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Multiple Choice:
Literary Racial Formations of Mixed Race Americans of Asian Descent

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

Multiple Choice:

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This dissertation reassesses key paradigms of Asian American literary studies in the interest of critically accounting for the cultural productions of mixed race Asian Americans. Over the last twenty years, Asian American literary criticism has focused narrowly on a small body of writers, such as Maxine Hong Kingston, David Henry Hwang, and Amy Tan, who achieved mainstream popularity with U.S. feminists and/or multiculturalists, or focused on authors like Frank Chin and John Okada whose literary personas and works lend themselves to overt appropriations for civil rights causes and/or identity politics. “Multiple Choice” participates in a renewed interest in the expansion of Asian American literary boundaries and critical inquiry.

“Multiple Choice” addresses the complex racial formations of select mixed race Asian American authors and subjects from the turn of the century to the present. My study situates, both theoretically and historically, the diverse ways in which mixed race peoples variously represent themselves. As the dissertation’s metaphorical title suggests, self-representations, or an individual’s ethnic choices, especially in the case of mixed race Americans, are constantly adjudicated by others (e.g. cultural critics, the media, or U.S. census designers and evaluators). Notwithstanding the omnipresence of these external
forces, "Multiple Choice" also engages the complex sets of choices made from within specific Asian American communities, particularly those choices that come in conflict with other Asian American identities. The dissertation looks at writers both well-known and virtually unknown: Edith Eaton, Winnifred Eaton, Sadakichi Hartmann, Aimee Liu, Chang-rae Lee, Amy Tan, Shawn Wong, Jessica Hagedorn, Peter Bacho, Thaddeus Rutkowski, and Paisley Rekdal.
For my grandparents:

Carroll Laverne Leonard & Marjorie Alberta Leonard

&

Dr. Guillermo Torres, Sr. & Hilaria Protacio Torres
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Preface

A choice, I realized, either could be made by me or asserted by me.

Paisley Rekdal, *The Night My Mother Met Bruce Lee*¹

Don’t hate me because I’m still tragic and beautiful (after all these years). Isn’t it true I work best for you as a tragedy? You have your moment of showy guilt, then I’m out of your hair for another decade, until the next movie. You never have to face that this Frankenstein of yours is you also, is us, is America. Yet how could you? That would render even you impure. So let it remain just me and my tragedy. The toxic mix of my blood.

Lisa Jones, *Bulletproof Diva: Tales of Race, Sex, and Hair*²

Street Scene: Baltimore, 1999

Selling incense, soliciting change, and outfitted with what my “white” male companion says were brand spankin’ new sneakers, a “black” man crossed a northeastern U.S. city street with us. While waiting for the next walk signal, he told me “You’ve got that Oriental thing going on.” “I do?” I asked, letting this familiar game of “what are you?” run its course. “Yes, yes, you do,” he affirmed. “Really?” I asked, wanting to hear more about how he divined my link to Asia. “I don’t know where, but if you look and dig up those roots, you’ll find that Oriental in you.” I probably chuckled, turned my head toward my companion and raised my right eyebrow with a grin. “Yeah, yeah,” the incense-packing fortune teller continued. “But there ain’t nothing wrong with that,” he said with a quick glance at both me and my companion. “Nope, there ain’t nothing wrong with that,” he
repeated. In a few words, he called me out of a white closet and gave my friend an
unsolicited verbal pat on the back and unofficial license to miscegenate. He cared not for
what I am; indeed, he must have seen himself as a soothsayer, as one telling me something
I didn’t yet know, something that might reset my life’s course. What did he see that tipped
him off? What is “that Oriental thing” and how would one know if one had it “going on”?
Was there a peculiar curve of my eye? Did Asia speak from my longish brown-red hair or
long black dress? Did my embroidered mary jane shoes switch on his epiphanic lightbulb?
Was it my “purse,” a pouch of green Chinese patterned silk, that clued him into the
“Oriental” in me?

He sensed something ineffable, something so minor that I needed him to tell me
that it was there. He admitted that he wasn’t sure. But was that “I don’t know where....”
an admission that he had trouble identifying my “Asian” traits or was it his obvious lack of
knowledge about my family tree? We didn’t play a typical round of “what are you?”; he
didn’t look to me to authenticate his suspicions and testify to the “transgressions of my
parents’ interracial love.” He didn’t ask me where I came from (i.e. which foreign country
I once called home). He assumed I didn’t know about any Asian heritage, so there would
be no reason but to conjecture that I am from the United States. He did not praise my
ability to speak English. I wasn’t given the room to say much, in fact. He assumed that I’d
been living a white li(f)e. If I didn’t speak Tagalog, whip up a wicked chicken adobo (I’ve
converted vegetarians into carnivores with this dish!), travel semi-regularly to the
Philippines, or have a Filipino mother, his revelation might have been shocking. That is, if
I did not culturally identify as Filipino and white, he might have shook my world in the
briefest of sidewalk encounters. Alternately, he may have made no impression on me at all. As quickly as he pronounced his racial revelation, he retreated, assuring me that the fact of impurity need not be a problem. But his assurances seem less directed at me than they were at my male companion. Lest my white male companion fear this black man’s pronouncement of my impurity, the black man tempered his proclamation. Would I be reactionary to say that these men silently policed and negotiated my now-racialized sexuality? I have little doubt that the diviner would have felt less entitled to spark this conversation had I not been so female.

Had this episode happened at any other time, at any other place, it would probably be little more than a hazy memory. This man had the good fortune to play pin-the-race-on-the-“honkey” with me the night before the “White Danger” panel appeared at the American Literature Association conference in Baltimore. Less than twenty-four hours before I presented a distilled version of chapter two of this project, I was reminded of the common impression that there is “something wrong” with impurity. Furthermore, there is an anxiety about this impression—a will to have it otherwise, a desire to counter the idea that mixture is necessarily wrong, tragic, and/or problematic. The words of reassurance—“There ain’t nothing wrong with that”—echo in my mind as I balance conventional late twentieth-century wishes for indifference to racial difference with current representations of mixed-race Asian/Anglo Americans. A considerable amount of recent literature suggests that there is, indeed, something “wrong with that.” No matter how widespread the word-on-the-street resistance to racist notions about mixture and the racist projections about the lives of mixed race progeny, negative images about mixed race
people abound in the current fiction by and about mixed race Asian/Anglo Americans.

No “All of the Above” in the World of True or False

I’ll be the first to admit that my own biraciality fuels the core investigations of this project, although the architecture of my personal life is necessarily different from the texts that I investigate. At least one thread binds me to the topics that each of the authors in the dissertation discuss—that of choice. I choose to identify as both Filipina and white. No matter my choice, I am, based on appearance, interpellated differently by nearly everyone I come into contact with. I quibble with Rekdal, finally, for choice is both asserted by me and by others for me. Casual and formal ethnicity tests are administered at every turn; I may choose to fill in the bubble next to “all of the above” but there will always be someone to come by and tell me whether my response is true, real, honest, correct.

Sometimes the tests are more literal than metaphorical: at a retreat for leadership counselors of Asian American high school students, a test of one-hundred true or false questions was administered. You may know this “test”; it circulates widely on the internet under the name “Ways of Asians” or “How to tell if you’re Asian.” All the counselors went through the list to calibrate our individual Asian-ness. Sample assertions and my ruminations: You want to drive a Lexus or a Mercedes. No. You know what bok choy is. Yes. Piles of shoes make it difficult to open the front, back, and closet doors of your house. Sometimes, on a bad day. You receive red envelopes full of money around February. Scarlet valentines, maybe; money, no. People think you’re good at Math. Well, I’ve never been asked to do calculus on the street. You have no eyelashes. False. Your ancestors invented the backscratcher. I don’t think so. Your mother has short, curly
permied hair. Yeah, once upon a time. You eat rice every day. If I had it my way, yes. You’ve had to eat parts of animals that they don’t even put in hotdogs. Umm, yeah. Your parents want you to marry within your race. No.

I answered thirteen or sixteen with a yes, or true, making me thirteen or sixteen percent Asian. The response from the head counselor: “you’re not very Asian, are you?”

Maybe that, like the list, was a joke, but my immediate sense was that my performance on this test confirmed unspoken suspicions, based on my non-Asian features, about my racial loyalties. Never mind that the questions largely assess Japanese- and Chinese-ness, a bias that the test shares with early Asian American studies. No one wanted to hear it. If we followed blood fractions, I should be exactly 50% Asian, but I don’t want to play the half and half game, and, perhaps more importantly, Filipinos, according to this test, aren’t Asian. If I’d been asked if I knew what balut is, or if my “pamily” members sometimes confuse their “f’s” and “p’s,” I would have aced the exam. That makes me wonder: does my will to pass even this ridiculous test somehow confirm my Asian-ness; Asians, after all, loathe to get “B’s” and always have high GPA’s, right?

Others pretend not to wonder, and some really don’t think about it, and others assume that the green of my eyes and paleness of my skin equals the white of my heart and mind. Still others have asked me, like Keiko Van Heller and Rocky Rivera ask each other in Jessica Hagedorn’s novel *Gangster of Love*, “Tú, eres Chicana?” I sometimes answer the way Keiko does, “You never know . . . Do you?”
Introduction

False Binaries: Whiteness & Asian American Literary History, Creativity, and Criticism

While the bulk of emergent critical whiteness studies and ethnic studies are primarily self-reflexive—whites studying whiteness, non-whites studying non-whiteness—studies of mixed race subjectivity demand an interrogation of how narratives about whiteness are constructed within non-white discourses.¹ My sense is that Asian American literary history alternates between constructing the category of whiteness as monolithic evil or erasing it altogether. One might readily recognize this dyad as the disjunction between white supremacy versus whiteness as American cultural normalcy, or as it is better known, as the universal. Whereas mainstream studies of whiteness seek to deconstruct the massive category of “White,” ethnicize groups such as Irish, Italian, and Jewish Americans, and also mark white sites as privileged, I focus on how Asian American cultural history has built itself against what it knows and understands as “white” at the expense of what I call “whiteness within.” Asian American literary history understandably measures and constructs Asian American literary origins against Anglo American literary and sociopolitical traditions, because of the specters that whiteness raises for Asian America, such as racist stereotypes, colonialism, racial hate crimes, racist legislation. Unfortunately, the building of Asian American cultural history against Anglo American cultural forms is an act of Othering that results in the production of incomplete narratives of Asian American literary origins. Ironically, what compels the incompleteness of originary stories is the need for alternate canons to appear cohesive and
leakproof.

For the multiracial subject who is both Asian and Anglo American, the result of manufacturing Asian American narratives antithetical to Anglo America is an ethnic identification constructed *against* one’s mixed ancestry. Instead of calling attention to the cross-ethnic possibilities for the mixed race author, Asian American literary critics/historians identify multiracial subjects monoracially, as Asian Americans. Therefore, rather than analyze how an Asian/Anglo American author like Edith Eaton straddles and addresses both Asian and Anglo American cultures, critics champion her as a “pioneer” writer whose concerns are pro-Asian America, and therefore anti-Anglo America—a false binary.

One goal of this project, then, is to renarrate Asian American literary traditions, focusing on Asian America’s relationship with whiteness so that we do not manufacture false choices and narratives for multiracial Asian Americans.² By centering our focus on multiracial subjects of Asian descent, Asian America’s position in the multiracial present and future can be thereby better understood. Furthermore, by rehistoricizing and rethinking Asian American literary traditions in the interest of the multiracial Asian American subject, we allow ourselves to imagine multiracial narratives that are not simple tragic. Asian American novels of the last ten years suggest that the multiracial person of Asian descent, like the tragic mulatto of African American fiction, is marked by some form of woeful experience—gang rape, premature death, sexual promiscuity, drug addiction, psychosis. I have little doubt that the representations of Asian/Anglo Americans, which suggest that their lives are tragic and crazy, emerge from a desperate, if
irrational, need to separate Anglo and Asian America into irreconcilably conflicting cultures.

Asian American literary critics consistently differentiate Asian American discourses from those of whiteness in part for fear of appearing inevitably complicit with whiteness’s common susceptibility to promote racist and imperialist agendas. To my mind, however, Asian Americanists’ constant separation from whiteness disables effective challenges to such agendas. To repress and to remain silent about whiteness, to avoid a fully engaged characterization and critique, allows the category to operate in its most successful, cunning mode within the status quo, leaving the category unmarked—as the invisible, the understood “natural” order of American life. Of course, one can easily argue that Asian American authors have always sought implicitly to vary representations of whiteness in opposition to how whiteness sees itself—as the singular ‘American way.’ If whiteness, in dominant ideology, is the naturalized state of American affairs, Asian America challenges this hegemonic quality, time and again, by racializing American political, social, and literal landscapes—a racialization that results in the marking of whiteness as everything but normative and universal. Indeed, the prevailing, and yet problematic, idea that white America is a culture of racism subverts the notion that whiteness is invisible, universal, and therefore benign. Nevertheless, the hegemonic quality of whiteness has not been effectively challenged by the best efforts of Asian American authors and literary critics.

Again, Asian America’s relationship to Anglo America is largely an exercise in opposition. The most clear-cut example of othering Anglo America for the formulation of
an Asian American literary canon resides in early anthologies (*Aiieeeee!* particularly) and criticism (e.g. Elaine Kim’s *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context*) that define Asian American literature as non-white, non-Asian-Asian, and decidedly American. According to early definitions, Asian American literature exclusively encompassed writing by American-born persons of Asian descent, and towed a certain party line—anti-assimilationism and anti-exoticism, both of which should also be understood as anti-white and anti-white-supremacist.

Gendered culture wars that characterize early Asian American literary criticism contest what an anti-white supremacist paradigm should look like. The *Aiieeeee!* group understood feminism and white racism as irreparably synonymous. In other words, the *Aiieeeee!* group interpreted feminism as a platform that sacrificed Asian American men and their already-embattled masculinity to the fires of white racism. While Asian American feminist responses to such claims insist upon the coartication of anti-sexist and anti-racist discourses, very little has been done to differentiate opposition to white racism from opposition to whiteness.

For those who believe that whiteness is nothing but a monolithic evil, a suggestion that Asian American studies should focus on the relationship between whiteness and the Asian American literary tradition is occasion for skin to twitch, blood to boil, tempers to inflame, and accusations of race betrayal and “selling-out” to fly. Discussing this dispute in physical terms is warranted, because, to my mind, cries of race betrayal are rooted in dangerous and mistaken, essentialist claims about a positive, correlative relationship between whiteness and Asian American bodies, or more aptly
stated, Truth, race, and the body. This triad serves as the nucleus around which most
issues in Asian American literary studies spin. Studies of Asian/Anglo Americans further
make manifest the need for our attention to this tangled trio because Truth, race, and the
body are at the heart of Asian America’s relationship to Anglo America.

Since the inception of Asian American cultural critique in the late 1960s, capital
“t” Truth and race have been inseparable. The marriage of Truth and race pervades the
problem of representation, the ever-present predicament of creating acceptable, singularly
“correct” Asian American narratives. It is this pressure on Asian American authors by
other Asian Americans to represent (for the gaze of imagined Anglo American audiences)
a singular reality of Asian American experience that transforms truth into Truth. This
pressure emerges ironically as a resistance to misreadings of Asian American literature as
anthropological or sociological fact. In order to counter racist stereotypes of Asians in the
United States, Asian American studies has sought to correct dominant (i.e. white racist)
misguided notions by advancing their own “authentic” representations. Separate
databases of knowledge compete with one another; what is “known” by Anglo Americans
(stereotype) is resisted by advancing what is “known” by Asian Americans
(representations of the “real”). Against dominant portraits of emasculated Asian
American men, the Aiiieeedd!!! troop celebrates stories of heroic, warrior-like Asian
American men. Against alternating visions of Asian American women as exotic, erotic
slave and/or dragon-lady emasculator/temptress, Asian American feminists narrate stories
of female legacy (mother/daughter stories), self-determined sexuality, and feminist anti-
racism.
Enter betrayal; one can only betray, in these terms, if there is a certain set of ideas that are thought to be the Truth about Asian America. A distinction between the “real” and the “fake” emerges from the insistence upon particular kinds of stories and characterizations. Tales of heroic anti-white racism, histories of settlement and immigration (Asia to West coast U.S. movements principally), and (recently) panethnic Asian American allegiance are considered “real,” while texts that “negatively” represent Asian American men and women and thereby supposedly cater to white audiences are marked as “fake.” Telling the truth and fighting against stereotypes (racist lies) are key components of “real” Asian American writing; verifying stereotypes and pandering to white racism mark “fake” Asian American writing.

Asian America’s knowledge base is made all the more essentialist by the reigning methodological paradigm that I call subdivision. Subdivision is the breaking of Asian American’s component ethnicities into discrete categories: Americans whose ancestry is Japanese versus Chinese versus Filipino versus Korean versus Vietnamese. To tell the story of the Japanese in the United States is to relate the history of internment. When one talks of Chinese in the United States, one necessarily deals with bachelor societies and the construction of railroads. Such story-telling creates a false notion of ethnic purity; the less one adheres to the paradigmatic definitions for each subgroup, the less pure and the less real one is.

The positive, or correlative, relationship between Truth and race disciplines the bodies of Asian Americans, especially bodies of mixed race Americans of Asian descent. Asian Americans continually have to deal with dominant notions of what the body, or the
face, suggests about one’s nationality, language abilities, ethnic affiliation, and sexuality. The juncture of facial characteristics and cultural affiliation hinges on assumptive knowledge—what one believes to be the truth about people who look a certain way. For instance, familiar comments of surprise like “you speak English very well” register a connection between what one assumes and what another looks like. For mixed race Asian/Anglo Americans, similar comments abound from all racial communities: “You don’t look Asian”; “How nice, but precarious, that whites are interested in working on Asian American literature”; “You’ve got that Oriental thing going on.”; “What are you anyway?”.

Furthermore, the body codes as blood for mixed race Asian Americans. What is found in the veins is often understood, as I discuss in chapter one, as an “interior reality”—that which tells the truth of affiliation, origin, and claim to authenticity.

Inasmuch as Asian Americanists uphold socially constructed notions of race and critique racism as an ideology that perpetuates connections between the body and racial and cultural traits, Asian Americanists have yet to completely unfasten biology from race.

While my outline of the “truth, race, and body” morass is one way to characterize Asian America’s problematic notions of ethnic purity and authenticity and the limits that these notions impose upon literary criticism and literary production, poet/critic Garrett Hongo’s introductory essay to a special issue of *Amerasia*, “Asian American Literature: Questions of Identity” (1994), is another. Hongo agrees that “the category [of Asian American literature] has been all too narrowly defined to include the wide range of diversity in all of the published works” (3). Although he is concerned mostly with the diversity of current Asian American writing, in general, and is not necessarily trained on
the exclusion of mixed race Asian American writers and subjects from the Asian American literary canon, Hongo and I agree that the narrowness of Asian American literary definition is a result of insistence on ethnic purity and truth. Hongo traces how “a vocal and influential few” have “define[d] Asian American literature into two fundamental categories—authentic and inauthentic” and calls for Asian Americanists to “shift ourselves away from our own outdated, patriarchal center” (4). Although he doesn’t name them as such, Hongo refers to the gendered culture wars in Asian American literary studies, and emphasizes the hold that the Aiiiiiiii group and others (i.e. “the patriarchal center”) have had on Asian American literary production, critique, and canon-building. Hongo insists that we put an end to “the ideological practice of judging the cultural pertinence of a given poetic work by employing a litmus test of ethnic authenticity.” The “litmus test,” Hongo writes, “works this way—if a work is adjudged meritorious by any American institution that can be characterized as ‘mainstream,’ then that work must necessarily be ‘inauthentic’ in terms of Asian American culture and, therefore, is due for condemnation by loyalists and exclusion from the reading lists of Asian American or Ethnic Studies courses” (4). Hongo considers this practice of certain Asian Americanists to dismiss works that have been endorsed and accepted by “mainstream America” (read white America) to be “nothing more than fascism, intellectual bigotry, and ethnic fundamentalism of the worst kind” (4). Agreed. Hongo’s call to arms against this “test” is a bid to disentangle the trio that I name “Truth, race, and body,” although he does not use these terms.

I would argue that what Hongo suggests is a possible outcome of leaving the
“patriarchal center” of Asian American studies unchallenged, is not merely possibility, but proven result. Hongo argues that if we do not complicate our sense of what qualifies as “Asian American literature” and/or fail to revise the current paradigms that insist on ethnic authenticity, “an old ideological center will continue to be produced out of each of our public events, out of our conferences, out of our editing and critical writing, resulting in the repression of variation and independence, the flattening of differences, and the silencing of lambs and lions both” (4). The conditional inclusion and complete dismissal of certain mixed race Asian American authors from the Asian American literary canon demonstrates that the “old ideological center” overruns Asian American literary studies. Hongo continues:

If we do not produce new critical approaches and widen parochial perspectives regarding literary style, I fear, there will continue to be three dominant, ideologically narrowing modes out of which critical thinking (and the construction of a literary curriculum) will emerge: (1) the unconscious assumption that what is essentially Asian American is a given work’s overt political stance and conformity to sociological models of the Asian American experience, (2) the related notion that a writer writes from a primary loyalty to coherent communities, and (3) vehement castigation or rude, categorical dismissal for literary qualities deemed “assimilationist” or “commercial.”

What Hongo names as the three primary wayward notions that possibly will guide literary criticism if Asian America’s current critical paradigms remain unchecked are indeed the very yardsticks against which mixed race Asian American literary production has been
measured.

In addition to, and emergent from, the qualifications Hongo delineates, Asian
Americanists wrench mixed race subjects into yet another stifling configuration—
monoraciality. Most literary critics do not advance composite racialized subjectivities for
multiracial subjects. Chapter one, "Turn-of-the-Century Eurasians: Edith Eaton,
Winnifred Eaton, Sadakichi Hartmann" addresses the variety of ways in which literary
critics have read three late-nineteenth- to early-twentieth-century Eurasian artists from the
U.S. and Canada who mark some of Asian America’s literary beginnings—the Eaton
sisters (Chinese and English), and Carl Sadakichi Hartmann (Japanese and
German)—reveal that the positioning of the multiracial subject within the Asian American
literary canon has everything to do with how critics understand the subject’s relationship
to white American culture. Close, comparative readings of literary biographies and
autobiographical works, evidence the ways in which literary critics have constructed
Eurasian9 American writers monoracially, as Asian American, not Asian/Anglo
American. I argue that critical ways of reading these Asian/white American artists are
dictated by civil-rights-based political imperatives, particularly, the situating of Asian
American cultural traditions in opposition to those of white America. How critics
understand the Eaton sisters’ and Hartmann’s various relationships to white America
largely determines how critics read and position these multiracial authors and their
subjects within the Asian American literary canon. The more an author identifies with, or
speaks positively of, white America, the more removed she or he is from the centers of
Asian American literary studies since the 1960s.
Civil-rights-based paradigms also guide the ways in which stories of resistance and emergent subjectivity are told. Chapter two, "Persistent Pathologies: Representations of Asian/Anglo Americans and Narratives of Injury in the 1990s," explores novels of the last ten years that represent Americans of white and Asian descent and focuses on the pathologization of mixed race at the end of the twentieth century. Chief among the novels analyzed in this chapter are Shawn Wong’s American Knees, Chang-Rae Lee’s Native Speaker, Amy Tan’s Hundred Secret Senses, Peter Bacho’s Cebu, and Aimee Liu’s Face. Almost all of these novels figure biracial Asian/Anglo Americans as analogous to the doomed, tragic mulatto of African American fiction. These novels relate to a protest tradition of Asian American literature by repeatedly narrating injury in order to articulate both politicized racial subjectivity and depathologized identity. But, I argue, these novels break from a protest tradition by problematizing the endemic white/nonwhite binary. Asian/Anglo American men clearly have access to the masculinist tenets of the protest tradition and are thus able to construct depathologized identities. In contrast, there is a preponderance of Asian/Anglo American pathologized female characters which speaks to the dearth of workable social justice frameworks for multiracial Asian American women. The final moments of the chapter are devoted to looking at Shawn Wong’s novel American Knees in which he suggests that easing the strictures of cultural nationalism allows for the non-pathological, non-injured subjectivity of an Asian/Anglo American woman.

Chapter three, “Experiment for the Cure: Autobiography, Pathology, and Thaddeus Rutkowski’s Genre-Bending Roughhouse,” investigates another possible means
to the depathologization of Asian/Anglo American subjectivity—manipulation genre boundaries. This chapter takes brief stock of the U.S. investment in the personal pronoun, the 1990s explosion of ethnic autobiography and mixed race autobiography in particular.

In contrast to how U.S. autobiographies generally aim to "cure" their ethnic injuries by exhibiting their American cultural traits, Thaddeus Rutkowski's *Roughhouse* straddles the borders of autobiography and fiction and worries at the already flimsy distinction between the two. Importantly, Rutkowski does not go about "curing" the mixed race Asian American by eschewing pathology and tragedy. The Asian/Anglo American narrator of *Roughhouse* is clearly traumatized by his childhood, but Rutkowski's "experiment for the cure" manifests in his attempts to unhinge injury from ethnicity.

Rutkowski effects this, momentarily, I argue, by deracializing the written narrative and racializing the text's accompanying illustrations. Whereas all of the texts discussed in chapter two aim to inscribe the mixed race subject into an Asian American community, Thaddeus Rutkowski's *Roughhouse* demonstrates disinterest in asserting a singular, coherent Asian American identity, and thus divests from the narration of injury as a means to politicized ethnic subjectivity.

The final chapter, "Questioning the 'Rules of Multicultural Mythology': Paisley Rekdal's *The Night My Mother Met Bruce Lee*," continues chapter three's exploration of new ways of articulating non-injured politicized ethnic subjectivity in the absence of injury narratives. Rekdal's multi-genre text has the qualities of memoir, autobiography, travel narrative, and narrative photo album. But it is not by genre-bending alone that Rekdal manages to articulate her non-injured biracial subjectivity; Rekdal gets to the
heart of the matter and interrogates the very foundations of ethnic storytelling. She avoids truth-seeking ventures and thereby refuses to involve herself in hopelessly haggard debates about authenticity. Rekdal, I believe, signals a dynamic, exciting future of ethnic storytelling that challenges binary, conventional thinking about gender and ethnicity in the United States.

While this project is fundamentally interested in dismantling the binary opposition between white and nonwhite, the project’s focus on white and Asian Americans, I am aware, threatens to reinscribe the dichotomy. As well, one might argue against my occasional use of the word “multiracial” to describe people whose parents are monoraced, if you will. The term “multiracial,” to borrow from Maria P.P. Root’s definition in *The Multiracial Experience*, includes people who might be also called “biracial.” My singular concentration on Asian/Anglo Americans, here, is, first and foremost, a matter of demographics: The majority of mixed race Asian Americans come from white and Asian parentage. It is my sense that studies of Asian/Anglo Americans disrupt the notion of binary opposition between Anglo and Asian, especially if we avoid making monoracial choices for the mixed race subject. Furthermore, this white/Asian frame brings into focus where the nonwhite/white binary does not always sustain the study of Asian American literature.
Chapter One

Turn-of-the-Century Eurasians:

Edith Eaton, Winnifred Eaton, Sadakichi Hartmann

Each of the writers I discuss in this chapter is marked by white heritage, and yet critics do not centralize questions about the roles whiteness plays in the authors’ self-construction, their performances of multiracial identity, and multiracial Asian American writing in general. Asian American critics almost exclusively focus on whiteness in terms of what kinds of anti-racist (i.e. anti-white) strategies an author advances. While Edith Eaton (a.k.a. Sui Sin Far) claims the title of “the first Chinese American writer,”¹ her sister Winnifred Eaton (a.k.a. Onoto Watanna) is accorded little critical attention, and Sadakichi Hartmann exists within Asian American annals as a literal, buried footnote. Critics champion Edith Eaton as a “dutiful daughter,” who celebrates her mother’s heritage, adopts a Chinese pseudonym, and writes short stories and journalistic pieces in defense of persons of Chinese descent in North America. Winnifred Eaton’s complexity—her provocative self-identification as Japanese at a time when Japanese were favored over Chinese and the popularity of her fiction (with white readers?)—is an undesirable Rubik’s cube, if you will, for Asian American critics.²

Sadakichi Hartmann, however, is virtually absent from Asian American literary criticism, and his autobiographical and creative writings remain uncirculated.³ Even within studies of Walt Whitman and art history, where Hartmann once commanded substantial attention as Whitman’s friend and the first person (presumably) to write a
volume on American art history, he has vanished from the academic scene. Hartmann seems a superlative example of the potential of ethnic performativity. Like Winnifred, Hartmann’s various, curious ethnic performances over the years render him a complicated puzzle. Moreover, Hartmann’s falling out of an Asian American spotlight is directly related, I think, to his literal identification with whiteness, marked by his occasional assumption of the pseudonym Sidney Allan. Biographer Gene Fowler has his own suppositions about Hartmann’s failures—that Hartmann was a moocher, a drunk, and a hack, but an interesting character nevertheless, who warrants the effort to compose a whole volume dedicated to Hartmann’s wacky antics.

