



Love to Resist
1st Drive to Validate
Healing City, U





1

Dear readers,

Welcome to my project about Asian family love.

I attempt to write a love letter aiming to interrogate what love means for Asians and Asian Americans. I work with theories of social justice using the authors Sarah Ahmed, George Yancy, and Angie Chung. All of these authors have inspired me to write about emotions and research a concept that we tend to take for granted: love. Family love is often thought to be given and given in a particular way. With my project, I challenge norms of North American family love as well as validate and represent an alternative type of family love. Along with these authors and theories, I hope to validate this different understanding of family love among the Asian community.

Growing up Asian American I learned that the ways traditional North American families show affection towards one another was not the way my family displayed or understood love. This caused doubts about my own family love, as media representation of Asian and Asian American love and affection were unseen within the greater society. Due to the lack of Asian representation in the media, and the reproduction of stereotypes of Asians and their dynamics of the family, it became important for me to find alternative representations of love within other spaces of knowledge making. I found a more nuanced representation of an Asian family dynamic in Kim's Convenience, Ins Choi's 2011 play about a Korean family living in Toronto, Canada, which was adapted for television in 2016. I look to the play to find those specific moments of family love that are often unspoken and that come with their own complexities regarding cultural and generational differences. Thus, I analyze Kim's Convenience and connect it to my own experiences, in hopes of creating a space of healing for Asian Americans who have experienced discrimination based on stereotypes. With this, I hope you all enjoy my series of letters, and see them as my attempt to validate Asian family love.

With love,

Mandy Tran



2

Dear readers,

This is a letter to you about Asian family love. I am writing to represent and validate the ways that Asian families portray affection toward one another. I will be analyzing the play, *Kim's Convenience*, as evidence for the cultural and generational difference in family affection. I connect this analysis with my personal experiences as a first generation Vietnamese American living in the United States of America. My name is Trần Huệ Mẫn but I also go by Mandy, and this is my project about Asian family love.

I hope as I write this letter you will gain some knowledge about the ways Asian/ Asian Americans have been understood. Asians are often understood in terms of the yellow peril, where Asian/ Asian Americans are often constructed as threatening to White society, while simultaneously being vulnerable to being threatened.(1) This construction of who Asian/Asian Americans are creates a misrepresentation of the actual dynamics of the Asian body, in which Asian/Asian Americans encompass many different countries of origins while being reduced to one pathologized identity. With this, it becomes important that Asians are portrayed in all forms of knowledge making.

Just as it is important to understand how Asian/Asian Americans are portrayed, it is also important to understand what emotions mean in Asian/ Asian American lives. The concept of family love is not universally understood in one particular way. In North America, we often see families show their love to one another through physical affection (hugs and kisses) and words of affirmation ("I love you"). But this particular portrayal of family love does not represent all the ways families show their affection towards one another. I argue that family affection is portrayed differently among different cultures and generations. Because emotions move and do not reside in one space or concept, it is understood differently among different bodies.(2) Sara Ahmed states, "Emotions circulate and are distributed across a social as well as psychic field." (3) This suggests that emotions move, making it difficult to locate where they are in a body, object, or figure, and it is through collective knowledge that a society comes to understand the emotions we feel, such as the concept of family love. Thus, we should understand family love not as a singular expression or ideal, but as multiple, interconnected forms of expression that can only be understood through collective knowledge. The meanings of family love are relational, between and among bodies, families, and societies, and shaped by histories attached to bodies, families, and societies. I connect the ways that Sara Ahmed describes how we come to understand a particular emotion with my project through the idea that we collectively understand what family love is due to the variety of knowledge making processes that represent a few distinct expressions of family love among many.. I offer these diverse representations to counter the overrepresentation of traditional North American families represented in all knowledge making spaces, as if it is the only representation. This overrepresentation is due to the values placed on the concept of what constitutes a normal family. This idea of what a normal family is and the overrepresentation of it devalues any other family dynamics and the ways affection is portrayed within "other" families. Thus, I challenge how we have collectively come to understand this normalized concept of family love.

