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Content Warning: A Literary Analysis of Asian American Young Adult Suicide and Suicidality

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in Asian American Studies

by

Caitlin Shiou-Tsuey Yee

Thesis Committee:
Professor James Kyung-Jin Lee, Chair
Professor Julia H. Lee
Professor Sora Park Tanjasiri
Associate Professor Sarah Park Dahlen

2024

DEDICATION

for students
for my younger self
for my family and friends

*May we each find the love and courage
we need to speak our stories and truths
so boldly the world can never turn away again.*

Joanna Ho
Author's Note in *The Silence that Binds Us*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS	v
INTRODUCTION	1
LITERATURE REVIEW	4
OUTLINE	9
OPENING SCENE	10
PERFORMANCE-BASED LOVE	16
FATAL ABLEISM	25
SURRENDER	30
ENDING SCENES AND CONCLUSION	31
WORKS CITED	35

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Content Warning: A Literary Analysis of Asian American Young Adult Suicide and Suicidality

by

Caitlin Shiou-Tsuey Yee

Master of Arts in Asian American Studies

University of California, Irvine, 2024

Professor James Kyung-Jin Lee, Chair

What does Asian American mental unwellness look like? How can the humanities bridge the gaps in modern medicine and psychiatry? This thesis will explore these questions and more through literary analysis of suicide and suicidality in young adult novels, fiction, and memoir with Joanna Ho's *The Silence that Binds Us* (2022), Emily X.R. Pan's *The Astonishing Color of After* (2018), Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* (1993), and Stephanie Foo's *What My Bones Know* (2022). Suicide feels like the end, and literally, it is: it is the end of life. On the other hand, it is also a launching point to a deeper understanding of Asian American mental unwellness and the conditions within the Asian American family that produce this unwellness.

INTRODUCTION

In 2021, suicide was the second leading cause of death for individuals between the ages of 10 and 24 in the United States (CDC), and in 2019, suicide was leading cause of death for young adult Asian and Pacific Islanders between the ages of 15 and 24 in the United States (“Mental and Behavioral Health”). From 2018-2021, across ethnic and racial groups in the United States, the percent relative rate change of suicide for individuals between the ages of 10 and 24 was 8.2% for Hispanics and Latinos, 10.6% for Asians, and 36.6% for Blacks or African Americans (Stone et al. 161-162). These statistics provide a quick snapshot of what suicide looks like for young adults and Asian Americans; however, data is often not disaggregated by ethnic group, and categories such as “multi-ethnic” complicate understandings as this label does not specify what identities are under this term. Thus, it is difficult to identify where care is needed. Yet, even more troubling are the ways these data points of Asian American suicide are used and who they are and are not for. These opening statistics have become convenient lines for Asian American scholars to, as disability studies scholar Mimi Khúc puts it, “deny that we’re the model minority” by reinforcing that “Asian Americans are suffering too” (47). Asian American studies scholars will use suicide statistics as evidence that the model minority is a myth opposed to being recognized as an identity that is internalized and desired. Even still, the underlying question of why suicide is a prominent cause of death and a persisting issue fails to be answered.

There is a plethora of information to “explain,” “prevent,” and “cure” mental health for Asian Americans. Asian American mental unwellness is often met with “mental health stigmas” (i.e. shame),

“generational differences,” and “traditional” and “cultural” factors, beliefs, values, customs, and so on (Kramer et al. 227-228; Nishi). To circumvent these “barriers,” mental health professionals and resources, often coming from training in white-dominated spaces, are told to be more culturally competent and sensitive when treating individuals. In recent years, Asian American mental health has slightly improved as scholarship on healthcare disparities, racism, and intergenerational trauma has grown and found its way into treatment practices. Yet, the perpetuating narrative is that mental health is an individual issue, and therefore, it has an individual solution.

To confront the shortcomings of care for Asian American unwellness and respond to her sister’s suicide, women’s studies and ethnic studies scholar Eliza Noh, under the pseudonym Lisa Park, wrote “A Letter to My Sister.”¹ Noh’s letter traces how her sister’s suicide was within the context of white supremacy, the limitations of the modern medicine, and her family’s abuse and denial; she calls out how societal systems and institutions frame suicide to look “like an individual problem, not a social or political matter” through labels such as “mental illness” (67). Noh states: “the Asian ‘model minority’ is *not* doing well,” but this continues to go unacknowledged as Asian Americans continue to unalive themselves (67). While originally published in 1997, Noh’s letter still speaks to how mental health is a persisting topic today. Through the lens of biomedicine, Asian American suicidality is viewed as an individual pathology, and it is decontextualized from the modes of violence within society, institutions, and the mainstream narrative of what it means to be Asian in the United States.

¹ I will refer to Noh by her given name in this thesis.

The biomedical framework of mental health and mental illness is conveyed through the process of generalizing people's symptoms, pinpointing a diagnosis based on these symptoms, and proceeding with treatment. Sociologist Arthur Frank in *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics* narrates how medicine "colonizes the body by making it into its 'case,'" and patients must renounce care of their bodies over to bureaucratic institutions (172). While modern medicine may be helpful in some instances, it has limitations on how to actually care for individuals when symptoms of illness are from outside and beyond the body. Therefore, the humanities are necessary for understanding the Asian American mental health crisis because it complicates the tidy problem-solution model of modern medicine and psychiatry. Literary analysis bridges the void by intentionally providing Asian American representation and context to refocus from the unwellness itself to individuals and society. Here, the humanities can supply the ability to listen and the language to define Asian American suffering through the contexts of history, society, experiences, and relationships.

This thesis will utilize literary analysis to investigate Asian American mental unwellness and suicidality. My thesis is born from my love of reading books featuring Asian American characters and stories. When living through my adolescence, I saw myself in these figures and identified with their struggles and triumphs. My thesis is also written from my positionality as a student and scholar of the United States' education system who experienced and witnessed firsthand the toll academic pressure can take on one's mental health. My intention is to unite these two identities as student and scholar to contribute a nuanced discussion of how the humanities and modern mental health practice connect with the field of Asian American studies. I write this thesis not to offer solutions but to invite us all to reflect and to create space to talk about Asian American mental unwellness and suicidality in literature

and in the world at large. My utmost priority is to handle this complex and difficult topic delicately and with care but also deliberately and with diligence. I hope my words and research can be a clear testament of this.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, I will first provide a literature review of young adult (YA) literature, debate on its efficacy, and explain why focusing on this genre is instructive to understand the unwellness of Asian American young people. Then, I will turn to a brief discussion of representations of Asian American youth in non-young adult literature and why this representation is important to read alongside young adult literature. Finally, I will offer the example of a mental health professional trying to assess how Asian American identity impacts mental health, highlight its limitations, and thus demonstrate why reading Asian American literature that addresses mental health and suicidality is illustrative.

