Identity Politics?

The Asian American Movement in History and Literature

In December, 2014, a friend called during my visit to New York City. She invited me to a rally supporting the family of Akai Gurley, a young black individual shot and killed by a police officer in the Brooklyn housing projects. The police officer was Chinese American, and the Asian American community group coordinating the rally thought it important to have the demonstration in Manhattan’s Chinatown. A group of us gathered in a small park on a frigid afternoon, singing and chanting while Chinese-speaking activists leafleted the residents passing through.

When the police officer was later indicted, the group publicly commended the Brooklyn district attorney. But other Chinese Americans reacted differently. As the New York Times reported, some saw it as discriminatory: hadn’t white police officers avoided charges in the murders of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and several others? Phil Gim, one of the individuals propelling opposition to the indictment, claimed the officer was "being sacrificed for all the injustices that happened," and added, "we don’t want to be pushed around or picked on anymore" (Yee).

Gim’s quote is interesting because it acknowledges the injustice of police killings while advancing a politics anchored in an ethnic identity perceived as disrespected by state institutions. For those who find the position objectionable, it likely illustrates what literary critic Helen Jun has diagnosed as the limits of liberal
multiculturalism. Indeed, it magnifies the problems that Jun found in criticisms of the Los Angeles Police Department’s abandonment of Koreatown during the Rodney King riots: regardless of personal outrage at the King decision, such critiques implicitly relied on the specter of a disorderly black populace (2-3).

Within Asian American studies, criticism of liberal multiculturalism has developed over at least two decades. Lisa Lowe’s influential *Immigrant Acts* (1996) devoted a chapter to "heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity" in order to undermine representations of a monolithic Asian American community. Kandice Chuh’s more recent *Imagine Otherwise* (2003) is notable for the severity of its conclusions. Chuh argues that liberal multiculturalism, as a politics that seeks equality for Asian Americans and others within the U.S. nation-state, cannot adequately ground solidarity with movements that question the legitimacy of the state, such as the Native Hawaiian struggle for sovereignty. Furthermore, liberal multiculturalism’s assumption that society is divided into ethnic identities affiliated with discrete, knowable cultures is itself politically problematic. An Asian American ethnic identity that emphasizes the importance of racialization over other social processes, such as heteronormativity, may reproduce social marginalization within Asian American communities. Ultimately, the problem, for Chuh, is that every identity is exclusionary. She proposes conceptualizing Asian American criticism as a "subject-less" discourse unmoored from any substantive Asian American identity (26).

Writing with a very different set of theoretical commitments, Walter Benn Michaels has argued in *The Shape of the Signifier* (2004) that in a world understood
as comprised of multiple subject positions, each with its own culture or perspective, differences in beliefs are taken as reflecting differences in identity. Liberal multiculturalism - what Michaels calls identity politics - in this model is essentially the legitimization and appreciation of practices, beliefs, or cultures of previously marginalized subject positions. Michaels advocates instead for an understanding of politics that might be termed 'ideological', in which what is at stake is the universal truth of contested beliefs.

While Michaels and Chuh differ in many respects, both move from an analysis of liberal multiculturalism's problems towards a more general critique of identity; both, in fact, assume a relatively direct link between identity and politics. This paper is also an engagement and critique of liberal multiculturalism, but proceeds differently; rather than conceive of identity politics abstractly, I draw attention to the specific ways that Asian American politics and identity have been represented in the historiography and literature on the Asian American movement. The Asian American movement (AAM) generated complex and unexpected linkages between identity and politics, and the narratives I analyze do not presume or aim at a simplistic ethnic group unity or liberal multiculturalist politics. While historical studies and literary fiction are produced with divergent purposes, and thus provide different ways to conceive the connection between identity and politics in Asian America, reading both these genres as narratives underscores how that connection is not simply given but must be represented.

In the first part of this paper, I evaluate major historical interpretations of the AAM, focusing on liberal multiculturalism and radical responses to it. Both of
these approaches prove unsatisfactory due to their assumption that the movement possessed a unique political essence. I highlight the significance of class in explaining the differences between the frameworks.

In the second half of this paper, I examine how liberal multiculturalist and radical frameworks imply distinct conceptions of "Asian American" identity: Asian America can be thought of as either an ethnic or a political community. I read Karen Tei Yamashita's novel I Hotel to reconstruct the dynamics of interracial solidarity in political Asian America, a notion that seems alien in an age when 'Asian American' has frozen into a marker of ethnicity. I conclude by asking whether our discussion may open up possibilities for new historical narratives about the AAM.

**Part One: History**

"In Chinatown, as a matter of fact, our main problem is the Chinese bourgeoisie"

---Alex Hing, 1970

The Asian American movement consisted of a bewildering array of activism. Students demanded and won ethnic studies departments; other individuals in 'the movement' threw themselves into trade unions, "communes and cooperatives, drug rehabilitation programs, bookstores, newspapers and journals, theaters" (Yamashita 610). Activists developed Marxist cadre organizations alongside cultural centers, law cooperatives and musical groups, campaigns for housing and campaigns against sexism. In order to make sense of the movement's diversity, historians have sought to establish a defining political vision of the AAM. Although movement participants adhered to a broad range of political beliefs, historians tend to view one set of ideas
as central to the movement. This political vision proves its superiority relative to other contesting visions as the AAM develops, as movement actors that adopt this vision prove to be the most effective agents of social change.

William Wei's *The Asian American Movement* (1993) was the first book-length study of the AAM; for over a decade, it was also the only book-length study. It has therefore become the starting point for subsequent discussions of the AAM. From the study's first page, Wei sets forth a liberal multiculturalist - what he calls ethnic or cultural pluralist - depiction of U.S. society. Liberal multiculturalism describes the social landscape as one comprised of ethnic communities with different cultural worlds. According to Wei, the general spirit of the American nation is one that aspires to relations of "cooperation and harmony" among different ethnicities; however, the historical prevalence of racial oppression has undermined this aspiration. Within this framework, ethnic groups confronting the reality of racism realize that "in order to be an integral part of American society and to interact with others on equal terms, they must first become an autonomous and empowered people" (8). Wei casts the AAM within this general mold: it was "essentially a middle-class reform movement for racial equality, social justice, and political empowerment in a culturally pluralist America" (1).

Wei thus begins with a liberal multiculturalist vision of the United States and, based on this assumption, describes the AAM as seeking to realize that vision. As a consequence, the AAM’s presumed political goal is to become an integral part of American society, by removing barriers to participation in its culture, economy, and politics. The movement’s pursuit of "racial equality" is described as a striving for
interaction on "equal terms", which I presume means the dismantling of
discrimination and the elimination of racial disparities across many spheres of
social life. For Wei, the movement can only accomplish this by transforming Asian
Americans into an "autonomous and empowered people." Although Wei omits a
fuller description of the content of this transformation, these terms hint at the
importance of pan-ethnic group unity as a prerequisite for political power within a
pluralist landscape.

