

Rose Fotino

Professor Ichiro Takayoshi

ENG 199: Senior Honors Thesis

30 April 2025

Analyzing Asian Narratives from Boston: Collective Struggle and Liberation

Introduction: Personal Note and Thesis Contents

After completing the fall semester of my senior year, I also completed the English major at Tufts University except for this thesis. Reflecting upon my undergraduate journey, I am extremely proud of my work and learning through these courses and my professors and their guidance throughout my undergraduate career. The coursework I have completed for the major had a major role in my success and passion, as I have been able to regain my love for literature that became lost in high school, especially amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

Unquestionably, my two favorite courses from the major were ENG 36 (Asian American Writers), which was also my first English course at Tufts, and ENG 91-04 (Topics in Literature and Culture: Women of Color Memoir). Many of the stories from the syllabi of these courses landed very close to home, both as a Korean American and a trans woman of color. Most importantly, I fell in love with how these courses aimed to uplift marginalized voices and tell widely unheard stories. Many of the texts from these courses do not have the accolades or widespread recognition in pop culture that texts from other courses I have taken do (*Dr. Faustus*, *Paradise Lost*, and *The Great Gatsby* just to name a few). Because the value of these courses

resonates so deeply with me, I knew I wanted to critically analyze and construct an argument using systemically omitted voices in my thesis.

My other passions and academic and professional disciplines would help me determine whose voices I would choose to explore in this thesis. On a July afternoon the summer before my senior year, I was scrolling on Instagram while eating dinner after work. My friend reposted an infographic to her story highlighting the fact that “Chinatown is the hottest neighborhood in Boston” by as much as 12 degrees Fahrenheit warmer compared to other Boston neighborhoods ([@chinatownclt](#)). The issues and information in this post both frustrated and motivated me, as I wanted to look further into the issue and kept reading other posts on the Chinatown Community Land Trust account that night. Chinatown is a neighborhood I have held dear since childhood, and I have been subconsciously aware of many of the social, economic, and political issues within the local community. With my background in these types of issues through my second major in Economics, I knew I could explore and analyze these issues through research about Boston Chinatown.

Later that summer, at Boston Chinatown’s August Moon Festival, I stumbled upon a booth for Asian Women for Health, a local “non-profit organization dedicated to advancing Asian women’s health and well-being through community engagement, education, and representation” ([AWFH](#)). I was extremely fortunate that the woman facilitating the booth stopped me to compliment my tattoos. As the conversation progressed, she connected me with the organization’s many initiatives that aim to provide equitable health for local Asian women. After learning more about Asian Women for Health’s mission, as well as enrolling in their professional

training program in community health, I knew I wanted to combine my passion for marginalized literature, Boston Chinatown, and the disparities evident within the neighborhood.

In this thesis, I have three key sections to develop my argument. In the next section, I explore history and data that help contextualize issues that Asian Bostonians have faced in the past and may face today. I then conduct close-reading of select stories from Asian writers who live in or have strong ties to Boston, and how the experiences told in these stories may broadly speak to Bostonian Asian experiences. I believe the narrative texts I analyze should come from Asian perspectives that have hands-on experience with Boston beyond tourism, as outside perspectives cannot internalize Bostonian issues that someone with personal ties can. Although history and data can quickly give a sense of aggregate trends and outcomes, history and data can efficiently capture the experiences of Asian Bostonians, and community members through narratives is crucial for understanding individual lived experiences about history and data. Asian Bostonians and augment the individual voices of these authors

There is already a myriad of literature that examines the lived experiences of Asian Bostonians. However, my unique methodological contribution to pre-existing literature will be my significant analysis of narrative texts to construct my argument. While I understand and commend the importance of sociology, political science, and diaspora literature, I believe the individual, lived experiences documented through the narrative works are equally as valuable when analyzing Asian Bostonian issues. Ultimately, I argue that although Asian Bostonian narrative works are rooted in histories of collective struggle and disparities, their main goal is to amplify, liberate, and celebrate the lived experiences of Asian Bostonians whose perspectives are often overlooked.

Asian Bostonian Historical Context and Data

In this section, I aim to ground the narrative works analyzed in this thesis in reality. The following historical events and current data from the 20th century to today underscore disparities that Asians in Boston have faced in the past and may still encounter today. Many narrative works analyzed in this paper will allude to, or outwardly mention, these exact events and conditions that have negatively impacted Boston's Asian community. While the ultimate goal of the narrative works analyzed in this thesis is to uplift and amplify the lives of Bostonian Asians, making connections from these narratives to the real world through history and data contextualizes local narratives and their roots in structural disparities.

For Bostonian Asians, the 1960s and 1970s were heavily marked by collective struggle as a result of major changes in public policy at the federal and local levels. Much of this change and struggle stems from the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which resulted in Boston's Chinatown and South End becoming home to even more Chinese immigrant families. This influx of Chinese immigrants further established these two neighborhoods as some of Boston's primary ethnic enclaves for the local Chinese community, creating a sense of communal home for Chinese immigrants regardless of where they lived (Martin). Boston's Chinese community, and Asian community as a whole, was rapidly expanding and providing new homes and warmth for many individuals.

Although this policy resulted in granting many new Chinese immigrants homes in Boston, structural disparities prevented growth of Boston's major Asian neighborhoods and made for more difficult lived experiences for Bostonian Asians. In the 1960s, Interstate 90 (I-90) was extended through Boston. As a result, Chinatown was essentially split in half, both by

construction, demolition of homes, and the presence of the highway itself. The extension displaced many immigrant families already in Boston and made entering the neighborhood for new immigrants much more difficult. Furthermore, Chinatown as we know it today lacks access to green space, and affordable housing, and suffers from poor air quality because of I-90 (Norton). Combined with the surrounding other major highways (I-93 and Route 28), some of Boston's wealthiest neighborhoods (Back Bay and Downtown), and the Financial District, Chinatown is left constantly vulnerable to pollution and gentrification. For example, many luxury condominiums are proposed and built (Gürcan). This constant vulnerability due to city and highway structures worsens outcomes for residents and leaves many at perpetual risk of displacement, which are structural disparities Boston's Chinatown wrestles with daily.

Changes in local social policy also resulted in a citywide struggle for Boston's students of color. *Morgan v. Hennigan* from June 21, 1974, aimed to counteract the Boston School Committee's illegal perpetuation of segregation and lower funding to districts of primarily black students in primarily black neighborhoods. The policy resulted in the busing of black students to other school districts to redistribute the racial composition of Boston schools (Pazzanese). This policy, long overdue, intended to rectify Boston's long-standing school segregation and structural racism. Unfortunately, many white Boston residents were unhappy with this ruling and publicly protested by throwing trash at school buses of black students commuting to other schools. Oftentimes, classrooms remained segregated even though the total racial compositions of schools changed.

Likewise, Chinese students were also bused to other districts within the city, a policy that resulted in students being placed in dangerous positions (Martin). Howard Wong, recalling his

experiences from being bused to the North End, says “There were overt acts of racism towards us when we were doing a tour of Paul Revere Park. We had one group of kids that would spit at us” (Martin). To make matters worse, the Tam brothers incident struck fear and captured Boston’s structural racism towards Asian students. James and George Tam, students bused to Charlestown, were wrongly accused of stabbing Patrice Borden, a white girl, to death. More details regarding this case will be introduced in my analysis of the short story “Odes of Activism,” which will further highlight Boston’s failure to the Tam brothers and harm to the local Asian community. In response, Asian parents organized and boycotted schools as a part of their demands regarding bus safety, which were met except for more Cantonese-speaking teachers. Boston’s school desegregation policy, its impact, and Asian parents’ response exemplify structural disparity and struggle yet rooted in collective action and strength unique to the experience of Boston’s Asian community in the 1970s.

Through the 1990s, Boston Chinatown was still intertwined with crime. Many would describe Boston’s Chinatown Massacre, as “one of the deadliest crimes in Boston history” (Kath et al.). In the early morning of January 12, 1991, murderers Hung Tien Pham, Siny Van Tran, and Nam The Tham killed five and badly injured one in a social club on Chinatown’s Tyler Street. Currently, Tran and Tham are serving life sentences after being captured in China. However, Hung Tien Pham is still wanted by the FBI to this day with a \$30,000 incentive to whoever can provide information about his whereabouts (Kath et al.). Pham is also known to have been involved with group crime with Ping On in Philadelphia, Chicago, San Francisco, and Toronto around the time of the Chinatown Massacre (FBI).