Young Adult (YA) Fiction and Representations of Asian Americans in YA Literature

In this thesis, I begin with young adult fiction for four reasons. First, I do so to underscore the value of young adult literature as it is often deemed solely for young readers' entertainment and is in turn unworthy of study. Second, studying young adult literature allows us to observe development and identity formation within this demographic. Third, it offers us the opportunity to examine presentations of mental health for Asian Americans as it continues to be a rising issue for younger generations. Finally, reading stories of unwellness in young adult fiction provides us a window to view

applications of fiction as a safe place to explore outcomes and to imagine possibilities when things appear dire in real life.

To start, I will foreground a definition of the “young adult” genre. In his article, “Young Adult Literature: What Is Young Adult Literature?,” English scholar Chris Crowe draws from his experiences as an educator to define “young adult literature” as “all genres of literature published since 1967 that are written for and marketed towards young adults” (121). As the young adult genre is intended for non-adult readers, it is frequently viewed purely for young people’s entertainment; thus, it is taken less seriously and deemed as lacking the supposed “timeless” or “literary” quality that classic literature supposedly has. Even so, this brings into question what is considered “quality” literature and who has the authority to make this determination. English and children’s literature scholar Philip Nel contends how we need to care about children and young adult works because “stories provide children with their earliest ideas about how the world works, and about what literature is and why it matters.” The stories young people are exposed to today shape the coming generations.

The young adult genre’s purpose is useful for examining the struggles of growing up, the path of maturation into adulthood, identity formation, and how fraught this can be for individuals who identify with minoritized identities (e.g. ethnic, racial, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, etc.). Library sciences scholar Sandra Hughes-Hassell builds upon critical race theory scholars’ concept of “counter-storytelling” in “Multicultural Young Adult Literature as a Form of Counter-Storytelling.” Counter-storytelling is “a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told,” and it is the weapon against what is generally accepted as the dominant narrative (214). Hughes-

Hassell argues how counter-stories not only fight master narratives and stereotypes, but they also bring validity to the stories for those of minority identities.

In her introduction to *Growing Up Asian American in Young Adult Fiction*, English scholar Ymitri Mathison situates Asian American teenagers amidst the mainstream stereotypical white American teenager. Specific to Asian American teens, their identities are heavily influenced by how the outside world depicts them “within a model minority stereotype and as an exoticized perpetual foreigner” (4). Other books on young adult literature may have a brief mention or section of Asian Americans, but the scholarship is limited. Chapters within *Growing Up Asian American in Young Adult Fiction* center on experiences that are salient to young Asian Americans such as internalized racism, internal and external stereotypes, hypersexualization and masculinity, multicultural identities, immigration, and transnational adoption. While mental health is not mentioned directly, these encounters influence Asian American teens’ mental well-being, and readers can consider these impacts when engaging with other Asian American young adult texts and characters. While Mathison’s book is one that specifically addresses Asian American young adult literature, there is ample earlier scholarship that discusses the longer history of Asian American children’s literature, such as work by Junko Yokota, Violet Harada, and Lorraine Dong.²

Young adult fiction is particularly applicable in navigating stories of Asian American unwellness. Generally, fiction permits readers’ emotional engagement and investment in the narrative’s

² See Yokota, *Children’s Literature in the Reading Program*, Ch. 7; Harada, “The treatment of Chinese and Japanese characters in American settings in selected works of fiction for children;” Dong, “Once Upon a Time in Chinese America: Chinese American Folklore in American Picture Books.”

plot, characters, and relatability. In her article “Life and Times Reading Fiction: The Benefits are Numerous,” general practitioner Rosemary Marshall describes how “stories can assist by confronting and exploring issues relevant to everyday life” (79). When content such as mental unwellness, suicidality, and suicide seem difficult to tackle in the real-world, fiction offers a realm of what could be. At a distance, readers can safely participate in the fictional world, while also critically making connections to reality.

Representations of Youth in Asian American Literature

Just as young adult fiction can both reflect and reach an audience of young readers grappling with the struggles of adolescence, so might the representation of young people by older adult authors who provide insight into young people’s complexities and contradictions that contribute to their unwellness and suicidality. The two titles of focus in this thesis are Fae Myenne Ng’s fiction novel *Bone*, and Stephanie Foo’s memoir, *What My Bones Know*. In *Bone*, the protagonist, Ona, is a young adult dealing with mental health and suicide, and the cause of her suicide is never explicitly explained. Previous scholarship has analyzed Ona’s death as a literary device or symbol that is used to propel Ng’s plot forward. Scholars Allen Gee and Yoonmee Chang have explored the narrative’s character hierarchy and portraits of Chinese American family and culture, respectively. Other scholars such as Thomas Kim and Juliana Chang have looked broadly at themes such as legal and moral authenticity or melancholia. While these readings usefully exhibit how immigration history, Chinese patriarchy, and class dynamics affect the Leong family, they fail to acknowledge Ona’s suicide in its most basic terms. In *What My Bones Know*, part of Foo’s journey is revisiting her high school and questioning the

hostile home and academic environments she and her classmates were accustomed to. She describes how the exterior of these experiences seems to be successful and high achieving, so “why would you want to further investigate, to see whether [the reason] all these students want to have perfect grades and freak out otherwise, is because they’re being abused at home?” (Noor). However, Foo’s interrogation of her past allows her to see the role of the model minority in making her “a product of a place” and an individual with layers of trauma (Owusu). Both *Bone* and *What My Bones Know* point to structural dimensions of Asian American unwellness: for *Bone*, histories of immigration, exclusion, and labor exploitation are the conditions of trauma that the parents pass down to their second generation children and ultimately leaves their middle child dead from suicide. For *What My Bones Know*, the toxic interplay between parental abuse at home, and an unchecked culture of academic performance at all costs, leaves an entire student body under a kind of collective mental health siege.

Asian American Mental Health

As stated previously, Asian American mental health continues to be seen as an example of individualized pathology, and few mental health resources are able to speak to this shortcoming. Here, I share an attempt by an Asian American healthcare practitioner, psychologist Jenny Wang, to remedy Asian American mental unwellness. In 2022, Wang published *Permission to Come Home* as a “one of the first books of its kind” mental health resource for “Asian Americans, immigrants, and other minorities and marginalized people” (“Permission to Come Home Book”). Opposed to presenting itself as research or medical help, Wang’s book is an invitation for Asian communities to have “permission” to connect with their Asian identities. Wang addresses common motifs that Asian

Americans do not allow themselves to partake in such as questioning, feeling, raging, and failing, and she often returns to how culture and parental dynamics are barriers to engaging with these experiences. While *Permission to Come Home* is a practical intervention, and Wang points out how it would be “impossible to fully capture the lived experiences of all Asian diasporas,” Wang does not critically acknowledge power dynamics within the Asian American family as the primary source of Asian American mental unwellness at large (*x*). She does grant “permission” to individual readers when parents may not (or ever), but her approach cannot account for the ways that the fundamental asymmetries of power within the Asian American family are the conditions of suicidality.

