distressed (Appendix B). All participants were also made aware that they were under no expectation to discuss anything that made them uncomfortable or caused them distress; the choice to join or withhold from discussion was up to each participant.

The book club was relatively small, and it became smaller as it progressed: we started with four UK participants and three US participants, and by the end there were only three UK participants and one US participant remaining. Though this was a small number of participants, research demonstrates that qualitative studies benefit from smaller group sizes when the purpose of the study is an in-

depth exploration rather than statistical generalisation (Sandelowski, 1995; Donmoyer, 2008; Morgan, 2008; Boddy, 2016; Schreier, 2018). Thus, a smaller sample suited the aims of this research study, which were to deeply analyse the use of YA with diasporic Asian American/British ESEA participants and to create a space for participants to discuss nuances of culture and identity (a discussion which at times became deeply personal). Sandelowski (1995) also argues that when using criterion sampling, a smaller sample size allows for a deeper focus on the ideas, thoughts, and reflections of a group that share a single demographic variable; in the case of this study, that of ESEA ethnicity. This is particularly important when working with sensitive topics such as race and culture, which may elicit strong reactions from participants (Morgan and Hoffman, 2018). Lastly, the constructivist framework of this study lent itself to a smaller sample size, as the individual and communal negotiations of identity which are so central to concepts of difference and hybridity would not be able to be effectively observed and analysed within a much larger group (Bhabha, 2004; Boddy, 2016; Hall, 2021a).

### **Finding participants**

I initially looked for participants from different secondary schools and organisations where I have contacts and acquaintances. To find the Asian American participants, I first contacted my old secondary school (Wootton High School in Maryland, USA), as well as several Asian-interest organisations with connections to the greater Washington, D.C. area. While looking for organisations, I quickly found many clubs and organisations founded and led by secondary school students themselves, most of which had been started recently in response to growing social justice movements such as Black Lives Matter and Stop AAPI Hate. Ultimately, I reached out directly to the Dear Asian Youth organisation, whose stated mission is to “[uplift] and [promote] the Asian community through intersectional activism,” and which also runs a book club of its own (*Dear Asian Youth*, 2024). The administrators of the book club were keen to participate in the project and they immediately disseminated an interest form to their members. Within a month of contacting the group, I had five participants with confirmed interest. However, there was a five-month delay in getting the study started because I could not find enough British ESEA

participants right away, and the number of US participants dwindled to three by the time the study began.

In contrast, it was incredibly difficult to find British ESEA participants. Over the course of six months, I contacted four schools through teacher contacts, 10 schools through the Swire Chinese Language Centre, 16 schools through the IOE (Institute of Education) Confucius Classroom programme, and six Chinese language weekend schools. I also sent a message out on an email listserv for all Mandarin teachers in the UK, thanks to a contact in the network who was willing to message on my behalf. In addition to secondary schools and language schools, I contacted university programmes such as the Leeds Centre for New Chinese Writing, the Liverpool Confucius Institute, and the Royal Society for Asian Affairs and SOAS University of London to see if they could connect me with any interested participants. A small number of schools and teachers replied to these messages; most of them said they would pass on the information to see if there was any interest, but only two students ever reached out afterwards (and one student did not end up following through on participating).

I also reached out to book clubs over this period; the National Teen Book Club (organised by Speakers for Schools) publicised the details of my study to all the teachers in their network, with no results. The book clubs at the local libraries I contacted also said there were no participants fitting the study description (they seemed to be made up of younger participants). I was able to find a few ESEA-focused book clubs online and through social media, but they turned out to only have adult participants and could not point me to any student-centred ESEA book clubs. I even contacted tutoring organisations Coach Bright UK and UpReach Academy as well as a friend at a non-profit organisation supporting refugee families, but they were unable to help.

Lastly, I connected with 18 different ESEA community organisations: Besa.n (Britain's East and Southeast Asian Network), ESEA Green Lions, Voice ESEA, ESEA Young Londoners, Kanlangun UK, Every Asian Voice, Kind Red Packet, ESEA Archives, ESEA Publishing Network, Liverpool ESEA Network, ESEA Hub, Hackney Chinese Community Services, Daikon Media, the Southeast and East Asian Centre (SEEAC), the China Exchange, Dear Asian Youth (London chapter), Pagoda Arts, and the British Chinese Studies Network. Most of these organisations responded



to me and were eager to help. However, none of them had any adolescent members - their organisations served adults and sometimes university students at the youngest. Several of these groups put out a call on social media to their networks on my behalf, posting on Twitter, Instagram, and even their newsletters about my study. The only person that responded to these calls was a mother who recognised the importance of the study, but her children were too young (primary and early secondary) to participate. And when I tried to find student-led organisations like the ones in the US, I found that they seemingly do not exist in the UK. All the social justice and Asian-interest organisations I could find were aimed at university students and adults, not secondary students.

This difficulty in finding ESEA organisations led by, and for, secondary students seemed to reflect how British ESEAs are still lagging behind Asian Americans in terms of representation, activism, and research. It also reflected the gap between Asian American representation in YA, which is far from perfect but exists, and British ESEA representation, which currently consists of only three YA novels - *The Life of a Banana* by PP Wong, *Chinglish* by Sue Cheung, and *If You Still Recognise Me* by Cynthia So. After more than six months of searching, I finally had one participant reach out to me because her teacher had seen one of my email flyers and had encouraged her to participate; the other three participants came quickly afterwards as a group because one participant heard about my study and brought along two friends.

In the end, this was the group of participants:

**Table 1. Participant information**

Pseudonym	Age	Location	Self-described ethnicity
Juliette	18	Seattle, WA, USA	Mostly Taiwanese, Filipino, Pacific Islander
Ariana	17	Danville, PA, USA	Chinese
Eva	18	Long Beach, CA, USA	Filipino, Vietnamese, Chinese
Juno	18	Glasgow, Scotland, UK	Chinese
Paige	18	London, England, UK	Mixed heritage (Chinese and white)
Lana	18	Glasgow, Scotland, UK	Chinese
Catelyn	17	Glasgow, Scotland, UK	Chinese

Because of the diverse ethnicities represented across this group of participants, I intentionally continued to frame the study as geared towards Asian Americans and British ESEAs, rather than the more limited label of British Chinese which has been more commonly used in the UK in the past. The US participants would have been accustomed to the 'Asian American' identity label, but being called 'British ESEA' was perhaps more disconcerting and confusing for UK participants, as it was (and still is) a relatively new term in the UK. Despite this, most of the UK participants remained in the study, while the US participants mostly fell away. Perhaps this framing of the study was one of the contributing reasons for the drop-off, but there is not enough data to state conclusively either way. I dive into this matter more in Chapter 9, reflecting further on possible reasons for the difference in UK and US participation.

### **Gender and class?**

As evidenced by Table 1, I did not ask the participants to provide any identifying information beyond age, ethnicity, and nationality/city where they were currently based. I made this choice because nationality and ethnicity were the two identifying categories most important to my participant recruitment process, as well as the main connections between the US and UK novels chosen for the book club. As participants were already so difficult to recruit, especially in the UK, I felt it was appropriate to limit the initial questions asked about their identities, which could have seemed intrusive and led to diminished interest from the group. Research from Hughes, Camden and Yangchen (2016) supports this cautious approach, as they have found that "sensitive questions can affect survey outcomes by decreasing (a) the number of participants who are willing to take the survey," as well as affecting the quality and accuracy of later responses (p. 139). Thus, a series of more interrogative questions may have made the study feel more extractive to participants, especially at the beginning of the study when they did not have any reason to trust me or the other participants.

Hughes, Camden and Yangchen (2016) also assert that when dealing with complexities of identity, "asking participants to classify themselves into categories that do not fit them can lead to frustration and uncertainty about how to respond" (p. 138). I was especially aware of this in regards to asking about social class, which is a very pertinent issue in the UK but not commonly

asked about in the US and may have been an off-putting or strange question for US participants. And regarding gender, all participants presented as female; there were initially three potential male participants who expressed interest in the study but did not end up following through. When I asked them why they changed their minds, none of them responded to me so I cannot decisively comment on why this study attracted only female participants.

Overall, I did not feel I had enough time or enough participants in this study to fully dive into the intricacies of gender identity, social class, and location (beyond broad US and UK differences), which is another reason why I did not ask participants to name these aspects of their identity. The small sample size especially influenced this decision, as this study would not have been able to present generalisable conclusions about intersectionalities between gender, social class, ethnicity, and nationality. Thus, the research questions reflected the narrower scope of study, asking questions only about nationality and ethnicity in the form of Asian American and British ESEA identities. According to Frederick (2021), a smaller scope can justify asking fewer demographic questions: “When demographics are neither central to the purpose of the study nor are there hypotheses about their impact, it may be beneficial to only include a small number of items, if any, rather than a comprehensive set of demographic questions.” Furthermore, it is considered a best practice to only report demographic subgroup data “if there are at least 10 participants in a given subgroup, both to protect participant privacy and maintain statistical power” (Frederick, 2021). With only seven participants in my study, it seemed prudent to ask fewer demographic questions, especially as the initial participant information sheet did not mention the relevance of any demographic categories beyond ethnicity and nationality.

Instead of asking for specific demographic information right away, I relied on the book club to naturally create relationships between myself and the participants, allowing them to represent themselves how they wished to one another. This created a more natural dynamic between participants as they discussed their experiences in response to scenes from each novel, giving them the power to choose how much they wanted to divulge about their gender, social class, and other potentially sensitive topics. It is as Holliday (2009) contends: “It is perhaps

too uncannily obvious that researchers should restrain themselves as far as is possible from imposing their own agendas on what their subjects tell them” (Holliday, 2009, p. 147, cited in Phipps, 2013). For example, gender and sexuality are important topics in the UK novel *If You Still Recognise Me*, and one of the participants chose to organically disclose her queer identity in her Padlet posts and share her experiences with the other participants. This participant-led approach reflected the ontologically constructivist framework of the study, as I refrained from dictating a researcher-led agenda and instead made space for the participants to take the lead in discussions.

This study exemplified the tension between “(i) the normative nature of methods taught...and their compliance with a range of institutional codes all ensuring ‘methodological hygiene’... and (ii) the intercultural subject in all its complexity as colonial, hybrid and decolonizing subject” (Phipps, 2013, p. 18). Phipps argues that compliance with ‘methodological hygiene,’ while crucial when designing a study, can also overshadow the participants themselves and their burgeoning thoughts, restricting them to a limited view on how they should respond and present themselves in the study. Instead, in lieu of an extractive research model which views participants as subjects, participants should instead be partners in research that takes the “mode of exploration and embodiment, to allow a flow of action, impressions, natural conversation, showing and relationship” (Phipps, 2013, p. 22). Ultimately, the goal of my study was to foster this ‘exploration’ and ‘flow’ between participants, letting them lead discussions and choose how to represent themselves to others. Although this meant that nuances of social class and gender were not highlighted in their responses, I am hopeful that future studies with more participants might provide far more insight into the intersectionality between these areas of identity, using my study as a stepping stone to further explore these aspects of identity with more depth and sensitivity.

## **Method: Book club**

I chose to use a YA-focused book club to facilitate this study because research has shown that YA can effectively engage teenagers and young adults in conversation about many difficult issues, giving them an opportunity to reflect on subjects ranging from the personal to the socio-political (Alsup, 2003;

Kornfeld and Prothro, 2005; Soter and Connors, 2009; Wolk, 2009; Schieble, 2012; Falter and Kerkhoff, 2013). This is because YA is explicitly written for young adults, so the characters are relatable and situated in a relevant setting, rather than in an outdated version of the world. These stories are especially necessary because they “[show] teenagers that their experiences have value... one of the most important reasons to have literature for and about young adults” (Crowe, 2002, p. 115). In addition, YA novels from BIPOC authors can spotlight the stories of young people who rarely see themselves represented in literature (Hughes-Hassell, 2013). *If You Still Recognise Me* and *The Silence that Binds Us* are two such novels, beautifully depicting a diverse portrait of the diasporic ESEA community.

The initial plan for the book club was relatively straightforward: the three US and four UK participants would follow a reading schedule with approximately a quarter of the novel assigned each week to finish each book in a month. The book club took place online and was mostly asynchronous. This was necessary because of the transatlantic aspect, which brought together participants from two different countries and several different time zones. Additionally, online book clubs are something that are already happening around the world; research has shown that in today’s technology-heavy world, many teenagers and adolescents are actually quite familiar with, and sometimes even more motivated by, a “digital [context] for learning” rather than a traditional “face-to-face” reading experience (Fox, Morris and Rumsey, 2007; Day and Kroon, 2010; Schreuder and Savitz, 2020, p. 264; Stevens, 2020). An online book club is also able to bring participants from across a large geographic area into an authentic online community where they have a forum to discuss relevant issues (Grisham and Wolsey, 2006; Scharber, Melrose and Wurl, 2009; Hennessey *et al.*, 2022). And lastly, online book clubs offer a means for like-minded countercultural and minority individuals to find one another and ‘gather’ in a safe space. Shier (2012) discusses the example of a feminist young adult book club where participants exclusively read books with strong female protagonists and feminist themes, writing, “Their growing presence online illustrates the power of technology to provide an impetus for critical discussion, community formation, and broader social change” (p. 123). This is similar to the vision behind this online book club, which sought to bring together young people from

across the ESEA diaspora to discuss salient topics such as culture, identity, and nationality.

### **Online asynchronous usage of Padlet**

This study asked participants to use Padlet, which is a very user-friendly platform where participants could write their thoughts and respond to others after reading each section of chapters, like a private online messaging board. To ensure confidentiality, participants were actively instructed not to make a Padlet account and to only use their first names as identifiers on their posts and comments. Participants were also instructed not to send any videos and photos in their Padlet posts to avoid accidentally revealing any personal information. All the data was downloaded on a weekly basis and the Padlet was wiped clean and re-used for the following week's discussion; the saved data was analysed with NVivo coding and within an Asian Critical Race Theory framework, using Braun and Clark's process of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2019; Terry *et al.*, 2017; Iftikar and Museus, 2018; Morgan and Hoffman, 2018). This allowed the data to be coded and analysed for the development of any themes across the Padlet posts, in combination with the other data sources.

Although there are only a few case studies regarding the effectiveness of using Padlet in a classroom, each study seems to confirm that students enjoy using Padlet because of the interaction and collaboration that the platform encourages (Ali, 2021; Gill-Simmen, 2021; Ahmad, Rubayyi and Etfita, 2022; Cleary, 2022). Gill-Simmen (2021) asserts that Padlet can effectively motivate students to participate in asynchronous discussion, boosting engagement throughout the day. Cleary (2022) agrees, adding that for some students, the anonymity of a Padlet post alleviated the social anxiety about getting the answer right or wrong, allowing them to focus instead on the process of dialogue and reflection. Even more promisingly, Ali (2021) noticed that "students who had formerly expressed ambivalence towards participating in our face-to-face tutorials were now actively engaging and were able to directly interact with their peers" (p. 3). Based on these initial research studies, it can be concluded that Padlet is effective at motivating students to engage in deep discussion, especially when the discussion takes place asynchronously.

After much deliberation, I decided to leave the weekly Padlet check-ins relatively unstructured for the participants. Instead of posing specific questions pertaining to each reading section (like a discussion guide), I posted the following general discussion questions each week:

Some broad questions to begin discussion (use if useful, ignore if not):

1. What did you like/dislike about the chapters you read?
2. Is there anything that resonated with you, or any particular quotes that stuck out to you?
3. Did you have a strong reaction to anything you read?
4. Is there anything in the chapters you didn't understand or would like clarification about?
5. Have you noticed similarities/differences in the US v. UK experience?
6. What are examples of 'mirrors' (reflecting your own experience) v. 'windows' (looking into someone else's experience)?

At the time, I believed this was the best way to conduct the book club discussion; I wanted to remove my own input and biases as much as possible and allow the participants to take the lead on deciding what they themselves found significant in each section. I thought that by using the same general questions each week, participants would be able to highlight what they found meaningful and relatable, which would spark genuine discussion on the Padlet.

### **Focus groups on Zoom**

In addition to Padlet, I planned to have two focus groups throughout the study for both the US and the UK participants, taking place at the end of each book (weeks 4 and 8) and running for no more than 45 minutes. Because of the time difference, I sent the participants a survey asking them to select which times (in their own time zones) they were free. I then chose a time where most participants were available to participate. Practically, this meant that despite efforts for a mixed group with both UK and US participants, the one focus group that ended up happening consisted of only UK participants (more on this later). In the Zoom call, private messaging between participants was disabled, and participants were instructed not to give out their personal information (such as email addresses, location, social media handles, etc). Participants also had the

option to keep their cameras off for all or part of the focus group. I emphasised that if any personal information was accidentally revealed, it should not leave the online space.

I chose to include a focus group for several reasons; first, because the research is exploratory, the focus group allowed for unplanned and unforeseen subjects to organically appear in conversation, giving precedence to the priorities of the participants instead of relying on an interview guide with possible blind spots (Wilkinson, 1998; Macnaghten and Myers, 2004; Bagnoli and Clark, 2010). The focus group also allowed for a different dynamic to form with participants as they respond to one another in real time, resulting in interactions that can be analysed as part of the data itself (Macnaghten and Myers, 2004; Morgan, 2010). Wilkinson (1998) describes these interactions as part of the “co-construction of meaning” that can happen through social processes such as conversation (p. 123). This “co-construction” can often result in richer data than elicited in solitary interviews, as participants tease out the nuances of the conversation through their unique perspectives and continued engagement with the topic (Morgan, 2012). And as Morgan and Hoffman (2018) contend, “This means that focus groups are especially useful for investigating the extent of both consensus and diversity among the participants, as they engage in sharing and comparing among themselves with the moderator in a facilitating role” (p. 3).

The advantages of focus groups are not only evident in groups with adult participants; groups with children and young people, especially older adolescents such as the ones in my study, also demonstrate similar co-creating processes and exploratory potential (Fox, Morris and Rumsey, 2007; Gibson, 2007; Bagnoli and Clark, 2010; Wilkinson *et al.*, 2022). In fact, focus groups may be an even better option for young people because they may feel more inclined to share in a group of their peers rather than speaking only to the researcher, where their responses feel less like a conversation and more like a formal interview (MacDougall and Darbyshire, 2018). This can help to rectify the imbalance of power between the researcher and the researched, as well as reducing the impact of hidden biases that may be present in a researcher’s prepared questions (Wilkinson, 1998; Fox, Morris and Rumsey, 2007). This was



especially crucial for me as a ‘insider’ who may have had preconceived ideas of what the participants would think or find important.

### **‘Booktalk’**

In keeping with the exploratory nature of the research, there initially was not a strict discussion guide for the Zoom discussion. It was instead informed by Aidan Chambers's (2011) work on “booktalk,” which he defines as “a form of shared contemplation” (p. 107). He explains:

Booktalk is a way of giving form to the thoughts and emotions stimulated by the book and by the meaning(s) we make together out of its text - the imaginatively controlled messages sent from the author that we interpret in whatever way we find useful or delightful. (Chambers, 2011, p. 107)

Booktalk can take several forms with different emphases, as participants share likes and dislikes, bring up questions about the text, and make connections from the book to their lives and the wider world (Chambers, 2011; Hadjioannou and Townsend, 2015; Maree and van der Westhuizen, 2021; Scheckle, 2022). Accordingly, the discussion relied on what the participants themselves found significant and/or interesting, and on what questions they decided to pose to the other members of the book club. These conversations ultimately supported the process of co-creation and “sharing and solving difficulties over the puzzling elements of a story [so that] we may discover what that piece of writing means for each of us now” (Chambers, 2011, p. 105).

This dialogic approach is supported by the Reading for Pleasure pedagogy, which is guided by LIST: “Learner-led, Informal, Social and supported by Texts that Tempt” (The Open University, 2022). The practice of booktalk is included in this pedagogy, and when used in the classroom, teachers found that booktalk helped to turn reading into a social activity that motivated students to read and discuss classroom texts (McGeown, 2013; Hadjioannou and Townsend, 2015).

Additionally, booktalk enabled students to deepen their thinking and begin asking more complex questions of their peers, even encouraging them to take risks and make “extended exploratory contributions,” which is one of the main goals of this constructivist research (Safford, 2014, p. 98). Consequently, I

mainly took the stance of an observer and made minimal contributions to the discussion, allowing the participants to set the agenda.

The focus group was recorded and transcribed using Zoom's transcription service. The transcript was coded and analysed with NVivo coding and within an Asian Critical Race Theory framework, using Braun and Clark's process of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006, 2019). The principles of AsianCrit served as a pre-existing framework to deductively identify possible codes and themes, but there was also opportunity for new themes which did not fit into AsianCrit's tenets to inductively emerge from the transcripts.

### **Counterstories**

In the last two weeks of the book club, participants were meant to respond to the books by participating in the practice of counterstorytelling, a method within the field of Critical Race Theory that strives to elevate the stories of those who are often silenced by society. As Solórzano and Yosso (2002) explain, "Counter-stories can shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform" (p. 32). My original plan was for participants to do this through zine-making<sup>9</sup>. Historically, zines have been used by countercultural movements and artists because they represent total creative freedom and are meant to be shared with others who also are interested in the same topics (Poletti, 2008; Desyllas and Sinclair, 2014; Ramdarshan Bold, 2017; Ashtari, Huq and Miraftab, 2022). Researchers argue that this has particular power with young persons, as zines give them permission to construct their own stories in a world which often ignores and belittles their narratives (Soriaga Veloso, 2020). There is also a forgotten tradition of Asian American zines focused on activism - when fighting for the creation of Asian American studies in colleges like Berkeley and UCLA, Asian American activists created the zine *Gidra* to spotlight the ideas, passions, and issues important to the community (Honma, 2016; Lee, 2018).

Even though the participants did not get to make zines, they still engaged in counterstorytelling throughout the book club as they shared their own

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<sup>9</sup> What actually happened will be discussed in the next section.

experiences with the other participants, writing about moments where they both identified and dis-identified with the narrative and characters. This practice of counterstorytelling is particularly necessary for minority young people, as they are the most likely to hear narratives about themselves that contain stereotypes, false assumptions, and harmful labels (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002; Hernandez, Torres and Glenn, 2020; Rodríguez, 2020b; Tuhiwai Smith, 2021). It is also a crucial part of Iftikar and Museus's (2018) AsianCrit tenet 'Story, theory, and praxis,' which posits that the stories and experiences of marginalised groups can be a powerful way to answer back to oppressive dominant narratives. Thus, the inclusion of counternarratives in this research study was a step towards rectifying the imbalance of stories in the world, with the ultimate goal of meaningful change in the ways that Asian American and British ESEA young people are portrayed in wider society.

## **Thematic Analysis and AsianCrit**

Finally, the results of the study were qualitatively analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, which Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019) define as a "method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p. 79). This method of data analysis relies on a reflectively inductive process where the researcher immerses herself in the data to allow themes to organically appear, instead of forcing the data into predetermined categories of analysis (Terry *et al.*, 2017; Braun and Clarke, 2021). It also requires the researcher to reflexively identify and confront biases that may cloud judgment when analysing the data (Berger, 2015). This was a crucial step for me, as my positionality as an 'insider' could easily have led me to make assumptions about the participant responses.

Additionally, I used the lens of Asian Critical Race Theory (AsianCrit) to analyse the study results, which is a framework that takes critical race theory and applies it specifically to the Asian American experience (Iftikar and Museus, 2018). AsianCrit has seven specific tenets, some of which are similar to the main principles of critical race theory as set out by Stefancic and Delgado (2001), but with a stronger focus on the specific challenges faced by Asian American persons and communities. Iftikar and Museus (2018) explain these guiding beliefs:

1. *Asianization*: Systemic white supremacy racialises Asian Americans and forces them into stereotypes such as ‘the model minority’ and ‘the yellow peril.’ More recently, the Covid-19 pandemic has seen a renewal of Asian Americans racialised as a ‘foreign threat.’
2. *Transnational contexts*: It is impossible to understand the relationship between White supremacy and Asian Americans without analysing the national and transnational processes that shape and give context to this relationship at any historical point in time.
3. *(Re)constructive history*: It is necessary to focus on creating a narrative which includes and elevates the crucial (and usually invisible) roles that Asian Americans have played in US history.
4. *Strategic (anti)essentialism*: As race is a social construction, Asian Americans can strategically position themselves as part of the larger, monolithic Asian American movement when necessary, while also making national and ethnic distinctions that are important to understanding the complexity of the Asian American experience.
5. *Intersectionality*: Race is not the only defining factor for Asian Americans; it intersects with other identities such as gender and social class to create and describe a person’s experiences. This also describes the intersection of oppressive systems such as racism, colonialism, and sexism and how they work together to impact marginalised peoples.
6. *Story, theory, and praxis*: The stories and experiences of Asian Americans can challenge and upend the dominant epistemologies currently based on White European theories and researchers. Stories are particularly important here, as “stories inform theory and practice, theory guides practice, and practice can excavate stories and utilize theory for positive transformative purposes” (Iftikar and Museus, 2018, p. 941).
7. *Commitment to social justice*: AsianCrit is part of the movement towards ending all systems of oppression.

This framework has only been used in an Asian American context, but these tenets can also be seen in the mission statements of several British ESEA organisations and movements that emerged after the anti-Asian racism that erupted in the UK during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, the organisation kindredpacket started an ESEA storytelling initiative, “Stories of our

Heritage,” which very much aligns with AsianCrit’s precept of ‘story, theory, and praxis.’ Kindredpacket’s description of the project states:

To practice storytelling is to begin reclaiming our narratives from a place of pride, remembering the joys that very much exist alongside pain and shame. We hope that this platform serves as a healing space where we can educate ourselves by listening to the stories of others and writing our own. Each of our stories, a puzzle piece towards the constellation of the ESEA culture.  
(*kindredpacket*, 2021)

Other organisations such as Voice ESEA and Hackney Chinese Community Services embody AsianCrit’s ‘commitment to social justice,’ ‘strategic (anti)essentialism,’ and ‘(re)constructive history,’ as they work in the community to uplift and empower the ESEA community in the UK (*Voice ESEA*, 2021; *Hackney Chinese Community Services*, 2021). Thus, it might be argued that the AsianCrit framework can be effectively applied to the British ESEA community. As the study progressed, it was interesting to see the divergences in the ways that these principles were expressed in the context of the US versus the UK, as nuances of the “oxymoronic diaspora” came to light (Dufoix, 2008, p. 24).

Ultimately, I completed the process of thematic analysis in several parts, incorporating both reflexive thematic analysis and the AsianCrit framework. First, I copied all the data from the Padlets into an Excel document where I highlighted the text with colours identifying common themes across participant responses and writing brief notes about the responses.

<p>👤 &lt; a hook because the book got me <b>hooked immediately</b>. I liked <b>how Danny's death hung over the book right</b> from the start, instantly pulling the story forward.</p>
<p>Agreed – there was a dreadful foreboding as Danny's suicide is made known from the very first chapter (and blurb). I like how his <b>suicide wasn't treated as a plot twist</b>, allowing Danny's struggles with mental health to feel authentic and avoiding romanticising his death.</p>
<p>'I was unmoored. Without my anchor, I floated on an endless ocean under a starless sky.'</p>
<p>The <b>tonal whiplash from IYSRM was a punch to the gut</b>: everything here is shrouded in darkness. <b>Danny's suicide made me really emotional</b>. His <b>closeness with May was a 'mirror' to my relationship with my sister</b>. Despite <b>strong sibling relationships</b> being a saving grace from the silence imposed by parents, there is still so much darkness and damage that can't be expressed. <b>I really enjoyed this opening</b>, however, I felt like the <b>dynamic of a strict mum with a more laid-back dad</b> was quite stereotypical.</p>

**Figure 1. Image of colour-coded responses from participants**

When highlighting, I broadly looked for ‘mirrors,’ windows,’ and any strong reactions to the text. This process allowed me to familiarise myself with the data as I carefully read through it and made annotations. Next, I placed all the data into NVivo and did a second, more in-depth inductive coding process, following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) multi-step process by combing through the responses several times and reflexively reorganising codes. I first grouped them according to a “central organising concept,” looking at broad similarities across participant responses and categorising them under larger umbrella terms (Terry *et al.*, 2017, p. 18). After I created a first set of central concepts, I went back into the data within each one and determined whether there were smaller groupings of themes that could become their own sub-codes, or even a new code category. As I reread the data, I also determined whether some parent codes could be merged or made into sub-codes, a process that entailed much shuffling and reshuffling of my overall codes and thematic structure. As Braun and Clarke (2006) explain, I was looking for “data within themes [that cohered] together meaningfully, [and] clear and identifiable distinctions between themes” (p. 91).

I also used NVivo for the deductive analysis using AsianCrit; because I was using pre-defined categories, I went through all the data again and coded for the seven tenets defined above. This was a far quicker process than the inductive thematic analysis, as I was combing through the data for specific, predetermined topics to fit into my AsianCrit codes. In the end, both the inductive and deductive analyses provided valuable insights into the book club, especially in the ways that themes repeated and diverged across books and participants.

## **Part 2: What happened?**

### **Book Club: *If You Still Recognise Me***

As hinted at several times already, the book club did not exactly run according to my original plans. The first week of Padlet posts was incredibly successful - participants read chapters 1-9 of *If You Still Recognise Me*, and everyone contributed a long, reflective post sharing their initial reactions, questions, and feelings. Each participant was able to answer several of my posted questions, and three of the participants made the effort to add comments to the reflections from the other participants. While not everyone added comments,

each participant did reference the thoughts of at least one other participant in their own post and addressed them by name, and many participants also embedded questions to each other within their posts. It was clear that each person was thoughtfully and intentionally reading, writing, and responding on the Padlet.

However, by the second week participation dropped noticeably. Out of the seven original participants, only five of them continued to write posts about the second section of chapters (10-18), and they no longer posed questions or responses to each other by name like they did in the first Padlet. Additionally, only two participants left responsive comments on the Padlet. And by the third week, only three participants had posted full reflections by the end of the week. After sending follow-up emails to those who had not yet posted, a fourth participant did add a short comment on one of the posts and a fifth participant ended up emailing me her reflection separately, after the Padlet was 'closed.' It was clear at this point that the structure of the Padlet discussions would need to be completely redesigned if the study was going to move forward.

As I was planning on concluding the first book with a Zoom session anyway, I used some of the discussion time to ask for initial feedback on how the book club could be restructured to better serve the participants. I also followed up with an email asking for further thoughts and ideas, and a few participants responded in detail with some suggestions. Here are a few selected responses:

I would prefer sharing over Zoom more often. I did kind of find myself overthinking a lot of what I was writing out on the Padlets and I spent a long time typing up quotes (though I think that might just be me being super pedantic!). While posting on the Padlets allows me to be more specific, I feel the Zoom session really gave us the freedom to build upon each others' ideas and be more unfiltered in expressing opinions.

Regarding reading time, I think 2 weeks might be more manageable for me since the academic term is starting.

I was thinking that for the padlet, the questions could be more specific so they require shorter answers, or, if someone is short on time, they could respond to each question using a scale. For example, on a scale from 1-10, how much do

you relate to this character, 1 meaning you do not relate to this character at all, 10 meaning you strongly relate to them?

Instead of this Padlet where you post your thoughts in one big chunk, we could use a group chat where we post little thoughts and reactions in real time as we read the book? These can then add up to an equivalent of our big monologues, and I think will create a more discursive atmosphere.

Based on this feedback, a few things seemed clear; participants wanted more time to read, more ‘natural’ discussions, and to spend less time formulating “monologues.” Consequently, I attempted to restructure the book club procedures before we began reading and discussing the second novel, *The Silence that Binds Us* by Joanna Ho.

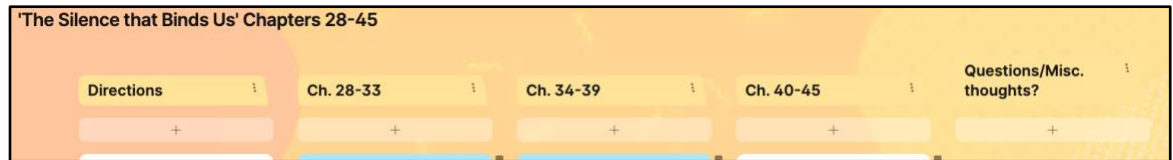
Though unorthodox, such a responsive and iterative approach to research design is not unheard of; Given (2008) calls this “emergent design,” which is a “flexible approach to data collection and analysis [allowing] for ongoing changes in the research design as a function of both what has been learned so far and the further goals of the study” (p. 2). Emergent design is more common in qualitative studies than in quantitative, particularly in research projects that are exploratory and inductive. Given argues that this is part of a reflexive research process, as changes are made based on observing and evaluating “the needs arising from the earlier observations and analyses” (p. 4). In the case of my research project, the primary changes were made at the data collection stage as I found it necessary to implement a more structured format to keep participants engaged and work around their busy schedules. All of these adjustments were underpinned by the continuing ethical awareness framing this entire project (as detailed in the previous Ethics section) and remained within the approved ethical parameters from the ethics committee (Appendix C).

### **Book Club: *The Silence that Binds Us***

As changing to a Zoom-only format was not viable due to the international and asynchronous aspects of the study, I focused the redesign on how I could more effectively use Padlet to better mimic the conversationality of a synchronous discussion. First, I changed the reading pace from one week per section to two, while also making sure to tell participants that the two-week reading schedule



was flexible and could be extended if necessary. Next, I split the assigned chapters into three smaller chunks, displayed as separate columns in the Padlet, and asked participants to post several shorter responses instead of one giant, overwhelming essay.



**Figure 2. Image of new Padlet structure with three columns for chapter subsections**

And finally, I replaced my initial set of open-ended questions with this set of shorter, more specific prompts:

For each section, choose at least one of the following response options:

- Pick an image, gif, or emoji (or several) to describe your feelings/reactions and explain with a quick caption.
- Write down a quote or theme/idea that resonated with you and explain.
- On a scale of 1 (hate) to 5 (love), how did you feel about this section? Why?
- If you had to pick three words to describe this section, what would they be and why?
- Were there any windows or mirrors for you?

My goal with these adaptations was to make posting on the Padlet less of a formidable task for participants. By switching to shorter, more frequent posts, my hope was that participants would be able to better process their thoughts; I also hoped that the more targeted questions would help them not to overthink their answers. I did also plan to have two Zoom sessions this time, one at the halfway point in addition to the planned session at the end of the book.

Again, the first set of posts for chapters 1-27 went incredibly well, with the five remaining participants immediately adopting aspects of the new post guidelines. In addition to continuing to comment on ‘windows’ and ‘mirrors,’ three participants included pictures and emojis in their posts, one participant used a rating to describe the second section of chapters, and every participant shared at least one impactful quote over the course of the three weeks that we ended

up spending in this first section (with many sharing two or three). Each participant shared a thought or reflection for each of the three smaller sections for a total of 15 posts, with a 16<sup>th</sup> post under the ‘miscellaneous questions’ column. Additionally, four out of the five participants left comments throughout the Padlet, with a total of nine comments being made by the end of the three weeks; there were also several references to each other’s posts within the text of the main posts throughout in the form of informal comments.

The second set of Padlet responses (chapters 28-45) also went relatively well. Again, there were 15 main posts in total as all five participants posted a response about each of the chapter subsections. However, this time there were only five comments posted, all from the same participant. Despite this, participants did continue to respond to each other within the text of their posts - “*Like [participant] and [participant], I also liked how...*” - so the conversationality between participants was still in evidence. It did also take four weeks this time to get through this set of chapters as participants got busier; one participant was working on university applications and two others were busy moving into university for the first time. Due to these complications, the planned Zoom session did not end up happening as none of the participants were able to agree on a time for the call when they would all be free.

At this point, I checked in again with all the participants to make sure that they were all still willing and able to participate in the book club, especially when they seemed to have so many other important things going on. Each participant responded to me saying that they were still eager to stay involved, but that they would almost certainly need more than two weeks on each book section. Taking this into account, I planned to spend at least a month each on the third and fourth sections of *The Silence That Binds Us*. But despite the best intentions of the participants and myself, in the final two sections of the book the asynchronous structure of the book club began to break down. Because of the long period of time spent on one Padlet, the participants ended up all posting at very different times, which impacted the conversationality between participants. One participant who finished the book early and consistently posted in the first week found herself unable to interact with anyone else because they did not post anything until the third or fourth weeks; in fact, there

were only two participants that finished posting about the third section of the book by the end of the month.

Due to these complications, the end of the study became more like an independent reader response activity rather than a collaborative book club. To keep momentum going, I opened up the final Padlet so that the two participants who were ready could share their final responses, and one of them ended up completing the final Padlet before the rest of the group even began posting about the third set of chapters. Consequently, even though I originally had planned to gather the whole group together for a final Zoom session and zine-making counterstorytelling project, it seemed prudent to change course and conclude the study independently for each participant, as any more waiting would lead to vastly diminishing returns. Ultimately, I believe this was the right decision; although the second participant finished posting about the final chapters a week after the first participant, the final two participants took an additional month to share their posts on the latter half of the novel. They both ended up posting all their responses on the final Padlets at once, sharing six responses in quick succession. One of them communicated to me that this was because although she had finished the book long ago, she did not have the time or capacity to truly sit down and gather her thoughts until she had a break in her academic coursework.

Thus, in lieu of gathering the group together for yet another time-consuming activity, I simply asked each person to conclude the study by sending me their final thoughts about which book they preferred and why. And although the participants all ended up finishing at different times, there were still elements of conversationality preserved through the Padlet discussion format, especially for the participants who finished last. One participant in particular still took the time to leave several in-depth comments on the reflections from the others, and it was evident that each participant (besides the participant who finished first) was still reading and responding to the posts that came before. Even without leaving any official comments, they continued the practice of referencing each other's thoughts in their own responses - *"as everyone else has mentioned..."*; *"like [participant] and [participant], I found..."*; *"however, as [participant] mentioned..."* - demonstrating a continued dedication to discussion and the co-

creation of knowledge as they pointed out what they liked and agreed with, expanding on ideas brought up by others.