Whereas most critics read the Eaton sisters as prototypes for self-construction who enable Asian Americans to resist hegemonic categorization, one should first inspect the notion of self-construction, for it is not as self-apparent and innocent as one might believe. The discourse of “self-construction” is, I would argue, an ironically national discourse of individuality that resonates both within American studies broadly and Asian American studies. For American studies, the issue of self-fashioning brings to mind distinguished self-inventors like Benjamin Franklin, Booker T. Washington, Fitzgerald’s Gatsby, Faulkner’s Sutpen, and the characters of Horatio Alger’s rag-to riches success stories. In Asian American studies, narratives of self-construction are typically subversive stories of the ethnic minority figure’s management of ethnic identity against racist stereotype. Rather than dismiss the argument that the Eaton sisters provide Asian America with models of self-construction, I illustrate how Asian American critics do not cheer all forms of self-construction. Indeed, there are unspoken rules about how one
should self-construct. I argue, therefore, that self-construction is not a self-centered act, finally, but one that takes into account a community of both perceived peers and opponents.

Metacritically, I examine how the Eaton sisters are constructed by other Asian Americanists. I suggest that critical biographies (outside perception) and the Eaton sisters’ autobiographies (self-construction) are a kind of racial formation. We cannot read the autobiographies of the Eaton sisters as straightforward non-fiction as do critics and biographers such as Amy Ling. If we pause and read the autobiographies against the critical renditions of those texts, we see that there is a certain amount of disagreement and ambiguity between the biographer’s image and the autobiographer’s self-construction. When we read the autobiographies as fictional constructions, we begin to note where critics are not merely outlining the Eaton sisters’ self-constructions, but their own critical constructions of the Eaton sisters as well. We find, then, that the Eaton sisters do not contend only with white racial discourses, but with Asian American discourses about the proper ways of ethnic identification, too. Using the metacritical analysis from the sections on the Eaton sisters, I posit in the Hartmann section a way for critics to read and represent Asian/Anglo American subjects.

**Fame and (Dis)Fortune, Eurasian Sister Style:**

**Asian American Critical Ambivalence about Self-Construction**

The self is not a fixed entity but a fluid, changing construct or creation

determined by context or historical conditions and particularly by power

relationships. . . Nowhere do we find this phenomenon more clearly, even literally
demonstrated than in the choice of identity made by persons of mixed race.
Unhampered by physical features which may declare a particular exterior identity at odds with interior realities, mixed-race people, particularly those combining Anglo and Asian races, are free to choose the identity or identities that suit a particular historical moment.

Amy Ling, "Creating One's Self: The Eaton Sisters," emphasis mine

Upon reading Amy Ling's introductory remarks to her essay on the Eaton sisters as prime examples of the process of self-construction, one might think, "Wonderful! Anyone is at liberty to choose her own racial identification." Indeed, the majority of critics of the Eaton sisters replay this notion that their divergent self-identifications provide us with a striking case study of the intersection of historical condition and a supposed freedom to choose ethnic identification. But there's a catch to this formulation; a few "catches," to be more precise. As I see them, the following "catches," or hidden meanings and values appear consistently in the critical work on the Eaton sisters: first, a preference for the "honest" self-identification over the inventive; second, a predilection for the serious writer over the popular; and third, the characterization of all anti-white sentiments as undeniably valorous, all white-sympathetic proclamations and identifications as problematic, if not villainous acts of betrayal to one's non-white ethnic community. These three critical values are what explain, I think, the unequal critical attention paid to the Eaton sisters. At the core of these values are long-standing, but rarely articulated, prescriptive ideas about how Asian American canon- and tradition-building should relate to white American culture.
This catalog of hidden values also evidences how self-construction is not an easy, judge-less, let alone free matter. Freedom to choose is a partial misconception. If “context and historical conditions” determine the self, choice is regulated. Note, for example, how the “self” is not an actor in the first sentence of Amy Ling’s paragraph on Eurasian self-fashioning, above, but rather the “self” is acted upon, “determined by” outside forces. Self-fashioning is not a solo venture. True, the “self is not a fixed entity,” but “free to choose” does not logically follow when one’s self is so limited by outside forces. Not only does historical context enter the equation, but so do others’ evaluation of one’s self-construction. Together, one’s self-fashioning and others’ adjudication of a particular ethnic persona, I argue, constitute a racial formation. Historical and social contexts play a role at all points: one’s ethnicity is formed or “chosen” within (a) particular context(s) and is assessed in another/others. This is particularly true of the Eaton sisters whose divergent ethnic identifications formed during the decades surrounding the turn-of-the-century are evaluated by Asian American critics in the present moment, according to late-twentieth-century, civil-rights-based concerns.

Choice and Truth—however disparate notions—emerge as the two common denominators in the criticism about the Eaton sisters. For instance, the recent anthology of Asian American literature (1996), edited by a member of the seminal Aiiiiieee! group, Shawn Wong, rehearses classic narratives about Asian American literature (e.g. its historical dependence) as well as trenchant problems in Asian American literary production (e.g. communal responsibility of an artist to tell the Truth and thereby counteract stereotype). Wong introduces Edith Eaton’s short story, “The Americanizing
of Pau Tsu” by giving an account of Eaton’s mixed parentage, and how she “chose to be Chinese American instead of passing for white at a time when America was in the heyday of anti-Chinese legislation” (Wong, 65). Notice how Wong suggests that the only choices available to Edith Eaton are 1) choosing to be Chinese American, or 2) passing as white. Winnifred Eaton’s inventive self-fashioning as a Japanese noblewoman apparently is not an option, for Wong, for the mixed person of Chinese and Anglo heritage either in her own historical moment or our current one. Nor can the Chinese/Anglo American be both white and Chinese. While Wong does not include any writings by Winnifred Eaton in the anthology, but he does mention her in biography of Edith: “Winnifred sold herself as having Japanese instead of Chinese ancestry, which, at the time, would have been more ‘acceptable’ to Anglo Americans” (Wong, 65, italics mine). Clearly, in his description of Winnifred Eaton’s choosing of a Japanese persona, Wong implies the notion of “selling out,” or betrayal of one’s imagined community for material gain. He mentions that Winnifred probably doctored Edith’s obituary which names their father as English, their mother as Japanese. Wong therefore argues that Winnifred’s ethnic choice infected Edith’s and was the occasion for Winnifred’s “many lies” that she told so that Anglo Americans of the time would find her more attractive. In contrast to this falsified obituary, Wong provides a paragraph from Edith Eaton’s “Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian” which names her mother as Chinese and thereby tells the truth. The final line from Wong’s page-long biography of “Sui Sin Far” epitomizes Asian Americanists’ conventional thinking about the difference between the sisters; Wong writes, “The dominant theme in the lives and careers of the two Eaton sisters as writers
and as Eurasians of mixed ancestry was one of choice. The student of Chinese American literature is fortunate that Edith made the choice to tell the truth” (Wong, 65, emphasis mine). Wong here bangs the same Aiitieeeee! drum for “real” as opposed to “fake” Asian American writing. Recall that the accusation of “fake” writing was leveled at feminist Asian American writing, which, in the Aiitieeeee! sense, is white-racist. By naming Edith Eaton as “truthful,” however, Wong insures that people do not mistakenly conflate anti-feminism with anti-female; Edith Eaton, he suggests, can be a woman writer and still be loyal to her race. And for that, we, the students of Asian American literature, should consider ourselves lucky.

Asian American feminists are all too familiar with the problems of binary logics like “fake” vs. “real,” serious vs. popular, and white-identified vs. ethnic-identified. Nevertheless, these same binaries operate in the feminist critical and literary biographical works about the Eaton sisters. Because such logics are usually deployed against Asian American feminists regarding their putative betrayals of Asian American men–betrayals that purportedly fuel the engines of white racism–it is somewhat surprising and troubling to witness the same dichotomies operating in critical works promoting the first Asian American writers as feminist. To establish an Asian American feminist literary legacy, feminist critics have addressed the problems of “fake” vs. “real,” suggesting that the binary is inadequate to explain gender tensions in Asian American literature and criticism. Notably, Amy Ling’s project to outline a genealogy of Asian American female writing, of which her work on the Eaton sisters is a part, is a response to such accusations from the Aiitieeeee! group and their followers. Asian American feminists have
successfully argued for the validity of pro-feminist Asian American writing. For their own work, they also dismantle somewhat the notion of Asian American feminist writing as "fake." But the question of feminist loyalty to versus hatred of white culture remains because it cannot be addressed using the argumentative paradigm currently framing Asian American literary studies in general, let alone contests of gender in Asian American literary studies. When the Aiiieeee! group named pro-feminism as white-racist (which is conflated to mean all things white) and therefore "fake," Asian American feminists disentangled pro-feminism from "fake-ness," leaving the basic assumption that Asian American literature should be anti-white intact. A new paradigm of Asian America's relationship to whiteness did not emerge from the now classic Asian American gender wars. Asian America, in general, has yet to confront, explicitly, its unwillingness to characterize white America as anything other than a culture of racism, which explains the prevalence of notions of choice and truth and the continued use of the binaries "real" and "fake" with regard to the Eaton sisters.

Regardless of Asian American feminists' success in co-articulating feminist and ethnic concerns, criticism of the Eaton sisters demonstrates how the binary of white-sympathetic vs. ethnic-promoting re-entrenches the dichotomies of "fake" vs. "real," and "popular" vs. "serious" The logic is as follows: Winnifred Eaton is a popular writer, because she coddles and never challenges white audiences and their racist assumptions. Her popularity is assured by her non-confrontational, Orientalist persona and writings. Winnifred Eaton is fake because she chooses an identification favored by whites, that apparently has nothing to do with the reality of her mother's Chinese blood. On the other
hand, in critical estimation, Edith Eaton is serious because of her supposed dedication to holding white people accountable for their racist views. Edith Eaton is real because she tells the truth and embraces her mother’s Chinese background. The language used by Asian American critics for this tension is “communal responsibility vs. artistic freedom.”

The Eaton sisters, however, force us to rethink the binary between artistic freedom and communal responsibility. Yes, Winnifred Eaton exercises her creative license and writes stories about Japanese nationals and landscapes, despite never having been to Japan. And she invents narratives about herself as a Japanese North American woman writer. The question of whether or not to grant artistic freedom to ethnic writers is inadequate for the mixed race author, for Winnifred Eaton’s exercise of artistic license might very well also be her adherence to her communal responsibility. Is it impossible to say that Winnifred is expressing a commitment to a white community, her father’s community, when she writes to white audiences? How would one go about proving an uncompromised relationship between Winnifred Eaton and her white readers? To say that Winnifred Eaton’s exercise of her postulated artistic freedom in both her life-story and her fiction has made her more attractive to whites does not necessarily mean that she has neglected her communal responsibility, if one of her imagined communities is comprised of people who share her father’s heritage. Which leads one to wonder: is the idea of artistic freedom invoked benevolently as a way of somehow forgiving ethnic authors who manage to succeed in the fickle literary marketplace? When a minority-identified writer does not take up arms against white culture, and yet still talks about racial encounters,
does that necessarily mean she is committed to artistic freedom? Does absence of overt discussion about racial hatred and discrimination always signal validation and perpetuation of colonialist, orientalist discourses? What are the particular unspoken codes of commitment that signal a virtuous, acceptable Asian American writer?

Once we ponder these questions, we see that the tension is not between responsibility to ethnic community over and against artistic inclinations. Rather, it’s a question of what singular version of Asian America, which story of community, which Truth can be told to the satisfaction of Asian American critics and literary historians. For the mixed race Asian American whose heritage is part white, attention to white audiences need not be read as a betrayal of community, although in an Asian Americanist paradigm that sets itself apart from white America, pro-white sentiments are almost always understood as anti-Asian. What should be clear is that the very notion of community is a vexing one for mixed race authors, indeed for all writers of color.

Let us unpack the language of Ling’s celebratory remarks on self-construction of racial identity for a closer look at how the white-identified vs. ethnic identified binary functions. Ling clarifies that identity formation is not created in a cultural vacuum, not in a decontextualized site for endless play. She argues for a brand of racial formation, in the style of sociologists Omi and Winant, where racial identity is devised through a dialectic process between the individual and the State. Ling’s own narrative about the Eaton sisters, in conjunction with the Eaton sister’s own self-constructions, is another racial formation, in which Ling’s remarks are representative of the purist Asian American culture that disciplines mixed race subjects and thus forces them into making “authentic”
monoracial choices. Ling creates a kind of continuum along which one is placed according to how one looks and what those looks mean in given contexts. The continuum runs from easier (for multiracials) to harder (for monoracials) self-identification. Ling is particular about what kinds of people are capable of virtually unrestricted self-construction; she names mixed race persons of Anglo and Asian backgrounds as unique, privileged players in the self-construction game. She implies that Asian/Anglo Americans can more easily choose their racial identifications, than, say, Chicano/Asian Americans, or African/Asian Americans. Ling argues that there “are more choices open to [Asian/Anglo Americans] than to people of monoracial ancestry” (306). However, separation of self-construction (i.e. self-choosing or self-fashioning) from the critical act of choosing representatives is impossible.

This establishment of a continuum respectively correlated to multiracial and the monoracial is fairly straightforward. But the phrase “unhampered by physical features which may declare a particular exterior identity at odds with interior realities” is a tricky one. How are multiracial Asian Americans, particularly Asian/Anglo Americans, “unhampered by physical features”? How can such a contention be true given that physical features provide both guides for self-identification and others’s identification of the subject? How and why is a measure of freedom located on the face? What does it mean to have an “exterior identity” that may conflict with “internal realities”? In what way does this statement reinscribe Asian American theories with a sense race as a biological category?

A look to an earlier essay by Ling may shed some light. Again, she is careful with
her words, but in this essay exposes more implications of her argument. Ling writes, “Edith assert[ed] her Chinese heritage, despite the fact that her facial features did not betray such origins.”¹¹ In the context about which Ling writes, Edith takes a written stand against the injustices Chinese persons in North America face, but one might wonder why she would take such a stand since she seems like a nice white lady. Looks like one, anyway. Facial features do not “betray” Chinese origins; instead, Chinese-ness cannot be read on her apparently Anglo face. Ling suggests that Edith’s blood is the truth of Chinese origins, not displays of culture that might also be read as Chinese American. Given that Ling’s subjects—the Chinese/English North American sisters, Edith and Winnifred Eaton—could pass as white, it’s safe to assume that what Ling means, finally, is that if one can pass as white, and if one is also of mixed heritage, part of that heritage being Anglo, then one’s task of self-construction is easier, made more “free” by the fact of Anglo heritage. Ling might have said as easily, “because Asian/Anglo Americans are more likely to be able to pass as white, they are free to choose their ethnic identification.” In short, this formulation suggests that one can capitalize on white privilege—the bonus here of looking white—in order to develop her own sense of identity as a person of color. We can see why Ling would be uneasy about her reading of the Eaton sisters’ apparent capitalization on the benefits of whiteness. If we read closely Ling’s assessment of the Eaton sisters, we can begin to account for the reasons why Edith Eaton commands more contemporary critical space than Winnifred Eaton: despite our reveling in the possibility of free self-construction for white-looking persons, Asian Americanists valorize those who choose non-white identifications and who remain loyal to non-white interests (Edith
Eaton), in contrast to those who choose non-white identifications and apparently pander to white interests (Winnifred Eaton).

Whereas Edith Eaton chose to identify herself as Chinese American through the pseudonym “Sui Sin Far” to sign her writings about the Chinese American struggle against white racism, Winnifred Eaton chose “Onoto Watanna” to signal a Japanese American identification for her writing about Japanese characters. Implicitly, critics often read their alternate choices as a distinction between honesty (Edith’s loyalty to the “reality” of her Chinese blood) and problematic creativity (Winnifred’s “lying” about Japanese ancestry in spite of the “truth” of Chinese blood). Not only is Edith more honest by adhering to a “truth about blood,” she picks a name that has real meaning—“Sui Sin Far” in Cantonese means “Chinese Lily.” Conversely, “Onoto Watanna,” Ling contends, has no known meaning.\(^{12}\) Edith is characterized as a valiant anti-racist in a time of extreme Sinophobia. Winnifred, on the other hand, is understood as a sell-out because of her betrayal of blood truths and her enormous success as a popular novel writer. While Edith is said to have died early because of chronic ailment caused by the physical affects of racial hatred,\(^ {13}\) Winnifred lived a longer life, supporting herself and her four children on the monetary rewards of her writing successes. We are to assume, then, in this logic, that Winnifred’s choosing of a safer, white-friendly identification (Japanese were favored over Chinese during the time) is what secured a long life. It is worth noting that this attitude toward Winnifred Eaton seems set to change for her books are being reprinted and recirculated, her granddaughter Diana Birchall is currently preparing Winnifred’s biography for publication and the AAAS conference recently dedicated an entire panel to
her biography and writings. Nevertheless, Winnifred’s recuperation notably lacks
detailed unpacking of contemporary critical constructions of her as the second, or inferior,
sister.

This is not to say that I devalue the work done by critics on the Eaton sisters. I
appreciate that we celebrate writers who take a strong stance against racism. The point is,
however, not to confuse anti-racism with anti-white. I do recognize, of course, the ease of
conflating racism with whiteness, but call the reader’s attention to how such a move
constructs whiteness as a monolithic evil and thus makes us guilty of another form of
discrimination and essentialism and makes critics blind to many potential political allies.
Rather, we should emphasize the distinction between anti-white and anti-white-
supremacy. To perpetuate such false oppositions is detrimental to multiracial
Asian/Anglo American subjects as we shall especially see in chapter two.

A Cross-bearing Bridge: Sui Sin Far/Edith Eaton’s Autobiography and Tales of
Interracial Relationships and Eurasians

After all I have no nationality and am not anxious to claim any. Individuality is
more than nationality. “You are you and I am I,” says Confucius. I give my right
hand to the Occidentals and my left to the Orientals, hoping that between them
they will not utterly destroy the insignificant “connecting link.” And that’s all.

Sui Sin Far/Edith Eaton, “Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian”

I have no organic disease, but the strength of my feelings seems to take from me
the strength of my body. I am prostrated at times with attacks of nervous sickness.
The doctor says that my heart is unusually large; but in light of the present I know
that the cross of the Eurasian bore too heavily upon my childish shoulders.

Sui Sin Far/Edith Eaton, "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian"16

Edith Eaton's autobiographical essay, "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an
Eurasian," outlines her various experiences as the daughter of a Chinese mother and an
English father. In the span of her forty-nine years, Edith resided in locations as diverse as
England, Canada, Jamaica, and the United States.17 She claims no nationality. She
disdains the impulse to choose one and only one nationality. Because of her mixed
parentage and her occupation as a reporter of Chinese American and Eurasian stories for
periodicals with white readerships, she professes to be a human bridge between
"Orientals" and "Occidentals," in the United States and Canada. It is important to note
that Edith Eaton does not see herself as a bridge across oceans, not between the Asian and
North American continents. Her hope against utter destruction of herself as "the
insignificant 'connecting link'" between divergent nationalities is a hope that braces
against the pains she suffers as a Eurasian, as a woman who is neither "Oriental" nor
"Occidental," but a middle space that is burdened by "the cross of the Eurasian."

Through both her short stories and her autobiographies and by eschewing a
singular national identification, Edith Eaton challenges those who are quick to claim her
as Chinese American and others who wish to label her as white. Eaton pairs an ironic
invocation of Confucius's "You are You and I am I" with an American democratic notion
of individuality, which is also ironic.18 "Individuality," she says, "is more than
nationality," but one should note that individuality, like self-construction, is a
national/collective discourse, a point which is surely not lost on Edith Eaton. By thus pairing Confucius and the discourse of America individuality, Eaton adeptly proclaims a transitory national affiliation based on notions of autonomy that are present in both Western and Chinese cultural discourses. Eaton’s resistance to categorization by others and her refusal to be slated as either “Oriental” or “Occidental” lend themselves to (mis)appropriation by contemporary Asian American critics who are eager to outline complicated Asian American subjectivities that are not merely “Asian Asian” and not simply American. Indeed, Eaton’s assertion of transitory nationality, if any at all, is a resistance to contemporary critics as well, who are compelled to co-opt her for their own ends. Therefore, her hope against “utter destruction” is also a directive to her readers to remember that as much as she seeks to instruct and to be a model for complicated ethnic subjectivity, she is uniquely different from those she wishes to link.¹⁹ She is a Eurasian woman whose cross to bear is her own unique position. “Utter destruction” would be to deny that she is both Asian and white, not Asian or white. Eaton’s short stories about interracial relationships and Eurasian characters confirm this notion and expose the forced quality of the choices “available” to mixed race Asian Anglo Americans. Indeed, Eaton suggests, finally, that the “choices” offered to Anglo/Asian Americans comprise the bulk of the so-called Eurasian “cross to bear.”

To fully understand the nuances of Edith Eaton’s representations of Eurasians and her stories of interracial love let me offer as introduction a reading of one of her very short children’s stories, “What about the Cat?,” which interrogates claims to realism.²⁰ This will give us a sense of how one might go about understanding Edith Eaton’s
autobiographical pieces as carefully constructed, rather than straightforward non-fiction. “What about the Cat?” (1908) narrates a tale of a “little princess” who interrogates all of her royal subjects about the location of her beloved feline.\(^{21}\) Although the story does not name the princess as Chinese, an illustration by George F. Kerr of a princess in imperial Chinese garb, standing at eye level with her Chinese sword-bearing chamberlain, accompanies the story in its original publication in *Good Housekeeping*. The juxtaposition of characters unidentified narratively as any specific nationality or race with the illustration of the characters dressed as Chinese leads readers to understand the tale as one about Chinese people. Furthermore, the story’s original publication intimates that the story is not an original creation by “Sui Sin Far.” Rather, the byline reads “transcribed by Sui Sin Far,” which means to suggest that “Sui Sin Far” translated and revised the story from a Chinese original.\(^{22}\)

Each one of the princess’ servants tells a fantastic story of the cat’s whereabouts and activities. In the short amount of time, reports of the cat’s shenanigans vary widely: the princess’ eldest maid says the cat “is sitting on the sunny side of the garden wall, watching the butterflies,” where she meowed and entranced the prettiest of all the butterflies to fly into her mouth and fall down her throat; the second maid tells the princess that the cat is “seated in your honorable father’s chair of state and your honorable father’s first body-slave is scratching her back with your father’s own back-scratcher, made of the purest gold and ivory” (147); another charge tells the princess that the cat is at a duck farm, being embraced by the ducks, and floating down the river upon the backs of the ducks who have made her a raft for safe passage, but the cat, in this version, finally,
strangely, beats the ducklings to death with her paws, causing the big ducks to quack wildly (147-8); the princess’ gardener professes that the cat is “frisking somewhere under the cherry tree” but is unrecognizable for she has been fed a magical porridge which transformed her “white fur coat” into a “glossy green, striped with black” so that she now “looks like a giant caterpillar, and all the little caterpillars are going to hold a festival in its honor” (148); at her final inquiry, one of the chamberlains tells the princess that the cat is “dancing in the ballroom in a dress of elegant cobwebs and a necklace of pearl rice,” her partner being a yellow dragon. The cat and dragon dance so impressively, the chamberlain says, that “all who behold them shriek in ecstasy” as “three little mice hold up her train as she dances” while “another sits perched on the tip of the dragon’s curled tail” (148). At each of these stories, the princess alternately smiles, laughs, affirms the goodness of the story, and shivers. After completing each independent deposition, the princess amasses her servants and inquires about the veracity of the stories: “You have all told me different stories when I have asked you: ‘What about the cat?’ Which of these stories is true? No one answered. All trembled and paled” (148). The princess, pulling the cat from her sleeve, pronounces all stories untrue. A courtly chamberlain kowtows three times before the princess and offers the following explanation for the servants’ deceptions: “would a story be a story if it were true? Would you have been as well entertained this morning if, instead of our stories, we, your unworthy servants, had simply told you that the cat was up your sleeve?” (148).

Veiled as a child’s tale of a princess, her cat, and her servants, Edith Eaton’s “What about the Cat?” outlines a surprisingly more complex narrative of truth, realism,
and one’s manipulations of them. Whereas the majority of Edith Eaton’s stories are
written as non-fiction, Eaton recognizes the playfulness of storytelling. At the same time,
like her princess character, Edith Eaton prioritizes sincerity, truth, and realism. This is a
primacy that is shared, as I outline above, by Edith’s contemporary critics. This brief story
alerts readers to the ways in which Edith embraces both truth and fiction and asks readers
to question how one can tell the difference between the two. Because the princess kept
the cat up her sleeve all along, she alone was privy to the cat’s whereabouts. Edith
thereby suggests that one of the primary ways that one would be able to disprove stories
and recognize them as false and constructed is if one manipulated the storytelling
conditions, as surely she can as author. Let me suggest that the moral to “What about the
cat?” is not merely the one the princess’ courtly chamberlain offers. Stories are not meant
only to amuse readers/listeners. “What about the Cat?” cautions discerning readers
against wholesale acceptance of stories as truth, for one cannot tell if the cat, or, the truth,
of the story is hidden up a sleeve. Edith Eaton offers her readers, those whom she sees
herself as serving, a clue to her other tales: fiction and nonfiction are not independent
genres, lines between the two are blurry.

This parable on the blurring of lines between fiction and fact is a particularly
important lesson for critics of Edith Eaton to remember as we read her autobiography and
her stories about miscegenation and Eurasianism. While Edith may not be out to merely
entertain her readers with occasional fabrications, masked as truths in non-fiction, she is
seeking certain effects, namely the impression that she is dedicated to fighting battles for
the Chinese in white newspapers. Popular readings of Edith Eaton’s œuvre call narratives
of her life "truth-telling" and "truth-adherent," in contrast to Winnifred Eaton's inventive self-fashioning. I argue, somewhat to the contrary, that Edith Eaton constructs herself just as carefully as her sister does.

Edith Eaton's construction is so deliberate and convincing that most readers do not recognize it as construction, but read her autobiography instead as unadulterated narration. While one can read "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian" as evidence of Edith's uncompromised support of the Chinese in the United States and her favoritism for her Chinese-ness, she, in fact, subtly reminds us of her dual heritage. The most widely-read scene from "Leaves" details Edith's dinner conversation with her employer and other people in a unnamed Midwest U.S. "little town away off on the north shore of a big lake" (224). When one of Edith's dinner companions "makes a remark about the cars full of Chinamen that past [sic] that morning," her employer responds in a racist manner, saying, "Somehow or other . . I cannot reconcile myself to the thought that the Chinese are human like ourselves. They may have immortal souls, but their faces seem to be so utterly devoid of expression that I cannot help but doubt" (224). This prompts other dinner companions' racisms:

"Souls," echoes the town clerk, "their bodies are enough for me. A Chinaman is, in my eyes, more repulsive than a nigger."

"They always give me such a creepy feeling," puts in the young girl with a laugh.

"I wouldn't have one in my house," declares [Eaton's] landlady.