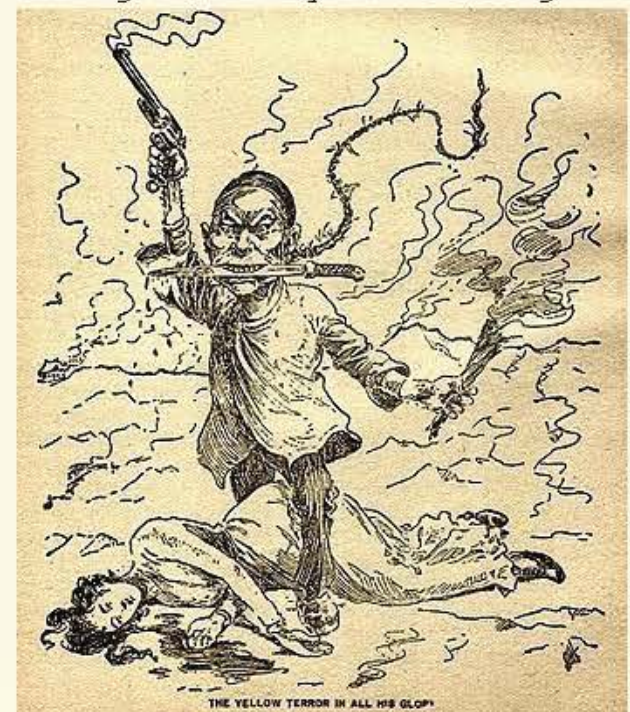
I invite you all to work together to understand the ways that Asian/Asian American families have been misrepresented and misunderstood, while also validating their ways of showing family affection.

I'll see you in the next letter.

With love,

Mandy

1. Yellow Peril: the construction of Asians and Asian Americans as threatening, while also constructing Asian/Asian Americans as vulnerable, threatened, or in danger (Ono & Pham, 2009, pg. 25). Ono, K. & Pham V. N. (2009). The Persistence of Yellow Peril Discourse. Asian Americans and the Media, 25 - 44.
2. Ahmed, S. (2004). Affective Economies. Social Text, 22, 117-139. Duke University Press. Pg. 120.
3. Ahmed, S. (2004). Affective Economies. Social Text, 22, 117-139. Duke University Press. Pg. 120.





3

Dear friends,

I want to self reflect with you all about why I want to do this project and its relevance. Self-reflection is key to understanding past mistakes, trauma, and to heal. Thus I will be reflecting on the authors--George Yancy, Sara Ahmed, and Angie Chung--along with the purpose of the project and the format of the project.

This project would not be possible without George Yancy's "Dear White America," an New York Times op-ed written by the philosopher to address race relations in the U.S. I gained interest in the ways that Yancy used the concept of love to write about difficult conversations around racism, sexism, and their effects. He starts his letter with a request to listen with love, the type of love that can be difficult but promotes growth.(1) Yancy starts the letter by drawing from the words of African American novelist and activist James Baldwin, "As you read this letter, I want you to listen with love, a sort of love that demands that you look at parts of yourself that might cause pain and terror, as James Baldwin would say."(2) Yancy asks readers to approach his letter with an open heart in order to understand his perspective and his arguments. This request is important as it is asking the reader to put aside their own biases in order to recognize how being comfortable can have negative consequences for others. I want to take this concept of listening with love from Yancy and request for you all to continue along with this journey to validate the cultural and generational differences of portraying family love among Asian/ Asian American families with an open mind and heart to validate these differences and create a space of healing.

From my previous letter, I have mentioned Sara Ahmed's "Affective Economies", about emotions circulating. Emotions do not reside in a subject but can still have their effect through binding subjects together.(3) I center emotion in these letters as a method to behind me to you, dear reader, and to separate family love from its dominant constructions in North America. By focusing on diverse representations of family and family love, I seek to de-link ideas around what family love from the traditional White North American family. This dominant representation of North American family love masquerades as the only way to express family love, which can negatively affect those who organize family differently and whose families express love differently. Thus I work to challenge normalized understandings of family love.