The Chinatown Massacre captured two major trends about the Boston Chinatown community. First, this event exposed the fact that Boston's Chinatown is intertwined with organized crime like many other Chinatowns across the United States. Unfortunately, the presence of organized crime in Chinatowns is often used as a weapon to stereotype Chinese people as having a 'vile, foreign nature.' Rather, the trend of organized crime in Chinatowns stems from systemic racial oppression and lack of structural support in the United States. In many cases, Chinese enclaves face issues with immigration, housing, discrimination, and income. The support to resolve these issues with a community-based approach is often inadequate, which leads individuals to pursue profits through crime (MOCA). The exact motives of Pham and his crew remain unknown to this day (FBI). However, given disparities throughout Boston Chinatown's history that persist today, we can reasonably assume the city's structural oppression of its largest Chinese community was a key factor that fostered organized crime.

More importantly, the repercussions of this event haunt the community in Boston's Chinatown to this day. An NBC 10 documentary produced shortly after the 30th anniversary of the Chinatown Massacre uses the voices of locals from Boston's Chinatown and local law enforcement to retell the event with first-person perspectives. Rosemary Lim, a worker in Boston Chinatown, recalls "During that couple months, Chinatown really quiet and then you know, people afraid to come out." Shooting six people, and killing five out of those six, especially in an area as tightknit as Boston's Chinatown, was naturally bound to radiate throughout the community and put safety into question. The massacre disrupted the lives of the immediate victims, their families, and the community as a whole. Chinatown, and Boston residents as a

whole, left locals to conflate Chinatown's identity as a Chinese ethnic enclave and a hub for underground violence and further stigmatize Chinatown as dangerous.

Though Lim calls attention to the impact of gang violence on community engagement in Chinatown, she also humanizes individuals in the community involved in gang violence. When asked about Sky Dragon, a prominent gang leader in Boston's Chinatown, she says "To me, he wasn't a bad guy but I don't know what kind of businesses he does on the side but and just a regular, normal guy to me. He's kind of protecting Chinatown... He has... his group of people and they try to in Chinatown try to not allow, to not allow outside people coming in to do troubles, you know like that." Lim gives Sky Dragon grace that news outlets and law enforcement may not. The structural disparities and gentrification rampant in Boston Chinatown justify fear of outsiders coming into Chinatown and taking over. Through these disparities, we have seen how the Chinatown community has to initiate organizations to combat issues such as the busing crisis. Underground gangs give Chinatown natives a platform to protect the pre-existing community. Although Sky Dragon's involvement in gang violence is not the ideal method of community protection, Lim can make sense of his actions because of the issues with outsiders Chinatown has faced throughout history.

Later in the documentary, Lim directly calls out Boston's failure and lack of support for Chinatown. She adds "We don't feel the policy protecting us that much so we had our way to how to protecting in Chinatown... it's like self-protecting program around in here." Again, based on past events such as the busing crisis, we can see in history how Chinatown and Boston's Asian community as a whole has been left to defend themselves while the city acts like a bystander. Chinatown has been left in the hands of everyone other than its residents in many

contexts. Underground gangs that oversee Chinatown give residents a sense of tangible control of the neighborhood. Lim's statement represents a call to action to provide more systemic support for the needs of Chinatown and its residents instead of addressing gang violence-related cases as they come. Gang violence as a whole may have been significantly reduced throughout the neighborhood had stronger protective measures been in place.

Alongside the tragedy the Boston Chinatown Massacre brought to the community, Chinatown residents had to fight against gentrification through the 1990s. By 1990, over ¼ of the land in Chinatown had already been consumed by New England Medical Center (NEMC, known as Tufts Medical Center today). The land NEMC stands on today was once housing but was seized by the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA) in the 1960s for institutional use. At the time (and today), Chinatown was the most crowded Boston neighborhood in terms of residents per acre (Leong). The combination of natural housing constraints and gentrification forced many residents out of Chinatown and Chinese immigrants looking to move into Chinatown must look elsewhere, fracturing the bond and strength of the local Chinese community by making it difficult to live in one of the ethnic enclaves they would be likely to feel most comfortable.

Beyond housing, community resources were also in jeopardy. NEMC aimed to take control of Parcel C, a land plot in the center of Boston's Chinatown. Parcel C was originally proposed by the BRA to be a community center for the neighborhood but was canceled because of the early 1990s economic recession. However, NEMC still proposed \$11 million to buy Parcel C for a parking garage and a community center nine times smaller than the original community center proposal. Chinatown Neighborhood Council (CNC), Boston City Hall's Chinatown advising group approved the proposal (Tong). NEMC is a large institution that had plenty of

capital and savings and would have profited even more from Chinese locals with these resident parking spots. Moreover, the CNC's approval demonstrates that local officials have an interest in economic gain rather than residents' well-being. Most importantly, following through with this plan would worsen congestion from cars and the already problematic air pollution problem in the neighborhood.

Although the garage received approval, community organizers quickly protested the proposal with environmental concerns and disdain for the BRA and CNC's economic goals in mind. By strategizing with flyers, rallies, formation of Coalition to Protect Parcel C, alliance building, and strong arguments and demands toward BRA and NEMC ([Leong](#)), Boston's Mayor Menino canceled NEMC garage proposal and instead handed to the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA) with prohibition of institutional use ([Walker](#)). While the coalition was dissatisfied with Menino's decision to transfer power to CCBA and not involve the coalition, blockading NEMC's parking garage proposal and regaining rights for community use prevented potentially worse car traffic and air pollution that would worsen the quality of life for the Chinatown community.

Symbolically, the fight for Parcel C in the 1990s represents two points. Institutions with great economic power always have their interest in mind before the interests of the communities that they plan to take over. Even in times of broad economic downturn, NEMC still had \$11 million to spend to expand on land that they had stolen from local Chinese residents. Despite the economic power and established presence of NEMC in Boston's Chinatown, residents used organizing strategies to successfully stop the garage from getting further than the proposal stage. These issues of gentrification and organization strategies throughout the 1990s Parcel C protests

will reemerge in my analysis of *Noodle & Bao*, a graphic novel based on Boston's Chinatown that follows the point of view of local community organizers. From the perspective of organizers, the graphic novel provides a more in-depth view of gentrification's negative implications for communities and the extent of work on behalf of organizers to rally their communities to fight for their well-being.

Unfortunately, gentrification has persisted in Boston's Chinatown. Tufts University's Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning Department (UEP) has determined that it is Boston's neighborhood at greatest risk of gentrification. Demographic shifts in the neighborhood align with the findings of Tufts UEP. During the late 1980s, just a few years before the fight for Parcel C against NEMC, Boston's Chinatown had 70% Asian residents. As of 2010, that number decreased to 46%. Raghav Seth, a Tufts Medical student, claims that many students and white-collar young professionals have moved into Chinatown housing. These groups' influx into the neighborhood is a result of Tufts Medical's presence and generally rising housing prices, respectively ([Vavra](#)).

Tufts junior Wayne Ye, who was collecting information on Chinatown residents and rental agreements during the summer of 2014. Similar to Seth, Ye finds that Asian American families in the neighborhood are declining. Moreover, he elaborates that the non-Asian residents who had moved into Chinatown housing chose it as their most affordable option, being careful to add that Chinese immigrant families can barely keep up with rising prices. Likewise, many Chinatown landlords encourage gentrification, as profit margins are much higher for Tufts Medical students compared to Chinese immigrant families who had historically lived in the neighborhood ([Vavra](#)).

Even today, we find that Asian Bostonians still face many socioeconomic disparities. Although these disparities may not be as apparently severe as in the past, such as widespread public discrimination during the busing crisis, they have a negative impact placing unique hardship on Asian Bostonian households during and following the COVID-19 pandemic. The poverty rate (as of 2021), which the federal government considers a household of \$26,500 for a four-person family, among Asian households in Boston is higher than that of Black households and three times higher compared to white households. Many would consider that household income unsustainable for one person, let alone four people, especially in a city as expensive as Boston.

Much of this recent financial hardship may be due to the share drops in revenue amongst Asian-owned small businesses relative to white, Black, and Latinx businesses (Leung). Following the outbreak of COVID-19, discrimination towards Asians has increased and continues today. Much of this discrimination originates from racist, prejudiced blame towards Asian Americans for the virus and pandemic (Tang). Unfortunately, these harmful sentiments likely have an association with the decreases in revenues that local Asian businesses have faced in recent history.