This characterization of the movement as liberal multiculturalist in essence
appears to contradict Wei's description of the AAM as "lack[ing] an ideology or even
a plan of action to attract and unite a following" (3). Indeed, throughout *The Asian
American Movement* Wei foregrounds the AAM's sharp internal political divisions,
particularly between reformists and revolutionaries. Wei therefore maintains that *in
essence* the AAM is a quest for cultural pluralism while also acknowledging the
existence within the movement of a variety of political beliefs, including some at
odds with cultural pluralism. Wei manages this contradiction by concluding that the
movement achieved its goal of a more authentic multicultural society "without
[movement activists] necessarily intending to do so" (274). In this account, then, the
AAM aimed at a redistribution of power among ethnic groups within the institutions
of liberal democracy despite the ideological diversity of the movement and perhaps
even against the intentions of many of its participants. This may be a strained
historical interpretation, but it is the straightforward result of Wei's assumptions
about the nature of U.S. society and the political essence of the Asian American
movement.
Wei's chapter on the Asian American women's movement sheds light on how the liberal multiculturalist framework shapes the author's historical narrative. The chapter's title, "Race versus Gender," is misleading; the author's aim is to show that gender divisions do not ultimately undermine his commitment to liberal multiculturalist politics. Wei describes how the Asian American feminism developed as a response to sexism within movement organizations. The movement's seminal newspaper *Gidra*, for instance, was plagued by a sexist work culture, and the staff's gender composition changed from near parity to heavily male-dominated (75). With empirical richness, Wei describes the activist organizations that emerged during the 1970s and 1980s, from cultural and artistic collectives like Unbound Feet, to outreach programs serving survivors of domestic violence such as the New York Asian Women's Center. The late 1970s and early 1980s witness a qualitative shift in the movement, as participation in the 1977 national women's conference in Houston spurs both a set of regional conferences focusing on Asian American women and the formation in 1982 of the National Network of Asian Pacific American Women (NNAPAW). In sum, Wei views Asian American feminists as deeply impacting Asian American community organizations, "making them more sensitive to women's issues," while engagement with "European American feminist organizations" has been less successful (100).

The chapter thus describes how gender divisions within the movement lead to a more inclusive liberal multiculturalist vision, rather than eroding the ethnic group unity that provides a basis for that vision. This is one response to critics such as Chuh, who argue that liberal multiculturalism presumes an ethnic identity that
privileges race at the expense of other aspects of identity. On the other hand, while
the chapter reconciles the opposition between race and gender announced in its
title, Wei’s account draws attention to another cleavage within the community that
appears less easily reconciled: class.

Wei mentions, however briefly, two groups - Asian Immigrant Women's
Advocates, and Korean Immigrant Workers Alliance - that organize immigrant
workers, and in general he writes with sympathy about working-class women, the
"most neglected and least active" among Asian American women (80). Matters are
different, however, when it comes to the activists that actually raise working-class
issues within larger Asian American women's organizations.

Within Wei's narrative, the series of regional Asian American women
conferences culminating in the founding of NNAPAW are crucial, amounting to
nothing less than "a revival of the Asian American women's movement" (94). But
the organizing leading up to the conference was criticized by activists (dubbed" the
Old Guard" by Wei) who called attention to the lack of involvement by "low-income
immigrant women workers" in conference planning (95). They withdrew their
participation and remained on the sidelines.

For Wei this is not surprising, because The Asian American Movement
questions whether these activists are genuinely committed to the women's
movement. In describing their critiques of NNAPAW, Wei remarks that, "the Old
Guard believes that class issues are more important than gender ones and thinks
[NNAPAW] should emphasize working-class women." Wei goes on to describe how
NNAPAW responded to such criticism:
National Network believes that the type of community activism characteristic of the first phase of the women's movement was ineffectual and that it will be professionals, rather than the workers, who will be in the vanguard of social change in the United States. Besides, its leaders claim, when it organizes activities that focus mainly on middle-class women, it is merely responding to the wishes of the majority of its members. The leaders can also claim, with considerable justification, that many of their general activities, such as combating stereotypes, benefit all Asian-Pacific women. (98)

Wei never specifies any of the individuals that comprise the Old Guard, so we cannot verify his representation of their position. However, it does seem reasonable to conclude that his account of the debate over NNAPAW portrays its leaders' argument extensively and in its own terms, and describes the Old Guard's claim reductively and in exaggerated terms; it is unlikely that a participant would have justified a focus on working-class women with the reason that "class issues are more important than gender ones." Overall, though, this passage is notable for the author's dismissal of a politics that emphasizes class differences within the Asian American community even while it underscores the class-based beliefs (professionals, not workers, as the agents of change) that characterize NNAPAW's leadership.

Wei's description of the Old Guard's alleged prioritization of class replicates his dismissive tone towards the AAM's left-wing activists as a whole. Wei forcefully maintains that that the AAM's political maturity depended on jettisoning the radical and revolutionary politics that were attractive to a substantial number of movement activists. For Wei, the left's social and political analysis was substantially wrong, because they "changed their focus from racism to capitalism. They believed that racial oppression was merely a tool of capitalists to divide working-class people and that the fundamental solution was socialism," an ideology that Wei describes, with
much irony, as a form of "false consciousness" (238). Whether this is a criticism or caricature of the theories of racial oppression that circulated among the AAM’s revolutionary wing will not be considered here. For Wei, it is a flawed analysis that produces political blindness.

Finally, the revolutionaries themselves move to pursue political openings in the electoral system. This, Wei notes, amounts to nothing less than a renunciation of political radicalism. It is worth quoting his commentary on this development at length:

In their quest for empowerment, Asian Americans have explored two different political roads: radical and electoral. In the late 1960s, many of them took the radical road, which reached its apex in the mid-1970s. The antiwar movement had been the center of their political lives, keeping Asian Americans of different political persuasions together for the duration. When the Vietnam War ended in 1975, they were at a loss as to what to do next. [...] Many concluded that the militant confrontational style of the late 1960s was no longer an effective tool for social change.

In the 1980s, the only viable option open to Asian American activists was electoral politics. By engaging in electoral politics they ended their political isolation and purely community role. [...] As more and more Asian American political activists become involved in electoral politics, the more likely it is that they will finally be able to achieve the Movement’s goals of empowerment and equality, as well as progress toward the nation’s goals of a democratic and ethnically pluralist society. (269-270)

The prodigal youth has grown into a responsible adult, and the mark of maturity is the capacity of the Asian American community, often in coalition with other minorities, to elect Asian American political officials. Ascriptive representation is the culmination of empowerment. Protests and clashes with the police had their place in an earlier era, but they don’t win elections. To the extent that the radicals and revolutionaries awaken to this realization, Wei argues, they implicitly acknowledge the central importance of liberal multiculturalism.
Wei begins his account with an assumption about the political essence of the Asian American movement; paradoxically, his interpretation of the rancorous debates within the movement only reinforces that assumption. The AAM validates the ideals of liberal multiculturalism, despite the intentions of many of its actual participants, because avowed revolutionaries become politically effective only by joining with reformers and moving into "mainstream" politics to reap the rewards of an "open and flexible" social order. For Wei, writing in the early 1990s, contemporary events must have seemed to support this judgment, as the crisis of the socialist bloc – encompassing both the Tiananmen Square repression and the collapse of the Soviet Union – allegedly rendered a final verdict on the socialist alternative to capitalism. Wei’s triumphalism, we have seen, depends partly on a narrative in which initially deep divisions - along lines of gender and political ideology - are reconciled to the benefit of liberal multiculturalism and notions of ethnic group unity. But we have also glimpsed, in Wei’s discussion of Asian American feminism, how The Asian American Movement has greater difficulty addressing class cleavages. We will return to the question of class division and ethnic unity in our discussion of radical responses to Wei’s interpretive framework.