## **Reflections on an asynchronous, online book club**

Overall, I started the study with seven participants and ended with four. Despite this drop in participation, I believe that the study results are still justified and valuable, particularly in this very new field of ESEA and YA studies. Furthermore, exploring the reasons behind this decline could be incredibly illuminating for any other researchers hoping to work with ESEA young people and replicate parts of this study. Accordingly, here are my reflections on several crucial pieces of my research project:

### **Overwhelmed by ‘assignments’**

Rather than feeling freed by the open-ended nature of the Padlet, participants actually became overwhelmed by the lack of direction. Although I did not make the questions mandatory and I explicitly told them to ignore the list if they did not find the questions useful, participants seemed to put quite a lot of pressure on themselves in the first week to answer most (if not all) of the questions at once. Several participants treated the Padlet posts as mini essays, typing quotes from the text and writing analyses about themes, characters, and plot development alongside their personal reflections. Additionally, the reflections became quite lengthy, as the quick reading pace resulted in participants reflecting on roughly 100 pages of the novel in one single post. All these factors created a particularly stressful environment, one unintentionally bolstered by my desire for the participants to take the lead in the content of their reflections.

Furthermore, though none of the participants explicitly mentioned anything about their education levels or study habits, their excellent writing samples led me to believe that they were all great students. This perhaps contributed to the pressure they were putting on themselves to ‘turn in’ exemplary work, even if it was non-graded work in a non-classroom context.

## **International scheduling conflicts**

When I was planning my methodology for the book club, I carefully considered how I could best use digital tools such as Padlet and Zoom to facilitate an asynchronous book club, especially taking into account how the participants would be logging on from three different time zones (at one point we had people posting from four time zones, factoring in summer holiday travels). While I thought quite a lot about the daily time difference for participants, I failed to realise the major impact that the mismatch in academic calendars would have as well.

I had advertised this research study to potential participants as a summer book club that would last eight weeks. However, because of the long delay between finding enough UK participants to begin the study, the US participants were left waiting for nearly six months. The initial five US participants were quickly confirmed at the beginning of February, but they had to wait until mid-July for the study to begin due to the massive delay in finding UK participants. By the time three months had passed without any updates, two of the US participants had understandably stopped responding to my emails about whether they still wanted to be involved.

Once I finally had my confirmed participants, we began the book club on July 24, which was the beginning of summer holidays for the UK participants. However, most of the US participants were already more than a month into their summer breaks (school finished for them in mid-to-early June), which meant they had to wait a while for the ‘summer’ book club to begin. This waiting period was on top of the six-months delay they had already endured while waiting for UK participants to be confirmed, perhaps resulting in the later drop in participation and enthusiasm for the project. The end of summer matched up a bit better in the UK and the US; many of the US participants went back to school in the last week of August, and the UK students returned at the beginning of September.

Moreover, participants did not end up sticking to the two-week reading schedule once school started. I was happy to be flexible and adjust the reading schedule as needed, but this flexibility also meant that what was once an 8-week commitment became closer to a 24-week commitment, with participants

prioritising their academic workloads once school resumed (rightfully so!) and often taking longer than two weeks to read and reflect. For example, it took some participants almost six weeks to finish posting on the Padlet for chapters 28-45 of our second book *The Silence That Binds Us*. The UK participants in particular were not able to fully complete this section of chapters until their autumn breaks at the end of October.

### **Young people at a transitional age**

I have found that all the factors analysed above are part of the inherent difficulties in working with young people at such a crucial transitional age (17-18). They are in a unique stage of life which contains so many vital milestones for every young person, but which also comes with unique stressors such as high-pressure exams, heavy workloads, and massive changes in themselves and their environments (Dobson, 1980; Compas, 1987; Anda *et al.*, 2000; Jetha and Segalowitz, 2012; Banks and Smyth, 2015; Núñez-Regueiro and Núñez-Regueiro, 2021). There are so many demands on the time and energy of young people at this age, perhaps causing this period of adolescence to be tremendously under-researched compared to other age groups.

It seemed clear that the pressures of this transitional stage truly impacted participation. Firstly, the British end-of-year examination period made it very difficult to recruit participants in the UK. In fact, when I reached out to sixth form teachers at the beginning of the calendar year to ask for their help in publicising this research opportunity to their students, many of them told me that they did not want their students to be distracted while studying for exams and preparing for university. Thus, even though I started my recruitment process in January and was able to find US participants immediately, I did not have my first UK participant response until April (and this individual did not end up participating in the study). I was unable to reach a critical mass of participants until early July, once the end of the school year was in sight, contributing to the late start for the book club. Then, after summer had concluded, the busyness of the beginning of the school year also caused significant delays in the reading schedule. At least two of the participants graduated from secondary school and began university while in the middle of this book club, and most other participants entered their final year of secondary school. When faced with so

many new experiences and pivotal decisions, the book club understandably became less of a priority.

### **Reflections on my teacher v. researcher mindset**

On a final, personal note, I learned that my past life as a middle-school English teacher was something that could influence and strengthen my present pursuits in research. For example, when I initially began designing the methodology for my book club project, I kept reminding myself that I was designing a research project, not a school assignment; the participants had to take the lead without being unduly influenced by my biases and opinions (Deutsch, 1981; Mercer, 2007; Holmes and Gary, 2020). This is why I first chose to create such unstructured and open-ended prompts, which is something I never would have done as a teacher. In the classroom, I would have used much more specific questions and perhaps even given students an example or two of how I would like their responses formatted, leaving less room for creativity but more certainty in how to get a good grade. I was so afraid of imposing this teacher-student dynamic onto the book club process that I went too far in the other direction, removing myself so completely that participants became overwhelmed by the unclear expectations. Thinking as both a teacher and a researcher would have most likely given me better insight into how I could have first framed this research study for high-achieving students.

I finally began tapping back into my teacher mindset at the midway point when I realised that the current expectations for the book club would need to be revamped. As a teacher, if I tried something new that did not quite work with the students, I would usually invite the class into a process of discussion on how to make it better. This is what I finally did with the research participants, and their feedback ended up guiding the second half of the book club. After this point, I made sure to keep an open line of dialogue with the participants, asking for feedback and staying flexible as their academic commitments increased. Once I recognised that I could take the experiences and knowledge gained from teaching in the classroom and adapt them for use in my research, the research study became more productive and enjoyable for participants.

## Limitations and Generalisability

The main limitation of this study was that it was not generalisable or statistically representative due to its small sample size. This study will not be able to produce defined conclusions about Asian American or British ESEA young persons as a group; in fact, it was striving to do the exact opposite. The goal of this study was to make room for the distinctive experiences of each person, not as part of a diasporic monolith but as hybridised individuals shaped by their unique contexts and circumstances. As such, the small sample size and open-ended qualitative methods allowed for a deeper investigation into each participant's responses to the YA (Boddy, 2016). Additionally, such in-depth investigation yielded rich data that required intensive analysis, so it was necessary to use markers such as redundancy to determine the number of participants needed, lest the researcher ended up “‘drowning’ in more data than it is possible to analyze” (Morgan, 2008, p. 3; Schreier, 2018).

Ultimately, researchers argue that generalisability should be redefined in qualitative studies, not relying on statistical significance but by asking: “Why will knowledge of a single or limited number of cases be useful to people who operate in other, potentially different situations?” (Donmoyer, 2008, p. 2). To answer this question, the in-depth data resulting from this study could set the foundation for future research into the identities and education of ESEA young people, particularly regarding representation and the books used in the US and UK English curriculum. It could also be of interest to authors and publishing companies that are particularly concerned with Asian American or British ESEA young adult literature and identity formation. This data will be particularly important in the UK, as there is a scarcity of research concerning ESEA young people, especially research that explores the subtleties of how a new generation of young people are expressing their hybrid identities and redefining the parameters of the diaspora.

## Conclusion

As this chapter detailed, the methodology and structure of the study underwent several changes throughout the research process. As I conducted the study, I learned the importance of a responsive approach to study design, particularly



when working with young people with many other responsibilities and demands on their time. By listening to participants and following an “emergent” design process, I believe that this study was strengthened and ultimately became more engaging for participants (Given, 2008). This led to several significant and insightful moments from participants, which will be analysed in the following chapters.

## Chapter Six: Introduction to the Participants

In this chapter, I will introduce the participants, using their own words to create an emerging picture of who they are as individuals and as a group. Their responses will be organised and analysed according to these four introductory questions:

1. What does being Asian American or British Asian mean to you?
2. Share a movie, TV show, book, etc. where you've seen yourself or felt represented?
3. Any examples of media that you felt mis-represented you?
4. What is your perception of Asian identity where you live?

I gave them the option to answer as many or as few questions as they wanted, and I also made the decision to kick off the study by introducing myself to the participants by answering question number 4. Though I fully intended to keep my views and opinions out of the study in order to not unduly influence the direction of discussion, I did think it was important to establish a connection with the participants and to clearly communicate some of my reasoning behind the study, especially because we would never meet in person (Deutsch, 1981; Mercer, 2007). Thus, I shared in the first Padlet post:

4: I'm Taiwanese American and I grew up in a city in Maryland with a pretty large East Asian population. But even though I was surrounded by a big Asian community, I rarely saw myself reflected in media or the stories we read in school. Once I moved to London to begin my PhD program, I realized that there was a huge lack of multi-dimensional East Asian representation in the UK as well. As a result, I began to envision a transatlantic book club that would put the focus on East Asian young people, giving them (you!) space to read, respond, and discuss directly with one another in an intercultural exchange. I'm really excited to begin this process of discovery with you!

Though only six of the seven participants responded with introductions, it became clear that while there were certainly similarities amongst the group, each participant was coming to the study shaped by their own unique experiences, contexts, and backgrounds.

### **A note on ‘asynchronous interthinking’**

When analysing participant responses, it quickly became clear that despite the asynchronous nature of the study, participants were actively reading, responding, and building upon one another’s thoughts and ideas in the Padlets. This process is very much representative of the concept of ‘interthinking,’ a term coined by Mercer (2000) to describe the process of collective meaning-making facilitated by language. He writes, “In using language to make joint sense of their experience, two people may create a new kind of understanding that neither could have achieved alone - which they may both then go on to express in words for the consideration of others” (p. 9). The key to ‘interthinking’ is not just that people are having a conversation, but that there is something new created and made understood through the act of speaking with one another.

This is an important difference between the three types of ‘talk’ that Mercer identifies: cumulative, disputational, and exploratory. First, cumulative talk describes a conversation where participants uncritically agree with one another; a conclusion can be reached but it is unchallenged and differing viewpoints are not considered. Next, disputational talk is when no compromise or conclusion can be reached because participants are unwilling to listen to one another’s ideas or change their own minds. Lastly, and most ideally, exploratory talk is exemplary of complex ‘interthinking’:

Exploratory talk is that in which partners engage critically but constructively with each other’s ideas. Relevant information is offered for joint consideration. Proposals may be challenged and counter-challenged, but if so reasons are given and alternatives are offered. Agreement is sought as a basis for joint progress. Knowledge is made publicly accountable and reasoning is visible in the talk. (Mercer, 2000, p. 98)

Critical engagement amongst participants is necessary for exploratory talk, as they must listen carefully to each other and be willing to have their own ideas be challenged. As Mercer says, the “reasoning is visible” from all parties throughout the conversation (p. 98).

Though Mercer mainly focuses on how spoken language can facilitate interthinking, he briefly writes about how technology has the potential to transform the way people think and communicate together, bringing together groups of people that would have otherwise never have been able to hold a dialogue (Littleton and Mercer, 2013). Indeed, there are already examples of technology in the classroom that enable new and creative models of interthinking between students (Grisham and Wolsey, 2006; Larson, 2009; Rasmussen and Hagen, 2015; Mercer, Hennessy and Warwick, 2019; Omland, 2021), as well as technology-aided extracurricular activities such as online book clubs that generate conversation and new knowledge (Scharber, 2009; Scharber, Melrose and Wurl, 2009; Stevens, 2020). Although these conversations may not be happening synchronously or building sentence by sentence like an in-person conversation, moments of interthinking are still possible if participants are critically reading and responding to the written thoughts of others. Thus, I will slightly adapt Mercer's terminology and use the term 'asynchronous interthinking' to describe the participants' discussions going forward, as this term better captures how participants used the Padlets as a tool for the co-production of knowledge and meaning-making, despite the temporal and physical distance between them.

This practice of 'asynchronous interthinking' was evident throughout my analysis of the participants' introductory posts, as the participants' responses demonstrated how they read, reflected, and built upon the responses of others when formulating their thoughts. In particular, the Padlet conversations demonstrated both "cumulative" (uncritically building on other responses) and "exploratory" (critical engagement with visible reasoning) talk, as participants collectively made meaning together (Wilkinson, 1998; Mercer, 2000, p. 97; Littleton and Mercer, 2013). I will now go through the answers to the four posted questions to briefly summarise participants' answers and to draw out some overarching themes present in their responses.

## An Introduction to Participants

### What does being Asian American or British Asian<sup>10</sup> mean to you?

As this is the first time we hear directly from participants, I have included their self-described ethnic backgrounds as a brief reminder when relaying these first responses. Five of the participants chose to answer the first question, and their answers demonstrated a subtle, but clear, divide between the Asian Americans and the British ESEAs. Eva and Juliette, in describing their Asian American identities, used language that pointed to the positive and expansive possibilities of identity:

Eva (Filipino, Vietnamese, Chinese): Being Asian American to me, means **adaptation and appreciation**. Holding the identity of being Asian American entails having to adapt to American society and culture while continuing to appreciate your own cultural background. It means having to **balance the feelings of belonging and alienation** due to having a place among multiple social groups rather than only one.

Juliette (mostly Taiwanese, Filipino, Pacific Islander): Being Asian American to me feels like constantly trying to **find appreciation and nuances in between cultures, identities, and communities**. I feel like Asian American identities are often presented in a single-dimensional way without consideration to **intersectionality**, so exploring what it means to Asian American to me also means constantly **adding complexity to my own experiences**.

Specifically, Eva and Juliette both used the word “appreciation” when describing their thoughts on being Asian American, already demonstrating the ‘cumulative’ talk and co-construction of meaning occurring as they read each other’s responses and adopted the terminology that also resonated with them (Wilkinson, 1998; Mercer, 2000). While not ignoring the difficulties inherent in being between cultures, they both also affirmed that this in-betweenness can be

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<sup>10</sup> I used the term ‘British Asian’ instead of ‘British ESEA’ here because the participants told me they were unfamiliar with the ESEA label at the start of the study, perhaps pointing to its slow dissemination outside of activist circles and interest groups.

something to be thankful for, especially in the ways that it allows them to experience the “nuances” of identity and community. Both participants also reflected on the intersectionality and multi-dimensionality of belonging to many groups, pushing against society’s tendency to flatten identity to one singular thing. I found it interesting that, when read together, Eva and Juliette’s last sentences almost perfectly encapsulated Berns-McGown’s (2008) assertion that to be a part of the diaspora is to be connected to many spaces at once and “to hold a *complex* identity that *balances* one’s understanding of those places and the way one fits into each of them” (p. 9, my emphasis). And though Juliette acknowledged the constant struggle inherent in identity negotiations, both participants communicated some level of understanding that their culture and identity will be formed in the “*inbetween space*” (Bhabha, 2004, p. 56).

On the other hand, the British ESEA participants were far more negative in their descriptions of their identities. Catelyn started the conversation with a very generic statement about British ESEA identity, and Lana and Juno both wrote about feelings of never belonging anywhere:

Catelyn (Chinese): British Asian to me, is a large umbrella term for all sorts of people that have their own unique experiences tied to British and Asian culture.

Lana (Chinese): It’s hard for me to articulate what being British Asian means to me. During a culture event in my school, I felt **frustrated at the oversimplification of culture**, how everyone seemed to be trying to put in me in a box, when in reality I see myself as more a **mix of identities and cultures**. So I would say that being British Asian, or ultimately having a mixture of cultural identities, creates **the sense of never truly belonging**. Having said that, this means that I **find belonging among others who also feel that they do not belong** (e.g., members of the LGBTQIA+ community, fellow British Asians).

Juno (Chinese): Being Asian British to me, means constantly **drifting in the liminality** between so many complex facets of identity and culture, never quite able to truly define yourself. It feels like **eternally being an intruder**: whether that is in regards to British society or to my Chinese

heritage. In that sense, **a lack of belonging** feels integral to this experience. I want to be proud of my Asian heritage but this concept sometimes contends with a **desire to be invisible**, especially when everyone around you is trying to confine you into a singular, palatable identity. However, as Lana said, embracing this inability to belong allows a sense of belonging with other marginalised groups.

Interestingly, Lana and Juno both identified the same in-betweenness that Eva and Juliette described, but they saw this “liminality” as something that excluded and alienated them from being a part of either culture. Lana even described her frustration at the “oversimplification of culture,” but then admitted that acknowledging the complexity and mix of her cultural identity led to feeling like there was nowhere that she belonged. Juno similarly described this feeling quite poetically, writing that she felt like she was “constantly drifting in the liminality” and “eternally [intruding]” in her own cultures. For Lana and Juno, British ESEA identity represented a state of not belonging anywhere, perhaps revealing an unconscious belief in the essentialised nature of identity and culture rather than the openness that comes with claiming a hybrid identity (Ang, 2001; Bhabha, 2004; Hall, 2021b).

Interestingly, the participant responses seemed to foreshadow the responses to the next question, which asked about representative media. Perhaps for the US participants, it was easier to appreciate the nuances and complexities of their diaspora identities because they had seen it represented well in US media (see responses to the next question). In contrast, Lana and Juno, who espoused a more pessimistic outlook on not belonging anywhere, may have been impacted by the lack of ESEA visibility in UK media, exemplifying Saha’s (2021) assertion that the media plays a powerful role in shaping what society imagines about minority groups. That being said, Lana and Juno both agreed that a degree of belonging can be found by seeking out other groups that also do not fit into a limited construction of identity. Looking at all the responses together, it was clear that what the participants were describing was in fact a concept of hybridity, even if they did not use this specific term. Eva and Juliette emphasised the positive aspects that could be found in-between cultures, while

Lana and Juno found themselves (and others) questioning the legitimacy of their hybrid identities.

**Share a movie, TV show, book, etc. where you've seen yourself or felt represented?**

In answering this question (and also the next question about *unrepresentative* media), the first thing to note is that all the examples given were from American media. None of the participants were able to think of any examples of British media, representative or not. This emphasises the lack of British ESEA representation in the media, as already evidenced by the difficulty in finding a YA novel featuring a British ESEA protagonist for this study.

Nearly all of the participants could name at least one instance where they felt themselves represented, which was encouraging. Four of the participants - Lana, Ariana, Juliette, and Juno - mentioned the recent movie *Everything Everywhere All At Once* as a powerfully reflective moment for them. Lana and Juliette specifically mentioned seeing themselves in the character of Jobu Tupaki, a sympathetically portrayed antagonist who struggles as a queer Asian American woman to reconcile her identity with family expectations, and Ariana and Juno shared that the film made them both cry. In addition to this film, Ariana saw herself in the familial relationships in the novel *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan, and Juno felt represented in “the portrayal of intergenerational trauma and anger in [Netflix’s] *Beef*” and also by the representation of culturally divided family dynamics in the film *The Farewell*. Eva added that she felt represented by the novels *Days of Distraction* by Alexandra Chang and *The Sympathizer* by Viet Thanh Nguyen.

Beyond identifying with portrayals of hybrid Asian American or British ESEA identities in the media, several participants also mentioned examples of media which represented their queer identities as well. For example, Lana named Sameen Shaw from the TV programme *Person of Interest* as a “very cool, bisexual” character that she could really identify with, and Juno stated that she “really resonated with the exploration of a displaced queer Asian identity” in Ocean Vuong’s poetry collections. And lastly, Juliette made a point to mention that she felt as though she related more to media featuring queer BIPOC women,



rather than to media featuring only the Asian American experience. This speaks to the intersectionality of culture, nationality, ethnicity, and queer identity; each participant's specific blend of identities were expressed in different ways, meaning that they all felt themselves represented in distinctive and unique forms (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002; Iftikar and Museus, 2018).

Finally, Catelyn was the only participant who did not truly have an answer for a piece of media in which she felt represented, reflecting that she has not “consumed much media that portrays British/American Asians which is interesting.” This self-awareness pointed to her realisation that there really was not much accessible representative media for her. In the end, she could only mention a movie trailer she once watched:

Catelyn: The one thing that comes to mind is a trailer I watched for the movie *Minari* by A24 where, although I have not watched the movie, I felt that the trailer represented many Asian immigrants strive for the American dream and felt quite moved to see something like this come up.

It was fascinating that Catelyn did not even watch the movie in its entirety, but she felt that she could relate in some way to the immigrant struggle previewed in the trailer. It is also noteworthy to mention that, even to a UK participant, the concept of the ‘American Dream’ has become so ingrained in representations of immigration and immigrant motivations that it is a familiar narrative all around the world.

### **Any examples of media that you felt misrepresented you?**

Three participants - Eva, Lana, and Catelyn - shared examples of unrepresentative media, stating how certain media enforced stereotypes or was simply old-fashioned and no longer reflective of contemporary society. Catelyn first brought up *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan, which was a book that Ariana previously mentioned as representative of her own experiences. While Catelyn acknowledged that the intergenerational and intercultural mother-daughter relationship was well-portrayed, she also felt that the book was more representative of a past era:

Catelyn (Chinese): I enjoyed the intricate portrayal of the relationship between a Chinese mother and a Chinese American daughter. However, at times I did feel like it was quite old fashioned talking about concubines and arranged marriages. Perhaps a book that was more representative of the Asian American experience in the past but no longer as relevant.

Catelyn brought up an important point about cultural relevancy in stories. *The Joy Luck Club* was first published in 1989 and is still required reading in many US schools 35 years later, despite there now being many obviously outdated references and practices in the novel. And while it is exciting to see students reading a novel centred on the Asian American experience, it can become problematic when this story becomes the *only* Asian American story to which students are exposed; this reduces the story to an item on a diversity checklist rather than a novel which explores the many-faceted complexities of a diasporic group (Yokota, 2009; Yoo-Lee *et al.*, 2014; Rodríguez and Kim, 2018).

Next, both Eva and Lana also named the recent Disney+ show *American Born Chinese* (an adaptation of the graphic novel by Gene Luen Yang). Eva first wrote about feeling conflicted about the show as there were some aspects that felt representative, but she ultimately felt that it further enforced stereotypes:

Eva (Filipino, Vietnamese, Chinese): Something that made me feel somewhat mis-represented was *American Born Chinese* (on Disney+). While some aspects of the show were very spot on, I felt like it relied too heavily on making fun of culture and a specific type of upbringing to portray a perspective.

Responding on the Padlet, Lana agreed and added some more examples of media that relied on stereotypes:

Lana (Chinese): I agree with Eva, some shows and other media portray the very specific 'tiger mum' stories which I'm sure resonate with some, but the lack of diversity of Asian stories can lead to stereotypes becoming entrenched. *Minions 2* (the most recent minions movie) annoyed me with those 'kung-fu' dragon magic things, as well as *American Born Chinese*- I turned it off after the first 10/15 mins or so because I'm sick of it.

In her response, Lana identified several stereotypes (“tiger mum,” “‘kung-fu’ dragon magic things”) often applied to the Asian American or British ESEA community. Her strong word choice (“I’m sick of it”) communicated how she was so angered by the uncritical and continued usage of these stereotypes that she refused to consume any more media that reinforced them.

Catelyn, Lana, and Eva all aptly understood that the problem with stereotypes was not that they are entirely unrepresentative; they all acknowledged that there were groups who would identify with specific labels and experiences that they themselves disagree with. However, stereotypes become an issue when, as Lana said, “the lack of diversity of Asian stories [leads] to stereotypes becoming entrenched.” It is as Adichie states: “The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story” (*The danger of a single story*, 2009). Ultimately, the solution is not to get rid of older books like *The Joy Luck Club* or to stop including cultural tropes in the media, but to include more stories that can represent the wide spectrum of Asian American and British ESEA identities and experiences.

### **What is your perception of Asian identity where you live?**

In their responses, all of the participants shared that they live in predominantly white areas and go to predominantly white schools, with Ariana specifically sharing:

Ariana (Chinese): I've had teachers/coaches mistake me for other Asian students on multiple occasions - It's usually a genuine error, but it does make me feel like I'm being grouped into a larger monolith.

This points not only to the scarcity of other ESEA students in Ariana’s school, but also the microaggressions that BIPOC students face in white-dominated spaces (Tokunaga, 2016; Iftikar and Museus, 2018). Ariana’s feelings of not being seen as an individual reflect the historical stereotyping of Asian Americans and British ESEAs, as they are collectively labelled as ‘yellow peril,’ ‘model minority,’ ‘perpetual foreigner,’ among other stereotypes (Takaki, 1998; Kawai, 2005; Benton and Gomez, 2008; Wu, 2014; Yeh, 2014; Lee, 2015).

Additionally, five of the six participants - Eva, Juliette, Lana, Juno, and Catelyn - specifically mentioned their family and/or family friends as a main part of their community, pointing to the intergenerational relationships that act as connections to their diasporic heritage and identities:

Eva (Filipino, Vietnamese, Chinese): Growing up, the only Asian community I was familiar with was my **family**, in my school there were mostly people of white descent.

Juliette (mostly Taiwanese, Filipino, Pacific Islander): I didn't particularly feel connected to the Asian/Asian American community at school in addition to school already being predominantly white. Many of my interactions within the Asian American community is through **my parents and family friends...**

Lana (Chinese): My 'Asian community' would consist of some close friends from school and **my parents' friends**, which is not a lot.

Juno (Chinese): The Asian community I grew up with was mainly people at school and **my parents' friends**.

Catelyn (Chinese): I feel that my perception of the British Asian identity is quite limited, my British Asian community consists of friends at school and **friends of my family**.

Kuah-Pearce (2006) describes this connection as two of three crucial relationships that every diasporic individual forms: to 'homeland' and to the diasporic community where they are. For these participants, their parents and parents' friends acted as both a connection to a cultural heritage (i.e. 'homeland') that they never directly experienced, as well as making up a large part of their ESEA community where they are now. Lana, Juno, and Catelyn also mentioned friends at school as part of their ESEA community, with Catelyn elaborating, "I feel as though I have met some of my friends through bonding over similar experience as a British Asian." For the participants, it initially seemed that proximity to their daily lives played a large part in forming their ESEA communities.

However, as the participants continued describing their ESEA communities, a divide once again became evident between the US and UK participants. While both groups of participants began by describing the perceived lack of ESEA community, the Asian Americans went on to describe the ways that they had essentially reached out beyond their immediate contexts to find, or make, their own community. For Eva, finding more community was as simple as reaching out to other communities, allowing her to access a larger support network and access events centred on the Asian American experience and identity:

Eva (Filipino, Vietnamese, Chinese): ...However, as I entered my teen years I began to broaden my reach among the Asian communities in my area and found that there were more people similar to me than I had thought. After establishing connections to the community of Asian Americans around me, I became more exposed to diverse media and outreach events.

Next, Juliette found further community by working at an Asian and Pacific Islander (API) museum, finally finding representation:

Juliette (mostly Taiwanese, Filipino, Pacific Islander): Many of my interactions within the Asian American community is through my parents and family friends, as well as an API culture and arts museum I worked at, where I truly felt my Austronesian and queer identities were represented.

And lastly, Ariana spotlighted efforts to diversify the curriculum and a friend who observed the lack of Asian community and started a Dear Asian Youth chapter in her city:

Ariana (Chinese): ...However, there have been some new efforts to increase/celebrate diversity - In my English classes, books by Asian writers have been added to the curriculum + one of my friends recently started a Dear Asian Youth chapter!

Each of these participants took their community into their own hands, proactively involving themselves in the smaller communities already in place around them. And where these spaces did not already exist, as in Ariana's case,

she had access to someone who was willing to create a community for her and others like her. While this spoke strongly to the willpower and independence of the Asian American participants, it also pointed to the fact that there were already organisations and resources in place to support the formation of Asian American community, and that these resources were accessible at a secondary school level.

In contrast, the British ESEA participants responded to their similar lack of ESEA community by describing feelings of isolation and disconnect. Lana wrote:

Lana (Chinese): Many of my parents' friends from that time have left Scotland, where I'm from; because of this I perhaps perceive the Scottish Asian community as something small and distant from me.

It seemed that beyond her parents' immediate circle, Lana had not had the opportunity to form an ESEA community of her own, leaving her feeling alone as these secondary diasporic connections move away from her. It is unclear if there truly are no other Scottish ESEA organisations or resources near her, but it at least seems like they are not immediately apparent or well-known.

Juno echoed this sentiment, relating an instance where she felt excluded from the ESEA community because of her lack of language skills:

Juno (Chinese): There was a weekly Chinese School for kids from around Scotland but I always was kind of closed off there because my Chinese was... kinda abysmal.

Even though there were attempts at providing resources and lessons through a language school, Juno felt like she already had to have a certain cultural capital (i.e. language) in order to easily access this community. Interestingly, she also responded to the lack of Asian community by intentionally distancing herself from the other British ESEAs around her:

Juno (Chinese): When I was younger, I stupidly pushed away the few Asian peers I had. I think I wanted to avoid - like Ariana said - being perceived as part of a monolith at my predominantly white school, or maybe because I saw

them as competition for opportunities where - as our teachers frequently emphasised - we would have the advantage of ticking off a diversity box.

Juno, like Ariana, wanted to avoid the microaggressions common in white-dominant spaces; looking back, she reflected that pushing away her peers may have been a pre-emptive attempt to separate herself in a bid to demonstrate individuality. Furthering this line of thought, she shared that she had always been told that she is in direct competition with other British ESEAs, resulting in a scarcity mindset rather than one of solidarity. This messaging from Juno's teachers has parallels to the rhetoric used by the Asian American groups currently invested in tearing down systems of affirmative action, as they believe that it is necessary to pull down other minority groups in order to attain one of the limited spots at prestigious universities (Balingit, 2023; Chang, 2023; Dirks, 2023; Rios and Stein, 2023). Juno ended her comments by reiterating her feelings of isolation, stating:

Juno (Chinese): I don't think I really appreciated how establishing strong bonds with my few Asian peers when I was younger would help me feel less isolated in our predominantly white area.

Finally, Catelyn commented on not only the lack of ESEA community around her, but also the lack of representation in the media:

Catelyn (Chinese): I have always found there to be a lack of British Asian/Asian American representation in media which is not great, however, I feel that this has also pushed me to become more connected with the Chinese side of my identity - I consume a lot of Chinese media (c dramas<sup>11</sup>), maybe this is the way I compensate for a lack of representation in western media?

Catelyn's response differed from all the other participants; lacking hybrid British Chinese representations, she turned to Chinese media instead to "compensate" and learn more about her Chinese heritage. According to Kuah-Pearce (2006), this is a common practice that helps individuals "[locate] the communal selves in the diaspora," as diasporic individuals turn to familiar forms of cultural capital

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<sup>11</sup> Chinese dramas

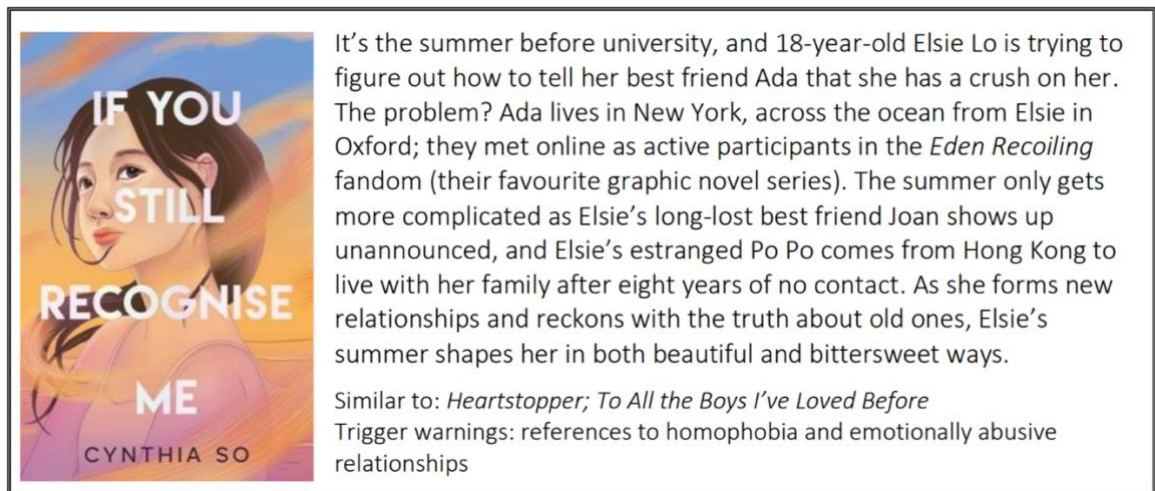
that can help bridge the gap between past heritage and a new, unfamiliar setting (p. 230). Yeh (2014) also observed this commonly occurring in 'British Chinese' and 'Oriental' nightlife and music clubs, as young ESEAs found inspiration, connection, and identification in global Asian music such as Cantopop, K-pop, and even Asian American musicians. Similarly, for Catelyn, Chinese dramas and media helped ground her in the process of figuring out her identity, especially when there was a severe lack of hybrid representation and community around her.

## Conclusion

Now that I have gone through the participants' introductory posts and given a brief analysis of their answers, it is clear that there were already some initial differences between the UK and US participants and how they viewed their identities and communities. In the next sections, I will analyse the discussion generated by the two novels in the book study, *If You Still Recognise Me* by Cynthia So and *The Silence that Binds Us* by Joanna Ho, with a focus on how these questions of identity, hybridity, and community continued to emerge throughout the discussion.



## Chapter Seven: *If You Still Recognise Me*



**Figure 3. Synopsis of the novel, taken from the Participant Information Sheet**

As previously mentioned in Chapter 5, the book club was structured slightly differently for each novel based on feedback from the participants. The first book discussion for So's *If You Still Recognise Me* was largely unstructured and asked participants to respond to a quarter of the novel at one time (indicated by the chapter headings further down). The only guidance I gave participants was the following list of optional questions:

1. What did you like/dislike about the chapters you read?
2. Is there anything that resonated with you, or any particular quotes that stuck out to you?
3. Did you have a strong reaction to anything you read?
4. Is there anything in the chapters you didn't understand or would like clarification about?
5. Have you noticed similarities/differences in the US v. UK experience?
6. What are examples of 'mirrors' (reflecting your own experience) v. 'windows' (looking into someone else's experience)?

### **'Asynchronous interthinking' and responsive conversationality**

Because of the unstructured prompt and the large novel sections, participants ended up posting long 'monologues' sharing their thoughts on several of the prompts at once. However, this did not prevent participants from reading one another's posts and responding, both by using the 'comment' function on Padlet

and by directly addressing their peers in their own posts. In fact, as I read through each participant's 'monologue,' I was encouraged to find that they were not actually monologues featuring only their own thoughts, but that participants were actively referencing one another and even demonstrating changes of mind and further thinking as they read what their peers had to say and responded asynchronously.

Thus, in my following analysis I have at times taken the liberty of extracting examples of responsive conversationality from the participants' larger monologues on the Padlets and arranging them together into a more coherent sequence of mini conversations to make the 'asynchronous interthinking' visible. Other researchers have used this method when an online platform did not automatically create conversation threads (Nelimarkka *et al.*, 2015), and on platforms like X (formerly known as Twitter) when attempting to create a picture of topically related tweets and threads (Zubiaga *et al.*, 2016; Babvey, Lipizzi and Ramirez-Marquez, 2019). Accordingly, in the following sections I will present these examples of conversationality, organised according to the themes that emerged from the analysis.

## **A Brief Summary of Codes and Topics from the Padlets**

As I read through and inductively analysed the participant responses from each weekly Padlet for *If You Still Recognise Me*, the following topics and threads emerged. I will now briefly relay the key points from each Padlet, with a particular focus on the 'windows' and 'mirrors' identified by participants in each section of chapters.

### **Padlet 1: Chapters 1-9**

***Mirrors: Food and meals.*** Participants were quite pleased to see familiar foods and scenes of family mealtimes in the first section of the novel, remarking on these scenes as 'mirrors' of the food they eat with their own families. Juno and Ariana appreciated how the novel portrayed the importance of food in ESEA cultures, while Paige drew important connections between her personal 'mirrors' and how food can also represent cultural challenges for diasporic ESEA individuals.

***Mirrors: Disconnect from ‘homeland’ and family.*** Participants saw ‘mirrors’ in Elsie’s many feelings of cultural disconnect, especially in how the novel portrayed Elsie struggling against parental and cultural expectations to find a space where she could truly exist as her authentic self. Juno and Juliette focused on Elsie’s feelings of disconnect from her family abroad, and Ariana shared that she had similar feelings as a second-generation Chinese American.

***Windows AND Mirrors: Family dynamics concerning LGBTQIA+ issues.*** There were instances where participants, due to their unique backgrounds and experiences, differed on whether a scene was a ‘mirror’ or ‘window.’ For example, there were several tense scenes in the first chapters demonstrating how the family’s conservative attitudes were directly at odds with Elsie’s queer identity; Juno and Lana found this to be a very accurate description of their own interactions with their families while Paige, coming from a more liberal background, found it to be a ‘window’ into the hostility created when someone dared to challenge a family’s conservative cultural norms.

***Windows AND Mirrors: Disconnect from language.*** There was also some disagreement over whether one should feel embarrassed for not knowing one’s ‘native’ language. Catelyn reflected on a moment where Elsie felt ashamed that she could not respond in Mandarin, finding it strange that Elsie blamed herself for a strangers’ stereotypical assumptions. On the other hand, Ariana and Juno both felt they could relate to Elsie in that moment, having experienced similar moments of language-related embarrassment themselves. In an instance of ‘asynchronous interthinking,’ Ariana’s and Juno’s statements actually caused Catelyn to consider a different perspective on language (or lack thereof), leading her to conclude that diasporic individuals are unfairly under an incredible amount of pressure in the area of ‘authentic’ language-learning.

***Imagined Windows.*** Several participants reacted to Elsie’s musings about growing up in the UK rather than Hong Kong, sharing a set of responses that I am calling *imagined windows*. Ariana, Juno, and Juliette had a conversation where they each shared how they wondered their lives might have been different if they had grown up in the diasporic ‘homeland.’ These reflections were neither truly ‘mirrors’ nor ‘windows,’ but they expressed the participants’ imaginings of how their lives might have been different elsewhere. This revealed how they

were still in the process of figuring out how to establish diaspora identities for themselves.

## **Padlet 2: Chapters 10-18**

***Windows AND Mirrors: Family dynamics and culture.*** As participants further read about Joan's and Elsie's relationships with their families, Juno and Lana could particularly relate to the suffocating reality of living in a home where you do not feel comfortable being yourself. Catelyn and Paige agreed, seeing a cultural 'mirrors' in the ESEA family drama while also pointing out that the novel could act as a 'window' into ESEA culture and conflict, as such family drama is rarely shared with outsiders.