OUTLINE

Joanna Ho’s debut young adult novel, *The Silence that Binds Us* (2022) anchors my argument regarding the role of literature in Asian American mental health. Ho’s novel was written in response to the teenage suicide epidemics in her Bay Area community and her personal experiences of hearing how Asians in her community were to blame as the epidemic’s cause (Author’s Note). The narrative is told from the perspective of the protagonist, Maybelline (May) Chen, who is wrestling with high school culture, wanting to pursue her passion of writing, and struggling with the tension of her parents’ disapproval. May’s world is tragically fractured when her older brother, Danny Chen, suddenly ends his life, and community members direct racist and stereotypical allegations toward the Chen family regarding the cause of Danny’s suicide. May and her family are left to grieve his death as May’s desire to write and speak out against these accusations continues to grow. I begin with a close reading of the first scene in *The Silence that Binds Us* as it hints at the novel’s forthcoming tensions, and it establishes

a lens to view the rest of the novel's events through. From this scene I have identified three themes: performance-based love, fatal ableism, and surrender. In tandem, I will use three other Asian American works of literature, Emily X.R. Pan's *The Astonishing Color of After* (2018), Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* (1993), and Stephanie Foo's *What My Bones Know* (2022), to further illustrate how these themes are not isolated incidents in one work of fiction, but rather are prominent themes that work individually and collectively in the everyday lives of Asian Americans.

OPENING SCENE

From the first page of *The Silence that Binds Us*, readers are aware this is the start of Danny's last night alive. The book opens with a scene of the Chen family hosting a dinner party with their family friends, the Wus, and their daughter Celeste. The scene at first carries warmth and comfort with family-friendly banter and steaming bowls of delicious beef noodle soup. However, the tone of the dinner changes when seemingly well-meaning inquiries from both sets of parents are also obviously a game of comparison. Danny's mother, Mrs. Chen, first changes the subject with a simple question: "How's school, Celeste?" (Ho 3). At base, this question seems like Mrs. Chen is attempting to engage in small talk, or she is trying to earnestly ask how Celeste is doing. In actuality, Mrs. Chen *does* care about how Celeste is doing, but only to the point of using Celeste as a measuring stick to compare against her own children, Danny and May. As the conversation unfolds, we soon understand she is looking for affirmation that her children are doing just as well or better than Celeste. In initiating the conversation, she is also silently hoping the Wus will ask a question in return about how her children are doing, so she can flaunt their achievements.

Upon hearing Mrs. Chen's question, "Celeste look[s] up, chopsticks frozen in the act of depositing noodles into her mouth" (3). Celeste's spoken and unspoken responses are key to note. Instead of swiftly responding to the question with an automatic, generic small talk answer, Celeste is "frozen" as if she is caught off guard and considering how to respond; it is like she is frozen in fear of what is to come. Celeste politely responds, "It's good, Āyí" without elaborating or offering more to the conversation (3). In fact, there is no need for Celeste to contribute more as her mother, without missing a beat, redirects the spotlight to the Chens with: "I heard you did very well on your math test last week, May" (3). Celeste's mother cannot help herself in commenting on how May is doing. Unlike Mrs. Chen, she does not even phrase it as a question. She asks May directly in hopes May will provide more information. We have no idea who Mrs. Wu is receiving her information from, but we can infer May's mother is the source. Later on in the conversation, May even thinks to herself: "[she doesn't] know where [her] mom gets her information, but she has her ways" (3). Regardless of their physical presence, the Wu and Chen children are the subjects of their parents' conversations. Mrs. Chen chimes in: "Not as well as Celeste... I heard she got the top score!" (3). Instead of acknowledging her own daughter's accomplishments, Mrs. Chen instantly compares May's "very well" to Celeste's "top score." At this point, it is futile to compete with the highest possible score. Given the comparative nature of the conversation, we can venture that Mrs. Wu "subtly" brought up the math test because she knew her daughter did better, and she wants to boast about Celeste's feat. In response, "Celeste shifted uncomfortably" (3). Despite her accomplishment, it is evident Celeste takes no pleasure in this conversation.

The unfurling dialogue of Celeste and May's school achievements leads to the first theme of performance-based love. Performance-based love is love and care that is only given and taken away based on accomplishments of academics, career, relationships, lifestyle, and the like. The logic of performance-based love is that whatever "performance" is being put on, it must be considered acceptable and to the standard of another (i.e. one's parents, peers, societal expectations, etc.). In short, this love is founded on what you do and how well you do it. For children who are recipients of this conditional love, they may argue their parents mean well, or they owe it to their parents to be high achieving; yet, as stated previously, and as we will continue to see throughout this dinner scene, even the most innocent forms of questions and care can carry remnants of performance-based love.

Mrs. Wu replies by expressing her concern with how "[Celeste] stays up so late to study, [and] sometimes [they] worry about her" (4). Mr. Wu adds, he "tell[s] [Celeste] to relax a little. An A-minus never killed anyone!" (4). Mr. and Mrs. Wu may have anxieties about their daughter's work habits, and they may be attempting modesty and humor in the conversation to lighten the mood. Nonetheless, their daughter's accomplishments come at a cost. From Celeste's perspective, she likely "just keeps working" instead of listening to her parents because she is *unable* to stop. For her to stop working means she would fall short of achieving the academic success her parents are ultimately so proud of. She has to continue to work, even at the expense of her well-being and parents' protests, because she feels she has no other option. Contrary to Mr. Wu's statement, A-minuses *do* kill.

The second theme of fatal ableism emerges with Celeste's lack of self-care. There are two components to fatal ableism. The first is "fatal," causing death, and the second is "ableism," based in disability studies where normative bodies are valorized ("Fatal' Definition). Together, one has the

ability to do a presented task, but for Asian Americans, it is abusing and exhausting this ability's limits that brings about death. Death may seem extreme, but any iteration of neglecting basic needs such as inadequate sleep, poor nutrition, lack of hydration, and mental health deterioration is fatalistic and brings about premature death. For Asian Americans, the destructiveness of this shape of ableism is often not even up to the individual; it is in the hands of someone or something else expecting yielded results. In this way, performance-based love is an enabler for fatal ableism: To receive love, you must work yourself to the bone, killing yourself in the process.

