Introduction

I have trouble understanding why someone so smart would drop out of school and run away from home at 14 and end up as a junkie-whore. Yes, it's hard to be the dutiful daughter of immigrant parents from China and Hong Kong, the kind who consider friends a frivolity and an 89 per cent exam mark a failure . . . But I'm a parent now. Millions of Canadians have overcome such traumas, if that is the word, without self-indulgent melt-downs.

Canadian journalist Jan Wong, in interview of Evelyn Lau, The Globe and Mail

Too often, . . . narratives of gender and sexual awakening are accused of undermining the "serious" work that Asian American texts are expected to perform: to expose anti-Asian sentiment in the United States, to limn the trauma inflicted upon Asians by Western imperialism, to envision better worlds where Asians and Asian Americans will not be construed as foreigners in their own homes, to create a common cultural ground for pan-Asian unity, and (more recently) to apprehend Asian Americans' larger global-economic agendas and cross-border alliances. Each of these social agendas comprises a supportable priority. However, it would be a mistake to interpret the pursuit of these goals as anomalous or more important than the exposure of tyrannies within the household.

Rachel Lee, The Americas of Asian American Literature

This is a book about the Asian immigrant family and intergenerational conflict—conflict that we think we know; after all, the story has been often enough told. But in order to dislodge us from our tired circuits around the immigrant family romance, this analysis deliberately brackets the (inter)personal. So Ingratitude will not be particularly interested in the
mothers in our bones. Instead, it will conduct a reading of the immigrant nuclear family as a special form of capitalist enterprise: one invested, Gayatri Spivak might say, in obtaining “justice under capitalism.” To the extent that migrating to positions of global advantage is about the hope for upward mobility, it is about the hope of profiting in the Western capitalist economy. And I do mean profit, because this project considers the Asian immigrant family a production unit—a sort of cottage industry, for a particular brand of good, capitalist subject: Get your filial child, your doctor/lawyer, your model minority here. The book also takes up the systems of that production: What is it to leverage guilt or fear, to manufacture in a subject these very useful mechanisms of ingratitude or inadequacy?

The upcoming readings of narratives such as *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (Jade Snow Wong, 1945), *The Woman Warrior* (Maxine Hong Kingston, 1976), *Oriental Girls Desire Romance* (Catherine Liu, 1997), and *Runaway: Diary of a Street Kid* (Evelyn Lau, 1995) reconstruct the processes by which diligent, docile, immigrants’ daughters are produced. We attend to the means, and then the psychic costs, of this subject formation: even when it succeeds, but especially when it misses its mark. When she ran away from her parents at age 14, Evelyn Lau spent two years on and off the streets of Canada—scrambling for food and shelter in foster homes or strangers’ homes, selling sex for drugs and basic necessities, risking attack and being attacked—enduring, in short, the harshest physical conditions it was in her power to choose. All this, rather than go back to being the dutiful daughter of her immigrant parents: earning straight As, cleaning the house, one day to become a doctor. What was it about that existence she found so very dreadful? Even years later, she does not know; she cannot say. Something, she thinks, about being trapped inside that house.

Such is the core conundrum of this book: how is it that young women like Evelyn may come to madness or suicide without being able to point to any legitimating personal histories of abuse or trauma in the home? Jade Snow enumerates the minutiae of her grievances against her parents, and these youthful sorrows of curfews and playmates do demonstrate a certain unfairness or disproportion in their child-rearing practices. Yet no strand of these minor episodes, however finely strung, could approximate the intensity of the “stubborn, unhappy struggle . . . between [Jade Snow] and her family” (JS Wong, 90). She is punished unreasonably, but not beyond the bounds of Chinese cultural strictures or of American senses of propriety; in response, she takes a position in a white household at the age of 16 in order to move out of her own family’s home, the beginning of a course to which she later refers as a
“break with her parents” (136). The “enraged struggle” (Kim, AAL, 66) implied by such a severing resonates with that of daughter figures in a litany of other childhoods, comparably vexed and equally mundane. Thus, despite the wealth of literary accounts we know to be generated by filial distress, there has been precious little language even in these stories to explain exactly what drives these young women to the desperate things they do. It is that peculiar disjunction which drives this book to look for the circuits of power and subjectification running beneath the narratives, the structural rather than inflictive violences that prove such a challenge to articulate in literary form.

