

Intersectionality in the 1950s: *Last Night at the Telegraph Club*

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The definitive U.S. portrait of the 1950s is often limited to the Cold War or the rise of American suburbia. Malinda Lo's young adult novel, *Last Night at the Telegraph Club*, challenges that portrait. The novel highlights intersectional histories and realities central to protagonist Lily Hu's life as an Asian American and lesbian. Lo writes that the novel is an attempt to draw "some of this history out from the margins," to un-erase the stories of trailblazing women like activist Crystal Jang, poet and professor Merle Woo, and physician Margaret Chung.¹ This novel about Lily's Chinese American family and the lesbians of the Telegraph Club places the 1950s persecution of LGBTQ+ individuals (the Lavender Scare) alongside the Red Scare, and the experiences of immigrant families in Chinatown alongside the popular TV images of white suburban families. This more complicated story, seen through the eyes of 17-year-old Lily, doesn't simply bring a historic period to life; it helps students see how Lily's world is connected to theirs.

The Novel

Last Night at the Telegraph Club is a richly contextualized rendering of the United States during the Cold War, a personal narrative of a Chinese American immigrant family, and a story of two young women falling in love in a time of fear and intolerance. Set in San Francisco's Chinatown in 1954 and 1955, Lo offers readers intimate portraits of the immigrant and LGBTQ+ communities central to Lily's story. The novel also includes flashback chapters from the points of view of Lily's aunt, mother, and father, with timelines that place characters in the context of local events like San Francisco Police department raids on gay bars, and national events such as

the McCarthy hearings.

Lily Hu and Kathleen Miller, the couple at the heart of the novel, grapple in different ways with coming out as young lesbians. Their affinity for math brings them together, and their relationship develops at the Telegraph Club, a lesbian bar featuring popular "male impersonator" Tommy Andrews. Lily and Kath each face homophobia as they come out, and sexism in their desires to pursue careers in STEM. However, Kath is white, and does not share Lily's experiences with anti-Asian racism or live with the anti-immigrant threats to Lily's father, who faces possible deportation for alleged ties to communist groups. Nor does she grapple with Lily's conflicts over love and loyalty for her Chinese American family and community, and the lesbian community she is discovering. After a police raid in which Kath is detained and Lily is seen leaving the Telegraph Club by a classmate, Lily's family discovers that she was, as her mother puts it, "at this club for homosexuals."² Lily refuses to lie about her sexual identity and is sent to live with her aunt in southern California.

Reading Questions on the Novel's Organization

Have students flip through the novel and see what they notice about how it is organized (timelines, song titles, flashbacks).

- What can you learn from the organization of the novel?
- How does focusing on different characters in chapters enhance perspective?
- What different themes are represented in the timelines?
- Why does Lo include both "history" (personal history) and "History" (local, state, national, and international events) on her

timelines? What impact does this have on your expectations for the novel?

Researching the 1950s

Students will come to *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* with some of their own ideas about the 1950s. With a partner, have students share what they believe about the decade as well as the sources of their knowledge (such as TV, family, school, etc). Questions they can discuss with their partners:

- *Where do your images of the 1950s come from?*
- *How might this decade differ from the 1940s? 1960s?*
- *Do you think your ideas about the 1950s are accurate? How can you find out?*

To arrive at a fuller picture of the decade, and to prepare students to read Lo's book, have different groups examine selected materials (documents, videos, photographs, etc.) related to a specific historical context (Red Scare, Gender, Chinese Americans/Ethnicity, and LGBTQ+) of *Last Night at the Telegraph Club*. After examining and discussing the sources pertaining to their topic (see Table 1 p. 176), each group will select relevant video clips and excerpts from print documents/images to share with the class for a 10-minute presentation, which will illuminate the history that informs the novel. Later, students will return to examine these same topics as they emerge in *Last Night at the Telegraph Club*.

As Students Read Malinda Lo's playlist

Once students have noticed the song titles that begin the six sections of the book ("I Can Dream Can't I?" "I Enjoy Being a Girl," "I Only Have Eyes for You," "Chinatown, My Chinatown," "Lush Life," and "Secret Love"), direct them to Malinda Lo's playlist for the book. The playlist includes the six section songs, as well as other songs referenced within the plot of the novel.³ Play the first song prior to assigning the first section, and the subsequent songs before students read those sections. Then re-play them at the end of each section.