***Windows: Fanfiction and queer representation.*** The topic of fanfiction emerged for the first time in this section, as participants peered into a 'window' demonstrating how fanfiction became a unique avenue for Elsie to see her queer and BIPOC identities represented. Paige mentioned that while she used to find fanfiction to be 'cringe,' she began to change her mind after seeing how it could be a unique medium for queer Asian stories. Additionally, Juno particularly loved the sheer joy of the fanfiction elements in the story, which she had rarely seen in queer media portrayals before.

***(False) Windows: Single stories, more stories.*** The discussion culminated in a reflection on the prevalence of the 'single story,' especially in immigrant and diaspora narratives. Juno and Lana were disappointed in the "predictable pattern" of ESEA narratives, bemoaning the fact that all immigrant narratives seem to be centred on trauma and identity loss. Ariana agreed, but also offered the perspective that the novel was unique in its British context; she had previously only encountered US-centric queer narratives before and appreciated the 'window' into such stories and experiences outside of the US. Ultimately, all participants argued that it was crucial for stories to represent marginalised groups in a nuanced manner, particularly when portraying LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC young people who have been misrepresented for so long.

### **Padlet 3: Chapters 19-27**

***Mirrors: Exclusion and hyper-awareness.*** Three participants - Juno, Lana, and Catelyn - all strongly related to a scene where Elsie describes her feelings of exclusion from the supposedly inclusive queer groups at her school. These participants all saw a 'mirror' in Elsie's uncertainty over the reasons behind the exclusion, each sharing similar insecurities over past moments where they had felt rejected or treated differently but were unsure of why.

***Windows: Exclusion/representation in the queer community.*** In addition to the previously discussed 'mirrors' of personal exclusion, participants also found many 'windows' into the experience of exclusion *from* the queer community, particularly for BIPOC individuals. Juno especially found the 'window' into the queer Hong Kong community to be fascinating, especially in the novel's discussion of how this community was reversing typically negative labels and widely using them as acts of reclamation and ownership.

***Rejected Mirrors: Single stories, more stories.*** Participants once again touched on the topic of the 'single story' and the necessity for more stories. This was particularly noticeable in a discussion between Lana and Juno regarding stereotypes and assumptions from other people, as Lana emphasised how she was finding fewer 'mirrors' in the text as the novel progressed. Likewise, Juno was frustrated that readers of this novel might assume all ESEA teenagers were like Elsie, demonstrating a reticence for her identity to be casually reduced to the characters in the novel.

### **Padlet 4 and Zoom: Chapters 28-37**

***Overall Thoughts.*** Participants were split on their overall thoughts on the novel. Ariana and Juno quite enjoyed reading it; Ariana most enjoyed witnessing Elsie's growth as a character over the course of the story, while Juno resonated with the many discussions about race, queerness, and intersectionality. In contrast, Catelyn, Paige, and Lana were more reserved - all three participants seemed to be less familiar with YA, and Catelyn repeatedly used the phrase "just vibes" to communicate how she felt the story was somewhat lacking in substance.

***Windows AND Mirrors: A ‘universal’ story.*** Three of the British ESEA participants surprisingly shared that they did not feel that there was very much that was uniquely British about the representation in the novel. In fact, they felt that the story was quite universal, especially in its depiction of family dynamics and intersectionality. For Juno, the main benefits of the UK setting were the moments she could recognise places in the text, and Paige was actually more interested in how the Chinese side of British Chinese identity was portrayed. Catelyn and Paige also had a conversation about the mentions of ‘yellow fever’ in the story, which is a derogatory term for white men who only want to be in relationships with ESEA women. The use of this term really stood out for Catelyn and Paige, as they had previously only encountered this label in US media.

***Windows: Family dynamics and generational trauma.*** Ariana, Paige, and Juno liked how the family conflict between Elsie’s queer Uncle Kevin and his parents (Elsie’s grandparents) was clarified and somewhat resolved. For Ariana, the power of the ending lay not in its traditional ‘happy ending’ for the characters, but in the ‘window’ into the possibility of a more hopefully future for Elsie’s family. Paige and Juno agreed, noting how meaningful it was that the family recognised they still had work to do in order to truly reconcile with one another and heal from past traumas.

***Mirrors: Diaspora identities.*** Paige, Catelyn, and Juno had a thoughtful discussion on diaspora identities, with Paige reiterating her feelings of disconnect and displacement. For Paige, her mixed identity was the cause of her feeling out of place, and even though the character of Elsie was not of mixed heritage, reading about Elsie’s similar experiences of exclusion validated her own experiences. Catelyn and Juno both agreed, with Catelyn also revealing that she had somewhat changed her mind on the topic of identity over the course of the book club and that she now better understood Paige’s feelings of displacement.

## **Diving Deeper into Interpretation**

Now that I have briefly detailed the many topics that emerged from the participant conversations about *If You Still Recognise Me*, I will next conduct an in-depth analysis of the overarching themes that emerged from the data.

## AsianCrit and overall themes

As described in Chapter 5, AsianCrit is a theoretical framework that emerged from Critical Race Theory and adapted the seven critical race tenets to make them more applicable to the Asian American experience (Iftikar and Museus, 2018). Even though this framework has only been used thus far in an Asian American context, I decided to apply them in a deductive coding process to see if there were any tenets that would also describe the British ESEA experience. Ultimately, I found four to be particularly applicable to the discussion generated by *If You Still Recognise Me*:

- Asianization: The process of how Asian Americans are racialised and forced into stereotypes such as ‘the model minority’ and ‘the yellow peril.’
- Transnational contexts: The national and transnational relationships and networks that shape the experiences of Asian Americans.
- Intersectionality: The intersection of race with other identities such as gender and social class, as well as how systems of oppression intersect.
- Story, theory, and praxis: Counterstories that challenge and upend the dominant epistemologies currently based on White European theories and researchers.

When I took these four deductive codes and cross-referenced them with the range of topics that emerged from the novel discussion, I found that the inductive and deductive strands came together in the three overarching themes and five sub-themes listed below, using the words of the participants as descriptions:

**Theme 1:** “I feel like my identity is in a constant state of flux.”

**Theme 1a:** “I’ve been unable to tell if people interacted differently with me and my Asian friends...or if I’m just wallowing in my own insecurity.”

**Theme 1b:** “I can’t help but feel a little guilty about it.”

**Theme 1c:** “I often find myself holding onto any piece of passed-down family history or idea.”

**Theme 2:** “Living under a constant glare of parental expectations makes it really hard to break out of [a] self-destructive mindset.”

**Theme 2a:** “I enjoyed the bit where he says is proud of her, something that means a lot in East Asian culture.”

**Theme 3:** “The story is following that same predictable pattern...”

**Theme 3a:** “The importance of representation and role models in literature absolutely cannot be understated.”

I will now go into a deeper analysis of these three themes, using participant responses and the relevant AsianCrit tenets to demonstrate how these themes emerged from the novel discussion process.

## **Theme 1: “I feel like my identity is in a constant state of flux.”**

Several participants strongly identified with scenes depicting Elsie’s feelings of detachment from her cultural background and ‘homeland’ in Hong Kong, with three participants - Paige, Ariana, and Juno - using the word “disconnect” to describe their feelings. The title of this theme comes from Paige, who explained this disconnect through the lens of her own mixed-heritage diasporic identity:

Paige: I strongly resonated with the theme of cultural disconnect. As someone who is mixed race (Chinese on my mum’s side, white on my dad’s), I feel like my identity is in a constant state of flux depending on the country I am in. When I visit China or Malaysia, my appearance evidently shows someone who is not wholly East Asian, leading to being perceived as a ‘tourist’... Strangers often approach me in English, and I am handed English menus at restaurants, and on occasion, even offered a knife and fork... Conversely, in the UK I am frequently assumed to be more fluent in Chinese than I am.



Paige's comment described how the interplay of two AsianCrit tenets - 'Asianization' and 'Transnational contexts' - worked together to racialise her in different contexts: in Asia, Paige felt as though others perceived her as 'white,' while in the UK she felt racialised by others as a "perpetual foreigner" (Iftikar and Museus, 2018, p. 940). This demonstrated Beech's (2011) assertion that in a liminal space, individuals are often forced to reckon with the perceptions of others and the dilemma of how to present themselves to society in reflective process. Paige's feelings of being in a "constant state of flux" also encapsulated the difficulty that diasporic individuals face when trying to name and understand "the different ways [they] are positioned by, and position [themselves] within, the narratives of the past" (Hall, 2021b, p. 225). Similarly, Ariana also wrote that she identified with these feelings of disconnect, writing:

Ariana: As a second-gen immigrant, I often feel disconnected/alienated from my culture/heritage.

Even though Ariana identified as fully Chinese American, she still keenly felt the alienation from her Chinese heritage, demonstrating the precarious feeling of existing between two worlds common among second-generation immigrants (Leu, 2010; Tokunaga, 2016).

The other participants also felt this sense of 'Asianization' and 'identity flux,' particularly when placed within similar transnational contexts. Despite initially finding herself unable to relate to Paige's post at the beginning of the book club, by the final novel discussion Catelyn was reflecting on a recent trip to China and realising that she actually identified more with Paige's assertion of 'identity flux' than she first thought:

Catelyn: Yeah, I have to say I when I read, I mean, I remember that bit and I remember for me that was more of, uh - oh I don't really experience that. Both my parents are Chinese and so when I go back to China, I don't really get that too much... But I actually went back recently and I kind of... I kind of more get that 'feeling like a tourist' thing. I mean, obviously you are a tourist because you're not living there permanently but, um... more of like a different lifestyle and stuff. And a different sort of, um... like people... like it's just a different... well you're obviously living in a

different cultural environment, I guess? And that's a different, quite a big change from the UK and so I can sort of see both sides, like the mirrors and the windows, sort of?

Interestingly, Catelyn revealed that when she initially read about Elsie's feelings of disconnect, she thought, "Oh I don't really experience that." Unlike Paige, Catelyn identifies as full Chinese and so she never had the experience of superficially sticking out in China. However, after reading and listening to the other participants and engaging in 'asynchronous interthinking,' she adopted a more nuanced view on the topic, reflexively thinking about her recent experience as a British Chinese individual in China to better understand the perspectives of the other participants. Like Paige, Catelyn's statement betrayed a burgeoning understanding of how she might be racialised and positioned differently in an international Chinese context, as a tourist rather than someone who belongs there. As Catelyn shared this on Zoom, the many pauses and breaks she took while formulating her statement demonstrated the still unfinished nature of her thoughts on the subject, exemplifying the diasporic individual's struggle to form a "coherent (if not always stable) experiential sense of self" (Gilroy, 1991, p. 127).

Juno also agreed with Paige and Catelyn's feelings of not fitting in, sharing:

Juno: Yeah I also - my parents are both Chinese, but I feel like when I do go to China it feels... it just feels really weird, like how different the culture and people's lifestyles are. Cos like...I guess there's not really like, the superficial difference of race but... I mean I've never been good at speaking Mandarin either so that's also a language barrier type thing? And then, yeah, just kind of having that barrier between you and your relatives who live on another continent... Um, so it's kind of like they're leading like a whole kind of different life from you and like there's so much that you'd miss out on.

Even though Juno is Chinese British, she shared that she did feel very different whenever she visited China, mentioning cultural and lifestyle distinctions as well as language barriers. Compared to Paige, who focused on how others perceived her external differences and treated her as such, Juno very much felt an internal

divide between herself and others. This led her to feel disconnected from her family in China, as she had no way of truly understanding the nuances of their lives, demonstrating Hall's (2021) argument that "as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute 'what we really are'; or rather - since history has intervened - '*what we have become*'" (p. 225, my emphasis). Paige, Catelyn, and Juno were all trying to untangle this process of diasporic 'becoming' in their own lives, finding themselves and their identities caught between different circumstances, contexts, and expectations (both internal and external).

These feelings of 'identity flux' and in-betweenness led some of the participants to feel like they did not have a real place to call home. For example, Paige's mixed identity left her feeling stranded and out of place in the UK, China, and Malaysia, embodying this sentiment from Murphy-Shigematsu (2012), a scholar of mixed-heritage himself: "The United States is my home and Japan is my home, but I also feel that homelessness is my home" (p. 219). Catelyn also admitted to feeling this way, writing, "I think of China as another home, yet I realise that I do not have many friends there." Similarly, Ariana also could relate to this loss of home and heritage: "As a second-gen immigrant, I often feel disconnected/alienated from my culture/heritage." All of these participants were trying to find places where they could feel like they unequivocally belonged, struggling to claim the possibility of being "British [or American] *and something else*" (Clifford, 1994, p. 308). Tellingly, none of the participants shared that they felt completely comfortable in all their different contexts, or that it was easy to find a place to fit in.

Ultimately, the participants' feelings of 'identity flux' and 'homelessness' demonstrated how they felt caught in between two conflicting places, and in a sense, two conflicting narratives about who they should be in each place. They were unable to claim an identity that encompassed all facets of their experiences, families, and cultures, perhaps revealing their own unconscious internalisation of the various stereotypes that had been employed against them. In a way, they believed that they could not be fully British or American and fully ESEA, exemplifying Hall's (2013) argument that "stereotyping deploys a strategy of '*splitting*'. It divides the normal and the acceptable from the abnormal and

the unacceptable. It then excludes or *expels* everything which does not fit, which is different” (p. 247). For participants, their ‘identity flux’ was rooted in this feeling of being both ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal,’ of trying to belong but also feeling excluded. Tellingly, none of the participants seemed to realise how they were trapped in this restrictive definition of identity, and none of them raised the possibility of perhaps being able to push back and reject this binary version of reality.

**Theme 1a: “I’ve been unable to tell if people interacted differently with me and my Asian friends...or if I’m just wallowing in my own insecurity.”**

Additionally, Juno, Lana, and Catelyn also shared how they felt the process of ‘Asianization’ and lack of identity affected them in the UK, and not only when they were abroad in Asia. These participants all strongly identified with a scene where Elsie reflects on how she always felt excluded from the (white) queer community at school. I am including the quote here in its entirety for context:

The worst thing is that I’ve never been able to figure out whether this awareness of being set apart from others is something that I’ve internalised, so that I just feel like I’m unwelcome because of my long history of not belonging, or whether it’s something that’s really happening to me in the actual moment, that I really am being treated differently, in a way that I can’t articulate but can only feel, because life has made me uniquely sensitive to it. (So, 2022, p. 264)

Responding to this quote, Juno wrote:

Juno: The feeling she describes here is one I have also felt before yet never been able to articulate. So often, I’ve been unable to tell if people interacted differently with me and my Asian friends compared to our white friends or if I’m just wallowing in my own insecurity; it’s a really disorienting feeling. Has anyone else experienced something similar?

Reading this quote from Elsie helped Juno to verbalise her own thoughts on similar situations. Juno specifically described scenarios where she found herself questioning her experience of exclusion and difference: was it truly a racist encounter, or was she being paranoid and hyper-aware of insignificant differences? This caused Juno to doubt her own perception of events and

second-guess her own feelings, which is why it was so enlightening to read Elsie's perspective in the novel. This is yet another example of the importance of representation, especially when it comes to feelings of disorientation and doubt, in order to help readers see that others are experiencing the same insecurities that they are and to normalise speaking about these difficult topics (Iftikar and Museus, 2018; Au, 2023).

Lana and Catelyn responded to Juno and agreed with the 'mirror' of Elsie's experience:

Lana: In response to Juno, I could definitely connect to that quote... Because, in reality, there are many ways other than race you could stand out from the norm - your accent, your height, behavioural quirks, the way you dress - and it's impossible to tell which aspect of you is causing this prejudice. But then, it could all be in your head. Perhaps as British/American Asians, we are more sensitive and insecure about this, when other people will just ignore it? Maybe other groups, such as overweight people, may share similar insecurities over being treated differently due to their appearance?

Catelyn: [Elsie's] question regarding whether she feels like she doesn't fit in because of internalised ideas or because prejudice is actually happening, is something I can definitely relate to, and I also feel like, just as Lana said, different groups of minorities may also relate to.

Lana added to the conversation by highlighting the second-guessing that occurs in these moments of exclusion, remarking on how it could be a multitude of things besides race that are causing the discomfort (or it could be nothing at all, as Juno said). Catelyn and Lana both agreed that this phenomenon is most likely not unique to members of the ESEA diaspora but is perhaps something that most marginalised groups will encounter and have to grapple with.

Interestingly, this discussion was purely from the British ESEA perspective, and I am very curious about how an Asian American participant would have responded to this quote and conversation from Juno, Lana, and Catelyn, who were all British. From the initial introductory post, it seemed evident that the Asian

American participants were far more grounded in their diasporic Asian identities than their British ESEA counterparts, and it would be fascinating to conduct a future study to see if they had similar insecurities about the reasons behind prejudice or if they were more comfortable confronting the racism around them. Additionally, the US has a far longer history of Asian American activism and identity formation, and Asian American activists were the first to use the term ‘Asianization’ (Iftikar and Museus, 2018). Ultimately, any difference in UK and US responses will remain unknown. However, it can be concluded that the British ESEAs in the study (and Elsie, a fictional British ESEA) felt a real unease with calling out racism, becoming hyper-aware of how others were perceiving them and continually second-guessing their own perceptions and feelings. Clearly, the UK participants felt Othered, even if they could not exactly explain why or how.

The uncertainty of Catelyn, Juno, and Lana, regarding these interactions pointed to the insidiousness of the racialisation process in the UK. As Mau (2014) contends:

Despite their apparent ‘success’ in ‘integrating’, the persistence of the processes of racism and Othering creates barriers for British Chinese pupils to be accepted as authentically ‘British’. The fact that British Chinese young people appear to be ‘ticking all the right boxes’ and still experience exclusion illustrates the impossibility for individuals from minority ethnic/cultural groups of being accepted as equal members of society within a system that privileges a certain version of Britishness; integration becomes a futile one-sided exercise. (Mau, 2014, pp. 124-125)

Said (2003) might argue that this demonstrates Orientalism still at work in a so-called post-racial and colourblind world, as it continues to create a “vision of reality whose structure [promotes] the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, ‘us’) and the strange (the Orient, the East, ‘them’)” (p. 43). It also again illustrated the truth of Paige’s words about their identities being in a “constant state of flux”; without certainty about their own identities and place in society, Juno and Lana seemed to lack the confidence to call out prejudice or even determine if it was happening at all. Lana’s final question pointed to how she perceived this uncertainty and sensitivity to perhaps be a uniquely Asian American/British ESEA problem, revealing a certain level of understanding of

how white supremacy and ‘Asianization’ were at work in these interactions even if she did not have the language to quite express it.

**Theme 1b: “I can’t help but feel a little guilty about it.”**

Participants’ feelings of “identity in a constant state of flux” also engendered a great deal of guilt, particularly in the areas of language (or lack thereof) and their overseas family relationships. First, participants discussed the mixed feelings they felt when others wrongly assume they can speak Mandarin. For example, Catelyn responded to a scene where Elsie feels ashamed that she cannot reply to a stranger in Mandarin with disbelief and confusion:

Catelyn: As someone who does speak Mandarin, I find it strange when something like this happens to me. However, I would have never thought that a non-speaker would find it self-conscious and look for faults within themselves? I am very surprised by Elsie’s self-blaming response, as the one who is speaking Mandarin to her is judging someone by their appearance and making unfounded assumptions about what language they speak.

For Catelyn, this moment was a ‘window’ into the experience of discomfort when confronted with a language barrier, particularly in a language that one is ‘supposed’ to know how to speak. This surprise may have stemmed from the fact that she seemed to know Mandarin well enough to hold a conversation, and therefore had never personally experienced the awkwardness and embarrassment that Elsie describes. She also brought up an important point about assumptions, questioning why others would just assume that anyone who looks ESEA would automatically know how to speak Mandarin. This speaks to dominant society’s tendency to racialise and dehumanise ESEA individuals by “[lumping] all of them into one category and [characterising] them as a monolithic racial group” (Iftikar and Museus, 2018, p. 936).

However, Ariana’s and Juno’s comments on Catelyn’s post revealed that this same moment was a ‘mirror’ for them, reflecting how they often internalised their failure to respond in the ‘correct’ language. The title of this sub-theme was taken from Ariana, who said:

Ariana: Unlike Catelyn, I do think I can understand Elsie's feelings of self-consciousness. I know some Mandarin, but not enough to really hold a conversation. When strangers speak to me in the language and I can't respond, I feel like I've neglected an important part of my cultural identity. Although I agree that no one should make assumptions about the languages we speak, I can't help but feel a little guilty about it.

As demonstrated in her statement, Ariana felt torn between feeling like she had "neglected an important part of [her] cultural identity," while also realising that it was unreasonable for others to assume anything about her language capabilities based solely upon her appearance. Juno agreed, writing:

Juno: Same here about the language barrier - I understand Mandarin but can't really speak coherently in the language. I was always taught that if strangers start talking Mandarin to me, it's a display of goodwill so an inability to reciprocate it always leaves me feeling slightly dejected.

Similarly to Ariana, Juno felt "slightly dejected" at being unable to speak Mandarin with strangers, implying that there was a social contract around language that she could not fulfil. For both Ariana and Juno, language seemed to be vital part of their cultural heritage - or rather, their *idea* of how they should appropriately express their cultural heritage. They both understood that strangers were projecting unreasonable expectations around language on them both, but they still felt guilty when they could not meet those expectations. This idea of language as intrinsic to identity came from the diasporic community's emphasis on using "shared values embodied in language, ethnicity, and custom" to build an 'imagined' community in the diaspora (Chun, 1996, p. 115; Anderson, 2006). And while these emphases on shared values were able to help diasporic communities to maintain strong ties with the respective 'homeland,' they also often closed these communities off to the possibility of adapting and changing over time, resulting in a reliance on "arrested, fixated [forms] of representation" that may no longer serve members of the community (Bhabha, 2004, p. 107). As Catelyn aptly summarised later in the discussion, "I feel that there is a lot of pressure around British Asians/Asian Americans to learn both languages associated with their [cultural] identity when growing up which is incredibly burdensome." Ultimately, these "incredibly burdensome"



expectations were creating strong feelings of guilt when participants felt themselves falling short.

Additionally, participants also felt similarly guilty about not being able to truly connect with their extended families overseas. Juno, Ariana, and Catelyn had the following conversation on this topic:

Juno: I video call my cousin in China every few weeks but there's still such a massive gulf in experiences and language. Does anyone else have similar experiences with relatives who live half the world away?

Ariana: To answer your first question, I've also felt like I can't really connect [with] my family members in China - we video chat as often as we can, but I often feel like I'm too "americanized" to really relate to their experiences.

Catelyn: Replying to Juno's comment about feeling disconnected with relatives, I completely understand. Almost all of my family live in China, yet when I go back, I often feel as though I have no real connections to people in this part of the family. Especially with my cousins, I feel like the 'foreigner', someone who has lived abroad for their entire life, they are not close to me at all. The fact that I do not return often also makes connections very difficult to build. I think of China as another home, yet I realise that I do not have many friends there.

Significantly, these responses indicated that the disconnect felt by participants was not merely a construction in their minds; despite their consistent efforts to call and visit their relatives, there was still a divide between them and their extended family. Ariana's feeling of being too "americanized" was again illustrating the 'identity flux' she was undergoing as she attempted to build relationships with her family in China; she felt as though their experiences and contexts were so different that they could not relate to each other. And like Ariana feeling too "americanized," Catelyn also felt like a "foreigner" whenever she attempted to connect to her family in China. They both were experiencing the "shock of the 'doubleness' of similarity and difference" that Hall (2021) argues is inherent in a return to a 'homeland' that is no longer home (p. 227).

All these participants had indeed experienced the impact of this undeniable difference on their perceptions of their heritage, ‘homeland,’ and family relationships.

In the final Zoom discussion session, Juno again touched on these feelings of guilt surrounding family connections, saying, “Yeah, just kind of having that barrier between you and your relatives who live on another continent... Um, so it’s kind of like they’re leading like a whole kind of different life from you and like there’s so much that you’d miss out on.” Referencing Elsie’s regrets from the novel, Juno mentioned her own feelings of regret that for missing out on so much of her family’s lives overseas despite her best efforts at staying connected. Like Ariana and Catelyn, Juno’s feelings of disconnect and alienation exemplified Hall’s (2021) assertion that “cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture... It is not once-and-for-all. It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute Return” (p. 226). From Hall’s perspective, this openness should be something to be celebrated, as it provides the chance to move forward and form new identities without being tied to the past. However, for the young people in this study who were trying to figure out how to make a life between cultures and contexts, this openness left them feeling lost and guilty over growing apart and missing out.

**Theme 1c: “I often find myself holding onto any piece of passed-down family history or idea.”**

In response to these feelings of loss and disconnect, participants sought out points of mental and physical connection, latching on to the things that they thought would help them solidify connections to their cultural identities and temper the “constant flux” of identity. This is a common practice amongst diasporic individuals, who seek to “[locate] the communal selves in the diaspora [through] cultural familiarity” (Kuah-Pearce, 2006, p. 230).

One of the ways that participants sought to locate themselves was through the depictions of food in the novel, as demonstrated by this short exchange between Juno and Ariana:

Juno: I really liked the in-depth descriptions of food throughout the novel as I feel it is quite integral in ESEA culture.

Ariana: Like Juno, I also really liked the descriptions of the food throughout the chapters! The dinner the Lo's (Los?) had is pretty similar to the ones my family likes to make, steamed fish and all.

Both Juno and Ariana saw 'mirrors' in the depictions of food in the novel, but in slightly different ways; Juno's remarks demonstrated an appreciation for seeing her own culture reflected in the pages of the book, pointing to the importance of food in Asian American and British ESEA communities as a link to past culture and present connections. In comparison, Ariana made a much more personal connection to her own family traditions and food preferences, sharing that her family also has "steamed fish" for dinner. For Ariana, the pleasure in reading about food came from her recognition of particular food items that she personally favours and consumes. Juno and Ariana's appreciation of the food in the novel took on even more significance considering the history of ESEA children being bullied for the 'weird' food they eat, marking a moment of pride instead of shame (Eslea and Mukhtar, 2000; Ward, 2004; Tokunaga, 2016; K, 2022).

Similarly to Ariana, Paige also wrote that she could see herself in the 'mirrors' of food in the novel, writing:

Paige: Two quotes that made me laugh also served as 'mirrors.' Elsie's remark, "Chinese broccoli is too bitter for my taste," carries connotations of cultural detachment. "Po Po's bound to have some words for me regarding my ineptitude with chopsticks," evoked humour whilst highlighting the challenge of cultural expectations.

In her comments, Paige seemed to be laughing at herself reflected in the character of Elsie's dislike for Chinese broccoli and "ineptitude with chopsticks," acknowledging a personal connection to these moments. However, she also situated this recognition within the larger diaspora, connecting the dots between her personal 'mirrors' and the overarching challenges faced by diasporic individuals.

For all three participants, identifying the ESEA food in the novel became a way to connect themselves to their cultures, demonstrating Kuah-Pearce's (2006) assertion that "certain types of food that the members of the diaspora have consumed in their hometowns have become indispensable in the diasporic culture, eventually emerging as an imperative category of soul food that becomes a must within most migrant communities" (p. 230). This "soul food" consumption is often a crucial way for diasporic individuals to claim and maintain cultural kinship while living in the diaspora.

Another way that participants sought to ground themselves against 'identity flux' was to search for points of connection and familiarity in mementos, stories, and history. Responding to a moment in the novel where Elsie frantically searches for a coin purse and keychain from Hong Kong, the only objects that connect her to her grandfather who passed away, Juno and Juliette shared:

Juno: I resonated with Elsie's feelings of disconnect from her relatives in Hong Kong... I really relate to her desperation to feel close to a homeland and family that she feels so dissociated from.

Juliette: Adding onto Juno's mention of a desperation to find connection/meaning, I often find myself holding onto any piece of passed-down family history or idea and sometimes even superstition, especially when there aren't any culturally-significant or passed-down material things my parents or I own after generations of immigrating.

Juliette's poignant comment is where the title of this sub-theme comes from, as it captures the desperation of participants to find objects or ideas that can anchor them within the shifting dimensions of diaspora. Both participants revealed a longing for a history and a 'homeland' that they would never know, exemplifying the "lived tension...of living here and remembering/desiring another place" (Clifford, 1994, p. 311). And beyond simply feeling disconnected, this "desperation to feel close" revealed the profound feeling of loss Juno felt was inherent to her diasporic identity, as she searched for ways to claim a closeness to a family and homeland that she had never known. This sense of loss is also reflected in Juliette's response to Juno, as she listed the ideas she holds on to - "passed-down family history or idea and sometimes even superstition" -

in an attempt to forge a connection with her past. Juliette acknowledged that these ideas are poor substitutions for items or heirlooms of actual cultural significance, but there are simply no material items that can act as a connection.

According to Kuah-Pearce (2006), this is a necessary process for locating the self through “shared histories, shared ideologies and shared cultures for support, and [embracing] cultural familiarity to help reconfigure itself as it undergoes the adaptation and transformation process in its new environment” (p. 231). Members of the diaspora need to be able to find points of connection in stories, histories, or concrete objects, as these are necessary forms of support for the ‘reconfiguration of self’ that must inevitably occur to survive in a new environment. However, this does not mean that diasporic individuals should seek to indiscriminately recreate and adopt tradition; Gilroy (1994) argues that moving forward as a diaspora requires a “determinedly non-traditional tradition... not tradition as closed or simple repetition [but as] living memory: more embodied than inscribed” (p. 212). This idea of “living memory” preserves tradition while simultaneously allowing for the necessary change and evolution that will enable the diasporic community to move forward in new directions. Consequently, Gilroy might assert that efforts to simply recreate rituals and habits from the past will only result in feelings of desperation and loss, as demonstrated by the participants’ anxieties over finding objects and ideas from their histories to ground themselves in the present.

Finally, the discussion from participants showed that they were also seeking to build connections with their heritage through *imagined windows*, which is a term I am using to describe the participant speculation about the directions their lives might have taken if they had grown up in the ‘homeland.’ In response to a scene from the novel where Elsie wondered about what her life might have been like had she grown up in Hong Kong, participants shared this set of responses:

Ariana: Like [Elsie] with Hong Kong, I’ve wondered how different my life/sense of self would be if I was raised in China.

Juno: Yes! I always get led into existential spirals when I think about what my life would be like if my parents didn’t have the chance to come to

Scotland: how different would my opinions, personality, perception of myself be?

Juliette: I have also thought quite a lot about what my life would've been like had I gotten raised by my grandmother in Taiwan.

These sentiments from Ariana, Juno, and Juliette were not quite true windows, nor were they true mirrors. Instead, they captured a bit of both, as well as a sense of imagined nostalgia as participants wondered how their lives would be different had they never become part of the Asian American/British ESEA diaspora. The aforementioned 'identity flux' led these three participants to often wonder how their senses of self and identity would be different if they had been raised in an environment where they were not made to feel caught in-between cultures and contexts. Consequently, Ariana, Juliette, and Juno could all acutely feel the "lived tension" of living in the diaspora, as they tried to balance "living here and remembering/desiring another place" (Clifford, 1994, p. 311). Their 'imagined windows' became part of their attempts to forge a meaningful connection to their heritage, just like Juliette's search for "passed-down family history or [ideas]." But in the end, these 'imagined windows' were only the pieces of "memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth" that characterise a diasporic reimagining of the past (Hall, 2021b, p. 226).

### **Conclusion: Diaspora and homeland**

Ultimately, the participant responses around the theme and sub-themes of identity "in a constant state of flux" seemed to suggest that the participants were defining their diasporic identities through their relationships with the 'homeland,' revealing an alignment with Safran's (1991) argument that a diaspora is forever tied to the 'homeland.' The participant discussion particularly revealed an affinity with three of Safran's six requirements for a diaspora:

- 2) they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland—its physical location, history, and achievements;
- 3) they believe that they are not—and perhaps cannot be—fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it;

6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship. (Safran, 1991, pp. 83-84)

The participants expressed all three of these sentiments in the discussion, particularly emphasising their feelings of alienation in the US and the UK; after analysing their discussion, their responses suggest that it was these feelings of unstable identity that led them to seek out ways to build stronger identities by finding and forming attachments to their heritage. However, this model of living in the diaspora also caused the participants to feel insecure, anxious, desperate, guilty, and lost. Thus, it can be concluded that their constant feelings of in-betweenness and 'flux' point to how the participants are not yet open to the possibility of hybrid and open diaspora identities which embrace the fact that "these questions of home, identity, belonging are always open to negotiation... to become iterative, interrogative processes rather than imperative identitarian designations" (Bhabha, 1997, p. 3). The participant responses revealed how they were still trying to figure out how best to live out their identities as "iterative, interrogative processes" in ways that melded their histories, heritages, and current selves.

## **Theme 2: "Living under a constant glare of parental expectations makes it really hard to break out of [a] self-destructive mindset."**

The weight of external expectations on the participants also played a role in their 'identity flux,' which leads us to the next theme. Taken from a comment by Juno, this theme captured how participants could deeply identify with Elsie's feelings in the novel of being suffocated by the silence and expectations of her conservative Chinese family. These feelings of intergenerational misunderstanding and conflict are common in ESEA diasporic communities, demonstrating yet again how AsianCrit's 'Transnational contexts' are shaping the lives of ESEA young people (Iftikar and Museus, 2018). Tokunaga (2016) describes how these contexts impact young Asian Americans, but her words are also applicable to British ESEAs:

[Asian Americans] face a world of multiple, often contradictory, messages about who they are, what they should become, and how to navigate the world. Their parents expect them to follow and inherit their homeland traditions, beliefs, and values... They negotiate this in-between terrain, which is ‘in a constant state of displacement - an uncomfortable, even alarming feeling’ (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 1), while carving out a place to belong. (Tokunaga, 2016, p. 1087)

Tokunaga’s words parallel the participants’ previous feelings of in-betweenness and ‘identity flux,’ demonstrating how this in-betweenness (and the negative feelings associated with it) is in fact exacerbated by parental and community expectations.

Juno resonated deeply with the suffocating weight of these expectations, writing:

Juno: The difficulty in communication and showing affection within Elsie’s family reflected my own experiences... The ‘clammy fog’ that descended over the dinner table when the family witness the gay kiss on TV was very well-expressed. Her parent’s and Po Po’s intolerance unintentionally stifles Elsie’s identity [and] I found this loss of identity relatable.

And in another statement about a character named Joan, from which I took the title of this theme, she shared:

Juno: I really resonated with Joan’s sense of ‘filial piety’ clouding her decision to protect herself from a toxic environment with shame. Living under a constant glare of parental expectations makes it really hard to break out of that self-destructive mindset.

Juno’s sentiments illustrated the pervasiveness of the concept of ‘guai’ in ESEA communities, as children are expected to obey their elders without question, even at the cost of suppressing their opinions, desires, and identities. As Chen and Lau (2021) describe, being ‘guai’ means that children must unconditionally “accept authority, conform to accepted norms of behaviour, are expected to become useful members of society and understand the importance of maintaining the prevailing social order” (p. 295). These social norms stem from



the importance of ‘face’ and honour in ESEA cultures, as an individual’s actions either reflect well or poorly on the entire community (Abe-Kim *et al.*, 2007; Chen and Lau, 2021; Au, 2023).

Juno’s strong word choice - “loss of identity,” “toxic environment,” “clouding her decision...with shame,” “self-destructive mindset” - showed that she understood how harmful and repressive these intergenerational and intercultural expectations could be. And in fact, studies demonstrate that many other young people feel the same frustrations and anxieties as Juno, revealing that ESEA children and young people are at greater risk of “clinically impairing internalizing problems, namely depression, social anxiety, and suicide” (Au, 2023, p. 30). Tragically, data from the US-based National Center for Health Statistics corroborates these claims, as their records show that in 2017 and 2019, suicide was the leading cause of death for Asian Americans between the ages of 15-24 (National Vital Statistics System, 2018; Heron, 2021). The records also show that suicide was the second-highest cause of death for Asian Americans between the ages of 25-34. Clearly, the “loss of identity” and “self-destructive mindset” that Juno identified are also affecting countless other ESEA young people in devastating ways.

‘Intersectionality,’ another tenet of AsianCrit, also played a role in causing this “self-destructive mindset,” as participants noted how their race intersected with gender identities to create unique structures of personal repression (Iftikar and Museus, 2018). For example, Lana shared the following reflection:

Lana: I found several ‘mirrors’ in Elsie’s experience as a queer person with a more conservatively minded family, particularly how she has to hide that aspect of her at home and her longing to connect to fellow queer people and freely express herself with her appearance, like Joan. Elsie’s identity is also being smothered by her hiding her bisexuality from her family, another consequence of being from a conservative Asian culture (in her case).

Like Elsie, Lana felt the internal conflict caused by the repression of her queer identity in the face of her family’s conservative views. And like Juno, Lana felt the pressure to be ‘guai’ and to keep the status quo, carefully refraining from

upsetting her family. Au (2023) argues that this is common amongst ESEA young people who are taught that “a responsible and mature adult would contain [their emotional turmoil] by repressing their emotions” (p. 28). It was evident that both Juno and Lana were feeling the strain of this emotional repression, unable to truly be themselves under the “constant glare of parental expectations.”

**Theme 2a: “I enjoyed the bit where he says [he] is proud of her, something that means a lot in East Asian culture.”**

However, participants were optimistic about a better future for themselves and their families, as they reacted positively to the hint of future reconciliation for Elsie and her family in the novel. First, participants appreciated the introduction of Uncle Kevin, Elsie’s estranged uncle who was rejected by the family years ago for being queer. Remarking on Elsie and Uncle Kevin’s emotional encounter, Catelyn wrote:

Catelyn: Uncle Kevin being a fellow queer person did not seem too shocking as the others seem to agree. I enjoyed the bit where he says [he] is proud of her, something that means a lot (at least I feel like) in East Asian culture.

Like Juno and Lana, Catelyn demonstrated an awareness of the emotional repression usually expected in ESEA cultures, which is why she found it noteworthy that Uncle Kevin broke the norm to express his pride in Elsie’s choice to be true to herself. Similarly, Juno also shared:

Juno: I also really liked the loving acceptance Uncle Kevin shows to Elsie! Especially given Kevin’s rejection by his own parents. Elsie has expressed how her inability to accept herself is both perpetuated by and results in feelings of inadequacy, so to see her being affirmed for just coming to terms with her identity is very sweet.