Moreover, the distribution of disparities within the local Asian diaspora is extremely unequal. For example, over 80% of Korean, Japanese, and Indians in Massachusetts have a college degree whereas less than 33% of Vietnamese and Cambodians have one. About household income, Nepalese families have ~\$60,000 whereas Indian families have ~\$130,000 with \$85,000 being the median household income for the Greater Boston area. This great inequality in the distribution of education and household income reflects varying disparities

amongst subgroups within the diaspora of the local Asian community. Even though two people may both be Asian and from or near Boston, their individual and community needs are likely to be much different. When discussing the experiences, needs, and disparities of Asian communities, we must be careful to specify the roots of the source material because the Asian diaspora is so large. The experiences of Chinese populations in Boston, expressed in history and narratives, cannot fully speak for the experiences of Bostonian Vietnamese, Indian, etc. I will maintain this sensitivity to other ethnic groups within the Asian diaspora in my section that analyzes narrative works, which are largely by Chinese authors or have Chinese subjects.

This overview of the history and current data captures elements that uniquely highlight Asian experiences throughout Boston's recent history. Due to Boston Chinatown's geographic limitations, the neighborhood faces structural disparities that negatively impact the daily lives of its residents. Combined with the neighborhood's vulnerability to gentrification, Chinatown's community has changed significantly with many Chinese immigrants being forced to relocate. As one of Boston's biggest Asian ethnic enclaves, these struggles have presented significant challenges for Boston's Asian community. Likewise, policy at the state and federal level can also have strong implications for Asian Bostonians as shown through the busing crisis. Though the intent of *Morgan v. Hennigan* was to rid the city of unacceptable, outdated school segregation, this policy resulted in public discrimination and injustice toward Asian Bostonians.

Despite the adversity Asian Bostonians have faced throughout history to today, Boston's Asian community has an extensive history of organizing against Boston's injustices and having their demands met. This organizing demonstrates the strength of Asian Bostonian voices and the uplifting of non-English speaking voices through community power. Although the most

apparent, abhorrent community struggles are over 30 years in the past, Bostonian Asians still face many disparities today. Namely, these current struggles continue to revolve around gentrification, economic instability, and new increases in anti-Asian rhetoric following the COVID-19 outbreak.

In the upcoming section, I will closely read and analyze the narrative works of Asian authors either from Boston or with close ties to the city's Asian community. Often, these works draw upon the issues that Asian Bostonians have faced throughout history. Likewise, the current history and data I have outlined aligns with narrative topics and sentiments. However, we see that these narrative authors go beyond calling attention to disparities and amplify the individual and community strength, resilience, and struggle of Asian Bostonian lived experiences.

Asian Bostonian Narrative Texts

In this section, I analyze narrative texts written either by Asians from Boston or with close ties to the city's Asian community. My analysis is conducted through close reading important excerpts from longer narratives, or line by line for shorter prose pieces and poetry. After closely reading many narrative texts of various formats, I have extrapolated two overarching themes. The first of these two themes is community building, which I define as the mundane daily aspects of Asian Bostonian lived experiences that naturally foster community and a sense of home for Asians in Boston. The second theme I identify is community organizing. As we have seen in the previous section, Asian Bostonians often turn to organizing to fight for the well-being of Boston's Asian community. This tendency is reflected in many narratives written by Asian authors who live in or are involved with Boston's Asian community. Upon close reading Asian Bostonian narratives through the lens of these two themes, we find that these

narratives complicate, humanize, and uplift our understanding of Asian Bostonian history and data through the unique lived experiences these authors portray in their narratives.

Community Building

Community building is extremely prevalent throughout Shaina Lu's *Noodle & Bao*, a fictional graphic novel based on Boston's Chinatown aimed to present community organizing and gentrification in an accessible form to children. Through Momo, the story's protagonist, Lu introduces one of the story's main motives when Momo says "This is a love story between people... and a town. My town! I grew up in Town 99. So I know all the best places to buy fruit, practice tai chi in the park, and the best place to... eat!" (Lu 2-5). This framing tells us that place is both physical and deeply personal, inviting us to care for Town 99 as we would a loved one. Town 99's community and environment have become a focal point of Momo's identity, so being connected through its community brings her joy and fulfillment.

For Momo, Town 99's community has become so internalized and comforting to her that it has assumed immortality. As her friends from the neighborhood are discussing their intentions for the future, she shares "I haven't thought about my future yet. But I know for sure that it'll be here, with all my friends and family in Town 99" (Lu 89). Even though she had acknowledged the gentrification in Town 99, the neighborhood has assumed permanence with proper care. The assumption that Town 99 will always exist motivates Momo to give back to her community and preserve the environment she had grown up in for her family and friends for the future. Having the promise of Town 99 for future generations gives Momo purpose, both for herself and society.

Before the block party to protest Ms. Jujube, a new and rich property manager, and her establishment of Fancé Hotel and Fancé Cafe, Momo sophisticates her understanding of Town

99, recognizing that its presence cannot be taken for granted. “What is Town 99? It’s a place, I guess. But a place is more than the buildings here. It’s the people who make up the community here. We must rely on each other” (Lu 192-193). By this point, Momo realizes that community and environment are her primary motivations for maintaining Town 99 as she has experienced and lived in it. Momo and her community’s well-being rely on the Town 99 community to not just be present, but also in active solidarity with one another. Powerful forces, namely Ms. Jujube, who I will further analyze in the *Community Organizing* part of this section, have no sympathy for Town 99’s heritage from which Momo descends. To preserve the community that Momo and many of her neighbors love, community organizing fueled by strong love for Town 99 as they know it and as it has benefited their ability to live is needed to combat malevolent forces such as gentrification. While there is an expression of love shown through community organizing to combat structural changes, having to organize in the first place is exhausting, strenuous, and unfair to residents who already have to work so hard to continue living in Town 99. However, Momo’s closing message captures what Town 99 ultimately means to her and how Town 99 serves as a source of relief and comfort in tense, difficult situations where organizing is needed.

Through Momo and Town 99, Lu imagines bright futures for neighborhoods like Town 99 through the bond of tight-knit communities. Cynthia Yee, a writer who was raised in Boston’s Chinatown, takes a different approach in her short stories featured in her online series *Hudson Street Chronicles*. Yee portrays community building by recalling her life of growing up in Chinatown, where she experienced joy and character development at the same time Chinatown was facing displacement and change. For example, her story “Snow Angels” takes a

heartwarming, nostalgic approach to narrating her experiences living in Boston Chinatown. By reminiscing about her roots and upbringing, Yee depicts community and environment coming together to create lifelong memories and outcomes. She recalls a children's book "Do Like Kyla" and how the characters made snowmen and says "It reminded me of playing with my cousin, Albert, in the snowy streets of Chinatown Boston when we were around seven years old and having such a happy, good time... We smiled at each other, giggling, as we put handfuls of snow on each others' heads, backs, and legs, and rolled in the snow" (Yee). Yee depicts moments where she and her cousin can bond with one another and enjoy their environment. Third spaces, such as accessible neighborhoods as depicted in this story, allow for more time for community building to occur both interpersonally and with the environment in which they are raised.

As characteristic throughout many of Yee's short stories, she is careful to call attention to real-world issues directly related to her stories. In "Snow Angels," her author's note reflects on the broader implications of displacement caused by events out of residents' control. Her joy of playing in the snow as a kid "was short-lived after hundreds of immigrant families, including Cynthia's, were forced to move out of their homes due to the highway construction" (Yee). The author's note refers to the construction of I-90, which we have seen split up and displaced many Chinatown residents, thus harming the ability to physically build a community. Moreover, the construction fractures the intergenerational culture tied to Boston Chinatown, perpetuating the difficulty of having a strong sense of home. These effects may be especially true for children such as Yee in this story, as losing home and third spaces to uncontrollable events may cause difficulty grasping an identity about a certain community or environment.