It would be almost fifteen years before the next book length study on the AAM appeared in 2008: Michael Liu, Kim Geron, and Tracy Lai’s The Snake Dance of Asian American Activism (referred to in this paper as The Snake Dance). Its publication reflected a renewal of interest in Asian American movement scholarship. Most of this recent work has challenged Wei’s liberal multicultural
interpretation and instead stressed the political radicalism of the movement (Fujino 2008). Liu, Geron, and Lai, for instance, define the movement’s political vision against ethnic pluralism. For them, the mainstream conventions of liberal multiculturalism that dominate Asian American activism in the 1990s constrict the scope of political goals to "equitable access to seats of power, changes in policies, and amore color-sensitive functioning of social institutions" (154). This pluralism displaces what the authors call a commitment to “structural change” which they view as the foundational politics of the movement. As in Wei’s study, the authors establish the political essence of the movement in the opening pages of The Snake Dance, where they claim that "both the reform and revolutionary poles of the AAM saw a need to restructure society to serve universalistic principles of peace, social justice, and equality to Asians in America. Politically, the AAM challenged the U.S. social and political structure […] The AAM was also a search for an alternative social system to improve the lives of Asian Americans" (xvi). Here, the commitment to structural change unites the movement’s entire political spectrum (its revolutionary and reformist wings).

Whereas Wei argues that liberal multiculturalism defined the movement despite its ideological diversity, here Liu, Geron, and Lai argue that the liberal multiculturalism ascends within the movement in conflict with its foundational political commitments. This approach raises the question of how a vision of “structural change” that includes reformism at the movement’s outset eventually defines itself in opposition to the reformism of the 1990s. The authors resolve this
by crafting a narrative in which the AAM’s revolutionary wing embodies the movement’s original vision.

_The Snake Dance_ begins with the militant protests during the 1968-75 period, around U.S. imperialism, housing, social services, ethnic studies, and unionization. These early campaigns are united by the notions of “self-reliance, self-determination, equal treatment, rectification of historic wrongs and the belief that [movement activists] were changing fundamental aspects of their communities” (87). Liu, Geron, and Lai describe a different set of challenges that confront political activists as the movement transitions into the 1970s. Community activism shifts from a focus on ethnic enclaves into a wider range of spheres, including workplace organizing; this, combined with the geographical diversity of the movement, demands more sophisticated organization and coordination. At the same time, activists seek a theory that could provide a political compass amidst the decade’s turbulent political waters, in which rising conservatism meant "local political opportunities for change contracted" with each passing year (93).

Driven by this, movement’s political activists turned largely to Marxism. The I Wor Kuen group, for instance, began in New York City as a radical organization "with roots in the student and anti-war protests" and the Asian Americans for Action collective (81). Within a few years it adopted a revolutionary ideology and twelve-point program that paralleled the Black Panther’s program, calling for "self-determination and community control for Asian Americans, decent housing, childcare, and education, an end to racism and militarism, and a socialist society" (82). In the late 1970’s, I Wor Kuen had formally adopted Marxist-Leninist ideology
and merged with a Chicano organization to form the League of Revolutionary
Struggle. Similar transitions took place with the Union of Democratic Filipinos,
which joined Line of March, and Asian Study Group, which became the Communist
Workers’ Party (99).

According to the authors, Marxism “provided a greater discipline as well as a
comprehensiveness that activists needed for the times. Marxist analysis broadened
and made more effective many of these organizations” (99). Marxism thus provided
the glue for the movement, by maintaining the movement’s political and strategic
cohesion in the face of possible fragmentation arising from the movement’s
dispersion into multiple social and geographic arenas of activity.

Despite this, the authors detect a larger process of differentiation within the
AAM. The activists working within “service agencies, Asian American Studies,
women’s groups, and art and culture groups” mainly accommodate themselves to
the pressures of professionalization and institutionalization by becoming “less
confrontational and critical of the power structure” (116). This is an early signpost
of the mainstream politics that the authors describe as counter to the AAM’s goals of
structural change. Notably, its roots are in the divergence between the revolutionary
and political section of the movement and all others.

Liu, Geron, and Lai describe how the political and social challenges of the late
1970’s multiply during the descent into Reaganism. Activists now contend with a
national assault on redistributive social policies, a polarization of the class structure
within Asian American communities and an increasingly visible professional class,
and new immigrant and refugee populations often hostile to anti-capitalism. Despite
the unfavorable political climate under Reagan, a complex social landscape, and the subsidence of mass protest, *The Snake Dance* characterizes the movement as expanding its reach during this period. In campaigns such as the movement for redress of Japanese internment, or Jesse Jackson’s presidential campaign, the activists prove to be capable strategists. They are guided in their efforts by the Marxist concept of the united front, which emphasizes the significance and tactical complexity of revolutionaries working in coalition with a range of social classes and political forces. In the campaign for redress, radicals from the League of Revolutionary Struggle and other groups develop working relationships with the more conservative JACL, while the Jesse Jackson presidential campaigns brings revolutionaries into the heart of a Democratic Party electoral campaign. If this represents a departure an earlier revolutionary skepticism towards U.S. electoral politics, it is because the reality of Reaganism and the historic opportunities afforded by a campaign like Jackson’s created “positive rationales for engagement [that] overshadowed any concerns about the limits of change through established structures” (142).

The international crises of socialism at the end of the decade, however, undermine the ideology that had underpinned the aspirations and strategic vision of the movement’s political activists. When combined with the increasing fragmentation among the movement’s different sectors of work and the dominance of neoliberalism in U.S. politics, the pressure on the political organizations prove too much to withstand. Exhausted from decades of activism and ideologically disoriented, the Marxist organizations disband nearly simultaneously, leading to
“diversity and dissonance in the community.” Asian America is left without a relatively unified set of actors to provide leadership to a social movement, and “movement symbols and ideas only occasionally [resonate] with their communities” (149). Thus, the authors conclude, “the original AAM ended with the dissolution of the political organizations" leaving a vacuum that liberal multiculturalism would fill (151).

The narrative that Liu, Geron, and Lai construct thus follows the movement’s initial radicalism, born out of the militancy of the late 1960s, as it bifurcates in the mid 1970s. One path leads towards professionalization and a tamping down of anti-systemic politics. The other path, traveled by the Marxist activists, also leads towards an engagement with the electoral system and other institutionalized channels of politics; these activists, however, maintain a link between their work and the movement's original vision of structural change. Over the course of the movement, the Marxists emerge as the most effective political actors and the only wing of the movement capable of providing coherence and direction to a diverse array of campaigns and activities. In the end, however, internal strains and external pressures force the Marxists - and the AAM - from the historical stage. In this account, the hegemonic politics of race in the 1990s – which center “liberal notions of rights of citizenship” or, even worse, amount to little more than “corporate colorization” (154-55) – represent not the triumph of the movement but its collapse.

A comparison of these interpretations of the AAM reveals radical and liberal multicultural approaches to be almost antipodal. The divergence is nowhere clearer
than in accounts of the transition from the 1980's to the 1990's. For Wei, the transformation of the Asian American electorate from an invisible population into a cohesive voting bloc during this period represents political empowerment and portends the future achievement of racial equality. For Liu, Geron, and Lai, this positive development does not outweigh the reality of the rapid disintegration of revolutionary organizations, bringing about the original movement’s end.