Up to this point, the conversation does not feel like one at all. A majority of the dialogue at dinner is between the parents, and it consists of them talking about their children's accomplishments. The conversation eventually rounds back to the Chens when Danny's mom "[looks] up like she'd just thought of something," and she instructs, "Danny, tell everyone the news!" (5). May has the intuition that her mother has "been waiting for this moment all day," and it supports the notion of Mrs. Chen bringing academics into the conversation to exhibit her son's achievements (5). Danny is a deer caught in headlights as his "eyes widened," and "He choked. 'Not now, Ma'" (6). Danny is unable to breathe, and it is like he cannot bear participating in what his parents are forcing him to take part in. May also perceives "a flash of something drowning behind [Danny's eyes]" (6). Danny may as well be drowning in this comparison competition; he is visibly in discomfort, yet no one is paying heed to his needs or wants. Danny's objections are dismissed with his mother's "Now is the perfect time! We're like family here" (6). Mrs. Chen's depiction of the Wus as "family" indicates a closeness that the Chen and Wu families have known each other for some time. This comparison game at dinner is presumably not an isolated incident, and this practice has become ingrained in Danny, May, and Celeste. Eventually,

Danny pauses and “rearrange[s] his face so quickly that no one else notice[s]” before revealing his acceptance to Princeton (6). Danny’s rearranged face is a facade. On the outside, he must feign happiness with his university acceptance, a product of his hard work and academic achievement. Everything is okay. On the inside, he is uncomfortable with being the center of attention, and he must conceal his true feelings: tonight is my last night alive.

The final theme is surrender as demonstrated by the feelings of defeat expressed by the verbal and non-verbal protests from the Chen and Wu children to their parents boasting about their triumphs. In every part of this family-friendly dinner, we have seen snippets of failed resistance, and it is on full display with Danny. Surrender underlines that objection against performance-based love and fatal ableism is pointless, and one’s only option is to submit. What then, do you do when you are unable to stand submitting any longer? As we know in *The Silence that Binds Us* and will see in other works, you defer to ending your life. Surrender is the final layer on top of performance-based love and fatal ableism. To receive love, you must work yourself to the bone, kill yourself in the process, and submit to this cycle or submit to death.

Amidst the congratulations, “someone ask[s], ‘Did you hear from Stanford yet?’” (6). Again, this question appears benign: Did you hear from this college you applied to? On the other hand, through the lens of Asian American parenting and the comparison that is inherent in this framework, this question could imply that Princeton is not enough. One Ivy League is not enough, and Stanford is what you *should* be striving for and where you *should* be getting accepted to. While Danny “[keeps] smiling,” he is described as looking “lost” (6). He is lost in the world he has been forced to become accustomed to.

The conversation shifts back to Celeste when Mrs. Wu has “some exciting news to share too” (6). Again, Celeste is in opposition to her mother’s sharing by “[giving] her mom a look that said, *Shut up, Mom*, and [shaking] her head faintly” (6). Her mother ignores her and shares Celeste’s plan for the summer is to take part in a Google internship program. The program is “supposed to be for graduating seniors, but [Celeste] got in even though she’ll only be a junior next year” (6). As this news follows that of Danny’s college acceptance, it seems Mrs. Wu is trying to measure Celeste against Danny; Celeste, a junior, has an internship that is meant for someone of Danny’s age. It is clear Mrs. Wu and Mrs. Chen are proud of Celeste, but Celeste seems mortified and embarrassed by it. May notes how “[her mother] never looked at [her] that way, a lantern glowing with pride” (6). As expected, Mrs. Chen would not and cannot be proud of May on her own accord because she wants her daughter to be like other kids. Even if May were to be “good enough,” the essence of comparison is that no feat is ever enough, and there is always something more to strive for.

We finally return to May when Mrs. Wu asks the modest question: “What will you be doing this summer?” (6). May replies, “Oh, uh, I don’t really know” (7). She knows it is “obviously not the right answer,” as if there is a “right” and “wrong” way to answer the question, even if her response is truthful (7). Danny comes to May’s rescue by diverting attention to her interest in dance, but May’s internalized reflection is how she hates people “watching [her] and “sizing [her] up” because she feels “their eyes highlight all of her deficiencies” (7). Confidence building is a universal adolescent experience where one must discover their identity and build trust in themselves. In part, May’s insecurities could also stem from her Asian American upbringing. She likely has had a lifetime of

comparison, and comparison *is* highlighting one's deficiencies to say, "you are not good enough, and you need to be a certain standard."

I offer this close reading of the novel's first scene because it is a structuring scene to understand factors Asian American lives are built upon, and for many Asian Americans, this scene is one we are too well accustomed to. A classic component of Asian American parenting is the endless competition – whether that be between friends, extended family members, siblings, and/or others. As pictured in this dinner, tension can begin with a simple question or comment, and it can spiral into a tense face-off. Ostensibly, there is nothing wrong with a desire to do well or with parents having high hopes for their children. Even so, these intentions, no matter how benign, can morph into forms of parenting that give rise to conditions that push their children into trapped circumstances, cultivate seemingly illogical decision making, and in the case of this novel, drive individuals to end their lives. For Celeste, May, Danny, and many young Asian Americans, this is the reality. From this first scene I have outlined three themes that appear in Asian American literature dealing with mental health suicide: performance-based love, fatal ableism, and surrender. These themes intimately and intricately work together to collectively convey the toxic conditions by which Asian Americans have internalized how to receive love, validation, and acceptance. There is recurrent trauma that occurs from this type of environment, regardless of how mild or extreme their iterations are. In these next sections, I will delve into each theme in detail by presenting literary examples of how these themes create and nurture Asian American unwellness.

PERFORMANCE-BASED LOVE

Performance-based love can be broken into three pieces: “performance,” “based,” and “love.” “Performance” is how well an individual does an activity (“‘Performance’ Definition”), and “based” is serving as the foundation and point of development (“‘Based’ Definition”). In this context, “love” is parental love; parental love is often viewed as something that should be unconditional, and children freely receive this love. When “love” is put together with “performance” and “based,” this supposedly no-strings-attached love becomes conditional because it is founded upon and nurtured depending on the child’s performance. This is the love many Asian Americans know, and in academic settings especially, this type of love feeds into Asian American students’ obsession with grades. As seen in *The Silence that Binds Us*, performance-based love is demonstrated through simple questions about academics, but these questions veil deeper intentions of comparison and expectations.

English and Asian American studies scholar erin Ninh in her book *Passing for Perfect: College Impostors and Other Model Minorities* expands on Asian American performance by addressing the model minority both as an identity and as a mode of racial performance. As an identity, the model minority is more than a myth or a label; it is an internalized reality. To be Asian American is to understand the societal, familial, academic, and personal standards that must be followed in order to racially “pass,” yet “the cost of passing is always high” (*Passing for Perfect* 13). To be anything less than passing is “even more intolerable” (13). To further illustrate, author and activist trained in social work and clinical mental health Kai Cheng Thom opens her essay “The Myth of Mental Health” with a personal anecdote of how immediately after her suicide attempt and release from the hospital, her father strikes up a conversation about still needing to take the SATs the next day. Despite the gravity of the situation, Thom was still expected to produce a performance of a “good” Asian American

student and carry on as if nothing happened. Thom uses this brief narrative to question what it means to be a “mentally healthy person,” and its ties to the model minority. My following analysis of *The Astonishing Color of After* and *Bone* examines two individuals who know the pressures of the model minority reality and feel the only way to cope is to end their lives.