"Now, the Japanese are different altogether. There is something bright and
likeable about those men,” continues Mr. K. [224]

In one short scene, Edith Eaton outlines a hierarchy of racism, the crude, laughable ignorance (i.e. Edith’s landlady’s declaration that she wouldn’t house a Chinese person) and flippancy (i.e. the young girl’s self-amused laugh) of her dinner companions, and provides a brief historical context for her sister Winnifred’s adoption of a Japanese persona. Her final purpose in this scene is a successful one; Edith seeks to paint herself as a staunch, brave anti-racist:

    A miserable, cowardly feeling keeps me silent. I am in a Middle West town. If I declare what I am, every person in the place will hear about it the next day. The population is in the main made up of working folks with strong prejudices against my mother’s countrymen. The prospect before me is not an enviable one—if I speak. I have no longer an ambition to die at the stake for the sake of demonstrating the greatness and nobleness of the Chinese people.

    Mr. K. turns to me with a kindly smile.

    “What makes Miss Far so quiet?” he asks.

    “I don’t suppose she finds the ‘washee washee men’ particularly interesting subjects of conversation,” volunteers the young manager of the local bank.

    With great effort I raise my eyes from my plate. “Mr. K.,” I say, addressing my employer, “the Chinese people may have no souls, no expression on their faces, be altogether beyond the pale of civilization, but whatever they are, I want you to understand that I am—I am a Chinese.” [224-5]
Indeed, what an admirable proclamation! Despite her fears of speaking, and her “ambition to die at the stake for the sake of demonstrating the greatness and nobleness of the Chinese people,” Edith Eaton/“Miss Far” reveals that she is Chinese. Her employer receives the declaration astonishingly well and apologizes: “I should not have spoken as I did. I know nothing whatever about the Chinese. It was pure prejudice. Forgive me!” (225). Edith’s final courage in this moment is a declaration of her dedication to the cause of fighting for Chinese people. It is as much directed as her immediate subjects, those at the dinner party, as it is aimed at her readers, then and now.

While I, frankly, find the account unbelievable, I do not think Edith’s possible pretense invalidates her dedication to fighting against racism. In fact, it seems that she has a very refined sense of anti-racism, after all. Moreover, when Edith Eaton stutters “I am—I am a Chinese” and declares herself singularly Chinese, she is at few other times more Eurasian than at this moment. Unlike earlier moments in “Leaves,” Edith calls herself Chinese in this scene as opposed to saying that her mom is Chinese. Her stuttering bespeaks both her fear of declaration and an ambivalence about naming herself as one nationality over another. Whereas Shawn Wong and Amy Ling maintain that Edith Eaton is far more truthful than her sister because she chose not to pass as white, let me argue that, in this moment, she is passing. But this is not passing in the usual sense, for, we must admit, she does proclaim herself to be Chinese. Nevertheless, her employer calls her “Miss Far,” her adopted pseudonym, which is an assertion, to use Ling’s words, of her Chinese heritage. If she were using the name “Sui Sin Far” while in the Midwest, why must she, then, make such a proclamation that she is Chinese? One must conclude that
she was passing as white, that she allowed herself to be understood by others, until this moment, to be white. To readers of “Leaves,” Edith uses “Miss Far” to pass as Chinese, and thereby declare in narrative her loyalty to the Chinese in America. Were it the case and her companions assumed that by her silence she was not hiding her Chinese heritage, but silently expressing a disdain, as a white woman of refined taste, for discussions about “washee washee men,” her declaration that she is Chinese, is, in fact, an announcement of her mixed race status as both Chinese and white. One could argue to the contrary that because she calls herself Chinese at this moment, she negates others’ perception of her as white. Notwithstanding this possible argument that she cannot be both white and Chinese simultaneously in the eyes of her companions, she constructs herself textually as both at the same time. Her companions assume that she is white at the same moment they supposedly call her “Miss Far.” Throughout her autobiographical narrative, people alternately call her “Miss Far,” “Little Miss Sui,” and “Sui.” Because we know these names to be Edith’s own constructions, we must understand the entire narrative to be one of construction, slight fabrication. What she could not be simultaneously in her daily activities—both Chinese and white—she constructs, in her writing, as possibility.

The racism Edith Eaton experienced as a child was aimed not so much at her mixed heritage, but almost exclusively upon her Chinese ancestry. She tells of how she is the subject of others’ curious, scrutinizing gazes and hushed conversations. When she was four years old, she recalls, Edith’s nurse tells “another of her kind that [Edith’s] mother is Chinese,” to which the “informed” exclaims “Oh, Lord!” (218). Edith’s retelling of the story elicits a slap from her mother when the nurse denies any wrong-
doing. A few years later, a female child cautioned another against socializing with Edith: the girl says, “I wouldn’t speak to Sui if I were you. Her mamma is Chinese” (218). Her playmate proclaims a continued interest in playing with her: “I don’t care . . . Even if your mamma is Chinese, I like you better than Annie” (218). At this, Edith subtextually affirms her anti-racism, and tells “her first conscious lie,” proclaiming, “But I don’t like you,” while turning her back on her potential playmate (218). At age six, the prejudice against Edith turns toward the fact of her mixed heritage. At a children’s party, Edith realizes that she has been the subject of others’ discussions when “a white haired old man . . . adjusts his eyeglasses and surveys [her] critically. ‘Ah, indeed!’ he exclaims. ‘Who would have thought it at first glance. Yet now I see the difference between her and other children. What peculiar coloring! Her mother’s eyes and hair and her father’s features, I presume. Very interesting creature indeed!’” (218).

At the same moment that she attempts to construct herself as wholly Chinese, as one who should be accepted by the people of Chinatown whom she chooses to defend in the newspapers, Edith Eaton is clear about the difficulty of life as a Eurasian. Not only does she experience racism as people perceive her to be Chinese, others discriminate against her due to the fact of her mixed heritage. Indeed, discrimination against her as a Eurasian comes from otherwise opposing ethnic groups, from “both sides,” as it were. Some Chinese women wish her to marry Chinese men, but they are “a little doubtful as to whether one could be persuaded to care for [her], full-blooded Chinese people having a prejudice against the half white” (223). At this racist thought, Edith says, “Fundamentally, I muse, all people are the same,” which contemporary readers might first
understand as a universalizing impulse that professes color-blindness. But Edith quickly subverts that somewhat benign racism and suggests that all people are the same because they all harbor prejudice:

My mother’s race is as prejudiced as my father’s. Only when the whole world becomes as one family will human beings be able to see clearly and hear distinctly. I believe that some day a great part of the world will be Eurasian. I cheer myself with the thought that I am but a pioneer. A pioneer should glory in suffering. [223-4]

Again, Edith’s cross to bear is her status as a woman between worlds. Edith reinvokes her “cross” here and reminds us that she is physically burdened by the racism of both whites and Asians. Many critics are willing to take uncritically at face value Edith’s role as martyr. Indeed, the unrestricted celebration of Edith Eaton is a testament to how convincing was her self-construction as a martyr. While Amy Ling appropriates Edith Eaton as a pioneer for the good of Chinese Americans, Edith Eaton’s actual primary concern is to Eurasians who are subject to discrimination from those of both their mother’s and their father’s races. Eaton’s projection for a majority population of Eurasians can still be heard one hundred years later, in contemporary, idealistic sentiments which claim that the “browning of America,” or the miscegenated status of all future people, will finally put an end to racism and discrimination. Such fantasies, it seems, will always project onto the future, which like tomorrow, unfortunately never comes.

The rest of Edith Eaton’s autobiography narrates varying versions of Eurasian
subjectivity, although each version shares one component—that the Eurasian is distinct from both Asians and whites. In each telling about various Eurasians she has met, Edith declares her own Eurasian subjectivity. The first Eurasian Edith tells about is the child of a Chinese man who wrote an article “in which he declares, ‘The Chinese in America owe an everlasting debt of gratitude to Sui Sin Far for the bold stand she has taken in their defense’” (223). Edith discovers that her celebrator “has an American [read white] wife and several children [in whom she] is very much interested” (223). Her “heart throbs in sympathetic tune with the tales they relate of their experiences as Eurasians. ‘Why did papa and mamma born us?’ asks one. Why?” (223). It is significant to note that Edith is here celebrated as Chinese for her defense of other Chinese, but that she quickly reminds readers that her sympathies reside especially with Eurasians like herself.

Edith catalogs several differing ways in which Eurasians respond to the world around them. One “half Chinese, half white girl” who “had heard little but abuse of the Chinese,” Edith writes, “pass[es] as one of Spanish or Mexican origin,” and therefore “she lives in nervous dread of being ‘discovered’” (227). Other Chinese Eurasians, not unlike Edith’s sister Winnifred, assess the American preference for the Japanese over the Chinese and, thinking to advance themselves, both in a social and business sense, pass as Japanese. They continue to be known as Eurasians; but a Japanese Eurasian does not appear in the same light as a Chinese Eurasian” (228). Again, Edith demonstrates her sympathy for all Chinese Eurasians, no matter that they veil themselves—pass as white, as Japanese Eurasian, as Spanish and/or Mexican: “The unfortunate Chinese Eurasians!” she exclaims. “Are not those who compel them to thus cringe more to be blamed than they?”
What’s missing from both these accounts is the racism perpetuated by “full-blooded” Asian/Americans against Eurasians. Regardless, the kind of distinctive bind in which Eurasians find themselves is never far from Edith Eaton’s mind.

“The Story of One White Woman Who Married a Chinese” and its sequel “My Chinese Husband” foreground interracial romance, and yet Edith’s recurring worries are directed at the Eurasian child. Minnie Carson is a white woman who deserts her adulterous husband, and with her daughter runs off into the night where she meets and later marries Liu Kanghi, a Chinese man who gives her shelter and welcomes her into his family. By comparison with Minnie’s first husband, Liu Kanghi is gentle and yet strong, supportive, and loyal. Liu Kanghi’s family and the Chinese people around whom they live are more accepting of Minnie than the “many Americans who look down upon [her] for becoming” his wife (77). It is “only when the son of Liu Kanghi lays his little head upon [Minnie’s] bosom” that she ponders the sagacity of her choice to marry Liu Kanghi. Just as Edith Eaton imagines herself as a human bridge, when Liu Kanghi and Minnie’s child is born, “the old mulatto Jewess who nursed” Minnie exclaims, “A prophet! . . . A prophet has come into the world” (82). Minnie simultaneously wonders about her marriage, racial conflict, and her “prophetic” child, a possible leader of a new nation of people:

For my boy, the son of the Chinese man, is possessed of a childish wisdom which brings the tears to my eyes; and as he stands between his father and myself, like yet unlike us both, so will he stand in after years between his father’s and his mother’s people. And if there is no kindliness nor understanding between them,
what will my boy’s fate be? [77]

The measure of Minnie’s decision to intermarry rests in the fate of her and Liu Kanghi’s son, little Kanghi. Edith Eaton offers few final words on Minnie’s decision, but does forecast tragedy. In “My Chinese Husband” Liu Kanghi is “brought home at night, shot through the head. There are some Chinese,” Eaton claims “just as there are some Americans, who are opposed to all progress, and who hate with bitter hatred all who would enlighten or be enlightened” (83). Eaton clearly supports interracial marriages in the sense that they are progressive and enlightening, but suggests that little Kanghi’s life will continue to be plagued, because the murder of his father reveals that this is “no kindliness nor understanding” between whites and Chinese. Eaton’s criticism is not trained solely upon whites, for it is, finally, Chinese, who prove “unenlightenment” through violence.

Edith’s short story “Its Wavering Image” reenforces Edith’s loyalty to the Chinese people she writes about and expresses a certain distrust of whites. Pan, a “half white, half Chinese girl” (61) whose mother is dead, lives with her father in Chinatown. “She always turned from whites. With her father’s people she was natural and at home; but in the presence of her mother’s she felt strange and constrained, shrinking from their curious scrutiny as she would from the sharp edge of a sword” (61). Mark Carson, an ambitious white reporter, who “was spoken of as ‘a man who would sell his soul for a story’” (62) enters Pan’s life and “it was only after [his] coming . . . that the mystery of her nature began to trouble her” (61). After seeing Pan in Chinatown at her father’s store, Mark is “puzzled” and asks the city editor “What was she? Chinese or white? The city editor
answered him, adding: 'She is an unusually bright girl, and could tell more stories about the Chinese than any other person in this city—if she would' (61). Readers are not privy to the city editor's response and are therefore left to wonder "what was she?' What does he think she is?; What does Mark believe her to be? By not narrating the city editor's answer, Edith Eaton refuses to cast Pan mono-logically. We are, however, told that whatever she is, she has cultural authority of which she is protective. Mark ingratiates himself and become's "Pan's first white friend" (62). With her, a revered member of the Chinese community, Mark gains full access to Chinatown as Pan leads "him about Chinatown, initiating him into the simple mystery and history of many things, for which she, being of her father's race, had a tender regard and pride" (62). As one might easily predict, Mark betrays Pan and writes a special-feature article for his paper on the ins-and-outs of Chinatown. Edith is again careful not to tell us what Mark writes about, for to do so would be to perpetuate the betrayal.

"Its Wavering Image" suggests that Eurasians can be just as loyal and knowledgeable to Chinese and might have thus served to allay the fears of Edith's Chinese subjects who wondered about the honorability of her intentions. Simultaneously, Edith details her dismay at the way in which choices are forced upon Eurasians. The story's title metaphorically suggests that one should see Eurasians as both Asian and white. Like the moon, to which the title refers, Pan's image wavers. The moon is ironically constant in its fluctuation. Likewise, Pan switches from American clothes to Chinese clothes, from being seen as Chinese to being seen as white and back again. Her constancy, her Eurasianism, resides in the suggestion that she will always wax and wane,
change and vacillate. Mark sees Pan as white and insists that she be white and white
alone. Pan’s ability to learn suggests to Mark that “at times [it was] as if her white self
must entirely dominate and trample under foot her Chinese” (62). His racist inclinations
lead him to insist that Pan does not belong in Chinatown because she is white. He tries to
force her to “decide what [she] will be—Chinese or white,” charging that she “cannot be
both” (63). Pan decides, after Mark’s betrayal, to dress as a Chinese woman and thereby
proclaim her choice to be Chinese. Pan’s final “choice” to be Chinese is not a rejection of
being both Chinese and white simultaneously: “Tonight she wore the Chinese costume.
But for her clear-cut features she might have been a Chinese girl” (66). Pan’s
transformation is incomplete, thus suggesting that while she declares Chineseness by
wearing “the Chinese costume,” she remains also part white. Edith Eaton again calls our
attention to the turmoil that is involved in the act of choosing and suggests that while it
may seem that certain singular choices are being made, the moon remains ever in flux,
ever ready to change again.

Edith Eaton’s uncelebratory contemporary critics, Marlon Hom and Lorraine
Dong, claim that one should fault Eaton for, among other things, the ways in which her
“Eurasian characters . . . do not reveal much in terms of the turmoil experienced by
Eurasian women at the time or the reasons why such a woman would choose one identity
over the other” (162). No matter if one agrees with them about the lack of depth to
Eaton’s characters in general, Eaton, to my mind, does not spare her thoughts on the
“turmoil” of being Eurasian. More importantly, Eaton does outline reasons why Eurasians
might choose certain divergent identities, while simultaneously forcing the point that the
key “turbmoil” to being Eurasian is others’ forcing of “choices” upon them. The issue of choice is, finally, Edith’s Eurasian cross to bear.

“Sentimental Moonshine”: Onoto Watanna/Winnifred Eaton’s *Me: A Book of Remembrance & A Japanese Nightingale*

What then I ardently believed to be the divine sparks of genius, I now perceived to be nothing but a mediocre talent that could never carry me far. My success was founded upon a cheap and popular device, and that jumble of sentimental moonshine that they called my play seemed to me the pathetic stamp of my inefficiency. Oh, I sold my birthright for a mess a potage!

Winnifred Eaton/Onoto Watanna, *Me: A Book of Remembrance*²⁷

I thought of other sisters . . . the eldest, a girl with more real talent than I—who had been a pitiful invalid all her days. She is dead now, that dear big sister of mine, and a monument marks her grave in commemoration of work she did for my mother’s country. It seemed as if our heritage had been all struggle . . . It seemed a great pity that I was not, after all, to be the savior of the family, and that my dreams of the fame and fortune that not alone should lift me up, but all my people, were built upon a substance as shifting as sand and as shadowy as mist.

Winnifred Eaton/Onoto Watanna, *Me: A Book of Remembrance*²⁸

Winnifred Eaton’s autobiography, *Me: A Book of Remembrance* (1915), written after the success of several of her novels set in Japan, narrates the few brief years of her
struggle for success as a writer. She measures her success, as the two above quotations
detail, by comparison between herself and the work and success of her sister Edith Eaton,
“a girl with more real talent” than Winnifred. One cannot help but continue to compare
her to her sister, but one should also remember the performative quality of Winnifred’s
autobiography. Winnifred performs humility and remorse, qualities which the majority of
late twentieth-century critics read as her guilty recognition of the problematics of her
self-construction as a Japanese noblewoman despite her Chinese ancestry. One might
alternately read “cheap and popular device” as unreflexive of Winnifred’s self-fashioning
as Japanese, but rather as critical of her use of the romantic plot. Their “heritage had been
all struggle” after all, regardless of whether she chose to perform as a Japanese woman.
Whereas Edith is lauded for the “work she did for [their] mother’s country,” Winnifred
also envisions her work as geared toward the uplift of family, “all [her] people,” her
work, in the realm of fiction, does not effect the same obviously noble ends. If she is
retracting at all, Winnifred is not, I believe, repenting her decision to perform Japanese-
ness so much as regretting her choice of genre—“sentimental moonshine.” That
Winnifred’s works are written in fictive form is not a small matter, for, indeed, secondary
only to her assumption of a Japanese persona, it is an issue that most critics find
problematic. Winnifred’s Japanese persona and her writing of romantic, sometimes
Orientalist, fiction are part of the same coin. The popular acclaim of her novels bespeaks
her success with the fiction of her life-story, her adopted persona, as well as her novels.
When one is knowledgeable about Winnifred Eaton’s aptitude with narrative
manipulation, one cannot take at face value her affected remorse and humility. What is
presented as realistic autobiography is, in fact, another layer of genre and subject manipulation. And as we shall see below with a reading of Winnifred’s *A Japanese Nightingale*, what masquerades as mere fiction might very well be the substance of self-reflexive biography.

The introduction to *Me* by Jean Webster (niece of Mark Twain, friend to Winnifred) prioritizes non-fiction. Against contrary suspicions, Webster claims that the book is “pure reporting; the author has not branched out into any byways of style, but has merely told in the simplest language possible what she actually remembered” (1). Webster provides as evidence for the “pure reporting,” without affectation of style, the “fact” that Winnifred wrote the book in a matter of two weeks, while in the hospital. Webster thus implies that Winnifred had neither time nor energy to fabricate. One should quickly recall Edith’s lifelong struggle with illness and the ways in which she looks to her illness as proof of her affected martyr-ship. This is not to belittle Edith’s real physical disability but to highlight Edith’s own strategic use of her illness, and to suggest that Webster makes note of this so that readers might immediately sympathize with the author. Webster further corroborates the narrative’s validity by saying “I have known the author for a number of years and I know that the main outline of everything she says is true, though the names of people and places have necessarily been changed in order to hide their identity” (2). The foremost name in *Me* which is “changed in order to hide... identity” is Winnifred’s. While Winnifred portends to divulge her own story, she publishes the book anonymously. In the text, she refers to herself as Nora Ascough, a clearly “white” name. Who, but the introduction’s author, can then tell whether the story
is true or false? What, if you will, does Winnifred have up her sleeve? Furthermore, and perhaps more interestingly, while Webster insists on non-fiction, she likewise masks Winnifred’s mixed heritage, calling it merely “peculiar heredity,” rather than labeling her a Eurasian of any specific kind. Notably, *Me* does not specify Winnifred’s mother’s heritage, but instead names her mother “a native of a far-distant land,” and “foreign-looking.”

To recognize that Winnifred has a nuanced sense of the differing effects of fiction and non-fiction is to call attention to her performance. Contemporary critics neglect somewhat the subversive quality of Winnifred’s performativity. Critics take Winnifred’s own words in *Me* as evidence of her guilt and regret for lying about her Chineseness, and then measure this against her putative betrayal of her heritage, and brand everything she says as untrue, or meaningless. This is particularly true of Winnifred’s pseudonym. The name “Onoto Watanna” accrued cultural importance with the success of Winnifred Eaton’s novels: “Onoto” is the name of a line of French pens that were released after Winnifred’s novels gained popularity and a cigar company also named a cigar “Onoto,” and advertised the cigar with a portrait of a woman with white facial features, wearing a kimono. Despite the cultural value of the name “Onoto Watanna,” most critics follow Amy Ling’s lead and understand the name to have “no known meaning.” This lack of “true” signification buttresses notions of Winnifred’s inauthenticity.

Yuko Matsukawa, a new voice in the quest to give Winnifred Eaton substantial attention, argues differently. In “Cross-Dressing and Cross-Naming: Decoding Onoto Watanna,” Matsukawa contends that Winnifred is a trickster figure, whose subversive
potential is not yet unearthed. Matsukawa suggests that in contrast to Edith’s work which lends itself to overt appropriation for feminist studies, “Winnifred Eaton and her work . . . do not lend themselves to easy theoretical categorization” (106). One of Matsukawa’s most important contributions to the study of Winnifred Eaton is her unpacking of Winnifred’s pseudonym—Onoto Watanna—and her revision of what many critics have believed is a name that is only “Japanese sounding,” not authentic. Matsukawa, reads Winnifred’s “Onoto Watanna” autograph, found in the frontispiece of her novel The Wooing of Wistaria (1902). The autograph, Matsukawa writes,

is written not only in Japanese but also in the order in which Japanese names are written: surname first and then the first name. Out of the five characters that comprise the signature, the first two represent the last name “Watanna” written in kanji or Chinese ideograms and the remaining three spell “Onoto” in hiragana, one of the Japanese alphabets . . . The legible half, the top two characters, represents the last name “Watanna,” composed of the Chinese ideograms (Japanese pronunciation) for “to cross”: wata[ru], and “name”: na. The first character not only means simply “to cross” but also “to cross a body of water and reach the other side,” “to convey,” “to pass,” “to go abroad.” “Watanna” is a contrived name in that the ideograms were probably chosen for their meaning and then someone determined how to pronounce them. In any event, the characters that represent her last name suggest that she is indeed deliberately crossing boundaries and that her name allows her to cross over or pass. [107]

What’s particularly compelling about this “real” meaning of “Onoto Watanna” is multi-
fold: 1) the sense of Winnifred’s deliberateness; 2) Winnifred’s simultaneous attempt at
authenticity and critique of the valuing of authenticity; 3) the self-reflexivity and
multivalence of the chosen pseudonym; and 4) the combination of Chinese and Japanese
ideograms into something that is neither Chinese nor Japanese, nor entirely Anglicized.
This final point marks Winnifred Eaton’s simultaneous identifications with her mother’s
Chinese, her adopted Japanese, and her father’s heritages.

While on the surface it may seem as though Winnifred Eaton does not detail, as
Edith does, the trials and tribulations of being a young Eurasian, Winnifred gives, at the
beginning of her autobiography, the directive that one should read her life’s experiences
as predicated upon her mixed heritage: After telling about her English-Irish father and her
mother who “was a native of a far-distant land” (3), Winnifred claims, “this story [of my
parents] is frankly of myself, and I mention these few facts merely in the possibility of
their proving of some psychological interest later” (4). Whether the text of Me is an
extended meditation upon Eurasianism is a debatable point. Few problems that
Winnifred, or rather Nora, encounters are attributed to race. Instead, class and gender are
 spotlighted; Webster says in the introduction; Webster writes, Me “is an illuminative
picture of what may befall a working-girl who, at the age of seventeen, gaily ventures
forth to conquer life with ten dollars in her pocket” (2).

Winnifred Eaton’s second novel, A Japanese Nightingale (1901), also discusses
gender and class, but highlights Yuki, the main character’s Eurasianism. One might read
this novel as Winnifred’s early experiment in the writing of non-fiction veiled as fiction,
for the social positioning of Yuki is quite like that of Winnifred’s own. I do not wish to
suggest that Winnifred deliberately wove her life-story into the narrative of *A Japanese Nightingale*. Instead, I suggest that this novel can be read as an explication the ways in which Eurasianism functions in the marketplace and how that, in turn, effects interracial families. As Winnifred tells a superficially romantic, sentimental, uncomplicated tale of interracial love and tribulation, she also reveals subtextually the complex negotiations entailed by her assumption of a Japanese Eurasian persona.

For context’s sake, let me venture a crude, highlighting plot summary. Yuki, the nightingale of the novel’s title, is a singer and dancer, a geisha. Her name, meaning “snowflake” in Japanese, bespeaks her singularity and alludes to her whiteness, although her whiteness, as we see in the description of her, is not phenotypical. Her performances are dazzling to Western male patrons. An American theatrical manager, believes there to be “a fortune in her!” (10) and he wishes to hire her in his traveling troupe of Asian talent. He quickly seeks to make her into a commodity. Upon inquisition of the proprietor, the manager and readers are privy to the disparagement of Yuki for her mixed heritage:

> Beautiful excellencies! Phow! You cannot see properly in the deceitful light of this honorable moon. A cheap girl in Tokyo, with the blue-glass eyes of the barbarian, the yellow skin of the lower Japanese, the hair of mixed color, black and red, the form of a Japanese courtesan, and the heart and nature of those honorably unreliable creatures, alien at this country, alien at your honorable country, augestly despicable—a half-caste!” [14]

In a position similar to Edith’s, Winnifred makes note of the alienation of Eurasians from
both Asia and America. In contrast to this money-driven, enterprising, somewhat imperialistic white American man, the narrator presents Jack Bigelow. Jack is aggressively pursued by local matchmakers because he is “known to be one of the richest foreigners in the city” (16). He “naturally shrank” from the prospect of arranged marriage to a Japanese woman,

and in this position he was strengthened by a promise he had made before leaving America to a college chum, his most intimate friend, a young English-Japanese student named Taro Burton, that during his stay in Japan he would not append his name to the long list of foreigners who for a short, happy, and convenient season cheerfully take unto themselves Japanese wives, and with the same cheerfulness desert them. [16-7]

The matchmaker, however, brings Yuki to Jack, and like the theatrical manager, he is entranced by her. Despite his promise to Taro, Jack marries Yuki. After a short time, Jack begins to assume his marriage to Yuki is that which he so utterly despised—the pretense of love for monetary gain. Yuki amasses a good sum of money from Jack and disappears. She does so repeatedly. Because we know only so little about Yuki, it’s the proprietor’s words against Eurasians in general which set the stage for a reading of Yuki’s later activities as proof of the deceptive, despicable qualities of Eurasians. She performs for money. She marries for money. She is wholly unreliable and deceptive. Later, her deceptions are revealed as loyalty to her family; because her brother is in America and the family requires more money to keep him there studying, Yuki learns the arts of the geisha and then marries for money. As one can quickly surmise from the predictable structure of
Winnifred’s novels, Taro and Yuki are related—brother and sister. Taro is appalled by the marriage and Yuki disappears again, ashamed of herself. This final disappearance, compounded by the shock of his sister’s and best friend’s marriage, and his guilt that his sister sold herself for his sake causes Taro to swoon. Taro receives a blow to the head and dies soon thereafter. Yuki and Jack reunite after some time and live happily ever after, readers presume.

In some respects, we can read *A Japanese Nightingale* as a resistance to the expectations of Winnifred Eaton’s white readers. As well, Winnifred anticipates the complaints of late-twentieth-century Asian Americanists. Winnifred is Eurasian, like Yuki. Winnifred performs Japaneseness with her assumption of “Onoto Watanna.” She is also white, like Yuki, the “snowflake.” Winnifred culls money for this performance and repeatedly dupes her readers who uncritically assume that she is only Japanese.

Winnifred, like Yuki, gains monetary rewards for her performances directed at white audiences. Winnifred is critical of this simple formulation by reminding readers that monetary rewards are, finally, culled for the benefit of her family. One might recognize, in the figure of Taro, the purist, hypocritical Asian Americanist who wishes for the women of his country to remain untouched by the hands of foreigners, despite the fact that his own family lineage is not “pure.” Winnifred demonstrates that Taro’s single-mindedness is detrimental both to the self and the stability of the family.

