It is perhaps the worst-kept secret of race relations in the United States, that the Asian American “model minority” is, in fact, a myth. But badly kept secrets are usually more useful when revealed than hidden. As a U.S.-specific political formation, the model minority myth emerged from the crucible of mid-20th century Cold War politics abroad, burgeoning cultural nationalism of various ethnic minority groups at home, and rapid institutional shifts following the Civil Rights era—by and for overwhelmingly white neoliberal interests who sought not only to qualify neoliberal multiculturalism but to substantiate it. Over time, the myth’s implicit and ever-changing message has come to exceed conversations between sociologists and journalists, settling the contours of a complex system of identity that finds reinforcement from Asian families and coethnic communities themselves. In and beyond decrying the standing of other minority groups, the model minority works to constitute not only one potential disciplining identity projected onto Asian Americans; but in many cases it comprises the only one—the first that comes to mind, and thus the most powerful.

When thus taken not only as a sociological phenomenon but as a disciplinary structure of cultural, psychic, and political identity and subjectivity, the myth of the model minority offers a compelling point of entry into understanding mobility, belonging, and sociality in portrayals of Asian American life and ideological landscape. To probe the richest availability of such portrayals, in this thesis I turn to narratives of model minority discipline is arguably most concerned with and recognizable through: second-generation Asian American literature. The mighty complexity of mythic form and function compels me to draw extensively from Roland Barthes’s Mythologies, Michel Foucault on normalizing power, and Judith Butler’s theories of identity performativity and the queered processes of racial passing. Each literary text this thesis engages with—Nina Revoyr’s Southland, Don Lee’s Yellow, and Fae Myenne Ng’s Bone—offers entry into a distinctive social universe that a model minority disciplined subject must negotiate.

This thesis sets out to introduce anew the vexed productivity of the model minority myth as a generative and disciplinary force in literary productions, cultural memory, and political-as-personal lives of Asian Americans and the institutions with which they contend. By conceiving of Asian American identity in but not of the myth, this thesis sifts through unplumbed genealogies of desire, deep-seated investments in heteronormative sexuality, and dimensions of belonging and debt that begin to envision alternate conceptions of model minority melancholia, failure, and kinship. Such is the only way we can get at the inadmissible forces that—via circulations of power and structures of feeling—attempt to fortify, conceal, and mediate the myth. This thesis peers close at not only about what the myth does, but what life lived around, within, and beyond alignments and breakages with the myth can reveal. As much as it has been problematic, this myth that premises inclusion as productivity and self-discipline, has also been both productive and self-disciplining. As such, this thesis will advance the argument that the myth will never be entirely expendable.