Emily X.R. Pan’s *The Astonishing Color of After* is a magical realism young adult novel. This book follows the journey of biracial protagonist Leigh Chen Sanders as she travels to Taiwan to meet her maternal grandparents for the first time and to reconnect with her and her recently deceased mother’s culture. The chapters alternate between present day, Leigh’s memories, and memories of Leigh’s maternal family history. Specifically, I draw attention to Leigh’s mother, Dory Sanders. Similar to *The Silence that Binds Us*, we know from the start of the book that Dory ends her life. We are told Dory has had bouts with depression throughout her adult life, and it is implied her battle with this mental illness is what drove her to make her choice. While depression is a weighty facet of Dory’s life, performance-based love is even more tightly interwoven throughout the fabric of her livelihood. From adolescence to womanhood, the only love Dory has known from her parents is one that comes with a price tag, and this is clearly depicted in Dory’s decision to move to the United States to pursue music and her marriage to a white American man. We gather our insight of this tension via conversations between Dory’s older sister, Jingling, and their parents where Jingling is forced to be a mediator and messenger between the two and where Jingling is also a victim of this conditional love.

The first performance Dory must enact is to be an obedient Chinese daughter and to not continue with music. Consequently, Jingling is also compelled into fulfilling the role of being dutiful to her parents, while simultaneously wanting to remain loyal to her sister. Concurrently, the two

sisters are sized up against each other, and their parents' favor hinges on their acquiescence. Jingling is told she "[was] never this much trouble," "did everything so well," and "[was] always so focused" (Pan 268). To their parents, "trouble" is equated to disobeying their career standards. The "praise" Jingling receives implies she was all these things *for* her parents, regardless if she truly wanted to. Erin NINH's first book, *Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature*, identifies these feelings as an "indebtedness," and she likens the Asian American parent-child bond to a creditor-debtor relationship. NINH clarifies indebtedness is not necessarily monetary, but a feeling of obligation for Asian American children to "repay" their parents' hard work and sacrifice with obedience and success (35). In vain, Jingling also attempts to curb her parents' comparing jabs, but she is ultimately forced into complicity with them because Dory "will listen to [her]" (Pan 268). Jingling is tasked to "tell [Dory] to work harder...[and] understand her priorities" (268). Dory and Jingling's priorities are not their own; rather, they are desires of their parents that are thrust upon them. Whether it is how they behave or the careers they choose, Dory and Jingling are imprisoned in this cycle of indebtedness to please and give back to their parents. As indebtedness is accrued over a lifetime, it can never actually be repaid (*Ingratitude* 16). As a result, Asian American children subsist with a compounding debt, but what do they do when they can bear it no longer?

As established, the demands of performance-based love may be well-intentioned. It could be argued that Jingling and Dory's parents' career pressures are reasonable and mindful for their daughters' future. One model is legal scholar and writer Amy Chua's quest to raise successful daughters the "Chinese way." Chua's memoir, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, names her characteristics of a "tiger mother" such as never allowing her daughters to "choose their own

extracurricular activities,” “get any grade less than an A,” and “not be the #1 student in every subject except gym and drama” (3-4). Chua’s goal was to prove how “Chinese parents are better at raising kids than Western ones,” and she claims she was successful in how her daughters developed strong work ethics, continue to value excellence, and pursue their hobbies and extracurriculars as their own choice (1). Jingling acknowledges this possibility by resolving she will tell Dory what her parents have mentioned about working hard and understanding her priorities. Nevertheless, Jingling also recognizes if Dory’s priorities differ from their parents, these aspirations are still valid because there is more to being a “perfect child, a perfect wife” (Pan 268). With Jingling’s support, Dory has the agency and freedom to pursue her interests, but the price of rebelling against her parents’ priorities will be costly. For performance-based love, this means no parental love can or will be given.

While away in the United States, Dory falls in love with a white American, Brian. When Dory’s parents discover their relationship, they are furious, and they insist she “must marry someone Chinese. She *must*” (311). Again, the role Dory must undertake is the obedient Chinese daughter: An obedient Chinese daughter marries someone who is also Chinese. Scholar Mimi Khúc expands on Ninh’s concept of indebtedness by asking her students to conceptualize the meaning of Asian American “success” in what they “owe.” Khúc’s book, *dear elia: Letters from the Asian American Abyss*, reflects how “success” for marriage is “not just any kind of married,” but the “right” person in terms of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, familial background, career, and the “right” time with dating and having children (67). By Dory’s parents’ terms, she is not even married yet, but she is already on the path to failure. Once again, Jingling is called to realign Dory, and they return to the well-worn pattern of comparative questioning: “How did we come to have such a disobedient child? Why

couldn't she be more like you?" (Pan 406). In alignment with Khúc's identifications of marital "success," they mandate "[Dory] *will* love a good Chinese man with a good family, who can give her a good life" (406, emphasis mine). The justification for their rationale is that a Chinese man with a good family will provide for Dory. Even so, there is no guarantee that with all of these qualities, Dory will be taken care of and will be happy. The catch of performance-based love is that it is not optional; it is a command. They also declare "[Dory] doesn't know what love is" (406). Perhaps Dory is naive and *doesn't* know what love is. After all, the only form of love she knows is what her parents have shown her; their love is based upon what she does and how well she is doing it. By this reasoning, her parents' construction of love is not any better. Love for many Asian Americans is *always* conditional. Khúc then asks: "Can we imagine a love without debt?" (79).

Dory chooses to marry a non-Chinese man, Brian, and this decision is the breaking point as she fails to fulfill the performance her parents want from her. The love from her parents is taken away, and Dory's parents disown her; she no longer has a home, and "[she is] no longer [their] daughter" (Pan 410-411). Ninh's *Ingratitude* calls attention to how indebtedness and disownment go hand in hand with disownment as a consequence for when Asian American children fail to work towards paying off their debt. Innately, Asian American parenting is "structured by the constant threat of violent disownment" (*Ingratitude* 16). Ninh also points out how disownment can take forms of either abandonment of the parents or banishment of the child, but regardless of the case, love is conditional as "there's exploitation of dependence and attachment" (102). Effectively, Dory does not maintain contact with her family in Taiwan (and vice versa), and she continues to build a life for herself in the United States. Many years later, the consequences of this type of love and the ultimatum are still

apparent in Dory's life and in her daughter's. Unbeknownst to Dory, her husband continues to contact her parents, and they eventually express to him their regret for the things they said. With this in mind, Dory's husband appeals to Dory that enough time has passed, and she should reconcile with her parents. He particularly uses Leigh to implore that she deserves to have a relationship with her grandparents. Even many years later, Dory has not forgotten the wounding words of disownment from her parents. The mindset she has internalized is that her parents "have only disappointment in who [she] is. [Her] entire life. Disappointment" (Pan 411). Dory's husband makes the effort to console her: "it's been so many years," and "they didn't mean it" (410-411). His words are meant to appease, but he is unable to empathize with Dory on the traumatic weight of their words. To Dory, her parents *did* mean what they said, and she is unable to picture alternatives for how her life could turn out.