_critical precedents: going home again_

At either end of the 50 years between the publications of *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and *Runaway*, second-generation narratives of the immigrant family are joined by structural and thematic consistencies all the more uncanny for the changing conditions that Asian America has undergone. This is a period that straddles Japanese American internment, the Korean and Vietnam wars, sweeping transformations and proliferations of the ethnic and class composition of the racial demographic, the dramatic globalization of capital and of ethnicity, and midway through that span, the birth of Asian America into political sentience as a radically minded coalition. Yet the intergenerational conflict—its forms of power, its discourses of subject formation—replicates with compelling faithfulness across an era of seemingly imposing historical changes. At every interval and increasingly, this period has produced narratives by young women railing against their up bringings—to the point where such stories have become recognizable commodities, their extraordinary correspondences droning into ordinary clichés of a literary convention. Consequently, in the very motion that recognizes these narratives as forming a prominent genre of Asian American literature, scholarship has come simultaneously to dismiss them as texts partaking in a politically devalued and, thus, foreclosed project: Filial angst is cast as willing maidservant to a racial project to downgrade conflict from the political and historical to the cultural and interpersonal. It is deplored that the ethnic community “is described in terms of social death, Asian parents are depicted as unfeelingly oppressive and laughably ineffectual, and Asian American youngsters are celebrated for escaping the prison of ethnicity” (Li, 129). Such accounts of parental pressures and communal expectations are said to lend undue credibility to the model minority myth, and to disable critiques of institutional racism, political disenfranchisement, and economic exploitation, by diverting blame for
the iniquities produced by those social forces onto the ethnic subjects themselves, their families, or their communities (Kim, AAL, 60). The field has thus tended to conflate unfavorable representations of the ethnic family with model minority narratives, and forcefully to dissociate itself from both.

In posing its critique of the generational narrative, Lisa Lowe’s “Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity” begins by recognizing that the texts of Asian American literature will often frame themselves as stories centrally about the dynamics of generational and cultural divide. The essay then proceeds to caution against “interpreting Asian American culture exclusively in terms of the[se] master narratives,” because doing so will yield an essentializing and reductive reading of Asian American culture: that of the timeless, personal, and familial struggle of assimilation (Lowe, 62–63; emphasis added). Granting the political pitfalls of a purely privatizing or internalizing narrative of oppression, however, it is no less problematic to deal in exclusively externalizing explanations, which project the locus of power (and oppression) outward—and leave ethnic communities’ social institutions looking impossibly innocent of accountability.

This has been the wont of progressive scholarship, to finger the white establishment whenever the wages of intergenerational conflict have come calling. Wendy Motooka has reproached “the Asian American critical enterprise” for just such critical deflection: “We tend to think of ourselves as outside the field of power, or at least we write about ‘it’ as if it were ‘out there,’ rather than considering ‘it’ as us” (Motooka, 208). Thus, even when prompted by the makings of a crisis in Asian American mental health, our scholarship has more often than not been circumscribed by the strict blinders on our politics. In “A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia,” David Eng and Shinhee Han respond to what they describe as “disturbing patterns of depression that [they] have been witnessing in a significant and growing number of Asian American [college] students,” who seem from the examples they provide to be specifically the children of immigrants (Eng and Han, 344). Yet as a “critical response,” the essay is guilty of a harmful hermeneutical bias. Despite its earnest intent to fathom the psychological distress of their students, the essay immediately—and ultimately exclusively—attributes this distress to the psychic tolls of externally imposed racialization and stereotype: media productions of Asianness and other systemic forms of racism. That bias governs the argument, with the exception of a brief space in which the authors respond directly to the following explanation from one of their distressed subjects: “My parents sacrificed everything to raise me here . . . and now it’s up to me to please them and to do well in school” (353). The student’s reference to her parents in causal terms is neither subtle nor obscure; for the length of
three paragraphs, the authors are held by her frank citing of parental martyr rhetoric and expectations, to consider that familial pressures may be a factor in her crisis. And yet, even as this hermeneutic possibility is posed, it is foreclosed by the authors’ own curious phrasing: “are Asian American parents as completely selfless as the theme of sacrifice suggests, or is this theme a compensatory gesture that attaches itself to the parents’ losses and failures?” (354; emphasis added). Rather than suggest that it is the parents who nurse their losses with themes of sacrifice, the argument contorts to bar its parental subjects from occupying the syntactical subject position, in order to avoid indicting them with agency: “The loss experienced by the parents’ failure to achieve the American Dream . . . is a loss transferred onto and incorporated by Elaine for her to ‘work out’ and to repair” (353; emphasis added). In this scrupulously passive language is an exemplary, and implausible, piece of misdirection. While there is no question that the losses of immigration matter, that institutional racism and media representation figure into the second-generation experience, so too does power in the most intimate, vulnerable, and formative of social contexts—one which may demand that the subject compensate for familial losses by successfully navigating hostile social and political waters, and which may very well redouble the stakes of “racial” failure: “Those Asian Americans who do not fit into the model minority stereotype . . . are altogether erased from—not seen in—mainstream society,” Eng and Han lament, then tack on, “they are often rejected by their own families as well” (351). Whereas the injury of stereotype takes the brunt of their analysis, the familial warrants from the article only that reluctant aside, as if, compared to lack of prime-time TV diversity, erasure from the family is the less devastating rejection. In its flight from the inescapable yet inadmissible implications of familial power, Eng and Han’s article manifests the scholarly stance which discourages even the elaboration on intergenerational conflict, so thoroughly has it been deemed a specious and perfidious trope. In the face of real distress, this is a dangerous reticence. Disabling in advance those inquiries that discomfit “our” political collective, how will we craft but the most painfully evasive critical responses? The built-in urgencies of the situation demand much more of us—but for starters, they require a more textually and materially accountable reading, as part of owning our accountability.