Juno had previously remarked that she could relate to how the silence from Elsie’s parents caused her to feel a “loss of identity,” and was now pointing out the sharp contrast with the “loving acceptance” from Uncle Kevin. Both Catelyn and Juno were able to appreciate the significance of the approval of an older queer role model, especially one who could provide a counterstory to the typically conservative attitude toward sexuality in ESEA cultures. Participants

concluded that it was important for the plot to include Uncle Kevin as queer family member who could affirm and encourage Elsie, breaking generational cycles of shame and representing the possibility to simply be accepted.

Based on their responses about the ending of the novel, it seemed as though participants wanted to believe in a more hopeful and communicative future for their themselves and their families, like they saw reflected in the text. For example, Ariana wrote:

Ariana: I like how the author explained the situation with Gung Gung, Po Po, and their children. It's definitely complex, and I wanted to resent Po Po for continuing to blame Kevin [for being queer]. However, even though she still doesn't really understand him, at least she's trying to reconnect. The Lo's have gone through a lot, so it's nice to see them begin to heal, and come back together.

Despite the lack of a neat happy ending, Ariana appreciated how the conclusion allowed for the possibility of healing from generational traumas, as well as the emotional growth within Elsie's family over the course of the story. Even though she "wanted to resent Po Po," Ariana recognised that she was trying in her own way to make it up to her son.

Paige and Juno agreed, writing:

Paige: I also thought the family stuff was... like, it really was really emotional for me, especially when she was talking to her Grandma as well about [her Grandma's] entire life and her relationship with her grandpa and all that.

Juno: I did like how you kind of got the Grandma's perspective and you kind of understand and sympathise with her, but Elsie doesn't pressure her uncle into forgiving the Grandma... because a lot of the time people kind of feel like that's the right thing to do, but sometimes there's so much emotional baggage and stuff and you can't really forgive it.

Though Paige was not one of the participants that had previously commented on identifying with the uncommunicative family portrayed in the novel, she was

very moved by the novel's portrayal of the family's slow steps towards healing and reconciliation. And while the novel purposely left the conclusion very open-ended, Paige appreciated how the narrative took the time to delve into the grandmother's story, contextualising her actions and helping readers to empathise with the older generation. Additionally, Juno particularly liked how there was no expectation of an easy resolution, as deep-rooted intergenerational and intercultural conflicts are usually not so easily solved and forgiven. Ultimately, all three participants recognised the authenticity in leaving the ending slightly unresolved and open, alluding to the potential for further healing but also the difficulty inherent in this undertaking.

### **Conclusion: Community and hybridity**

These comments from participants showed how the openness and in-betweenness of personal hybrid identities can also be applied to families and communities, as communal identities are negotiated and constructed in the diaspora. Berns-McGown (2008) calls this a process of "weaving two worldviews together," where an individual "combines cultures and world-views in ways that are, unsurprisingly, complex and constantly shifting" (p. 16). If enough individuals embrace this process of shifting identity, this combining of worldviews can slowly affect an entire diasporic community and create change across a generational and cultural divide. Participants picked up on this concept in the novel, as Elsie, her parents, and her grandparents all began to expand their worldviews and incorporate new beliefs after learning to speak honestly with one another. Thus, while the participant discussion demonstrated that they fully understood the "constant glare of parental expectations," it also revealed that they were also hoping for the possibility of hybrid identities, not only for themselves but for their families and larger communities. It is this hybridity that allows for the possibility of "living together-in-difference," both on a grand global scale and within intimate family affairs (Ang, 2001, p. 194). The participant responses from Theme 1 revealed that this was something they were still learning for themselves; in Theme 2, they were perhaps realising that the possibility of hybridity could also create an open, in-between space for the adults in their lives as well.

### Theme 3: “The story is following that same predictable pattern...”

The final theme that emerged from the discussion of *If You Still Recognise Me* encapsulated the AsianCrit tenet of ‘Story, theory, and praxis.’ This tenet, adapted from Critical Race Theory, argues that “racially marginalized people’s experiential knowledge can serve to challenge dominant, White, European epistemology and offer an alternative and empowering epistemological perspective that is grounded in the realities of people of color” (Iftikar and Museus, 2018, p. 941). In other words, ‘Story, theory, and praxis’ seeks to validate the experiences of marginalised groups and to create opportunities for more and better stories to be told.

This sentiment was strongly felt by participants, particularly Juno and Lana. They had several conversations across all four Padlets about how they perceived the story to be quite limited in its scope, portraying a narrow view of the immigrant and diasporic experience. Lana first stated:

Lana: It feels like there is something off... the story is following that same predictable pattern of someone not at peace with their second generation immigrant identity and having to take drastic action to find themselves.

The title of this theme comes from Lana’s statement; she felt strongly that this second-generation narrative of ‘finding yourself’ was stereotypical and overdone, taking issue with this restrictive ‘single story’ of the ESEA diasporic experience (*The danger of a single story*, 2009). Lana perhaps was also communicating that she did not see many ‘mirrors’ of her own experiences as a second-generation ESEA individual (Bishop, 1990). Remarking that she found second-generation stories to be formulaic and contrived, Lana seemed to have difficulty believing the identity crisis central to the novel. She took issue with the “predictable pattern” of the story already evident in the beginning chapters, implying that she had often encountered similar stories before. This was in line with her earlier comments in Chapter 6, as she pointed out the stereotypes<sup>12</sup> in stories like *Minions 2* and *American Born Chinese*. Lana seemed to be

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<sup>12</sup> “tiger mum” and “kung-fu dragon magic”

particularly sensitive to the lack of representative stories about the ESEA diaspora, asking for stories about experiences beyond the typical identity crisis.

Juno and Lana also had the following exchange regarding unrepresentative stories:

Juno: Interesting observation about the story following a somewhat ‘predictable pattern’ (although I’m holding out for some twists later on!). Do you feel that the second generation ‘finding themselves’ narrative has become kind of cliché or, in a way, commodified for Western expectations? These narratives are undoubtedly valid and important however, they always seem to assume discomfort with existence as an amalgamation of cultures/identities (hopefully that sort of makes sense!).

Lana: Yeah, that was well put, Juno. It would be nice to see a greater diversity of second generation immigrant stories in that respect.

Adding on to Lana’s original point, Juno wondered if the second-generation identity narrative had become “commodified,” perhaps portraying the only type of diaspora story that dominant society could comfortably accept. Juno’s question about “commodified” stories points to Saha’s (2021) argument that the narratives produced by Western media have the power to ultimately shape “what we understand as real” about diasporic communities and BIPOC people - in this case, the ‘finding yourself’ narrative which has now become the default story about second-generation individuals (p. 21). This version of acceptable reality is also why many BIPOC authors feel restricted by the US and UK publishing industry to only being able to write about ‘ethnic’ experiences that fit a particular storyline, pressured to write about “war-torn countries and suffering” (Ramdarshan Bold, 2019b, p. 119). Again, Juno and Lana’s conversation highlighted the necessity of having *more* stories - diaspora narratives about identity are valuable and important, but they should not be the *only* stories told about the hybrid ESEA experience.

This conversation came up again later in the novel study, again as a discussion between Juno and Lana:

Juno: Does anyone else feel that queer Asian narratives are oversaturated with trauma/pessimism?

Lana: So far, it seems like the book is portraying being Asian diasporic as something negative. This paints a bleak picture of second generation immigrants never belonging and suffering as a result- which has the danger of creating a sense of shame and helplessness for diasporic Asians. While it is true that second generation Asian immigrants do suffer negative consequences, there are also plenty of positives, which I hope the book will acknowledge later on.

Again, Juno and Lana discussed their desire for *more* stories; specifically, they wanted diaspora stories that were not centred on trauma, lack of belonging, or the generally negative aspects of growing up in the diaspora. As Lana argued, if there are only stories about hardship, these stories (no matter how accurate) can lead to a skewed view of one's diasporic identity and "a sense of shame and helplessness" rather than pride. This also speaks to the larger context of BIPOC authors feeling pressured to write about "forced marriage, terrorism, immigration issues, or being refugees," as if those are the only stories that define the diaspora (Ramdarshan Bold, 2019a, p. 119). Juno and Lana's remarks built on their previous conversation, arguing that the story was painting an increasingly depressing picture of diasporic ESEA identity, one which they rejected as unrepresentative of their own experiences. Crucially, they both recognised that the story was not necessarily disingenuous or unimportant; however, they knew that there must be a "balance of stories" about the ESEA community in order to accurately depict both the positive and negative experiences that make up the diaspora (Bacon, 2000).

Both Juno and Lana were worried that the 'single story' presented in the novel might impact how others view them as ESEA individuals. As Lana poignantly argued:

Lana: As the story progresses and gets increasingly specific, I am finding more 'windows' than 'mirrors'. This is not a story I see myself in, nor have I really connected with any of the characters (which goes to show that there is more to us than being queer and Asian diasporic!), but it has

given me an insight into how other people might view me. Would non-Asians, having consumed this media, look at me, a queer British Asian, and imagine I'm like Elsie, or Joan? Often I am assumed to speak an Asian language at home, or to be unused to hugs from my parents, for example. Or maybe I'm overthinking other people's reactions.

Lana, as a queer British ESEA, shared that she could not relate to a book full of queer British ESEA characters, raising the important point that "there is more to [her] than being queer and Asian diasporic!" She did not resonate with the 'single story' of what it means to be British, ESEA, and queer presented in the novel, underscoring once again the importance of having more stories representing these topics. Lana seemed to have an implicit understanding of Saha's (2021) assertion that stories and media shape reality, and she was disturbed to think that others who read the novel would associate her with either of these characters or any other ESEA stereotypes.

In response, Juno reiterated the call for more stories about the ESEA diaspora:

Juno: I really love your comment about the perception of non-Asians; really highlights the need for an increased diversity of Asian narratives to be shown in the media!! Although I relate to a lot of Elsie's experiences and perceptions, to think that a non-Asian person might so willingly equate my life to that of Elsie/Joan is quite frustrating and restrictive.

Juno's comment exemplified Adichie's (2009) argument about the 'single story' creating stereotypes: "And the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are *incomplete*" (*The danger of a single story*, 2009, my emphasis). Both Juno and Lana were worried that the incompleteness of the story would cause them to be stereotyped according to the tropes in the novel. Furthermore, they were afraid of being trapped and restricted to a binary construction defined by 'us' and 'them,' as they imagined the reaction of non-Asian readers to the limited perspectives presented in the novel. They recognised that the incomplete stereotypes in the story "symbolically [fixed the] boundaries" of what it means to be part of the ESEA diaspora, limiting them to the tropes defined by society (Hall, 2013, p. 248). Ultimately, both Lana and Juno raised the issue that there simply are not enough stories about the queer



ESEA experience, especially stories focusing on the intersectionality of queer identities and ESEA diasporic identities. Research backs up these assertions; according to data collected by the Cooperative Children's Book Center, only 3.1% of books published in the US in 2019 were about LGBTQIA+ characters or subjects, and only 8.7% were about Asian Americans (Tyner, 2021). Though Asian American stories have slightly increased since then (11.7% in 2023), British Chinese (*not* ESEA) stories made up only 0.3% of children's fiction in the UK in 2021 (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, 2022; Cooperative Children's Book Center, School of Education, 2024).

Participants had one last conversation about this topic in the final Zoom discussion, where Lana again argued that the book presented a restrictive picture of what it means to be queer and ESEA:

Lana: I found that this book focused too hard on Elsie's suppressive Asian family and her queer identity, which didn't give space for Elsie to 'breathe'. I'm not saying literature should ignore Asian character's cultural backgrounds, or if they're queer to ignore the fact they're queer and the struggles associated with it, but I don't think I can cope with a story that's solely about that.

Lana had mixed thoughts on the representation in the novel. Overall, she thought the ESEA representation in the novel was passable; even though it featured some stereotypes, it also humanised its characters and had hints of a global perspective. However, Lana really took issue with the overt attention to Elsie's queer identity and Chinese heritage, arguing that Elsie did not feel like a fully formed character because everything was made to be about her struggles with these parts of her identity. Lana made the valid point that characters should be allowed to be about more than their struggles, again referencing the harm that a 'single story' can cause.

Catelyn really agreed with this point from Lana, sharing:

Catelyn: I think that's quite interesting because I do sort of agree... I feel like there needs to be more branching out because still you don't really see main characters as, like, queer Asian main characters in widespread

media. And I feel like... a lot of books with queer Asian characters have to focus a lot of their topics on the fact that they're queer and Asian and talk about the struggles? Um... I feel like it's maybe a bit overdone because I feel like a lot of them just talk about the same thing or like really similar topics... I feel like it's a good point that they should be able to be queer and Asian but also have like, a plot line that's not just about the struggles associated with them.

Adding to Lana's point, Catelyn argued that queer ESEA characters should be allowed to be more than just 'queer' and 'Asian' and 'struggling,' especially because there are so few stories currently centred on the queer ESEA experience. She thought there seemed to be a certain expectation for stories about queer ESEAs to "talk about the struggles," and though she acknowledged that these topics are all very important, it should also be allowed to have stories that are not dictated by these aspects of their identities. Interestingly, she commented on the lack of queer ESEA stories but also on how queer ESEA 'struggle' narratives are all similar and "overdone," perhaps revealing that she has never read or seen a story that deviated from this formula.

Juno somewhat agreed, but also shared an extremely nuanced take on the matter. Although she understood Lana and Catelyn's perspectives, she also raised the point that it might be unfair to judge queer ESEA stories and authors so harshly:

Juno: Yeah I agree... But I guess that is, like, the wider problem of lack of representation because I guess if we had more diverse characters and situations it wouldn't feel like it's a stereotype. Because at the beginning, I kind of found this storyline kind of... eh, like some aspects were stereotypical and slightly cringe. And I don't think this is, like the right way to think about it... but I kind of justified it at the start like, white authors are allowed to tell stories that are cliched or cringe a lot of the time and I feel like, when you're the figurehead of representation it kind of feels like the standards are higher because it's just, you need to be able to speak to people who haven't been represented for so long and it's a lot of pressure!

Juno understood that the problem was not really that the story was unrepresentative; rather, the problem was that there were simply not enough stories, especially in the UK, to portray the wide spectrum of diasporic ESEA experiences. Although she agreed with everyone that the story was a bit “cringy” and perhaps not the best representation for queer ESEAs, she also reasoned that white authors are usually not taken to task for “stories that are clichéd or cringe,” simply because there are so many white authors and thus, so many stories that represent all aspects of the white experience. Because of the scarcity of queer ESEA authors and stories, there are unfair expectations placed upon just a few pieces of media to portray all possible stories and represent everyone (Ramdarshan Bold, 2019b, 2022). Juno’s words echoed British author Rashmi Sirdeshpande’s thoughts on the matter:

Every time you write a character who is underrepresented, there is so much pressure. The burden of representation feels so heavy. I think the reason is because there aren’t that many stories out there. You worry that this is the story that people hone in on to educate them about an entire culture, which would never happen with a white kid in a story, because you would know that there are so many different family set ups, so many different pieces to their life. (Sirdeshpande, cited in Ramdarshan Bold, 2022, p. 23)

Both Juno’s and Sirdeshpande’s remarks are indicative of the near nonexistence of ESEA stories in British children’s and YA literature - only 0.3% of British children’s literature in 2020 and 2021 featured Chinese characters or stories, and no data was collected about any other ESEA cultures (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, 2021, 2022). The current invisibility of ESEA stories creates an impossible expectation for a very small number of authors to ‘authentically’ represent ESEA experiences, avoid cliché, be original, and avoid “cringe” - like Juno said, “It’s a lot of pressure!”

**Theme 3a: “The importance of representation and role models in literature absolutely cannot be understated.”**

Though the participants did not always see perfect ‘mirrors’ in the text, they did appreciate the ‘windows’ that the novel afforded into unfamiliar spaces, particularly enjoying the scenes that gave them a glimpse into the importance of representation for other marginalised groups. In a sense, these ‘windows’

allowed the participants to imagine how different aspects of the text could act as representative ‘mirrors’ for someone else.

For example, Elsie’s appreciation for fanfiction and fandom also became a significant ‘window’ for Paige and Juno, as they witnessed the powerful representation enabled by fanfiction in the novel:

Paige: Despite initially finding the fanfiction culture ‘cringe,’ perhaps because of pre-conceived biases, I began to appreciate why it meant so much to Elsie. The importance of representation and role models in literature absolutely cannot be understated, through the empowerment they offer and the potential they have to shape identity. I came to understand that fanfiction as a platform uniquely provided representation of queer, Asian stories... I found it unique that Asians were represented in the context of queer romance.

Paige described her massive change in attitude towards fanfiction, initially finding it a “cringe” practice but ultimately coming to the realisation that for marginalised groups like the LGBTQIA+ community, fanfiction could be a powerful tool to reclaim their stories and recentre themselves and their experiences (Thomas, 2011; Lamerichs, 2018a, 2018b; Floegel, 2020). Paige also commented specifically on the value of seeing ESEA stories embedded within the fanfiction discourse, as queer ESEA diasporic narratives are not heavily featured in the typical second-generation diasporic narrative. This fictional representation of fanfiction reflected how many marginalised readers are turning to fanfiction in the real world, taking ownership of authorship and seeking to “write their own story rather than letting others write them out of it” (de Manuel and Davis, 2006, p. 3).

Juno wholeheartedly agreed, writing:

Juno: The importance of increased visibility and validation is again expressed through the ‘freeing’ effect of fanfic: *‘queer characters get to have different love stories and find themselves and each other and be happy in a million different ways, over and over again.’* This quote emphasised to me the rarity of queer narratives in fiction that are simply joyful.

For Juno, the joyful expression of fanfiction stood out the most, as she had not encountered many joyful queer stories focused on being “happy in a million different ways” (So, 2022, p. 179). Consequently, fanfiction as an act of counterstorytelling is especially meaningful for communities that have always been overlooked or misrepresented, letting them tap into the “transgressive force” of storytelling to right representative wrongs (Thomas, 2011, p. 7).

Participants also liked how the novel portrayed Elsie in a non-stereotypical way, paying special attention to how Elsie turned to her friends for support during family drama. Catelyn and Paige both remarked on the importance of this storyline in the novel:

Catelyn: Elsie’s family drama being mentioned to us and her conversing with her friends about it, is something I don’t often see in other books, perhaps this is being used as a side plot. I think it is especially interesting as in a lot of East Asian culture, I feel that family drama is something that is usually kept behind closed doors, within the family.

Paige: I definitely agree that in East Asian culture, family drama is supposed to be kept private and hushed or is otherwise considered ‘airing dirty laundry in public.’ However, my personal experience is that the East Asian representation in literature and films I’ve encountered does in fact seem to revolve a lot around family and family drama.

Catelyn’s and Paige’s comments revealed an understanding of the importance of ‘saving face’ in ESEA communities, as ESEA individuals are highly conscious of how their actions might reflect well or poorly on their families and communities (Chen and Lau, 2021; Au, 2023). This attitude can be highly detrimental, as it encourages “emotional suppression [as] a common coping resource”; thus, Catelyn and Paige appreciated the novel’s depiction of a main character who did not isolate herself and had a supportive community around her (Au, 2023, p. 31). And as previously mentioned, Juno also appreciated the inclusion of Uncle Kevin as a character who unequivocally supported and accepted Elsie, especially because “Elsie [had] expressed how her inability to accept herself is both perpetuated by and results in feelings of inadequacy, so to see her being affirmed for just coming to terms with her identity is very sweet.” Uncle Kevin’s

acceptance of Elsie acted as a counterstory to the traditionally repressive family environment, illustrating the difference a supportive family member can make.

And finally, participants enjoyed the representation of Elsie's friend group, as well as the depiction of the older queer couples. Juno and Paige both commented on the importance of representation for all marginalised groups, particularly BIPOC young people and the LGBTQIA+ community. Juno remarked on the friendship dynamics depicted in the novel, writing:

Juno: Seeing Ritika, Joan and Elsie all learning that they are worth being listened to, no matter how negative and painful their thoughts are, was intensely cathartic. Through being emotionally vulnerable with each other they reclaim a sense of identity and visibility that young people of colour are too often deprived of.

For Juno, who was tired of the diasporic trauma narrative, seeing this positive portrayal of friendship was therapeutic and healing. She particularly focused on the ways that the friend group supported each other through difficulties, expressing that this was a powerful moment that enabled the "[reclaiming] of a sense of identity and visibility." Juno was thrilled to find this representation in the novel, as it was a counterstory that went against the 'single story' of the suffering and pain of BIPOC young people.

Paige added that she not only appreciated the positive representation of BIPOC people, but also the introduction of an older queer character:

Paige: Similarly, meeting Lily, an old queer woman, was a moment I found touching and heartwarming. The impact of representation through the older generation is profound, as it creates a sense of legacy and continuity for queer individuals. Lily's presence not only signifies progress and resilience but also offers a glimpse into the possibilities of a fulfilling and authentic life as a queer person.

Focusing on the importance of generational representation in the queer community, Paige found Lily's character invaluable in communicating the "possibilities of a fulfilling and authentic life as a queer person." This

counterstory was especially noticeable and important in a YA novel, as it depicted positive aspects of the queer community outside of the target YA audience. The character of Lily was a portrayal of the possibility of queer joy, both for the characters and for potential readers who may be struggling with their own identities, cultures, and place in the diaspora.

Likewise, Ariana wrote:

Ariana: Elsie describes feeling isolated [and] mentioned being an outsider around her other queer classmates, which has intensified her feeling of “otherness.” I think getting to see older queer couples has been a really positive experience for her! Her reaction to meeting Lily and Sabina was very sweet, and also reminded me about how valuable representation in the media is.

Reflecting on Elsie’s feelings of exclusion from the queer community (perhaps because of her race) and her “otherness,” Ariana commented on the necessity and power of representation within the queer community. For all three participants, these characters and situations reemphasised the importance of representation and of being able to see yourself and others in story. Although none of the participants could personally relate to these scenes, they understood the significance of these characters as possible ‘mirrors’ for other marginalised groups, exemplifying Delgado’s (1989) assertion that “[stories] can open new windows into reality, showing us that there are possibilities for life other than the ones we live” (p. 2,414).

### **Conclusion: Single stories and counterstories**

Ultimately, the participant responses revealed their dissatisfaction with the typical diasporic immigrant narrative, especially regarding the elements of trauma and distress that so often define these stories. The British participants were especially affected by the stereotypical elements in the novel, with some forcefully expressing how they could not truly see themselves in the text despite the British ESEA characters and setting. Their conversation truly epitomised the problem of the ‘single story,’ as defined by Adichie (2009): “The single story creates stereotypes. And the problem with stereotypes is not that they are

untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.” The British ESEAs understood that the lack of ESEA stories in the UK had inadvertently created a ‘single story’ of the ESEA diaspora, impossibly placing the burden of representation upon a very small number of ESEA authors. Thus, they were especially sensitive to any counterstories that were also present in the text, no matter how small the portrayal. And finally, all the participants understood the power of representation for marginalised groups, particularly highlighting the importance of joyful stories and scenes that acted as a counterstory to the reader’s expectation of a typical traumatic diasporic narrative. They recognised how “stories can shatter complacency and challenge the status quo,” and this theme captured their desire to see more stories and better stories about themselves, their families, and their communities (Delgado, 1989, p. 2,414).

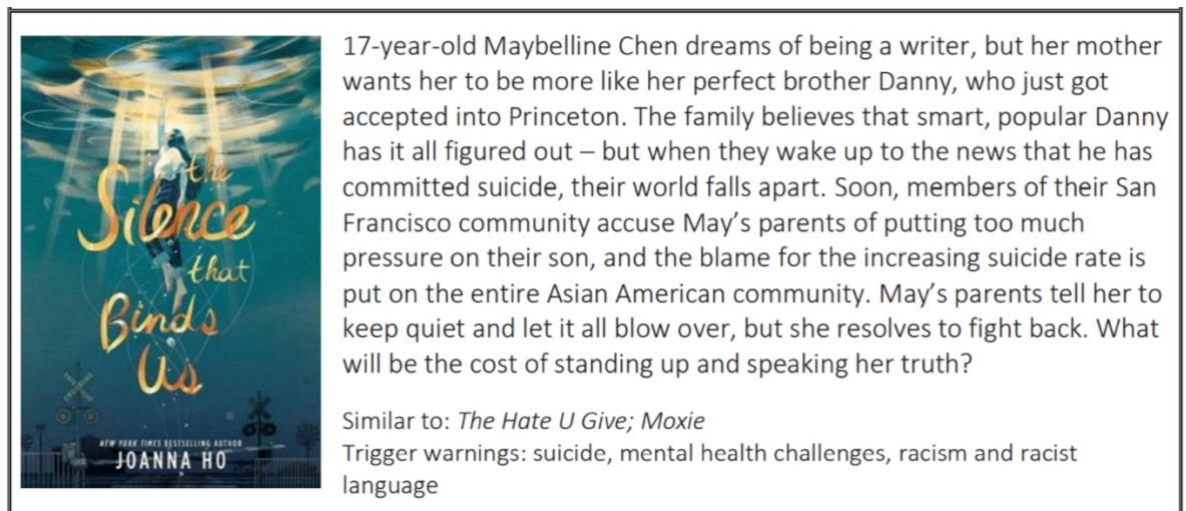
## Conclusion

Even though the book study for *If You Still Recognise Me* did not go exactly to plan, it still yielded an incredibly fruitful discussion from the participants which brought up questions of identity, family, disconnection, representation, intersectionality, and so many other topics. This first book study demonstrated that while there were certain aspects of the ESEA diaspora that seem to be universal across states, countries, and nationalities, there were also countless variations and differences in how Asian American and British ESEA young people see themselves and express their identities, leading to several moments where the same scene was both a ‘mirror’ and a ‘window’; clearly, the ESEA diaspora is non-monolithic, full of contradictions, and very much still a hybrid space of negotiations and transformations.

The book club also resulted in three main themes about pervasive feelings of ‘identity flux,’ intergenerational conflict and connection, and the need for more and better stories about the diasporic ESEA community. Overall, the book club demonstrated the power of YAL to create a ‘safe space’ for participants to discuss these difficult and personal topics, exemplifying Alsup’s (2003) assertion that “YA literature...can [help adolescents] feel as if they are not alone” (p. 160).



## Chapter Eight: *The Silence that Binds Us*



**Figure 4. Synopsis of the novel, taken from the Participant Information Sheet**

As I described in Chapter 5, I initiated a check-in with participants to see if anything should be changed for the second half of the study. In their feedback, participants expressed a desire for more time to read and respond, as well as more specific prompts to enable shorter answers. Thus, I restructured the Padlet into three separate columns so that the assigned reading sections could be further split into three smaller, more manageable, chapter chunks. I also replaced the original set of questions with this set of more targeted prompts:

- Pick an image, gif, or emoji (or several) to describe your feelings/reactions and explain with a quick caption.
- Write down a quote or theme/idea that resonated with you and explain.
- On a scale of 1 (hate) to 5 (love), how did you feel about this section? Why?
- If you had to pick three words to describe this section, what would they be and why?
- Were there any windows or mirrors for you?

These changes allowed participants to post shorter and more frequent responses, capturing more of the natural flow of the reading experience. It also drastically cut down on the monologues from participants, leading to even more examples of ‘asynchronous interthinking’ as it became easier for participants to quickly read and respond to each other’s thoughts.

## A Brief Summary of Codes and Topics from the Padlets

Imitating the structure of the previous chapter, I will now briefly list the topics that emerged from the initial analysis of each weekly Padlet for *The Silence that Binds Us*, focusing again on the ‘windows’ and ‘mirrors’ identified by participants.

### Padlet 1: Chapters 1-27

***Mirrors: Parent-child relationships and intercultural differences.*** One of the first things that stuck out to participants was the depiction of the Chen family dynamic. Catelyn saw a ‘mirror’ in the strained relationship between May and her mother, especially in the moments of cultural disconnect portrayed in the novel. Juno and Paige agreed, and Paige also pointed out other specific ‘mirrors’ such as the high expectations for academic excellence from May’s mother. Lastly, Ariana and Paige had a discussion about how perhaps May’s mother was also subject to these same high expectations, leading to a thoughtful analysis of how diasporic individuals of all ages might be under similar pressures to assimilate.

***Windows: Experiences of grief.*** All the participants were struck by the descriptions of intense grief and mourning after the tragic suicide of May’s brother Danny. Catelyn, Lana, Juno, and Ariana all commented on how the author effectively used form to portray the process of grieving, creating a ‘window’ for them into the experience of loss, while Paige found the description of the mother’s grieving process to be profound and realistic. In this discussion, it was evidence that the four participants built upon each other’s thoughts in a display of ‘asynchronous interthinking’ as they each added to Catelyn’s original post about the communicate effect of chapters structured as short poems, describing how this set of chapters helped them to understand the “dissociation effect” of grief and time passing.

***Windows AND Mirrors: Forces of silence.*** Participants reacted very strongly to the blatant anti-Asian racism depicted in the novel as a response to Danny’s suicide, leading to a thoughtful discussion on how and why individuals and communities can be silenced. The impetus for this discussion was a scene from

the novel where a respected community member, Mr. McIntyre, used racist rhetoric to blame the Chens for their son's suicide. Lana, Juno, and Catelyn were shocked by the overt racism, and Juno found herself questioning how she would personally react in the same situation, wondering if she would "make a meaningful change or...just be stoking the flames."

## **Padlet 2: Chapters 28-45**

***Mirrors: Lack of familial knowledge and history.*** Paige, Juno, and Ariana all saw 'mirrors' in a scene where May was asked to complete a family tree assignment for school; May struggled with writing her grandparents' Chinese names and realised that she knew very little about their lives. All three participants could relate to this experience, and each one shared how they had to ask for help to complete similar assignments in real life. Lana also shared her similar frustration at not knowing the names of certain ESEA foods, which left her feeling isolated from aspects of her culture.

***Windows AND Mirrors: Learning and speaking about racism.*** Participants identified many 'mirrors' and 'windows' in how the narrative depicted the process of learning about and confronting the many forms of racism. Juno conceded that she rarely thought about racism and structural inequities until she was made aware of their pervasive impact. Catelyn and Juno also discussed how important it is to verbalise thoughts on racism and racist encounters to others rather than dealing with these matters alone, as both participants could relate to the experience of conducting hypothetical debates about racism inside their heads, admitting that this often led to them "[spiralling]." Consequently, it was a valuable 'window' to see May and her friends having a productive and validating conversation about their experiences of racism.

***Windows: The consequences of speaking up.*** Lana, Paige, Juno, and Ariana shared their perspectives on the various silencing forces that emerged in this section, both external and internal. Paige and Juno were angered by Mr. McIntyre's attempts to coerce May and her family into silence, and they commented on how the novel presented the threats as a 'window' into the very real experiences of vulnerable BIPOC individuals. Ariana added that she had

heard stories from her community that mirrors the scene in the novel, particularly regarding protestors facing threats of unemployment.

***Windows: The power of community.*** Participants quite enjoyed seeing May become more integrated into a community of like-minded friends, particularly in scenes where they encouraged her to fight against injustice. Catelyn and Ariana discussed how beneficial it can be to talk about hard topics with other people who can understand, and Catelyn appreciated the ‘window’ into how community played a vital role in helping May process her brother’s suicide and the ensuing racist incidents. They loved seeing how the solidarity from her friends and community let May know she was not alone and gave her a safe space to talk about the difficult things happening in her life. Much of the discussion also centred on a scene where May and her friends fought back against racist ‘jokes’ in the classroom, leaving Paige, Juno, and Ariana feeling validated and triumphant.

### **Padlet 3: Chapters 46-64**

***Mirrors: Non-monolithic ESEA diasporic community.*** Participants enjoyed a scene where May read through the comments on a poem she wrote to honour Danny, as the comments ranged from encouragement to anger that she was taking it upon herself to speak for the Asian American community. Lana, Paige, and Juno liked that the novel provided a nuanced depiction of the non-monolithic diaspora, creating a fuller picture of many perspectives and varying viewpoints.

### ***Windows AND Mirrors: Relationships between ESEA and Black communities.***

This section of the book also dealt with the oft-contentious relationship between the Asian American and African American communities. Lana and Juno enjoyed the ‘window’ into Black and Asian community relationships, especially the author’s continued portrayal of diverse perspectives within and across each community. Paige, Juno, and Ariana also saw ‘mirrors’ of how they themselves first learned about anti-Black racism from social media and friends, appreciating how the novel depicted May’s biases being challenged in a constructive way.

***Mirrors: Family expectations.*** Participants analysed why May’s parents discouraged her from seeking justice for her brother and the Asian American

community. Ariana saw a ‘mirror’ of her own mother in May’s mother’s reluctance to speak out, choosing to put the safety of her daughter and her family first. Juno also saw ‘mirrors’ in this relationship, sharing that her parents also believe that speaking up about injustice will only cause further harm; they choose instead to fight for the safety and prosperity of family over fighting for larger societal causes. Likewise, Paige shared that she was taught by her parents and community that seeking ‘justice’ is not worth throwing away the safety and stability earned by previous generations.

***Windows: The consequences of speaking up.*** Participants again shared their thoughts on the very real consequences that May, her family, and her friends were facing because of May’s activism. Lana and Paige empathised with the difficult choice: should they stay silent to protect themselves and their families, or should they speak up regardless? Juno also commented on the implications of this choice for the wider community, as she acknowledged that many people already do not know how to ask for help in similar situations.

#### **Padlet 4: Chapters 65-epilogue**

***Mirrors: White privilege and performativity.*** Participants identified several ‘mirrors’ in the novel’s depiction of ‘white privilege’ and performative activism, seeing several parallels in the text to their own experiences as well as recent trends in society. Juno and Lana liked that the novel made sure to put the focus on May and the BIPOC students reclaiming their narratives, providing a counterstory to the ‘white saviour’ trope, with Juno further adding that she liked how the novel presented the hard choices that white allies often must make. Paige and Juno also remarked on the biases caused by white privilege in the novel and how these scenes were representative of how society often equates protesting to rioting.

***Windows: An ideal world where justice prevails.*** Participants were well aware of the impact of white supremacy on society; perhaps because of this, some participants viewed the triumphant protest presented in the novel as a ‘window’ rather than a ‘mirror,’ peering into an idealised world where oppressed communities could successfully take ownership of their stories. Lana and Juno both remarked on the easy, somewhat idealised resolution to the conflict, with

Lana explicitly stating that “it’s nice to dream of a world where standing up to racism is possible.” In contrast, Paige and Ariana liked seeing the success of the protest, finding it an uplifting and encouraging way to conclude the novel; however, neither of them mentioned that this scene reminded them of successful protests they had seen in real life, implying that they also felt that this was a ‘window’ instead of a ‘mirror.’

***Mirrors: The continuing struggle for justice and connection.*** Even though participants quite liked how the author portrayed the resolution of May’s internal family conflict and the external conflict over her activism, they also saw several ‘mirrors’ in how May had to continue speaking out against racism and working to connect with her mother, as they acknowledged that such work is often messy and time-consuming. Ariana especially liked how the ending showed the continuing education of Mr. McIntyre, who still did not understand his white privilege even after listening to May’s and her friends’ counterstories and protests. Juno agreed, again seeing a realistic ‘mirror’ in how May had to learn that fighting racism and unlearning biases is a lifelong battle.

***Final Thoughts.*** Lana asked the group if they thought the novel could help to change racist views in the real world. Paige thoughtfully responded, also indicating doubt about whether a white reader would respond well to the novel, and Juno reflected that it would most likely come down to individual readers and their desire to learn more about Asian American social justice issues. Overall, this last discussion revealed a tension within the participants between celebrating social justice wins and antiracist initiatives while also feeling sceptical about whether these efforts would bring about lasting change or transform racist mindsets. Though all the participants loved seeing the protest succeed in the story, they seemed more hesitant to believe that similar change could come about in the real world.

## **Diving Deeper into Interpretation**

Having completed an overview of the initial threads of conversation that emerged in each Padlet, I will now conduct an in-depth analysis of the overarching themes that emerged from the data.

## AsianCrit and overall themes

I followed the process I used for the analysis of *If You Still Recognise Me*, beginning with a deductive analysis of the discussion using the seven AsianCrit tenets. When compared to *If You Still Recognise Me*, three of the tenets were the same: 'Asianization,' 'Transnational contexts,' and 'Story, theory, and praxis.' There was also a new tenet that featured heavily in the participant discussion:

- Commitment to social justice: The call to end all forms oppression; not only racism, but "sexism, heterosexism, capitalist exploitation, and other systemic forms of dehumanization and domination" (Iftikar and Museus, 2018, p. 941).

Using these four deductive codes in combination with the inductive codes that intuitively arose from the participant discussion, I found four themes and seven sub-themes:

**Theme 1:** "A realistic portrayal of how...parents of East Asian descent often show their (maybe 'tough') love and care for you."

**Theme 1a:** "I haven't really considered how those expectations could apply to [ESEA parents] as well."

**Theme 1b:** "Language barriers can play a role in alienating you from your culture."

**Theme 2:** "I am glad that these views are being explored, to dismantle the notion of the Asian diaspora experience as singular or monolithic."

**Theme 2a:** "The biases held by the Asian and Black communities towards each other are rarely explored."

**Theme 3:** "Throughout history, people of color have been turned into scapegoats in order to fit/support a certain narrative."

**Theme 3a:** "People in power will resort to anything to keep activists silent (to make sure their narrative is the one that is heard)."

**Theme 3b:** “Often I feel like there is the urge to stay silent and oppressed in order to stay safe.”

**Theme 4:** “Speaking out against injustice is both an act of love and a form of resistance.”

**Theme 4a:** “I loved the constant assurance from May’s friends that speaking up is the right thing to do.”

**Theme 4b:** “It’s nice to dream of a world where standing up to racism is possible.”

In contrast to the resulting themes from *If You Still Recognise Me*, which were largely internal reflections on diasporic identity and family relationships with some final thoughts on ESEA stories, the themes for *The Silence that Binds Us* spanned both the personal as well as the political, beginning with reflections on family and ending with musings on protest, societal racism, and the possibility of justice in this world. I will now analyse these themes and sub-themes, incorporating both inductive and deductive codes as well as the relevant literature to unpack the narratives within the participant responses.