Angie Chung's chapter "Love and Communication across the Generation Gap" in her book *Saving Face: The Emotional Costs of the Asian Immigrant Family Myth*, influenced this project as it helped me to form words and phrases that describe what Asian family love is and looks like among cultural and generational differences. This reading allowed me to find myself in the participants that she interviewed, along with my understanding of the dynamics of the Asian family. Chung challenges the stereotypical concept of the Asian family as an emotionally deficient and psychologically dysfunctional unit that reinforces patriarchal oppression, and sacrifices humanistic values to breed obedient overachievers.(4) With her research, she recognizes the emotional disconnects and miscommunication between generations as rooted in economic hardship, while also recognizing the cultural differences in conveying love and the ways various ethnic groups communicate emotions.(5)

Building on the work of these scholars, I use the concept of love to represent and validate different forms of family love, and create a space of healing for those whose diverse expressions of love have been underrepresented or maligned when they are represented. I will do this through an analysis of Ins Choi's play, *Kim's Convenience*, connecting it to my own experiences. I hope to further understand how cultural and generational differences shape expressions of familial love.

My intentions in writing you all a letter is to create intimacy, so you can feel the emotions within the message. I have also chosen this format so that my research will be digestible and accessible. Through writing these letters, I want you all to walk away from this project knowing that there is space for you to hold, as well as space for marginalized folks to reside in.

Let's continue in the next letters with the analysis of the play, *Kim's Convenience*.

With love,

Mandy Tran

1. Yancy, G. (2015, December 24). Dear White America, The New York Times. Retrieved from <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/12/24/dear-white-america/>

2. Yancy, G. (2015, December 24). Dear White America, The New York Times. Retrieved from <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/12/24/dear-white-america/>

3. Ahmed, S. (2004). *Affective Economies*. Social Text, 22, 117-139. Duke University Press. Pg 119.

4. Chung, A. (2016). "Love and Communication across the Generation Gap" in her book *Saving Face: The Emotional Costs of the Asian Immigrant Family Myth*. Rutgers University Press, 45- 92. Pg. 45.

5. Chung, A. (2016). "Love and Communication across the Generation Gap" in her book *Saving Face: The Emotional Costs of the Asian Immigrant Family Myth*. Rutgers University Press, 45- 92. Pg. 47.



4



Dear friends,

I have gone through my fair share of doubts about my own family and their expressions of love. Most of these doubts came from media representations of family love. Media has a big influence on my understanding of family love. This understanding often comes from the dominant portrayals of the traditional North American family portraying their love for one another through physical affection and words of affirmations.

While understanding this concept, I looked to the media to find Asian/ Asian American family representation. I found Kim's Convenience, a television series, showcasing a contemporary immigrant Asian family. I found that the show was based on a play. I looked to the play for a more nuanced representation of Asian family dynamics. I found that Asian family love was based on expectations and sacrifices, influencing the ways they show affection.

The basis of Kim's Convenience includes Appa-the dad, Umma- the mom, Janet- the daughter, and Jung- the son. Appa and Umma run a convenience store. Janet occasionally works at the store, in addition to being an aspiring photographer. Jung's relation to the Kim family is strained because of a past conflict with Appa, resulting in Jung no longer living at home. Their complex family dynamic offers a unique site to examine expressions of familial love.

Throughout the play, we see Janet and Appa speaking to one another about sacrifices, expectations, and affection.



JANET: Appa, I'm not taking over the store.

APPA: Janet, you is thirty years old now and still single. You have to understand, now is desperation time for you. Sudden death, overtime, penalty kick shootout. Expiration date is over. Take over store is only choice you having.

JANET: I can't believe —

APPA: Me and Umma is struggle whole life make life for you. We do what we have to do, hope you can be doctor, lawyer, big success, but what you do? Take picture. We don't have to come to Canada for you take picture. Even you can take picture in North Korea.

JANET: Appa —

APPA: Janet, I am dying . . . one day in future and before I dying, I —

JANET: You want to retire.

APPA: What is my story? Hm? What is story of me, Mr. Kim? My whole life is this store. Everybody know this store, they know me. This store is my story. And if I just sell store, then my story is over. Who is Mr. Kim? Nobody know that. You take over store, my story keep going.

JANET: But Appa, that's life. Whether you choose it or get thrown into it, you make it what it is. And if you're not happy with your life, I'm sorry, but you can't expect me to make your life — I don't know — meaningful.