Yee further discusses her lived experiences through family holiday traditions when she was growing up in “Gifts.” She says “My family did not believe in buying gifts for birthdays and Christmas... It was considered an unnecessary frivolity in our frugal immigrant life” (Yee). While it is commonplace for many American families to celebrate Christmas and exchange gifts, Yee’s family has not conformed to these standards. Rather, they “gave [her] red envelope money for the Chinese Lunar New Year and [her] birthday with good wishes and something about saving the money for the future or letting it grow baby coins in the bank” (Yee). Instead of fully adopting American traditions, Yee’s family still preserved Chinese traditions that uniquely created Chinese American immigrant identity. As a result, Yee was able to enjoy the gift from her Uncle Eddie much more than many other American children might have appreciated. He gave her “two books... [She] was amazed and thrilled to receive a real Gift. [She] had never owned a book and aside from the Maryknoll nuns, no one ever gave me a gift. I would pore over those two books every chance I had” (Yee). Through these interactions with her uncle, Yee maintains generational resourcefulness and a tight-knit community through gift-giving with her family. The gift allows Yee to shape her love for literature and tell the story of her uncle which may have otherwise been lost to history. Even at the time of publishing the short story, “in the many years that have passed, lost the Sun book but have kept “The Book of Natural History”... at [her] Cape Cod house where [she] planted a large garden” (Yee), further demonstrating the warm memories kept through cultural tradition and community.

Through the bond Yee had developed with her Uncle Eddie, “[they] traveled together to China with visas from Canada. He wanted to see his wife and grown family. I was just curious to see the land of my parents’ birth. He had not seen his wife and children in over twenty-five years

and never met his grandchildren... This was a time of return and reunion for my sojourner uncle and for me, his American-born niece, entrance into an unknown way of life” (Yee). The fact that they need Canadian visas to visit China at that time reflects disparities many immigrants may face when trying to reunite with family overseas. Moreover, the difficulties for Uncle Eddie are even higher, as this trip represents rebuilding in-person connections with his direct family after 25 years of separation. Yee even calls him a “sojourner” despite going on the same trip as him for the same amount of time, symbolizing how returning to China is returning to another home for Uncle Eddie. Because Yee was born in America, this trip does not carry the weight of loss and longing the way it may for Uncle Eddie. However, Yee understands how her identity is fractured into multiple parts as a descendant of Chinese immigrants.

Yee recognizing the differences between herself and her uncle, combined with their strong bond, likely influenced her strong efforts “to negotiate with two alienated governments to bring his wife and two of his sons, their wives and their daughters to America. But he died before their arrival” (Yee). Though the cause and timeline of Uncle Eddie’s death are unclear, rebuilding the relationships fractured by strict travel laws impacted the ability of his direct family to reunite with Uncle Eddie in the States. From Yee’s account of her bond with her uncle, in addition to the barriers to reuniting with family in China, Yee underscores the disparities in immigration and travel resources her family and many other Boston Chinatown residents may face.

While “Snow Angels” and “Gifts” reminisce on Yee’s more heartening experiences about Boston Chinatown disparities, Yee’s “Duck” has a greater focus on struggles Chinatown residents may experience by comparing Chinatown and its community to Downtown Boston, a neighborhood adjacent to Chinatown, and outsiders.

Yee tells us her thoughts about how her mother would feel if she knew Yee was skipping Chinese school, saying “MaMa had enough to cry about. She’d had to leave three daughters in China, one dead in her grave, but she didn’t talk about that one... The last thing MaMa needed now was a renegade daughter, an American girl, running loose, in an empty city lot in a western land” (Yee). In her concerns, Yee also addresses the weight of her parents’ trauma as Chinese American immigrants. By force, Yee’s mother had to experience the loss of her children through overseas separation and death. Moreover, Yee’s father had largely been absent when her mother was pregnant, giving birth, and first raising most of their children. The underlying forces that eventually led Yee’s family to come to America left her mother with only two hard choices, both with unfavorable outcomes. In the context of this story, Yee is her mother’s only child she still gets to regularly see. Losing Yee would completely break her mother’s spirit, stripping her even further of her sense of family and motherhood.

Yee’s father’s response to becoming an American, though different from her mother’s, is a direct response to the significant change of settling in a new country. Yee says “He had taken on American ways, American movies, American music, and had given an American birthday party for his only American-born child” (Yee). By repeating “American” in describing the customs and interests her father had taken up upon settling in America, Yee emphasizes the stark cultural departure her father had taken after “He never returned to China again” (Yee). Her father had been in and out of China and America through his adolescence and young adulthood. Though he never had to carry the emotional burden of childbirth and the death of his daughter, he too carried separation and loss of traditional family and fatherhood when coming and going

between countries. By latching onto American culture once finally settled down in Boston Chinatown, he alleviated some of the burden of the past adversity he faced at his younger age.

When narrating the difference in her experience between inside and outside of Chinatown, Yee portrays the difficulties her family and herself face about intersectionality and situational code-switching. She tells us “I lived in two worlds, a Chinatown world and a Downtown world” (Yee), and then describes Downtown’s prevalence of sex work, the dirtiness of the streets, and the stores her mother would take her along with. By framing her life in two different worlds, Yee explains her adversity juggling two identities. Her challenges may be faced by many other second-generation Chinese American immigrants. Yee then ventures into Downtown with her mother, where heavy imagery shifts the tone to feel third-person and external despite still being told from her point of view. Emphasizing the description of the objects and interactions around her rather than dialogue makes Yee feel more detached from her surroundings, reflecting the changes she made as her environment changed.

Even Yee’s mother demonstrates intersectionality through her changes in behavior away from home. As she is about to buy a zipper from a store Downtown, her “MaMa smiled her sweetest smile, the one she reserved for white folks” (Yee) in an attempt to bargain for a lower price. In San Ba, China, her mother was used to market stalls where it is normalized to bargain for goods. By bringing Yee along with her ability to speak English, she hopes to practice her culture’s methods of purchasing goods in the confines of America. Her mother’s change in body language reflects the dynamic between a white-dominated Boston and the marginalized Chinatown community. She expects that by acting extremely nice and putting on an act for white people, they might give her a discount the equivalent of a mere ~\$5-6 in today’s money. Her

mother's behavior reflects a broader power dynamic between white Americans and Chinese American immigrants, foreshadowing the final scene in this story with the F.B.I. barging into Yee's family's home.

As a result of Yee's intersectionality, she explains "signals got crossed up, no matter how hard I tried. That's another thing that happens when your MaMa didn't understand the world as you did. Sometimes my wires tangled, and I did the American thing in a Chinese setting, and the Chinese thing in an American one" (Yee). Though Yee and her mother have some extent of intersectionality, Yee has to confront hers much more as a second-generation Chinese American relative to her immigrant mother. As a result, her older Chinese relatives do not perceive her as 'Chinese enough' as indicated by their nickname "Hollow Bamboo" and the use of the term "*Jook Sing*." In more American settings, such as school, her teacher separated her by giving Yee her own "seat for the smartest boy or girl." She also ate more Americanized food at school, such as ham sandwiches on Wonder Bread, both as a 'forbidden fruit' and to avoid criticism from peers. Having to make deliberate changes based on setting demographics caused Yee difficulty and uncertainty regarding her identity. She even admits that "Until I grew up, I accepted, as an integral part of my life, that I felt embarrassed, mortified even, whenever I ventured beyond Chinatown with MaMa" (Yee). By outlining the differences between inside and outside of Chinatown, in addition to Chinese and American settings, Yee portrays the difficulties many Chinese immigrants and descendants of immigrants may face in an American context.

Yee already shows the underlying power dynamic between Chinese and white individuals through her mother at the zipper store. She later recounts direct discrimination and harassment towards Chinese immigrant homes through her family. One night, two F.B.I. agents angrily

barraged Yee's front door with aggressive knocking in search of cocaine. "Open the door!" someone shouted. / "F.B.I.!" / "Open the door! You hear?" / "Open this door!" / Fists hit wood. / Bang! Bang! / Palms slapped wood. / Bang! Bang! / A man's voice. / Shouting. / Shouting English. / A White Man's voice, a *Lo Fan*. / "Open this door! Hear me?" / More shouting. / More banging" (Yee). The officers' aggression is emphasized by the short, stand-alone phrases and onomatopoeia. Yee carefully identifies that these are white men, in particular. These men are in a high position in the societal hierarchy because of their occupation and positionality, giving them the power to exert unwarranted, unreasonable hostility to assume their household has cocaine without repercussions. Moreover, Yee's mother and aunt could not even understand the police, only able to understand their aggressive tone and body language. Many Chinese immigrants may also face difficulties through language barriers, which can result in situations such as this encounter where they can be taken advantage of. Had it not been for Yee's bilingual, "fearless, wise, and kind" (Yee) father, the situation could have escalated even further. By showing the social differences between Chinatown and Downtown, and between Chinese and white folks in Boston, Yee captures disparities between immigrant intersectionality and being Chinese in an American, predominantly white system. However, she also captures the strength and resilience of her family to stand up to and combat these disparities they faced in their daily lives.