### **Theme 1: “A realistic portrayal of how...parents of East Asian descent often show their (maybe 'tough') love and care for you.”**

Corresponding to the initial themes of *If You Still Recognise Me*, participants strongly identified with the disconnect between generations portrayed at the beginning of the novel. The novel began with a scene set in the Chen household which established the family dynamic, and participants quickly noticed the difficult relationship between Maybelline (May) and her mother. Catelyn was the first to post about how she could see herself in the complex parent-child relationship portrayed in the story:

Catelyn: “I am trying to help you, Maybelline.” I like this quote because I feel like it is a realistic portrayal of how my mum (and maybe other parents of East Asian descent) often show their (maybe 'tough') love and care for you.



Catelyn saw her own mother reflected in the novel's depiction of Maybelline's mother, particularly in her overbearing expression of care. She also observed the intercultural aspect of the relationship, commenting on the disconnect between ESEA parents and children in how they demonstrate and receive love. This comment is where the title of the theme came from, as it succinctly captured the tension between appreciating a parent's love while also acknowledging how this love can be "tough" and overbearing. Juno and Paige agreed, commenting:

Juno: I also found this quote to be a 'mirror'. For me, the dinner party really highlighted this dynamic - the kids feeling super uncomfortable as the parents proudly brandish their child's achievements, very lively while also really tense!

Paige: Yes, this was definitely a 'mirror!' I feel like this reflected the dynamic where many parents genuinely mean this and feel frustrated when their children think they are just being overly critical.

Juno and Paige could both relate to the difficult parent-child dynamic presented in the opening chapter, with Juno highlighting the challenge of parents who showed their care in ways that left her feeling "super uncomfortable." Paige also considered the scene from a parental perspective, acknowledging that this disconnect could make parents "frustrated" at their children's lack of appreciation for their efforts. Both of their comments demonstrated the impact of AsianCrit's 'Transnational contexts,' as participants saw their first-generation parents' brand of 'tough love' reflected in the scenes between Maybelline and her mother. And as Catelyn, Paige, and Juno all implied, the disconnect is not only generational but also cultural. They empathised with May's identity as a second-generation ABC<sup>13</sup> "divided between [her] parents' native culture, the past, and assimilating into American society, the future" (Mathison, 2018, p. 12). All three participants demonstrated an understanding that they were different from their parents in a number of ways, exemplifying Hsiao's (2020) assertion that "second-generation young people are confused about their identity and highly aware of their differences from their parents, who usually identify themselves with Chinese people" (p. 39). These participants clearly felt

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<sup>13</sup> American-born Chinese

how living in a liminal space of “ambiguity and in-between-ness” could negatively affect the parent-child relationship (Beech, 2011, p. 288).

Additionally, Paige identified several other ‘mirrors’ in the parental expectations depicted in the first section of chapters:

Paige: Other mirrors I found were the pressure for Maybelline to be more like Celeste who is 孝顺<sup>14</sup>, the idea that ‘good grades aren’t enough, you need to be doing more for your future’ and that ‘nose rings are only for pigs and cows.’

The ‘mirrors’ identified by Paige are all examples of the strict expectations for children in many ESEA cultures, encapsulated by the Chinese concept of *guai* (obedient, excellent, and dutiful). As Chen and Lau (2021) explain, “Children who embody these core behavioural virtues are thought to be *guai* because they accept authority, conform to accepted norms of behaviour, are expected to become useful members of society and understand the importance of maintaining the prevailing social order” (p. 295). All of these expectations were present in the quotes that Paige chose to share on the Padlet, particularly the expectation to submit to a parent’s definition of accepted behaviour. In response, Ariana agreed with Paige, reiterating the ‘mirror’ of how the parents unfavourably compared Maybelline to her friend Celeste:

Ariana: I could definitely connect with Maybelline’s feelings of inadequacy compared to Celeste, and wanting to avoid judgment at the dinner table.

Similarly to Paige, Ariana resonated with the feeling of falling short of parental expectations, and especially the unpleasant feeling of being compared to another ESEA individual who seemed to be effortlessly *guai*.

In contrast to their discussion in *If You Still Recognise Me* about feeling ‘stifled’ by parental expectations, participants all seemed to recognise the nuances in the familial relationships presented here. They did not have the same visceral reaction against the stereotypical storylines as they did in the discussion of the

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<sup>14</sup> xiàoshùn – filial piety; obedience

first novel, finding instead several ‘mirrors’ of their own experiences with their parents, and even ‘mirrors’ in May’s mother’s behaviour. The participants also recognised that the intergenerational difficulties explored in the second book were examples of stereotypical narratives often applied to first- and second-generation dynamics. Perhaps this was because the second novel took more care to explain the motivations of the characters, both acknowledging the stereotypes at work while also communicating how the characters were trapped within the stereotypes themselves. Indeed, participants applauded how the novel highlighted contrasting views within the diaspora, praising the inclusion of many different perspectives and viewpoints.

**Theme 1a: “I haven’t really considered how those expectations could apply to [ESEA parents] as well.”**

For example, some participants felt very empathetic towards May’s mother, understanding how the mother was also existing in her own kind of liminal space. Paige shared that she actually saw the most ‘mirrors’ in May’s mother, writing:

Paige: I found the mother the most interesting character, and perhaps the one where I saw the most ‘mirrors.’ The lure of the Western Maybelline commercial to the Taiwanese mother seems to indicate a desire to assimilate into Western culture...The later description of the mother as a ‘well-trained circus animal’ suggests that, like Maybelline, her mother has also been conditioned to conform to certain standards of high achievement.

Paige resonated with how May’s mother felt like she was forced to adapt to American culture, empathising with the pressure on May’s mother that turned her into a “well-trained circus animal.” Paige realised that, like Maybelline, the character of the mother was also a hybridised and diasporic individual caught between different cultures, contexts, and ways of living (Gilroy, 1994; Bhabha, 2004; Hall, 2021b). Thus, Paige sympathised with both May’s and her mother’s struggles to formulate their identities, understanding the reasons behind both the mother’s expressions of ‘tough love’ as well as May’s desire for independence.

This observation was eye-opening for Ariana, as she admitted that she had never considered the complicated intercultural parent-child relationship from the parent's perspective:

Ariana: I really like this interpretation! Asian mothers setting high expectations for their children is pretty stereotypical at this point, but I haven't really considered how those expectations could apply to them as well.

In an example of 'asynchronous interthinking,' Paige's post helped Ariana contemplate how being a part of a diasporic community can affect both first- and second-generation individuals in unique ways. In a very real sense, the first-generation, exemplified by May's mother, were the first to experience the process of identity re-formation brought on by being a part of the diaspora (Gilroy, 1987; Hall, 2021b).

Later on in the book club, Ariana found herself empathising even more with May's mother, seeing her own parents 'mirrored' in the way that May's mother expressed her care for May by wanting to keep her close:

Ariana: A mirror for me was May's mother's emphasis on putting family first. Although they immigrated to the US (more than 2,000 miles from their home), my parents have always insisted that my sister and I stay close by after we graduate from high school. Since there are only four of us in the US, they want to make sure we can always stay in touch + take care of each other.

Ariana shared that it was a 'mirror' to see how May's mother stressed the importance of family, as her parents also emphasise to her how vital it is that the family stay close and "take care of each other" in a country where they do not have much support from extended family or community. For Ariana, this deeper understanding of May's mother's motivations helped her to contextualise her own parents' (sometimes suffocating) expressions of love and care, helping her to better understand them as diasporic individuals, like herself, also trying to piece together "a coherent (if not always stable) experiential sense of self" (Gilroy, 1991, p. 127).

And finally, the participants were struck by the descriptions of intense grief and mourning after the tragic suicide of May's brother Danny. All of the participants commented on how the author effectively used form to portray the process of grieving, creating a 'window' for them into May's feelings of loss, but Paige focused once again on how the author created an empathetic 'window' into May's mother's experience as well:

Paige: 'But who tended to the ghosts?' I thought this effectively showed caregiver fatigue and the debilitating effect of grief. I also thought the mother's fragmentation of identity and loss of identity was realistic, as parents often find a strong sense of identity in being a parent.

Again, Paige was the only participant to focus specifically on the mother's perspective instead of May's, sharing that the structure of the chapters not only showed grief but also revealed the "caregiver fatigue" that the mother must have been feeling. For Paige, this quote offered insight into how parents also struggle with identity formation, as well as a 'window' into what could happen when an individual loses something central to their identity.

The empathy extended by participants to May's mother in this section was a stark difference from their condemnation of the limited queer ESEA stereotypes in *If You Still Recognise Me*; none of the participants considered that perhaps the storylines depicted in the first novel might ring true for others in the community, especially the older generation. This was better reflected in the discussion of this novel, when participants began considering the perspectives of the mother in conjunction with the feelings of the daughter, once again exemplifying that the 'single story' might ring true for certain people in the community and that there are perhaps many different and valid ways to embody the diaspora. It is fascinating that the participants reacted in such different ways to the sensitive stereotypes presented in each novel, and I am wondering if their more forgiving discussion here was due to the novel's care to create a much more nuanced representation of the diaspora, including many more perspectives from different members of the ESEA community as well as differing views from the African American and white communities (see Themes 2 and 2a).

**Theme 1b: “Language barriers can play a role in alienating you from your culture.”**

Participants also resonated with the novel’s depiction of how intergenerational gaps can lead to missing knowledge and a lack of connection with one’s heritage, which the novel presented as a side effect of the disconnect between parents and children both seeking to make their way in the diaspora. First, Paige, Juno, and Ariana could all relate to a scene where May cannot complete a school assignment asking for her to write her grandparents’ names and details of their history. Responding to Maybelline’s lack of knowledge concerning her extended family, Paige wrote:

Paige: A specific ‘mirror’ for me was how, like me, May did not know how to write her grandparents’ names in Chinese or how to communicate with them.

This again exemplified the tenet of ‘Transnational contexts,’ as Paige’s identity was shaped by her upbringing in the UK to be fluent in English rather than Chinese. Consequently, she felt that the language difference severed her from her grandparents. Juno and Ariana, raised in the UK and the US, also felt the same way:

Juno: I found that ‘mirror’ to be relatable too! Family tree/story activities in school were always difficult because it always made me realise how little I knew about my grandparents.

Ariana: I can also relate to the mirror that Paige and Juno mentioned. For all of the family tree assignments I’ve had in the past, I’ve had to ask my parents for help coming up with names and hometowns of all of my relatives - it was always frustrating, and made me feel so disconnected from the rest of my family.

Both Juno and Ariana specifically mentioned how discouraging it was to be unable to complete the “family tree” school projects due to a lack of knowledge of their extended families, with Ariana sharing that she always felt frustrated and “so disconnected.” Language played a role in this disconnect, creating a barrier for both Paige and Ariana as they discussed being unable to write (or

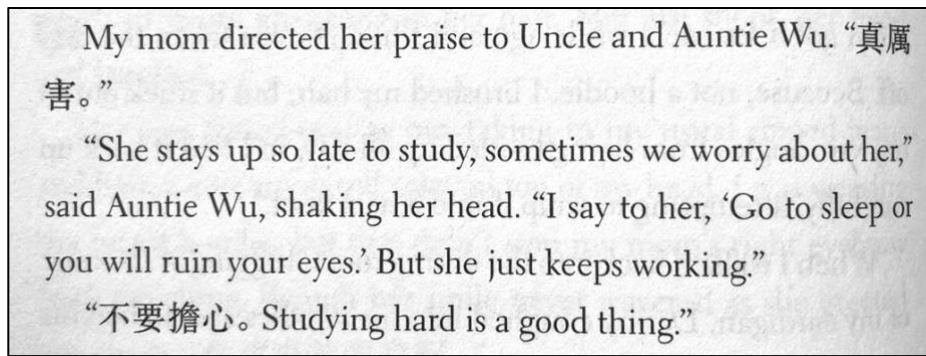
even know) their grandparents' names and hometowns in Chinese. Adding to this conversation, Lana wrote:

Lana: I could really relate to May in the hotpot scene, where she doesn't know the names of all the foods ("tubeshaped fish thing"), and also doesn't know her grandparents [names]- highlighting how language barriers can play a role in alienating you from your culture.

These participant responses revealed the same feelings of 'identity flux' that emerged from the discussion of *If You Still Recognise Me*, as participants yearned to feel connected to their heritage and extended family members. Ultimately, the discussion showed that participants' diasporic identities were still mostly dictated by the 'homeland' narrative, as described by Safran (1991): "They continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship" (p. 84). The participants responses were again signifying their discomfort at the "lived tension" that defines the diasporic experience, as they found themselves looking for points of connection (i.e. family trees and grandparents' names) to ground themselves in "the experiences of separation and entanglement" (Clifford, 1994, p. 311). Like Hall (2021) described, the participants were positioned by their 'transnational contexts' as "*both* the same *and* different," leaving them and their identities in an uncomfortable liminal space (p. 227).

These feelings all came together in a side discussion on the use of untranslated Chinese characters in the novel, sparked by Lana asking:

Lana: Does anyone else here feel a sense of sadness/defeat when they have to look up what the Chinese words in the book mean? As an Asian I feel almost obliged to know what they mean, that this book was written for people 'like me', so therefore I should understand. Maybe a footnote or glossary would have been nice, to make the book more accessible.



**Figure 5. Excerpt from *The Silence that Binds Us* demonstrating Chinese characters**

For Lana, the Chinese characters generated feelings of dejection as she realised she could not read the text, leading her to question parts of her identity. Her perception that she could not read characters even though they were written for “people [like her]” demonstrated an unease with how this reflected on her ‘Chineseness’ and defeat that she could not meet the implicit expectations set upon her. Lana’s internal struggle with the text and her identity revealed the difficulty in forming a diasporic identity whilst beset by expectations from all sides, a common experience for diasporic individuals, particularly in the second-generation. As Tokunaga (2016) writes in her study on Asian American girls, “They face a world of multiple, often contradictory, messages about who they are, what they should become, and how to navigate the world” (p. 1087).

Juno and Paige both agreed with Lana’s thoughts on the matter, with Juno also admitting that she found it difficult to interpret the Chinese characters in the text and Paige supporting the suggestion about including footnotes:

Juno: Yes, I also felt the same! I did appreciate the specific layer of authenticity evoked by use of a native language. Was a real boost to my ego when I managed to read the first few instances, but later on I had to sheepishly leave Google Translate open at my side most of the time.

Paige: I agree that a footnote would have been useful! It also made me think of the part where Celeste's Mandarin was described as not having the



'telltale' ABC<sup>15</sup> accent. As someone also with an ABC (BBC<sup>16</sup>?) accent, it was a 'mirror' for me.

Juno's comment on the "authenticity" of the text demonstrated yet another burden on diasporic individuals, as she shared that she felt proud when she could read the Chinese text but "sheepish" when she could not. Paige also felt a similar lack of authenticity, not only when encountering written language but spoken as well. She described how this discussion reminded her of a scene in the text where the ABC accent is disparaged, leading her to reflect on her own 'inauthentic' BBC accent.

Ultimately, for all three participants, language was a sore subject that brought up feelings of guilt and inadequacy, again demonstrating the difficulties that diasporic individuals can encounter when attempting to form their identities amidst a storm of expectations. This discussion about the participants' feelings of disconnect and dejection around language echoed similar thoughts that they shared in the discussion of the first novel, *If You Still Recognise Me*, marking it as a topic that provoked strong feelings. And as Catelyn wrote in that previous discussion, all the participants communicated how "incredibly burdensome" it was to navigate the pressure associated with language learning and 'authentic Chineseness.' For Lana, Juno, and Paige, this scene in the novel helped them to articulate how they were all struggling with expressing their ESEA identities while simultaneously grappling with their lack of Chinese language skills, which for them seemed to be an integral part of ESEA identity. Ang (2001) writes about this very issue in her work *On Not Speaking Chinese*, ultimately concluding that the concept of hybridity and its capability for "boundary-blurring transculturation" is the only way to move out of these spaces of alienation and shame (p. 198). However, the participant discussion revealed that they were still very much captive to feelings of guilt about their language skills (or lack thereof).

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<sup>15</sup> American-born Chinese

<sup>16</sup> British-born Chinese

## **Conclusion: Intergenerational and intercultural disconnect**

This first theme was most similar to the overarching themes that resulted from the discussion of *If You Still Recognise Me*, as participants disclosed some of the same feelings of being lost in the diaspora. But unlike the previous discussion, where ‘identity flux’ was mainly a reaction to the expectations of strangers in the UK, the US, and Asia, here participants discussed how their conflicted identities were shaped by parental expectations, distance from extended family, and language barriers - in other words, by the expectations of the diasporic community around them. The participants’ struggle to reconcile the many different pieces of their identities demonstrated the truth of Kuah-Pearce's (2006) assertion that “the conflicting demands placed upon the private self by the diasporic community and the host society inevitably lead to tensions within the private self” (p. 234). It was evident that the participants were very much feeling these tensions, revealing a continued discomfort with the “complex, on-going [negotiations]” necessary to build a life as a hybridised, diasporic individual (Bhabha, 2004, p. 3).

## **Theme 2: “I am glad that these views are being explored, to dismantle the notion of the Asian diaspora experience as singular or monolithic.”**

In this second theme, participants broadened their gazes, moving from reflections of personal identity to wider reflections on the larger ESEA diaspora and society. Participants were quite pleased to find several different Asian American perspectives represented in the novel, even when they were in conflict with each other, as it demonstrated the non-monolithic nature of the diaspora. Lana, Paige, and Juno had the following conversation describing the various responses to May’s post about her brother:

Lana: I found the comments section and the response from peers in the Asian diaspora very interesting, and I am pleased that the author considered these views, as they might be going round the reader’s head.

Paige: Yes, I agree! I think it was a good decision on the author’s part - it’s likely that some readers would have resonated with the other responses.

Juno: Like Paige and Lana, I found the exploration of more diverse views in the Asian diaspora community to be interesting. While I personally disagree with the responses of Byron and Alvin, I am glad that these views are being explored, to dismantle the notion of the Asian diaspora experience as singular or monolithic.

This was another example of the ‘Story, theory, and praxis’ tenet at work, as participants lauded the inclusion of more stories and counterstories to demonstrate the variety of views in the ESEA diaspora, even those with which they disagreed (Iftikar and Museus, 2018; Rodríguez, 2020b). The participants appreciated that a wide spectrum of diasporic perspectives were represented, believing that including these dissenting responses could potentially help to draw readers further into the story as they might be more familiar with these stereotypical narratives. And as Juno added, this inclusion also helped to “dismantle the notion of the Asian diaspora experience as singular or monolithic,” spotlighting the diversity of thought across the diaspora and combating the ‘single story’ of Asian American or British ESEA identity.

Lana, Paige, and Juno all thought it was very important that the audience understand the diversity of the diaspora, particularly because of society’s tendency to lump together all ESEA countries, cultures, and people groups (Pang, Han and Pang, 2011; Lee, 2015; Rodríguez, 2020b). This tendency has historically led to harmful stereotypes such as the ‘Oriental Other,’ the ‘yellow peril,’ and the ‘model minority,’ as the ESEA community as a whole became subject to many fears and biases during different eras of history (Takaki, 1998; Volpp, 2005; Wu, 2014; Lee, 2015; Li and Nicholson, 2021). Thus, the participants were encouraged by the representation they saw in the novel, even when they observed that clashing viewpoints were presented. For example, Juno remarked:

Juno: It was interesting to see the dichotomy of how organising social action simultaneously strengthened and deteriorated May’s connection to the Asian community - while becoming better friends with Celeste, May also feels alienated by Alvin’s contempt for her taking it ‘upon herself to speak as a voice for the Chinese community’.

Here, Juno is referring to scenes from the novel describing how May tried to speak out against racism and honour her brother's memory through public blog posts, speaking up at assemblies, and ultimately organising a counterstorytelling protest called #TakeBacktheNarrative at her school where BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, and differently-abled students shared their stories with their classmates. Reflecting on the many viewpoints held by different members of the diaspora, Juno noticed that May's stance on speaking out simultaneously increased her connection to certain people while alienating her from others. For Juno, this again emphasised the non-monolithic nature of the diaspora, as the community did not unconditionally support May's activism and many spoke out against it. Ultimately, Juno felt this was an accurate picture of the negotiations of identity in the diaspora, where perfect agreement as a community is impossible but diasporic individuals continue to try and work together to make a difference as best they can. It also revealed an understanding of Hall's (2021) assertion that a diaspora must be "defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference" (p. 235). As the participants quickly realised, it was this "heterogeneity," "diversity," and "difference" that was very much on display in the pages of the novel.

**Theme 2a: "The biases held by the Asian and Black communities towards each other are rarely explored."**

Participants also picked up on themes of interracial solidarity within the larger umbrella of non-monolithic identity and community, as they found the novel's depiction of African American and Asian American relationships to be another fascinating exploration of the internal biases within these communities and external biases towards other racial groups. A large part of the discussion for this theme revolved around a scene in the novel where May accidentally stumbles into a BSU (Black Student Union) meeting, and a heated discussion occurs about whether the BSU should support May's campaign against anti-Asian racism. Lana and Juno first reflected on the 'windows' they saw in May's experience at the BSU meeting:

Lana: I've never heard Black people's perspective on racism and speaking out before, so that was a good 'window' for me.

Juno: Agreed - this was also an insightful 'window' for me. Especially because I feel that the biases held by the Asian and Black communities towards each other are rarely explored, with a lot of media conflating and homogenising all POC communities' views on racism.

Juno's quote is where the title of the sub-theme came from, as she reiterated the importance of having counterstories from the perspective of many different marginalised communities, pushing back against the "conflating and homogenising" agenda of the media to once again disrupt the monolithic portrayal of not only the ESEA diaspora, but the Black diaspora as well. For Lana, who is British Chinese, this scene was also an important 'window' into the African American experience of racism. Both participants appreciated the nuanced viewpoints presented in the novel, particularly the differences in how the ESEA and Black students responded to May's call to action.

Additionally, Paige and Juno also saw 'mirrors' in the same scene, relating to how BSU members educated May about the ongoing African American struggle for justice by sharing several experiences of anti-Black racism in the school and community. They shared:

Paige: May's run-in at the BSU meeting served as a mirror to my own experiences learning about anti-black racism, although my own experience was not confrontational at all, and simply learnt through the news and social media.

Juno: I definitely think May's learning curve on anti-black racism acts as a 'mirror' to my own experiences. While the ease with which May believes she can 'conquer racism' seems evidently naïve to me now, I feel that I definitely have been guilty of this similar thought pattern when I was younger.

Paige and Juno both saw themselves reflected in May's ignorance and subsequent education in anti-Black racism. For Paige, this education happened mostly online, perhaps through the recent Black Lives Matter movement that was heavily broadcast on social media. And for Juno, this scene especially reflected her previous naivety regarding how easy it would be to "conquer

racism,” an opinion formed without the full knowledge of racism’s deep roots and impact in society.

Juno and Ariana continued the analysis of the BSU scene, adding:

Juno: I found it satisfying to see May’s biases deconstructed - I’m glad that the author emphasises how even though May is now very involved in social action, it doesn’t erase the need for her to constantly learn and grow from her previous ignorance of anti-black racism.

Ariana: “Sometimes the things we need aren’t easy to hear.” I liked how this section introduced a new perspective through the BSU meeting and May’s conversations with Hugh and Tiya. It was definitely not easy to listen to, but I’m [glad] that May learned that there were more dimensions to activism, and how she still has a lot to learn.

Both Juno and Ariana liked that the author included this scene, emphasising the importance of continuing to learn about and engage with social justice issues. They recognised that unlearning biases were a crucial part of this learning process, and thus were happy to see May unlearning some of her anti-black biases through hard conversations. Juno particularly appreciated how May’s interaction with the BSU revealed how little she really knew about the racism directed towards African Americans in her community, forcing her to reckon with her previous ignorance. Again, participants were drawn to the “heterogeneity and diversity” of views represented within the ESEA and Black diasporas (Hall, 2021b, p. 235).

Paige also added her thoughts on the BSU scenes, focusing on an interaction between May and Hugh:

Paige: I disliked Hugh’s [a BSU member] initial dismissive response because it felt like gatekeeping reactions to racism—implying that some experiences of discrimination are not severe enough to merit action. However, I understand that he was used as a device to segway into a discussion of antiblackness within the Asian community and to force May (and the

reader) to confront their own biases. I also found it a ‘mirror’ that discussions about racism are often emotionally charged.

While Paige initially balked against Hugh’s contemptuous attitude, she ultimately liked how the interaction served to illuminate the ignorance of many ESEA individuals regarding anti-Black racism, as well as the deeply entrenched racism within the ESEA community. This analysis from Paige encapsulated much of the historically contentious dynamic between Black and Asian communities pitted against each other by white supremacy. For example, scholars argue that while the ‘model minority’ stereotype seems to praise the accomplishments of the Asian American community, it actually does so by tearing down other minority groups and is used to mask the systemic injustices inflicted upon Black and Brown communities (Courturier, 2001; Kawai, 2005; Wu, 2014; Iftikar and Museus, 2018; Rodríguez, 2020b). As Wu (2014) argues, Asian Americans are elevated by virtue of being “*definitely not-black*” (p. 4). Though Paige may not have been aware of all this historical context, the scene from the novel was powerful enough that it made her stop and think about how marginalised groups are not immune from having their own biases against other communities.

Finally, Juno shared her thoughts on May’s friendship with Tiya, her Haitian American best friend, commenting on this quote from Tiya:

Juno: “I want to talk with you about race, but I don’t want to be your coach.” I found this explanation from Tiya very relatable. Sometimes I do feel that there are certain things that can be understood and left unsaid between me and other Asian friends; most of which I find difficult to express to my non-Asian friends.

Juno saw a ‘mirror’ in this conversation between Tiya and May, relating to how it can be much simpler to discuss racial topics with ESEA friends, as opposed to non-ESEA. However, she admired the way that May and Tiya still strove to have an open dialogue about these difficult topics, with both characters taking on more responsibility to educate themselves about the issues that were important for each another. Juno found the portrayal of their friendship quite powerful, as it used their open communication with each other and willingness to recognise

these profound issues to provide another example of the diversity and counterstories present in both Black and ESEA diasporas.

This entire section of the text pointed to the early days of the Asian American movement, when activists sought to form pan-ethnic and pan-racial groups such as the Asian American Political Alliance and the Third World Liberation Front to bring multiple minority groups together, yet again depicting a counterstory to the historical conflict between Black and Asian groups (Courturier, 2001; Maeda, 2012; Lee, 2015, 2018). By bringing together several different groups in solidarity, activists discovered that they could more effectively fight for inclusion and representation for everyone.

### **Conclusion: Non-monolithic diaspora(s)**

Ultimately, the participant discussion surrounding this theme and sub-theme revealed a frustration with the fact that society often creates a narrative of minority groups as monoliths with one set of views and perspectives. In reality, diasporic communities are not so easily defined. As Rodríguez and Kim (2018) assert, “Asian American, like African American, Latinx, and Native American, is a panethnic term that does not reveal the tremendous intragroup diversity of language, ethnicity, culture, religion, socioeconomic class, education, and historical experiences” (p. 18). The participant responses demonstrated an acute awareness of this fact, as well as a desire for the greater exploration of the many different views and perspectives represented in the ESEA diaspora (as well as other diasporas such as the Black diaspora).

### **Theme 3: “Throughout history, people of color have been turned into scapegoats in order to fit/support a certain narrative.”**

In this third theme, participants turned their attention towards the larger metanarratives of racism, discussing how ESEAs have been racialised time and time again by society. Ariana (a US participant) first commented on Mr. McIntyre’s racist views and how he saw Asian Americans as “disposable”:

Ariana: “People like us are disposable to him.” Mr. McIntyre’s rhetoric is one that has been used for years. While I was reading his letter, it reminded



me of how Asian-Americans were treated during the pandemic →  
 throughout history, people of color have been turned into scapegoats in  
 order to fit/support a certain narrative.

When reading this section, Ariana connected the arguments in the novel to the recent pandemic and the surge in anti-Asian hate crimes, as well as looking farther back into history to link current events to the historical scapegoating of Asian Americans and BIPOC people (Kim and Shah, 2020; Mercer, 2020; Phillips, 2020; Stop AAPI Hate, 2022). She not only demonstrated a strong knowledge of Asian American history, both recent and in the more distant past, but also an insight into the process of ‘Asianization,’ which Iftikar and Museus (2018) define as follows: “White Supremacy and pervasive nativistic racism in the US result in Asian Americans being racialized as perpetual foreigners, threatening yellow perils, model and deviant minorities, and sexually deviant emasculated men and hypersexualized women” (p. 940). The stereotype of “threatening yellow perils” was most evident in the novel, as Ariana saw how the white community was targeting the Asian American community and using them as ‘scapegoats’ for the community’s problems. This also demonstrated the dark side of Anderson’s (2006) ‘imagined communities,’ as the white community identified itself in opposition to the ‘yellow peril.’

Ariana’s note about the long history of scapegoating also pointed to the many historical instances where Asian Americans were targeted and stereotyped in American society. An early example was the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, which banned entry to the US for Chinese workers and denied citizenship to any Chinese still in the country because of nativistic fears that the Chinese were taking jobs from ‘real’ Americans (Takaki, 1998; Lee, 2015). Another example were the Japanese internment camps of World War II, when the entrenched fear of ‘yellow peril’ led to the unjust imprisonment of hundreds of thousands of Japanese and Japanese Americans on the suspicion of being Japanese spies (Takaki, 1998; Hayashi, 2004; Lee, 2015; Nagata, Kim and Wu, 2019). And like Ariana mentioned, the very recent Covid-19 pandemic revealed how quickly Asian Americans could go from the ‘model minority’ to ‘perpetual foreigners’ and ‘yellow peril,’ as the pandemic caused a 339% increase in hate crimes in the US (Li and Nicholson, 2021; Stop AAPI Hate, 2022; Yam, 2022). Similar hate

crimes were also occurring in the UK, with a 300% increase in anti-Asian violence in 2020 (Mercer, 2020; Chong, 2021).

Though not all the participants (especially those from the UK) may have known this long history of anti-Asian racism in the US, most were at least familiar with the recent anti-Asian violence caused by the pandemic. This lent the discussion a bit more context, as most participants had heard some iteration of racist rhetoric before. However, the openness of the racism portrayed in the novel shocked some UK participants, who were more familiar with subversive forms of racism and bias. Juno shared her outrage at a scene featuring a racist outburst from community member Mr. McIntyre, using emojis to emphasise her emotions:

Juno: 🤔😡 < My reaction to Mr McIntyre's outburst at the Junior Jam. I've known people who think like this, who see Asians as nothing more than 'machines'. However, they usually try to sugarcoat these views, so this public display of unrestrained racism was a shocking 'window' for me.

Juno called out the racist rhetoric right away, particularly the idea that ESEAs are "machines," finding herself shocked at the 'window' into such virulent racism. Such overt racism was eye-opening for Juno, who was more familiar with subtler implications such as British ESEA individuals having "a machine-like capacity for work but an inherent lack of creativity," a statement which somewhat attempts to disguise its racism with a back-handed compliment (Yeh, 2014, p. 1207). However, this stereotype is nothing new, having shown up again and again throughout history in the form of the 'yellow peril,' the 'model minority,' the 'foreigner,' and ultimately the Other. Similarly, Catelyn (UK participant) remarked:

Catelyn: I honestly was quite shocked and not really sure about how to react to the outbreak at the parents' meeting in the book. I admire May for her persistence to speak out despite her parents' wishes.

Juno and Catelyn's more uncertain reactions demonstrated a marked difference to Ariana's confident assertion that Asian Americans had always openly faced discrimination from American society.

Paige (UK participant) also posted about her surprise when she learned from the novel that the ‘model minority’ stereotype was a PR image that originated from the San Francisco Chinatown leaders:

Paige: I was shocked and surprised to read that “Chinatown leaders hired a PR firm to spread an image of Chinese kids who loved to study and followed rules.” I had always thought that this stereotype was externally imposed. This made me think about the double-edged nature of ‘model minority’ stereotypes, as later, this stereotype was twisted to blame student suicides on Asian communities, even though it originated as a protective measure.

For Paige, this revelation led to a deeper examination of the ‘model minority’ stereotype and its “double-edged” nature, remarking on how quickly society can turn from lauding the success of Asian American communities to blaming them for pressuring students into suicide. Paige’s reflection perfectly captured the precarity of being the ‘model minority,’ as a seemingly positive stereotype can quickly change to recrimination with a shift of context; this dynamic is demonstrated in Kawai’s (2005) argument that “people of Asian descent become the model minority when they are depicted to do better than other racial minority groups, whereas they become the yellow peril when they are described to outdo White Americans” (p. 115). Similarly, Hall (2013) contends that such a binary stereotype results in feelings of being “trapped [and] obliged *to shuttle endlessly between [stereotypes]*, sometimes being represented as *both of them at the same time*”; in this case, feeling the precarity of being both the ‘model minority’ and the ‘yellow peril’ depending on the context (p. 252). As Ariana previously mentioned, this cycle of blame has happened countless times throughout history, with ESEA communities often becoming targets whenever dominant society needed scapegoats.

Ultimately, the text helped participants to see a picture of how these stereotypes operated throughout history and in society today, especially when outsiders with more power write the stories that are considered authoritative and representative (Kawai, 2005; Saha, 2021). Said’s (2003) concept of ‘Orientalism’ is based on this assertion that stories can shape reality, and it

details the danger of playing into these stereotypes as an attempt to protect the community from further recrimination.

Lastly, Catelyn and Juno discussed their admiration for May choosing to stand up for what she believes in, using poetry and storytelling to create a counterstory to the ‘model minority’ myth and tell her brother’s story:

Catelyn: I admire May for her persistence to speak out despite her parents’ wishes.

Juno: Same here! I really admire May’s bravery for challenging these prejudiced ideals.

This conversation exemplified the ‘story, theory, and praxis’ tenet, as participants applauded May for refusing to be cowed into silence and marginalised by the dominant societal narrative. It also demonstrated the power of stories to galvanise a community to action, as “stories can name a type of discrimination (e.g., microaggressions, unconscious discrimination, or structural racism); once named, it can be combated” (Stefancic and Delgado, 2017, p. 51). However, Juno also admitted to some anxiety over the prospect of taking such a public stance against racism, sharing:

Juno: Speaking up against racist views is something I admittedly struggle with - would I make a meaningful change or would I just be stoking the flames?

Juno’s legitimate fear over the potential consequences of speaking up showed that she understood the entrenched nature of white supremacy in society, which leads us to the next sub-theme.

**Theme 3a: “People in power will resort to anything to keep activists silent (to make sure their narrative is the one that is heard).”**

Participants were struck by the novel’s titular depiction of the “silence that binds,” as the author demonstrated the ways that silence could be externally imposed on those who dared to speak up. Juno’s worry about standing up to racism was echoed in the novel, mostly by May’s parents, as they were concerned about how May’s activism was negatively impacting their family. As

participants discussed how Mr. McIntyre used his influence to sabotage May's mother, Paige and Juno commented:

Paige: I found it to be shocking, but realistic, that informal mechanisms like [Mr McIntyre's social capital] resulted in May's mother's career being directly impacted... Through hearing anecdotes in my community, it is a 'window' for me to understand how being older, Asian, and a woman poses significant barriers to finding a job.

Juno: Agreed - there is something so insidious about Mr McIntyre's threats; his awareness that he holds full power in the situation is revolting... Although, I think the idealist in me still can't help but side with May in speaking out, despite the palpable costs.

After reading this scene, both Paige and Juno gained an insight into the workings of systemic racism, seeing how BIPOC individuals and communities could be marginalised without any direct confrontation or violence. They witnessed how Mr. McIntyre's actions demonstrated that "white supremacy informs laws, policies, programs, and perspectives that dehumanize and exclude Asian Americans" (Iftikar and Museus, 2018, p. 940). For Paige, this specific moment was a 'window' into the experience of older ESEA women in her community, depicting an example of the daily employment barriers they face. She wrote that while she had heard stories about this from these women, the text truly brought this reality into focus.

Lana also commented on the repercussions of May's actions, writing:

Lana: Ok the racism hit hard, I particularly resonated with "our foreheads touch the ground in submission under the heels of powerful men and their lies". This section made me acutely aware of how, when it is "powerful men" who run the world, we are trapped and discouraged from fighting back. So it made me very pleased when May hit send.

Lana could identify with May's feeling of being trapped "under the heels of powerful men and their lies," viewing this scene as a 'mirror' of how the world is far more likely to trust and support the powerful (white) men in charge, even

when they espouse hate and lies. She resonated so strongly with this scene that she felt personally pleased and vindicated when May decided to fight back and tell her family's story in her own words. Even though Lana did not specifically use the word 'counterstory' to describe this moment, she essentially described how important counterstories can be for marginalised and oppressed peoples and communities (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002; Stefancic and Delgado, 2017; Iftikar and Museus, 2018).

As Lana became very aware of the consequences of the unequal power dynamic between "powerful men" and marginalised groups such as the ESEA diaspora, she wondered further about how groups could be made to feel powerless and defeated by the prospect of trying to stand up for themselves. She shared:

Lana: It was frustrating reading about how a powerful white man is able to control May's family to discourage them to speak out; it made me wonder if something similar is happening in my life on a more subtle level.

As she saw the machinations of the "powerful white [men]" attempting to control May and her family, Lana reflected on whether she herself had been a victim of similar invisible tactics. This seemed to be a moment where, like Juno, Lana found her eyes being opened to the pervasiveness of racism. Ultimately, Paige, Juno, and Lana all came to the conclusion that "people are not equal in deciding boundaries; a certain dominant group has more power to do so," resulting in the oppressive silencing forces featured in the novel (Kawai, 2005, p. 118).

Participants also observed that this oppression was not only aimed at May's family, but at her friends and allies as well. Paige shared her sympathy for May and her friends, recognising the difficult choices that the characters were asked to make:

Paige: I resonated with those who were scared to protest. I was glad to see Josh deciding to participate, but felt like his fear of going against his only family member was legitimate. Similarly, with Ava, the prospect of getting suspended is a really scary one.

Both Josh and Ava were white characters who were also grappling with the consequences of being allies, demonstrating that it was not only the BIPOC characters who faced threats for speaking up against injustice. These characters added another layer of understanding for Paige, as she could better relate to the predicament facing the protestors. She identified with May's friends who were realising that they could lose family relationships or academic standing if they chose to stand with her and protest, asking at what point does the cost of speaking up become too high?

And finally, Ariana connected the fictional situation back to reality, sharing her thoughts on this moment in the text as a 'window' into the experience of protesting:

Ariana: May is definitely more confident in her beliefs, but I wonder how that will change after the threats to her mom's job + comments about her poem. As protests and boycotts are happening now, I've heard similar stories about demonstrators losing employment and being the targets of death threats and violence → People in power will resort to anything to keep activists silent (to make sure their narrative is the one that is heard).