These are two distinct views on the Clinton era; yet, the studies also have much in common. Both describe a turbulent and militant early period of the movement beginning in 1968 and spanning the years of the imperialist war in Southeast Asia, a time of student strikes, confrontational tactics, and radical pronouncements. Both are sensitive to the pressures of professionalization, institutionalization, and organization-building as activists attempt to sustain the movement without the momentum of the early years. And both describe a change in tactics and strategy as activists confront the Reagan era by exploiting opportunities in mainstream and electoral politics.

But while Wei takes this overall trend in movement politics as evidence of the incorporation of the AAM into ethnic pluralism, Liu, Geron, and Lai emphasize a pronounced fragmentation even within this tendency. There were the activists that moved forthright into the politics of liberalism and reform, and those that utilized Marxism to develop more sophisticated strategies linking alliances with moderate groups and electoral politics to projected contours of structural change. Since neither Asian American Marxism nor pluralist politics were crystallized as developed theories at the movement’s birth, both authors can produce serious
arguments for an authentic lineage in terms of either ideological or organizational continuity.

This is not a question of evidence; the crux of the authors’ interpretive choices lies elsewhere, and I believe it hinges on the question of class. For Wei, the AAM was a middle-class movement driven largely by students alongside a much smaller number of working-class activists. There is little discussion of efforts, particularly in the later years of the movement, to build or transform labor unions in multiracial workplaces, even though some of the most talented Asian American activists lent their energies to these efforts. Quite strikingly, there is no mention of Gene Viernes and Silme Domingo, the two cannery union leaders who were assassinated in Seattle upon the orders of the Marcos regime. Their activism exemplified the convergence of workplace and political organizing that increasing numbers of movement participants aspired towards in the 1980s. Not by coincidence, it was often Marxist cadre that led the AAM’s labor organizing campaigns.

Wei, however, seems unable to muster a word about the positive contributions of Marxists to the movement except when, he claims, they behave like reformists. "They all," he judges, "subscribed to a Machiavellian political philosophy in which the end justified the means" (231). Even the real sacrifices made by left-wing activists in taking industrial or service sector jobs are diminished; it was all "essentially a piece of revolutionary theater in which they temporarily assumed the role of workers" (219). The bias in Wei’s study regarding class and Marxism might be a minor point, except that it weighs heavily on the relationship between the AAM
and the politics of liberal multiculturalism. That politics requires a distinction between racial oppression and the normal dynamics of capitalism; it also depends on the associated belief that ethnic group unity has a social basis that outweighs internal divisions due to class and other salient cleavages. More concretely, Wei sustains a triumphalist narrative of the 1980’s only by underscoring the increased visibility of Asian American representatives in political office (and other areas of social life) while downplaying the fact of dramatically increasing social inequality within Asian American communities and across U.S. society more generally. As we saw above, Wei is certainly aware of class divisions as well as gender divisions, but *The Asian American Movement* ultimately grounds the movement’s political vision in an imagined Asian American identity that stresses unity over difference.

By contrast, Liu, Geron, and Lai designate "valorizing the working class" as one of the key values of the AAM. They provide an expansive picture of workplace organizing activity, ranging from the establishment of workers’ centers to more traditional union campaigns. The attention to class explains why policies of ‘corporate colorization’ and community narratives centered on the professional class, symptomatic of liberal multiculturalism, come in for particularly harsh treatment; it is also one of the reasons Liu, Geron, and Lai argue that the Marxist revolutionaries upheld the spirit of the movement.

This bias towards Marxism shapes the authors’ interpretation of the movement as held together in the 1980’s, against the odds, by revolutionary activists providing both ideological continuity and political coherence. What is left out of this account is careful attention to the organization and thinking of other
organized forces, especially liberal forces, in the movement. The activists that established the national women’s organizations, liberal activists in the student networks, and moderate groups such as the JACL are not entirely excluded from *The Snake Dance of Asian American Activism* but come in for relatively superficial treatment. Did these movement actors also see themselves as also carrying forward the AAM’s basic values, and if so, why relegate them to the margins of a story centered – by the 1980s – on the Marxists?

The opposing interpretations of Wei and Liu, Geron, and Lai thus belie a kind of symmetry in analysis. Both liberal multicultural and radical approaches base their claims on an assumption about the movement’s political essence; they equate one part of the movement’s ideological spectrum with the authentic AAM. And beneath this assumption lies another one - that radical and liberal political projects are antagonistic not just in theory but in the historical development of the Asian American movement. Given this, it would be hard not to see the transition into the politics of the 1990’s as either a triumph or collapse, depending upon which side of the liberal-radical divide the author favors. The results can be cruder or, as with Liu, Geron, and Lai, more nuanced and complex, but both approaches have thus far produced one-sided historical narratives. A fuller interpretation of the AAM requires rethinking these assumptions.

To summarize, then, ethnic group unity plays an integral role in how Wei understands the political goals of the Asian American movement. For Liu, Geron, and Lai, however, unity is illusive: Asian American politics can either emphasize the working class or the professional class. In the next section, we discuss how these
contrasting visions of Asian American politics are connected to different conceptions of Asian American identity.
Part Two: Literature

"Olivia posed, But Asian American is a political designation. Karl answered, It's political, racial, and national."
-Karen Tei Yamashita, I Hotel

In the opening pages of The Snake Dance, Liu, Geron, and Lai position their own scholarship against William Wei’s book by arguing that Wei views the movement primarily as a project to forge a unique Asian American identity. This appears to be misreading; The Asian American Movement never proposes that identity formation takes precedence over the movement goals of civil rights and anti-racism. I have argued, by contrast, that the debate is not one of identity versus politics. It is, rather, about which political project embodies the authentic AAM: liberal multicultural or radical.

This is a productive misunderstanding, however, in opening up a new vantage point on the debate covered above, and in this section of the paper I revisit these interpretive frameworks in terms of contrasting notions of identity, through a reading of Karen Tei Yamashita’s I Hotel. The politics of Wei’s liberal multiculturalism relies upon an Asian American identity that is ‘ethnic’ in nature. In this view, Asian American identity occurs through the development of a shared culture and consciousness, buttressed by the belief that commonalities across the historical experiences of various Asian American ethnic groups outweigh differences. In the political realm, this process translates into the development of an autonomous and empowered people: aware of racial inequality and common
histories of exclusion, Asian Americans begin to view themselves as an ethnic group with unifying political interests.

The radical politics of Liu, Geron, and Lai can similarly be understood in terms of identity. Here, though, rather than an ethnic identity based on a sense of peoplehood, “Asian American” denotes a political affiliation. As Lisa Lowe writes in *Immigrant Acts* “‘Asian American’ is not a natural or static category; it is a socially constructed unity, a situationally specific position, assumed for political reasons” (82).

What I call Asian American ethnic identity, then, flows from the politics of liberal multiculturalism and its assumption that the United States is comprised of discrete ethnic groups and their corresponding cultures. While acknowledging the constructed nature of Asian American identity, ethnic identity tends to naturalize itself, by viewing group unity as a product of historical and cultural processes. According to Wei in his conclusion to *The Asian American Movement*, "it is clear that Asian Americans have transcended the communal and cultural limits of particular Asian ethnic groups to identify with the past experiences, present circumstances, and future aspirations of *all* Asians in America" (272, emphasis in the original). As we saw in the previous section, this conception of identity tends to promote a sense of ethnic group unity that downplays intra-ethnic division, including class and gender dynamics.