In Lu's *Noodle & Bao* and Yee's short stories, we see instances where strong community and family bonds alleviate and fight the underlying disparities Chinatown residents may face. However, Pong Louie's "A Better Life" from the collection *Asian Voices from Beantown* highlights a case where family bonds are in question. Sum Yiu Kwok, an immigrant from Hong Kong, arrives in Boston awaiting Kwong Yiu, his older brother, who sponsored him to come live

in America. Rather than give his younger brother a warm welcome, Kwong Yiu gives Sum Yiu minimal emotional response. He coldly tells Sum Yiu “Don’t complain. You wanted me to bring you here, so now you’re here. I have a lot of schoolwork to do and should be at work, but I’m here to pick you up. Be glad that I came. Let me make this clear now. You’re here because YOU wanted to come” (Louie). Louie does not give us the background of their interactions before Sum Yiu’s arrival, leaving us to solely interpret the disconnect between the two brothers. Kwong Yiu’s emphasis on Sum Yiu’s agency leaving Hong Kong suggests that he may have had less privilege and choice in coming to America. As we saw through Yee’s parents in “Duck,” many immigrants may not have the luxury of choice in their immigration. Moreover, immigrating and staying where you are may both have unfavorable outcomes. In a sense, Sum Yiu may be privileged to even have the ability to want to come to America instead of staying in Hong Kong. The misunderstanding between Sum Yiu and Kwong Yiu captures an instance where community building may be difficult to exist because of key differences in individual experiences.

While Kwong Yiu remained absent from Sum Yiu’s life in Boston, Sum Yiu’s roommate Al actively helped him acclimate to the city. Though friendly, Al was not afraid to show Sum Yiu the structural disparities evident in Chinatown during their tour. Louie writes:

Al explained how the Mass Pike was built through the community, separating Chinatown from the South End, where they lived. How they built the Southeast Expressway through Chinatown to the east, taking half the land and housing. Then they moved to the “Combat Zone”, Boston’s red light district, to the area north of Chinatown and built the Theater District on the other side, effectively boxing Chinatown in and taking most of its land and leaving no room for expansion. He showed Sum New England Medical Center, always trying to take even more of Chinatown. (Louie)

The repetition of Boston’s injustice and negligence toward Chinatown and its community emphasizes how central many of these issues are to the neighborhood, taking precedence over

first highlighting the community, the food, or special events. Even Sum's first impression aligns with the highlights of Al's tour instead of being in awe of a new country. "Food for the Chinese, junk gifts for the tourists, Sum thought, not much housing and no recreation, no parks" (Louie). By openly sharing imperfect realities of Boston Chinatown with new individuals such as Sum, we can spark and facilitate collective action against structural injustice. Some critics may undermine the reliability of these narratives to explain broader issues such as community organizing because of their limited, single perspective. However, these stories reveal truths about the lives of Asian Bostonians that cannot be explained by overviews of history or aggregate data. In the following section, I more thoroughly examine Asian Bostonian writers demonstrating how organizing functions in Boston Chinatown and is often used to combat these types of issues at a community level.

Community Organizing

Similar to community building, many Asian Bostonian authors narrate their perspectives of community organizing and mobilizing for change in Boston Chinatown. Although the necessity to organize reflects inequality the neighborhood faces, the lived experiences of organizing demonstrate strength and resilience against oppressive systems and passion for the communities which organizers come from.

In the case of Lu's *Noodle & Bao*, Momo is highly aware of the gentrification that is taking place in Town 99 even though she is still a kid. The night after Ms. Jujube shuts down the Noodle & Bao food cart, Momo states "it's getting harder and harder to live in Town 99. Ma and Ba don't talk to me about money, but I know that our landlord has been raising the rent. Our town is slowly changing. I notice more shiny new stores and big buildings appearing... and more

of our neighbors disappearing” (Lu 31). The Town 99 that she loved from her childhood is disappearing because economic profits are conflicting with the preservation of heritage and community. As a result, much of Town 99’s original community has been forced to leave and will continue to leave without structural changes supporting working-class families and local businesses.

Subsequently, gentrification has placed lots of stress on families who were once able to comfortably live in Town 99 without fear of eviction. That same night, Momo overhears her own parents’ concerns about being able to stay in Town 99. She hears “... It’s so much... Can’t pay it... The Chan family downstairs already had to leave... We can work more shifts” (Lu 30). The struggles have escalated, forcing Momo to acknowledge it. She is still only a kid, and should be able to focus on more mundane events of childhood such as Cynthia Yee’s memories of playing with her cousin in “Snow Angels.” Unlike many kids, her age, much of her concerns regard whether she will be forced away from her childhood and everything she knows. Property managers such as Ms. Jujube perpetuate these disparities, which necessitates strong-spirited organizers such as Momo to step up to fight for their homes.

Although these rising prices are a great source of stress, even the most direct victims of gentrification may oppose action and organize against it. Momo’s mother overhears Momo in her bedroom shouting “And it’ll start with Noodle & Bao!” (Lu 34) about organizing and preserving Town 99’s community. When Momo excitedly tells her mom that she has “the solution to everyone’s problems” (Lu 34), her mom dismissively replies “You don’t need to solve anything, Momo. Go to sleep” (Lu 34). Even though Momo’s parents are struggling to financially support their family living in Town 99, they oppose Momo’s desire to change their situation. Momo’s

parents are two of many who are most directly forced to confront gentrification, yet do not want Momo to organize against it nor do they start organizing themselves. Momo's mother may want to fully carry the burden of maintaining their living situation, as they do not want Momo to concern herself with these problems either. However, Momo's mother may not realize that losing Town 99 is more than the loss of shelter. To Momo, the community surrounding their home holds just as much weight as the home itself. The dichotomy between Momo's and her mother's sentiments regarding organizing portrays the potential challenges organizers face when their communities are not as motivated as they are. Disagreement within marginalized communities may allow disparities to continue.

Lu then demonstrates how gentrification pits individuals within a community against one another through coalition meetings. Momo forms a coalition of residents, business owners, and workers on the block Ms. Jujube purchased to combat her plans to demolish and make space for her Fancé businesses. However, Momo is immediately faced with confusion and differing motives from her own during their first meeting. Local Feather Yi Yi says "I came because Noodle said there are free baozi" (154), which is much more shallow than Momo's mission of preserving the local community. All Town 99 residents, particularly those who live or work on the block Ms. Jujube plans to take over, are negatively impacted by the gentrification evident throughout the neighborhood. Yet, we see vastly different levels of motivation to fight against gentrification. Because community members may not have the same baseline of morale as Momo, the ability to effectively halt Ms. Jujube's plans becomes much more difficult.

Beyond understanding the coalition's purpose, language appears to be another major barrier to organizing. While Momo can only speak English fluently, many of the block's affiliates

can only understand Cantonese. Some did not even understand why they were at the meeting. One resident wondered if Ms. Jujube was coming to the meeting, even though one of the main points was so that the block's affiliates could form a plan without Ms. Jujube present. Although everyone at the meeting is from Town 99's working class families, many younger individuals such as Momo have more difficulty effectively communicating with their elders due to being American-born. Had Noodle not been there to translate Momo's messages, the coalition may not have made any progress. When gentrification attacks marginalized communities, especially communities of immigrants, its members are challenged with overcoming generational differences. As a result, the communities face unique challenges such as accounting for language barriers or cultural norms, which may fragment their community even more than bringing them closer together.

While Lu's *Noodle & Bao* presents structural disparities and community organizing in an accessible package for children, Cynthia Yee takes a more direct approach to call attention to broader politics and Boston Chinatown disparities that form her narratives. In "Arc," she narrates her family's roots and explains "I began life on the streets of Boston's Chinatown, mazes useful for evading enforcers of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. The Act barred Chinese from immigrating, becoming citizens, and intermarrying. Repealed in 1943, its effects linger. I am the inheritor, survivor, and product of Exclusion" ([Yee](#)). Yee is acutely aware of the dark origins of Boston Chinatown's structure. Evading law enforcement would naturally become exhausting for residents, creating constant fear and anxiety of displacement from their homes. Describing the environment as a series of mazes symbolizes the oppression resulting from the Chinese Exclusion Act, yet reclaims agency by highlighting the resilience and cleverness of the first

Chinese immigrants in the neighborhood. Although Boston Chinatown is rooted in structural racism, Yee contributes an empowering outlook on structural disparities to empower the Boston Chinatown community and become one with their surrounding environment.