APPA: But I give my life, my story for you.

JANET: But you're the parent. You're supposed to.

APPA: Why is that supposed to? I don't have to give to you my life. I could throw you away as baby. I don't have to love you as baby, but I do. That is choosing. I choose like that. So, you have to be thank you and give to me you life. Second half. Fifty-fifty. That's fair. Yah, lookit, I am work at store, what you do, you don't work at store and still you eat, sleep upstairs, yah? You whole life, that's how we doing. Thirty years. So, just switch side now, like soccer. Second half, you work at store and I don't work at store and still I eat, sleep upstairs. Understand? (*Beat.*) I'm not live more than ten years, it's good deal for you.

JANET: That's a messed-up idea, Appa.

APPA: What you talking?

JANET: That's a seriously messed-up idea.

APPA: YOU seriously messed up —

In this dialogue, Appa speaks about the struggles that he and Umma had to face as immigrants. It shows the sacrifice they made to provide for the children's success. But their notions of success are based on their children's economic mobility. While the parents hold these expectations for the children, the children have their own expectations and have made their own sacrifices. Janet expects for her parents to provide financial resources and to openly share their affections and appreciations. Their differing expectations show how cultural and generational differences shape the meanings of family love.

As I read through the play, I often find myself understanding how Janet feels during the moments of not feeling appreciated. My parents have their own story, and I understand how Appa feels. It is not new information that immigrant parents leave their homelands to provide more opportunities for their children. I understand this because my parents have their own stories of immigrating to the U.S.

My dad immigrated to the U.S. as a boat refugee during his early teenage years. With his experiences immigrating to the U.S. and growing up here, he adapted to the traditional North American society, while also holding on to Vietnamese culture. This created cultural and generational differences growing up. My father often refers back to his own journey to advance economically and states that it is my and my siblings' responsibility to take care of him and my mother when they grow older, as that is what he is currently doing for his family. This was the long expectation that is placed on us, which I understand as they hope for us to become economically successful. But even with this expectation, it creates a divide as I find myself wanting to fulfill every expectation that they have placed on me and my siblings, but also wanting to fulfill my own career aspirations. This divide comes from the North American society stating that everyone is their own individual and thus has the power to pursue their own dreams, (although this has its own complications). On the other hand, I am taught culturally through my parents that I am required to take care of my parents when they grow old, as that is the return in investment for providing me with opportunities to advance economically. I have now come to terms with the fact that it is not possible to fulfill every expectation of my parents, despite the guilt I feel when I acknowledge the sacrifices they made, because with every fulfillment or accomplishment, there will be an expectation to do better. With this expectation to become economically successful, going into a prestigious career field that reproduces the stereotypes of Asian/Asian Americans, and grappling with the individualistic success concept from North American society, I become torn in between cultural and generational differences of beliefs and expectations.

My mother, who didn't immigrate to the U.S. until her early 20's, grew up also understanding that she must sacrifice her own happiness and hopes in order to provide for her family. This further complicates things within my own family as love was often understood through my parents as providing resources. In return, I was expected to sacrifice my dreams in order to fulfill their dreams of wanting me to become economically successful. I often thought that if I were to give up on my own aspirations and fulfill theirs, my parents would finally show their appreciation for me and become proud. This shows a cultural and generational difference in the ways affection is portrayed. Growing up in North America, I learned that if I did something well, I would in return get praised; but within my Asian household, that was not the case, as there is always someone better than you, meaning you had to do better. I found myself believing that my parents did not love me enough to see my accomplishments and my sacrifices, leading me to have doubts about myself. But through many discussions, readings, representation, and open hearted conversations throughout time, I come to understand that it was more than just expectations to be economically successful, but it was their way of showing affection.

Through exchange of resources, time, finances, and parental hopes and dreams to provide opportunities for their children to advance economically are the ways Asian families portray their love for one another.

I hope with the stories of the Kim's family in Kim's Convenience and my own narratives, it allowed you to understand the complex ways that family love can be portrayed.

With love,

Mandy

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Dear friends,

It is currently late in the night as I am writing you all this letter. This one is going to be different. This letter is about my own journey toward understanding what family love is, so bear with me as I open my heart to write you this letter.