Given the sophistication of reading practices at the disposal of cultural scholarship, a theoretical reappraisal of generation and family need not be guilty of ahistoricizing, dematerializing, aestheticizing, or commodifying Asian American culture; it need not accept, in other words, that the familial space is

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exclusively “private.” Thus, *Ingratitude* articulates familial dynamics through precisely the kind of cultural materialism to which that theme has long been considered antithetical, and indeed through a baldly monetary lexicon that resonates with that of other recent scholarship. With the emergence of such work as Lisa Park’s *Consuming Citizenship* and Christine So’s *Economic Citizens*, economic participation increasingly surfaces as a dominant and defining trope of Asian racialization. Their work makes plain that—whether intent upon entering circuits of social exchange metonymically with money (So), or with the signifying powers of conspicuous consumption (Park)—it is through economic registers that the Asian American subject finds expression in language and the Western nation-state. Where Park and So may consider the microeconomics of the family in relation to the greater labor and commodities markets, however, this project attends to the financial and operational management that goes on inside the institution itself—behind the household doors at which economic dictates do not stop. I offer an analysis of the political-economic structures of power obtaining between parents and daughters in the immigrant family. What we call intergenerational conflict is at bottom a conflict of interests, and as such, symptomatic of a social and economic unit whose agents are differentially vested in power. Such conflict appears apolitical only when its language of filiality and affect—suffering and guilt, devotion and anger, trauma and disownment—is allowed to be spoken in isolation from the politics of the family. An understanding of generational dynamics as implicated by and participating in a racializing, gendered, and material history is by no means reductive of cultural politics, but even more fully accountable to them. For even by Lowe’s terms of “multiplicity,” if indeed Asian Americans are subjects marked by differences (of class, gender, sexuality, etc.), then we are also marked by generation; and if we as subjects are overdetermined by multiple axes of power, then the parent-child axis must be one. We are better served by a view to the relationality of these axes and explanatory narratives, than by the stance that one set of accounts must supplant the other as obsolete. Read through the family’s economic aspirations, or a parent’s class and national investments, Asian American intimate relations reveal themselves to be profoundly ordered by a capitalist logic and ethos, their violence arranged around the production of the disciplined and profitable docile body.

Certainly it is true that, in the tradition of Jade Snow Wong, the trope of intergenerational conflict has often been applied to conservative political ends: reconciling subjects with power. This apparent correlation prompts David Palumbo-Liu to draw a political distinction between what he consid-
ers more historically materialist literary accounts of Asian American family dynamics (such as Milton Murayama's *All I asking for is my body*), and more “popular” (hegemony-friendly) texts such as *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and *The Woman Warrior*, which he believes to “lend themselves to [model minority] readings” (Palumbo-Liu, 413), by virtue of their inattention to the American sociopolitical context. However, as I hope to demonstrate presently, these latter texts may “lend themselves” equally well to a historical materialist reading of the economic, social, and political inherent to them. As both Lau and Liu’s work illustrate, a narrative of intergenerational conflict need not be explicitly historical-materialist in order to “problematize” the “thematics of individual transcendence” (408) characteristic of model minority discourse. Moreover, because the critic’s reading practices are not identical to the narrative she reads, even a text that may be said, by design or in effect, to “privatiz[e] social conflicts and contradictions” by “confining them to the . . . domestic sphere of family relations” (Lowe, 78) can prove to be analytically productive as a symptomatic reflection of that which it submerges.4

An easy target of scholarship and a case in point, Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* assimilates its characters to an America whose systemic racial and economic discrimination it cleanly ignores. The book’s manipulation of intergenerational conflict—a “recuperative project that replaces an overly critical, authoritative parental voice with that of an oppressed woman” (Bow, *Betrayal*, 94)—must be understood not as distinct from or in contrast to, but as part and parcel of such assimilationist obfuscation of power. Yet while the former recuperative move (redeeming social conflict) has met with collective censure, the latter recuperative move (redeeming familial conflict) has received considerable critical support. Regarding the latter, Patricia Chu remarks approvingly that

The novel [*The Joy Luck Club*] is winning and persuasive when it suggests that images of the mothers as superhuman others are largely projections of the daughters’ own fears and fantasies, as in the story where Waverly Jong learns to see her mother, not as a malignant adversary . . . but simply as an old woman waiting for her daughter’s acceptance. (Chu, 149)