As policy gradually repealed “some of the worst effects of racism,” Yee and her friends “became practitioners of several sorts of social protest. We met in underused spaces and strategized. Our grassroots efforts succeeded: we established organizations for our after school child care, bilingual/bicultural health care, English language and job training programs, immigrant labor rights, and affordable housing initiatives” (Yee). The empowerment from strategically organizing to combat disparities such as education, healthcare, and income inequality gives Yee and her friends purpose and satisfaction. Yee recognizes that Chinatown raised her and endured some of the worst effects of racism towards Asian American immigrants, so she must continue to close disparities between Chinatown and other parts of Boston.

In Yee’s “Arc,” she shares internal sentiments that motivate her to organize for Chinatown. Yvonne Ng’s “American” tells a short story of an arguing couple that further proves the necessity for organizing. Jerry, a white man, tries to argue that “People would have a shit fit if I put together a White Writers’ Group” (Ng) with his partner Mei Mei, an Asian woman. Jerry’s dismissive tone toward Mei Mei’s Asian writing group reveals ignorance of systemic racial inequity. Jerry’s argument that society would be upset by a white writers’ group is invalidated by the fact that white writers, particularly in an American context, have access to broad representation and support for their texts. He frames his hypothetical white writers’ group as the victim, when in reality white writers have taken the spotlight from voices such as those from Mei Mei’s Asian writers’ group. Many writers from marginalized groups often do not have

equal access to a platform of a large scale. As a result, their texts are not read nor are their voices heard. Organized spaces such as Mei Mei's writers' group are needed to reclaim space and uplift voices such as theirs who have historically been marginalized in the context of American literature and history.

Even though Mei Mei screams at Jerry and calls out his ignorance, Jerry tries reaffirming his point, replying "I just don't agree with having a group like that. You set yourselves up to be a target... and you're separatists. I just don't get why you need a group like that in the first place" (Ng). Because Jerry does not face systematic marginalization, he perceives organizing efforts such as Mei Mei's writers' group as pointless despite the racial disparities Asian Americans face daily. While Jerry frames his misunderstanding of the group as a concern, the authority of structurally white systems that Jerry is in jeopardy when marginalized communities collectively organize to amplify their voices against the status quo. Jerry's critiques highlight struggles collective spaces may experience, as Mei Mei's writers' group is scrutinized for having no purpose despite its clear ability to make space for local Asians to share their lived experiences. More importantly, they delegitimize the adversity Mei Mei and her peers in her writers' group face as Asian Americans in a predominantly white geographic and structural context.

Mei Mei rebuts "First of all, I'm a proud red-blooded American. Second - until people stop saying to me - "oh you speak English well.. or no, where are you REALLY FROM? when damn Charlestown isn't enough - that's when we wouldn't need groups like this. I've got to go" (Ng). Many individuals such as Mei Mei embrace the intersectionality of being both Chinese and American. Unfortunately, Mei Mei is the subject of many microaggressions and racist sentiments for being Asian American. Moreover, many broader judgments regarding Asian Americans lack

the understanding that both identities can co-exist and form unique experiences beyond being solely Asian or solely American. Until Mei Mei and other Asian Americans are allowed to live in a society that does not scrutinize her identity and lived experiences, collective organizing through spaces such as her writers' group is needed to counter systemic disparities placed on Asian Americans.

While Yee and Ng demonstrate the necessity for organizing, Pong Louie's "Fight for Rights" shows forces within Chinatown that threaten the ability to organize. Minh, a Chinatown resident working for a local restaurant, is voicing his frustrations to his partner Lan about his workplace. Lan and Minh exchange dialogue about the correct path forward:

"You can't just keep working at that restaurant and not get paid for your work. It's not fair." / "What can I do? There's nothing I can do about it." / "You can talk to your co-workers first. Get them to all work together against Li." / "They're all in the same situation. They don't know what to do either. It's useless." / "If you don't talk to them, how do you know that they don't know anything? Talk to them tomorrow; promise me." (Louie)

Lan is just as dissatisfied with Li, Minh's manager, as Minh is even though she is not even working there. Her immediate suggestion to Minh is to work with his coworkers to end the exploitation. Even though Minh is the direct victim of Li's exploitation, he is naturally inclined to comply with Li's current working conditions. The difference between Lan's and Minh's responses to Li's exploitation reveals that organizing can be difficult when directly faced with oppressive systems. Minh's priority to maintain his stable restaurant job over fair treatment has many parallels with Momo's parents' initial opposition to Momo's organizing efforts. Organizing against Li may disrupt the workplace stability he has, so he sees no point to try and creating change. Because he feels hopeless that any change can be made, he assumes all his coworkers hold the same attitude. However, Lan being external to the exploitation at the restaurant allows

her to more clearly understand collective action against Li as a viable option for Minh and his coworkers. Beyond unfair compensation, Minh has also been working 11 hours a day for six days each week. This leaves little time for Minh to rest and to see Lan and their kids at home. Workplace disparities affect both the workers and the community which their work aims to serve. Although oppressive systems can emotionally trap us into complying with harmful conditions, we must understand their broader negative impacts and look for ways to organize against them.

After discussing Li's exploitation with his coworkers, Minh received suggestions about receiving help from the Chinatown People's Progressive Association. Even after he found out his coworkers were fed up with the restaurant, Minh still had some hesitation about going to CPPA because "People also said that they're commies. He hated the commies who had ruined Vietnam, splitting it into north and south. But he also knew that Lan, being from China, would support the idea" (Louie). Minh has carried the intergenerational trauma of Vietnam's communist past, influencing his attitude towards certain individuals or groups. Despite CPPA's resources to crack down on Li's exploitative practices, these rumors make him extremely skeptical about associating with the group. For many Asians and Asian Americans, histories between Asian countries can have a strong influence on who we choose to be in solidarity with. As a result, strong biases depending on ethnicity develop fracturing our needed solidarity in an Asian American context. Although our linked histories may be triggering and create strong biases against certain ethnic groups, we need to put our pasts aside for collective organizing efforts that require as much solidarity as possible.

Unfortunately, Minh would not live much longer after the CPPA had brought justice to the case. One night shortly after the case was resolved, "Lan heard three loud bangs. They

sounded like gunshots, so she ran down the stairs and saw Minh lying in the doorway in a pool of blood and screamed. New England Medical Center was just across the street, but it was too late, Minh's body was lifeless. All three shots were to his head. Lan held Minh in her arms, crying" (Louie). The murderer's identity and motives remain unclear. However, we cannot help but think Minh's death is linked to cracking down on Li's exploitation as this occurred immediately after the case had been solved. Tragically, the effort to organize against Li came at the cost of Minh's life. Minh and his coworkers had fought for months just to earn back the compensation they should have earned in the first place. Li was even allowed to continue business, so long as he was monitored and did not fire Minh or his coworkers for reporting him. Yet, the murder of Minh shows the harsh reality that strong, noble individuals are equally as vulnerable to danger as anyone else.

For Lan, she was so excited by the hope that "Now all of us can have a somewhat better life, not just you and me and the kids, but all the other workers and their families too" (Louie) only for her husband to be taken away from her that same night. In this scene's background, New England Medical Center symbolizes failure to save lives from the community which it has progressively taken so much land from. The ending to this short story is not the satisfying ending that we wanted nor what Minh and his family deserved. However, Louie's documenting this reality honors Minh's legacy as he made positive changes for the Chinatown community which should not get lost in history. Meanwhile, we must remain strong and continue to organize against oppressive systems of power even when severe tragedies occur.

The texts I have examined thus far are from individual authors. However, "Odes of Activism" combines works from multiple authors, many of which inspire activism and community

organizing. It is written collectively by Amanda Chiang, Gay Eng, Jackie Kim, and Pong Louie. This ode is broken into sections, presumably one section per author, though who wrote which section of the ode remains unclear. Additionally, the collection notes that “This ode was written to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Asian American Resource Workshop and was performed by members of the Writers’ Group at the 2009 banquet” (*Asian*).