To me, family love was understood as giving hugs, showing appreciation through kind words, and celebrating your successes and your happiness. But as I have become more critical throughout my undergraduate career, I became skeptical about what love means. Before my undergraduate years, I understood it through its happy times. This understanding came from how love was represented in the mass media. Media often portrayed traditional North American families showing affection through physical affection and words of affirmations. It rarely showed any Asian families displaying their affection in these typical, normalized ways. And even if Asians were in the media, their families became integrated into mainstream society. I did not feel that I could relate to these portrayals of the Asian family; but even if it did not feel right, I still looked for these moments in my own family. I thought that if my family showed the same type of affection as the ones in the media, that meant they loved me..

This is such a messed up idea because it tore me apart. It created an unrealistic idea of what a family should be and even now I question why this one type of family, showing a particular form of love, could be the dominant one. Why do we have to follow what one perception has shown?

I am angry because I don't think I needed to feel hurt. I did not need to doubt that my own family loved me. I did not ask to be integrated into mainstream society. I did not ask to be erased from these spaces of knowledge making. But why were we erased? Is it because the way we showed our familial love was not enough? Did it not feel like love and care? And even as I sit and write this right now, I still feel doubts that, yes it sometimes feels like my family's expressions of love were not enough and, yes, sometimes they really didn't feel like love. But this is untrue. Just because the ways a "normal" family expressed love for one another was not always found in my family, it does not mean I was not raised with love and care. I didn't know it at the time but I came to understand this when I sought out more Asian representation in the media. I looked to YouTube because that was where Asian creators were writing their own stories without the stereotype filters of what an Asian family should be. YouTube allowed me to find families like mine being represented in the media; it was raw and it felt right. I kept searching for Asian representation in the media and came across 'Kim's Convenience' This show became important to me because it grapples with the concept of family love by exploring cultural and generational differences between Janet and Appa. Appa understands love differently from the way Janet understands it. I related to the ways that Janet sought the type of family love associated with traditional North American families, which I found myself seeking from my own family. It is this struggle and conflict within myself that drove me to this research.

It was difficult to find Asian representation that was relevant to my experience, but I needed to search for such representation in order to understand my own family's way of expressing their love for me. Without Asian representation of Asian/Asian Americans in the media, I wouldn't have been able to accept my parents' ways of expressing their affection and would not have been able to start the journey to heal from these doubts.

I hope with this, you all are able to gain your own strength to heal from a cultural and generational difference in familial love and write your own unique story.

With love,

Trần Huệ Mẫn

P.S. Love comes with their variety of emotions; it is, for me, a sharing of an intimate time together, whether that is happiness or sadness. Love is the little moments of care, the moments in which sacrifices are made, the moments in which you can be vulnerable. Love is expressed through a variety of types of care and affection.

6

Dear friends,

Thank you for sticking with me through this project.

What I have attempted to do here is create a space of healing through making myself vulnerable with you all. By being open with my own story and my own journey to understand my parents' way of expressing affection, I hope to inspire you to start your own journey to identify, grapple with, and heal from cultural and generational differences in expressions of love. I have also explored Asian family dynamics from two perspectives, the fictional account of the Kim family (a Korean family) and an autobiographical account of my own family (a Vietnamese family). This shows that there is not just one generalized way that Asian families display their love for one another; but rather, it shows that there are multiple perspectives on familial love. Through providing these perspectives, it challenges the singular and dominant narrative of familial love, showing an alternative perspective of familial love, and opening a conversation about these differences in order to create a space of healing.

This last letter is merely an opening for a longer project. I want to thank all of you for sticking with me through this project. I also want to thank all of my professors, mentors, friends, and family for encouraging me to continue with this project that became very personal to me. Thank you for being here, listening, reading, and providing support for this project.

This project did not come easy, as I had my fair share of becoming lost in my own emotional journey; but nevertheless, this is the start of the conversation.

I believe this is not the end of this project, as I hope that you all are willing to write about your own unique experiences of family love, furthering my intentions for this project to become a space of healing and representation.

I close this introduction to this project in hopes that you all will write to heal from your own family wounds and come to an understanding of what family love means to you.

With love,

Mandy

find the
♥
from your
childhood