At the time of Dory's death, Dory and her parents never reconcile. Their relationship is left broken, so it is left to the next generation of the family in Leigh to decipher this fraught relationship and what it means for her as a product of her mother's decisions. While under her parents' household and abroad, Dory has been subject to a lifetime of conditional love from her parents. This pernicious environment is not stated as the cause or even a factor of Dory's death, but its conditions alone generate a toxicity that could kindle mental unwellness in anyone. In the context of this narrative, all of Dory's parents' influence is from abroad in Taiwan via phone calls or when Dory returns to Taiwan to visit her family. This story offers us an outlook to how performance-based love is not an isolated occurrence in the United States, but a phenomenon that spans transnational borders and generations. In the United States, this is expressed as the model minority, and scholars such as American studies

scholar Wendy Cheng and sociologist Ezra Vogel articulate how analogous expectations of upward mobility and exceptionalism as forms of survival and qualities to emulate emerged in east Asian countries in the Cold War era.³ Dory's parents are not Asian American, but the backdrop of their country and others extends to the genesis of these "model minority tiger nations."

Similar to how Pan's novel portrays how performance-based love creates conditions of indebtedness and threats of disownment toward their children, Fae Ng's *Bone* exhibits how strictness in Asian American parenting, an outcome of parents' unaddressed trauma, generates conditions for their children's suicidality. *Bone* is a narrative of the Leong family told in reverse chronology by the eldest Leong daughter, Leila. We know the middle of the three Leong sisters, Ona, has ended her life, and the family is left grappling with her death, family secrets, and their family's culture of dysfunction. While existing scholarship on *Bone* largely turns Ona's suicide into figurative, metaphorical meaning, I want to emphasize her suicide as a literal act of ending a life. Ona's suicide is in response to her parents' unique performance-based love, and despite it not being stereotypical "tiger parenting," it carries its own form of "strictness" and destruction.

When Leila and the youngest Leong sister, Nina, retrieve Ona's belongings from her workplace, Ona's co-worker stops them and asks, "Are your parents really that strict?" indicating their parents were a point of strain for Ona (Ng 110). Leila is confused by what the hostess means because to her, "strict implies rules and order and consistency, some sort of agreement" (110). The Leong parents could not be farther from this definition as they create and modify rules as needed. By Leila's

³ See Cheng, *Island X*; Vogel, *The Four Little Dragons*

definition, her parents are not “strict,” but their word is still law, and thus, strict in its own way.

Unlike *The Astonishing Color of After* where Dory’s parents have a specific vision for their daughter, the Leong parents tailor their expectations on a whim. The conditions of their love are more fluid, but also more difficult to fulfill. Leila reflects how Ona “felt more stuck than divided about her loyalties to Mah and Leon” (112). Regardless of relaxed or strict parenting, conditional parenting’s origins can be traced back to unresolved trauma. In “Intergenerational Communication about Historical Trauma in Asian American Families,” psychologists Jieyi Cai and Richard Lee stress the need to understand trauma for Asian Americans as a critical discourse in collective contexts opposed to traditional medicine’s naming as a “clinical condition” (236). For Asian Americans, some collective contexts to consider could be U.S. imperialism, war, genocide, and immigration to name a few. In the aftermath of these conditions, Cai and Lee assert the significance of family relationships as the main route through “which historical trauma exerts intergenerational effects” (237). Author and journalist Stephanie Foo echoes this by sharing her personal insight on the NPR podcast, *Invisibilia*. Foo describes how she has met countless Asian parents who avert discussing their past traumas as a tactic of protecting themselves and their children. Yet, Foo discloses how what is missing for their children is the “why” and the context (Shaw). Simultaneously, there is tension between the desire to understand and the acceptance of perhaps never fully understanding.

As the middle daughter, Ona is positioned as the emotional support for her parents, but in the process, she also becomes devotedly chained to them. Ona must perform as a “good” Chinese daughter and serve as an emotional moderator. In contrast, Nina is the rebellious one who runs away from the family, and Leila is the one who attempts to be dutiful despite her thinly-wearing patience. From her

distanced perspective, Nina observes “how [Leila] was locked into living Mah’s and Leon’s lives for them... [and] how Ona’s need for them destroyed her” (Ng 112). Through the lives of the Leong sisters, *Bone* addresses the trap of performance-based love as their parents are unable and unwilling to undertake their traumas and instead rely on their children as mitigators. Mah and Leon’s restraint is their means to survive, but it comes at the price of their daughters’ well-being and lives. For Ona, she is unable to envision a life for herself outside of her parents and their love. In being tied to their love and acceptance, Ona feels her only option to escape is via death.

FATAL ABLEISM

As I did with performance-based love, I will divide fatal ableism into its two parts: “fatal” and “ableism.” The first part, “fatal,” is defined as causing death. The second part, “ableism,” has multiple conceptualizations rooted in disability studies. Disability studies scholars Priya Lalvani and Susan Baglieri in their book, *Undoing Ableism: Teaching About Disability in K-12 Classrooms*, refer to “ableism” as a belief of superiority of those who are “non-disabled, ‘able-bodied,’ or ‘able-minded,’” and in turn, there is a belief of inferiority and discrimination toward people who have disabilities (71). Disability scholar-activist Fiona Campbell’s “Inciting legal fictions: ‘disability’s’ date with ontology and the ableist body of law” describes how ableism is more than just a belief, but a “network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard)” that is viewed as the “ideal” body (44). As a whole, disability studies identify ableism as a valorization of bodies as normative under which existing environments are sufficient.

Fatal ableism for Asian Americans is a form of “hyper-ableism” where there is an expectation that Asian Americans are not just fulfilling standards of “able-bodies,” but they must go above and beyond these limits. Thus, hyper-ableism goes hand in hand with upholding the model minority identity, and this is particularly exacerbated for students in their work ethic, achievements, extracurriculars, and the list goes on. To constantly strive to overachieve and maintain this standard comes at the cost of one’s physical and mental well-being, and it can ultimately bring about death. Scholar Eliza Noh writes “Terror as Usual: The Role of the Model Minority Myth in Asian American Women’s Suicidality” to investigate the connection between the model minority and suicidal tendencies. Noh identifies three avenues by which the model minority influences suicidality; she elucidates how the model minority produces pressures to succeed and when it is internalized, individuals blame themselves for failing to measure up (319-320). The model minority is also a barrier for Asian Americans in receiving help for their unwellness because it presumes they are succeeding (320). This final point draws attention to the impending danger of fatal ableism as Asian Americans continue to succeed despite their unwellness. In *The Silence that Binds Us*, we see expressions of fatal ableism through Celeste Wu’s insistence to study late into the night despite her parents’ protest, and my following examination of *What My Bones Know*, *The Silence that Binds Us*, and *Bone* provides other demonstrations of fatal ableism.