This quote refers to a moment in which an adult Waverly describes herself as “a scared child,” hiding from her mother “behind my invisible barriers” and imagining “what lay on the other side: Her side attacks. Her secret weapons. Her uncanny ability to find my weakest spots”; but in her epiphany Waverly decides “I could finally see what was really there: an old woman, a wok for
her armor, a knitting needle for her sword, getting a little crabby as she waited patiently for her daughter to invite her in” (Tan, 183; emphasis added). The passage sets up, and Chu’s commentary perpetuates, a false binary: as if authority that is not malicious in intent must then be inert, indifferent to power and incapable of harm. Rather than allow that authority may be caring and yet harmful, that it may mean well and be deeply invested in power, Tan and her critic both suggest that authority is either malignant or not authority at all, “just” or “simply” an old woman: passive and helpless to the will of another, and tragically misconstrued. Scholars recognize that Tan’s “mother-daughter discord eventually evaporates without a trace of historical justification” (Li, 116), because “the conflict” between them is revealed “to have been not so much related to class tension and the daughter’s increasing cultural enfranchisement and mobility, but simply to childish growing pains surrounding individuation that necessitate the adult’s attempt to regain self-esteem” (Bow, Betrayal, 109). However, “childish growing pains” is not merely an alternate explanation for conflict, unrelated to and supplanting social and cultural accounts; rather, to characterize conflict as “childish” negates it as genuine conflict at all. There is, Tan claims, no problem here. And the analysis of power is irrelevant in a universe that disavows conflict itself. Thus, a refusal to interrogate power in the familial context can also disable social critique: conflict that does not exist renders any accounts of class tension or cultural disenfranchisement moot. But alternatively, criticism that takes to task subjection within the family is well-situated to appraise its intersectionality with other apparatuses of power. For if the narrative that evacuates intergenerational conflict urges us to reconcile ourselves with a universe in which there is no authority but what we mistakenly imagine, one which acknowledges vested power within the family may be part and parcel of, even necessary to, a study of those powers within which the family exists.

Because the Asian immigrant family has by definition entered the province of Asian American national subject, the reappraisal of one means a necessary reckoning with the other. Thus I join a recent slate of scholars in proposing that, given the ascendancy of model minority discourse in contemporary political culture, it is imperative to reassess both the discourse itself and scholarship’s stance upon it. Dismissing the model minority identity as a discursive instrument, used by whiteness to discipline other non-white communities, has long represented the ideological consensus among Asian
American intellectuals and activists; this is what Viet Nguyen has termed the field’s “model minority thesis,” in response and rebuttal to the mainstream’s “model minority paradigm.” Per his synopsis of that paradigm, Asian Americans are identified with “a system of social values that prioritizes family, education, and sacrifice” and “prioritizes obedience and hierarchy”; these values incline the group to be “reluctant to blame others for any lack in their social position,” “willing to accept their social position with gratitude,” and guided by “self-sacrifice rather than self-interest, . . . quiet restraint rather than vocal complaint in the face of perceived or actual injustice” (Nguyen, 146). The paradigm deems that, thanks to these accommodationist virtues, Asian Americans are able to raise themselves out of poverty without public assistance or special consideration, serving thus as a silent but willing rebuke against those who would demand changes from the system rather than strive to succeed by its rules.

It is a central tenet of the model minority thesis that the model minority identity is a myth: an invention of dominant culture that bears little relation to reality. Thus, the rebuttal relies heavily on indicators of Asian American failure or deviance, statistics of poverty or criminality that attempt to demonstrate the fabricated nature of this discourse of achievement. That may be a disingenuous case to make, however, or one that partly misses the point. The heart of the issue is not whether an Asian immigrant family currently meets the socioeconomic or professional measures of the model minority. Rather, the issue is whether it aspires to do so, whether it applies those metrics: not resentful of the racializing discourse of Asian success as a violence imposed from without, but implementing that discourse, with ingenuity, alacrity, and pride, from within. In other words, an identity’s materiality is perhaps more appropriately gauged by its fictions and active identifications (what its discourses aim to fabricate) than merely by its present circumstances.

By such standards, if ever that identity was only myth, certainly the model minority is mythical no longer. As Susan Koshy has forcefully argued, the aspiration “of new immigrant groups” of various Asian ethnicities for inclusion in forms of white privilege—conditional upon their complicity in an ongoing contradistinction against blackness—is a crucial element of their racial formation and agency (Koshy, 154). Likewise, Karen Su cites “post–Civil Rights economic gains as well as an influx of professional-classes in immigration” (Su, 24) as having shifted Asian American class identifications upward, and contributed to the formation of a population “more prone to accepting” the mantle of the “model minority” (25). She observes that the majority population of the community is now made up of first-generation
immigrants who may cleave to the very accommodationist values “demon-  
ized within Asian American identity politics” (20); they are accompanied by  
young professionals who, in rapidly growing advocacy organizations, operate  
on principles of individual economic advancement for the voting consumer  
(24).  