Whereas Edith Eaton proclaimed outrightly her writings’ political purposes, Winnifred Eaton continually affects a more masked approach to both writing and public self-performance. The unconscious manipulation and neglect of “reality” for which she is
faulted, is precisely that with which she plays. One can read in her “sentimental moonshine” the matters which she holds dear. If Asian Americanists must adhere to strict civil rights based paradigms of “authenticity,” Winnifred will forever pale in comparison to her sister Edith Eaton. Nevertheless, with a critical eye, one can easily make note of the fact that Winnifred herself is preoccupied with notions of authenticity and loyalty. Indeed, a reading of her “sentimental moonshine,” reveals far more complex senses of “fakeness,” “reality,” “truth,” and loyalty for which few are quick to give her credit.

“Some Cases of Alien Ancestry Demand Expert Discrimination”:

Reviving Carl Sadakichi Hartmann

Poet, playwright, art critic and historian, improvisational dancer, self-proclaimed King of Bohemia, inventor. Carl Sadakichi Hartmann. Jack-of-all-trades. German-Japanese, naturalized American. During the decades surrounding the last turn of the century, Hartmann held the attention of many people in scholarly and artistic circles. To list his friends and colleagues is to catalog a who’s who of intellectuals and artists: Walt Whitman, Alfred Stieglitz, Ezra Pound, Stéphane Mallarmé, Douglas Fairbanks, Charlie Chaplin, John Barrymore, Isadora Duncan, H. L. Mencken, Theodore Dreiser, among many others. To begin a list of his accomplishments is to set ablaze questions of why he is so under-researched: Hartmann is credited as having been the first person to write a comprehensive history of American art; he argued persuasively for photography as a reputable art form; he visited frequently with Walt Whitman and self-published an account of those visits under the title “Conversations with Whitman”; he innovated and performed what he called “perfume concerts,” playing music, reading travel monologues,
and releasing various scents into the air to invoke non-U.S. locales, usually Japan; he wrote at least four plays, hundreds of poems, one novel, and countless critical articles on America's burgeoning art scene.

Over the course of his life, in addition to wearing many occupational "hats," Hartmann assumed several different context-dependent ethnic identifications. Late in his life, Hartmann discusses his several identifications in a short, but rich piece called *A Youngster Dons Mikado Garb: A Confession*. In 1887, upon disembarking from a transatlantic Germany-U.S. steamer ship, appropriately named, he says, "Lessing," he nominally masked his Japanese parentage and went around Philadelphia under the name "Carl S. Hartmann." Because the Asian population on the East coast at this time was minuscule ("only two hundred Japanese residents in New York City"\(^{29}\)), no one took him for Eurasian, but often people assumed, by looking at his facial features and despite his German surname, that he was South American. "Addicted to the get-famous-quick version of life,"\(^{30}\) Hartmann decided the more enticing personality of a Eurasian would give him a "fix." To audiences of high-society women in Philadelphia and Boston, Hartmann lectured on "European art, literature, music, Walt Whitman, the slums of Paris and what not," under the name "C. Sadakichi Hartmann," and dressed as a Japanese imperial warrior.\(^{31}\) No doubt Hartmann's expectations for the success of this persona was related to the popularity of Gilbert and Sullivan's opera *The Mikado* that hit the American scene at the same time Hartmann dressed as a *Mikado*. Around 1902, Hartmann started using the name "Sidney Allan" to sign various critical articles on photography. "Sidney Allan" was no less an adopted persona than the *Mikado*, for Hartmann bedecked himself
with a derby hat, monocle, walking stick, a watch chain, and a three-piece suit and gave
lectures as “Sidney Allan.” Art historian Jean Weaver suggests that the assumption of
“Allan” paid homage to one of Hartmann’s favorite poets, Edgar Allan Poe. Weaver also
claims that “as ‘Sidney Allan,’ Hartmann became (or tried to become) the proper
gentleman Sadakichi Hartmann simply never was.”32 One of Hartmann’s later
performances as Chinese court magician in Douglas Fairbanks Sr.’s film The Thief of
Bagdad (1924) speaks to the ways in which the Hollywood circles of which Hartmann
was a part saw him as forever Asian.

Now, nearly one hundred years after Hartmann’s most prolific period, very little is
said about his contributions to creative performance, literature, and art and literary
criticism. While prolific, only his plays, Buddha, Christ, and Confucius, selected pieces
he wrote about Whitman, and a sketchy collection of quotations from his various
manuscripts have been published in the last thirty years. These are all are currently out of
circulation. Selections of Hartmann’s critical art reviews, however, are witnessing a
revival with the publication of Jean Weaver’s Sadakichi Hartmann: Critical Modernist.

Most striking is Hartmann’s virtual absence from Asian American literary history
and criticism. Hartmann’s legacy to Asian American literature is buried in footnotes and
cursory overviews. Hartmann appears in Elaine Kim’s Asian American Literature as part
of an extended footnote in reference to Anglo American literary racist representations of
Asians in the United States as “the unassimilable alien” and portrayals of mixed race
characters that reveal the racist assumption that villainous Asian traits are racially
inherited. Kim suggests that mixed race Asian American writers (Kim includes Sui Sin
Far, Diana Chang, Han Suyin, and Hartmann, but not, note, Winnifred Eaton) take up notions of race very differently from Anglo Americans, for, according to Kim, Eurasian writers tend not to describe “wars waged in [the] veins,” and the ones she discusses she understands as decidedly pro-Asian, anti-Anglo. She cites Hartmann as a victim of white racism (constant barraging by white racists for his Eurasian ancestry, police harassment during WWI for suspected ties to Germany, and the FBI’s surveillance in the 1940s for suspected ties to Japan) and quotes an uncontextualized, unanalyzed morsel from his manuscripts that starts “Anyone familiar with colonization...should be ashamed to belong to the white race.”33 Clearly, the relegation of Hartmann to the footnotes says equally as much about his position with the Asian American literary canon and Asian America’s oppositional relationship to whiteness.

Fifteen years after Kim’s text, Hartmann emerges from the footnotes in Stan Yogi’s essay “Japanese American Literature” in The Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature but is no less glossed. Yogi points to Hartmann as possibly the first writer to compose haiku in English. Yogi includes Hartmann as an exception to the generational paradigm he uses to organize Japanese American literary history: Hartmann was not a typical Issei because the majority of these first generation Japanese in the U.S. “were plantation workers and small-business owners in Hawai‘i, and farmers, small-business owners, or domestics on the West Coast.”34 Instead, Hartmann’s immigration was through Ellis Island, not Angel Island, and his occupation was as intellectual artist, not laborer. A recent “historical anthology” of Asian American poetry situates Hartmann as the first Asian American poet, and yet gives readers no context for his work; the
editor's only words on Hartmann are: "Asian American poetry dates as far back as the 1890s with the publication of poems by Sadakichi Hartmann, considered among the first to write Symbolist poetry in English."35

Other non-Asian American literary critics who discuss Hartmann are far more interested in Hartmann's many well-known associates than in his own racialized life-story and his critical, literary, and artistic contributions. Jean Weaver rightly suggests that:

The peripheral brilliance of Hartmann's acquaintances and friendships among the best-known figures of American arts and letters over several decades forms an irresistible distraction to the critical commentary that is Hartmann's contribution to the literature of art. A list of Hartmann's contacts is a compendium of culture . . . so that the task of defining Hartmann's importance and location in the history of art becomes one of selecting the significant from the merely fascinating.36

Indeed, George Knox and Harry Lawton's editions of Hartmann's writings, *Conversations with Whitman* and *White Chrysanthemums: Literary Fragments and Pronouncements*, make a claim for Hartmann's inclusion in American literary canons based on his association with well-known intellectuals; Knox and Lawton introduce Hartmann to the literary world with a quotation from Kenneth Rexroth that names Hartmann "the court magician to two generations of American intellectuals." Magician? Jester? Entertainer of American intellectuals, decidedly not himself intellectual? Lawton and Knox's dealings with Hartmann's texts are sketchy. *White Chrysanthemums* proves to be a frustrating tease: Lawton and Know provide no source, date, nor context for the hundreds of literary fragments. The topical organization of the volume likewise gives no
sense of context. As Lawton and Knox were mostly responsible for the collection and organization of Hartmann’s papers at the UCR library, they have succeeded in insuring a constant flow of researchers to UCR, looking to fill in the gaping trenches of their teasing text. Or else, they steer scholars away from him altogether. Gene Fowler’s controversial biography of Hartmann, Minutes of the Last Meeting, exemplifies the fascination with Hartmann’s acquaintances. While Fowler sets out to chronicle Hartmann’s life, the text tells just as much, if not more, about John Barrymore, W. C. Fields, and himself. Fowler relates nothing about Hartmann’s immigration to the U.S., East coast experiences, family, writings, or creative performances. Instead, Fowler paints Hartmann as a drunken mooch. No wonder Wistaria Hartmann Linton, one of Hartmann’s thirteen children, sued Fowler for defamation of character.

To the credit of Hartmann’s critics and biographers, however, while distracted by the “merely fascinating” (i.e. Hartmann’s famous friends, not Hartmann in his own right, nor Hartmann’s professional relations with others), they hone in on one of the key aspects of Hartmann’s life: his various performances, his many roles that put him center stage. While Lawton, Knox, and Fowler see Hartmann as an entertainer for intellectuals, however, I emphasize an inquiry into Hartmann’s many racialized performances, his adoption of context-dependent identities and how Hartmann epitomizes not only an entertainer’s playful performance, but identity performance. His recuperation into Asian American literary circles hinges on marking him as an ethnic subject, something that most critics and biographers, Asian and Anglo American alike, have not done satisfactorily because of the contesting binary opposition of Anglo and Asian that seek to
impose false choices on the multiracial subject. Hartmann is an oddity to Anglo American critics, all, so far, that is, but Weaver. To Asian American critics, his oddity is erased entirely, for unlike the attempt to monoracially identify the Eaton sisters, Hartmann is never even discussed.

"It was just the right moment": Hartmann and Ethnic Performance

To attract attention as a personality, I posed as a “Eurasean” [sic]...and it worked wonders. It was really not a hoax. As I am half Anglo Saxon and half Asiatic, no deception was necessary. I had pliable material to work with and used it to my best advantage...[T]ake a good long look at me. Do you discover anything strikingly Oriental: in my sparse figure, the structure of the skull, the position of the eyes, my features (upper jawbone), skin texture, hair, my gestures and intonation of voice? Did you ever meet a Japanese who resembles me? No, you haven’t, as it is biologically impossible. Such mutations do not occur if the proper material is absent...I was never suspected even of being half Asiatic. In fact it was never mentioned. I was most frequently taken for a South American...[I]t was really the transformation of my name from Carl S. Hartmann to Sadakichi Hartmann which won the day. I dropped the Carl as too Teutonic and dug up the pet name my mother had given me. I made the most of the supposedly German Japanese combination, and was even foolhardy enough to hire a Mikado costume for some of my lectures, and have the photo for sale in stationery stores. It was just the right moment for it.37

In the quotation above, Carl Sadakichi Hartmann “confesses” to the manufacture
of a racialized persona that "came from only one source, [his] imagination." Just as he
deems the late nineteenth century "just the right moment" for his self-construction as
Eurasian, his disclosure was appropriately timed. Although no date is given on the
unpublished manuscript of *A Youngster Dons Mikado Garb: A Confession*, one can
reconstruct the date from the historical narrative Hartmann details as well as the out-of-
character take on his supposed Japanese ancestry. Hartmann’s uncanny refutation of
Japanese heritage and his open-armed embrace of the United States is strikingly
uncharacteristic of his otherwise constant insistence on dual Japanese and German
heritage. The time, which can only be understood as World War II years, is "right," that
is, appropriate, for Hartmann’s "confession"—Japanese ancestry was a timely
performance, not based on any reality, only "a self-invented legend." "All the news items
that went out into the reading and literary world—that [his mother] may have been a
princess, a samurai’s daughter, a famous geisha, or a direct descendant of the artist
Toyokuni...were all furnished by [him] as nobody else could furnish them, and... half a
century later like a boomerang they... came back at [him]" (3-4). Stories, fictional or
not, of his mother’s racial affiliation formed a backfiring weapon that brought him FBI
harassment, constant surveillance by his neighbors and the local police, and potential
internment. No doubt as he exoticized himself in *Mikado* costume for lectures to
audiences of tea-sipping socialites, *A Youngster Dons Mikado Garb* later constructs
Hartmann as indubitably American, not foreign, but no less mixed race. He writes that
while he knows nothing of his mother due to his father’s suspiciously purposeful silence,
he still knows her to be Asian, whether Japanese, Korean, or otherwise. Hartmann’s life-
story offers Asian Americanists a lesson in the subversive and dangerous power of carefully timed ethnic performance. While he stresses the context-dependence of ethnic self-fashioning, and details the many ways in which Eurasians can self-perform, he always insists on mixed race heritage.
Chapter Two

Persistent Pathologies:

Narratives of Injury and 1990s Representations of Mixed Race Asian Americans

At the turn into the twentieth century, the Eurasian population has certainly increased from that of Edith Eaton’s time, but this demographic change has not brought about the utopian world that Eaton envisioned. Former prostitute deflowers priest; Flaky, pathological liar binges on drugs and alcohol; Rape victim returns to Chinatown and photographs the crime scene; Couple splits (presumably) because the Amerasian woman is “not Asian enough”; Racist children smother a birthday boy to death. These are some of the available sensationalist narratives about mixed-race Asian/Anglo Americans in novels of the final decade of the twentieth century. Artists both central and peripheral to the canon of Asian American literature include representations of biracial Asian Americans in their novels: Peter Bacho, Cebu (1991); Aimee Liu, Face (1994); Shawn Wong, American Knees (1995); Chang-rae Lee, Native Speaker (1995); Sigrid Nunez, A Feather on the Breath of God (1995); Jessica Hagedorn, Gangster of Love (1996); Amy Tan, The Hundred Secret Senses (1995); Nora Okja Keller, Comfort Woman (1997); Heinz Insu Fenkl, Memories of My Ghost Brother (1997); Linda Watanabe McFerrin, Namako: Sea Cucumber (1998); Ruth Ozeki, My Year of Meats (1998). That these novels portray biracial American characters of Asian descent at all indicates a growth of interest in mixed race Asian American subjects, in a decade leading to what many have called the “multiracial twenty-first century.” Asian American literature of the 1990s that depicts Asian/Anglo American subjects, however, testifies to the perseverance of stereotypes. Regardless of a popular resistance to the tropology of mixed race as tragic, these Asian American novels resurrect the well-known African American figure of the doomed, tragic mulatto for late twentieth century Asian/American contexts. Tragedy, pathology, unsuccessful therapy, physical and psychological trauma indelibly mark narratives of
white and Asian biraciality.

As in the African American literary tradition, 1990s Asian American literature is highly populated with female mixed race figures. With the exception of a few secondary characters—Mitt in Lee’s *Native Speaker*, Simon Bishop/Yihan Johnson in Tan’s *The Hundred Secret Senses*, and Joe and Henry Chung in Liu’s *Face*—all of the known mixed race Asian/Anglo American characters are female.¹ Although the representation of mixed race issues chiefly by female characters dialogues with the African American literary paradigm of the tragic mulatto as female, as mulatta, it would be hazardous, I think, to infer too much from African American literary studies. Asian/Anglo American women appear nearly one hundred years after the tragic mulatta, in different literary moments, and under different historical conditions.²

In part, we can attribute the gendering of Asian/Anglo biraciality in the 1990s, primarily to the fact that Asian American literature by and about women has dominated the cultural scene. As King-Kok Cheung suggests in her introduction to *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, Asian American literature underwent “dramatic changes” in its thirty or so years as a field. The artistic changes were paralleled by shifts in critical perspectives: Identity politics, “claiming America,” and a heavy focus on race and masculinity increasingly have given way to studies of heterogeneity, diaspora, connections between Asia and Asian America, and the intersection of ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality.³ While Cheung does not directly discuss texts by and about Asian Americans of mixed ancestry, every change that she describes characterizes the fiction that depicts Asian/Anglo Americans. The literary divergence from cultural nationalism, American nativity, and American-based histories and politics marks a scene more hospitable to narratives by and about women as well as by and about biracial people. The explosion of Asian American literature in the 1980s and 1990s resulted largely from the widespread mainstream reception of books by and about Asian American women, most
notably Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*. Most of the authors reviewed in this chapter speak to and benefit from this trend. Although the feminist concerns of some Asian American writing can make appeals to cultural nationalism via a shared anti-white racist discourse, Asian/Anglo American characters cannot seek easy refuge under the wings of cultural nationalism. Asian/Anglo American characters conjure collective, familiar memories of gendered abuses and tribulations, but critique the depiction of a common white enemy that pervades Asian American cultural nationalism and Asian American feminist fiction.

The constant iteration of the tragic in these Asian/Anglo American novels puts them into conversation with the political protest tradition of Asian American writing as it was defined in its earliest, civil-rights-inspired moments. Narratives of injury overwhelmingly serve as the basis for political subjectivity. Clearly biracial Asian/Anglo American fiction answers the call for racialized politicization via their participation in a discourse of the tragically injured self. Placing such calls are Asian American cultural nationalists, who insist that a writer must narratively mobilize against racism in order to be considered “Asian American.”

Although problematic, such dictates are warranted given the high stakes. David Palumbo-Liu’s *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* is extremely useful for its contextualization of Asian American cultural nationalism within U.S. racial ideology. Palumbo-Liu connects four topics that, as I see it, have direct relevance to the pathological spins put on narratives about biraciality: 1) racial schizophrenia; 2) history, or collective memory; 3) the issue of ethnic choice; and 4) cultural nationalism. In the U.S., Palumbo-Liu argues, hyphenated racial and cultural subjectivity is constructed as fundamentally psychotic, pathological. The “trope of schizophrenia,” he states, “has been used to describe the ‘dual personalities’ of hyphenated Americans, who are . . . depicted as unable to engage unproblematically in that invented hegemonic memory” (Palumbo-
Liu, 298). Palumbo-Liu historicizes the notion of racial schizophrenia through the paradigms of "the marginal man," African American "double consciousness," and Asian American cultural nationalism.

According to Palumbo-Liu, eminent Chicago school sociologist Robert Park delineated a portrait of the migratory (male) subject, as the "marginal man" an inherently "schizophrenic" subject, split between Old World and New World traditions, marginal in the New World because of his clinging to Old World values. Park's argument echoes W. E. B. DuBois's notion of "double consciousness" that paints the racialized, black (male) subject as split in two—both black and American, knowledgeable of both sides, conscious of the split, and thus torn. Palumbo-Liu is quick to point out that "the key difference between the concept of the marginal man and double consciousness is of course that, rather than naming Marginal Man's cultural conflict between old and new world, DuBois's concept explicitly connects double consciousness and political power." In DuBois's formulation, a wish to merge black with American politically motivates the subject; Palumbo-Liu writes:

This merging would not entail the loss of either, but rather a depathologized new whole. DuBois used double consciousness as a metaphor to describe the effects of racialization upon the African American psyche. To do so he removed the onus from individual psychic dysfunctionality and placed it on institutional racism. Yet in later periods the superficial and ideologically expedient reading of "double-consciousness" as "dual personality" tended to repathologize the individual racial and ethnic subject and make the psychic instability of the subject a product of his or her own inability to make cultural choices. [Palumbo-Liu, 300]

The notion of choice that emerges from later readings of "double consciousness" serves as a connecting link to Asian American racialization. Palumbo-Liu offers an analysis of the clinical findings of Asian American psychologists Stanley and Derald D. Sue who
argue that making cultural choices, or making an “identificatory commitment” was crucial for Chinese American subjects in order to stave off insanity. Should a Chinese American fail to address the stresses imposed upon him (or her?) by “the traditional Chinese family,” “western influences,” and racism, the Sues conclude, “mental health problems are frequently the result” (Sue and Sue, 40; quoted in Palumbo-Liu, 301).

Parenthetically, the phrase “making cultural choices” evokes the dilemma of false choices offered to the mixed race Asian American subject (for example, the choice between Asian and American) and to Asian American feminists (the choice between Asian American and gender). The biracial subject and the monoracial bicultural subject have something in common that makes the mixed race subject stand as a kind of integrated, superlative symbol for the bicultural, in terms of being both Asian and American. Both the monoracial and the biracial are said to suffer from the psychic disruption that results from an inability to make singular, concrete choices.

Asian American cultural nationalism, as an “identificatory commitment,” emerges as a strategy of resistance to racial pathologizing, or a condition of racial schizophrenia. Palumbo-Liu writes, “Asian Americans having recourse to cultural nationalism sought to ground identity outside of the debilitating dualism of schizophrenic pathology” (303). Palumbo-Liu looks to Chin and his Aiiiiiiiiiiii! co-editors as the Asian American progenitors of Asian/American cultural nationalism, a germane move in Asian American cultural studies. Cultural nationalism, then, rejects the dual personality model for hyphenated subjectivity and challenges America’s “invented hegemony” and resultant characterization of Asians in the United States as inherently split and pathological, by renarrating American history in terms of Asian peoples in the United States, and by laying claim to the United States. Nevertheless, Asian American collective identity, as expressed by the tenets of cultural nationalism, relies on a brand of hegemonic memory, even while it intends to subvert U.S. hegemonic forces which continually pathologize racialized
subjects by way of marking their distance from (white) American cultural, political, and social history.

If cultural nationalism, however, represents the only productive resolution to racial and cultural schizophrenia, what happens to Asian Americans who do not have recourse to cultural nationalism? More specifically, what liberatory paradigms are available to feminist racialized subjects who are castigated by Asian American cultural nationalists and neglected in every racial formation Palumbo-Liu describes? Furthermore, what about the mixed race subject who does not consistently claim anti-whiteness as cultural nationalists and Asian American feminists do? What some might see as the logical response to white racism-cultural nationalism of "minority" groups-fails to offer consistently workable strategies and frameworks to those who do not share nor always subscribe to certain collective histories.  

The leading Asian American feminist response to the masculinist bias of cultural nationalism refutes the premise that giving voice to one's gendered oppressions cancels or is apart from one's anti-racism. Asian American feminist writers refuse to silence their own protests against the male dominance that often characterizes the platforms of cultural nationalists, or the Asian American cultural scene, in general. Asian American literary critics have been aware of the conflict between feminism and the cultural nationalist paradigm that guided much of the early production and critique of Asian American literature, and many have noted the strategic successes of certain feminist authors in the coarticulation of gender and ethnicity.  

Asian American feminists, however, share with male cultural nationalists an under-scrutinized tendency to perpetuate a white/non-white dichotomy. In terms of cultural nationalism, the discourse of the tragic almost exclusively equates racism with white racism. The prefaces to Aiiiiieee!, The Big Aiiiiieee!, and Charlie Chan is Dead evidences how the co-evolution of Asian American literature and literary criticism
requisitioned early Asian American writers to be their own critics. The policing function of Asian American literary criticism has been well-noted. Questions of gender and sexuality preoccupy early Asian American critical inquiry. Representations of Asian/Anglo Americans allow us to recognize how both cultural nationalists and Asian American feminists have succumbed to the coercive force of America’s national definitions of race as pure, discrete, and oppositional. Asian American writers/critics, both cultural nationalists and feminists alike, challenge the broadest, most frequently operative definitions of race and ethnicity in the United States, but not to the degree that they have us rethink the entrenched racial binaries at the heart of their own work.

Asian/Anglo American fiction narrates injury in keeping with the Asian American literary paradigm of narratively performing collective memories of marginalization and oppression. At the same time, however, Asian/Anglo American fiction sustains a subtextual critique of the hegemonic, anti-white impulses of cultural nationalism and Asian American feminism alike. These novels about mixed race Asian/Anglo Americans in the 1990s remind us of the permeability of racial categories and, particularly, the instability of the race and ethnicity of one’s oppressors. Mixed race Asian/Anglo Americans do not exclusively name whites as their oppressors, for to do so would be, at times, to name members of one’s family. I am mindful of how mainstream second wave feminists did not hesitate to implicate family members in their early formulations of patriarchy. A similar issue is central to Asian American literary studies in terms of the gender wars, which concerns whether feminists sacrifice the successes of a collective stand against racism if and when they name and critique patriarchy. Nevertheless, within the frame of Asian/Anglo American fiction, the question manifests itself as a familial one.

Although Asian/Anglo American narratives detail ethnic-based injury and thus converse with the “state of injury” integral to most Asian American fiction, they also
disengage from conventionally told collective memories. Gone are the various details of relocation and internment. Absent are the Chinese American grandfathers who built U.S. railroads. Nowhere is the Filipino *manong* working the fields of Hawai‘i and/or California. Asian/Anglo American characters relate histories that intersect with and expand upon conventional Asian American history. This divergence from typical historiography is likely produced by the complex process that Sau-Ling Wong calls “denationalization” in her 1995 essay “Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads,” (*Amerasia Journal* 21:1 & 2 [1995]: 1-27). Denationalization, in Wong’s formulation, refers to a combination of several cultural phenomena: “the easing of cultural nationalist concerns as a result of changing demographics in the Asian American population as well as theoretical critiques from various quarters ranging from the poststructuralist to the queer”; increased “permeability [of] boundaries between Asian Americans and ‘Asian Asians,’” which is similar to a permeability of boundaries between Asian American studies and Asian studies; and “the sweep of the postmodern condition [that] has made it more and more acceptable to situate Asian Americans in diasporic contexts” (Wong 1-2).

An interplay of these phenomena contributes to the amenability of 1990s Asian American narratives to stories about biracial Asian Americans whose histories bespeak the opening of trade routes between Europe and Asia and also mark the imperialistic presence of U.S. soldiers in Asian territories. In its original context, the term “Amerasian,” as coined by Pearl S. Buck, refers to the unwanted offspring of American servicemen and Asian women. We now know this term as a referent to bicultural Asian Americans, more so than as its original biracial meaning. Frequently abandoned in Asia, biracial Amerasians form an underclass in countries such as Korea, Vietnam, and the Philippines, where American military forces were stationed. Two Filipino American novels that characterize biracial Asian Americans—*Cebu* and *Dogeaters*—draw upon that
narrative. And for the most part, the rest of the novels that characterize Asian/Anglo Americans—Native Speaker, My Year of Meats, Face, A Feather on the Breath of God, Gangster of Love, The Hundred Secret Senses—locate such characters in the U.S., while invoking the history of the U.S. intervention in Asian countries and the immigration to the U.S. many generations removed. One text stands out here—Shawn Wong’s American Knees—for Wong remains very much interested in a U.S. based Asian American formulation—as can be easily detected in the title of the novel, American Knees—not Japanese, Chinese, but American. It is in this text that one can note a persistent testing of cultural nationalism’s tenets with regard to the mixed race subject of Asian descent.

Particularly important is how Asian/Anglo American fiction participates in the “easing of cultural nationalist concerns” and stakes out new critical terrain by pointing to cultural nationalism’s limited ability to provide a working paradigm for the many groups that purportedly have recourse to it. Indeed, these novels demonstrate that Asian/Anglo American characters have a complicated relationship with cultural nationalism, insofar as cultural nationalism reproduces the entrenched binary racial paradigm and insists upon one’s effort to claim the United States as a real and imagined home. When Asian/Anglo Americans cannot call upon the resources of cultural nationalism and, I would say, feminism, to challenge the pathologizing impulses of white America and, dare I say, Asian America, they rehearse the tragic, the pathological. The rehearsal is part and parcel of the effort to locate new racial paradigms that can optimally account for the heterogeneity of Asian America and the complex intersections of ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality.

Biraciality as Symptom and Symbol in Peter Bacho’s Cebu

Peter Bacho rounds out the cast of characters of his novel Cebu with several mixed race Filipino Americans: Johnny Romero, Sugar Silverio, and Ellen Labrador. The ways in which Cebu is typical of U. S. Filipino literature has bearing upon the exceptional
contexts in which its biracial characters function.\textsuperscript{10} As is common for Filipino/American literature, \textit{Cebu} redirects Asian American literary interest toward the transnational, away from U.S. cultural nationalist interests such as white racism and panethnic coalition. Thus, the question of \textit{Cebu}'s biracial characters' ability to appeal to U.S. Asian American cultural nationalism is somewhat irrelevant. Nonetheless, the novel's portrayals of biracial Asian/Americans corresponds with the common Asian American portrayal of biracials as irreparably stereotyped and woe-begotten.