By contrast, Asian American 'political' identity views the Asian American as a subject of political struggle that includes campaigns for Asian American racial equality, but also includes support for working-class politics and multiracial
solidarity. For instance, in a 1970 interview with *Aion* magazine, a leader of San Francisco’s Red Guard Party claimed that "in Chinatown [...] our main problem is the Chinese bourgeoisie and it happens to be the same bourgeoisie that oppressed the people in China [...] I don't consider them middle-class because they are working for the interests of the oppressor" ("Interview with Alex Hing"). Asian American political identity stresses the contingency of ethnic group unity and thus is compatible with a radical politics that also views other, cross-cutting political antagonisms as consequential. Asian America, in this view, is analogous to a political coalition.

The concluding pages of Gish Jen’s *Mona in the Promised Land* provide an entry point into considering the dynamics of Asian American identity. Here, a young Mona reflects on how her family members – parents Helen and Ralph, both immigrants from Shanghai, and sister Callie - have fared since the novel's beginning in 1968. Callie has changed, Mona believes. She now calls herself Kailan, and instead of parkas, she sports "Chinese padded jackets" and "cloth shoes," which Helen and Ralph never even wore in Shanghai. Kailan has turned “so Chinese that Ralph and Helen think there is something wrong with her” (300). But becoming Chinese turns out to be part of becoming Asian American:

She says she’s proud to be Asian American, that’s why she’s using her Chinese name. (Her original name, she calls it.) But what in the world is an Asian American? That’s what Ralph and Helen want to know. And how can she lump herself together with the Japanese? The Japanese Americans, insists Callie/Kailan. After what they did during the war! Complain Ralph and Helen. And what, friends with the Koreans too? And the Indians? The parents shake their heads. (300)
The passage reminds the reader that there was nothing natural or self-evident about Asian American identity, and captures how "Asian American" disrupted commonly held ideas about how individuals should be grouped into peoples. Indeed, because Asian American identity as it emerged from the AAM was pointedly a constructed rather than natural one, its internal tensions are foregrounded, as Jen does with irony and wit. Asian American identity, of course, is intended to undermine racist assumptions that people of Asian descent are somehow the same, regardless of whether they are from Asia or the United States. "After what they did during the war!" fume Ralph and Helen. But everything depends on who "they" are, because what the Japanese state and what Japanese Americans did, or endured, could not be more different. As a category, then, it is intended to differentiate Asian Americans from Asians. Simultaneously, though, the identity implies a rejection of Eurocentric assimilation and an affinity with Asia, which is why recovering her imagined Chinese cultural origins - it's her "original" name, not her Chinese one - becomes so important for Kailan. In a final paradox, it seems as though becoming Asian American, and finding a shared peoplehood with the Koreans and Indians, requires a self-fashioning into the particularities of Chinese-ness.

Asian American identity is, in this passage, pulled in two directions at once, which we might describe as universalism and difference. The tensions multiply once we consider Asian American as an explicitly political identity rather than a primarily cultural one, as it appears in the passage from Mona in the Promised Land. The play of difference and universalism intensifies when Asian America is understood as a multiethnic coalition bound by shared forms of marginalization as well as shared
political commitments, for what is to prevent other coalitional identities - based on other shared experiences and commitments - from displacing Asian America? As Maeda reminds us, inter-racial coalitions and international solidarities were central to the Asian American movement; given this, Lai Ying Yu asks, "why was it also significant to claim an 'Asian American' identity?" (71).

In what follows, I will be less concerned with the multi-ethnic nature of Asian American identity and will focus instead on the way Asian American political identity emerges from inter-racial political affinity. I explore these complex dynamics through a reading of Yamashita's novel *I Hotel*, which depicts the AAM in 1960's and 1970's San Francisco. The novel is named after the International Hotel, a single room occupancy building that had housed elderly Filipino and Chinese men in San Francisco's Little Manila for decades. When a corporation purchased the hotel in 1968 with the intent to turn the location into a parking lot, it became the site of a decade-long battle over housing rights (Habal 2007).

*I Hotel* is a labyrinthine text. As Yamashita writes in her Afterword, her background research on the movement was "difficult to coalesce into any one storyline or historic chronology. The people I spoke with had definitely been in the movement, but often times had no idea what others had been doing" (610). The form of the novel reflects this sense of fragmentation; *I Hotel* is written as ten novellas, each one corresponding to a different year in the decade 1968-1977 and titled as a different 'hotel': "Eye Hotel", "'I Spy' Hotel", "Aiiieeeee! Hotel", "International Hotel", etc.
Despite book's title, only a few of the novellas deal with the campaign to save the International Hotel. Rather, each novella follows a different group of characters - poets, painters, booksellers, garment workers, revolutionaries, and musicians, among others - as they traverse the decade and the AAM on sometimes-intersecting, sometimes-diverging paths. These diverse plots, moreover, are written in diverse artistic mediums, literary genres, and narrative voices. "Aiiieeee! Hotel", for instance, is both an homage to and satire of the Asian American arts movement, and contains dance choreography, drawings, a comic book, Chinese mythology, and illustrated poems; "Inter-national Hotel" tells the story of two revolutionary cadre, Olivia Wang and Ben San Pablo, in the form of a Marxist Confucian Analects. Each paragraph is numbered sequentially and Yamashita intersperses the novella with quotes from Lenin, Marx, Malcolm X, as well as (hilariously) Imelda Marcos.

It's easy to get lost in this maze. Our reading focuses on "Int'l Hotel," a novella that is illustrative of Yamashita's concern with incorporating the complex entanglements of Asian America at the level of narrative voice. "Int'l Hotel" stages the centrality of relationships between Japanese American and Native American activists in the development of Asian American political identity. The novella begins with a group of Japanese Americans - Ria Ishii, Stony Ima, and Wayne Takabayashi - waiting for a boat to take them to Alcatraz. The island has recently been occupied by a group of Native Americans in order to reclaim it from the U.S. government; the Coast Guard has responded by establishing a blockade in an effort to cut off their access to food and water. Ria, Stony, and Wayne are bringing supplies to the Native
Americans: a sack of calrose rice, a case of spam, and a gallon of soy sauce. The second paragraph of the novella introduces the group:

A group self-identified by their Asian features gathered at Pier Thirty-nine under a full November moon, dancing through the usual lace of San Francisco Bay fog. Of course, depending, they could have been mistaken for Indian. It wouldn't be the first time someone recognized the features that claim the same genes that crossed the Bering Strait or canoed across the Pacific. Different tribes is all. (374)

It's a clumsy phrase - "a group self-identified by their Asian features" - that verges between sense and nonsense. Self-identification is a subjective act, a choice, but a group's "features" are ostensibly objective, something that others identify us by. The syntax here, twisting together of subjective and objective, mirrors the formation of the racialized subject - an individual that chooses to identify with the category put upon her. But the next two sentences erode this logic, and portend how this novella troubles the anchoring of Asian American identity purely in an assumed racialized subject. "Self-identification by Asian features" implies a recognition that being categorized as Asian entails the experience of "racial lumping" (Liu, Geron, and Lai, 17), where one is presumed to share the same physical, psychological, and cultural features with other Asians. This normally leads to a self-fashioned sense of commonality among Asian Americans; but, the text suggests, the mistaking of Asians as Native Americans might affect this process of identification. In the next sentence, it's no longer certain that this is actually a mistake: "It wouldn’t be the first time someone recognized" - not misrecognized - "the features that claim the same genes [..]