The first section of the ode uses the second-person point of view to craft a call to action. The speaker first asks us a series of rhetorical questions “What do you do when men holding Justice are holding her upside down? What do you do when the semblance of the fair is so crooked, twisted, and locked up that all appears as confusion that begets rage, that begets anger, and is gonna be gettin’ you?” (Chiang et. al). These questions call out patriarchy and structural disparities, aiming to anger us and motivate action to combat these power structures. When we are direct victims of structurally unfair systems, we can lean towards a highly emotional state that prevents us from acting against them. By framing these questions to ask us what we do, the speaker encourages us to take action and organize rather than be angry yet substantively complacent.

While the first section of the ode takes the approach of a call to action to promote activism and organizing, the third section tells the specific story of the Tam Brothers to show the power and necessity of community organizing. Similar to the first section, the speaker asks rhetorical questions to capture their rejection of being complicit with the injustice toward the Tam Brothers. They ask “How could they arrest the victims and charge them with murder? And how could I want to be part of the legal system that allowed it to happen?” (Chiang et. al). The Tam Brothers were constantly subject to racial violence in Charlestown. Perpetrators of this

violence were “Townies,” a group of teenagers who attacked the brothers on their way home. As a result of defending themselves, the Tam brothers were wrongly accused of murdering a white girl. Despite being constantly in danger for their existence, legal authorities dared to believe that the Tam brothers were the ones who executed the murder instead of the “Townies.” Out of the dozen “Townies” at the scene, the Tam brothers were picked as targets in court.

Moreover, by being a citizen of Boston, the speaker is inherently complicit in the legal injustice of the Tam brothers’ charge of murder through their tax dollars that fund Boston’s government and legal systems. The least they could do was rally for justice for the Tam brothers, who were wrongly accused and scapegoated as a result of Boston’s flawed legal system. Many individuals felt the same way as the speaker. “Community people were outraged and attended the trial every day to show their support, resulting in a happy ending. They were acquitted and exonerated... The Tam brothers were considered innocent, except for being immigrants” (Chiang et. al). By organizing and collectively showing up to the trial in support of the Tam brothers, the speaker and community members were able to help sway the results of the brothers’ trial in their favor. The impact of the community coming to support the Tam brothers in person proves that organizing can effectively combat injustices Boston’s citizens experience every day. Moreover, public advocacy exposes Boston’s failure towards its Asian community to the general public. Documenting stories such as the Tam brothers’ and calling attention to the underlying factors of their injustice shows us the importance of organizing for Boston’s Asian community. Asian Bostonians’ roots in activism and collective organizing have granted us many resources and privileges we have today that others in the past did not.

Instead of using prose to highlight the importance of community organizing, the fourth section presents a poem “asian american studies” about frustrations with America’s structural racism that necessitates organizing in the first place. The speaker defines Asian American Studies as “struggling / to educate / and inform / about / how / Amerika / screwed us:” (Chiang et. al). Each line is no longer than two words, which continues throughout the rest of the poem. The brevity of these lines emphasizes each word by disrupting the flow of the speaker’s message. The disruption created through these short lines conveys the speaker’s fatigue, which tells us, readers, that we need to pay attention to their message. Scholars and educators in the realm of Asian American Studies struggle to share their knowledge in the first place. This struggle is often due to the creation of narratives catered to white Americans rather than telling authentic stories from Asian Americans. Moreover, structural barriers prevent many Asian Americans from having their voices equally heard. Spelling America as “Amerika” resists notions of national pride so the speaker’s emphasis remains on the nation’s failure to Asian Americans.

These failures include how America “excluded / us, / restricted / us, / interned / us, / silenced / us, / stereotyped / us, / whitewashed / us, / and then / pointed / to us / as / models” (Chiang et. al). America has oppressed Asian Americans in many ways, yet simultaneously tries to frame Asian Americans as a model for how racial minorities are ‘supposed to be’ through stereotypes of Asians as obedient and submissive. The speaker’s repetition of “us” shows America’s failures to Asian Americans is not just a personal opinion, and that they impact all Asian Americans. By including themselves and the Asian American community as a whole, the speaker invites other Asian Americans to use their voices to spread awareness around structural disparities against them and to organize ways in which these disparities impact their daily lives.

After closely reading and analyzing many narrative texts from Asian authors with ties to Boston, I have found that the lived experiences told in these stories often complicate our understanding of Asian Bostonian history and data. They offer unique perspectives that may deviate from historical resources and data figures. While some critics may argue that these singular perspectives do not accurately represent what Asian Bostonians generally experience, I argue that valuing these narratives equally helps us understand the nuances of community struggles and liberation. In the following section, I further synthesize my findings between history, data, and the narrative texts examined in this thesis.

Synthesis: What History, Data, and Narratives Contribute to Each Other

So far, I have analyzed Asian Bostonian historical context, contemporary data, and narrative texts written by local Asian authors in separate sections. In this section, I synthesize what each category of source material contributes to the other. By placing history and data parallel to local narratives, I find that history and data develop an aggregate sense of Asian Bostonian disparities and local narratives complicate history and data through individual perspectives. When together, the combination of these sources provides a deeper understanding of patterns of disparities, resistance, and responses of Asian Bostonians.

Because Asian Bostonians heavily responded to the busing crisis with organizing and activism, synthesizing this history with my close reading of “Odes of Activism” archives and resists past injustice. In doing so, we find that “Odes of Activism” recalls the experiences of the Tam brothers and other Asians during the busing crisis and uses these events to provide the perspective of being directly involved in solidarity and organizing. Likewise, researching Asian

Bostonians with the busing crisis underscores the importance of having platforms such as poetry to unify communities.

When Boston began school desegregation in 1974, with busing of students of color as part of this policy, the city's main goal was to rid public education of outdated, discriminatory policy. However, the combination of busing and segregation practices still in place within the walls of some schools resulted in racially motivated violence and accusations towards many Asian students. For example, Chinese students bused to predominantly white neighborhoods faced public harassment. Moreover, the Tam brothers were wrongly arrested for the murder of a white girl even though they were innocent and often attacked by a white teenage gang also known as the "Townies." As a result of such injustices, Asian Bostonians organized boycotts and demands for safety and supported victims such as the Tam brothers in legal cases. These tragedies rooted in disparity fueled action toward justice for Asian Bostonians.

Written decades later by authors from AARW, "Odes of Activism" recalls the busing crisis and the Tam brothers to portray the emotions behind community organizing and resistance. In particular, the poem's third section frames the events of the busing crisis in systemic racism and that change was of special moral importance and urgency for the safety of Boston's communities of color. The authors expand their emphasis on structural racism that Asians often face with the fourth section's staccato structure that bluntly explains that stories such as Tams' are overlooked in Bostonian history. The disruptive, dissatisfied tone expressed through different structures in each section of "Odes of Activism" shows that although narrating these tragic histories is exhausting, they are also necessary to model future organization efforts.

Given clear parallels of trauma, death, and community impact between the Chinatown Massacre and Pong Louie's "Fight for Rights," I must analyze them in conjunction with one another. While Louie's story of Minh is not a direct retelling of the Chinatown Massacre, "Fight for Rights" teaches us mechanisms at the individual level. Although the Chinatown Massacre is often perceived as nothing more than a gang violence tragedy, these historical and narrative sources demonstrate structural neglect that allows underground crime to persist. Historical context tells us why Chinatown gang violence has existed, while Louie's short story portrays tensions around organizing against gang violence.

As mentioned earlier, the Chinatown Massacre shocked both Chinatown and Boston as a whole, and subconsciously looms over the community as Hung Tien Pham is still wanted by the FBI, and community members from the time of the massacre are still with us to discuss the massacre from their perspective. When placed in the context of Chinatown gang violence history and local community members, the massacre becomes much more complex than proof of Boston Chinatown's underground crime. MOCA tells us that organized crime that takes place in Chinatowns across the United States often stems from structural disparities, namely housing, immigration barriers, and economic well-being. In NBC's documentary, local Chinatown worker Rosemary Lim's description of Chinatown gang violence leaders affirms MOCA's conclusions. She says that Sky Dragon, one of these leaders, is just as normal to her as anyone else in the neighborhood and not inherently bad. He simply used underground crime as his outlet to protect Chinatown locals from externalities, which the city has failed to do in many ways as we have observed through historical context and data on Asians in Boston. Lim's account of Sky Dragon frames him and his work as informal protectors of Chinatown's locals rather than purely just a

criminal, while still acknowledging the flaws and dangers of his methodology. Historical research on Chinatown gang violence, in addition to Lim's account of the subject in NBC's documentary, frames underground crime as a flawed, but protective role in place of Boston's lack of protections for its Chinatown residents rather than an inherent cultural pitfall.