- *What do you predict about each section, based on the lyrics and mood of each*

song?

- *What do the lyrics tell you about the time period?*
- *After reading the section, how accurate were your predictions?*
- *How appropriate was the song as a theme for the section? Why do you think Lo made this selection?*

Teacher discussion questions for themes in the book

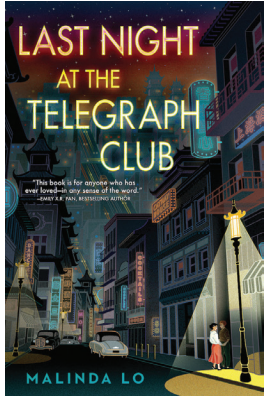
Red Scare

- *On what did the FBI base its visit to Lily's father? Why would the government want to deport Chinese immigrants?*
- *Do you think there were other ethnicities then/now who were investigated by the FBI?*
- *Why did it take several years to bring down McCarthy and McCarthyism? How important was the Senate's censure of McCarthy?*
- *How does bigger political History (e.g., The Red Scare) affect individual lives and histories?*

LGBTQ+

- *What special challenges did a girl attracted to other girls face dating in the 1950s? Do you think Lily and Kath would have to maintain such secrecy today?*
- *How important is it for gay teens to know other gay teens?*
- *Lily and Kath surreptitiously read lesbian romance novels in the drug store. How important was/is it for LGBTQ+ kids to see themselves in books? What are the implications for teens of today's book banning based on issues of heteronormativity?*
- *To what extent is it easier to name LGBTQ+ identity now? What has made it easier or still difficult?*
- *How was "family" defined in the 1950s? How has the legalization of same-sex marriage helped to normalize LGBTQ+ relationships?*

Table 1. Historical Context of *Last Night at the Telegraph Club*

Topic	1950s Red Scare	Gender	Chinese Americans/ Ethnicity	LGBTQ+
<p>Sources</p> 	<p>Primary sources on Red Scare, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/educational-resources/age-of-eisenhower/mccarthyism-red-scare</p> <p>Being Chinese in America during the Red Scare (7 min clip), www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/mccarthy-numbed-with-fear-chinese-americans</p> <p>McCarthy hearings, ending with “Have you no sense of decency?” (2.5 min clip), www.facebook.com/watch/?v=10155526445323689</p>	<p><i>The Fifties</i> documentary, episode “Let’s Play House” (first 14 min.), based on David Halberstam’s book of the same name, www.youtube.com/watch?v=dB61C_iTPnI&t=430s</p> <p>Malinda Lo’s blog “Miss Chinatown,” www.malindalo.com/blog/2021/2/17/the-making-of-miss-chinatown</p> <p>Jennifer Holt, “The Ideal Woman,” www.csustan.edu/sites/default/files/honors/documents/journals/soundings/Holt.pdf</p> <p>Women at Work in the 1950s (photos) https://text-message.blogs.archives.gov/2018/03/27/women-at-work-in-the-1950s</p>	<p>Chinese Exclusion Act (3 min. video) https://ny.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/the-chinese-exclusion-act/asian</p> <p>The McCarran-Walter Act (1952, document and commentary) https://immigrationhistory.org/item/immigration-and-nationality-act-the-mccarran-walter-act</p> <p>Malinda Lo’s blog “Racism and the Chinese American experience,” www.malindalo.com/blog/2021/3/30/racism-and-the-chinese-american-experience</p> <p>“Rice all the time?” Chinese Americans in the Bay Area (16 min. podcast) https://update.lib.berkeley.edu/2020/07/10/rice-all-the-time-chinese-americans-in-the-bay-area-in-the-early-20th-century</p>	<p>The Lavender Scare, www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2016/summer/lavender.html</p> <p>Coming out in the 1950s (14 min. video; contemporary teens interview elders), https://youtu.be/FGOnoPnmeH4</p> <p><i>Stoumen v. Reilly</i> public assembly rights www.sfgate.com/sfhistory/slideshow/How-one-SF-bar-a-Holocaust-survivor-and-his-204322.php</p> <p>Malinda Lo’s blog on the Raid, www.malindalo.com/blog/2021/6/22/the-raid-on-tommysZ</p>
<p>Guiding Questions</p>	<p><i>What was the rationale for the Red Scare?</i></p> <p><i>Why did McCarthy’s allegations go unchallenged for so long?</i></p> <p><i>How should the U.S. government have responded to the threat of communism and spies?</i></p>	<p><i>What were the expected gender roles in the 1950s?</i></p> <p><i>What is the gap between the idealized portrait of domestic life for middle class white women and the reality of dissatisfaction for housewives? Whose stories are missing?</i></p>	<p><i>What laws sanctioned discrimination against Chinese Americans?</i></p> <p><i>How were Asian Americans portrayed in popular culture and what were the consequences?</i></p> <p><i>How do the actual experiences of Chinese Americans in the 20th century compare with Lo’s portrayal?</i></p>	<p><i>How was the Lavender Scare related to the Red Scare?</i></p> <p><i>On what grounds did the California Supreme Court reverse the lower court’s decision in Stoumen v. Reilly?</i></p> <p><i>What were the implications of the “gay bar case”?</i></p>