\textit{Cebu} sits squarely within the tradition of "U.S. Filipino writing" which N. V. M. Gonzalez and Oscar Campomanes describe as "largely diasporic/exilic and postcolonial in case and oriented toward 'Philippine' locales and reference points" (Gonzalez and Campomanes, 77). The title of the novel--\textit{Cebu}, the name of an island in the Philippine archipelago--easily demonstrates the latter point. That the protagonist accompanies his mother's body from the U.S. to Cebu, her home island, indicates the final wishes of a woman who thinks of herself as a waylaid sojourner in the U.S. The novel serves as a vivid example of the postcolonial dimensions of U.S. Filipino culture, particularly in literature, as it glosses U.S. and Spanish imperialistic influences in the Philippines and narrates the horrors of Japanese occupation of the Philippines. The postcolonial status of the Philippines reverberates in all of the novel's action.

Furthermore, with respect to the novel's place in the (Asian) American literary canon, \textit{Cebu} epitomizes the ways in which Filipino American literature stands apart from the Asian American literary canon as it has been defined since the 1980s. Gonzalez and Campomanes write:

U.S. Filipinos have not produced enough best-selling or retrievable bildungsromans and narratives of 'becoming American,' with all the troubled quests that such essentially developmentalist emplotments represent. Indeed, the massing of Asian American literatures as a 'textual coalition' . . . around such
U.S.-centric narrations has worked to delimit the field of Filipino American
literature or the pool for its writers and texts . . . It is as though Filipino writing
needed to exhibit U.S.-specific geographical coordinates or recognizably
‘American’ (immigrant or intergenerational) perspectives in order to be
considered properly Asian American or to belong to the order of texts that this
now conventional category secures.

_Cebu_ does not offer a coming of age story for a lone Filipino American protagonist, iike
Bulosan’s _America is in the Heart_ (1943) which is, by now, firmly within the canon of
Asian American literature, despite the novel’s own distinction from the canon. _Cebu_ does
attempt to reconcile “Filipino” and “American” in what are now conventional terms in
Asian American literature. And the novel’s back-flashes to the Japanese occupation of the
Philippines during World War II jeopardizes the project of pan-Asian coalition in the
United States, because these episodes remind us of the arbitrary and fragile coalescing of
divergent ethnic groups under the heading “Asian American.” _Cebu_ interrogates the
difference between Filipinos in the United States and Filipinos in the Philippines.

The characterization of the _mestizos_ is no exception. Although _Cebu_ suggests that
the geographic location of a _mestizo/o_ evokes different historical parameters, one
similarity persists regardless of location: all Filipino American _mestizas/os_ are
hypersexualized. Within the context of _Cebu_, the American-born and based _mestiza_ and
_mestizo_–Sugar and Johnny–are products of

a lot of mixed marriages that typically involved young immigrant Filipino males
with any available female. Half of Ben’s [the protagonist’s] peers were mixes of
some kind, despite a variety of legal and social bans on interracial sex. This,
according to Teddy [the protagonist’s closest friend] during one of his eighth-
grade flashes of insight, proved that Filipinos were friendly and would poke
anything that moved. [148]
This crass, puerile “insight” bespeaks a general attitude toward sexuality that infiltrates not just Cebu’s historicizing representations of Filipino men in the United States, but all representations of mixed race Filipino/Americans in the text as well.\textsuperscript{11} In contrast, the personal history of Ellen Labrador, a biracial Filipino/Anglo American living in the Philippines, signifies on U.S. imperialism in the Philippines and engages with the tradition of white American (typically military) men’s sexual liaisons with women of color throughout Asia.

One mestiza stands out—Ellen Labrador, the only child of a Filipina and a green-eyed, therefore presumably white, “American (businessman, tourist, soldier, doting parent even for a moment, or one-night stand, [Ellen] never found out)” (98). Ellen is upwardly mobile; she rises from an undisclosed position in a “massage parlor in Quiapo [a neighborhood in Metro Manila]” to personal assistant to one of the most powerful women in Manila (121). However, “the U.S. was her dream . . . Most didn’t make it, but for Ellen . . . the dream was more personal. She was American-made, at least partly, and because she was, she just might succeed” (98).

Although the text problematizes culpability and free will, it is safe to say that Ellen transforms Father Ben Lucero’s crisis of faith into a full-blown lapse of faith. Ben’s is a lapse somewhat incomplete, for he can easily rationalize that sex with Ellen was a matter of the Philippines, a product of the climate and the time. On his first and last trip to the Philippines, Ben, an American-born Filipino, accompanies his mother’s body to her home island of Cebu. While Filipinos are understood as always already mixed (products of Spanish colonialists and indigenous tribes), Ellen is marked as an undesirable mongrel, for she is a product of neocolonialism—the union of a Filipina and an Anglo American soldier—rather than an “acceptable,” or naturalized mixture of Spanish and indigenous Filipinos. A lascivious ex-prostitute, Ellen seduces Ben, the virginal priest, and causes his lapse of faith. As she carries the priest’s love child, she converts to
monogamy, but cannot shake a habitual deceit that eventually causes Ben’s death. Like her mother before her, she reenacts the tragedy of her particular mixed race position, and must remain stranded in the Philippines with her own doomed child, a living symbol of transgressive interracial desire, the repercussions of interracial sex, and the projected tragic narratives of the biracial subject. Ellen personifies the tragic results of neocolonialism, and Anglo American intervention in the Philippines.

“Maybe the World Wasn’t Ready for Him”:

Effacing Asian/Anglo American Men & Chang-rae Lee’s Native Speaker

In Asian American novels, Asian/Anglo American men are scarce. If they are cast, they perform behind the scenes. Amy Tan’s The Hundred Secret Senses, for instance, characterizes several Asian/Anglo American men—Simon Bishop (Hawaiian/Anglo, or properly hapa), and brothers Kevin and Tommy Yee (Chinese and white)—but their stories are dispensable in the text’s central female-centric narrative. In Aimee Liu’s Face, Maibelle’s own trauma as a mixed race woman depends upon her Chinese/Anglo American father’s decision to live as a Chinese American in New York’s Chinatown. Her father’s and her brother’s lives, however, do not take center stage. What representations of Asian/Anglo American men exist, however, sustain a tragic refrain—Simon Bishop is (momentarily) sterile and Maibelle’s father suffers from a kind of post-traumatic stress disorder owing to his photographic witnessing of the atrocities during Japan’s occupation of China. Chang-rae Lee’s Native Speaker—the one text that brings the Asian/Anglo American male center stage, if only for a moment—offers an explanation for why Asian/Anglo American male characters are so rare. Lee suggests that “perhaps the world [isn’t] ready” (120) for a mixed race Asian American man. Native Speaker problematizes the community-building efforts for all its Korean American male characters, thus suggesting that the cultural nationalism of the Asian American panethnic civil rights movement has little room for Korean American men, let alone, Korean/Anglo American
men.

*Native Speaker* cannot imagine how a male Asian/Anglo American can live past the age of seven, which is, Lee tells us, “just around the age when you start really worrying about your kid . . . wish[ing] you could keep him inside the house for the next ten years, buckled up and helmeted” (93). Mitt’s parents, Lelia and Henry Park, however, do not harbor the kind of uneasiness one might have about the safety of a maturing child who will increasingly participate in a world rife with dangers, playing “outside somewhere, sometimes even alone, crossing the streets, scaling rocks, wrestling with dogs, swimming in pits, getting into everything mechanical and combustible and toxic” (93). Nor is parental anxiety a matter, here, of the child’s friends merely being “wild, bad kids, the kind that hold lighted firecrackers until the very last second, or torment the neighborhood animals” (93). Mitt is an unusual child—“some beautiful kid” (22) with a “perfect life” (93). He can traverse literal, odd, “dysfunctional” spaces like the family’s New York warehouse apartment in which no one else, not even the family cat, feels comfortable (21). Furthermore, “his boy’s form [was] so beautifully jumbled and subversive and historic. No one . . . had ever looked like that” (95). In his role as “the truest moment” of his parents’ interracial union, we might understand him as a symbol of the possibilities of interracial harmony (99).

Mitt’s appearance is paramount because it indicates how “Mitt wasn’t,” as his mother says coarsely, “all white or all yellow” (120). His physical affinities with both of his grandfathers signals Mitt’s racial hybridity:

There were certain concordances [between Mitt and his paternal grandfather]. In profile, you saw the same blunt line descend the back of their necks, those high, flat ears, but then little else because Lelia—or maybe her father—had endowed Mitt with that other, potent sprawl of limbs, those round, vigilant eyes, the upturned, ancestral nose. [95-6]
Here, Lee traces Mitt’s masculine legacy, rather than focusing on anything particularly ethnic. Elsewhere, Lee highlights Mitt’s more ethnic features: “round, only half-Korean eyes and reddish highlights in his hair” (65). At their first meeting, neighborhood boys heckle Mitt with a slew of ethnic slurs. The boys’ tauntings seem fairly advanced, for the boys graduate from calling him “chink,” “gook,” and “jap,” (strictly anti-Asian slurs) to recognizing and disparaging his biracial status by using “words like mutt, mongrel, half-breed, banana, twinkie” (96), once they see Mitt playing with his white mother and his Asian father.

Mitt’s biraciality marks the novel’s engagement with the notion of mixed race people as symbols for racial harmony. Mitt’s erasure from the present announces the text’s pessimistic vision of American racial politics. Mitt is smothered and killed at his seventh birthday party by the neighborhood boys who once derided and beat him, and stuffed mud into his mouth. Ridicule, violence, and a gagging of his mouth fail to establish Mitt’s silence. Death alone terminates Mitt’s metaphoric voicing of racial solidarity. Lelia, Mitt’s mother, argues for the element of purpose in Mitt’s death. She does not suggest that the boys had any intent on killing Mitt when they made a dog-pile with Mitt on the bottom; rather, she proclaims that “when your baby dies it’s never an accident. I don’t care if a truck hit him or he crawled out a window or he put a live wire in his mouth, it was not an accident” (120). She gropes for meaning in a conversation with her husband: “Sometimes I think it’s more like some long-turning karma that finally came back for us. Or that we didn’t love each other. We thought our life was good enough. Maybe it’s that Mitt wasn’t all white or all yellow. I go crazy thinking about it. Don’t you? Maybe the world wasn’t ready for him. God. Maybe it’s that he was so damn happy” (120). Larger things are at work in the death of Mitt than the potential violent actions of young ones; what perhaps makes the most sense is Lelia’s thought about the unpreparedness of the world for someone like Mitt that renders him forever childlike,
forever hopeful, forever happy. The eternal is confirmed because of his absence.

As the name “Mitt” suggests to me a wholly American identification, playing on the masculinist trope of America’s so-called favorite pastime (baseball), violence and the current impossibility of the Asian/Anglo American male are likewise portrayed as decidedly American. Mitt’s death is predicated upon the inability of American racial ideology and Asian American liberatory paradigms to make room for the continued happiness and presumed perfection of a male figure so “jumbled and subversive and historic.”

**Gendering Biraciality, Importing Anti-Imperialism: Aimee Liu’s *Face***

In Aimee Liu’s novel *Face*, biraciality never implies a hoped-for racial harmony, not even where *Native Speaker* suggests we might find it—in portraits of Asian/Anglo American men. While *Native Speaker* erases the Asian/Anglo American male rather than subject him to the awful truth about irreparably disharmonious race relations, *Face* presupposes disunity. Each biracial character in *Face* must make sense, on his or her own terms, of what it means to personify racial and cultural accord or discord. Nevertheless, the novel sets up tragic biraciality as a particularly female condition. In addition, despite its exclusively United States setting, the text also connects the wretched feature of biraciality with movements that resisted white imperialistic ventures in Asian countries.

One of *Face’s* Asian/Anglo American men maneuvers with relative ease through potentially contentious racial terrains. The protagonist Maibelle’s brother, Henry, often passes for white, apparently without any complications that passing might entail. Henry is “the only one of [three Asian/Anglo children] who looked like his [white] mother’s child” (Liu 35). When Henry and his best childhood friend, Tommy Wah, discuss a Chinese son’s duty to his family, Tommy sheds a different light on Henry’s racialized physicality, saying “Why you don’t understand about face is because you have no face to lose” (Liu 46). Where face carries dual reference to facial characteristics and Chinese cultural
dignity, Tommy thus comments on both Henry’s white physical and white cultural traits. Owing perhaps to his ability to pass as white, Henry later denies that physical appearances have bearing on one’s political inclination or social standing. When Henry disparages ethnic minority movements, Maibelle tells him that he is “ignoring one fundamental factor”: “Looks! Skin color. Hair. Eyes. Body type. Far as most whites are concerned, Chinese are Chinese—for that matter, any Oriental is Chinese—and blacks are black. No difference where they were born or what language they speak” (Liu 56). Henry disagrees: “That’s bull” (Liu 56). He professes that “life’s too short to waste on an ethnic identity crisis” (Liu 57). Maibelle argues that he can lightly dismiss questions about his ethnicity because his experience has been relatively crisis-free. Maibelle reminds him about his dexterous racial mutating that depends on his current paramour, his pastime, or his location:

But you’re the original chameleon. With Miss Argentina, you’re a Latin lover. With that girl Lina you’re a Slav. In Chinatown, you were the pinball wizard, and if you’d had green hair and purple eyes it wouldn’t have made a dent in your popularity. I always felt shut out because I didn’t look Chinese enough to pass.

[Liu 57]

Henry has the capacity to blend in with his surroundings and has managed his potentially dangerous biraciality without the help of “Movement leaders” whom Henry says claim that “if you’ve got one drop of nonwhite blood you got to consider yourself a mi-nor-i-ty” (Liu 56). He does not deny his habitual ethnic switching and he indicates that he feels Maibelle’s sense of alienation results from what he calls her “wounded-bird” demeanor: “You felt shut out because it’s your nature to feel shut out. Admit it, you didn’t fit in any better in high school or college than you did in Chinatown” (Liu 57). Henry’s characteristic pragmatism delivers him from an “ethnic identity crisis,” and drives him to “fix” himself so that there are no “little Henry Chungs . . . marching around Manhattan”
(Liu 59). Henry thereby marches himself straight into stereotype as a sterile mixed breed which causes Maibelle to announce, “I’m not the only wounded bird” (Liu 59).

The wounded bird metaphor also suits Maibelle and Henry’s sister, Anna or Aneela Prem, as she calls herself. Anna locates in cultish, “fanatical” spirituality a salve for her existential wounds (Liu 37). She subscribes to a “cosmic dress code” and consumes no meat or caffeine (Liu 33). Her spiritual activities manifest change, most notably, on her face: “the improvement in [her] skin is a direct result of diet, helped by the colors [of her clothes]. And frequency of sex, of course” (Liu 33). Upon seeing her family for the first time in several years, she delivers “a well-rehearsed monologue about ‘spiritual awareness,’ ‘articulation of joy,’ ‘knots of negativity,’ and ‘vigilance of conscience’” (Liu 33-4). Most importantly, the unnamed group to which Anna belongs adheres to a process that allows her to escape the confines of time and memory; when prompted by her sister to share a memory of childhood, she declares, “I have been rebirthed. I have died to the past and to the future. As the Dhawan says, I have opened myself to the timeless, eternal present. Memories are irrelevant” (Liu 37).

Maibelle, Henry, and Anna’s Chinese/Anglo American father, Joe Chung, however, believes differently. He responds to Anna: “Sometimes I think [memories are] all that is relevant . . . Too bloody relevant, in fact” (Liu 38). Joe Chung was born and raised in Shanghai. His white American mother anglicized his given name, Chou, to Joseph when she registered him in school. Chinese children would call his mother “white witch” when they would walk outside their Shanghai compound. He went to school with “classmates—sons of wealthy industrialists with long histories of collusion with the Manchus. Brits and Krauts, with a handful of weaker, more malleable French or Italians as support troops” (Liu 89). These classmates beat him, nearly drowned him, and called him “chink bastard” (Liu 89). So vivid and painful are these memories that he clings to them into his old age and relates them to Maibelle in order to prove to her how growing
up in Chinatown is incomparable with his difficulty as the child of a white woman and a Chinese scholar.

Maibelle perceives that her own “madness” must be the result of “some genetic common denominator. Some shared historical virus that had twisted [her family] in small ways and large” (Liu 37); “the strain in [her] family arose from a contest of sorrows” (Liu 91). Maibelle most closely connects with her father from whom she inherits not only racial heritage, but also an aptitude for photography, an attachment to memory, and a nail biting habit. Redheaded, green-eyed Maibelle returns reluctantly to her childhood home, New York’s Chinatown. She collaborates with a former friend on a pictorial history of that racialized space. While she authenticates her claim to Chinatown via her participation in recovering a visual and written narrative of Chinatown, Maibelle’s feelings of perpetual alienation do not subside. Her occupation as an airline stewardess symbolizes her life of flight as she runs from coast to coast, man to man. She has had no contact with her family in years. Moreover, insomnia or recurring nightmares plague her.

Late in the novel, Maibelle recovers a memory of the year her nightmares began, when, only fourteen years old, she begged Anna for help with an unwanted pregnancy. Maibelle pieces together fragments of a horrifying incident that she has repressed for fourteen years; a group of recently-immigrated Chinese boys gang raped her. The boys belong to a group called the Dragonflies, formed by a Chinatown proprietor who planned to “resurrect the Boxers, the antiforeign movement of the last century whose name meant ‘Fists of Righteous Harmony’ and whose mandate was to preserve the dynasty and destroy all foreigners” (Liu 282). As a consequence, imported hatred for whites materializes in the form of sexual violence. Sexual violence cannot be divorced, here, from racial violence, for as the boys rape her, they call attention to her green eyes and curly red hair, situating her as a white female victim. Fourteen years after the rape, Maibelle returns to the scene of the crime—tenement apartments in Chinatown. As she
looks through the camera’s lens, she details what she now recalls: “Rooster hair, they called it. . . They’d brought me up here and stood in a circle around me staring and pointing and yanking my curls. They’d struck matches to prove the green of my eyes” (353). And as they raped her, they called her, in Chinese, “white witch.”

Maibelle “admired . . . most in the world” a group of girls known as the Yellow Butterflies—a less treacherous, female version of the Dragonflies (Liu 1). Ironically, Maibelle’s white features generate her high esteem of the Yellow Butterflies and mark her as a target for their torture. As Maibelle describes her life as “a child in Chinatown,” her admiration takes shape in physical dissimilarity:

I see myself in these memories as a tall, pale, redheaded girl reflected in a storefront window. A narrow face with a broad off-center nose. Too-wide eyes the color of jade and only a vague Oriental cast . . . [In contrast] the Yellow Butterflies . . . had the flawless appearance of porcelain dolls, Pale skin. Flying cheekbones. Diminutive noses. Waist-length hair that hung straight, gleaming like dark cellophane, and those classic almond eyes with their smoothed-down lids, as if carved in a single stroke.

Maibelle wishes to look more Chinese so that she could feel more comfortable in Chinatown. As well, she believes that if she looked more Chinese, she might have a chance at female companionship. True to the form of children depicted in *Native Speaker* and earlier in *Face* with regard to Maibelle’s father, the Yellow Butterflies torment Maibelle on the playground: they were “tittering about [her] height, [her] green eyes. They said [her] hair was like cock feathers” (Liu 2). They ask her if her grandfather is the Jolly Green Giant and if her hairdresser is Chicken Little (Liu 2). If she lacked the safety of her home, she fears they “would come pull [her] hair out strand by strand [and] suck the color from [her] eyes. They would beat [her] with their wings until [she] melted into the pavement” (Liu 2). The Butterflies’ attacks, similar to those of the Dragonflies, focus
on Maibelle’s eyes and hair which signal her difference. If poetic justice were enough, Maibelle might be vindicated: During her college years, Maibelle runs “into one of the Yellow Butterflies selling panty hose at Bloomingdale’s. She’d had her eyes done. Had the lids lifted, folded, and cut until the almond shape was gone and with it her exotic, imperious beauty. Now she looked innocent. Cute. She could pass for American” (3). Maibelle learns that all the Butterflies had plastic surgery, which suggests that their contempt for Maibelle’s difference was more complicated that simple loathing of an other; their racism was tinged with self-contempt.

The Chinese/American community in which Maibelle grows up exhibits a resistance to whiteness that bars, alienates, and tortures Maibelle. Optimistically, Aimee Liu suggests that Maibelle’s “cure for terror lay in photographic alchemy” (Liu 16) in conjunction with a gender-sensitive cultural nationalism. Photography alone cannot release Maibelle from her nightmares; she likens the developing tank with “a martini shaker, except that it is not filled with the elixir of forgetfulness but of memory” (Liu 91). Memories are indeed relevant, but require some substantive co-narrative, which is supplied by her collaborator on the Chinatown project. Maibelle’s collaboration with her brother’s friend, Tommy Wah, on the historical review of Chinatown occasions her return, her photographic endeavors, and her final reconciliation. Notably, since childhood, Tommy has changed his name to Tai. He stands in for a brand of cultural nationalism that coexists and cooperates with feminism and eschews the notion of a common white enemy. While some “thought he’d turn into Chinatown’s Malcolm X . . . he’s opted for Studs Terkel” (Liu 55). The difference between a black-power based Asian American political activism (like the Aiiiiieeee! group’s) and Terkel’s methodical surveying is crucial, for Tai’s sensitivity facilitates Maibelle’s friendship with him. And this friendship offers Maibelle an avenue for resolution and healing.
Fantasies of Racelessness and Apoliticism: Amy Tan’s *The Hundred Secret Senses*

Amy Tan’s *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995) holds the title of most distinct contemporary novel portraying mixed race Asian Americans. All other 1990s novels about biracial Asian Americans cement together biraciality and pathology in keeping with the paradigm of narrating injury in order to construct ethnic identity. *The Hundred Secret Senses*, however, portrays biracial Asian American characters who break from cycles of tragedy: drugs and alcohol are recreational, not addictive nor symptomatic of ruined life; rape, murder, sexual licentiousness, and other paradigmatic narratives of biraciality are non-existent, or are summarily invalidated. Amy Tan’s most recent novel illustrates that when biracial characters are not diagnosed with pathological tendencies, they are yoked with the impossible dream of a raceless and therefore racism-free world. This is by no means a new dream starring the product of miscegenation; rather, it is a burden that biracial people are often forced to shoulder. Typically, however, the dream circumscribes a distant future where the dreamer depends on generations of interracial coupling. *The Hundred Secret Senses* waits just one generation and attempts to erase all signs of ethnic subjectivity, stereotypes of lives marked by tragedy included.

Tan is not bucking stereotypes about biracial Asian Americans; she simply refuses unhappy endings. And in refusing unhappy endings, or narratives of injury, Tan shuns their partner—racial politics. Tan rejects the possibility that literature would do anything like refute stereotypes, engage in racial politics, or have anything to teach its readers. For instance, in an interview with the “Internet media company” *Salon*, Tan claims that there is “a danger in balkanizing literature, as if it should be read as sociology, or politics, or that it should answer questions like, ‘What does *The Hundred Secret Senses* have to teach us about Chinese culture?’” As opposed to treating it as literature—as a story, language, memory.” In this same interview, Tan expresses her belief that the pressure to be categorized as an Asian American writer who has something to teach her readership about
Chinese culture "[is] lessening . . . [and] happening less here partly because people are more aware now of the flaws of political correctness—that literature has to do something to educate people." Tan claims apoliticism, and one suspects that it is this wish for apoliticism that causes Tan to skirt tragic narratives and pathologized characters. Or, to put it more appropriately, Tan pretends, like many well-intentioned liberals, to be "color blind."

Tan’s use of the term "political correctness" signals her defensiveness against Asian American critics who fault her for orientalist representations of Chinese Americans. She is motivated to claim that literature does not refute stereotypes and that she has not deployed her writing to do so, because she is often castigated for pandering to stereotypes of Chinese/American men and women. Although her success has been enabled by the efforts of Asian Americanists and academic feminists, Tan refuses to succumb to the pressure to be responsible to its politicized communities.

Amy Tan’s The Hundred Secret Senses garnered mixed reviews. Fans of fiction that deals with such human traits as love and loyalty generally are pleased with Tan’s latest novel, whereas seekers of complex narratives of social and cultural community relations register disappointment and disbelief. To characterize crudely the split between favorable and condemning reviews, however tempting, as one between white and Asian American reviewers would be too simplistic. Generally speaking, the applause for the novel is boisterous in the non-Asian American press, whereas Asian Americanists add the novel to the list of Amy Tan’s discreditable successes. Tan’s reviewers reveal the investments of Asian American cultural criticism in the creation and management of Asian American cultural identity. These reviews get to the heart of the politics of literary canon building, and the politics of ethnic self-fashioning. To date, all of Tan’s novels have consistently accrued negative impressions from Asian Americanists and Sheng-Mei Ma focuses on Tan’s children’s books. Literary value and popularity are diametrically
opposed. Sentiment is pitted against modernist values of literary accreditation.

Asian Americanists have consistently lambasted Amy Tan’s writing for her tendency to oversentimentalize and exoticize her primary subject—the relationship between Chinese American female mothers and daughters, or, as is the case in *The Hundred Secret Senses*, the relationship between half sisters, one Chinese, the other Chinese/Anglo American. Following this general trend in Asian American cultural criticism, *A Magazine*, Asian America’s slick fashion, culture, and politics rag, seared Tan’s *The Hundred Secret Senses*, branding it the “biggest non-literary event” of 1995 in its short review of all the year’s Asian American books. *A Magazine*’s review does not give any sense of the novel, but rather fictionalizes the emotional impact of the film version of *The Joy Luck Club* on a mother/daughter couple of unspecified ethnic heritage. (The second person address of the paragraph-long review suggests that the reviewer imagines an Asian American duo, given the magazine’s Asian American readership.) The mother and daughter bond over the film, cry by the end, grope for Kleenex, and forget (momentarily) their squabbles over hygiene and what mom heard about public toilets and herpes from Geraldo Rivera. Later, the fictional mother gives her daughter a copy of *The Hundred Secret Senses* with “Love, Mom” penned on the flyleaf. The daughter “swallow[s] the lump in [her] throat and start[s] to read. About ten pages later [she] figures [she’ll] wait for the flick.” *A Magazine* thus dismisses *The Hundred Secret Senses* by appealing to the purportedly debased sentiment of Amy Tan’s oeuvre. Never mind that this is a different book, *A Magazine* intimates, it’s Amy Tan, and therefore, just the same—non-literary sentimental drivel that momentarily bridges contemporary generational gaps. Notably, the same *A Magazine* review favors a panethnic selection of history, memoir, historical fiction, anthropological study, and a theoretically informed anthology; under the heading “Five Books I Would Have Read Even if I Weren’t a Books Editor,” the reviewer lists *Winged Seed: A Remembrance* by Li-Young Lee, *Reef* by

One of two *New York Times Book Review* reviews briefly locates *The Hundred Secret Senses* within the Asian American literary canon, by comparing the novel to Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior: A Girlhood Among Ghosts*. Other reviewers seesaw: Is *The Hundred Secret Senses* universal (i.e. white) or Chinese American?; Is the novel magical realism or naturalism?; Is it popular, easily accessible, or literary? *AsianWeek* claims that the book is both Chinese American spirituality in white face and ethnic literature: “At its worst, *The Hundred Secret Senses* resembles a Chinese American version of something Anglo movie star and rebirth aficionado Shirley MacLaine might have written. At its best, this novel serves as another fine example of the magic realism genre used by such contemporary writers as Isabel Allende.” *Town & Country* monthly regales Tan with the title “preeminent voice of the Chinese American immigrant experience,” but mitigates this particularity by claiming that the novel “strikes universal chords.” Agreeing with *AsianWeek*’s genre description, *The Jerusalem Post* delivers a food-metaphor-spattered review that would make Wittman Ah Sing of Kingston’s *Tripmaster Monkey* go ape: “*The Hundred Secret Senses* cooks up magical realism with MSG flavoring.” Rather than “[sail] through one bestseller after another,” *The Jerusalem Post* continues, Tan “has obviously worked seriously to produce a delightful novel of literary achievement” and “[f]or lovers of Chinese culture [the novel] is a joy.”