When we reach the phrase "different tribes is all", the succinct eloquence of the vernacular registers aesthetically the distance we've travelled from the
paragraph's opening lines. The phrase throws off balance our sense of difference; it asserts that the difference between tribes is not a fundamental difference at all. Rhetorically, this recalls the political context of the novella: the Native American organization occupying Alcatraz brought together political activists from various tribes, who called themselves Indians of All Tribes (IOAT). The four sentences of this paragraph, then, trace a shift in conceptions of identity alongside a shift in language that incorporates a Native American political subjectivity.

An author doesn't introduce a gun without having it go off, and predictably the novella's plot involves an actual confusion of Native American and Asian "features". The Japanese American activists are waiting for a boat that never arrives, but Ria has met Jack Denny, a Modoc Indian who happens to have a boat called *The Turtle*, and he's heading to Alcatraz as well. While they are loading the boat, a night guard comes around; he is patrolling to make sure nobody breaks the blockade. One of the activists, Stony Ima, is able to convince the guard that they - including Jack - are a Japanese fishing crew. After they make it out to the Bay, Jack "a red man but yellow enough" thanks the group for helping him pass (377).

If Native American and Asian are described here as overlapping rather than distinct, this is also replicated at the level of narrative form. "Int'l Hotel" carefully positions itself within a tradition of Native American storytelling. As the group rides the Turtle to Alcatraz, Jack Denny explains that he was named after Captain Jack, a Modoc chief who killed a U.S. general in the 1870's. As Denny tells the story of his namesake, the narrative weaves together direct discourse - quotes from Denny -
with free indirect style in a way that blurs the distinction between the various narrative levels of diegetic and metadiegetic.

The section begins with what appears to be background related by the narrator: "Captain Jack, the man Jack "Turtle" Denny was named after, was the chief of the Modocs when they lived on the lava beds around Lost River and Tule Lake [...]. That was around 1870, a hundred years ago" (379). But the next line quotes Jack - "You know how the U.S. Army can have all the manpower, the guns, the copters, the bombs, and napalm, and still be losing the war?" - so it turns out that we are already in the middle of the story Jack Denny is telling. Then, as he describes the battle between the U.S. army and the Modoc braves:

outboard motor puttputt...and the battle rose from the inky ocean in great detail: bloody guts of the killed and wounded, a frayed army of white soldiers shredded by their own crazed departure through jagged rock. And only a single Indian - his head blown up by his own curiosity fallen. But like every Indian victory, it's still just a story. If the Modoc could hold the inhospitable lava beds, what pride should remove their claim? (379)

The narrative is simultaneously rendering the story that Jack Denny is telling as well as the group's experience of that story. But the narrator is also layering on commentary about the nature of the story, and by the time we get to the next paragraph, we are not sure whether we are reading an indirect report of Jack Denny's story or the narrator's commentary on it. "Winning a battle could get you a peace treaty, but not necessarily the one you want and not necessarily the one they'll keep. The price of peace, if it has one, is never cheap" (379). But this seems to be the point, for this whole section is prefaced by a description of the scene of storytelling in which "the story bloomed around them in a translucent fog" (378).
Within the world of the novella, Jack Denny's story permeates the environment, and within the discourse of the novella, Jack Denny's storytelling permeates the narrative voice.

The group manages to land on Alcatraz and avoid sinking just as *The Turtle* begins to fill with water. But these details of plot are a mere intermission, and "after a change of clothing, the storytelling continued" (381).

The Indians of All Tribes had a comparative story going about Turtle Island. It seems like several tribes have a variation of this creation story, how the Earth was born from a tiny plug of soil on the back of a turtle. There are usually three animals who go in search of land. Some say the questing animals were an eagle, a loon, and a muskrat. Others interchange beaver and otter. Others put in for the toad. But there's pretty much agreement that it was a turtle's back and always some minor amphibious animal who came back to the surface of the water with a precious plug of earth. Maybe it's a creation story, but maybe it's also a story about sacrifice and quest. (381)

Some say ... Others interchange ... Others put in ... Maybe ... Maybe ... "Int'l Hotel" represents this tradition of storytelling as iterative, producing new versions and new meanings with subsequent retellings. This sense - of each story existing within a universe of stories - pervades "Int'l Hotel." The narrator continually speculates about the possibility of other plot paths or character possibilities:

How many graduate students of philosophy and political economics? Maybe there were others, but one was Ria Ishii. (383)

Maybe you do get to turn, turn again, and turn back [...] And maybe when you get there, it's not the future at all but the constantly evolving present. (393)

O.K., so someone there could say that Stony took two tabs and slipped Jack one, but that in itself would not account for everything. (399)

The story begins with a stick of straw that, tied to the body of a horsefly, becomes a toy that pleases a little child, in exchange for three oranges that quench the thirst of an old woman, in exchange for [...] This is how a poor man is rewarded by the gods for belief and compassion [...] (400)
This last passage opens the novella's fourth chapter, in which Wayne Takabayashi's various encounters with characters who give and receive gifts in turn is intended to be read as a variant of the short parable. Indeed, the whole novella turns out to be yet another iteration of the Turtle Island story. "Int'l Hotel" contains five chapters: Turtle Island, Crane, Cormorant, Muskrat, and Tule Lake. Each of the middle chapters follows one of the Japanese American activists from the original group before they meet again seven years later during a pilgrimage to Tule Lake, the site of a Japanese internment camp and the 1870's Modoc resistance recounted by Jack Denny. In the final chapter, the narrator describes the novella's progression as "the Japanese American version of the Turtle Island story, you got a crane and loon and muskrat that go searching for a plug of earth in a lake that turns out to be a dried-up, desiccated lake called Tule Lake" (414).

The intermediate chapters explore the boundaries of Asian America in their own provocative ways, by looking at how the Asian American movement related to Chinatown sweatshop workers, land struggles in Japan, or South Asians. Asian immigrants, Asians in Asia, and Asian Americans avant la lettre - Roshni, "born in Mumbai, raised in Karachi, educated in Beirut", is politely asked to leave a meeting of the Asian American Political Association - "Int’l Hotel" asks the reader to consider how Asian American political identity emerged from these encounters with Asian America’s others.

This thematic development culminates in the Tule Lake pilgrimage narrated in the final chapter. Asian American activists began organizing regular visits to the site of World War II internment camps beginning in the 1969 ("Camp Pilgrimages").
Prior to the pilgrimages, "the long-whispered topic of the internment" was widely known about but little discussed due to feelings of guilt or shame by the formerly interned issei and nisei (Liu, Geron, and Lai, 135). The pilgrimages recovered a silenced episode in Asian American history, and the internment would become a central feature in narratives of Asian American history such as Ronald Takaki’s *Strangers from a Different Shore*.