In "Fight for Rights," Louie portrays a much different framing around how Boston Chinatown locals respond and interact with closeby gang violence. While Minh eventually organized against Li, he initially resisted the idea because of his sense of helplessness in the situation. Oppressive systems such as Li's exploitative workplace conditions harm people's financial situations, but more importantly their ways of thinking, trust, and belief in possibilities. While Louie never confirms if Li was directly involved in Minh's death, the abrupt transition from Minh's organizing to his death suggests that his actions against Li's exploitation carry fatal consequences. Many would consider Minh to have done the morally correct thing to report Li and his exploitative practices. Yet, Minh is ultimately the one punished the most by being killed shortly after his report to CPPA. His death was directly across from NEMC, a major structure within Boston's Chinatown we know is directly tied to gentrification and neglect for locals. Even with this major hospital right at their doorstep, Minh could not be saved and fell victim to underground crime Boston has allowed to happen through structural neglect of Chinatown.

To further elaborate on the struggles Asian Bostonians have faced tied to NEMC, my final synthesis expands the ideas from my findings about the 1990s community organizing for Parcel C and Shaina Lu's graphic novel *Noodle & Bao*. In both contexts, large institutions threaten the displacement of communities for their benefit. However, this history and Lu's graphic novel do not simply critique and call attention to gentrification. Rather, they center

Boston Chinatown's and Town 99's commitment to preserving the communal unity that provides its locals a comforting home. Momo, *Noodle & Bao*'s protagonist and main organizer, makes it clear to us that Town 99 is central to her identity, sense of belonging, and happiness. Likewise, protests against NEMC's takeover of Parcel C in the 1990s were ultimately a response to defend against a movement that would contribute towards the erasure of Boston's Chinatown.

The organizers of these respective movements face many challenges in meeting their demands. For example, the Parcel C coalition struggled in its relationships with stakeholders. Many within the coalition were disappointed with Mayor Menino's decision to transfer Parcel C to CCBA because of skepticism of CCBA's interest in the Chinatown community. However, Lu carefully adds that community organizing can be difficult because of challenges rallying the community needed to embrace resistance movements. Momo's initial attempts to rally her neighbors against Ms. Jujube were met with confusion and resistance. Because she is second generation and faces language barriers with her elders, basic communication created high barriers for her to convey her messages. Moreover, her parents' discouragement toward her organizing reflects generational differences in response to threats to her home. The Parcel C coalition's struggles with stakeholders, combined with Momo's difficulties rallying her neighbors to combat Ms. Jujube's luxury developments prove that solidarity is difficult to gather in marginalized communities where economic and cultural conditions go against the needs of community organizing.

Upon synthesizing Asian Bostonian history and data alongside narratives, we find that understanding systemic challenges throughout the 20th century that Asians in Boston have faced requires more than acknowledgment of outcomes. Researching relevant historical context and

data is crucial for learning about at an aggregate level. However, narratives contribute to the lived experiences of Asian Bostonians by showing us how navigating structural disparities feels, what has been lost, and why these events and figures matter at an individual and community level. “Odes of Activism,” “Fight for Rights,” and *Noodle & Bao* are just three of many examples of local narratives that show the struggle, endurance, and organizing efforts directly from Asian Bostonian points of view. By humanizing history and data, narrative works from local Asian writers complicate Asian Bostonian history and data and demonstrate that the well-being of the Asian Bostonian community is created through struggle and strength at an individual and community level.

Conclusion

Based on historical context and data about Asian Bostonians from the 20th century to today, we find that many have faced structural disparities that continue today. These disparities permeate many parts of daily life, ranging from poor environmental conditions to underground crime. Many statistics also suggest that Asian Bostonians face unique struggles that other demographic groups in the Boston area do not.

While narratives can only represent no more than a few people at once, the texts I select for close reading provide insight into what life as an Asian Bostonian is like at an individual level. These narratives have aligned with the disparities we find in history and data, but complicate our understanding by showing the mechanics of why these disparities may persist. Other times, these narratives completely deviate from any notion of disparities, focusing on the mundane parts of life such as community, family, and food that bring joy and liberation.

When these different materials are synthesized together, we develop a more complete understanding of Asian Bostonian experiences from the 20th century to today. For example, knowing that community organizing has been used amongst Asian Bostonians to combat flawed systems falls short of fully understanding what organizing is. Many narratives we have analyzed show that starting and sustaining organizing efforts to create substantive change takes lots of unrecognized effort and time, as it can often be met with pushback even with the community needed to create change. History and data are crucial for gathering a broad understanding of Asian Bostonian history and trends, but narratives give insight into the mechanics and deviations from that broad understanding.

This thesis extensively analyses many narrative works written by Boston-based Asian authors, which many scholars have not done as thoroughly. However, there are still limitations to the methodology in this thesis. Namely, these limitations relate to the scope of the narrative subject and the perspectives of authors. Although I contend that the unique, singular experiences told through narrative texts form a more complex understanding of Asian Bostonian experiences, the scope of perspectives can become much more diverse.

Most, if not all of the texts I have analyzed, center around the experience of Chinese Bostonians and predominantly Chinese enclaves. Gathering an in-depth collective analysis of Chinese Bostonian literature is valuable. However, understanding the experiences of other Asian ethnicities in Boston through text is equally necessary. Boston is home to many other Asian ethnic enclaves. For example, Dorchester has a significant Vietnamese population with many Vietnamese businesses called Little Saigon (Boston.gov). Although AARW, the non-profit organization responsible for *Asian Voices From Beantown*, is based in Dorchester, many of the

stories within the collection still center around Chinese Bostonians or Boston's Chinatown. Much of the source material I have identified, both non-fiction research and narrative texts, use 'Chinese' and 'Asian' interchangeably. Subsequently, many individuals conflate the experiences of Chinese Bostonians and the history of Boston's Chinatown with the experiences of Asian Bostonians as a whole rather than just a piece of a much larger tale. Future literary scholarship should encompass the experiences of Asian Bostonians across the Asian diaspora in order to develop a more complete understanding of the differences and similarities amongst Asian ethnicities in Boston.

Bibliography

Air Pollution in Boston's Chinatown and Income Disparity,

sites.tufts.edu/gis/files/2017/06/Gurcan_Anil_UEP232_2016.pdf. Accessed 30 Apr. 2025.

Asian Voices from Beantown: Short Stories & Poetry from the AARW Writers' Group.

AARW Writers' Group, 2012.

@chinatownclt. "Chinatown: The Hottest Neighborhood in Boston" Instagram, 14 July 2024.

Kath, Ryan, et al. "Boston's Chinatown Massacre: A New Look amid an Ongoing Manhunt, 30 Years Later." *NBC Boston*, NBC10 Boston, 3 Aug. 2021

Leung, Shirley. "Data Points to Disparities among Asian Americans, a Demographic That Often Is Portrayed as Monolithic - The Boston Globe." *BostonGlobe.Com*, The Boston Globe, 6 June 2021

Lu, Shaina. *Noodle & Bao*. Quill Tree Books/HarperAlley, Imprints of HarperCollins Publishers, 2024.

Martin, Phillip. "50 Years Ago, Chinese Students Were an Underserved Afterthought in Boston's Busing Crisis." *GBH*, GBH, 6 Sept. 2024

Norton, Michael P. "Federal Grant Targets I-90's Negative Impact on Boston's Chinatown." *WBUR News*, 28 Feb. 2023

Pazzanese, Christina. "School Reform Expert on 50-Year Legacy of Boston Busing."

Harvard Gazette, 26 June 2024

"Who We Are." *Asian Women for Health*

Yee, Cynthia. "Arc." *Hudson Street Chronicles*, 3 May 2019

Yee, Cynthia. "Duck." *Hudson Street Chronicles*, 12 Mar. 2021

Yee, Cynthia. "Gifts." *Hudson Street Chronicles*, 20 Feb. 2018

Yee, Cynthia. "Life from the Viewpoint of a Chinatown Chicken." *Hudson Street Chronicles*, 16 Feb. 2018

Yee, Cynthia. "Snow Angels." *Hudson Street Chronicles*, 14 Feb. 2018