Though she treats these groups as distinct and doubly dismaying rather than related phenomena, Su recognizes that the turn to model minority identifications characterizes both immigrant and second generations, and asserts that it is politically unfeasible to insist on alienating or ignoring this dominant majority “as if they were ‘fake’ Asian Americans” (24) or embarrassing mavericks. In his overview of Asian American identity politics, Glenn Omatsu, like Su, recognizes that neoconservatives have achieved a critical mass in the population, and by virtue of their numbers that they cannot be summarily dismissed for their views. However, what he poses as an ideological enigma or disconnect from the civil rights struggles—“Where did these neoconservatives come from?” (Omatsu, 180)—can be readily explained by the intergenerational, immigrant paradigm: As “newcomers to Asian American issues” (183), the neoconservatives are likely the progeny not of civil rights–era activists as he supposes (178), but of the post-1965 arrivals Su and Koshy cite. The children of post-1965 immigrants have been intravenously injected into the climate of material access and economic restructuring Omatsu describes, in the immediate wake and ongoing mobilization of model minority discourse. If they recognize U.S. racism not in the lineage of social movement coalitions, but rather in terms of the glass ceiling, this is but in keeping with their parents’ (neoconservative) convictions and training: that their children must excel to overcompensate for disadvantage in the racial hierarchy (Louie, xxxi, 56). Thus, these “young, middle-class professionals,” graduates of “the elite universities” (Omatsu, 181), whom Omatsu calls a new breed, I call second-generation.

In recognition of the paradigm’s actual currency among an increasingly professional-laden immigrant population (Koshy, 192), Koshy bids scholarship acknowledge that Asian American racial formation entails a dialectic of agency: not only the externally imposed “assignation” of model minority status, but also the internally driven “assertion” of that identification (158). Moreover, she bids “left and right progressive critics” achieve not only an analytical clarity on the “political embarrassment” of such assimilationist investments, but also on our own political investments in denial—our standing on the wish for the essentially subversive Asian American subject (160). In that vein, Nguyen also critiques the Asian American intellectual class (which he defines as “inclusive of academics, artists, activists, and non-
academic critics” [Nguyen, 5]) for its rigid valuation of cultural texts and practices in proportion to their oppositional politics, and its censure of texts and practices for any accommodationist tendencies; he finds such a value system limiting and dishonest in a context where, not only does the “model minority” as an identity form the mainstream of contemporary Asian American culture and politics, but those intellectuals themselves practice selective accommodation for their pragmatic institutional survival. Where it secures consideration and resources within the university, in other words, the field’s leveraging of social oppression is a savvy self-marketing ploy. While I am less concerned here with scholarship’s commodification of Asian American identity per se, I too would have us interrogate the animosity directed at narratives of intergenerational conflict, for self-incriminating investments scholarship may have therein. For in a very real sense, the model minority do not come from nowhere; we—academics, dissidents, activists alike—come from them. Such studied disregard as the field reserves for these stories suggests something there that it would cost too much to see. But that the model minority paradigm can hardly be articulated, even in synopsis, without resort to a language of filiality—sacrifice, obedience, hierarchy, gratitude—signals that it is time to stop skirting the obvious: The assimilationist, individualist, upwardly mobile professional class of the model minority is, for familial intents and purposes, Asian America’s model children. An effective understanding of the Asian American subject’s relation to the nation must therefore come to terms with the immigrant family as that nation’s intermediary and agent.