In the final chapter of "Int’l Hotel", the three Japanese American activists on the Tule Lake pilgrimage decide to visit Jack Denny, who lives nearby. Denny invites them to participate in a group sweat, where they collectively relive moments in their families’ histories: a confrontation between Jack's uncle and guards outside the internment camp, Wayne’s grandmother playing the piano and eking out some joy within the camp’s barbed wire, Ria's mother boarding a ship, taking baby Ria from Japan to Chicago, Stony's father giving his mother a book of tanka poetry during internment. "Relive" is perhaps not the right word, for Jack, Wayne, and Stony were not actually present during these moments - Wayne, in fact, never met his grandmother - while Ria was too young to remember her journey to the U.S. These are experiences that the activists had never known about, but which somehow come to life, and the sweat thus effects the intergenerational connections that figure centrally in other representations of the pilgrimage. Afterwards, the group explores the historic terrain of the Modoc War:

But the Modoc War was just one rebellion. Like the story goes, you can win a rebellion but not for long. And then there was the Vietnam War. Jack said, "I’ll tell you a secret, why the war had to end."
   "Antiwar protest?"
   "Yeah, that, but really it was because we" -- he pointed to himself, a vet-- "we refused to fight. Got sick of the killing and just stopped, you know.?"
Funny how a group can be bound by refusal and resistance. Maybe something does get passed along. Could be ghost stories, something in the deep places of your psyche [...] 

Most discussions of the AAM’s relation to the antiwar movement highlight the racist character of war propaganda and military culture, and the inspirational nature of the Vietnamese resistance as part of a larger wave of 'Third World' revolutionary movements. Here, "Int'l Hotel" instead presents resistance to the Vietnam War in a different light, as an iteration of rebellion by Native Americans - who served in disproportionate numbers during the war - against the U.S. military (Schelling). The Native American oral tradition conveys the stories of "refusal and resistance" binding the 'Indians of All Tribes' across generations.

There is a wrinkle here, however. The last part of this passage continues: "Could be ghost stories, something in the deep places of your psyche [...] Then one day, it all gets sweated out" (419). Perhaps, then, the reader should take this as a description of Asian American political identity, which grounds group identity on political commitment: refusal and resistance. In this reading, what has been "passed along" are the stories of survival, miniature acts of resistance to the dehumanization of anti-Asian racism.

In The Shape of the Signifier, Walter Benn Michaels argues that much contemporary fiction has shifted the foundation of racial identity from "essence" to collective history. In works like Beloved, authors represent "something we have never known as something we have forgotten and thus makes the historical past a part of our own experience" (137). Beloved is exemplary because, as a ghost story, the past literally returns to haunt the present; collective memory is relived. "Int'l
Hotel" evokes this conception of identity, with the difference that the recovered past is experienced as resistance as well as trauma. These ghost stories of Asian America have somehow subsisted in the "deep places of the psyche" of Ria, Stony, and Wayne.

Whereas Michaels describes this shift as a way to reconsolidate racial identity, however, in "Int'l Hotel" the group that relives their historical past is multiracial. Political commitment, it seems, can be passed along across lines of race and ethnicity. The ambiguity of the passage - is the group bound by refusal and resistance, ghost stories buried in the psyche, a Native American or Asian American one, or perhaps a multi-racial group of the politically committed? - is thus the point of the novella, which challenges the reader to imagine an Asian American political identity emerging from a sense of collective history that includes the Modoc uprising, and an Asian American movement that might be an iteration of indigenous rebellion. Tule Lake, after all, was the internment camp where so-called "disloyal" Issei and Nissei were sent after refusing to serve in the U.S. military. Many Tule Lake internees had renounced their U.S. citizenship, thus producing a group of Japanese Americans who, like Native Americans through much of U.S. history, were ambiguously positioned: under the power of, but excluded from, the nation-state (Ngai, 187-201). Might one think these histories together rather than separately? And while I don't think this means that Asians somehow are Native Americans, it does imagine how inter-racial solidarity is constitutive of, and not supplementary to, Asian American political identity, while at the same time exploring how this may make the specificity of that identity unstable. Different tribes is all.
Although I’ve focused on one novella, the dynamics of political identity we read in "Int’l Hotel" recur throughout I Hotel. One particularly interesting example takes place in "I Spy' Hotel," in which Nelson Lopez, a Salvadoran American, is falsely accused of shooting a police officer. He runs into Aiko Masaoka while trying to steal her car; she turns out to be a sympathetic radical criminology student. In her apartment, she tells him: "We just say you’re hapa. Mixed. You can be Nelson Goro Tanaka. Your mom was Mexican. No, Filipino. Or maybe Hawaiian. That could work" (171).

Nelson warms up to the idea, and his enthusiasm for the Japanese American community leads him to learn the language, volunteer his time to assist the elderly Issei, and help out at the radical bookstore. Strangely, he manages to intuit that another Japanese American - Sanford Miike - is a government spy, whom Nelson refers to as inu. Inu, Nelson tells Aiko, is the Japanese word for dog, what "we called those traitors [government informants] in the camp" (178, emphasis added). The novella thus poses the question of whether belongingness depends on "Asian features" or a more complex identification with Asian American political culture and history. The text provides no easy answer: at the end of "I Spy' Hotel", Nelson hijacks a plane to flee for Cuba, leaving behind Asian America as well as a heartbroken Aiko, but in later novellas (chronologically set before the hijacking) he reappears as a peripheral character referred to simply as Goro Tanaka.

In I Hotel, Asian American political identity is centrifugal, always in the process of remaking itself through new solidarities and political subjects, from
transnationalism to women of color feminism to disability activism. These new sensibilities are incorporated into political radicalism through the rhetoric of equivalence, which stresses the similarity of disparate systems of oppression across history and geography. Here is Aiko Masaoka talking, in "I Spy' Hotel", about the military bases on Okinawa and the developers displacing residents of San Francisco’s Japantown:

It's the same shit after all, imperialist military and corporate takeover of land that belongs to the people. Okinawans suffer from dual-repression: by the U.S. military and the so-called Japan Self-Defense Forces. It's an imperialist partnership. Same thing could be said for Gintetsu and the NCDC [who are developing Japantown]. (155)

And here is the Japanese American member of the Black Panthers, Mo Akagi, speaking at a rally:

See, understand that the Los Siete trial [of Latinos accused of killing a police officer] and what's happening to the [African American] Soledad Brothers are not isolated incidents. They're just like the practicing of a theory [...] they disguised this theory of genocide as 'manifest destiny', dig. And toward the black people in the United States, they disguised it as a racist stereotype [...] Now toward the Chinese people, see, this theory was disguised another way. It was called 'Yellow Peril,' and that was rational for exclusion acts. [...] And understand, against the Japanese people in more contemporary history, they had the same theory of genocide, and the game they ran on the Japanese people, when they put over a hundred thousand Japanese Americans into camps [...] (212)

Mo goes on to describe the Vietnam War, the Kent State massacres, banks, male chauvinism, and jails as manifestations of the same theory.

Elsewhere in the same novella, Eldridge Cleaver half-seriously suggests the entire Red Guard Party, established in San Francisco's Chinatown, could have been a chapter of the Black Panther Party if they had sent the right communique to Panthers headquarters. So, while this rhetoric facilitates political alliances it also makes it hard to keep Asian America in focus as a political community. The text
manages this dilemma by revising the conventional view of the Asian American movement as a youth rebellion against the assimilationist impulses of an older generation. Instead, Yamashita places intergenerational political mentorship at the heart of the movement's development.