There is no “at its worst” in the non-Asian American reviews of *The Hundred Secret Senses*. Reviewers allay imagined readers’ fears that the novel might be “too ethnic.” Appeals to the universal themes of love and loyalty supercede any ethnic
component of the novel. And whatever might be too ethnic about the novel does not foreclose its literary possibilities. Further, *The Hundred Secret Senses*, as *The Jerusalem Post* tells us, is delightful to the admirer of Chinese culture, to the occasional eater of Chinese food, MSG and all.¹⁴

The novel’s use of biracial figures as symbols of a raceless future is part of its success with mainstream America. While weaving the supernatural, historical, and contemporary, and mixing white with Chinese, Amy Tan’s *The Hundred Secret Senses* portrays several biracial characters. Each biracial character embodies different versions of biracial identity: 1) the biracial as symbol for bicultural, hyphenated identity; 2) the biracial as stereotype; 2) the biracial as negotiator between monoraces. These three main, distinct portrayals of biraciality collapse together under the weight of *The Hundred Secret Sense*’s supernatural, reincarnation narratives. In the end, when all bows are tied and characters in previous eras are said to be reincarnated in the modern moment, Tan suggests that race does not matter. Tan takes up biraciality as both symbol of racial and cultural mixture, and in a gesture towards universalism that is so beloved by many of her mainstream readers, Tan wishes to signal, however unconvincingly, the beginning of the end of racial difference and the persistence and transcendentalism of love.

Olivia, the only female child of Louise Kenfield and Jack Yee, symbolizes American hyphenated identity. Her narrative is a familiar one to Asian American literary critics: an Asian American is at first singularly assimilated with white America but then “finds her [Chinese] roots” and finally revels in her bicultural heritage. Olivia’s brothers, Tommy and Kevin, are extras in Tan’s staging of female bonding; Tommy’s and Kenny’s lives are unnarrated and their experiences as biracial men are ancillary to the narrative’s core—the timeless sisterly (and motherly) relationship between Olivia and her half-sister Kwan. As a young girl, Olivia’s only connection to Chinese heritage and culture is her father Jack. However, Olivia proclaims that the Yees are, despite their Chinese last name,
consummately American:

We were a modern American family. We spoke English. Sure, we ate Chinese food, take-out, like everyone else. And we lived in a ranch-style house in Daly City. My father worked for the Government Accounting Office. My mother went to PTA meetings. She had never heard my father talk about Chinese superstitions before; they attended church and bought life insurance instead. [7]

Before Jack dies, he confesses that he has a daughter living in China and he wishes that she be brought to the United States. This confession and its aftermath exposes Olivia to the Chineseness she never knew before.

Olivia is wholly Americanized by the time Kwan arrives from China; she learns about her Chinese roots from Kwan. Kwan serves as a surrogate for both Olivia’s father and mother. Olivia learns Chinese from Kwan. Language acquisition is like osmosis. Olivia expresses no interest in learning Chinese and once she knows it, she senses that it is more like an contagion or a curse than a link to her ethnic heritage:

Kwan would jabber away in Chinese. She kept on talking while I pretended to be asleep. She’d still be yakking when I woke up. That’s how I became the only one in our family who learned Chinese. Kwan infected me with it. I absorbed her language through my pores while I was sleeping. She pushed her Chinese secrets into my brain and changed how I thought about the world. Soon I was even having nightmares in Chinese. [13]

In turn, Olivia teaches Kwan English, but because she is “not an enthusiastic teacher” (13) and because she resents having a sister and having to share her room with someone her fellow classmates call a “retard,” Olivia misinforms her eager student. For instance, pears translate to “barf” in a childish prank (13). As Louise spends more time with girlfriends and exotic men, Olivia resents the absence of motherly love and attention. “In many respects,” Olivia states, Kwan has “been more like a mother to me than my real
one” (23). Kwan launders Olivia’s clothes (even late in life!), cooks her dinner, nags, and arranges for Olivia’s reunion with her estranged husband. As a biracial woman, Olivia’s story is not inherently tragic; her only sustained lament is that her mother did not pay enough attention to her. Olivia barely blinks at the death of her father. While he’s on his death bed, she is selfish, thinking that when her parents want to talk alone, they are discussing her decapitation and flushing of her pet turtles. As with all Amy Tan novels, the heroine is challenged, but, in the end, she is set to live happily ever after.

Like Olivia, her husband Simon Bishop is assimilated to white America, although he is Chinese and Hawaiian. While Simon’s face is “chameleonlike” and switches between various nonwhite ethnicities, one could easily call him American. Olivia immediately connects with Simon, upon their first meeting “in a linguistics class at UC Berkeley” where she “noticed him right away because like [her] he had a name that didn’t fit with his Asian features”; she “had a sense [she] was seeing her male doppelgänger” (74). Tan’s portrayal of Simon is typical of biracial characterization. Unlike Olivia’s, Simon’s biracial story is typically tragic. Simon embodies one of primary stereotyped predictions about the biracial person: that a product of a mixed marriage will be sterile and unproductive, like his or her fauna counterpart, the mule. Olivia and Simon wish to have children, but cannot, because, as they discover, Simon is sterile. But, magically, by the end of the story, Olivia and Simon have a fourteen-month-old baby girl. In characteristic Amy Tan fashion, all’s well that ends well: “We went back to the fertility specialist and he did more tests. Well, what do you know? The earlier tests were wrong. The lab must have made a mistake, switched the charts, because sterility, the doctor said, is not a reversible condition. Simon, he announced, had in fact not been sterile” (398). Medical logistics of infertility aside, it is no coincidence that Simon and Olivia conceive their child on their trip to China. At the moment of conception, Simon is culturally identified as American for when he is in China he ogles exotic Chinese wares and foods
with a tourist’s eye and palate. Sex with Olivia in China involves only love which supercedes race. When he is considered typically biracial, Simon is afflicted with the purported stereotypical condition of infertility, but once in China he proves himself to be nothing more than an American in love.

Another biracial character, Yiban Johnson, is a “one-half man,” a “go-between” (36) who negotiates between the Chinese and whites; he thus embodies the “best of both worlds” theory of biraciality, and switches, depending on context, between Chinese- and white-identified. But his existence in the nineteenth century disproves another theory of biraciality, that the world’s racial dilemmas are curable if only people would have more interracial sex and have more biracial children.

Kwan also encourages Olivia’s visit to China and there reveals Olivia’s past lives. Olivia visits China reluctantly. She realizes that she should go to find out the truth of her father’s name. He is not a Yee. In fact, Jack Yee, is the name of a man whose papers Olivia’s father finds sewn into an overcoat. Olivia’s father uses these papers to immigrate to the United States. Although he intends to bring his first family over to the United States once he settles there, the Chinese cultural revolution prevents him from doing so. Only one person would remember his true name, but by the time Olivia, Kwan and Simon reach Kwan’s village, Big Ma is killed in a freak accident. (Eager to see Kwan, Big Ma takes a bus to the city. Kwan, Simon, and Olivia pass a bus wreck on their way to Changmian where Big Ma lives. Big Ma has died in that accident.) Instead of discovering her true family name, discovering her true roots, Olivia “remembers” that she is the main character in Kwan’s ghost stories. Throughout their childhood, Kwan would tell Olivia about her life in late nineteenth century China where she was close friends with an American missionary, Miss Nelly Banner. While in China, Olivia “remembers” that she was Miss Banner and that she has been connected to Kwan through several reincarnations. (The story of Miss Banner is only one of Olivia’s previous lives.
Apparently, we are to believe that Olivia was once an orphan whom Kwan meets early in Kwan’s life. Kwan and this girl are drowned. Kwan’s spirit enters the body of the drowned girl. And the drowned girl is reincarnated as Olivia.

When Olivia alludes to her conversations with Simon and mentions their agreement that mongrelization is the only long term answer to racism, we get a glimpse of these two biracial people’s roles in the ‘browning of America’ and a brief vision of this hopeful, idealistic wish for a world without racism, indeed a world without race. But, if we take the interracial relationships in the text as any indication, we can predict that the racisms that inform mixed race coupling dictate the continued existence of racism despite biraciality, despite “mongrelization.” Like many in interracial relationships, Louise Kenfield, Olivia’s mother, did not marry a Chinese man, Jack Yee, and the Italian Bob Laguni whom she thought was Mexican, and she did not date a continuing list of “ethnic” men because she does not believe in the fiction of race; indeed, she dates and marries these nonwhite men because she has a fetish for the exotic. As well, the extant racism against biracial people, proves that racial intermixing and the end of racism do not skip gaily along, hand in metaphorical hand. In a text where biraciality stands alternately as the symbol of cultural assimilation, as the lived out story of biracial stereotype, and as the bridge between so-called monoraces, it’s not that race does not matter and will at some point never matter, as Tan would have us all believe. Rather, race is the only matter.

**Testing the Limits of Cultural Nationalism, Searching for New Paradigms:**

**Shawn Wong’s *American Knees***

I think our literature had to go through that period where you get the history down first and then you move on. It’s almost necessary in the sense that you educate an audience to your literary traditions. Once they’re educated, you can go beyond that.

Shawn Wong, interview, *A. Magazine*
Asian American historiography is an interminable project—a fact which mixed race Asian Americans solidify. The histories of mixed race Americans of Asian descent abide among the many as-yet-untold histories of the people of Asian descent in the United States. Narratives that feature mixed race Asian Americans relate histories relevant to the Asian American community that are rarely told in both literature and social history. Asian/Anglo American characters strain the foundation of Asian America’s domestic perspective and thus force us to contend with our own epistemology and historiography.

In an interview with *A. Magazine*, however, Shawn Wong suggests that we can pinpoint Asian American literature’s historiographical moment, located in the past. Now that the historiographical period of Asian American literature is over, Wong continues, it is possible to “go beyond that.” Wong deserves the title of pioneer of Asian American literature for his role in the *Aiieeeee!* anthologies, his novel *Homebase*, and his edition of HarperCollins anthology of Asian American Literature. And it is from this position as Asian American literary pioneer that Wong proclaims an end to Asian American literature as history-telling, a primary concern of Asian American cultural nationalism as espoused by the *Aiieeeee!* collective.

Nevertheless, Wong’s second novel, *American Knees* (1995) fails to disengage from historiography while it attempts to “go beyond.” The mixed race Asian American character in *American Knees* stresses the importance of Asian American history while simultaneously calling for the abandonment—or at the very least, revision—of cultural nationalism. In *American Knees*, Wong sets out to revamp the image of Asian Americans, for, as he states, “judging by the literature, we, as Asian American characters in these novels, seemed to be only interested in recovering history . . . We weren’t having fun, falling in love, going to barbecues or shopping.” Wong proudly proclaims that *American Knees* is a departure from typical Asian American novels for its adherence to the romantic
comedy genre, or, in other words, for its characterization of Asian Americans who have fun, shop, fall in (and out) of love, and attend cocktail parties. Wong jokes that *American Knees* was his effort to offer an Asian American novel that his sister-in-law could read while on vacation, whereas *Homebase* is better suited to the college ethnic studies classroom than the beach. As well, Wong cheekily flaunts his authoring of the first published intraracial Asian American phone sex scene.\(^{15}\) Regardless of the venue in which one reads *American Knees*, its comedic, saucy elements work to thinly veil a serious, albeit oblique, critique of Asian American cultural nationalism. In *American Knees*, Wong suggests that the tenets of early Asian American cultural nationalism fail to offer a liberatory paradigm that is accessible to all people who might call themselves “Asian American.” Chief among *American Knees*’s critiques of cultural nationalism is its wholesale opposition to Anglo America. Furthermore, Wong’s vehicle for the exposure of cultural nationalism’s limits is a mixed race figure—Aurora Crane, a Japanese/Irish American raised in the Midwest.

Aurora does not self-identify as Asian American, but this is not to say that she lacks ethnic or gender consciousness. She is painfully aware of the equally troubling exoticization of her by both Asian American and Anglo American men. She recognizes that her co-workers see her as only Asian when they silently encourage her to socialize with the only other Asian American at a company party. Aurora has a keen sense of herself as a subject of the gaze that cannot figure her out; At their first meeting, Aurora wonders about how Raymond Ding, a Chinese American divorcée, will broach the subject of her mixedness:

When he eventually got around to asking ‘What are you?’ would he be different from any other obnoxious bore? Or would he simply be overly curious but too polite to ask? There would be that slow realization creeping over his face, the ponderings and machinations that nestled in the eyes, the slight squint, as if
squinting could detect racial ancestry. He would ask finally, when she noticed he
was no longer listening to her and merely watching her talk, all the while trying to
decipher and calibrate the skin tone, the shape of the eyes, the color of the hair. [34]
Aurora has encountered many obnoxious bores who refuse to use the possessive pronoun
“her”; Aurora’s skin, eyes and hair are not hers, but disembodied and ideal—“the skin
tone, the shape of the eyes, the color of the hair. Such abusers of grammar, Aurora
believes, deserve the title “truly devious and ignorant” (34).

Raymond proves that he is neither devious nor ignorant. As well, his silence is not
occasioned by politeness, but erudition that is at once arrogant and at other times
endearingly coy. He immediately recognizes Aurora as mixed race: “He knew without
asking that her parents had named her Aurora because of aurora borealis—a child of many
colors. Perhaps her childhood friends teased her and called her ‘A.B.’ for short. She was
looking away from him, bracing herself for questions about her name, but Raymond
posed them to her silently and smiled to himself at the answers” (38). Raymond wonders
to himself, “Was she part Korean or Japanese? . . . Or maybe he was altogether wrong
and she was native Alaskan or Indian or Latino. What a relief that would be” (40). His
silence secures his place in the game of flirting. Because “he did not squint to determine
her ethnicity . . . she did not leave him guessing. Their conversation was complementary.
She offered information, and he filled in the blanks without asking embarrassing
questions . . . Aurora did not have to explain herself or her identity” (42-3). Two days
later, they kiss, appropriately, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, suggesting a new
kind of decidedly American union. In the spirit of Lincoln, Raymond and Aurora will
unite the participants in a civil war—Asian American men and Asian American women.
Realizing that their budding inter-Asian romance is unconventional, Aurora “whispers in
his ear, ‘Public and demonstrative Asian love. A rare sight’” (43). So rare, in fact, that
“one of the little southern white children asked the teacher, ‘Are they making a movie?’”
(43). A week later, when Raymond is back in San Francisco and Aurora’s still in D.C.,
ye initiate phone sex. And then, “Two years later, in San Francisco, they were packing
their separate things and parting” (43). Their flirting, their courtship, and their extended
relationship happens in the space of a few paragraphs.

The details of Aurora and Raymond’s break-up are more juicy and far more telling
about the possible fate of inter-Asian American dating, which is a subterfuge, I would
argue, for serious interethnic, intergender Asian American tensions. Notably, Wong’s
portrait of Aurora is non-tragic. Cultural nationalism is the ill-fated “character” in
American Knees. And it’s thanks to Aurora that cultural nationalism in its Aiieeeeee! form
foreshares the inevitability of its transformation. Wong does not, indeed cannot, abandon
the undertakings of cultural nationalism, particularly its investment in history. In his
telling of the failure of Aurora and Raymond’s relationship in American Knees, Wong
points to 1960s and 70s cultural nationalism as contributive to the demise of 1990s
intraracial Asian American heterosexual love. The novel suggests that the end of Aurora’s
and Raymond’s relationship has as much to do with Aurora’s white parentage than with
any existent Japanese-Chinese hostility.

Working as a director of the Office of Minority Affairs at Jack London College in
Seattle makes Raymond’s interest in race and ethnicity professional and political, so
much so that what is finally characterized as Raymond’s hang-ups about whiteness
interfere with his ability to stabilize a romantic relationship with Aurora:

The first few months [of their relationship] had been like being in a college ethnic
studies class, as they compared notes about being Asian in America and being
biracial. Raymond spoke of the sixties and seventies and ideas like ‘self-
determination’ and ‘multiculturalism,’ which [Aurora] had only heard in school and
never from a lover. In the sixties, Negroes had become blacks, and Raymond had
become ‘Asian American’—without a hyphen. Sometimes he lectured in bed about
institutionalized racism. For him it wasn’t enough that she simply know which box to check on the affirmative action form. She needed to know the exact definitions of race and ethnicity, the history of the struggle, the symbols of institutionalized racism . . . Aurora, who knew all this information in a general way, listened patiently, but all she really wanted to know was how long Raymond’s hair had been and what he had worn when he was at Berkeley. [53-4]

Because Aurora does not exhibit race consciousness in a way that Raymond thinks she should, he preaches: “If you don’t know what questions to ask, you lose your history; when you lose your history, you lose your sense of self” (53). Raymond contemplates whether he had “been so adamant to ‘teach’ her simply because he couldn’t forget that Aurora was half white . . . Was he harboring some guilt for having a half-white girlfriend instead of displaying pride for having a half-Asian girlfriend?” (61). Aurora’s characterization of Raymond’s race consciousness as a legacy of a particular activist past, located at Berkeley, where Raymond would have long, hippie hair invokes the temporal and spatial roots of Asian American cultural nationalism and sets Raymond’s adamance about knowing history as a throwback to old, perhaps untenable race theorization.

Indeed, Aurora’s friends and family recognize that Raymond’s race theories reify white/nonwhite binaries in unproductive ways. As Aurora’s friend Brenda suggests, Raymond’s teachings make Aurora “suspicious of all white people,” (146). As Aurora’s white father suggests, the kind of knowledge that Raymond espouses is akin to the college education that makes Aurora “come home with this ethnic identity crap and jokes about white guys.” To be sure, this notion cannot be understood as merely the manifestation of one white man’s anxieties about ethnic studies, for Brenda Nishitani, Aurora’s friend, berates Raymond for “brainwash[ing Aurora] into having a kind of racial paranoia” (146). Brenda goes further to the heart of the matter when she tells Raymond “There’s no gray area with you . . . Everything has to be black or white or should I say
yellow or white? People have to express their identity all the time” (146).

By the end of the novel, Raymond’s insistence on Aurora’s ethnic consciousness raising has changed as he eases up on his concern for identity politics. If one takes as an allegory Raymond’s various romantic relationships, one might say that the final success of Raymond and Aurora’s relationship bespeaks the easing of cultural nationalism in such a way that allows Raymond to envision a more multifaceted Asian America. To put it very briefly, each of Raymond’s three relationships with Asian/American women tests the viability of a different kind of cross-gender, intra-racial union. At the risk of grossly oversimplifying, each Asian/American woman Raymond is with can be said to symbolize a different kind of Asian American female subjectivity, largely in terms of what they offer Raymond’s sense of ethnic self. In other words, Raymond’s relationships with different kinds of Asian/American women reflect various definitions of Asian American subjectivity. Raymond’s first wife, Darleen, provided Raymond with the opportunity to be “a good Chinese son [with] a Chinese family in which to practice his legendary Chinese filial duty.” Raymond’s relationship with Betty Nguyen points to a difference between American-born and raised Asians and recent immigrants. Aurora brings into relief Raymond’s “hangups” about ethnicity and history to the detriment of intra-racial coupling. Wong seems to be testing out several definitions of Asian American subjectivity, history, and community: Are Asian Americans Asians who have lived in the U.S. for many generations, who call only the U.S. home? Are Asian Americans recent immigrants whose histories and cultures are Asian focused? Are Asian Americans a diverse group of people whose histories cannot be reduced to narratives of a gold spike and internment? Notably, there’s no question about the panethnic feature of Asian America as Darleen is Chinese, Betty is Vietnamese and Aurora is Japanese and white. Raymond and Aurora’s relationship can only flourish once Raymond lets go of his strict rules about racial identity and politics and, perhaps more importantly, once the Asian
American woman has her own firm sense of her ethnic subjectivity. And it is perhaps no mistake that Raymond and Aurora rekindle their romance after Raymond’s father momentarily loses his memory due to a minor aneurysm. Raymond’s father’s primary fear about his memory loss is that he might not be able to recall the smallest of details of his late wife and their life together. Here, history takes a decidedly non-racial turn. The important aspects of history are not classic oppositions between whites and nonwhites or diehard absolutes, but rather cultivated relationships. Raymond and Betty cannot be together, for as Betty says, “I’m an immigrant and my parents are immigrants. We don’t share the same history.” Aurora and Raymond, on the other hand, have a “shared history”—a history of their romance. The softening of Raymond’s ethnic vigilance allows for the union of a kind of biracial subjectivity and ethnopolitics. It is such a union that enables non-tragic biracial subjectivity. Finally, *American Knees* thus presents valuable lessons about the possible means to intra-ethnic coalition, the hazards of categorical, paradigmatic thinking, and the articulation of politicized, racial subjectivity in the absence of injury narratives.
Chapter Three

Experiment for the Cure:

Autobiography, Pathology, & Thaddeus Rutkowski’s Genre-Bending Roughhouse

Since its inception as a recognized field, Asian American literary studies has had a vexed relationship with the label “autobiography.” The well-known gendered culture wars hinged upon the easy slippage between autobiography and fiction. The naming and subsequent interpretation of Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts as “nonfiction autobiography” incited debates about truth, representation, and authenticity of Asian American experience.¹ The “autobiography” brand on The Woman Warrior, to use David Li’s words, “in effect controlled how the work was likely to be experienced.”² The generic categorization encouraged readers to understand The Woman Warrior as the authentic, unequivocal reality of Chinese American women’s experience. Thus, textual validity played an immense role in how the book was interpreted and received. White feminists eagerly embraced the book; some Asian American critics, mistrustful of “white acceptance,” quickly rejected the text.³ Still others critiqued Kingston for her misrepresentation of China and Chinese America.⁴ Frank Chin, Kingston’s most outspoken opponent, has taken particular offense to autobiography, in general, calling it “an exclusively Christian form,”⁵ “a white racist form.”⁶ Autobiography thus has the distinction among cultural nationalists as a sign of assimilation and a reification of white racism, particularly when the supposedly true representation of Asian Americans (men, specifically) corroborates racist ideologies.
Early formulations of this chapter neglected to keep in mind the autobiographical factor of the gendered culture wars. During the initial conceptualizations of this chapter, I sought to explore how Asian/Anglo American writers might wrench themselves out of injury and pathology narratives by writing autobiography, when they thus control representation. Such an interrogation is destabilized by the persuasive postmodern notion that representation is uncontrollable, which forces a change in the phrase “when they . . . control representation” to “if they can control representation.” As well, despite readerly inclinations to read autobiography as strictly factual, autobiography holds ambiguous generic status as both fabrication and fact, fiction and non-fiction. My own earliest suppositions for the therapeutic possibilities of autobiography, in fact, evidence how difficult are the lessons outlined in chapter one of this project, where I argue that the autobiographies of Winnifred and Edith Eaton should be read against the grain, as amalgamations of fiction and fact. Therefore, it’s an all-too-brief ride on the suspicion that self-representation can offer a full-proof strategy to de-pathologize mixed race subjectivity.

Unfortunately, self-representation fails to allow for the circumvention of pathology narratives, due, in part, to the problematics of self-representation and to the seductive qualities of nationalist discourses on race. In the late twentieth century, the genre of U.S. autobiography indeed may be said to necessitate the narration of injury to the point of self-pathologizing. Tragedy is a mainstay of U.S. life-writing, particularly that in which citizenship and civil rights are at stake. Americanization and acceptance by the U.S. in legal and social ways are the only cures to the tragedy that is wrought by differentiation
from American norms.

In chapter two, I argue that Shawn Wong’s *American Knees* demonstrates that a revision of Asian American cultural nationalism facilitates the incorporation of a depathologized mixed race Asian American subject within the now more flexible category of “Asian America(n).” Similarly, it seems, texts that challenge genre convention, resist the terms of cultural nationalism, and subvert certain binaries have more success in articulating biracial identity without resorting to injury narratives. This chapter takes up such a text—Thaddeus Rutkowski’s genre-bending *Roughhouse*. I contend here that, for all its talk of triumph, autobiography is a placebo for the pathologizing narratives of biracial subjectivity. In contrast, *Roughhouse* experiments with genre conventions and question the very terms of autobiographical writing and therefore better approximate successful therapy, if you will.

Before I offer in-depth readings of Rutkowski’s text, it is useful, I think, to survey the roles that first person narration plays in the U.S. popular imagination, ethnic literature in general, and emergent narratives of mixed race Americans in the 1990s. The widespread proliferation of the first person pronoun draws both scorn and appreciation. For better or worse, mixed race Americans are among those most frequently narrating their life stories in the first person.

**Observations on the Phenomenon of Autobiographical Writing in the 1990s**

The final decade of the twentieth century witnessed a flood of autobiographical writing that surged to the top of national bestseller lists. The *New York Times Book Review*, in particular, gave their highest accolades to autobiographies such as Frank
McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* (1999), James McBride's *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother* (1997), and Adeline Yen Mah's *Falling Leaves: The True Story of An Unwanted Chinese Daughter* (1999), thus calibrating and validating the saturation of the American reading public with narratives about the healing properties of Americanization. Written personal narrative thus prevailed within an American imagination already enthralled with the first person pronoun and sensational individualism as seen on television: talk shows from Jerry Springer to Oprah Winfrey; celebrity "news" from *People Magazine* to the *E! Gossip Show* or the same channel's *True Hollywood Story* series; reality television shows, from MTV's long-running *The Real World* and FOX's ever-popular *Cops* to newcomers such as CBS's flop *Big Brother* and its smash-hit *Survivor*, and FOX's over-the-top series *Temptation Island* and *Boot Camp*. Jealousy, adultery, fights (physical and verbal), stories of personal injury that culminate in triumph, drug abuse, issues of body image (and the list goes on) amalgamate into the thematic substances of, dare I say, a national addiction to pain and personal alleviation. Alleviation is a crucial element for it is the matter of eventual freedom from pain, or to put it more appropriately, the matter of triumph that solidifies the first person narration of trials and tribulations as particularly American. One might say that the American imagination has *always* already been enthralled with the personal pronoun. Therefore, the slew of autobiographical narratives in the late twentieth century U.S., a nation of individuals, does not herald a new moment of attention to the self.

U.S. autobiography spreads roots deeply in U.S. literary history, from Benjamin Franklin and his Puritanical discipline, to Walt Whitman and his grandiose, multitude-
embracing self, to those multitudes taking on their own singular, lyrical voices in the late twentieth century in unparalleled numbers. But while mass media pushes the limits of America’s obsession with reality stories, in the literary realm, the spate of first person narrative has been so extensive that book reviewers frequently register a jaded resistance to the genre—a genre in which, as one book reviewer states, “pathologies, of course, are the stock-in-trade.” This statement smacks of a high/low culture split. Book reviewer Adam Begley holds similar thoughts. In his review of Modern American Memoirs, a collection of memoirs edited by Annie Dillard and Cort Conley, Begley writes:

There is nothing new under the sun, but there’s always more. As redundant proof that every life has been lived and every story told, we produce an avalanche of memoirs, all manner of tragedy, triumph and travail. Heart-warming, heart-wrenching, noble, base, boring—whatever its twists and turns, our saga is always already old hat. Tell us it’s nothing special and we’ll write it up anyhow, convinced that our unique sensitivity, our inimitable style, our unprecedented circumstance will make the stale and trite seem fresh as the dew sparkling in the Garden of Eden at the dawn of creation. We are always Adam and Eve, waking to the world and naming it anew.9

Only halfway through the decade, in 1995, Begley exhibits such pomp and sarcasm for life writing. Americans are “headed,” Begley conjectures “for a ‘Me’ millennium,” in which all me’s are alike, no matter how each person seeks distinction from others.10 Notably, Begley’s invocation of the book of Genesis corroborates Frank Chin’s claim that autobiography has particular Christian resonance. While Begley maintains that the “first-
person singular is [the U.S.] national anthem,” his suggestion that the U.S. embrace of autobiographical writing points to a remarkable new kind of future—a “‘Me’ millennium”—approximates a logical fallacy. In other words, if Americans have always clamored around the first-person-singular, how is the twenty-first century so different as to occasion a new title?