Ariana recognised the powerful external forces intent on silencing May and her family, including indirect threats of unemployment and the pressure of racist online comments. Like Paige, she saw this as a 'window' into the experience of protestors who dared to speak up and were punished, which she had heard about but had never witnessed firsthand. The title of the sub-theme is taken from her powerful statement, as it nicely summarised the participant discussion regarding the terrible consequences of daring to stand up to systemic racism. The participant discussion also quite clearly demonstrated the importance of reading such difficult content, as it demonstrated how "young adult literature [can provide] a context for students to become conscious of their operating world view and to examine critically alternative ways of understanding the world and social relations" (Glasgow, 2001, p. 54).

Interestingly, there was again a clear divide between the "operating world view" of Ariana and the other participants from the UK. Ariana was very bold in

asserting how the situation with May's mother was a 'mirror' for her, stating that she had already heard many similar stories; on the other hand, the UK participants expressed their shock and dismay at the situation, viewing it as more of a 'window' into a reality of which they were mostly unaware.

**Theme 3b: "Often I feel like there is the urge to stay silent and oppressed in order to stay safe."**

In addition to the conversation about external silencing forces, the participants also delved into an analysis about the *internal* mechanisms of silence, discussing how and why marginalised groups might often silence themselves "in order to stay safe." First, Paige brought up the strong desire to 'assimilate' and stay quiet rather than make a fuss, speculating that perhaps May's parents pressured her to stop her activism because they did not want to stand out as targets:

Paige: Maybelline's parents desire to keep quiet about the racism and move on seems to be respectability politics - a strategy they employ to gain social acceptance by not rocking the boat to present a more 'respectable' image. I thought that the desire to assimilate nicely tied into the theme of silence as an oppressive force.

Dazey (2021) defines respectability politics as "the process by which privileged members of marginalized groups comply with dominant social norms to advance their group's condition"; as Paige read the text, she believed that this desire for protection was at the root of May's parents' behaviour. This aligned with historian Odo's argument that Asian Americans feel an immense amount of pressure to "endure contemporary forms of racism without complaint and to provide brave and loyal service *above and beyond* that required of other Americans" (Odo, cited in Lee, 2015, p. 380, my emphasis). Thus, this belief that going "above and beyond" can be a protective measure often silences marginalised groups without the need for extreme external threats or pressures.

Paige aptly realised that the parents, unlike May, were very concerned with the consequences of damaging their "respectable image" in front of the community. Their "desire to assimilate" was stronger than their desire to defend themselves, resulting in a strong internal pressure to stay silent and reflecting the precarious



position of Asian Americans throughout history as they attempted to navigate between the tropes of ‘model minority’ and the ‘yellow peril’. As Lee (1999) writes, “The model minority has two faces. The myth presents Asian American as silent and disciplined; this is their secret to success. At the same time, this silence and discipline is used in constructing the Asian American as a new yellow peril” (p. 190). Hall (2013) echoes this argument, discussing how a binary stereotype such as ‘model minority’ v. ‘yellow peril’ results in a vicious cycle of “unconsciously confirming [the stereotype] by the very terms in which they try to oppose and resist it” (p. 252). Paige understood that in this moment, May’s parents made the decision to stay quiet to remain being seen as the ‘model minority.’ Ultimately, this demonstrated that silence could not only be externally imposed, but also self-enforced.

Juno also commented on this aspect of May’s parents’ perspective, bringing the group’s attention to this quote from the novel: “What for? What will they do? They won’t do anything. It will just bring trouble to our family. To you” (Ho, 2022, p. 341). She elaborated:

Juno: I found May’s mother’s response insightful. Her mother understandably wants to protect May and preserve the stability of their family, which I found to be a ‘mirror’ to my own parents - they tend to hide any distress that may arise from racist incidents as they’ve become desensitised to them and believe speaking up will do more harm than good.

Juno observed that this attitude stemmed from the desire to protect May and the family at all costs, even if it meant accepting the racist remarks and stereotypes thrown their way. This was a ‘mirror’ of her own parents’ attitude, as she shared that her parents also try to ignore racist remarks, staying silent and unseen to protect themselves from further racism. Paige agreed with this ‘mirror’ as well, adding:

Paige: I understand where May’s mother is coming from because it reflects the lessons my parents/community have often emphasised. Especially in immigrant communities, where safety and financial security have often been hard-won, I understand that her mother’s reluctance is tied to a broader sense of long-term sacrifice and hope for a better future.

Paige recognised that many immigrants and diasporic individuals are simply not willing to jeopardise the safety and security that they painstakingly built for themselves, recognising how easily the ‘model minority’ can turn to the ‘yellow peril’ (Kawai, 2005; Volpp, 2005; Iftikar and Museus, 2018). Consequently, as British Chinese Journalist Katy Lee observes, many ESEAs find it easier to be “just sitting back, not complaining about stuff, and getting on with making money. Being quiet is considered a *really good quality*” (Katy Lee, quoted in Kam, 2021, p. 92, my emphasis).

Juno and Paige both perfectly understood the reasoning behind May’s parents’ desire to stay quiet and let racism go unchallenged, seeing themselves and their parents in the anxieties presented in the text. They also, perhaps unknowingly, were aligning themselves and their communities with the long Asian American tradition of identity as contradiction. As Lee (2015) writes:

To be Asian American in the twenty-first century is an exercise in coming to terms with a contradiction: benefiting from new positions of power and privilege while still being victims of hate crimes and microaggressions that dismiss Asian American issues and treat Asian Americans as outsiders in their own country. (Lee, 2015, p. 391)

Lee’s statement points to how the ‘model minority’ and the ‘yellow peril’ are two sides of the same racist coin. Thus, there is no amount of good behaviour that can cause society to finally stop seeing Asian Americans and British ESEAs as “outsiders in their own country.” However, the allure of respectability politics is powerful; as the participants saw in the text and in their own parents, the desire for safety can become an extremely strong internal silencing force.

Adding to the discussion, Lana shared that she found the entire situation to be a ‘mirror’ for herself:

Lana: I also resonate with May’s parents’ argument- often I feel like there is the urge to stay silent and oppressed in order to stay safe, so it’s been interesting seeing in the book what happens when you don’t.

The title of this sub-theme is taken from Lana's comment, as it summarises the high-stakes dilemma faced by immigrants and other marginalised groups: is it better to seek justice or safety? Catelyn also found this to be a predicament, commenting:

Catelyn: May argues that she is fighting back for the dignity of her family and her identity as an Asian American; however May's parents are worried about the effects of May speaking out, on her safety, on their job security which will deeply impact the family. This feels like the dilemma of sacrificing a person/smaller group to get justice for everyone, compared to just making everyone endure being insulted.

In the end, they both seemed to realise that there were valid perspectives on both sides of the argument, empathising with May's desire for justice but also her parents' legitimate fear of retribution. Unfortunately, this has been the choice throughout history for the Asian American community, as Asian Americans have continually "found their lives conscripted into the manufacture of a certain narrative of national racial progress premised on the distinction between 'good' and 'bad' minorities" (Wu, 2014, p. 5). As the participants realised, staying silent equates to 'good' minority; speaking up equates to 'bad.'

The novel not only depicted this dilemma in the Asian American community, but also for white allies as well. Juno commented on Ava and Josh, two white characters who must decide if they will support the protest organised by BIPOC students:

Juno: I found Ava and Josh to both be written in a nuanced manner - particularly, the intersection of each of their respective circumstances with that of May's. This dissection of allyship is interesting. I respect Josh using his privilege to support the protest, while I also do feel that Ava's fear is understandable.

Juno appreciated how both Ava and Josh were not only written as prospective 'white saviours,' but that they also learned to actively use their privilege to support May's protest. Juno also connected her comments to previous participant conversations in earlier chapters, pointing out how the novel is

demonstrating how the cost of speaking up does not only affect BIPOC communities; it asks white characters to also wrestle with the consequences of supporting their friends (suspension, loss of family relationships, etc.). Ultimately, this novel was able to help all of the participants to thoughtfully consider and discuss the difficult topic of racism and the cost of staying silent or speaking up.

### **Conclusion: Narratives and forces of silence**

Reflecting on the tricky situation, Juno remarked:

Juno: May is faced with the notion that many in her community feel powerless. It's frustrating that so many victims of racial injustice feel that there is nowhere they can turn for help, and that nothing they say or do will actually make a difference, but I do feel this is a widespread belief that fuels an obligation of long-term sacrifice, especially for first-generation immigrants.

Juno was struck by the parallels between the novel and real life, realising that many people feel alone and unsupported in matters of racial injustice. As she observed, this 'powerlessness' was reflected in both the external forces of silence (threats and intimidation) as well as the internal forces (desire for safety and conformity). Additionally, it was present in the overarching theme of scapegoating marginalised groups to fit into racist narratives; participants discussed how Asian Americans and British ESEAs have long been the target of racist rhetoric and have been met with violence, threats, and pressure when they try to stand up for themselves. Ultimately, their discussion revealed that they were simultaneously grappling with feelings of outrage and shock at the depiction of explicit racism, righteous delight in May's decision to stand up for herself, fear for the possible repercussions for May's family, and empathy for those who were afraid to place themselves in the line of fire. As participants learned, there are no easy answers or right courses of action.

## **Theme 4: “Speaking out against injustice is both an act of love and a form of resistance.”**

After wrestling with the many difficult choices and questions generated by the novel, participants were very moved by May’s choice to ultimately continue speaking out for her family, regardless of the risk. Paige was the first to express her thoughts on this nuanced depiction of activism, remarking on how it drew together the various threads of the story and resolved some of the conflict between standing up for oneself while also caring about community:

Paige: It was extremely satisfying to see the protest be successful. It felt especially meaningful because it represented the culmination of all the suffering and hard work May endured leading up to that moment. It also resonated well with the core theme of the story that speaking out against injustice is both an act of love and a form of resistance.

This juxtaposition between both aspects of activism inspired Paige, as she witnessed how May, her friends, and her family were able to combine their stories to amplify their voices and take a stronger stand together. This exemplified the power of communal counterstorytelling, taking the marginalised experiences of BIPOC communities and using them as “sources of strength” and communal care; it also demonstrated how community organising and counterstorytelling could be motivated by, and result in, “act[s] of love” (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002, p. 26).

Juno loved the way that Paige summarised these themes, adding a heart emoji to her response:

Juno: ❤️ I found May’s speech very emotional - it was an elegant culmination of the novel’s exploration of grief, family and speaking out... Like Paige, I really loved that speaking out was framed as an act of love - throughout the book May sees speaking out and familial obligation as conflicting - here, they become consonant.

For Juno, the reconciliation between May’s activism and her family’s concerns was a powerful moment in the text, showing that love for one’s community can

help to combat internal and external violence and be the deciding factor between staying silent or speaking up. She also reflected on how telling their stories ultimately helped the family to strengthen their relationship and become closer to one another after the traumatic events of the novel. For both Paige and Juno, the protest was both “an act of love and a form of resistance,” reconciling May’s conflict between speaking up about racism and honouring her family. Juno especially realised that this moment was significant in May’s journey of learning that her activism and her love for her family did not have to be diametrically opposed; instead, both aspects could work together to empower May to speak up and love even more.

This intertwining of love and activism was especially present in scenes where the grand gestures of the protest helped to reconcile May and her family and taught them to stand together in their grief. First, Juno discussed the significance of the family finally coming together to grieve for Danny:

Juno: 🧡 Seeing the family unite was very cathartic as their silence was previously wielded as a selfless action to protect each other from their own pain - however, in sharing each other’s sorrow, their relationship is able to flourish.

Juno realised that the titular silence was not only a reference to the societal silencing force of racism, but also to the silence that had overwhelmed the family in the wake of Danny’s suicide. Thus, she appreciated that this aspect of the story was also resolved in the final section of the book as the family put aside their silence to finally “[share] each other’s sorrow” and learn to be a family again. For Juno, the emotional scene emphasised the power in fighting silence together, rather than quietly dealing with difficult things alone.

Ariana and Lana agreed with Juno’s post, specifically referencing a shoebox that Danny had left for May with music and an encouraging message as an important breakthrough moment for May and her parents. They wrote:

Ariana: That entire chapter was so poignant and heartbreaking. I know that they are still processing his death, but I’m glad that May and her family were finally able to find some form of closure. Opening the shoebox allowed

them to bond over his memory + resolved some of the tension that had been previously pulling them apart (chased away all of those pregnant hippos!)

Lana: Danny's box was very touching :,)

First, the "pregnant hippos" referenced by Ariana came from the very first lines of the novel, where the author described the silence between May and her mother:

My mom has her own personal arsenal of silence, and she wields it like the Force, bending me to her will. Her silence can be a flashing yellow light, warning me to proceed with caution, or a magnifying glass she uses to study me like I'm some kind of alien species. Most often, her silence is a hippo, pregnant with disappointment." (Ho, 2022, p. 1)

Ariana remembered this metaphor and fittingly used it to describe May and her family finally coming together to break through the silence that had marked their relationship. Like Lana, she liked how May finally found the courage to open Danny's shoebox and share the contents with her family, helping the family to recognise that they needed to open up to one another and share their grief in order to find closure.

Juno also connected the family's private healing process to how the family came together in the end to fight silence at the societal level, with May's parents finally supporting her activism regardless of consequences:

Juno: May speaking at the protest...resolves this conflict of public outcry prying into a private tragedy. Speaking out is not only a rebellion against racist attitudes, but it also allows the Chen family to strengthen their bond - with May's parents proudly supporting her - all the while, the family is able to reclaim the right to process their grief.

As Juno said, the culminating protest was not only a powerful anti-racist demonstration for the school and community, but also May reclaiming her brother's story and sharing it in a way that honoured him and her family. Juno

noted the importance of the protest as closure for the family's private tragedy, as well as a powerful rebuke to the racist silencing forces in society. In both cases, May and her parents learned that they were most powerful and effective when they stood together and supported one another.

Furthermore, Ariana noticed how May and her parents' relationship began to heal because of May's commitment to speak her truth, highlighting this quote from May: "Our voices are more than sword and shield. They are bridges too" (Ho, 2022, p. 409):

Ariana: I thought that this section was really powerful! After reading about everything that May has struggled and persevered through, it was - as everyone else has mentioned - very satisfying to see the demonstration succeed and bring people together.

For Ariana, the metaphor of (counter)storytelling and speaking up as a 'bridge' was a powerful image conveying the connective, empathetic power of stories. Adichie (2009) would agree, arguing that "stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize" (*The danger of a single story*, 2009). Overall, the participant discussion revealed a better understanding of this duality, as well as how love can be a driving force behind the desire to "empower" and "humanize" those who feel powerless.

Additionally, participants noted how these "acts of love" could break the power of the internal and external silencing forces analysed in the previous theme, as a form of resistance in and of itself. Juno shared her thoughts on the final scene in the epilogue where the entire family stands at Danny's grave and shares a silence that no longer divides, but connects them:

Juno: I love how silence is remoulded into something beautiful and productive instead of destructive and harmful, as it was previously depicted. Throughout the whole book, May has wrestled several dichotomies, searching futilely for a single correct decision, so it is very satisfying here to see May at peace with dichotomies that she accepts will always exist but are all intertwined with love.



Juno loved how the text showed that love could help May to live more peacefully with the irreconcilable tension between seeking justice or seeking safety.

Although Juno recognised that there was no correct solution to this dilemma, she found it very moving that May could trust in the love she had for her family *and* her community to help her find the best way forward. Similarly, Ariana wrote:

Ariana: The last scene at Danny's grave was probably one of my favorites of the entire book → I loved the last line especially: silence can bind us out of fear, but it can also help us connect and bond with the people that we love.

Like Juno, Ariana loved how the novel connected the earlier silence with love, as the entire family stood in silent solidarity together in front of Danny's grace; the peaceful silence at Danny's grave symbolised the strong bond the family had formed after enduring the traumatic events of the novel. Juno also pointed out that the double meaning of the silence symbolised May's acceptance of the fact that there is not always a right course of action to take to move forward, but decisions "intertwined with love" can be enough. Consequently, this love was shown to resolve both the larger political conflict and the intimate familial grief that underpinned the entire story.

Finally, Ariana compared May's resolve to speak out as an act of love with a quote from Grace Lee Boggs, a Chinese American activist whom she had previously researched. She wrote:

Ariana: May's quote - "but every time we speak out, it is an act of love" - reminded me of Grace Lee Boggs, a Chinese-American activist that I wrote a research paper on last year. One of her favorite quotes of mine is: "Love isn't about what we did yesterday; it's about what we do today and tomorrow and the day after."

Again, Ariana demonstrated an admirable knowledge of the history of the Asian American movement, as she was able to connect May's fictional journey to Boggs's quote about the importance of persistent love. The favourite quote she chose to share also showed that she was already somewhat familiar with the

idea of love as activism, at least in Boggs's work. Ariana picked up on the similarity between the two statements, understanding that both May and Boggs might argue that love is the strongest motivation for speaking up, no matter the cost. Moreover, love must be the motivation for *continuing* to speak up "today and tomorrow and the day after" until your voice is heard and change arrives. It is with this perseverance, fuelled by love, that we might "[combine] elements from the story and current reality [to] construct a new world richer than either alone" (Delgado, 1989, p. 2415). Ultimately, these aspects of love and perseverance capture the spirit of the final tenet of AsianCrit, which is 'Commitment to social justice.' In this tenet, Iftikar and Museus (2018) contend that the Asian American community must be "dedicated to advocating for the end of all forms of oppression and exploitation" (p. 941). And as participants discussed, this continued dedication to forging a new world should be driven by, and built on, "act[s] of love."

**Theme 4a: "I loved the constant assurance from May's friends that speaking up is the right thing to do."**

Participants further analysed the importance of community support in the long fight for justice, applauding how May's friends demonstrated their support by continually encouraging her activism and joining her on the frontlines. As Juno wrote:

Juno: 🗣️ I loved the constant assurance from May's friends that speaking up is the right thing to do - the act of speaking up defies stereotypes of submissive Asian women and also helps to free May from the suffocating silence prevalent in her familial relationships as well as wider society.

Using a megaphone emoji to express the act of speaking up, Juno loved how May's community of friends encouraged her to speak her truth and take control of the narrative. She also applauded how this theme directly challenged the "stereotypes of submissive Asian women," which are tied to the view of Asian Americans and British ESEAs as the 'model minority' who never make a fuss about injustice (Pang and Lau, 1998; Kawai, 2005; Wu, 2014; Yeh, 2014; Kam, 2021). Juno's response demonstrated her awareness of how the 'model minority' stereotype is applied somewhat differently to ESEA women compared to ESEA

men, with far more of an emphasis on silence and submission (Archer and Francis, 2005b; Lee, 2015). For example, Yeh (2014) argues that “gendered constructions of ‘Orientals’ continue to pervade contemporary popular culture - men as Triad members and kung fu masters or emasculated servants, and women as exotic whores or *submissive wives, mothers and daughters*” (p. 1199, my emphasis). Countering this gendered expectation made May’s protest all the more meaningful, especially as she drew on the strength of several other Asian American women (her mother, her friends, her community members) who enabled and encouraged her. Ultimately, the novel provided a powerful counterstory for Juno, showing how powerful the ESEA community, and ESEA women, can be.

Participants loved the moments in the novel where this strength and support was pointedly demonstrated, especially in a specific scene from the novel where the students discussed the research they found on their family and cultural histories. When the discussion began to get heated, the BIPOC students banded together and spoke out against the stereotypes and racist ‘jokes’ from the white students, forging a space where they could take back their own narratives. Paige loved this section so much that she deemed it perhaps her favourite scene thus far:

Paige: The classroom discussion scene was probably one of my favourite parts of the book - it made me feel validated. There was also a feeling of vindication, as I was glad to see the students confronting the idea that racist ‘jokes’ aren’t funny and pushing back against the defensive “we’re not all KKK members” rhetoric.

Reading this scene, Paige felt “validated” when the BIPOC students refused to let the white students take charge of the discussion and turn their histories into a joke. Paige also liked how the students refused to let the white students get away with easy denials of racism (“we’re not all KKK members”), holding them accountable for their views. Adding on to Paige’s post, Juno wrote:

Juno: I also found the class discussion on racism really validating. The viciousness in which Celeste put down Noah’s snide comments was especially satisfying. In conversations like these, it’s easy to feel helpless

and outnumbered, so I liked how all of May's friends banded together to confront their classmates' racist mindsets.

Like Paige, Juno also felt "[validated]" by this scene in the novel. Both Paige and Juno used the word "validated/validating" in their response, implying that they had heard much of this racist rhetoric before in real life and expressing their satisfaction at finally seeing May and her friends speak out against the racism. Paige even used the word "vindication" to express how happy she was to see how the novel that the novel had included a scene showing the characters pushing back against racist jokes and defensive rhetoric. The participants truly appreciated the examples of communal counterstorytelling in this scene, applauding how it highlighted the "experiential knowledge of people of color" and helped the reader understand that such knowledge is "legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination" (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002, p. 26). Ultimately, they loved that this scene demonstrated the crucial role of community in fighting systemic racism and white supremacy.

This scene also continued to demonstrate the overarching theme of resistance as "acts of love," as participants observed how May and her friends demonstrated communal care by defending one another against the casual racism from their classmates. Adding on to Paige and Juno's praise, Ariana wrote:

Ariana: "We can't let them control the narrative forever." I liked how May and her friends rallied together during the classroom discussion - Despite their different histories, they shared a solidarity, and were able to counter every point that Noah and some of their other classmates brought up.

As the novel illustrated, such solidarity was crucial when protesting because it allowed May to "[draw] on the strengths of communities of color [to] turn the margins into places of transformative resistance" (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002, p. 37). But Ariana also realised that in order to form such transformative communities, one must be open and honest with the people around you. Reflecting on May's growth from a passive observer to an organiser and instigator, Ariana wrote:

Ariana: I also liked how May began to find community by talking about the situation... I think that the final conversation she had [with her friends] really showed how much she has grown and learned → she has finally started to recognize the importance in speaking out about the issues that matter to her + the power of her words.

Like the other participants, Ariana emphasised the power of community and pointed out how May's friends helped her to realise "the power of her words" as they affirmed her decision not to stay silent. This made it possible to fight the external and internal silencing forces together as a group.

As the novel discussion came to a close, the participants, like May, were enthused to see the great potential for change in "the everyday stories we tell ourselves individually and collectively" (Brah, 1996, p. 183). This sub-theme demonstrated the power of such collective storytelling, and the participant responses of "validation" and "vindication" underscored the emancipatory power such stories can hold for marginalised groups who are tired of staying silent. As Delgado (1989) contends, "Storytelling emboldens the hearer, who may have had the same thoughts and experiences the storyteller describes, but hesitated to give them voice. Having heard another express them, he or she realizes, *I am not alone*" (p. 2437, my emphasis).

#### **Theme 4b: "It's nice to dream of a world where standing up to racism is possible."**

However, the participant discussion also betrayed a sense of pessimistic realism about the world in which they live, as participants expressed their doubts about the possibility of such a perfect, happy resolution. Lana was the most cynical, writing:

Lana: 🙌 ^ a round of applause because I thought this section was very well written. It might have felt too good to be true, but it was a very satisfying ending to all the tension and conflict from the rest of the book. It's nice to dream of a world where standing up to racism is possible.

Overall, Lana found the protest to be a rewarding conclusion that wrapped up the conflict between May and those in the community who tried to silence her.

However, Lana's statement also betrayed an incredibly cynical view of the world. She could not even imagine the possibility of a successful anti-racist movement today; this 'window' felt "too good to be true" for her. This final comment, used as the title of this sub-theme, implied that Lana did not truly believe that community and "acts of love" could be enough to really create lasting change in a world full of injustice. Juno responded to Lana, writing:

Juno: Agreed - although this depiction of activism certainly felt slightly idealised, I did also feel it was very satisfying and uplifting.

Although Juno liked the positivity depicted in the novel's conclusion, she also felt the ending was "slightly idealised," echoing Lana's feelings that it was "too good to be true." Accordingly, Juno highlighted moments in the text that demonstrated how instances of conflict and misunderstanding were still present, especially in how May had to continue working to connect with her family and continue her antiracist work.

Juno: Realism is shown as the family's issues are not fully resolved even after their emotional reconciliation. The willingness for the family to further improve their relationship is something I think isn't presented a lot in YA novels, especially those featuring Asian families - family trauma usually just concedes after an emotional climax - so I'm impressed by this inclusion.

For Juno, this was a realistic 'mirror' of how it takes time and continued effort to truly solve deep-rooted family issues; problems are not magically fixed after one emotional experience. She especially liked how this realism was different from other YA novels she had read, rebutting the 'single stories' about ESEA diasporic families that do not fully deal with the long-lasting ramifications of family trauma, or stories that gloss over struggles to get to a 'happy ending.'

This realism was further reflected in the other 'mirrors' that participants saw in the protest, as they resonated with how the adults and authority figures only saw the protest as a "riot" to be quashed. For example, Paige could relate to this quote from the text: "[The principal] is probably freaking out about a student riot or something. Why doesn't she turn around and look at all the young

people sitting peacefully in the grass? This is not a riot” (Ho, 2022, p. 397). She remarked:

Paige: Reading this immediately reminded me of the common tendency for (mostly) right-wing pundits and media outlets to fear-monger about violence in social justice protests, whilst maintaining a double standard for political violence on their own side. The example that sprang to mind was Donald Trump calling BLM protestors ‘thugs,’ whilst calling those who stormed the Capitol ‘very special.’

Paige equated the principals’ wary attitude to that of Donald Trump and other right-wing figures who always “fear-monger about violence in social justice protests,” even though the protest led by May and her friends was peaceful, non-disruptive, and focused on storytelling. She rightfully pointed out the hypocrisy and white privilege inherent in these attitudes, demonstrated by the admiration extended to the Capitol Hill insurrectionists in contrast to the condemnation heaped upon Black Lives Matters protestors. Juno responded to Paige’s thoughts, adding her perspective on the relationship between hypocrisy and performativity:

Juno: Really liked the analysis of right-wing media painting social justice protests as riots. It was even more frustrating afterwards to see the headteacher’s performativity, which I think unfortunately mirrored the approach to social justice many schools in my area take: “I think they’re taking the we’re-supporting-student-voice path while the cameras are here.”

Like Paige, Juno saw a ‘mirror’ in how the schools around her often make performative statements about being open to student protests and social justice causes, masking how they make minimal effort to hear and support student activism. Despite these pessimistic connections to reality, their discussion demonstrated how reading YA can help young people clarify their worldviews and give them the “language to describe difficult truths they already know” (Older, 2015).

Participants also pointed out how the novel itself demonstrated an awareness that it would be impossible to solve the deeply rooted injustices of the world with one school protest, applauding the realism and honesty in this approach. Commenting on a final confrontation with Mr. McIntyre at the end of the novel, Juno asserted:

Juno: I'm glad that the author followed through on the deconstruction of May being able to simply stop racism in her community. Seeing this loose end definitely made it more realistic... The fact that even after the protest, privilege had to be spelled out to Mr McIntyre's face and he still didn't understand felt very true to a lot of powerful white people in real life.

Again, Juno saw a 'mirror' of society in how powerful men like Mr. McIntyre rarely change their minds after being confronted, nor are they held accountable for their racist speech and actions. This fictional dynamic felt very reflective of power disparities in society, especially when those in charge are confronted with their privilege and they turn a blind eye. She also found it to be a 'mirror' that Mr. McIntyre still did not understand what he did wrong, even after the counterstorytelling protest that May and her friends staged in response to his racist comments.

Furthermore, Ariana found it to be a 'mirror' that often BIPOC people are asked to take on the mental work of educating white people such as Mr. McIntyre; though they might be well-intentioned in asking for guidance, they ultimately end up becoming a further burden on BIPOC people's time and resources. As Ariana summarised:

Ariana: Although learning is an important part of confronting racism, people of color shouldn't have to teach and guide white people through the entire process.

Juno and Ariana's comments indicated an understanding of the entrenched nature of the "majoritarian story [which] privileges Whites, men, the middle and/or upper class, and heterosexuals by naming these social locations as natural or normative points of reference" (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002, p. 28). For example, Juno observed that despite all the work May put in to tell her own



story and elevate the marginalised voices all around her, Mr. McIntyre's perception of his place in the majoritarian story continued to prevail. Ariana also revealed her frustration at Mr. McIntyre's inability to see beyond his own majoritarian experiences, and especially at his lack of willingness to take the initiative to educate himself about BIPOC stories and histories. As Delgado (1989) aptly put, "Those in power sleep well at night - their conduct does not seem to them like oppression" (p. 2413-2414).

Lana agreed with this perspective, writing:

Lana: Chapter 75 felt like a message to all the powerful white people out there who just need to learn to listen. I resonated with how May and her friends had to "sing, shout, draw, paint, write - literally shut off [Nathan McIntyre's] mic" and that still wasn't enough to get him to listen. Whereas for people like him, there is "a whole system of people" who do the work for them and make their voices heard.

Reading these chapters, Lana could especially relate to the extreme measures that May and her friends had to undertake so that Mr. McIntyre would listen to them. She recognised the vast disparity in power between Mr. McIntyre (representing "powerful white people") and May's grassroots community, calling out the fact that the people in power need to do incredibly little to exert influence and be heard. Like the other participants, Lana saw a 'mirror' in the difficulty of getting people in power to truly listen to the perspectives of minority groups; even though the group "literally shut off [the] mic," Mr. McIntyre still did not actually hear what they had to say.

At the end of the novel study, Lana posed the following thought to the group:

Lana: I am very curious to know how certain white people would feel, reading this book, and whether it would prompt them to change.

This question seemed to reflect Lana's awareness of the prevalence of racism and white supremacy in society, as well as her pessimistic attitude towards social change ("it's nice to dream of a world where standing up to racism is possible"). She was unsure that simply reading a book would incite any

meaningful change in an audience that was not already in agreement with the message. Despite her own misgivings, she was curious how the group would respond. Paige was the first to answer, writing:

Paige: I thought about this as well. I'm slightly sceptical about whether a lot of white people would choose to read it in the first place. My scepticism probably stems from a sense of pessimism about people's willingness to step outside their cultural or experiential comfort zones. The author's choice to include dialogue in Chinese characters without providing translations could indicate an expectation that the primary audience will have a baseline knowledge of written Chinese.

Paige brought up a valid point about white readers perhaps not being the target audience for the book, as the inclusion of Chinese characters could alienate readers who cannot fully read the text. But more importantly, Paige shared that she is generally pessimistic regarding "people's willingness to step outside their cultural or experiential comfort zones," perhaps because she had not yet seen anything to counteract this belief in the unwillingness of others to meaningfully engage. Both Lana and Paige acknowledged that the themes of the novel would likely be uncomfortable for many white readers, and Paige was doubtful that they would be able to stomach this discomfort due to their complacent state which Delgado (1989) argues is created by "comforting [majoritarian] stories" (p. 2438).

Juno agreed, expanding upon Paige's point:

Juno: I do agree with Paige's point about many white people being unlikely to even pick up this book in the first place, as it could be culturally alienating. Ultimately, I guess it comes down to a white reader's willingness to engage: while I can see the book appealing to those already with an interest in social justice; I am sceptical about its ability to bring about changes in white people with racist views. Even just seeing some of the online backlash towards *Everything Everywhere All At Once* - with some white people refusing to watch the film as it apparently 'isn't made for them', as well as complaints from some native-English speakers about the sections that were in Chinese.

Juno acknowledged that the book might be appealing to readers already interested in (or at least open to) activism but agreed with Paige's scepticism that it could definitively change racist minds. She used the example of the critically acclaimed film *Everything Everywhere All At Once* to back up this point, pointing to complaints from white audience members that despite its award-winning nature, the film was too foreign for them. Overall, Juno thought that the counterstory provided by the novel would appeal to those ready to learn more about activism. However, like the other participants, she was more cynical about whether the novel could enact lasting change in prejudiced readers.

These perspectives from Lana, Paige, and Juno reflected Delgado's (1989) assertion that "[stories] can destroy - but the destruction they produce must be voluntary, a type of willing death" (p. 2438). Like the participants, Delgado was arguing that stories and counterstories do hold immense power for change, but the listener must first be willing to let go of their majoritarian assumptions and listen with an unbiased ear. Even after reading and discussing a novel focused on the emancipatory power of counterstories, participants still could not quite bring themselves to believe that most of the "powerful white people in real life" would choose to place themselves in such a vulnerable position.

### **Conclusion: Love and cynicism**

This final theme and sub-themes demonstrated a divide in the participants' thoughts on resistance and counterstories, with different perspectives on the power of stories for the oppressed and the power of stories for the oppressor. First, the participants seemed to understand and champion the power of an oppressed group speaking up and telling stories, as they recognised that these stories could bring together a marginalised community and let individuals know they are not alone in their struggles. This was evident in the participants' enjoyment in seeing the success of the protest and the love evident in the communal care shown by May, her friends, and her family. However, they were more sceptical about the power of stories to create lasting change in a world run by people who refuse to listen or be moved; in other words, they did not quite believe that stories could move the oppressor to meaningful change. They seemed to think that it would take more than stories to dislodge the systemic nature of white supremacy.

## Conclusion

Like the novel discussion for *If You Still Recognise Me*, the discussion for *The Silence that Binds Us* began with an internal look at the difficulties of forming and expressing hybrid identities in the diaspora; however, it soon branched into a broader discussion on the creation of historical racial narratives, the impact of activism in a world intent on silencing marginalised communities and voices, and the possibility of creating a better, more equal world. Overall, the four main themes that emerged regarding intergenerational/intercultural disconnect, non-monolithic diasporas, silencing forces, and the power (and limits) of counterstorytelling revealed the vast spectrum of conversation topics engendered by the novel, as well as the differing participant perspectives within each of these themes. Unmistakably, the non-monolithic nature of the diaspora was still very much on display in their discussion. Again, despite the differences in participant views and beliefs, the book club demonstrated the ability of YA to facilitate the continued discourse of profound themes and topics of conversation, mediating several perspectives from the participants and allowing them to share and build upon one another's conversations.

## Chapter Nine: UK and US Perspectives

As detailed in Chapter 5, I intentionally structured the research project in a comparative manner, using YA novels from the UK and the US to spark discussion between UK and US participants. In taking this approach, I hoped to highlight crucial differences within the larger ESEA diaspora, which is so often stereotyped as a static, unchanging monolith. Ultimately, at the conclusion of the book club, it became clear that the comparative approach had been effective: there were indeed several significant differences demonstrated in the responses of UK and US participants, particularly in their knowledge of Asian American and British ESEA histories and their outlook on a better future for the diasporic community. In this chapter, I will analyse the responses from the UK and US participants, highlighting significant moments within their conversations and contextualising their responses within the wider societal differences between the Asian American and the British ESEA movements.

As a reminder of participant identities and nationalities, here is the table of participant information:

**Table 2. Participant information**

Pseudonym	Age	Location	Self-described ethnicity
Juliette	18	Seattle, WA, USA	Mostly Taiwanese, Filipino, Pacific Islander
Ariana	17	Danville, PA, USA	Chinese
Eva	18	Long Beach, CA, USA	Filipino, Vietnamese, Chinese
Juno	18	Glasgow, Scotland, UK	Chinese
Paige	18	London, England, UK	Mixed heritage (Chinese and white)
Lana	18	Glasgow, Scotland, UK	Chinese
Catelyn	17	Glasgow, Scotland, UK	Chinese

### *If You Still Recognise Me*

At the end of the first novel discussion, there was unfortunately only one US participant remaining - Ariana - and four UK participants - Juno, Paige, Lana, and Catelyn. Thus, it was difficult to truly ascertain whether there was a stark difference in how the UK and US participants responded to a UK-based novel, or whether there were fundamental differences regarding identity expression and

diasporic relationships. However, there were a few points of discussion regarding UK/US differences that surfaced in the novel study.

### **Stories outside of the US experience**

First, Ariana chimed in with her thoughts on the bleak ‘single story’ often found in queer ESEA narratives. While Ariana generally agreed with Juno and Lana that the novel portrayed Elsie’s story as “oversaturated with trauma/pessimism” and “never belonging and suffering,” she also appreciated that it was a uniquely British take on a queer ESEA story. She commented:

Ariana: I do agree with Juno about the need for narratives with queer joy, but it was also interesting to hear about homophobia outside of the American experience. Most of the other stories I’ve read involve members of the Asian diaspora, but are based in the US.

As an Asian American, Ariana came to a slightly different conclusion than Juno and Lana, who are both British ESEA. She acknowledged the absolute need for more positive stories about queer characters and communities, but also pointed out the current rarity of *any* stories about the British ESEA queer experience. For Ariana, who had only encountered US-centric diasporic narratives, So’s novel was a fascinating ‘window’ into queer stories from other countries. This shows the dominance of US media, as the participants’ familiarity with the negative diasporic narrative seemed to be based on the American books, films, and television that they previously mentioned in their introductory comments. This difference between the UK and US participants revealed the wide range of experiences across different diasporas, which further demonstrates the non-monolithic nature of the ESEA diaspora (Iftikar and Museus, 2018). Again, this points to the rarity of any UK ESEA stories at all, and the continued dominance of the US media machine.

### **A universal story?**

Another interesting moment happened in the final Zoom chat, where I directly asked the three UK participants - Juno, Paige, and Catelyn - whether they felt that the novel captured the unique British ESEA experience, or if it was felt rather universal. While Juno expressed that she liked the “name-dropping” of

specific UK locations, which anchored her in the text, each of the participants agreed that the story felt quite universal to them, especially in its portrayal of difficult intergenerational relationships and the day-to-day struggles of living between cultures. They perhaps came to this consensus because they felt the novel was not especially different in its themes from the various pieces of Asian American media they named in their introductory statements, and in fact Paige reacted more to markers of Chinese identity and culture rather than British, appreciating how the author was able to include these details into the story. Interestingly, this perhaps speaks to the power of diaspora representation regardless of setting and context. It also may be a commentary on the lack of a solidified sense of British Chinese or British ESEA identity, at least when compared to the much more established sense of Asian American identity. Ultimately, neither Paige nor Juno felt very much attachment specifically to the British setting. The only thing that really struck them was the mention of ‘yellow fever’ in the novel, which they had only encountered before in US media.