Ingratitude charts a model of subject formation not exclusive to, but racially and gender-specific to, second-generation Asian American daughters. Of course, to speak of subject formation is already to locate this book in a Foucauldian universe; it is to suppose the subject an effect (though not always a fully actualized effect) of the techniques of power by which her body and knowledge are ordered. It is further to take technologies of power to be contextually adaptive systems interested in the development and optimization, as opposed to merely the repression and control, of the subject. Though Foucault has been much faulted for failing to elaborate a theory of the thinking subject, the genealogy his work has produced (McLaren, 113) of the human subject as an effect of power, “created as the delimiting field of possibility for all thought” (Bersani, 3), is by no means antagonistic to such an endeavor. I thus choose here, borrowing from Butler and the toolbox of psychoanalysis, to extrapolate from Foucault’s dissection of systems to the psychic effects
these systems must produce. For disciplinary and discursive forms of modern power, the desired subject is one efficiently managed by and productive within its intersecting institutions. These institutions (the school, the office, the prison, the home) serve specialized functions and interests but a common ethos; they are most highly rewarded when they each play well with others. It stands to reason that, mechanisms of subjection being mobile across material contexts and institutions, we may find certain practices iterated across plantation owner and parent (a comparison made in chapter 1), Chicano and Asian immigrant communities (chapter 4), or even white patriarchal domesticities at the turn of an earlier century and our own patriarchal domestic spaces (a parallel that informs this argument throughout); and that subjects trained to similar technologies—debt bondage, discursive disownment, designated failure, to name a few—will adopt recognizable postures. Taken modularly, the elements of subjection I describe here are thus hardly exclusive or proprietary to the Asian immigrant family. As each of its systems emerges from a specific problematic of race, nation, class, gender, or other power differential, and adjusts as those problematics shift, the complex that is this model of Asian American daughterly subject formation may be functionally distinct, without being essentially distinctive. This post-structuralist perspective on power should allow us the latitude, without having to efface particularities, to acknowledge parallels that social forms may take across immigrations (see Anzia Yezierska’s Bread Givers for echoes of Jade Snow Wong from a Jewish immigrant’s daughter from Poland), across compulsory reproductive femininities (inarticulably oppressive, “loving” relationships, in Kate Chopin’s The Awakening), or even across the diversities of “the” Asian immigrant family, which in backgrounds and circumstances is itself by no means singular.

This brings us to perhaps the thorniest of the book’s self-positioning tasks: situating its subject as “Asian American,” despite its heavily Chinese American archive. Ingratitude selects for narratives by Asian women that detail uneventful second-generation upbringings in North America, within nuclear families with Asian biological parents, and which give their extended attention to intergenerational conflict. The project’s systematic construction serves, in a different manner of speaking, to isolate the dynamics of intergenerational conflict, controlling for factors such as physical abuse or interracial parentage which would complicate the analysis, and holding constant others such as immigration generation. This is not to say that the reading presented here is valid only within such very strict parameters, but to appreciate that it must be manifestly valid within them. Only very recently has publishing

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yielded literature from writers of South- and Southeast-Asian extractions meeting these exacting requirements, as the Afterword will note. Stories by Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Divakaruni do enter the argument periodically in the chapters that follow, but given the more recent arrival of these immigrant groups into the Asian American demographic and literary market, it is not surprising that the ethnic distribution of intergenerational-conflict literature is uneven. There is presently ample evidence in cultural forms other than the literary that these discourses of filiality and model minority operate widely across Asian immigrant ethnicities; in popular, online, and visual culture as well as journalistic media, their tropes surface plainly from the unpublished lives of non–East Asian American women. With time, it may be that the intergenerational-conflict narratives running through these various communities today will surface increasingly in literary form.

It must be said, however, that literary studies will never generate a statistically adequate or demographically accurate sample of immigrant communities’ varying productions of the model minority; that is not its strength. To measure the incidence of intergenerational conflict and its discourses of race and family across the mesh of ethnicity, class, immigration classification, and countless other demographic lines, we best look to the empirical methodologies of present and future social science scholarship—such as Vivian Louie’s *Compelled to Excel*, Stacey Lee’s *Unraveling the “Model Minority” Stereotype*, Lisa Park’s *Consuming Citizenship*, Margaret Gibson’s *Accommodation without Assimilation*, Miri Song’s *Helping Out*, and Eliza Noh’s “Asian American Women and Suicide.” Such ethnographic and quantitative analyses grant access to the types of research questions that can both complicate and challenge the permutations of the current theoretical model, within material specificities: How, for instance, might the pressures for achievement compare for the daughters of immigrants such as post-1965 Indian doctors (whose visa classification allowed them to parlay their educational credentials into American professional status), versus those of immigrants who, like Korean college graduates-cum-shopkeepers, have experienced a galling downward mobility? It would hardly be prudent to look to theoretical readings and literary instruments for answers to such demographically discerning questions.

Nevertheless, without a calibration of social practice to documented history, *Ingratitude* may appear to invite charges of an essentialist characterization of the Asian American family—assuming, in effect, the beleaguered position of the authors whose narratives I recuperate. To be clear, the argument to follow will elaborate that these cultural discourses are inflected differently in different eras, in directions made possible by developments in
economic and social policy. And yet, the project does not intend to preface its analysis with a review of the history of Asian immigration to the United States, because that body of particulars is not sufficiently integral to this theoretical model to bear repeating here. This is not to deny the direct impact of immigration legislation on familial formations and therefore the contextual relevance of those changing policies to the topic at hand. This is, however, to stand on the cultural materialist position that social structures and cultural productions are not the unilateral products of the economic and political, but that the two realms exist in a dialectic. Such a materialist reading allows that a family, community, or nation might well insist on an ideological conviction over-and-above or even in defiance of material particulars (such, in a sense, being one of the hallmarks of a hegemonic ideology), and subsequently leverage that system of belief to form and force material realities. Hence, this book will not attempt to account for the literature faithfully or mechanically along the contours of shifts in immigration. Rather, as I stated earlier, the intergenerational conflict—its forms of power, its discourses of subject formation—replicates with compelling faithfulness across an era of seemingly imposing historical changes. Thus it is my position that the paired structures of the model minority and intergenerational conflict are, like the class struggle itself, neither ahistorical nor historically bound. The relative autonomy and persistence of this narrative being among its more defining characteristics, to subordinate it entirely to historical explanations is to risk misconstruing it fundamentally.