- What opportunities can leaving home and being exposed to a bigger world bring (especially for marginalized groups)?
- The author shows the characters encountering a great deal of homophobia and other bias, but ends with an image of lightness and love. What messages do you take away from this choice?

Gender

- What can beauty pageants tell us about gender roles? How much does beauty turn on sexual appeal?
- How did clothes and hairstyles define gender identity in the 1950s? How do they define gender identity today?
- How wide was the range of being female in the 1950s? How wide is the range today?
- To what extent were 1950s girls/women encouraged to go into STEM fields? How hospitable are advanced math classes and STEM fields for girls/women today?
- To what extent could women then—or now—have both a career and a family? What support structures need to be in place? Are they?
- How much of Lily’s feeling of being “split in two” is about sexuality vs. gender vs. her ethnicity? Is it possible to separate them?

Chinese American/Ethnicity

- What can beauty pageants tell us about assimilation? Are there different standards of beauty for Asian women than for Caucasian women?
- How much accurate/inaccurate information about other cultures did/do you think Americans get from U.S. newspapers/magazines?
- To what extent are interracial/interethnic couples accepted today?
- Do you think most immigrants came/come thinking they won’t see their homeland and older relatives ever

again?

- How can different standards in one’s old and new countries cause confusion for immigrants?
- How often do you think Asian Americans get asked if they speak English? To what extent do Asian Americans experience bias because of the “perpetual foreigner” stereotype?
- What do families look like in your school materials? Is there such a thing as an “All-American family”?
- What factors shape or decide who can live where?
- What do you learn from the book about assimilation or the idea of the melting pot in the 1950s, or now?
- What ideas do you have about immigrants and immigration? To what extent are these ideas shown to be “true” in the book?
- How do you respond when you witness or experience racial stereotyping?

Intersectionality Matrix

The novel highlights the interconnectedness of being Chinese American *and* a girl, of being Chinese American *and* at greater risk of being labeled a communist, of being Chinese American *and* a lesbian, etc. For example, the concept of a “good Chinese girl” shows the intersection of several of these identities: ethnicity, gender and sexuality.⁴ As students read, they can complete a matrix (see Table 2 p. 178) that allows them to see this interconnectedness (there were fewer overt connections between the Red Scare and gender).

After Students Read *The Further Adventures of Lily and Kath*

While the novel ends with positive images of Lily feeling “buoyant with this lightness, this love”,⁵ Lo leaves the future unstated. After students finish the novel, ask them what they think will happen.

- Do Lily and Kath stay together?
- Will Lily’s family accept her?
- Can Lily achieve her dream of working at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory and Kath become a pilot?

Have students create a list of their speculations, supported with references to the novel.

Teachers may also have students partner with a classmate who has different ideas. The goal is to have students consider the limits and possibilities available in the mid-twentieth century to young women like Lily and Kath. Then, hand out pages 302-305 of Lo's *A Scatter of Light*.⁶ Set in 2013, this companion novel includes an email from Lily's brother Eddie and a fictional *LA Times* article

about the many same sex-marriages that took place that summer, including Lily and Kath's. As a whole class, share and discuss:

- *To what extent were your predictions borne out? What, if anything, surprised you?*
- *Why do you think Lo chose this ending? Consider both what she had happen (their careers, for example) and what she chose not to include in Lily and Kath's*