Begley’s “Me” millennium goes by another name in novelist, essayist Danzy Senna’s estimation—the “Mulatto Millennium.” One cannot help but believe that titles given to the millennium bear a tinge of scorn—contempt that emerges from a healthy suspicion about commercial trends. For Danzy Senna, the late 1990s explosion of autobiographical writing has particular roots in the multiracial movement which has made bi- and multi-racial people popular, in the worst connotation according to Senna. Senna’s essay, “The Mulatto Millennium” appears in the anthology Half and Half: Writers on Growing up Biracial and Bicultural. Her satiric and unsettling essay breaks from the rest of the collection’s celebratory tone; Senna parodies the multiracial movement that advocates for biracial and multiracial Americans, particularly in the recent successful push to include a multiracial category on the 2000 U.S. census. Senna sees herself as “a black girl with a Wasp mother and a black-Mexican father, and a face that harkens to Andalusia, not Africa” (15). She maintains the designation “black girl” for political power; she “sneered at those byproducts of miscegenation who chose to identify as mixed, not black. [She] thought it wishy-washy, an act of flagrant assimilation, treason, passing even” (15). For a keener sense of the spirit in which Senna writes, allow me to quote the beginning of her essay at length:
Strange to wake up and realize you’re in style. That’s what happened to me just
the other morning. It was the first day of the new millennium and I woke to find
that mulattos had taken over. They were everywhere. Playing golf, running the
airwaves, opening their own restaurants, modeling clothes, starring in musicals
with names like *Show Me the Miscegenation!* The radio played a steady stream of
Lenny Kravitz, Sade, and Mariah Carey. I thought I had died and gone to
Berkeley. But then I realized. According to the racial zodiac, 2000 is the official
Year of the Mulatto. Pure breeds (at least the black ones) are out and hybridity is
in. America loves us in all of our half-caste glory. The president announced on
Friday that beige is to be the official color of the millennium. Major news
magazines announce our arrival as if we were proof of extraterrestrial life. They
claim we’re going to bring about the end of race as we know it.\(^\text{12}\)

To some in the multiracial movement, this vision may sound like a dream come true. This
is only the beginning of Senna’s incisive critique of the multiracial movement, which she
dubs “the Mulatto Nation (just ‘the M. N.’ for those in the know)” (15). “Mulatto fever”
culminates in a parade where participants sing “Kum ba Yah,” chant “Mulattos United,
Take Back the White!” and wear “huge yellow buttons on their lapels that read MAKE
MULATTOS, NOT WAR” (13). Senna continues, arguing that the multiracial movement
is “complete with their own share of extremists”—movement members write “treatise[s] on
biracial superiority, which beg[i]n, ‘Ever wonder why mutts are always smarter than full-
breed dogs?’” and tell Senna’s fictional double “that those who refuse to miscegenate
should be shot” (14-5). For Senna, such taking over the world means a loss of both
political efficacy and a real, clear portrait of the enemy; to her mind, white Americans are unequivocally "the enemy."

For all their extremism and ethnocentrism, the Mulatto Nation, to Senna’s mind, is also an enemy of sorts. An agent of the Mulatto Nation interrogates Senna; she tells the agent "In all this mulatto fever, people seem to have forgotten that racism exists with or without miscegenation. Instead of celebrating a ‘new race,’ . . . can’t we take a look at the ‘new racism’?" (21). Point well taken; perhaps in the effort to centralize mixed race, the multiracial movement advocates not for the abolitionment of race, but the advancement of a new race, keeping all of the same racial ideologies in place. In such an effort, Senna convincingly argues that there is a danger of forgetting to question power structures and new, more subtle, and therefore, to my mind, insidious, forms of racism. Indeed, Senna’s portrait of the multiracial movement offers some persuasive points about the shortcomings of largely ahistorical political movements that seek not to infiltrate and dismantle structures of power, but aim to usurp power for their members.

Senna gauges the temperature of “mulatto fever” in the sociocultural realm as well. She takes on the entertainment industry, effectively “outing” celebrities in identical lists named “Black Folks You May Not Have Known Are Black,” “Black Folks Who May Not Know They Are Black” (19). On both lists appear the following musicians and actors: Mariah Carey, Jennifer Beales, Tom Hanks, Carly Simon, Slash, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Johnny Depp, Michael Jackson, Kevin Bacon, Robin Quivers, Elizabeth Berkeley, Paula Abdul (19). Another list, called “Black Folks You Kinda Wish Weren’t Black” identifies Michael Jackson and Robin Quivers again, and adds Gary Coleman, as well as,
predictably, O. J. Simpson. Senna also demonstrates her witty, angry cynicism in her
creation of a dictionary called “Variations on a Theme of a Mulatto,” in which she
elaborately defines “Standard Mulatto,” “African American,” “Mestizo,” “Cabilasian,”
and coins terms such as “Jewlatto” (Jewish/Black), “Gelatto” (Italian/Black), and
“Fauxlatto” (mulatto impersonator). For a feeling of Senna’s resistance (to put it mildly)
to the multiracial category, allow me to quote her entire definition for her coined term
“Ho-lattoo”: “A female of mixed racial heritage who exploits and is exploited sexually. See
any of Prince’s Girlfriends” (26). Demonstrating how ridiculous she finds the
particularization of racial identity in this way, she suggests, finally, that those, like herself,
who might have been mistaken for any of these categories could be considered “Postlattoo”
(27). Despite her obvious energy for painstaking definition, Senna is ultimately impatient
with elaborate, theoretical explorations of multiraciality, preferring instead to hold fast to a
black/white portrait of the world.

Nevertheless, among Senna’s cultural observations, of particular interest is her
perusal of a parody best-seller list that sets her alter ego “running for home,” “in a fit of
nausea” (15):

I opened to the book review section, at the top of the best-seller list were three
memoirs: *Kimchee and Grits*, by Kyong Washington, *Gefilte Fish and Ham
Hocks*, by Schlomo Jackson, and at the top of the list, and for the third week in a
row, *Burritos and Borscht*, by a cat named Julio Werner. [15]

This moment in Senna’s “The Mulatto Millennium” is ironically her most ethnically diverse
and her least generous as she sends her double running for an appropriate place to vomit.
Senna finds these titles as indigestible as she might the food combinations they propose. She avers, “My experience . . . could never be reduced to cute food analogies” (21). In these made-up titles, Senna envisions the mixed race experience of men—a Korean/Black, a Jewish/Black, and a Mexican/Russian man—and thus diverges from nonfictional best seller lists that are highly populated by women’s autobiographical writing. Senna’s titles mirror the current cultural movement to ethnicize whiteness; White is as ethnic as Black or Asian. Crucially, Senna here indicates both the predominance of autobiography/memoir in the telling of multiracial stories and the public’s eager consumption of such stories.

Movements for civil rights and the emergence of ethnic autobiography go hand-in-hand, as Senna suggests in her creative account. Not only is the general 1990s U.S. sociocultural scene amenable to first-person narratives, but the efflorescence of multiethnic, multicultural, and multiracial autobiography also issues specifically from the co-evolution of quite recent race-related historical watersheds. Only thirty or so years ago, the U.S. was the site of civil rights gains, the development of ethnic literature and ethnic studies, and the abolishment of U.S. anti-miscegenation laws. Beneficiaries of those strides are now coming-of-age and voicing their stories in record numbers.¹⁴

Within the sizeable subset of 1990s autobiographies by ethnic minorities and ethnic whites, mixed race personal narratives total up to an astounding number of autobiographical texts published in the 1990s.¹⁵ Not including anthologized essays, self-published zines, and chapbooks, no less than five mixed race Asian Americans (mostly women) published autobiographical texts between the years 1992 and 2000: Lisa See, *On Gold Mountain: The One-Hundred-Year Odyssey of My Chinese-American Family*
(1995); Patricia Justiniani McReynolds, Almost Americans: A Quest for Dignity (1997); Bruce Edward Hall, Tea That Burns: A Family Memoir of Chinatown (1998); Elizabeth Kim, Ten Thousand Sorrows: The Extraordinary Journey of a Korean War Orphan (2000); Paisley Rekdal, The Night My Mother Met Bruce Lee (2000). Thus the final decade of the twentieth century more than doubled the number of mixed race Asian American autobiographies, adding to the literary history of Asian American writing that begins (in certain literary histories) with Eurasian women writers Winnifred Eaton, Edith Eaton, Kathleen Tamagawa, and Han Suyin. That the Eaton sisters, Tamagawa, and Suyin found autobiography to be a useful form for Asian/Anglo American narrative is compelling, for their stories are borne out of late-nineteenth to mid-twentieth-century cultural, temporal milieus that are not, to say the least, as culturally diverse as the present. This does not necessarily suggest that biraciality finds its comfortable, productive generic home in autobiography. But the fact that these earliest (biracial) Asian American authors chose to write autobiography might speak more tellingly about the late-twentieth-century feminist recovery projects that brought them to light. Such projects privileged, as we see in chapter one of this project, truth-telling, clear anti-racism, and feminist consciousness. As well, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Asian American feminists (like cultural nationalists) endorsed immigration narratives that demonstrated an impulse to “claim” America.

Each of the autobiographies of See, Hall, Kim, and McReynolds contributes to the tradition of immigrant writing—a category that has been privileged in the study of Asian American culture. While Asian American literary studies challenge the very notion of
canonicity, Asian American literature can be said to have its own canon—a group of oft-taught and oft-discussed texts, most of which take up immigration narratives. These texts engage with America’s long-lasting immigrant myth—America is so bountiful and generous that even the most different of immigrants can acquire limitless riches and self-sufficiency, confront any sort of tribulation, and eventually assimilate. Creative critiques of America’s inability to live up to its democratic promise and ideals often take shape as narratives of injury, tragedy, or disenfranchisement from the “American dream.” Asian American women, in particular, level multi-layered critiques against racism as well as white American and Asian-American patriarchy.

Rather than exploring the ways in which the cycle of tragedy and healing threads through the autobiographies and family histories written by See, Hall, Kim, and McReynolds, I look at Thaddeus Rutkowski’s Roughhouse for the ways in which experimentation with form and genre facilitate the depathologization of mixed race identity. Rutkowski engages familiar debates and attempts to disrupt inveterate binaries—biology / social construction, Asian / White. His ability to dismantle dichotomies both results from and contributes to his experimentation with form and different “ways of telling.”

**Thaddeus Rutkowski’s Experiment: Form and Biraciality**

Thaddeus Rutkowski’s *Roughhouse: A Novel in Snapshots* resists generic categorization, even as the text’s subtitle insists on its classification as a novel. This “novel,” however, exhibits more experimental and category-defying qualities, mixing scientific illustrations and narrative “snapshots.” The “novel” label declares its opposition
to the auto/biography category, though the text reads like an autobiography (e.g. the unnamed first-person narrator is Chinese/Anglo American like the author). As is typical of engagement with ethnic literature, readers often search for the autobiographical. In an interview with Bruna Darini in Ten Magazine, Rutkowski responds to the question of "how much of the product is real": "Ultimately, it doesn’t matter. The reading of the work shouldn’t depend on knowing that. The work should be able to stand on its own."  

Reviewers have variously characterized Roughhouse as "seemingly autobiographical," "in-your-face punk realism," and "more akin to an MTV video than a novel."

Roughhouse's experimentation with form also characterizes its representation of race and mixed race. Similar to the dually operative resistance/capitulation of the text’s experiment in form, Rutkowski takes interest in depathologizing mixed race, while simultaneously outlining the many various pathologies of an urban Asian/Anglo American man. Rutkowski seeks to unsettle a simplistic equation of biology and pathology, where biology and genetics shoulder hefty ideological weight, particularly in reference to the interracial family and its (typically pathologized) biracial children. While the written text bears few traces of race and ethnicity, the accompanying hand-drawn illustrations, I argue, pose the question of genetic, racial, and ethnic influence in the development of mixed race identity. Roughhouse’s scientific illustrations of peas reference both Mendelian genetics and the specificity of Asian/Anglo American subjectivity, because Webster defines "pea" as "a variable annual leguminous Eurasian vine . . ." The Eurasian narrator of the text is no stranger to pathology in the forms of insomnia, sexual fetishism and promiscuity, penchant for violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and suicidal tendencies, but Rutkowski
looks to de-link these from genetics, biology, and race. Rutkowski attempts to deracinate
the pathology of mixed race subjectivity, thus breaking from the (racist) notion that
biological make-up (as represented in the illustrations) takes developmental primacy.
Instead, Rutkowski traces, in the written space, the source of pathology to the narrator’s
psychopathic white father. I would argue that the written narrative skims on racial
markings and aims to universalize its characters. In this way, Rutkowski maintains the
consistency of whiteness as the universally unmarked, which stands in contrast to the
illustrations which racially mark and specify the text. To call critical attention to both the
white(ned) textual narrative with the nonwhite racialized illustrations, then, is to read of
the interplay of races, of biraciality. In detailed scientific illustrations of garden peas,
Rutkowski invokes the scientific method, genetics, a discourse of mixed race, and a
metaphor of affiliation—all of which relate to racism and predetermined mixed race
pathology—to violently focus and un-focus them in the novel’s successive textual
“snapshots.”

The novel deploys the “snapshots” metaphor to indicate a key ambivalence in the
written narrative: a wavering between moral indifference and aesthetic scrutiny. First,
there is little in the text that condemns or even comments on the substance of each
sensational snapshot—they are just pictures, scenes without explanation. One might
imagine an intimate showing of the snapshots with some alternately humorous,
embarrassed, humiliated, or outraged explanatory narrative. Such qualifications, however,
do not appear in the text. Instead of any lengthy excursus on the psychological states of
the narrator, the text is spare, observational, even indifferent to issues as potentially
shocking and horrifying as child pornography and physical sexual abuse of children; and characters as violent as a drunken gun-toting veteran on the rampage at a local bar; and children who invent elaborate, torturous "games" involving suffocation, pyromania, and bondage. The multivalent title, Roughhouse—"roughhouse," innocent, tumbling child's play or "rough house," brutal family/home life—exemplifies the text's vacillation between normalizing or arresting aberrance. A reader's potential shock is unshared with the mostly deadpan narrator. Witness, moreover, the prototypical dearth of commentary in the following remarkable scene:

Even though he had not slept with her for years, my father asked my mother if she would have another child with him. "I want to bring the child up right this time," he said. When she refused, he started to drink. During his binge, he explained how he had raised his existing children wrong. "My daughter," he said, "is a nymphomaniac, my older son is a sissy, and my younger son is an idiot." He began to spend time with a boy who lived nearby . . . My father decided to keep the boy. The boy's parents objected, but the boy declared in court that he wanted a new guardian. His father, he said, lived too far away, and his mother spent too much time entertaining truck drivers for money . . . When my mother lost patience with this arrangement, she moved to a bedbug-infested room in the town where she worked. No one believed she had bedbugs until she trapped a tiny, red specimen in a plastic bag and showed it to her landlord . . . My brother and sister and I, meanwhile, had moved to distant cities. There, we polished our skills in promiscuity, delicacy, and idiocy. [71-2]
Parental rejection, alcoholism, and marked poverty are as mundane and commonplace as a linoleum floor. Labels of degeneracy are reappropriated with sarcasm, without a glimmer of a writerly smirk. In photography, however, judgement abounds and all kinds of choices are made, for instance, in point of view, framing, and focusing. In Roughhouse, meaning resides within in the juxtaposition of scenes, the interstices of the narrative “photographs,” in the literal ellipses that appear between each scene, or “snapshot.” To extend the photographic metaphor, meaning does not reside in each snapshot so much as it is produced in the collection and arrangement of narrative “photographs.” This is particularly true of the juxtaposition of scientific illustrations and written narrative, to which I will now turn in detail.

**Genetic Experimentation, Racial (Un)Marking**

A mere one inch by one-eighth of an inch in area, a black and white technical illustration of a pea pod prefaces Roughhouse. Perhaps originally a drawing in a now-obsolete biology textbook, the pea pod stands on end, vertical, erect. At one end of the pod, a flawless cross-section reveals three tiny, perfectly round, equidistantly spaced peas. One or two more peas nestle in the other half of the pod, hidden from view. The number “11” floats halfway up the right side of the drawing, referring the reader to explanatory text that does not accompany the illustration here. The drawing evokes the phrase “peas in a pod” and thus intimates similarity, comradery. The biological exactitude of the drawing makes oblique reference to monk Gregor Johann Mendel’s famous experiments with peas. To flesh out a theory of genetics, Mendel meticulously categorized, cross-bred, and analyzed garden peas. Mendel earned the title “father of genetics” for his patience,
accuracy, and successful mapping of dominant and recessive traits in ordinary garden peas.

Immediately following the pea pod illustration, the opening textual “snapshot,” titled “Safety First,” professes the non-accidental feature of the never-named narrator’s birth. The first line of the text, “I was not a condom baby”—a negative formulation of “I was planned”—dates the text in the 1980s and 1990s and thus speaks to a moment when safe sex warnings and dialogues on unwanted pregnancies abound in national conversations (1). The security of this sex challenges the racist imagination that would contemn interracial sex. Although Orientalist fantasy fetishizes sexual relations between a Chinese woman and a White man as acceptable in its perversity, the fact that these relations are interracial confirms their aberrance, particularly when sex is procreative and not merely recreational. The narrator elaborates:

   The people who became my parents did not use latex, at least as far as I know.
   Instead, they used a thermometer to measure my mother-to-be’s basal temperature. When her metabolism was slow, they would have sex. When her body heat rose, they would also have sex. When it came to conceiving me, I believe, their parenthood was planned. [1]

Like Mendel’s experiments, this genetic manipulation proceeds with purpose and precision. Desire and labor combine to produce the mixed race subject. His parents voice no qualms about bearing a mixed race child. The narrator does not imply a reason to believe they should. Race is not a factor in the narration of this coupling, for Rutkowski postpones the racial/ethnic marking of his characters for another twenty or so pages, and even then, he merely indicates that the narrator’s mother and father do not share the same
first language (22). In fact, the only suggestion we have that this is a racialized moment is the juxtaposition of the (deracialized) sex scene with the (genetic, racial) pea pod illustration.

Programmatic, clinical sex results in another child, the narrator’s sister. In the end, however, the narrator admits to his parents’ failure to adhere to a scientific method of family planning:

My brother, however, was born accidentally. But his start probably wasn’t the result of faulty condom action. Most likely, it was caused by mindless thermal breakdown. My mother might have been holding the mercury tip to a light bulb or an ice cube and fooling my father into fooling around. Soon after that, my parents discovered abstinence. [2]

Human, thermal passion enters the cold, scientific equation and the researchers summarily end their experiment and instead practice abstinence. Nevertheless, safety prevails in all respects. Such safety refers to the avoidance of sex and its biological hazards. The deracination of the scene bypasses beleaguerment over the potential sociocultural risks of creating mixed race subjects in a racist world.

While the pea pod drawing opens the section of the text that describes the narrator’s birth, childhood, and adolescence, a second drawing marks the narrator’s departure from home, and a third drawing tags the narrator’s momentary return to home. Each illustration features the same etched precision. The second illustration portrays a plant with three sets of two leaves, two sets pointing in opposite directions, delineating the points of a compass. The third set of leaves wilt downwards from the top of the plant.
Clearly, the plant has been cut; pea pods and perhaps other leaves have been removed with Mendelian accuracy. The non-similarity of the peas in the pod of the first drawing occasions their removal from the plant. Off they go to participate in their own experiments, again, to “polish their skills in promiscuity, delicacy, and idiocy,” as the line preceding this second illustration reads.

The third illustration represents the sub-terra roots of the plant and signifies the text’s final, if momentary, success in deracializing pathology and trauma. The root system lacks the plant it supports; the leaves, stems, and peas have been meticulously pruned. The roots point downwards as if the sustenance they seek exists well below the surface. Nestled between a series of “snapshots” under the title “Morphing” and another series titled “Visiting Rites,” the root illustration marks the narrator’s maturation and his ability to now return home following his father’s death. It is here that the genetic and racial overtones of the illustrations collapse into a universal, deracinated narrative of family. In other words, the root illustration does not necessarily point to a racialized dynamic. Its genetic component—the peas—have long been gone. In the closing snapshots, the narrator searches for his own difference from his white father, thus emphasizing the role his father takes in his pathologization, over and against any racial explanation. As well, the narrator attempts to reconnect with his suicidal, abandoned brother and his wounded, sexually abused sister. That we get brief portraits of his siblings’ pathologization in these concluding moments that revolve around the literal and metaphoric death of the father, points to the prioritizing of the white father’s negative influence over a racial explanation for the pathology of mixed race. The narrator finds self-resolution not in an examination of
the racial dynamism of his psychotrauma, but in his and his siblings’ relationship with their father. Finally, the narrator asks his girlfriend, “Am I like my father?” She replies, “You think about things differently . . . Sometimes you wake up happy” (163).

As the narrator here blames only his father for the terror and psychopathology wrought on the lives of these mixed race children, biraciality unhinges from the equation. In this regard, I would say that Rutkowski successfully disjoins biraciality and tragedy, trauma, and pathology. But, in the end, there is no such easy, complete break in *Roughhouse*. Whether or not one accepts that the text is deracialized, it is crucial to note that sibling/parental relations (that with which the written narrative is preoccupied) are nonetheless genetic, even racial. The interplay of racialized illustrations and deracinated written narrative combine in the production of the mixed race subject who, like it or not, suffers and is as pathologically marked as most other fictional Asian/Anglo Americans of the 1990s.

*Roughhouse* is nevertheless useful for imagining a means to depathologization of mixed race. The possible means, *Roughhouse* suggests, are decisive breaks with paradigmatic ways of telling, banal discourses of race and racialization. Despite its radical experimentation with form, *Roughhouse* is unable to resolutely depathologize mixed race subjectivity. Where *Roughhouse* malfunctions, Paisley Rekdal’s collection of autobiographical essays, *The Night My Mother Met Bruce Lee*, rings in a new day of ethnic storytelling as it questions the role of injury narratives in the articulation of the ethnic subject.
Chapter Four

Questioning the “Rules of Multicultural Mythology”:

Paisley Rekdal’s The Night My Mother Met Bruce Lee

Paisley Rekdal’s The Night My Mother Met Bruce Lee: Observations on Not Fitting In addresses core preoccupations of both Asian American cultural nationalism and Asian American feminism: decidedly U.S.-based identity and historiography, panethnicity, gendered subjectivity, anti-racism. Concurrently, Rekdal explores both her Norwegian and Chinese backgrounds, in contrast to how she might capitulate to the anti-white discourses and injury paradigms of Asian American feminism and cultural nationalism in the formation of a politicized, racialized subjectivity. Rekdal gives perennial debates (namely nonwhite/white, biology/social construction, and immigration/diaspora) formal, elaborate burials and offers a refreshing way of detailing ethnic subjectivity, without resorting to narratives of injury, without manufacturing and reifying easy oppositions, and by questioning the very way in which ethnic stories are told and re-told. In what New York Times Book Reviewer Ann Marlowe calls “contradiction-embracing essays,” Rekdal nods to Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior, for Rekdal too has “learned to make [her] mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes.” Like Rutkowski’s Roughhouse (and Kingston’s The Woman Warrior), Rekdal’s text disobeys rules of generic categorization; The Night My Mother Met Bruce Lee is at once travel narrative, poetry, expository essay, autobiography, and memoir. The subtitle’s reference to observations is deceptive, for these essays are not anthropological and scientific in an
uncompromisingly objective manner. Rekdal observes the way the narrator of *Roughhouse* observes. But she doesn’t merely narrate “snapshots” in a way a distant observer might. She interrogates truth claims and the notion of objectivity. Rekdal’s crowning distinction from Rutkowski resides in this kind of interrogation—in her conscious deliberation of and clear deviation from classic “ways of telling” ethnic stories, primarily due to their uncritical belief in Truth. She also turns from classic ways of telling, because they draw up unfair, false lines of competition between whites and nonwhites.

The sassy cover of *The Night My Mother Met Bruce Lee* exhibits a late-twentieth-century contemporaneity and Generation X sensibility that are crucial to the text’s variation from paradigmatic ethnic-story-telling that is dependent upon identity politics and civil rights discourses. The “contradiction-embracing” cover demonstrates the publishing industry’s marketing of competing but co-dependent Orientalist fantasy and anti-Orientalist irony.² The text’s title and cover capitalize on the late 1990s surge of U.S. mainstream fascination with Hong Kong(-inspired), martial arts, action films. Centered on a pink background, a cartoon woman wears a blood-red *cheongsam* with a slit that is open to the top of her muscular thigh, stands tall, and surprisingly firmly, on black pumps, stares straight at the viewer, and sports, of all things, huge, red boxing gloves. Her long, black, center-parted hair is plaited to each side of her head, and tied with girlish rubber bands with two green balls that hold the ends together. She’s a subversive riot grrrl. She’s ready for a fight. She’s ready for a romp in the proverbial hay. She’s a child, playing dress-up with her father’s sports equipment and her mom’s Halloween costume. She’s all Orientalist stereotypes of Asian women rolled into one. The cover’s border, a golden
frame of sunset-colored Oriental flora, serves as the ground for a traditionally-dressed martial arts master to practice his various kung fu poses. This cover intimates an intra-racial, inter-gender fight; it multiples and miniaturizes its male figure and fetishizes, centralizes, and makes giant its female figure. The cover, a jumble of signs, seduces, repulses, subverts, validates, and exhibits power and powerlessness. I call attention to the cover in this way for a number of reasons: 1) to describe the visual matter that might elicit, alternately, a solo yawp of approval for its subversion of Orientalism or a collective chant of protest for its reification of Orientalism; 2) to unpack, ever so briefly, the text’s generational and historical contexts; and 3) to call attention to how the text exhibits its participation in a number of discourses and its non-dualistic inclinations from the very beginning of one’s experience with it.

The vignette from which the collection’s title is drawn frames the text in the tradition of the most-popularized kinds of Asian American women’s writing—“stories my (grand)mother told me”—but the tale is miniaturized like its cover: representative (many, teeny martial artists) in comparison with the rest of the volume in which Rekdal voices a suspicion of her mother’s stories. “The Night My Mother Met Bruce Lee” details the discrimination Rekdal’s mother faced when her race, working-class status, and college aspirations were read as incompatible. On this particular night at Diamond Chan’s Chinese restaurant in Seattle, Rekdal’s mother, at “age sixteen . . . loads up red tubs of noodles, teacups chipped and white-gray as teeth, rice clumps that glue themselves to the plastic tub sides or dissolve and turn papery in the weak tea sloshing around the bottom” (3). That Rekdal’s mother works in a Chinese restaurant does not solidify the fact that she is
Chinese/American. Breaking from stereotype, Diamond Chan’s is not a family restaurant, per se, although “most of her cousins work [there] after school and during summer vacations, some of her friends, too” (3). Chinese tradition, however, does make familial relations out of people in proximity: “A couple of my mother’s cousins are washing dishes . . . and some woman called Auntie #2 (at her age, everyone is Auntie and each must take a number) takes orders” (3). Rekdal’s mother’s negative exchange with a school guidance counselor reveals her race. As she clears tables at the restaurant, she replays in her mind a recent offensive conversation with the counselor. Rekdal narrates the flashback:

“Smith is . . . expensive,” the school counselor told my mother only yesterday, which is why my mother is slightly irritated now, clomping around under the weight of full tubs of used dishes. “Smith is not for girls like you.” What does she plan to be when she grows up? “A doctor?” my mother suggests. Um, no. “Nursing. Or teaching, perhaps, which is even more practical. Don’t you think?”

My mother, who is practical above all things, agreed. [4, ellipses original]

At first, her mother takes this as a comment on her working-class status, for as she remembers another day at work, she repeats the counselor’s words as if they were gospel; “Smith is not for girls like her”—girls who neglect “to fully tighten the lid” of soy sauce vials, girls who pick up the unconsumed food and drinks of restaurant-goers (4). In the end, Rekdal’s mother realizes that “girls like her” are “girls” who, like a “black, sweet-smelling pool” of soy sauce on a “white tablecloth,” would stain the white purity of an ivy league college like Smith (4). Her final thought on the matter expresses an outrage for the counselor’s implicit racism and class-bias, for the counselor’s definition of “girls like her”
as young women who are not white:

It is not, [Rekdal's] mother would argue, the fact she could be denied the dream of Smith so much that someone should *tell* her she could be denied it. [Rekdal's] mother knows the counselor was hinting at some limitation [her] mother would prefer to ignore. Still, she is whiter than white, should intelligence be considered a pale attribute. Deep down she understands she has a special capacity for work; she likes it, she's good at it, she excels at school and its predictable problems. Hers is a discipline entirely lacking in the spirits of whatever *loh fan* may sneer or wonder at her in study hall; to be told by a fat, dyed-blond guidance counselor she may be inferior? The monkey calling the man animal. [4-5]

Work is not the category that keeps her out of Smith. Rekdal's mother revels in her capacity to work, whether it be in study hall or at Diamond Chan's. The sticking point is that she is marked by a "limitation" that white authority figures might "sneer or wonder at"—a *racial* limitation that she wishes to ignore if only because she believes it does not describe her.