This book is of the belief that, in a dialectically minded study of discursive and emergent social formations, literary methodologies are a needful antithesis to the empirical. Per Raymond Williams’ thesis on structures of feeling, it is at the limits of our current language for social formations—“at the very edge of semantic availability” (Williams, *Marxism*, 134)—that we diagnose experience through a complex of thought and affect, cognition and sensation, “which cannot without loss be reduced to belief-systems, institutions, or explicitly general relationships, though it may include all these as lived and experienced” (133). These structures of feeling enable us to sense and respond to new alignments of social power and meaning, regarding which we do not yet have conceptual clarity. And if they are caught at work anywhere, Williams maintains, it is via aesthetic attempts to articulate whole sensibilities that such fourth-dimensional diagnostic apparatuses will be found: in artistic and literary expression, “often the only fully available articulation” (133). It is in a culture’s aesthetic production, then, that we may hope to distinguish those relations with which the subject struggles and that yet even
she cannot see to explain, much less to bare to the researcher’s gauge. Here we may sense the distance between claim and instantiation, and the interpellations into powerlessness and subjection that whirr silently in the gap. Differently put, what the examination of literary narratives can offer to the larger investigation into Asian American socialization is the textured wealth of a cultural product enmeshed in the symbolic, attentive to language, and self-incriminated with every word—an ideal hunting ground if one’s quarry is the inconspicuous logic of power’s symbols and rhetoric, and the trapped movements of the subjected mind. This pursuit I believe to be a reasonable one, even within the limitations of uneven ethnic distribution. I am committed to this project’s claims to a broader applicability than it can immediately demonstrate, because I hope it will not be the numerical representativeness of primary texts but rather the explanatory power of the resulting model which decides the limits of its relevance.

narrative and structure

Narrative structure is a vexing issue for the texts included in this study; beginning with the Wong in chapter 1 and continuing into the Lau and Liu in chapter 3, *Ingratitude*’s core texts are all symptomatically devoid of plot. As we will see, regardless of what genres they claim to occupy—ranging in form from diary to memoir to novel, variously retrospective or immediate, with varying mixtures of memoir and fiction—they are all piecemeal in structure, relating a day or an incident at a time without a definitive arc to unify and make sense of all their pieces. This makes for what Tomo Hattori describes as “an aimless, episodic quality...; they do not conclude so much as stop” (Hattori, 239). Pacing and dramatic structure are challenges to accounts preoccupied with the ways in which nothing happens, every day. What their words do not find language for in isolation, however, emerges collectively; and like layers of a recurring dream, these texts, assembled, unfold a story with a beginning, middle, and end. So it is that the four chapters of this book build upon each other in a trajectory that is both linear and hopelessly entwined—such that none of them could rightly be presented as a free-standing unit, and none of them truly makes sense alone. If this book has a structure, it is a classic plot. If it has a genre, it is biography. The collective biography of the Asian American daughterly subject, it is its own mix of memoir and fiction; it is an autobiography by indirection. *Ingratitude* begins with two of the seminal texts of Asian American literature, Jade Snow Wong’s *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and Maxine Hong Kingston’s
The Woman Warrior, to theorize a paradigm of parental power structured by fundamental paradox and impossibility. In an analysis especially informed by Michel Foucault’s theories of power, Judith Butler’s theories of subjection, and feminist theories of trauma, I argue that through modes disciplinary and discursive, the second-generation daughter is perpetually produced as the unfilial subject—caught in a system of “designated failure.” A keystone of familial discourse, the construct of “filial obligation” defines the parent-child relation as a debtor-creditor relation, but within this system without contract or consent, the parent-creditor brings into being a child-debtor who can never repay the debt of her own inception and rearing. Such debt is structural, a matter of position rather than payment, and places the child ever in violation.\textsuperscript{13} Into this paradigm figures also the workings of sovereign law: rule of law which may determine its own jurisdiction, enlist or expel its own subjects, and decide the nature of transgression at will or whim because it is, itself, the very essence of judgment. Though this portion of the argument builds on Agamben’s work, it takes its cue from Foucault’s position in Discipline and Punish that the sovereign has not surrendered the field entirely to biopower in the modern era but that the two co-exist, forming in this case an “economico-legal complex” (paraphrased from Fitzpatrick, 13). Moreover, a view to both forms is imperative here, to address a Foucauldian “operation of power . . . in which life is put [so explicitly] ‘in question’ and where [life] can be both protected and eliminated” (ibid.; emphasis added): Precisely on its productive “care of life” does parental authority, with its prerogative of birth and banishment, base its deductive brandishing of death. Informed by the foundational work of such critics as Sau-ling Wong and Lisa Lowe, chapter 1 performs a re-reading of Fifth Chinese Daughter which closely critiques the logic implicit in “intergenerational conflict,” and lays the groundwork of analysis for my discussion of later texts.