Table 2. Intersectionality in *Last Night at the Telegraph Club*

	Red Scare	Gender	LGBTQ+	Chinese American/ Ethnicity
Red Scare	P. 65-66 - Lily's father, a doctor, is visited by the FBI for treating a suspected member of a communist organization in Chinatown; the FBI took his citizenship papers; the FBI probably notified by an informant.		P. 287 - "It felt urgent, as if they were counting down the seconds until a bomb would explode. There was no time; they had to do this right now."	P. 90 - Lily to Shirley: "My mother says that they're using communism as an excuse to deport us." Shirley: "The immigration people are always awful to us. But nobody's going to get deported. We're Americans."
Gender	P. 234 - Madame Chiang Kai-shek visits SF; Grace supervises children in parade, described "as enraptured with their costumes as they were with the importance of their endeavor: representing the young Chinese in America."	P. 61 - Kath talks of her cousin, who had flown with the WASPs but is now married with kids and "no time to fly"	P. 367 - "She began to feel as if she had been split in two, and only one half of her was here in this living room. That was the good Chinese daughter.... The other half had been left out on the sidewalk before Lily walked in the front door."	P. 7 - of Miss Chinatown winner, a man shouted "She looks like a pinup, not like a Chinese girl!"
LGBTQ+	P. 2 - timeline (including McCarthyism, and the 1951 California Supreme Court ruling in <i>Stoumen v. Reilly</i> on public assembly rights for gays and lesbians)	P. 198 - Rhoda uses the word "butch" in suggesting Kath would like wearing a suit. Lily thinks of "butch like a blue ribbon awarded at the county fair"	P. 378 - "Everything she and Kath had done could be erased so easily. It could be erased by her family pretending it had never happened. It could be erased by her parents uprooting her from her home and sending her away so that Kath would not know where she was."	P. 94-95 Just after this conversation exploring lesbianism, Kath and Lily are approached by a middle-aged man, asking if they're looking for "fun."
Chinese American/ Ethnicity	P. 375 - "[Lily's] behavior could further endanger [her father] with the immigration authorities because it reflected poorly on him."	P. 244 - After Lana calls her a "China doll," Lily "wasn't sure if she should feel flattered or insulted"	196 - "twinge of excitement at the idea of another Chinese girl at the Telegraph Club"	P. 304 - "Sometimes Judy felt a deep and burning anger at her adopted country, and she never knew what to do about it.... America had given her so much in the four years since she arrived, but it also regularly reminded her of how it saw people like her."

future, such as having children.

- In their wedding announcement, Lily and Kath ask for donations to Lambda Legal, a group founded in 1973 to fight for the civil rights of LGBTQ+ people. How might Lily and Kath's lives have been different if such an organization were available in the 1950s?
- What do *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* and the sequel point to as necessary conditions for a world in which Lily and Kath can live full, happy lives?

Versions of History

The novel presents us with a number of different versions of the raid on the Telegraph Club. These different versions bring out questions of objectivity and bias in how history is recounted. Begin this activity by having students get into groups focused on one of these scenes related to the Telegraph Club raid:

- Lily's experiences at the club (297-98) and her visit to it after the raid (332).
- A *San Francisco Chronicle* story (314-315). Though fictional, the article is based on stories about similar raids on gay and lesbian clubs.
- Shirley's (Lily's friend) perceptions and retelling of the raid (317-319).
- Lily's mother's reaction to the newspaper story, and her unwillingness to accept that Lily was there: "you're not in the story, her mother said" (326-329).
- Conversations with the women at Tommy and Lana's house about the raid (341-343)

Students can discuss and report back on their group's version, and then engage in a shared discussion comparing the versions of history by considering these questions:

- What do you learn about the event and the larger historical issues we have discussed from each version?
- Who is telling the story and how does that influence how it is understood?
- What is included or left out?

- Which version do you think is the most objective? The truest? Are those two things the same?
- What conclusions can you reach by putting the versions together?