Felix Allos is a manong, or elder Filipino, a resident of the International Hotel, the narrator of "I-migrant Hotel" and a talented chef. In the pages of I Hotel, he is the only character to both focalize and narrate an entire novella, which showcases his virtuosity as a storyteller. At a United Farm Workers union meeting, Felix and some younger activists are listening to the famed union leader Philip Vera Cruz make a speech about "the context of the larger struggle" (428). What, exactly does Vera Cruz say? The reader never finds out, except that it's the "kind of speech about our history," because Felix substitutes his own story for Vera Cruz's speech. In order to "make it real to you, we got to put our real lives inside real history. I [Felix] tell you my version right here" (430).

What follows is a mini-epic that begins with the plantation worker strikes on Oahu in 1920, which end in defeat because of ethnic division among the Japanese, Koreans, and Filipinos. It follows Felix to California and labor conflagrations in the lettuce fields, harvesting work from the Mexico border to "Wenatchee next to Canada" and then Seattle, where he witnesses "Placido Patron take out his pistol and shoot Virgil Duyungan and Auerlio Simon" over a dispute in the cannery workers' union (451). Then, on to the fields of Stockton and finally Delano, where the Filipino workers begin the grapes strike that draws in Cesar Chavez and propels the UFW into history.
At each step, Felix summarizes his history in terms of lessons that the two younger activists, Macario and Abra, who are leading the International Hotel campaign. "Use the Koreans against the Japanese to break the strike," Felix tells them. "It's a lesson you learn. I tell Macario and Abra. This is how you could fail in the end" (430). He concludes his story with a reflection that seems addressed as much to himself as to the two activists: "Maybe that's the last lesson. You could be starting something someone else has to finish. And maybe it's never finished. Maybe down the road they forget everything. Who started it? Why did it start in the first place?" (431).

Felxi's mentorship passes down lessons and history, but also a task: finish what we've started. Here, the AAM has the historic role of completing the work of previous generations of Asian immigrants in their struggle for justice, even if the young activists have forgotten everything and are unaware of it. So, while Asian American political identity does spiral outwards towards inter-racial and other forms of affiliation, in I Hotel the ethnic trope of generational continuity anchors that identity in the histories of Asian peoples in the U.S. 'Ethnic' identity, in other words, supplements 'political' identity.

The theme of generations is one that opens the book. On Lunar New Year, 1968, Paul Wallace Lin is following his father through the alleys of Chinatown when his dad collapses and dies of a heart attack. Strangely, as he dies he apologizes to Paul for not remarrying after his wife's death. His last words are "Now, my son...I'm sorry...in the world all alone..." Except that maybe he said something else. The reader can't be sure, and neither is Paul, who "can't hear him with all the explosions
and the drumming" (2). The death haunts Paul, and "Every Chinese New Year for the rest of his life, he tries to hear his father's last words. And every year, he will hear something different" (2).

Paul learns from a literature professor that his dad was a Marxist revolutionary, who knew Chou En-Lai in France but returned to San Francisco in order to take care of his family instead of joining the revolution in China. He lived as a painter with other bohemian artists in The Monkey Block, a building that no longer exists but resembled the International Hotel "with businesses below, offices, restaurants" (28), and later he becomes the publisher of a local Chinese-language newspaper. The father's life thus seems to embody the diverse routes - artistic, literary, political - that the Asian American Movement will take, and the novella follows Paul as he grapples with this legacy in terms of his own involvement with the movement. The Asian American movement is both an attempt to answer the previous generations and a recognition that one can never really hear what has been said and disappeared; one must create something new.

**Conclusion**

This exploration of the complex dynamics of Asian American political identity, I hope, allows us to look at liberal multiculturalism and political radicalism differently. Asian American political identity is an unstable compound of universalist political affinities and ethnically defined historical roots. These two aspects may come into tension, as we see in the novella "Int'l Hotel," where the
"rememory" of history, to use Morrison's phrase, crosses ethnic and racial lines. In some instances, such as the Marxist groups that decided to focus on organizing a generic working class rather than Asian American communities, this tension may be resolved in one direction or another. But rather than a problem to be eliminated, however, this internal dynamic accounts for the power of Asian American political identity - one that can incorporate new kinds of solidarities and struggles without relinquishing the imagined political community that emerged through the histories represented in I Hotel and the historiography reviewed above.

This may also open up possibilities for historical narratives of the movement that eschew the reductive triumph or collapse storylines. Recent histories of the AAM have defined the movement’s radicalism in broad, perhaps vague, terms: for Maeda, its essence is "power and self-determination rather than civil rights" (Rethinking the Asian American Movement, 4); for Liu, Geron, and Lai, "politically, the AAM challenged the U.S. social and power structure" with the goal of restructuring society for "peace, social justice, and equality to Asians in America" (xvi); Omatsu argues that the movement "redefined racial and ethnic identity, promoted new ways of thinking about communities, and challenged prevailing notions of power and authority" (20). Our discussion, by contrast, has distinguished Asian American radicalism from liberal multiculturalism in terms of the relationship between identity or ethnic group unity and politics. Liberal multiculturalism imputes a collective interest to a unified ethnic group (or ethnic identity); Asian American radicalism links a diverse and broad set of political commitments, from
intra-ethnic class struggle to inter-racial solidarity, with Asian American identity in historically specific ways.

This core of radicalism, rather than the Leninist version of it, persisted in significant ways even as Marxist groups came apart and liberal multiculturalism became the hegemonic form of politics in the 1990s. In many cases, AAM activists carried it forward within the institutions they had built. To take one example, Pam Tau Lee became a student activist at the California State University at Hayward in the late 1960’s. She became involved in anti-war protests and the I Hotel struggle and through her contact with radicals at the I Hotel she became a member of I W.Kuen (IWK). Her first assignment was organizing Oakland high school students into the Bay Area Asian Student Union; she then began organizing in San Francisco Chinatown as a full-time volunteer, supported by IWK, for the Chinese Progressive Association. When the IWK became the League of Revolutionary Struggle, Lee joined the multiracial Marxist-Leninist organization along with most of her IWK cadre. After several years at CPA, Lee began working in the San Francisco hotel industry as a room attendant, and established herself as a leader in the city’s hotel workers’ union. When LRS dissolved, Lee moved from the union to UC Berkeley’s Labor and Occupational Health Program. During these two decades, Pam became one of the major figures arguing for the importance of looking at health and safety in the working experiences of women and people of color. For instance, drawing on her own experience as a room attendant, Lee pioneered the study of hotel room attendant workloads through participatory action research. Lee’s contributions to the environmental justice movement are equally significant. She participated in the
1st National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991, and co-founded the Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN) (Miaw, Lee).

Through Lee’s life, one discerns one of the trajectories of Asian American radicalism: formed in the crucible of anti-war and housing struggles it developed into Marxist ideology and then continued to evolve by letting go of Leninism while incorporating environmental commitments. Tracing the line of history from the I Hotel through I Wor Kuen, the League of Revolutionary Struggle, and then the Asian Pacific Environmental Network will require an interpretive framework that eschews political reductionism: just as our reading of Yamashita’s *I Hotel* demonstrated how 'ethnic' identity supplemented 'political' identity in that text, so we might look at how liberal multicultural and radical visions motivated complex interactions among a range of actors – governmental, institutional, and activist – in a way that both transformed those visions and produced the contemporary social institutions and politics of Asian America. Such an account would take its distance from both triumphalism and tragedy, but this story remains to be written.
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