In turning to The Woman Warrior, chapter 2 traces the particular challenges to narrative form posed by the depiction of an injury which cannot be embodied or instantiated, an affliction which is partly because it “is not one.” I interpret Kingston’s narrative strategies, in which the imaginary is inextricable or indistinguishable from the “real,” as an attempt to relate a subjectivity haunted by dire threats, but marked by no empirical harm. Maxine’s daily life is one in which nothing of account “happens”; her formation as a daughter, however, is structured by the constant threat of violent disownment. That threat, conveyed in the anecdotes and legends of her childhood imaginary, deploys discourse to condition the subject. Jade Snow’s attempts to relate the injustices of her upbringing, through the woefully mundane
details of her interactions with her parents, suffer from an inability to justify the depths of her anger with the seeming inconsequentiality of her examples. Such powerlessness to substantiate one’s suffering compounds and is itself a form of affliction. In forgoing the details of her American childhood, however, Maxine instead foregrounds its discourses, and confronts her parents’ use of discursive power: through the fierce tales of her imaginary, the narrator is enabled to articulate an anger proportionate to the harm threatened, and to recognize the threat itself as a type of harm done. In regarding the discursive as a material force, I reference Anne Cheng’s formulation of racial grief versus grievance, and also depart from earlier scholars like Elaine Kim and King-kok Cheung who, in order to protect an emerging identity politics, asserted between a “material reality” and a “discursive fiction” of violence in the family a distinction which is ultimately untenable.

Chapter 3 finds that between the era of Wong’s *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and that of Evelyn Lau’s *Runaway: Diary of a Street Kid* and Catherine Liu’s *Oriental Girls Desire Romance*, economic relations within the family have evolved in response to changing opportunities for the model minority. Second-generation children become viable capital investments, raised to enter the lucrative math- and science-based professional fields now open to them, in order to repay their parents’ suffering with prestigious consumer goods. In this context, I suggest, the unprofitable pursuit of literature can become an overdetermined act of self-preservation and disobedience, and an interesting precursor to other forms of masochistic rebellion: drug addictions, suicide, running away from home. Informed by psychoanalytic arguments regarding passionate attachments to power and the function of love and dependence in domination, this chapter neither valorizes nor censures masochism, but addresses both the possibilities and the limitations of such agency. In revisiting model minority discourse, the chapter asserts that because of the immigrant family’s commitment to capitalist ideals, a model child is required to be a model minority, dutiful and grateful to family and nation both. In this chapter and the next, I examine the subjective costs incurred in becoming—and in failing to become—the model minority.

Drawing from each of the foregoing discussions of disciplinary and discursive power, economic investment, disownment, and resistance, chapter 4 examines the formation of the daughterly subject in relation to the family’s exceptional structural investment in female chastity. Reading Chitra Divakaruni’s “The Word Love” and Fae Myenne Ng’s *Bone* in conjunction with each of the novels from previous chapters, I consider female sexuality as a site not only of particular concern but of particular utility for familial authority.
Anthropological work on chastity has long suggested a material basis and rationale for the cultural management of virginity, but these studies have tended to theorize the economic and social systems in which female bodies circulate without theorizing the female subject. Combining such anthropological perspectives with the techniques of literary criticism, I develop a Foucauldian analysis of the administration of sexuality but also a rendering of the young woman thereby produced: a paranoid and self-policing subject, commended to herself as object. To stand accused as a “lying, whoring, ungrateful, uncontrollable daughter” (Lau, Inside, 202) is not, I find, necessarily to be suspected of sexual activity so much as to be managed into obedience, as the regulation of a daughter’s chastity both requires and justifies measures of extreme control which make for an especially thoroughly disciplined subject. Finally, while I am interested in this chapter to address familial standards and investments which are unmitigatedly gender-specific, and relationships to power particular to women, I tread against the traditions of both psychoanalytic and Asian American feminist scholarship in declining to idealize the mother-daughter relation as one of natural alliance. I take as my unit of analysis the parent rather than the patriarch because within the context of intergenerational dynamics, it is the parental position which determines the interests and agenda of “the family,” and it is for the sake of the family—parental interests above and beyond gender differentiation—that the female docile body, guilty subject, and capital investment is produced.