Inspiring Students

In our current moment, conservative organizations and politicians are seeking to ban books and curriculum central to understanding Lily Hu's life, and violence against both Asian Americans and the LGBTQ+ community is on the rise.⁷ Teachers need strategies and support to teach books such as these in our fraught times, and students need spaces to discuss gender, sexuality, race, and bias and hate against marginalized groups. Because this book is set in the Cold War era, present-day students can be inspired by historical role models as well as current activists. For example, students might research the Green Feather Movement. During the height of McCarthyism, Indiana University students launched the movement in response to a call for a ban on Robin Hood in all school books for promoting communism because he stole from the rich to give to the poor. Students spread dyed green feathers throughout campus to protest censorship.⁸

As an activity to inspire students to learn more about LGBTQ+ history, and be inspired by activists, students could make connections to local LGBTQ+ leaders. These connections could either be in person, through contacting local organizations, or through oral histories archived in collections like *The History Project: Documenting LGBTQ Boston*⁹ and *LGBT Oral Histories of Central Iowa*.¹⁰ Students have also been launching Banned Book Clubs, and the American Civil Liberties Union has instructions on how to do so.¹¹ Malinda Lo offered inspiration for engaging in electoral politics in her National Book Award acceptance speech. Condemning campaigns to "remove books about people of color, LGBTQ people, and especially transgender people" from classrooms and libraries, Lo urged her readers to "educate yourselves about your school boards and vote in your local elections"¹² After reading a text set in the 1950s, 21st century students can become actors in their own era who influence and shape the future for the better.

Historical Understanding and Civic Agency

A thorough investigation of the issues in *Last Night at the Telegraph Club*, including the effects of the Cold War on 1950s United States, with respect to the Red Scare, and the positions of women, Chinese Americans, and LGBTQ+ Americans, addresses multiple National Council for the Social Studies standards.¹³ Clearly,

🎯 **CULTURE**, with its multiple connotations, including ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and sexual identity is foregrounded in Lo’s book, even if it is not in students’ textbooks. The juxtaposition of different generations of women and Chinese Americans allows students to explore 🎯 **TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE**, as they recognize that older and younger women and Chinese Americans, while advancing, may still be fighting some of the same battles for recognition and rights. Theme 🎯 **INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY** is a powerful theme in the book, as the protagonist moves from hiding her lesbian identity from herself, her family, and her friends to recognizing that her multiple identities—lesbian, woman, ethnic Chinese, American, daughter of immigrants, budding scientist—are all part of who she is that she no longer wants to conceal.

By the end of the book, Lily has a better understanding of the effects that the government can have on members of marginalized groups, with its local police power to raid LGBTQ+ clubs, state power to make court rulings on rights, and national power to threaten certain ethnic groups with deportation. One hopes that students, too, will recognize this emphasis on 🎯 **INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS, AND INSTITUTIONS**. That Lily, confronted with these government powers and societal norms, ultimately chooses to begin to challenge them addresses 🎯 **CIVIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES**. The range of possible activities at the end of this lesson—including addressing issues of banned books, anti-LGBTQ+ legislation in multiple states, and, on a hyper-local level, adding in the missing stories of people marginalized by their textbooks via post-it note—allows students to exhibit their own civic ideals and practices, the ultimate goal of social studies. 🏳️

Notes

1. Malinda Lo, *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* (Dutton, 2021), 407.
2. Ibid, 328.
3. Malinda Lo, “Music In and Inspired By *Last Night at the Telegraph Club*,” Spotify (2023), <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/3qzxWhLutqsUrVRKOWjhDx?si=bf0c908df6424077>
4. Lo, *Last Night at the Telegraph Club*, 289.
5. Ibid, 394.
6. Malinda Lo, *A Scatter of Light* (Dutton, 2022), 302-305.
7. Frances Kai-Hwa Wang, “How Violence Against Asian Americans has Grown and How to Stop it, According to Activists” PBS NewsHour (April 11, 2022); Helen Santoro, “How Anti-LGBTQ+ Rhetoric Fuels Violence,” *Scientific American* (Dec. 12, 2022).
8. Alison Kysia, “The Green Feather Movement,” Zinn Education Project (2013), www.zinnedproject.org/materials/the-green-feather-movement.
9. “Documenting LGBTQ Boston,” The History Project (2019), <http://historyproject.org/collections>.
10. LGBT Oral Histories of Central Iowa <https://lgbtoralhistories.sites.grinnell.edu>.
11. Eva Lopez, “How to Start a Banned Book Club,” ACLU (Sept.19, 2022), www.aclu.org/news/free-speech/how-to-start-a-banned-book-club.
12. Malinda Lo, “Acceptance Speech,” 2021 National Book Award for Young People’s Literature, www.youtube.com/watch?v=LngOIXlCMjY.
13. *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (NCSS, 2010), www.socialstudies.org/standards/national-curriculum-standards-social-studies-executive-summary.



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