To begin, Stephanie Foo’s memoir, *What My Bones Know*, captures firsthand the effects of academic institutions and parental pressures for Asian Americans. Foo’s memoir centers on her investigation of her abuse and trauma, her struggles with mental health, and her journey to and after her diagnosis of complex post-traumatic stress disorder (c-PTSD). Foo’s experiences are a testimony to

how Asian American mental unwellness extends beyond the pages of fiction into real-world realities, and it specifically highlights the destructive intersection of parental abuse and pressure to succeed academically with students working under stress and hiding their unwellness at school. As part of her research, Foo revisits and reflects on her hometown high school experience. She recalls her academic environment amongst her Asian American classmates being toxic; however, she never questioned it because “it was what it was,” and “it was the price you paid” (Foo 148). Upon reconnecting with several classmates, faculty, and staff at the school, Foo comes to the conclusion that “all of [the students] are victims of a dysfunctional community that was very good at throttling itself while murmuring, ‘Smile through your tears. Swallow your pain’” (174). On the surface, Foo and her classmates were doing well in their studies and their extracurriculars; they received exceptional grades, and they were heavily involved in sports, clubs, and activities. The darker reality was the students were suffering with a slew of mental illnesses from stress, anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and others. The root of these ailments came from varying degrees of parental pressures and abuse, and Foo remembers how she and her classmates would compare who had it worse, as if suffering was a badge of course. Foo and her peers were unwell, but they “achieved the American Dream because [they] had no other choice” (148). Foo details that many parents were immigrants or refugees fleeing traumatic experiences of sociopolitical conflict, war, and/or genocide in their home countries. Thus, their children were privileged to receive an education and to not know violence, poverty, or unrest. With this in mind, Foo and her peers would view their parents’ trauma as a means to endure and justify their own trauma. Foo and her classmates are the epitome of fatal ableism with their efforts to continue to perform in spite of their deteriorating mental health. While their parents did undergo traumatic

experiences, it does not justify the abuse, no matter how mild, they inflicted upon their children. Instead, it continues to perpetuate cycles of intergenerational trauma and reinforce the detriments of the model minority.

Returning to *The Silence that Binds Us*, what is startling about Danny's suicide is it is unexpected. Danny appears to be fine, especially on a night when he should be celebrating a college acceptance. In the aftermath of his death, May and Mr. Chen both circle to the same conclusion with signs of Danny's suicide from "I don't understand how I missed the signs that pointed to suicide" (Ho 51) and "I just don't understand. There weren't any signs. At least, none that I ever noticed. It came out of nowhere" (100). There is an abundance of resources on how to recognize the signs of suicide and how to help someone you suspect may be suicidal. For example, the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) divides the "Warning Signs of Suicide" into three categories: talking, feeling, and changing behavior. Talking is described as "wanting to die, great guilt or shame, [and/or] being a burden to others." Feeling is characterized as empty, hopeless, anxious, trapped, sad, or full of rage, and changing behavior is depicted as making a plan or researching ways to die, withdrawing and giving away items, taking risks, eating or sleeping more or less, or drug and alcohol use. The NIMH denotes these indicators to describe how suicide is preventable, and it urges that lives can be saved. Identifying signs can help in receiving support for mental unwellness or in averting the tragic act of suicide. Danny is unwell, but no one knows it because despite Danny's unwellness, he masquerades that he is fine. Encapsulating the definition of fatal ableism, he continues to exude excellence in everything from academics, sports, and college acceptances, even while he is suffering. May and Mr. Chen believe they "missed" the signs of Danny's suicidal ideation, but as Mr. Chen asserts, there *were* no signs.

Consequently, one cannot miss something if there was nothing to miss in the first place. There is far less scholarship on suicide when there are *no* warning signs. Psychiatrist Michael Miller explains people will rarely reveal their suicidal ideations, and “the paradox is that the people who are most intent on committing suicide know that they have to keep their plans to themselves if they are to carry out the act” (Skerrett). Every path to suicide is different, and the Alliance of Hope, a non-profit for suicide loss survivors, details how across the board people “are simply searching for a way out of an unbearable struggle.” The particular danger of fatal ableism is it makes it difficult, if not impossible, to decode Asian American unwellness, physically, mentally, and emotionally. Asian Americans are adept at pushing through their hardship and hiding their symptoms. To emphasize, Ho’s narrative does speculate that Danny may have been depressed. However, there is no official diagnosis, and it is narrowly hinted something is amiss through what May picks up from the opening dinner scene and her memories of Danny, such as when “he’d lock himself in his room,” “he didn’t feel like eating dinner,” and “he slept in later than usual” (Ho 100). These are also common teenage behaviors, and May herself eventually dismisses these incidents because “on their own, these don’t seem like a big deal” (101). Battling depression or not, Danny was “thriving” in his unwellness, and no one was even vaguely aware of it. From this, we can consider how hyper-ableism may as much be a sign of suicide for Asian Americans as the typical warning signs of suicide.

Continuing, *Bone* echoes both Foo and Pan by illustrating boundaries of fatal ableism and limitations to naming signs of Asian American mental unwellness. In conversation with Leila, Nina clarifies she knows about “shoulds” and “have tos” within her role in the family; she touches on the validity of this because there is always more to be done. However, Nina also has “learned this: [she]

can't do everything that is asked of her (Ng 33). Nina draws the limit for herself on what she is willing to do for her family; it is the boundary Ona failed to draw for herself, and the line Leila straddles in wanting to be dutiful to their parents while also craving freedom in her own life. As Nina and Leila wrap up Ona's affairs, Nina questions: "Why does everybody keep saying she was all right?" (111). Leila responds that people feel they should have picked up on Ona's suicidal ideation, but Nina disagrees because "Ona could keep a secret better than anybody" (111). Like Danny, Ona keeps her thoughts of suicide to herself, and her death comes as a shock to her family and friends. Immediately following Ona's death and the police investigation, Leila notes how the "[police officer] didn't get it. He was looking at the typical stuff" (139). Nonetheless, as I have argued, these "typical" indicators of suicide and suicidality are not the clues that point to mentally suffering Asian Americans.