Of course, it would have been fascinating to get a US-centric perspective on this issue, but unfortunately Ariana did not have anything to say regarding UK and US differences. This might imply that she also found the story universal enough that she did not feel the need to comment on differences or ask about anything she did not understand. However, the genre of book - a queer romance that dealt heavily with internal questions of identity - must also be considered, as the emerging themes raised questions of ‘identity flux,’ homelessness, difficult parental relationships, and the need for more stories about the diasporic ESEA experience. In their discussions, the ‘windows’ and ‘mirrors’ identified by US and UK participants did not fall neatly along national lines; rather, the discussion revealed the very personal nature of these discussions of identity, as each participant was seeking to understand, and express, their hybridised selves in various unique ways. Thus, despite differences in history and nationality, each of the participants expressed similar crises of internal identity.

### ***The Silence that Binds Us***

In contrast, the discussion of *The Silence that Binds Us* generated several more moments where participants pointedly commented on differences between the UK and the US. When compared to *If You Still Recognise Me*, participants

noticed far more ‘windows’ in the narrative regarding differences between the UK and US experience.

### **‘Windows’ into American teenage culture and schools**

For example, the UK participants found many ‘windows’ into the life of an American teenager. Juno wrote that she “found the teenage party culture to be a ‘window,’” asking, “Anyone else have any thoughts on this?” In reply, Lana shared:

Lana: I agree that there were a lot of US vs UK ‘windows’ here: I had to look up terms like ‘blowing up’ and ‘pre calc’. Don’t know about the parties, I certainly haven’t experienced any.

Juno and Lana both commented on the party portrayed in the novel, with Juno pointing out how the party scene seemed to reflect similar parties she had seen in other US television shows. However, both Juno and Lana were unsure if this was a ‘window’ into US culture, or just into a facet of the general teenage experience that they both were unfamiliar with. These comments from Juno and Lana seemed to demonstrate that despite the dominance of US media across the world, there were still many instances of cultural disconnect remaining.

Adding to Juno and Lana’s conversation, Paige also brought up a difference in the emphasis on free speech in the US and UK:

Paige: Yes! I also thought that schools as a mechanism for parents to air their grievances towards society is something you see more commonly in the US, where there is a stronger emphasis on ‘freedom of speech.’

For Paige, the racist outburst was also a ‘window’ into the US’s attitude towards freedom of speech, which in this case created an environment where individuals felt empowered to openly share racist views. The fact that this happened at school was also eye-opening for Paige, who felt that a similar incident would not occur at a school in the UK.



## The American Dream

Paige also had strong opinions about a scene in the novel where May not only faces backlash from the white community but also from within the Chinese community when she chooses to defend her family from racist attacks. To demonstrate this point, the novel includes a ‘Letter to the Editor’ written by a man named Byron Wong who attacks May for playing the ‘race card’ and argues that Asian Americans succeed because they work hard. Paige reacted strongly to this scene, eloquently responding to several of the arguments in the letter and connecting its contents to the ESEA community in the UK. Her comment is reproduced here in full:

Paige: I found Byron Wong’s letter thought-provoking. The belief that ‘America is the land of opportunity’ is one that I know some Asian people in my community believe in, especially first-generation immigrants who left Asia to escape persecution or to find better work. The same narrative exists for the UK. Similarly, the idea that Asian people uniquely ‘know the value of studying and working hard’ is an entrenched narrative in the community, especially amongst more affluent ones, in my experience. It’s a narrative that some Asians take great pride in. However, I do not resonate with these beliefs, along with many others in the community. I think the American dream is a lie and leads to a populist nightmare, and the idea that Asian people uniquely value hard work is a ‘model minority’ stereotype that homogenises diverse experiences and creates inter-minority division. It is a ‘mirror’ of my own experience that Asian communities are divided around these narratives.

Even though the text was discussing the American Dream, Paige saw several ‘mirrors’ of the ESEA community in the UK, especially the belief that America (and the UK) is a “land of opportunity” where anyone who works hard can succeed. She also observed how her community ‘mirrored’ Byron’s belief that Asians are the hardest workers, taking pride in a narrative that, in her opinion, only reinforces the ‘model minority’ stereotype. Ultimately, Paige declared that she believes the American Dream “leads to a populist nightmare,” taking May’s side against the metaphorical Byron Wongs of the world. Despite her conviction, she was aware that this issue was sensitive for many people, acknowledging that

“Asian communities are divided around these narratives.” Paige’s analysis of Byron’s letter revealed the similarities between the US and the UK regarding ‘model minority’ stereotypes and the belief held by many immigrant communities that one need only work hard to succeed in these countries.

Ariana also commented on this moment in the text, writing:

Ariana: I could see my parents in parts of the letter that Byron wrote. They also believe that “America is the land of opportunity”, a place where, if you work hard enough, success is guaranteed. I think it’s easy to get caught up in chasing the American Dream because it’s so idealized/glamorized. However, as Paige mentioned, it’s pretty far from reality, and just ends up feeding into stereotypes that are already held against people of color (whether that be the model minority myth, or assertions that they are lazy/incompetent).

As an Asian American, Ariana was very familiar with the rhetoric of the American Dream; she wrote that Byron’s letter was a ‘mirror’ of her parents’ perspectives on “the land of opportunity.” However, she agreed with Paige that chasing the American Dream only leads to further stereotyping of BIPOC communities, again mentioning the inescapable ‘model minority’ stereotype applied to both Asian Americans and British ESEAs. Ariana also recognised the double-edged nature of the American Dream, as it blames a person’s lack of success on personal laziness and masks the role of systemic racism and biases (Archer and Francis, 2005b; Kawai, 2005; Wu, 2014; Yeh, 2014; Wong, 2015; Zhou and Lee, 2017).

In this case, the novel revealed a similarity in how diasporic communities in both the US and the UK were split on their views on the American Dream. As both Paige and Ariana discussed, although they personally disagreed with the rhetoric of the American Dream, they each knew people (including Ariana’s parents) who wholeheartedly believed that one just needs to work hard to succeed in “the land of opportunity.” From their discussion, it seemed as though perspectives on this topic were split more along generational lines rather than UK/US, as Paige and Ariana mentioned that a belief in the American Dream was more common in first-generation immigrants who immigrated specifically for the promise of a better life.

### **Asian American/British ESEA history and narratives**

Finally, the novel discussion revealed a difference in Ariana's knowledge of Asian American history and narratives versus the UK participants' lack of knowledge about similar British ESEA history. Ariana, the only US participant, often made deeper personal connections to the text and included many instances of her knowledge of Asian American experiences outside of the scope of the novel, while the UK participants mostly responded to the text as if it was all new information. For example, Ariana made this remark connecting the events of the novel to the wider arc of Asian American history:

Ariana: Mr. McIntyre's rhetoric is one that has been used for years. While I was reading his letter, it reminded me of how Asian-Americans were treated during the pandemic → throughout history, people of color have been turned into scapegoats in order to fit/support a certain narrative.

Ariana clearly had enough background knowledge to contextualise this moment from the text within the larger history of Asian America, pointing to recent events such as the pandemic and the long history of 'scapegoating' Asians and Asian Americans. She was not surprised by Mr. McIntyre's racist rhetoric or actions, as she had seen it happen before.

At another moment in the text, Ariana also connected the fictional consequences of protesting with the real-life consequences that she had heard about from others in the community:

Ariana: As protests and boycotts are happening now, I've heard similar stories about demonstrators losing employment and being the targets of death threats and violence → People in power will resort to anything to keep activists silent (to make sure their narrative is the one that is heard).

This moment in the text was a 'mirror' for Ariana, as she saw how May's fictional dilemma reflected the hard choices and threats that protesters were facing in the US. Again, Ariana understood how this story fit into the long tradition of silencing activists to "make sure [the majoritarian] narrative is the one that is heard."

In contrast, Juno and Catelyn revealed their shock at the open racism depicted in the novel, writing that they had never seen or experienced such open hostility in the UK. This response betrayed a lack of knowledge of the contentious history of ESEA communities in the UK, which include instances of anti-Chinese violence as far back as the early 1900s when 30 Chinese-run laundries were destroyed and the Aliens Restriction Act made it nearly impossible for Chinese sailors to permanently settle in the UK (*The Advertiser*, 1911; *Press*, 1911; Jones, 1979; Shang, 1984; Benton and Gomez, 2008). Participants also revealed no knowledge of the government-sponsored illegal deportations of nearly 2,000 Chinese sailors after World War II, even after they had fought for the British in the war (Hancox, 2021; Haq, 2022; Loh *et al.*, 2023). Additionally, Paige admitted to learning from the novel that diasporic communities sometimes find it necessary to lean into ‘model minority’ stereotypes as protective measures, finding it surprising that US Chinatown communities would self-impose this stereotype on their communities to make themselves less of a target. Thus, though the UK participants were able to thoughtfully contribute in many ways to the discussion, their responses revealed far less knowledge of the history and context of activism in the UK.

Furthermore, Ariana was the only participant to bring in outside knowledge in her responses, noting the similarity between May’s character and Chinese American activist Grace Lee Boggs. She wrote:

Ariana: May’s quote - ‘but every time we speak out, it is an act of love’ - reminded me of Grace Lee Boggs. One of her favorite quotes of mine is: ‘Love isn’t about what we did yesterday; it’s about what we do today and tomorrow and the day after.’

Ariana had this background knowledge because she had previously written a research paper on Boggs, presumably in a school setting. Consequently, though there is obviously still a long way to go to reach equity, this demonstrated how some Asian American figures and histories are being taught in US schools (or there is at least more freedom to research student-selected historical figures). This is in stark contrast to the UK participants, who admitted in their introductory statements to feeling isolated and alone as British ESEAs, and without access to resources about ESEA history and organisations.

Lastly, Ariana was the participant who responded most positively to the ending. While the other UK participants discussed the unreality of the ending and their cynical outlook on the potential for real change, Ariana simply wrote:

Ariana: What a beautiful, beautiful ending! I really liked how May continued to stand up to Mr. McIntyre - Although learning is an important part of confronting racism, people of color shouldn't have to teach and guide white people through the entire process.

Though she, like the other participants, obviously picked up on the threads of unresolved conflict, she still considered the ending to be “beautiful,” even with the knowledge that May’s protest did not ‘fix’ everything. While the UK participants felt more discouraged about the potential of counterstorytelling and protest to create long-lasting change, Ariana seemed to better understand that real change would always require sacrifice and long-term commitment. This was reflected in her inclusion of the quote from Boggs, which acknowledges that social change will require work “today and tomorrow and the day after”; this quote also points to Ariana’s optimistic outlook on how love can propel a sustained social movement.

Ultimately, many fruitful UK/US comparison emerged from the *The Silence That Binds Us* discussion; but again, the genre of the novel must be examined. When compared to the more light-hearted romance of *If You Still Recognise Me*, *The Silence That Binds Us* was clearly a grittier text which tackled issues like white supremacy, activism, and counterstorytelling head-on. Furthermore, these topics were deeply embedded in a US-specific context, and thus it made sense that the differences between participants were more starkly defined. However, the responses to the novel also revealed fundamental differences in the participants’ worldviews, especially regarding the optimistic (US) vs. pessimistic (UK) outlook on the possibility of creating social change.

## **Reflections on the wider Asian American and British ESEA contexts**

As described in Chapter 3, the history of the ESEA diaspora varies greatly between the US and the UK. These historical differences have led to vastly

different present-day experiences for Asian Americans and British ESEAs, as was evident from the participant responses. I will now contextualise these responses by analysing these historical divergences, drawing out some suppositions about their impacts. Indeed, these differences were already apparent from the initial participant recruitment process and the tremendous difficulties I encountered when looking for ESEA participants in the UK.

### **‘Sojourner’ mindset**

Firstly, although the earliest wave of immigrants were making their way to both the US and the UK around the mid-1800s, their attitudes concerning immigration and relocation were very different. Because of the rhetoric around America as a golden land of opportunity, most immigrants (notably Chinese and Japanese) moved to the US in the hopes of making a better life for themselves. This point of view was especially prominent in the attitudes of the Chinese who travelled to California in the hopes of striking it rich in the gold rush. Though they faced racism and hard conditions, most persevered in the hopes of realising the American Dream, believing that resolve would be rewarded with riches and wealth (Takaki, 1998). Similarly, the Japanese immigrants who settled in Hawaii made a niche for themselves in agriculture, becoming successful landowners (Iwata, 1962). Furthermore, Japanese women were already immigrating as “picture brides” by the early 1900s, joining their husbands in America and raising families in their new countries (Nagae, 2012). Chinese women were also present by the 1900s, though in smaller numbers (Lee, 2015). Crucially, this allowed for Asian immigrants to begin setting down roots and begin building early communities in the US.

In stark contrast, the first Chinese immigrants to the UK were sailors who maintained a ‘sojourner’ mindset; although they stayed for a short time in port cities like Liverpool and London, these seamen always intended on going back to China to rejoin their families (Shang, 1984). They always considered China to be their true home, and they were sailing with the intention of earning money to return to their families. Thus, even though the earliest Chinatowns were formed as early as the 1880s, its residents were primarily transient sailors. It was not until World War II that the Chinese began to consider Britain as their new home (Shang, 1984). Even more importantly, it was the arrival of wives, children, and

parents in the 1960s and 1970s that truly signalled the end of the ‘sojourner’ mindset as, with the onset of the takeaway trade, Chinese men called for their overseas families to join them in running their catering businesses in the UK (Shang, 1984; Benton and Gomez, 2008).

Consequently, when comparing the growth of early ESEA communities, it seems that there was a difference of approximately 60-70 years between the formation of intentional communities in the US and the UK. As a result, Asian American communities and hybrid identities are two to three generations further along than British ESEAs. For example, the 60s and 70s were significant for both British ESEAs and Asian Americans, but in very different ways. As mentioned earlier, this period of time was when the first considerable wave of Chinese extended families were arriving and settling in the UK; in comparison, the Asian American movement at this time was already organised and calling for representation and recognition at institutional levels.

### **Lack of a historical pan-ethnic and educational movement**

In the 1960s, the Asian American movement greatly benefitted from the wider Civil Rights Movement. While African American activists fought for the end of segregation and for equal rights, Asian Americans were also fighting for recognition and inclusion. The Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA) at Berkeley was the first to coin the term ‘Asian American,’ signifying a pan-ethnic unity that brought together different Asian ethnic groups to create stronger coalitions (Maeda, 2012). Along with the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF), these organisations fought for the inclusion of Asian American histories at the university level, calling for Ethnic Studies programs to be founded at UC Berkeley and San Francisco State College. These new departments were created in 1969, after a prolonged period of striking from the AAPA, TWLF, and university students. Since then, most Ethnic Studies departments have come to include specific courses in Asian American Studies, which the Association for Asian American Studies (AAAS) defines as “an interdisciplinary field born out of the 1960s movements for racial justice, third world liberation, and student activism” (*About AAAS*, 2023).

These successes for the Asian American community did not only impact the field of academia. Activists and political figures fought to influence popular culture and public life through legislation such as the first Asian Pacific Heritage Week, which was proposed to Congress by Representatives Frank Horton (NY) and Norman Mineta (CA), and Senators Daniel Inouye (HI) and Spark Matsunaga (HI) in 1977 (*Asian/Pacific American Heritage Month*, 2023). President Jimmy Carter signed the resolution in May of 1978, and in 1992, President George H. W. Bush extended celebrations from a week to the entire month of May. Thus, although there is certainly still a need for further efforts to make Asian American history more visible and accessible at all levels of education, it is encouraging that these issues have made visible progress throughout the past decades of American history.

In contrast, a similar movement to make British ESEA history known has only just begun within the last couple of years in the UK. The recent *Chinese and British* showcase at the British Library, which was on exhibit from November 18, 2022 through April 23, 2023, was the first of its kind, using a collection of photographs, interviews, and historical artifacts to give voice to the experiences of the British Chinese community (Loh *et al.*, 2023). It also included several first-person accounts from British Chinese individuals who recounted their experiences of growing up in the UK, weaving their stories into the larger tapestry of British history. But as ground-breaking as this exhibit was, it still only focused on one facet of the British ESEA experience: that of the Chinese community. This is indicative of the lack of recognition for any other ESEA ethnic groups besides the Chinese; on the UK census, any British Asian who does not identify as Bangladeshi, Indian, Pakistani, or Chinese must check the box for 'Asian other' (*Population of England and Wales*, 2022). This has made it difficult for pan-ethnic movements to coalesce, especially when South Asian ethnic groups have historically dominated the conversation.

In fact, there was not even a term that specifically represented British ESEAs until fairly recently. Activists have long argued that the term BAME (Black and Minority Ethnic) obscures British Asians and pits ethnic groups against one another in the fight for recognition and funding, and many community organisations have shifted to using the terms ESEA or BESEA (British East and



Southeast Asian) to better represent their chosen identities (Bao, 2021; Yeh, 2021). Yeh (2021) traces the origin of these labels to the creative and cultural industries (CCIs), and now argues that the adoption of these terms signals an important and fluid new pan-ethnic and anti-racist movement:

I have argued that “British East and Southeast Asian” mobilisation in the CCIs is significant as a new form of expanded “pan-Asian” political community, which...marks a distinct political imaginary defined by a more radical approach that contests model minority integrationist approaches, in collective efforts to effect political and social change. (Yeh, 2021, p. 67)

This new ESEA movement is still very much in its early years, but exciting parallels can already be made to the pan-ethnic Asian American movements of the 1960s and 70s.

### **Lack of ESEA organising at the primary and secondary level**

However, despite the exciting progress being made in academia and wider UK culture, there are currently still no ESEA organisations solely dedicated to reaching students at the primary and secondary level. This is particularly true of upper secondary and sixth form students, who seem to occupy a completely unreached space between the few resources tailored to the primary and early secondary classroom and the clubs and societies at the university level that cater to ESEA students. Perhaps this is because of the rigorous exams that the older students are expected to complete, or because ESEA history is not part of the UK curriculum at all. In fact, some of the Chinese teachers I contacted to inquire about participants told me that they would prefer not to have their students participate, due to the possibility of pulling their focus from their upcoming exams. Thus, it seems safe to conclude that older students are not exposed to ESEA activism and history, and they consequently are less interested in a research project like mine, which focuses on ESEA representation in young adult literature. This is a marked difference from the Asian American participants, who were all already involved in various Asian American activist groups (many of which were founded by the students themselves).

## Reflections on differences in UK vs. US participation

Ultimately, these macro historical perspectives did seem to impact the views and perspectives that emerged from participants in the book study. These micro-level differences were apparent even from the very beginning stages of the planning process, particularly in the difficulty I had in finding enough UK participants to even conduct a comparative study. However, it was fascinating to see how the UK participants became more invested than the US participants as the study progressed. Even though five US participants were quick to volunteer in the study, the number had already dropped to three by the time the study began; by the conclusion of the study, there was only one US participant remaining. In comparison, the UK participation rates trended in the exact opposite direction. Despite the tremendous initial difficulty in finding UK participants, the four UK participants ended up being far more engaged and active than the US participants. Even though one UK participant did drop off near the end of the study, the UK group was far more persistent and engaged than the US group. Though I cannot truly confirm why the US participants did not continue with the study, I have made a few inferences based on their responses and the wider historical contexts impacting their lives today.

### Differing levels of involvement in activism and community

Curiously, one of the three remaining US participants dropped out after the introductory post, and another dropped out after the first sections of chapters - only one US participant remained active for the duration of the study. I believe this may have been because the US participants, who I found through the *Dear Asian Youth* organisation, were already very involved in Asian American activism and were perhaps expecting more from the study at the outset. *Dear Asian Youth* is a youth-led organisation formed in response to the anti-Asian racism that exploded during COVID-19; it has more than 156 chapters in 14 countries and runs several projects like a newsletter, a podcast, and a book club (from which I recruited my participants). On its website, the mission statement states:

Dear Asian Youth is a youth-led, global organization that promotes intersectional activism, solidarity with other marginalized communities, and equality and

equity. Through our digital platform, grassroots organizing, and community-based advocacy, we strive to showcase diversity in the Asian community as well as accurate and holistic representation. (*Dear Asian Youth*, 2024)

This already demonstrates a difference between the US and UK participants, as there are no comparable youth-led ESEA organisations in the UK.

The introductory posts from the participants also reflected this contrast in experience and involvement. All three US participants stated that they were involved in their Asian American communities - no matter how small - in meaningful ways, while three of the four UK participants (one did not complete the introductory post) stated that they felt disconnected and distant from their ESEA communities:

**Table 3. A comparison of responses about community from US and UK participants**

US	UK
After establishing connections to the community of Asian Americans around me, I became more exposed to diverse media and outreach events.	I perhaps perceive the Scottish Asian community as something small and distant from me.
There have been some new efforts to increase/celebrate diversity - In my English classes, books by Asian writers have been added to the curriculum + one of my friends recently started a Dear Asian Youth chapter!	Recently, I've felt disconnected from the Asian community where I live: it was small in the first place, but I don't think I really appreciated how establishing strong bonds with my few Asian peers when I was younger would help me feel less isolated in our predominantly white area.
Many of my interactions within the Asian American community is through my parents and family friends, as well as an API culture and arts museum I worked at, where I truly felt my Austronesian and queer identities were represented.	I feel that my perception of the British Asian identity is quite limited, my British Asian community consists of friends at school and friends of my family.

Looking at the responses, it was evident that all the participants grew up in predominantly white areas and that family and family friends made up a majority of their Asian American or British ESEA communities. However, each US participant explained how they were able to reach out beyond their immediate vicinities to find belonging and representation in other spaces: in broader Asian

communities and outreach opportunities, in diversifying curriculums and online *Dear Asian Youth* spaces, and in a museum which celebrates Asian and Pacific Islander identities and cultures. In contrast, the UK participants described feeling isolated, distant, and disconnected from the larger ESEA community. Not only were they in predominantly white spaces, but there were no opportunities to expand their reach and connect with other British ESEAs outside of their local contexts.

Because of these differences, it can be inferred that the UK participants were much more eager to connect with other ESEA participants and to participate in an online community centred around their reading experiences. This could explain why it was initially so difficult to find enough British ESEA participants to participate in the study, but also why they all persevered until the end of the book club despite becoming extremely busy with other commitments. As one UK participant wrote at the conclusion of the study, “Verbalising my thoughts on Asian diaspora narratives has really helped me process my own sense of cultural identity, especially after making a lot more Asian friends at university.” In comparison, the US participants were already all a part of the *Dear Asian Youth* book club; perhaps they felt less of a need to persist with the study because they were already reading and discussing books that reflected their Asian American experiences.

### **Impact of book order**

The order of books may have also contributed to the drop-off in US participants. We started the book club with *If You Still Recognise Me* by Cynthia So, a British YA novel, and ended with *The Silence that Binds Us* by Joanna Ho, an American YA novel. Though both novels deal with the Asian American and British ESEA experience, So’s novel veers away from discussing difficult topics such as racism and white supremacy, sticking more to the content of a classic YA rom-com. Though there are moments where race is brought to the forefront (mostly in the context of inter-generational family dynamics and language), the novel focuses mostly on queer and LGBTQIA+ issues and is written in a light-hearted manner. As even one UK participant said in our final discussion of the novel, “I honestly wasn’t a fan of the plot line... it was more of a ‘vibes’ book, like, no plot just vibes.” This is very different from Ho’s novel, which opens with a tragic suicide

and asks the reader to reckon with the devastating silencing effects of white supremacy. Though it has a ‘happy’ ending, the content of the book is much darker and more direct than *If You Still Recognise Me*.

Reflecting on the choice to begin with *If You Still Recognise Me*, I believe it engaged the UK participants but may have alienated the US participants. For example, even though most of the UK participants did not *love* the book, it was still a story written about a British ESEA protagonist, which the UK participants admitted that they had never really encountered before. One participant also mentioned that she liked how the author “name-dropped a lot of settings in the UK,” reflecting her own lived experiences. However, for the US participants, beginning with a lighter novel may have been a disappointing first introduction to the book club. As stated previously, all the US participants were already part of the *Dear Asian Youth* book club; the past three books they read were *Salt Houses* by Hala Alyan, *Our Missing Hearts* by Celeste Ng, and *The Chosen and the Beautiful* by Nghi Vo (Dear Asian Youth Book Club, 2023). These books are all categorized as adult fiction, and they all are written in a far more serious tone than So’s novel. The US participants may have been expecting something similar from this research study and, encountering a ‘vibey’ book instead, decided that the book club was not for them after all. On top of this, the US participants were most likely not familiar with the UK context, as UK media rarely makes it way to the US.

The US participants’ responses seem to back up some of these conjectures. When asked to share examples of media that they felt represented them, one US participant said, “The book *Days of Distraction* by Alexandra Chang is a contemporary novel that I felt reflected my own feelings and identity. *The Sympathizer* is another novel that made me feel represented.” Neither of these novels are young adult fiction; they are both adult fiction novels that deal explicitly with race and societal exclusion, among other difficult topics. Another US participant, after reading the first section of *If You Still Recognise Me* wrote, “I don’t read YA books as often as I used to, so this was definitely a shift! I’ve been enjoying the story so far, but I do agree that some of the characters don’t feel like they’ve been fully developed.” Ultimately, this is not an indictment on the quality of So’s novel; rather, it is a potential commentary on what young

Asian American and British ESEA readers want to read and engage with, a topic which would be worthy of future in-depth study.

## Conclusion

To conclude, not only was the comparative framework of the study useful when considering book selection and the novel study, it also provided valuable insights into the many historical variances between Asian Americans and British ESEAs. The resulting comparative historical framework contextualised the research findings, establishing how the divergent histories of each group shaped the experiences of each community up to the present day. Additionally, these comparisons demonstrated, yet again, that there is no such thing as a monolithic Asian or ESEA identity, experience, or perspective; instead, each individual must form their own hybrid identity through a process of “complex, on-going negotiation,” balancing the competing demands of the past and present (Bhabha, 2004, p. 3).

These comparisons made visible Hall's (2021) argument that “cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation” (p. 225). This “constant transformation” was present throughout this study, starting from each community’s early history and communicated in the unique expressions of ESEA individuals and communities today. Thus, the comparative structure of the study highlighted this process of “becoming” through the rich conversations between young diasporic Asian Americans and British ESEAs who expressed their identities in different ways. When reading and reflecting on the participant responses, it was truly evident that “cultural identity...[was] a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’” (Hall, 2021b, p. 225).

## Chapter Ten: Conclusion

In the previous chapters, I analysed participant responses and conducted a ‘deep dive’ into the themes that emerged from their discussion, paying particular attention to the participants’ reflections on their identities, their perception of their families and communities, and their expectations of the society around them. Then in chapter 9, I extended the comparative framework of the study to examine differences in the UK/US participant responses, contextualising their conversations within the divergences of the Asian American and British ESEA movements. Now, in this final chapter I will return to my research questions for some final reflections on the results of this study, as well as a consideration of its limitations and potential for future research.

### Revisiting the Research Questions

#### **Question 1: How do Asian American and British ESEA young people respond to East Asian representation in a YA-focused book club?**

When considering this research question, I found that I had to begin from chapter 6 and the analysis of the introductory questions. Though these questions did not reference the specific representation present in the two YA novels used in the book club, two of the questions did ask participants to consider how they did or did not feel represented in the media around them, and their answers provided an important contextualisation.

Firstly, the participants established that all their examples of representative/unrepresentative ESEA media were US-based; not even the British participants could think of any examples of British ESEA representation. And secondly, the participants were all hyperaware of accurate v. inaccurate representations of Asian American or British ESEA identity in the media, at least according to their personal standards of representation. They were all drawn to relatively recent examples of representation, except for one participant who mentioned seeing herself in the familial relationships of *The Joy Luck Club*. This was the only moment of slight contention in this discussion, as another participant mentioned that she found *The Joy Luck Club* to be quite old-fashioned and outdated in terms of its representative power. Otherwise, the participants seemed to uniformly agree that ‘good’ representation necessitated

a consideration of intersectionality and intergenerational relationships which allowed for complicated characters and motivations. On the other hand, participants disliked media that trafficked in hackneyed tropes and stereotypes, expressing their fears that this would lead to a reinforcing of stereotypes.

When reading and discussing the two YA novels, participants retained this keen sense of accurate v. inaccurate representation, pointing out the ‘mirrors’ in the text but also flagging aspects of the story that they felt were inauthentic or unrepresentative (Bishop, 1990). For example, all the participants resonated with the different struggles with identity and family conflict in the two novels (more on this in relation to the next research question). However, they also were quick to question the emphasis on trauma in *If You Still Recognise Me* and of queer ESEA narratives in general, as well as the too-tidy resolution of *The Silence that Binds Us*, finding both to be inauthentic when compared to the complicated reality of life. They particularly focused on the harm that such ‘single stories’ could cause, conscious that there were already so few Asian American and British ESEA stories being told (*The danger of a single story*, 2009).

In the discussion of *If You Still Recognise Me*, this was expressed in theme 3 - “The story is following that same predictable pattern” - and theme 3a - “The importance of representation and role models in literature absolutely cannot be understated.” In this case, participants were especially concerned about such “predictable” storytelling patterns because the novel was a rare example of British ESEA representation, though they did recognise the unfair burden being placed upon this single text. In this sense, participants were very aware of the lack of ESEA representation and felt caught between gladness that such a novel even existed and a desire for this one story to perfectly portray the ESEA experience. Thus, most participants expressed many critiques of the story, picking apart the ‘authenticity’ of the queer storyline, their inability to relate to parts of the story, and its predictable pessimism. As Lana definitively stated, “This is not a story I see myself in, nor have I really connected with any of the characters.” Juno’s response was slightly more forgiving as she acknowledged the unfair pressure placed upon the author as a “figurehead of representation.”



Similar sentiments about the ‘single story’ were expressed in the discussion of *The Silence That Binds Us*, but with more of a focus on the very real historical harm caused by society’s undiscerning adoption of stereotypes. This could be seen in theme 3 - “Throughout history, people of color have been turned into scapegoats to fit/support a certain narrative” - and theme 3a - “People in power will resort to anything to keep activists silent (to make sure their narrative is the one that is heard.” When compared to *If You Still Recognise Me*, the discussion felt far less insular and instead participants used the novel as a jumping-off point to discuss societal metanarratives about Asian Americans, particularly how past representations had been weaponised and used against the community. Again, the participants understood and reiterated the importance of representative narratives and counterstories that could work against societal stereotypes, appreciating how the novel itself became a counterstory against stereotypes such as ‘the model minority,’ ‘yellow peril,’ and submissive Asian women. In this sense, perhaps participants felt that *The Silence That Binds Us* offered a ‘better’ representation of the nuances in the ESEA diaspora.

Ultimately, the discussion engendered by the book club led to many critiques about, as well as affirmations of, the ‘mirrors’ represented in both novels. And as the many critical comments demonstrated, participants were highly conscious of how these novels potentially reflected on them as Asian American and British ESEA young people. They recognised that these two novels could be seen as ‘windows’ into the Asian American and British ESEA experience for an ignorant society, and they very much wanted to be represented well and with care.

**Question 2: How can YA help Asian American and British ESEA young people to interrogate and understand their own identities, as well as the identities of other Asian American/British ESEA young people?**

Looking back at the analysis chapters and the themes that emerged from the novel study, it was clear that reading and discussing the two YA novels helped the participants to process many of their thoughts on their own identities, leading to several productive conversations with their peers about this subject. This was particularly true in the discussion of *If You Still Recognise Me*, which was predominantly focused on different questions of self-discovery and growth.

As analysed in Chapter 7, the three main emergent themes of discussion for *If You Still Recognise Me* all revolved around various aspects of identity. Theme 1 - “I feel like my identity is in a constant state of flux” - dealt with these issues most explicitly, poignantly capturing the participants’ nearly uniform feelings of ‘identity flux’ as they revealed to one another their feelings of being racialised differently in different contexts. This resulted in internal feelings of uncertainty and unbelonging for the participants, especially when they felt like strangers were imposing external expectations of identity on them based entirely on their outward appearances. It was fascinating to see how the participants shared similar experiences in this regard, especially in their feelings of being *too* British or American to truly connect with family in Asia but simultaneously sticking out as always being *from somewhere else* when back in the UK/US. The UK participants also shared that they sometimes experienced intense feelings of insecurity when back in the UK, as they often felt unable to discern whether they were being treated differently due to their race or if they were only imagining instances of racism directed towards them. Additionally, the participants discussed their feelings of guilt about their ‘identity flux’, as well as their struggles to maintain points of connection to their cultural heritage to feel more stable in their hybrid identities.

*If You Still Recognise Me* theme 2 - “Living under a constant glare of parental expectations makes it really hard to break out of [a] self-destructive mindset” - also dealt with these questions of identity, particularly within conservative ESEA families. In this theme, participants explored how the external pressures of conservative ESEA cultures forced their identities into specific palatable forms, comparing their own experiences to the novel’s portrayal of a character’s loss of identity due to familial pressure and strict societal norms. But on a more positive note, participants also noted and appreciated how affirmation of identity could combat this loss and shame. It was clear that the participants felt the tension inherent within this dynamic, as they both respected and understood how they were undeniably shaped by the more conservative perspectives of their families while simultaneously acknowledging that these views were stifling parts of their identities. Additionally, participants were conflicted throughout the discussion, repeatedly acknowledged the many ‘mirrors’ in the text of their own relationships with their parents while also rejecting the limited ‘windows’

provided by the text, fearing that non-ESEA readers would reduce their identities to the characters in the story when in fact there was so much of their lives that did not conform to dominant discourses.

And finally, in theme 3 - “The story is following that same predictable pattern” - participants discussed how media can play a crucial role in shaping the perception of Asian American and British ESEA identity, for better or for worse. For example, some of the participants strongly felt that the novel did not represent their personal experiences and identities as diasporic individuals, and they questioned the societal tendency to portray trauma as a central aspect of immigrant/diasporic identity. They truly felt the tension of these ‘windows’ and ‘mirrors’; on the one hand, participants repeatedly acknowledged the impossible expectations placed upon BIPOC authors to somehow capture all facets and nuances of the diasporic experience, but on the other hand, participants felt very uneasy about how the limited perspectives provided by a very small number of stories might lead to wrongful and stereotypical assumptions about them and their families. Ultimately, they expressed their desire for more stories that could better capture the non-monolithic nature of the diaspora.

Some of these sentiments were present in the discussion of *The Silence That Binds Us* as well, particularly regarding the impact of familial expectations on identity. In theme 1 - “A realistic portrayal of how...parents of East Asian descent often show their (maybe ‘tough’) love and care for you” - participants discussed their feelings of being caught in-between their parents’ cultures and US/UK culture, with their identities trapped in a liminal space. This was emphasised by the participants’ feelings of guilt over their inability to read the Chinese characters in the novel, which they felt reflected poorly on their Asian American/British ESEA identities. But on a more positive note, theme 2 - “I am glad that these views are being explored, to dismantle the notion of the Asian diaspora experience as singular or monolithic” - saw the participants discussing how much they appreciated the plethora of diasporic views portrayed in the novel, as this inclusion demonstrated that many forms of identity could be valid and affirmed; in short, there was no ‘right’ way to be Asian American or British ESEA. In contrast to *If You Still Recognise Me*, the discussion of *The Silence That*

*Binds Us* gave participants a ‘window’ into a world where identity could be more fluidly negotiated and expressed on an individual basis.

When looking at the book club as a whole, it seemed as though much of the discussion seemingly revolved around the participants’ negative and conflicted feelings about identity. However, the book club itself appeared to provide a valuable opportunity for the participants to discuss these feelings with other young people and perhaps understand that they were not alone in their uncertainty and doubt. For instance, Juno expressed this sentiment in her final reflection on the study:

Juno: Verbalising my thoughts on Asian diaspora narratives has really helped me process my own sense of cultural identity, especially after making a lot more Asian friends at university. And fangirling over amazing Asian-led films and TV shows with you definitely helped me through some rough patches over the summer. I'm really grateful to have been a part of the study and to have met you [the researcher].

Extrapolating from Juno’s comment, the power of this YA book club was not in how it definitively answered the participants’ questions about their identities (though the novels were certainly a powerful impetus to get the participants thinking and talking); rather, the power of this book club seemed to stem from how it allowed the participants to share and process their identity-related insecurities, criticisms, questions, and hopes with others in a safe, shared space. Despite the time and distance between participants, they were able to deeply engage in ‘asynchronous interthinking,’ listening and responding to one another in a process of meaning-making through reading and sharing stories. This exemplified Brah’s (1996) assertion that identity is imagined through a “the everyday stories we tell ourselves individually and collectively” - in this case, these stories would include the YA novels as well as the participants’ own stories they provided in response to the texts (p. 183).

**Question 3: How have the divergences in Asian American and British ESEA community development shaped the identities of young people in these communities?**

After analysing and comparing the responses from the UK and US participants (which can be seen in Chapter 9), it seems clear that the historical divergences of each group did indeed shape the identities of these young people in very different ways. Though they certainly shared many similar perspectives, several important differences were revealed throughout the course of the book club.

First, their perception of their own identities as hybridised Asian Americans and British ESEAs seemed to be drastically different. Chapter 6 revealed that, although all the participants felt the complex difficulty of being a part of two or more cultures simultaneously, the Asian American participants also believed that their hybrid identities should be appreciated and explored. They shared that they believed their identities gave them access to different perspectives, communities, and dimensions in their lives; in short, they possessed a cautious optimism that demonstrated their belief in the expansive possibility of identity. This optimism was also communicated in their answers about the Asian communities around them, as each US participant shared that despite growing up in predominantly white areas, they were all able to reach out beyond their physical confines to connect with larger Asian American communities and interest groups. Thus, community was a tremendous influence in helping participants to feel seen and proud of their identities. In contrast, the British ESEAs viewed their hybrid identities with far less positivity, writing that they felt isolated, alone, and stereotyped. Their mix of identities made them feel invisible and unrepresented in British society, leading them to never truly feel that they belonged anywhere. Like the US participants, community played a significant role in these feelings; however, the UK participants discussed the *lack* of representative community around them and their difficulty in finding and connecting with other British ESEAs. One participant even admitted to pushing away other British ESEAs when she was younger, something she now regretted.