SURRENDER

The final theme of surrender speaks to the conclusion that resistance is powerless, and the remaining course of action is to submit. Surrender carries two options. The first is to relinquish oneself to the model minority and its harmful conditions: performance-based love and fatal ableism. When this becomes unbearable, the second option is to concede oneself to suicide. After each of the suicides in the three novels, *The Silence that Binds Us*, *The Astonishing Color of After*, and *Bone*, there is a barrage of questions. Why would someone make this choice? There is a longing desire to logically find a cause and understand the intimate details of the act. The question of "why" continues to be asked, but the reality is that "why" may never be answered. Thus, the focus here is not on the rationale of suicide itself or where blame should be placed. In this section, I delve into the meaning of the types of

questions that are asked and how they give insight to suicide becoming the outlet for someone who refuses to surrender any longer.

In *The Silence that Binds Us*, May asks: “Why wasn’t I enough to keep you here, Danny?” (75). Leigh asks a similar question in *The Astonishing Color of After*: “What makes a person want to die?” (76), and in *Bone*, Leila wonders: “What could have saved Ona?” (46). In asking these questions, there is an assumption that the individual *should* or *want to* live because there are relationships and experiences that are reasons for someone to want to continue on. Ultimately, individuals cannot be given reasons to live by someone else; it is something they will need to decide for themselves. For Danny, Dory, and Ona, they felt that living was so unbearable that suicide became their only option. The question they would ask in return is why *not* end my life? Leila continues to question: “What made Ona do it? Like she had no choice” (50).

Returning to Ninh’s *Passing for Perfect: College Impostors and Other Model Minorities*, Ninh answers the question: “*How do well-behaved Asian Americans become people with no felt options, no thinkable alternatives to the success frame?*” (21). Ninh’s “no felt options” framework interlocks with her earlier assertions of the model minority as an identity and racial performance, and it is fitting to address these novels’ questions. No felt options are where individuals have internalized the model minority identity and racial performance, and they reach a point where they feel no other options are possible. Rather than facing failure of not measuring up, they feel their only remaining choice is to escape by doing the unthinkable and seemingly illogical. In the case of each of these novels, Danny, Dory, and Ona surrender to the choice they feel is left: suicide. Ninh writes “to put oneself out of misery can have to do with protectiveness, holding intact not life itself but a vision of life that bears the

living” (135). These characters have chosen death over facing the possibility of failing to fulfill the model minority because said failure feels that unbearable. The surviving characters ask questions to look for the words to navigate their family’s tragedies, but their questions are met with silence. The reality is that silence *is* the language of no felt options and suicide.

ENDING SCENES AND CONCLUSION

I close with returning to *The Silence that Binds Us*. The novel’s epilogue leaves us with the Chen family on Tomb Sweeping day, an annual holiday where Chinese and Taiwanese families visit the graves of their ancestors and loved ones, clean them, and honor them with gifts for the afterlife. Here, the Chens surround and pay homage at Danny’s final resting place. We are told that May and her parents are attending individual and family therapy to work through their grief, and they are learning to communicate with each other. The family fondly recalls memories of Danny, and May expresses that “in this moment, I feel close to Danny. Close to my parents” (Ho 437).

Let us imagine that *The Silence that Binds Us* does *not* end the way it does. The Chen family never processes their grief after Danny’s death, and they do not speak about what happened. May does not feel close to her parents, and she feels she is unable to communicate with them to understand what happened. We can explore this alternate ending by revisiting the title, *The Silence that Binds Us*, and Ho’s final lines. Ho ends with: “This silence we share is one that connects us. It is a bond of heartbreak and healing. Sadness and hope. Darkness and light. And most of all, love” (437). Bind has a double meaning; it can be used as a way of uniting, but also as a way of chaining. From Ho’s connotation, it is clear she is seeking to use silence as a way to bond the Chen family together. No more needs to be said

about Danny's death because the silence is what speaks for itself, and love is the ultimate, overlaying link. On the other hand, this silence is what is tethering May to the same familial structure that pushed her brother to end his life. If there is nothing said or nothing more to be said in this "silence," then what is to prevent May from falling into the same fate as her brother?

The final scene Ho leaves us with is overall touching, but it feels as if one is wearing rose-colored glasses. Conversely, this is not to argue this ending *is not* possible. As this book is a work of fiction, the strength of fiction lies in exploring various outcomes. To some extent, there is also a limitation of storytelling. Readers will invest in stories that leave them feeling satisfied, and it is possible Ho's narrative's success depends on a tidy, happy conclusion. Perhaps Ho is attempting to visualize what an Asian American family can look like after a suicide: healthy, communicating, and whole — or maybe it is an incapacity of Ho herself to name the Asian American reality of suicidal aftermaths and write a different story. Let us turn to the sentiments of the other works in dialogue.

In *The Astonishing Color of After*, Pan closes with an Author's Note about her personal family experience with mental health. Regarding mental health, depression, and suicide, Pan urges readers "That stigma can and does kill. That stigma is perpetuated by not talking" (466). Pan also reiterates the idea of silence with the stigma around mental health in the Asian American community. She ends on a thought that "it was important to me that while Leigh's mother had experienced some terrible things in her life, there wasn't a *reason* to explain her having depression" (465-466). Pan is correct that there is a negative association to mental health for Asian Americans, and perhaps Dory unfortunately happened to be diagnosed with depression. Yet, Pan's final note focuses heavily on the mental health ailment itself that she seems to decontextualize it from her novel's narrative of Dory being victim of

comparison, verbal abuse, and renouncement of familial and home ties. Maybe there is no *cause* for Dory's depression, but as evinced by Pan's novel, there are certainly *reasons* that contributed to Dory's mental unwellness. A key opportunity is missed to communicate how it is not just mental health stigma that is an issue, but it is also the environments of the family, academia, societal structures, and more that create conditions for mental unwellness in Asian Americans. Pointedly, Dory's depression becomes a failure of modern medicine instead of a failure of the Asian American family.

Ng's *Bone* also mentions silence with how "Ona has become a kind of silence in [the Leong's] lives. [They] don't talk about her" (15). *Bone's* silence paints the picture of the stigma that Pan cautions against where Ona's suicide is a taboo topic that the Leongs wish to avoid. Subsequently, *Bone's* beginning is a foil to *The Silence that Binds Us*. The Leong family is in disarray after Ona's suicide as they are unable to move forward from her death, and they continue to live in limbo. Along these lines, *Bone* provides a provoking denouement, one where nothing is actually resolved and in turn speaks to the dismal realities of Asian American families in the aftermath of suicide. If feminist scholar bell hooks is correct in saying that "The function of art is to do more than tell it like it is – it's to imagine what is possible," then its converse may also be true — that Asian American literature's confrontation with suicidality helps us imagine what is impossible: an easy resolution to the family's central contribution to their children's death. Asian Americans may be offered coping strategies to deal with their mental unwellness, but fundamentally, there is no coping that can be done when the issue is a structural condition. To close, my analysis of suicide's representations in literature urges the need for a more comprehensive understanding of Asian American unwellness that includes, but is certainly not limited to, the biomedical approach.

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