As explored in Chapter 3, a comparative analysis of Asian American and British ESEA history lends important context to these contrasting responses. For example, history demonstrates that a sense of pan-ethnic Asian American identity was solidified far earlier than British ESEA identity, which is still in its

infancy as a movement. In the US, the identity label of ‘Asian American’ was created in the late 1960s as part of a movement calling for the creation of Ethnic Studies departments at several universities in California. Thus, Asian American activists have had multiple decades of experience in activist organising and community outreach, inevitably leading to a far more refined and complete sense of Asian American identity. However, the comparable term ‘British ESEA’ was only recently created in 2020 in response to the anti-Asian hate stemming from Covid-19. Prior to the creation of this term, ESEAs were virtually invisible under the umbrella labels of BAME (Black and Minority Ethnic) and ‘British Asian,’ and little to no attention was paid to their histories and identities. Even now, the ESEA label is still mostly used in academic and activist circles; it has not quite entered mainstream conversation or into primary/secondary schools. Furthermore, there is virtually no British ESEA representation in the media, which would explain the UK participants’ feelings of invisibility.

The impacts of these historical differences could be felt throughout the book club itself, especially in the discussion of *The Silence That Binds Us*. As detailed in Chapter 9, the Asian American participant demonstrated a greater depth of historical knowledge, sharing her thoughts on the historical harm caused by stereotypes and harmful narratives, making connections from the novel to the anti-Asian racism demonstrated in the pandemic, and even citing quotes from Chinese American activist Grace Lee Boggs. Nothing in the novel seemed to surprise her, especially its depiction of white supremacy and virulent anti-Asian racism. But for the British ESEA participants, much of the story functioned as ‘windows’ into an openly racist society, which revealed how little they knew of the contentious history of ESEA groups in the UK. It also indicated the continued exclusion of this history from school curriculums and broader societal consciousness.

Finally, these historical differences may have led to the difference in the participants’ perceptions of societal change. After reading and discussing *The Silence That Binds Us*, the UK participants revealed a sense of cynicism regarding the ending of the novel, which depicted the positive impact of a counterstorytelling protest at a school. In theme 4b - “It’s nice to dream of a world where standing up to racism is possible” - the British ESEAs discussed their

feelings of scepticism concerning the ending, stating that it was unrealistic to expect such change from a simple protest. One participant even asked the group for their thoughts on whether the book could change white people's minds about anti-Asian racism, betraying doubts that it would resonate outside of Asian American and British ESEA circles. The other UK participants agreed, stating that white readers probably would not even pick up the book in the first place. This pessimistic attitude may have stemmed from the participants' aforementioned lack of knowledge about past and present ESEA movements, as they were unaware of the history of ESEA activism in the UK. In comparison, the Asian American participant held a far more positive view of activism, acknowledging both the difficulty of change but also the very real power that people possess to stand up to racism and speak up for themselves and their communities. Her hopeful attitude seemed to stem from her knowledge of the power of Asian American activism, both historically and today, which was a resource that the UK participants simply did not have.

## **Key Findings and Contributions**

Looking back at the study, I have identified two key contributions to existing knowledge:

### **Contributions to British ESEA studies**

First, I believe that this study greatly expands upon the current understanding of the growing British ESEA movement, particularly in the perception and perspectives of the young people that are growing up as part of the diaspora. By working with British ESEAs aged 17-18, an underrepresented and neglected group within the current research, this study was able to gain insight into how these ESEA young people were attempting to negotiate their identities and make sense of the liminal spaces which they occupied (Bhabha, 2004; Beech, 2011). Additionally, previous research with young British ESEAs focused mainly on observations of British Chinese students and how they were perceived by their classmates and teachers (Archer and Francis, 2005a, 2005b; Mau, 2014; Francis, Archer and Mau, 2017). In contrast, this study took participants out of the structured classroom setting, shifting the focus from their identities as students and pupils and asking them to engage in a process of voluntary collective

meaning-making with other young ESEAs; very few guidelines were provided to let participants take the lead on discussion topics and what they chose to share. This study also demonstrated how young ESEAs in the UK are moving away from identifying with the ‘takeaway’ narrative that defined older generations of ESEAs, leading to new and nuanced perspectives from the participants themselves about what they identify with and value.

This study also placed British ESEA young people in conversation with Asian American young people, making space for valuable conversations that demonstrated the non-monolithic nature of the diaspora and helped the participants to verbalise their thoughts on identity in a safe space. Furthermore, the long and difficult process of recruiting British participants also underscored how this particular age group is currently not well-connected to the wider ESEA movement or community, highlighting a need for more targeted resources and visibility from the British ESEA community itself to reach these young people. Ultimately, all of these responses were contextualised within the larger ESEA histories of the UK, which this study also attempted to make more visible; the comparison of these narratives with the Asian American movement contributed valuable insights into the differences of identity formation and experiences among Asian American and British ESEA young people.

### **Using Padlet as a methodology for asynchronous meaning-making**

The second key contribution from this research study was the innovative use of Padlet as a tool for an asynchronous, online book club that spanned continents, states, and time zones. The use of Padlet in this study demonstrated that participants from across two different countries (US and UK) and multiple states could conduct meaningful and sustained conversations about topics that became quite personal at times, even when they had never met in person or even seen one another’s faces on a Zoom screen. And although three of the UK participants knew one another, two of them still commented at the end of the study that they liked having the opportunity to discuss topics such as race and racism, identity, and stereotyping that they rarely had the chance to speak about in their ‘real’ lives. This may have been because the Padlet was a closed, private space accessible only to participants (as opposed to public forums such as X, formerly known as Twitter), which focused participant attention on the



discussion at hand. Furthermore, the Padlets demonstrated that the participants were not only recording their own thoughts after reading the requisite chapters, but they were also actively reading and responding to one another's posts by using the 'comment' function and referencing one another by name in their posts. There were countless clear instances of 'asynchronous interthinking' and exploratory talk, as participants critically read, responded, and expanded upon the ideas and reflections of their peers (Mercer, 2000; Littleton and Mercer, 2013). Crucially, the study proved that Padlet could be an effective tool to facilitate these instances of 'asynchronous interthinking' and collective meaning-making, enabling a study with an international group of participants that would not have been possible otherwise.

## Limitations

Despite the important contributions of the study, there were also some limitations that must be stated, as well as unfinished threads that could become the basis of future studies into these topics.

A primary limitation of this study was the small sample size, which dwindled to just four participants - one US and three UK - by the end of the book club. While this small number of participants generated very rich and in-depth data throughout the discussions on the Padlets, it also meant that these results about identity, community, and representation cannot be widely applied to Asian American and British ESEA young people as a group. If anything, the small sample size demonstrated the opposite: while there were general similarities within the US and UK participants as a group, there were also several moments of difference and countless portrayals of unique expressions of identity that do not align with nationality. Thus, there is a great need for future studies that include more Asian Americans and British ESEAs in studies of YA and representation to see what new trends and identity formations may emerge. Ideally, these future studies should also expand upon the identities of participants to try and include ethnicities that are not primarily Chinese.

Another limitation was the lack of consistent Asian American perspectives throughout the study. After two Asian American participants dropped out rather early in the process, there was only one participant left who could 'represent'

Asian America, which was an unreasonable and preposterous expectation for this one participant. Although her responses did provide several moments of insight and comparison regarding possible differences between the US and UK participants, further studies which include more Asian American participants are necessary in order to gain a fuller understanding of the potential differences in identity formation and understandings of self. This is especially important in terms of the sheer size of the US and the number of different Asian ethnic groups present, all of whom have vastly different experiences and histories.

Additionally, even though the Padlets were an incredibly effective tool for asynchronous discussion, it would be quite interesting to see what would happen if a new study were able to be conducted synchronously, with face-to-face meetings either in person or on Zoom. Though the participants generally enjoyed the use of Padlets in this study, there were moments where they expressed the desire for more immediate modes of conversation which would allow for more spontaneity in their responses to their peers. Consequently, it would be fascinating to see how a change from asynchronous to synchronous would affect the levels of participant engagement and the data generated. Of course, such synchronous discussion might be impossible with a similar group of international participants, so future studies could also employ different asynchronous discussion tools, such as Instagram chats or Discord, to see how a change of platform might also impact the direction of discussion.

And finally, another strategy could be to incorporate several asynchronous platforms together to better mimic the feeling of a synchronous chat in addition to the 'sticky-note' function of the Padlet. For example, using Padlet in conjunction with something like Slack or Instagram Chat could provide the feeling of a 'synchronous' and informal chat between participants in addition to their longer posts. This could have provided more of a 'real-time' discussion for participants as they posted their thoughts throughout the reading sections, instead of being restricted to just a few Padlet posts per section. However, this would also only be possible if the participants were roughly reading and responding at the same pace so that a conversation could be sustained between multiple participants. This could be something for future studies to consider, if

the reading schedule could be decided upon by all participants and followed throughout the study.

## **Implications and Further Research**

Considering the findings of this study and the aforementioned limitations, I have made suggestions in the following two areas:

### **In schools**

Although this study did not take place inside a classroom or within a school setting, there are several implications for teachers and school workers regarding how they can better support young ESEA students, particularly in the UK. Firstly, it is crucial that teachers are supported in their own ongoing education regarding ESEA history, cultures, and the unique struggles faced by ESEA young people in order to go beyond a superficial approach to diversity that only focuses on “heroes, food, and festivals” (Rodríguez and Kim, 2018, p. 17). Many amazing ESEA organisations such as [besea.n](#) have recognised the lack of educational resources in this area and have created in-depth guides to help teachers educate themselves and their students about these nuanced issues; for example, they have shared resources about Lunar New Year and have created a list of age-appropriate ESEA literature for primary and secondary students ([besea.n](#), 2023). Additionally, teachers must work to overcome their own biases towards ESEA students as the ‘model minority,’ a stereotype which is especially prevalent in the classroom, by recognising and affirming the oft-complex and shifting identities of their young ESEA pupils (Archer and Francis, 2005b, 2005a; Mau, 2014; Wong, 2015; Francis, Archer and Mau, 2017).

Secondly, English teachers can use literature in their classrooms to create powerful moments of discussion for students, allowing students to experience the ‘windows,’ ‘mirrors,’ and ‘sliding glass doors’ made possible by rich and diverse stories (Bishop, 1990). Research has shown that literature can be effectively used in classrooms to introduce students to experiences outside of their comfort zones, as well as give them the language to begin talking about tricky issues such as race, politics, and social justice (Glasgow, 2001; Alsup, 2003; Hillsberg and Spak, 2006; Rycik, 2006; Wolk, 2009; Schieble, 2012; Ames,

2013; Falter and Kerkhoff, 2013). This study demonstrated how literature could create a safe space for a small number of ESEA young people to share their thoughts with one another, and teachers can take this even further by turning their classrooms into similar spaces where diverse groups of students can safely share, debate, and learn from one another, using literature as a starting point for discussion. Of course, this requires teachers to be comfortable facilitating such discussions, underscoring the importance of continued education and anti-bias work for teachers themselves.

### **In publishing**

Another recommendation falls within the realm of the publishing industry, particularly when considering the insightful comments from participants regarding their desire to see a greater variety of immigrant and diaspora stories about the ESEA community. As both the participants and published authors have repeatedly pointed out, the industry is still mainly publishing select books that portray the diasporic immigrant experience as full of trauma and hardship (Ramdarshan Bold, 2019a, 2019b). While these difficult experiences are undeniably part of growing up in the diaspora, there are countless other experiences that are overlooked in favour of creating this ‘single story.’ Additionally, this unfairly places the burden of representation on a very small number of authors, asking them to somehow capture all the nuances of an entire culture (Ramdarshan Bold, 2022). Ultimately, publishers should be more open to authors and stories that reveal new and different facets of ESEA individuals and communities, as every new story helps to create a fuller picture of the ESEA diaspora. And lastly, publishers can help grassroots ESEA organisations to create resources that are high-quality, easily accessible, and can be disseminated to schools, businesses, and organisations that would like to learn more about ESEA issues.

### **Final Thoughts**

In conclusion, this research study has generated several important insights regarding the identities of young people across the diaspora, as well as the power of YA, not only as a fictional refuge but as a generative space of connection and community. It has contributed to exciting developments in the

fields of British ESEA history and representation, particularly in its exploration of the thoughts and opinions of British ESEA young people in comparison to Asian American young people, which revealed the depth and difference inherent in diaspora identities. But beyond its contributions to academic knowledge, I believe that the power and importance of this study lay in how the participants were able to deepen their understanding of themselves and of the other young people in this study as they responded to the novels and shared pieces of their lives with one another. Such spaces of honest discussion and storytelling are crucial for young people, and the act of giving young people a space to discuss hard things can truly be transformative, especially in a world that seems increasingly divided and hostile towards those who appear to be different from the societal norm. It is in these spaces that young people can read, hear, and share stories about the bravery required to live and make a difference in such a world, as well as the collective power of raising their voices and refusing to be silenced. It is my hope that through taking part in this study, the participants were able to walk away with a renewed sense of hope and belonging despite the state of the world, seeing the possibility of a future rooted in love, community, and a sense of self built atop the histories and narratives of those that have come before.

# Appendices

## Appendix A: Participant Information Sheet



University  
of Glasgow

College of Social  
Sciences

### Participant Information Sheet

**Title of Project:** Encountering Windows and Mirrors in the Diaspora: Using Young Adult literature to explore the stories and counter-stories of East Asian young persons

**Name of Researcher:** Natalie Hsieh

#### **To whom it may concern,**

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take some time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Thank you for reading.

---

#### **What is the purpose of the study?**

We know that representation matters: two notable examples of this are the massive successes of the Hollywood films *Black Panther* and *Crazy Rich Asians*. But there is still barely any research regarding the representation and recognition of Asian young adult identities in contemporary Young Adult literature (YAL), and how Asian young adults themselves respond to these representations. This study will look specifically at Asian Americans and British Asians of East Asian descent.

The study itself will be an international, online book club comprised of East Asian students from both American and British diasporas.

#### **What are the criteria to participate?**

- You self-identify as East Asian or of East Asian descent
- You currently live in the United States or the United Kingdom
- You are between the ages of 16-18

#### **What will I be asked to do if I participate?**

Firstly, participation is entirely voluntary and will not affect your grades in any way. The study will take about 10 weeks in Summer 2023. This is mainly to give you time to read two

novels; beyond the reading time, **you ideally will not need to dedicate more than 30-45 minutes per week to this study.**

There are four main parts to the study:

1. You will **read two books** over the span of 8 weeks: *If You Still Recognise Me* by Cynthia So and *The Silence that Binds Us* by Joanna Ho.



It's the summer before university, and 18-year-old Elsie Lo is trying to figure out how to tell her best friend Ada that she has a crush on her. The problem? Ada lives in New York, across the ocean from Elsie in Oxford; they met online as active participants in the *Eden Recoiling* fandom (their favourite graphic novel series). The summer only gets more complicated as Elsie's long-lost best friend Joan shows up unannounced, and Elsie's estranged Po Po comes from Hong Kong to live with her family after eight years of no contact. As she forms new relationships and reckons with the truth about old ones, Elsie's summer shapes her in both beautiful and bittersweet ways.

Similar to: *Heartstopper*; *To All the Boys I've Loved Before*

Trigger warnings: references to homophobia and emotionally abusive relationships



17-year-old Maybelline Chen dreams of being a writer, but her mother wants her to be more like her perfect brother Danny, who just got accepted into Princeton. The family believes that smart, popular Danny has it all figured out – but when they wake up to the news that he has committed suicide, their world falls apart. Soon, members of their San Francisco community accuse May's parents of putting too much pressure on their son, and the blame for the increasing suicide rate is put on the entire Asian American community. May's parents tell her to keep quiet and let it all blow over, but she resolves to fight back. What will be the cost of standing up and speaking her truth?

Similar to: *The Hate U Give*; *Moxie*

Trigger warnings: suicide, mental health challenges, racism and racist language

2. You will post 2-3 reflections and questions on a **Padlet** after completing each week's reading. You should periodically check back on the Padlet after posting to read and comment on the posts from other participants.
3. You will be asked to participate in two synchronous **'book talks' over Zoom**, with each session lasting no more than 45 minutes. To work around the time difference, there will be separate Zoom sessions for US and UK participants.
4. You will **create a zine** (pronounced 'zeen') in the last two weeks of the study, which is essentially a little self-published magazine. Historically, zines have been used by countercultural movements and artists because they represent total creative freedom and are meant to be shared. Your zine should reflect this freedom – **the**

only requirement is that you create something that represents and reflects you in some way. This is your chance to tell your story!

### **What if I change my mind halfway through the project?**

- You can withdraw at any time without needing to provide a reason. If you want your contributed data to be removed from the study, please make this clear to the researcher within a month of the study's conclusion so the researcher can make sure to take out all related data before beginning the analysis process. It cannot be guaranteed to be removed otherwise.

### **How will my personal details be kept confidential?**

- Padlet:
  - To keep posts anonymous, you will **NOT** make an official Padlet account. Instead, you will choose a username, and you should not post any personal videos or photos.
  - The Padlet will be password-protected. All the posts will be downloaded on a weekly basis, and then the Padlet will be reset.
- Zoom:
  - You have the option to leave your camera off. You are strongly encouraged not to use your name or the names of other participants, and private messaging between participants will be turned off.
  - The Zoom sessions will be recorded, but only the researcher will access the recordings and any personal details will be retroactively redacted in the transcript.
- Zine:
  - The zines will be submitted directly to the researcher. You do not have to share your zine with other participants, but you can if you would like to (the researcher will first anonymise/redact any identifying details).
- Please note that confidentiality may not be guaranteed, due to the limited size of the participant sample. Confidentiality will be maintained as far as it is possible, unless I hear anything which makes me worried that someone might be in danger of harm. I might have to inform relevant agencies of this.

### **How will the collected data from this study be used?**

- After the study, the collected data will be pseudonymised and used primarily for the researcher's PhD dissertation.
- The research data may be made available to other researchers working in the fields of Young Adult Literature and East Asian studies, upon personal request.

### **What will happen to the data after this study is over?**

- The research data will be stored on a secure database for 10 years after the study is over. After this duration, the data will be destroyed.

This project has been considered and approved by the College Research Ethics Committee.



## Appendix B: List of resources given to participants in case of distress

### Participant Resources

#### In an emergency or crisis:

Always call 999 (UK) or 911 (US) for immediate help

#### If you feel overwhelmed:

Speak confidentially with trained crisis counsellors

- In the UK:
  - Samaritans: Call 116 123 or text SHOUT to 85258 (available 24/7)
  - YoungMind: Text YM to 85258 (available 24/7)
- In the US:
  - Youthline: Text 839863 or call 877-968-8491 (teens are available to help daily from 4-10pm PST and adults are available by phone at all other times)
  - Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741 (available 24/7)

#### Other resources in the UK:

Mental Health

- Mind - [mind.org.uk/information-support/for-children-and-young-people](http://mind.org.uk/information-support/for-children-and-young-people)
- Sane - [sane.org.uk](http://sane.org.uk)

Anti-Asian Hate

- Stop Hate UK - [stophateuk.org/](http://stophateuk.org/)
- besean (Britain's East and South East Asian Network) - [besean.co.uk](http://besean.co.uk)

LGBTQIA+

- Mind Out - [mindout.org.uk](http://mindout.org.uk)
- AKT - [akt.org.uk/get-help](http://akt.org.uk/get-help)

Suicide

- Papyrus Hope Line– Call 0800 068 4141 (9am-12am) or visit [papyrus-uk.org](http://papyrus-uk.org)
- Stay Alive - [prevent-suicide.org.uk](http://prevent-suicide.org.uk)

#### Other resources in the US:

Mental Health

- Mental Health America - [mhanational.org/finding-help](http://mhanational.org/finding-help)
- Active Minds - [www.activeminds.org](http://www.activeminds.org)

Anti-Asian Hate

- Anti-Asian Violence Resources - [anti-asianviolenceresources.carrd.co](http://anti-asianviolenceresources.carrd.co)
- Stop AAPI Hate - [stopaapihate.org](http://stopaapihate.org)

LGBTQIA+

- The Trevor Project - [thetrevorproject.org](http://thetrevorproject.org)
- PFLAG DC - Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays - [pflagdc.org](http://pflagdc.org)

Suicide

- Montgomery County Crisis Line (24/7) – Call 240-777-4000
- Suicide Prevention Lifeline – Call 988 or visit [suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://suicidepreventionlifeline.org)

## Appendix C: Ethics Approval Letter



College of Social  
Sciences

13 March 2023

Dear Natalie

### College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

**Project Title:** Encountering Windows and Mirrors in the Diaspora: Using Young Adult literature to explore the stories and counter-stories of East Asian young persons

**Application Number:** 400220149

The College Research Ethics Committee has reviewed your application and has agreed that there is no objection on ethical grounds to the proposed study. It is happy therefore to approve the project, subject to the following conditions:

- Start date of ethical approval: 06/03/2023
- Project end date: 30/09/2024
- Any outstanding permissions needed from third parties in order to recruit research participants or to access facilities or venues for research purposes must be obtained in writing and submitted to the CoSS Research Ethics Administrator before research commences: [socsci-ethics@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:socsci-ethics@glasgow.ac.uk)
- The research should be carried out only on the sites, and/or with the groups and using the methods defined in the application.
- The data should be held securely for a period of ten years after the completion of the research project, or for longer if specified by the research funder or sponsor, in accordance with the University's Code of Good Practice in Research: ([https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media\\_490311\\_en.pdf](https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_490311_en.pdf))
- Any proposed changes in the protocol should be submitted for reassessment as an amendment to the original application. The **Request for Amendments to an Approved Application** form should be used: <https://www.gla.ac.uk/colleges/socialsciences/students/ethics/forms/staffandpostgraduateresearchstudents/>

Provided on behalf of: College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee  
The University of Glasgow  
[socsci-ethics-lead@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:socsci-ethics-lead@glasgow.ac.uk)

## Appendix D: Example Padlet discussion for *The Silence that Binds Us*

### Ch. 65-70

Throughout the whole scene at the train tracks, I could feel myself tearing up. That entire chapter was so poignant and heartbreaking. I know that they are still processing his death, but I'm glad that May and her family were finally able to find some form of closure. Opening the shoebox allowed them to bond over his memory + resolved some of the tension that had been previously pulling them apart (chased away all of those pregnant hippos!)

1

### Ch. 71-74

"Our voices are more than sword and shield. They are bridges too"

I thought that this section was really powerful! After reading about everything that May has struggled and persevered through (with her family, Mr. McIntyre, classmates, etc), it was - as everyone else has mentioned - very satisfying to see the demonstration succeed and bring people together. I was also impressed by how well-thought-out and touching all of the speeches were, especially May's. Her quote - "but every time we speak out, it is an act of love" - reminded me of Grace Lee Boggs, a Chinese-American activist that I wrote a research paper on last year. One of her favorite quotes of mine is: "Love isn't about what we did yesterday; it's about what we do today and tomorrow and the day after."

1

### Ch. 75-epilogue

What a beautiful, beautiful ending! I really liked how May continued to stand up to Mr. McIntyre - Although learning is an important part of confronting racism, people of color shouldn't have to teach and guide white people through the entire process.

The last scene at Danny's grave was probably one of my favorites of the entire book -> I loved the last line especially: silence can bind us out of fear, but it can also help us connect and bond with the people that we love.

1

### Questions/misc. thoughts?

What does everyone think of this book compared to If You Still Recognise Me? I definitely found May's personal development and the family dynamic much more realistic in TSTBU. The intertwining of social issues and personal struggles felt a lot more cohesive in this novel.

1

I found Ava and Josh to both be written in a nuanced manner - particularly, the intersection of each of their respective circumstances with that of May's. This dissection of allyship is interesting. I respect Josh using his privilege to support the protest, while I also do feel that Ava's fear is understandable.

"I don't think we've ever cried together for Danny. We've each been floating alone, suffering alone. I think we've tried to be strong for each other, but maybe we would be stronger if we could be vulnerable together."

This section was filled with emotional gut punches. Aside from the heart-wrenching scene where May lets her suppressed sorrow engulf her at the tracks, this following moment of realisation with her parents was extremely moving. The tragedy of the Chen family being robbed of their opportunity to mourn in private for Danny is starkly emphasised. Seeing the family unite was very cathartic as their silence was previously wielded as a selfless action to protect each other from their own pain - however, in sharing each other's sorrow, their relationship is able to flourish.

1

"There is a silence that binds us. It ties our tongues when we need help. It muzzles our minds when we need to reach out and shackles our voices when we need to speak up."

I found May's speech very emotional - it was an elegant culmination of the novel's exploration of grief, family and speaking out. May now retrieves control over Danny and their family's narrative; it is no longer a tool used by Mr McIntyre, splayed open for public dissection. Like Eppie, I really loved that speaking out was framed as an act of love - throughout the book May sees speaking out and familial obligation as conflicting - here, they become consonant. Much of the tragedy around Danny's suicide is amplified by the inability for the Chen family to mourn privately. May speaking at the protest - while content with the fact that not speaking out is also a legitimate choice - resolves this conflict of public outcry prying into a private tragedy. Speaking out is not only a rebellion against racist attitudes, but it also allows the Chen family to strengthen their bond - with May's parents proudly supporting her - all the while, the family is able to reclaim the right to process their grief. I'm glad that throughout the sweeping gestures of the protest, the intimate struggle with grief and loss is never overshadowed.

1

"It's not just helping us work through grief, it's helping us talk so we can actually hear each other."

Realism is shown as the family's issues are not fully resolved even after their emotional reconciliation. The willingness for the family to further improve their relationship is something I think isn't presented a lot in YA novels, especially those featuring Asian families - family trauma usually just concedes after an emotional climax - so I'm impressed by this inclusion.

"In this moment, I feel close to Danny. Close to my parents. This silence we share is one that connects us. It is a bond of heartbreak and healing. Sadness and hope. Darkness and light. And most of all, love."

I love how silence is remoulded into something beautiful and productive instead of destructive and harmful, as it was previously depicted. Throughout the whole book, May has wrestled several dichotomies, searching futilely for a single correct decision, so it is very satisfying here to see May at peace with dichotomies that she accepts will always exist but are all intertwined with love.

1

I don't know what you did to get Josh to start things off, but it was a brilliant move. It made me listen."

"We didn't want him to speak. What he did wasn't part of the plan," I say, annoyed. "He did that on his own."

Mr. McIntyre's interpretation of Josh's role in the protest felt almost ironic. He perceived Josh's opening role as a personal message targeted at him, missing the broader intent of raising awareness in the community as a whole. His self-centred view seems ironic given his attempt to show understanding by visiting May's home, yet he still failed to grasp the full meaning of the protest.

I am very curious to know how certain white people would feel, reading this book, and whether it would prompt them to change.

3

**Anonymous** December 17, 2023

I thought about this as well. I'm slightly sceptical about whether a lot of white people would choose to read it in the first place. My scepticism probably stems from a sense of pessimism about people's willingness to step outside their cultural or experiential comfort zones. The author's choice to include dialogue in Chinese characters without providing translations could indicate an expectation that the primary audience will have a baseline knowledge of written Chinese. -

**Anonymous** January 6, 2024

I do agree with Eppie's point about many white people being unlikely to even pick up this book in the first place, as it could be culturally alienating. Ultimately, I guess it comes down to a white reader's willingness to engage; while I can see the book appealing to those already with an interest in social justice; I am sceptical about its ability to bring about changes in white people with racist views. Even just seeing some of the online backlash towards Everything Everywhere All At Once - with some white people refusing to watch the film as it apparently 'isn't made for them', as well as complaints from some native-English speakers about the sections that were in Chinese.

I found May's interaction with the mother and her baby at the tracks moving. In the act of helping another person, it felt like May found a sense of closure or healing after Danny's death. Her relief upon hearing the train's arrival, despite her personal grief associated with it, showed a connection with her community and a sense of care. I thought it was touching that May extended kindness to others and I was also impressed by her resilience.

"Food and warmth are life. That's why my mom is always hounding me about wearing a jacket and worrying about me catching a cold."

I think I resonated with these lines because providing food and warm clothing is probably a universal way of expressing love. I felt this moment was particularly moving

"She's probably freaking out about a student riot or something. Why doesn't she turn around and look at all the young people sitting peacefully in the grass? This is not a riot."

Reading this immediately



May in expressing love, a real time moment was particularly moving because May and her mum have a tense relationship.

I didn't like Tiya's reaction to May having doubts about taking part in the protest. I thought it was insensitive to argue that 'you have to make sacrifices' when May and her family might face serious financial consequences if May's mother were to lose her job, whereas Tiya's financial situation would most likely be unaffected. I thought Marc's advice that both choices would honour Danny was much more compassionate - he is entirely supportive of May, who is burdened with making an extremely difficult decision, whilst also respecting her autonomy.

♡ 2

🗨 1

👤 Anonymous January 6, 2024

I also enjoyed seeing this touching moment of growth for May at the tracks. She finds emotional healing through love instead of anger and resentment. This intimate showcase of love for a stranger within her community aids to strengthen May's connection towards her own mother - in a way, conciliating the conflict between May pleasing her family and fighting for a cause that is 'bigger than [her] family'. -

I particularly liked May's line in Ch.65 - "I don't need you to come in to save the day, Josh. This isn't about you". It seemed like a pushback against the 'White Saviour' and highlighted the book's theme of whose voices should be heard.

And Danny's box was very touching :)

♡ 3

🗨 0

Reading this immediately reminded me of the common tendency for (mostly) right-wing pundits and media outlets to fear-monger about violence in social justice protests, whilst maintaining a double standard for political violence on their own side. The example that sprang to mind was Donald Trump calling BLM protestors 'thugs', whilst calling those who stormed the Capitol 'very special.'

I agree that it was extremely satisfying to see the protest be successful. It felt especially meaningful because it represented the culmination of all the suffering and hard work May endured leading up to that moment. It also resonated well with the core theme of the story that speaking out against injustice is both an act of love and a form of resistance.

Despite being unplanned, I thought it was a smart move for Josh open the protest because it meant no initial resistance from the teachers and security, who likely assumed he was just entertaining the crowd whilst technical difficulties were being fixed.

♡ 2

🗨 1

👤 Anonymous January 6, 2024

Really liked the analysis of right-wing media painting social justice protests as riots. It was even more frustrating afterwards to see the headteacher's performativity, which I think unfortunately mirrored the approach to social justice many schools in my area take: "I think they're taking the we're-supporting-student-voice path while the cameras are here" -

^ a round of applause because I thought this section was very well written. It might have felt too good to be true, but it was a very satisfying ending to all the tension and conflict from the rest of the book. It's nice to dream of a world where standing up to racism is possible.

♡ 3

🗨 1

👤 Anonymous January 6, 2024

Agreed - although this depiction of activism certainly felt slightly idealised, I did also feel it was very satisfying and uplifting. -

provision.

"He puts his head in his hands and massages his temples. "I just want the best for Josh. What's wrong with that?"

Mr. McIntyre's character, especially in moments where he tries to justify his actions as being in his son's best interest, challenges common rationalisations used to defend prejudiced beliefs.

Also, by humanising Mr. McIntyre and making him more than a symbol of racism, I felt that the story engaged readers on an emotional level. It's easier for readers to dismiss characters who are entirely villainous, but when a character is shown with a mix of good intentions and flawed beliefs, it is more likely to resonate with those holding similar views.

"... but it's not the same here as I imagine it was for my mom in Taiwan, where it's a national holiday. I think traditions have a way of getting diluted when people move away from home."

This moment in the epilogue is a mirror of my own experience. Although my family celebrates Qingming Jié every year, I have missed most of them due to some academic commitment, being from the UK.

♡ 2

🗨 1

👤 Anonymous January 6, 2024

Agreed - the humanisation of Mr McIntyre was well-executed. I found it quite surprising as I think it would have been easy for the novel to simply end on the protest as a grand finale - I'm glad that the author followed through on the deconstruction of May being able to simply stop racism in her community. Seeing this loose end definitely made it more realistic. -

Chapter 75 felt like a message to all the powerful white people out there who just need to learn to listen. I resonated with how May and her friends had to "sing, shout, draw, paint, write - literally shut off [Nathan McIntyre's] mic" and that still wasn't enough to get him to listen. Whereas for people like him, there is "a whole system of people" who do the work for them and make their voices heard.

It was nice to see the resolution of May/Marc and the tribute at Danny's grave - emotional touches like these help make the story and characters more real, and their message more powerful.

♡ 3

🗨 1

👤 Anonymous January 6, 2024

Yes - the fact that even after the protest, privilege had to be spelled out to Mr McIntyre's face and he still didn't understand felt very true to a lot of powerful white people in real life. -

## Appendix E: Example of transcription and initial analyses

	Participant Response (mirror, window, surprise/disagreement, interesting)	Important points	Inductive Coding	Deductive Asian Crit C
June	<p>I resonated with Elsie's feelings of disconnect from her relatives in Hong Kong, especially how she feels the need to do something meaningful on the day of her Gung Gung's funeral. Wearing a white dress and burying her keyring her Gung Gung gave her, she notes it feels silly – I really relate to her desperation to feel close to a homeland and family that she feels so disconnected from: 'I wasn't sad, not exactly, but I was filled with a kind of longing for all the knowledge that would allow me to be sad. What would life be like for me if, like the keyring, I had been made in Hong Kong?' I video call my cousin in China every few weeks but there's still such a massive gulf in experiences and language. Does anyone else have similar experiences with relatives who live half the world away?</p> <p>I really liked the in-depth descriptions of food throughout the novel as I feel it is quite integral in ESEA culture.</p> <p>The difficulty in communication and showing affection within Elsie's family reflected my own experiences. There's an inherent sadness and lack of understanding hanging like 'second-hand smoke', and it's really depressing that Elsie feels that her duties towards her family are at the cost of her 'perfect summer'. The 'clammy fog' that descended over the dinner table when the family witnessed the gay kits on TV was very well-expressed. Her parents' and Po Po's intolerance unintentionally stifles Elsie's identity, negatively affecting her sense of self: 'my sense of who I am, neatly ordered, seems to come toppling down, falling apart into a jumbled mess of memories and feelings'. I found this loss of identity relatable; especially how it is intensified by the absence of her sole source of support, Joan.</p> <p>Elsie's feelings that her romance with Leo only felt legitimate because it wasn't 'sunshine and rainbows', all the time was also heart-wrenching: it seems Joan's radio silence leaves Elsie prone to romanticising her life. This is evident in her believing that finding Theresa is 'fate'; that was also relatable, as I too obsess over finding meaning in coincidence!</p> <p>The novel has provided a 'window' into Elsie's love of comics. I enjoyed insight into the belonging felt by Elsie as part of the Eden Recolling fandom. It's a really comforting refuge from her suffocating, depressing interactions with her family. Does anyone have any experiences with pen-pals/long distance friends? It's really wholesome to see how happy Elsie is to hear from Ada as Ada is so distant from the stress of Elsie's everyday life.</p>	<p>MIRRORS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- specifically about disconnect, separation from 'homeland', gulf in experiences and language</li> <li>- FOOD</li> <li>- conflict between self and family expectations (relatable loss of identity)</li> </ul> <p>WINDOW</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- to comics and fandom</li> </ul>	<p>Disconnect (internal)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- from 'homeland'</li> <li>- from family and expectations</li> <li>- from traditions/heritage</li> <li>- from language</li> <li>- from material signifiers of heritage</li> </ul> <p>Familiar identifiers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- food</li> </ul> <p>Assumptions from others</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- feeling like a tourist/foreigner - related to 'homeland'</li> <li>- assumptions of language proficiency</li> </ul> <p>Language</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- shame</li> <li>- burden</li> <li>- stereotype</li> <li>- inability to speak</li> </ul> <p>Liminality</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- identity in flux depending on context</li> </ul> <p>Imaginary Lives</p>	<p>emphasis on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Asianization - feeling more or less 'asian' depending on context and perceptions of others</li> <li>Transnational contexts - being 'asian' in the UK and Hong Kong</li> <li>Intersectionality - a lot of commentary on the intersection of queer and asian identities</li> <li>Story, theory, praxis - importance of representation in stories and MORE stories (against the single story)</li> </ul>
Ariana	<p>To answer your first question, I've also felt like I can't really connect my family members in China - we video chat as often as we can, but I often feel like I'm too "americanized" to really relate to their experiences</p>	<p>Mirror- also can't connect with far away family members</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- conflict between heritage and being</li> </ul> <p>*Some views change by the final Zoom*</p>		
Catelyn	<p>Honestly, as soon as I started reading this book, I felt like it was aimed for a different age range or, it is just not the writing style that I would normally gravitate towards, as I found many of the lines very cringey to read. Looking beyond that, it is interesting to look at other British Asians' experiences in daily life and reflect on my reactions of them.</p> <p>The way which Elsie describes her experiences in Hong Kong as a British Asian with her fellow friend is interesting. She says "Isn't it weird... that when we're here everyone looks like us, but I feel even more different than I do when we're in England?" feeling "like a tourist". This was quite surprising to me, as I have never felt this way before. When I go back to China, I feel a sense of relief to be among so many people just like me. Furthermore, one time when I came back to the UK, I remember feeling a bit of culture shock? I vividly remember walking down a busy street surrounded by white people and feeling a bit strange and maybe even a bit uncomfortable, but that wore off very quickly. Would love to hear about anyone else's thoughts about this.</p> <p>Another interesting line follows as Joan says at least there are no racist remarks at them in Hong Kong. Again, this is something I do not really think about. It feels as though Joan is suggesting that this is the only redeeming factor of being in Hong Kong?</p> <p>How Elsie responds to another tourist suddenly speaking Mandarin to her, is intriguing. She describes herself as feeling "self-conscious", that it feels like a "splinter, painful and irritating", that "something is wrong with [her]". As someone who does speak Mandarin, I find it strange when something like this happens to me. However, I would have never thought that a non-speaker would find it self-conscious and look for faults within themselves? I am very surprised by Elsie's self-blaming response, as the one who is speaking Mandarin to her is judging someone by their appearance and making unfounded assumptions about what language they speak. I question why Elsie responds in this way.</p> <p>Replying to Islaud's comment about feeling disconnected with relatives, I completely understand. Almost all of my family live in China, yet when I go back, I often feel as though I have no real connections to people in this part of the family. Especially with my cousins, I feel like the 'foreigner', someone</p>	<p>Does not agree or relate with main character(s)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 'cringey'</li> <li>- has never felt like a tourist in China before - feels RELIEVED because everyone looks like her</li> <li>- culture shock returning to UK</li> <li>- never thinks about getting racist remarks</li> </ul> <p>MIRROR - identifies with feeling strange when strangers try to speak mandarin to her (an assumption of language)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- questions why it would be off-putting/self-blaming</li> <li>- disconnect from relatives, feel like a 'FOREIGNER' (is this at odds with her previous comment about never feeling like a tourist?)</li> <li>- China as another home but with no family/friend connection</li> </ul>		

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