After all, she is nothing like the "newcomer" at the restaurant who "talks like he's got marbles piled in his mouth" (5). The unnamed newcomer asserts "I come from Hong Kong" . . . "From *real* Chinese." Is there a substitute? He leers at Suzy, waves his hand dismissively over the carved dragon beams, the waitresses gossiping in English. He's two years older than [Rekdal's] mother, lean, high-cheekboned, shaggy-headed. He has big plans for himself. He likes to whip his arms and legs around in the kitchen, threaten the other busboy. Already he's
dropped a dish, insulted the cook, cut his thumb on a knife blade. He smells funny.

[5]

No one at the restaurant likes him, particularly for his foreignness as exhibited in his
“funny” odor, his arm- and leg-whipping, and his imperfect English. They call him names
like “Mr. B. O. Jangles” and “Kung Fooey” (5). Auntie #2 states, ironically, in broken
English: “What the hell the matter with him? . . . I never seen nobody act like that before”
(5). They assert their distinction from his foreignness. Rekdal’s mother locates her
American identity, her belonging to America, and her surprise at her disenfranchisement
from an American dream in her marked difference from this recent immigrant. This
articulation of affinity with America by way of distinguishing herself from the recent
immigrant is reminiscent of Wittman Ah Sing’s walk through Golden Gate park in the
opening chapter of Tripmaster Monkey where he sees and dissociates himself from
Uncool.” They wear “F.O.B. fashions–highwaters or puddlecuffs,” and “smelled of
mothballs–F.O.B. perfume.”

Just as Wittman implicitly recognizes, Rekdal understands that her mother’s
disenfranchisement results from the racist conflation of her mother’s Chinese
Americanness with the immigrant’s foreignness:

She stacks more dishes in her tub. From the kitchen comes a high-pitched human
squawk and the sound of something clattering to the floor. He’s going to get fired
soon and my mother is never going to Smith. A waitress scurries out of the
kitchen, bearing more food, a panicked look on her face. My mother stands and
watches the kitchen door swing in place behind her. Back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. [5]

While doors, oceans, and years of assimilation may separate Rekdal’s mother and this recent immigrant, the flapping of the door, back and forth, back and forth, signifies the way in which distinction and hyphens are made permeable, passable, and incomplete in the racist imagination. Rekdal’s mother here evidences the way in which Asian Americans are “forever foreign” and exercises, at the expense of the recent immigrant, her resistance to such stereotyping. His incompetence, imminent unemployment, foreignness and unlikeability are part of the same equation that keeps her out of Smith. To be sure, the soon-to-be-fired man, insists upon their difference as well: he disdains the Orientalia of the restaurant (“waves his hand dismissively over the carved dragon beams”) and makes clear that he comes “from real Chinese”—a distinction that Rekdal’s mother (or Rekdal), despite her desire to be seen as culturally more American than he, questions (“Is there a substitute?”). Her will to distinguish herself from this recent immigrant is thwarted by the racist mind that cannot tell them apart. Her othering of this recent immigrant also marks her unwitting complicity with such racism.

Rekdal will articulate her own (Asian) American subjectivity differently, while mindful of how her ethnic subjectivity also pivots on her Norwegian American heritage. Rekdal’s Asian American subjectivity will not depend upon a capitulation to racism. Many years after this evening at Diamond Chan’s, Rekdal and her mother watch Enter the Dragon on television. Rekdal’s mother tells her daughter that she once knew this now-famous kung fu master, the film star now known as Bruce Lee: “I knew him . . . I worked
with him in a restaurant when I was in high school” (6). In a moment when Bruce Lee is current and hip, when “all the boys on the block bought numchucks” and have the movie poster taped to their walls, Rekdal labels this proximity to fame “officially the only cool thing about” her mother (6). Rekdal’s mother reveals very little about Bruce Lee; when Rekdal asks what he was like, her mother responds: “I don’t remember. No one liked him, though. All that kung fu stuff; it looked ridiculous. Like a parody” (6). As they watch the film, Rekdal’s mother’s “broad face twists into an expression [Rekdal] do[es] not recognize” (6). The undescribed expression speaks volumes about what Rekdal’s mother does not tell her daughter and perhaps registers her remembrance of that evening at Diamond Chan’s when she wished her own Chineseness were not so much like Bruce Lee’s, when she sought an American identity that depended upon a disaffiliation with recent immigrants who “smell funny,” are hopelessly klutzy and lack a command over the English language. Rekdal understands that her mother and Bruce Lee, while culturally separate, are always similarly interpreted by the racist gaze. Her mother’s appearance will always color her encounters with others:

My mother, because of her round and slightly sallow face, her dark hair and eyes, would always be perceived as Asian first. Regardless of her fluency in English, my mother’s appearance allows her to be categorized, her experience isolated from that of white America, to be discriminated against in the worst situations. [19]

Rekdal argues (like many before her) that phenotype determines her mother’s social position regardless of her cultural affiliation.

Appearance plays as large a role in the racial formation of a biracial woman like
Rekdal, although the process and results are markedly different. With regard to herself, Rekdal directly states:

Appearance is the deciding fact of one’s ethnicity, I understand; how I look to the majority of people determines how I should behave and what I should accept to be my primary culture. This is not simply a reaction white America has to race. If for the past several years I have become a part of white America it is because it has embraced me so fully, because it is everywhere, because it is comfortable to disappear into, and because the Chinese would not recognize me on sight. Any struggle to assert myself as more than what I seem to be is exhausting. A choice, I realized, either could be made by me or asserted for me. [15]

This quotation suggests quite plainly that race (biology, blood, essentialism) and ethnicity (culture, social construction, anti-essentialism) are inextricably wedded, whereas the discrimination that Rekdal’s mother faces differentiates race from ethnicity. Rekdal here implies that she feels more affinity with white America than she does with Chinese America. She would not be recognized by Chinese (as Chinese). The same also holds true, she intimates, of white Americans. Her facial features allow her to comfortably “disappear into” white America. How this translates into an “embrace” is untold, but it should be obvious that she feels no such warm acceptance by Chinese America. Importantly, Rekdal is clear that nonwhite America and white America share this view of race and ethnicity. Rekdal does not call this discrimination, but does call attention to how Americans of all ethnic persuasions lend their voice to a set of dicta about how she “should behave” and which ethnicity she “should accept as her primary culture” (15). Rekdal is likewise
unambiguous about the fact that she wishes to expend little psychic energy in a "struggle to assert [her]self as more than what [she] seem[s] to be," which is to say, one assumes, that her absorption into white America is not necessarily an act of deliberate passing. She has not asserted a choice, necessarily, while others have done so for her. How ironic that Rekdal allows for the possibility of others' asserting a choice "for her," choice being a term that usually only applies to one's own actions. Regardless of Rekdal's own feelings about how she has not "passed" into white America, her supposedly unequivocal absorption into white America has been read by others as an act of treachery--of betrayal infused with shame.

An interview with her alma mater's newspaper intimates that Rekdal attributes the writing of her text to a woman who accused her of being ashamed of her Chinese mother: "Actually, the book would not have been written had I not gone to the University of Michigan," explains Paisley Rekdal, who is surprisingly grateful to a fellow graduate student who accused her of being ashamed she was Chinese American. In the space of the text, Rekdal does not give her "accuser" as much credit as the article suggests. She writes:

One day, before my mother and I bought tickets to Taiwan, I learned of a disturbing rumor at my college. Several members of the English department felt that the prevailing tone of the university was elitist; people had begun to band in camps of friends that somewhat depended on race and racial sympathies. When I arrived as a student I was not aware of the friction, nor was I close friends with any of the other mixed students in my department, of whom there were only three,
at the time. One evening a biracial Latina woman invited me to a dinner party which I could not attend because I was ill. Then I learned of the theory circulating about my absence that night: I was ashamed of being half Chinese. [18]

Where she does not speak resistance to the accusation, Rekdal allows poetics to speak for her; she juxtaposes the accusation with counter-narratives that suggest how ridiculous she believes the accusation to be. She is proud of her Chinese heritage, but explaining that is not the path she takes to refute the claim. She might have easily launched into a discussion of how internalized racism seeks a victim from the margins. Or she might have called attention to how the accusation is based on such flimsy evidence—her non-attendance. The account is couched between a discussion of her and her mother’s planned trip to Taipei and a description of her soon-to-be-ended relationship with her fetishistic, Orientalist Irish boyfriend. Rekdal remains neutral and even-toned. At the same time that she asserts her feminist, anti-racist politics and her close relationship with her Chinese American mother, Rekdal mentions, ever so briefly, that her excusable absence from a departmental get-together sparked rumors and accusations of shame and, by extension, betrayal. Outrage at the accusation (“What a load of trash” [19]) is voiced by the same man who drunkenly tells Rekdal “You really should wear your hair back more... You look like a little China doll like that” (20). Rekdal does not raise her voice in opposition to her boyfriend. Rather, her body speaks for her: “When his smell grew too much to stand I sat up violently in bed, pushing him away” (20). Rekdal and her boyfriend split, but not because she violently, suddenly breaks up with his racist self. They easily go their separate ways. In this way, Rekdal subtly disassociates from white racism (of which she has been accused) and
exhibits her affection for her Chinese mother. The subtlety of the moment tempers what might be read as Rekdal’s conflation of whiteness with racism. Narrated actions, like juxtapositions, speak louder than words.

These moments characterize Rekdal’s refusal to participate in well-worn, hopelessly dualistic arguments about race, authenticity, loyalty, and betrayal. She clearly refuses to rehash haggard debates. I now turn to a short episode of the text which, I argue, exemplifies Rekdal’s racial politics. Color-blindness is not an option. Here, complex awareness and deliberate non-engagement—a different brand of civil disobedience and passive resistance—stock Rekdal’s anti-racist, anti-sexist arsenal.

The Trials of Biology and Nationalism

In a three-page long essay titled simply “Biology,” Rekdal renders a skirmish with a bully. The brevity of the scene and the simplicity of the essay’s title belie the profundity of Rekdal’s commentary. More than a mere run-in with racism, more than the name of a high school class, the episode explores the dynamic interrelationship of biology, racism, and nationalism. The precise details of the scene are as hazy in Rekdal’s memory as the sky that day as evidenced in Rekdal’s frequent use of questions (e.g. “Has it been raining?”) and her repetition of ambiguous words such as “someone” and “something” (179). Such scattered imprecision brings into sharp focus the solid, striking details that Rekdal supplies. At the same time, Rekdal suggests by the opening line of the essay—“Today it’s high school”—that this day is just like any other day, any other encounter with racism (179). In an unsupervised biology classroom furnished with “desks [that] have been arranged in little helixes of four, a ring of science tables lacing the edges of the dim
classroom...the white blinds squint shut, the fluorescent lights flicker behind their metal grating, a filthy American flag furls in the breeze of someone's throwing something at a friend" (179). The nation's sullied stars and stripes testify to violence, or at least unruliness, as the flag stirs in the wake of an unidentified flying object. The flag gathers filth from neglect and the violence that it attests to, which perhaps conjures a vision of the haggard, yet proud star-spangled banner waving over the Baltimore battlefield in 1814 that inspired Francis Scott Key to pen what would later become the U.S.'s national anthem. "Friend" is an ironic choice of words, rather than a mere a sign of Rekdal's honor to an ambivalence about whether the object thrown was as harmless as a piece of paper or as harmful as a piece of glass. After all, a friend, by definition, even by high school standards, would not throw something at a friend; if a friend were to taken to throwing objects, said friend would likely throw something to a friend. Regardless, Rekdal's furling flag suggests that the patriotism of this classroom's setting oversees disruption.

This same reverence for national culture and politics also underwrites the biological, genetic trope of this vignette. Genetics surface in the phrasing similarities between DNA's double helix architecture and the classroom's "little helixes" of desks. Paisley "slump[s] over a box or a beaker of something that won't work...something potentially genetic" (179). One suspects that Paisley's inability to remember all the details of the scene might be attributed to the quotidian quality of the incident, basic functions of memory, and, perhaps most importantly, also to the academic success of her lab partner, Paul Ling, who "etches sarcastic notes onto [their] class project paper" (179). Why should Paisley remember what she and her partner worked on when clearly Paul Ling masters in
the subject? Model scholar that he is, Paul Ling obviously feels unchallenged by the project; his sarcasm likely results from his extracurricular, self-initiated exploration of genetics. According to Paisley, Paul has "personally developed many genetic theories this year, about racial compatibility, about IQ. ‘That’s not a good mix,’ he has already warned [Paisley] about [her] own parentage: Norwegian, Chinese” (179). His “warning” points not to “a bad mix of physical features”—a claim that would make Paisley “squirm at the thought that he is calling [her] ugly”—but instead signals Paul’s preoccupation with food. Paisley decides that Paul’s declaration about her genetic “bad mix” is his way of “critiquing the combination of cuisines: ‘What do you eat?’ he asks” (180). Paul’s observations and conclusions about Paisley’s genetic mixture, therefore, neither confirm nor refute any racist logic about miscegenation and its products. Paul’s inquiry, it seems, is intended only to service his interest in food–culture.

In Rekdal’s essay, culture and biology are not mutually exclusive. Paul Ling’s food obsession affects his body and solidifies his position as a multi-point target of ridicule:

Paul himself eats well, all Chinese. He is fat, very tall, with broad features and short hair that sticks up in dark spindles and looks separated: charred cornstalks ruffled by the wind. Because he is fat he appears to have developed breasts . . . which is doubly unfortunate for him since his name already sounds feminine.

‘Pauliiiiine,’ the boys in the back coo. Paul Ling is cynical, smart, lazy, speaks in an agonizing lisp. [180]

An unlikely set of circumstances conjoins Paul’s effeminate body, garbled tongue, Chinese name, and preference for Chinese food. Paul Ling is Chinese American. He eat plenty of
Chinese food—exclusively. He is heavy and has developed sizeable breasts. He speaks English imperfectly. Paul’s ethnicity, food preference, masculinity, and speaking ability correspond haphazardly; cause and effect equations are inappropriate. Specifically, Rekdal avoids any indication that Paul eats Chinese food, is emasculate, and does not speak English well because he is Chinese American. In her portrait of Paul Ling, Rekdal does not submit to a racist equation of biology and behavior. At the same time, however, she does not adhere to an easy opposition between race and culture, or to put it differently, essentialism versus social construction. Importantly, Rekdal does not challenge directly racially-charged scientific inquiries to disprove science’s racist framework.

Rekdal deploys scientific inquiry to prove that racism—not racial essences—exist. The more important experiment here figures Paisley and Paul as a pair of adept scientists. Non-white figures thus take on the roles of researchers, rather than subjects. These lab partners experiment with ways of responding to racism. They are not guinea pigs in this experiment. Rather, they test hypotheses and work out whether or not a non-response to stimuli might put an end to the provocation—an incitement dependent upon a rudimentary, if not wrong, understanding of genetics. The experiment’s subject is all-American Mark Brown. Rekdal defines the research subject, marking in detail his status in a high school hierarchy, his appearance, his intelligence:

Mark is a football player, a senior in a biology room full of sophomores who are all (unlike him) right on track for graduation with their science credits. He has black hair and brilliant eyes, skin that looks smoke-colored. He wears his green and gold football jersey today, the silken, web mesh that reminds me of frog skin
shimmering in the fluorescence. His massive brows have worked together into a
single hairy minus sign above his eyeballs. He stares at the two of us. It is rumored
Mark Brown is popular, though we haven’t seen much evidence of it. Like almost
everyone else I know, he’s a satellite along the fringes of some crowd or other.

[180]

Clearly, Mark is not a blonde-haired, blue-eyed football star, invaluable to the school, the
team. Whereas skin marks race, Mark’s “smoke-colored skin” destabilizes the unmarked
feature of whiteness at the same time that it obscures whether or not Mark is white. His
popularity is questionable; indeed, high school popularity here, somewhat
uncharacteristically, is not a barometer of social relations. Mark’s jersey, a symbol of
belonging and achievement bears more resemblance to a classic biological dissection
subject—a frog—than it inspires awe, school spirit, or envy. Furthermore, Mark lives out the
stereotype of the academically challenged athlete. As well, in typical athlete fashion, Mark
taunts other students, thus exhibiting behaviors scrutinized by the experiment:

Suddenly to our right stands Mark Brown . . . “What?” Paul asks, tentatively
trying out a testy lisp. He’s had it with the Pauline thing. “Ching chong chang,”
Mark Brown retorts. Paul and I look at each other. Mark smiles and repeats,
Louder, “Ching chong chang.” He pulls back the dun skin around his eyes to mimic
slants, but all I see are the red webs in the corners of his sockets, the thin skin
grotesquely stretched over his bulging, glue-colored eyes. He has evolved into a
gila monster. He continues to sing turning his head to Paul and then to me,
serenading. [180-1]
One should say that this is not taunting, but an attempt to taunt, if twisted mimicry could be said to inspire fear and project loathing. Rather than feel wounded by Mark's behavior or feebly retaliate, Paisley characterizes Mark's slur as a song for wooing and imagines his eye-slant-making as his point of evolution into a reptile. Together, Paul and Paisley test a response, or a non-response, as it were:

Paul raises an eyebrow, glancing at me. You want to say something here? He yawns and I feel slightly left out. So I shrug and try to see us from the little keyhole of Mark's perspective: two flat-faced, unnaturally raisin-eyed students, one too fat, one too thin. Mark's face is red, but this might be from the contortions he's putting it through. [181]

No words are exchanged; Paul's eyebrow utters the question to which his yawn responds with indifference. No one leaves the room in tears. No one reports to an authority figure; indeed there is no authority figure to whom one might report. Paisley's shrug conveys her wish to participate in the experiment, her dialogic contribution. In the spirit of objective research, Paisley tries to imagine Mark's perspective and assesses, just as objectively, his possible field of vision—Paul and Paisley's physical attributes. Similarly, she reports on Mark's condition and behavior. The experiment ends successfully:

After another few seconds Mark retreats, bored by our lack of reaction. He keeps his eyes on us as he stalks off, however his fingers stretching his eye skin out a little more insistently and his voice still humming the anthem. Softer, softer, it only dies when he realizes, finding his own table again, how weak the sound of his voice in the classroom. [181]
To accompany the withering American flag’s movement, Mark Brown hums a racist anthem. Classmates do not join the chorus, but rather drown him out with their own self-involved prattle. And Paisley and Paul do not carry episode with them as exemplary of traumatized lives, or a call to arms. What is biology, then? A scientific discipline that provides a framework for racist discourse? An illogical antithesis to social construction, culture? The evolution of a species of high school bully to base reptile? Or is biology merely a setting for anemic racism under the guise of nationalism? For Rekdal, biology is all of the above. Rekdal is reluctant to pledge allegiance to the United States for its inherent racism, prescriptions for trauma, and dualistic antagonism.

Litmus Tests of Real, Authentic Narrative

Rekdal’s resistance to any form of U. S. nationalism manifests in her refusal to blindly accept the validity of certain stories. The key tale that Rekdal mistrusts—her mother’s narrative about how her grandfather acquired a laundry—embraces the American dream. Other family members, specifically Rekdal’s grandmother, have said the story is untrue. Rather than rigorously check facts, Rekdal dismisses truth-seeking ventures. Instead, she examines the possible reasons why her mother would insist on, and why her grandmother would deny, the story’s truth. She likens her mother’s story to the Philippine government’s tourist-boosting invention of a primitive tribe, and in this way suggests that her mother has something substantial to gain from the manufacture of a quaint ethnic tale. This tale has cultural capital that Rekdal’s mother understandably loathes to lose. Importantly, in Rekdal’s effort to unpack the reasons why such a story would have meaning, she does not diminish the cultural value of the tale. Rekdal is knowledgeable
about the elements that contribute to the making of good ethnic lore. She believes in the
script, but worries about its adherence to the narrative of the American dream that is,
more often than not, inaccessible. Her sensitivity to the power and value of narrative, her
mother’s narrative of ethnic belonging to the United States, allows Rekdal to be keen
about why she would not want to detail her own subjectivity in terms of “oppression and
racial isolation”—hallmarks of cultural nationalism (162).

In a section titled “Bad Vacation with Tasaday Tribe, or How My Grandfather
Acquired the Laundromat,” Rekdal details her mother’s version of how her grandfather,
Gung Gung, acquired a laundromat. The “story [Rekdal’s] Chinese mother told her white
mother-in-law,” involves a struggling, poverty-stricken Chinese family, a soon-to-be
interned Japanese American neighbor, and a verbal promise between two Asian American
strangers (157). Shortly after the incident at Pearl Harbor in December 1941, Rekdal’s
grandfather

suddenly is presented with an extraordinary business opportunity. A man named
Yanagiwa or Yamamoto (it is unclear . . . the name anonymous with syllables) . . .
comes to visit Gung Gung . . . a few days before Y. must go by train to the camps.
He doesn’t want the government to repossess everything, his home, his
laundromat. So he offers my grandfather his business . . . for a dollar. A dollar,
with the promise that my grandfather will give the laundromat back to him upon
his return. He can keep the profits; Y. will even train Gung Gung how to run the
machines. It is an offer my grandfather thinks over briefly at most. Who is this
man? Why should he trust him? Y. waits patiently on his clean doorstep. “OK,”
Gung Gung tells him. [158]

When tragedy visited the house of one Asian American man, opportunity knocked on another’s door. Y. and Gung Gung, Rekdal states, would not have been friends. Rekdal’s grandmother, Po Po, would not have given her husband the opportunity to “invite Y. into the house” because she was “hostile” to the Japanese due to the “stories about things Japanese soldiers did to the Chinese in cities they conquered” (158). But despite his wife’s hostility and the historical animosity between Japanese and Chinese in the U.S. only ten years earlier, in the thirties, when “Chinese . . . put up signs in their storefronts indicating their ethnicity so as not to be mistaken,” a Japanese American man entrusts his livelihood to a neighboring Chinese American man. Rekdal insists that this episode does not indicate that her family capitalized on the misfortune of other Asian Americans; her grandfather’s acceptance of the offer, Rekdal suggests, transcended inter-Asian conflict.

Therefore, Rekdal presents a heartwarming tale of the potential comradery between men, between Asian American men who precede panethnicity movements by decades. Rekdal wonders what facilitated this Asian American fellowship; she contends “Y’s decision to trust Gung Gung with the safekeeping of his laundromat would largely have been based upon [her] grandfather’s open-mindedness, the appearance of honesty radiating out of his small, bright eyes” (158-9). She quickly undermines this idealism, without sullying her grandfather’s image: “Or perhaps it was nothing more than that my grandfather was home that evening, sick with a head cold, his taxi cooling under the few stars that night” (159). Luck intervened, Rekdal suggests. Perhaps this simple exchange of property resulted not from transcendent, harmonious inter-Asian relations; Gung Gung
was in the right place at the right time. For all intents and purposes, Gung Gung should have been driving his taxi like every other night. But he was home to answer the door, to greet this stranger, to hear his proposal, to leave him on the doorstep while he considered the offer. The finer points put on the tale by Rekdal’s mother in conjunction with the claim that Gung Gung returned the laundromat for a dollar twenty years later while still running another laundromat opened by the first one’s profits “makes the story one of [the] family’s best anecdotes” (159). All in the manufacture of family lore, for Rekdal states “Unfortunately it is untrue. Nothing like this ever happened” (159).

Long after she first hears the story, Rekdal learns that “the story was a lie” (161). When Rekdal calls her grandmother, Po Po, to “find out what the name of the Japanese neighbor was,” Po Po denies the story. Po Po insists that “there was no Japanese neighbor who did that” and Gung Gung “bought it like anyone else! He bought it off Sam Wong because he was tired of driving a taxi” (161). In her defense, Rekdal’s mother insists on the tale’s truth, telling Rekdal that she heard it directly from her father; he was the one who told her. Rekdal begins to doubt her grandfather and question her mother’s intent:

‘Your father has a real dark side to him,’ Aunt Opal reportedly whispered to my mother once as a young woman, apropos, my mother insisted, of nothing. This phrase comes to me when I think of my mother’s mistaken story (I will not call it a lie), and makes me wonder whether my mother half-remembered, half-assembled it as an attempt to display my grandfather’s inherent goodness, erasing forever any possibility of evil percolating beneath his surface. [162]

The story is not a “lie,” but rather, it’s “mistaken.” Mistaken because it was wrongly given
or narrated. Rekdal refuses to label her mother a liar. Her mother’s investment in the story is real. And it is possible that she did not manufacture the tale alone, or at all—she might have remembered it as it was told to her. Gung Gung perhaps circulated this version of his laundry acquisition to boost his own possibly failing image.

The tale does more than bolster a single man’s persona, for, it seems, everyone has an investment in it. That Rekdal’s “Chinese mother” told this version to Rekdal’s white grandmother is crucial. Rekdal hereby intimates that this tale has currency with white Americans who, she says, “perhaps . . . needed to hear” it. Rekdal does not qualify why white Americans would need to hear the story, but one suspects this need emerges from the story’s confirmation that the American dream is attainable, even if the U.S. has demonstrated its capacity to disenfranchise people of color. As for her mother, Rekdal suggests that “perhaps by telling this story [her] mother (sick of being the one dark spot in a sea of paler faces?) could make herself seen by this audience. She could make herself visible.” Rekdal, too, like her mother, has an investment in the story’s truth. Her grandmother has an investment in believing the story is a lie; Rekdal’s mother states, “Po Po is sometimes ashamed to admit the truth. It makes her seem less American” (166). Also, were Po Po to corroborate the story, she would be testifying to a panethnic alliance that she did not appreciate at the time. Rekdal wants to believe it because it writes her into an Asian American cultural history, because her grandfather’s “acknowledgment of” the rest of her family was their “acceptance into his love and culture. Without it, [they] were shunned” (153). To raise questions about her grandfather’s morality would damage her own standing within the Chinese community. Rekdal protects her grandfather’s image and
her investment in the story, while she examines the tale’s attractiveness:

Really, my mother never discovered what Opal meant by Gung Gung’s having a
dark side, just as I will never know how my mother came by the story of the
laundromat, though I understand why so many people in the family—myself
especially—want to believe it. It is almost too good to be true. It follows all the
rules of multicultural mythology: a world war, a community rife with poverty and
unspoken hatred, internment camps, even a laundromat! It touches upon two of
the great themes in Asian-American culture—oppression and racial
isolation—suggesting that some heroism and transcendence can be achieved.[162-3]

Rekdal reveals a narrative pattern that writes Asian Americans into a cycle of tragedy and
triumph. She indicates that ethnic stories are governed by a set of rules. These rules guard
the ethnic community and its individual members against confirming racist ideology. To
portray Gung Gung as a man under whose surface evil percolates would validate racism.
As a guard against such representation, the “rules of multicultural mythology” prescribe a
tale of racial and economic strife, resistance to institutionalized racism, and eventual
triumph over adversity.

Parenthetically, this prescription for a healthy representation of Asian Americans
has a notable side-effect—the production of another kind of race-based stereotype. I’m
thinking, here, about the “model minority myth,” which emerges from the cycle of tragedy
and triumph, particularly when triumph is defined as the attainment of the American
dream. Efforts to vaunt the representations of Asian Americans are absorbed by racist
ideologies and recirculated as a containment apparatus for Asian Americans and a
barometer against which other ethnic "minorities" are measured. This approximates a no-win situation: both negative and positive representations of community confirm stereotypes that are deployed to different, although intersecting, ends.

One might see, however, in Rekdal’s work particularly, a careful negotiation of the slippery territory that is representation. Her advancement of several versions of the story—one that narrates heroic triumph and another that borders on negatively representing the Asian American community—challenges those who would appropriate a model minority representation of Asian Americans and resists the Asian American community that would fault Rekdal for misrepresentation.

A lyrical version of the family tale challenges what Rekdal calls the "rules of multicultural mythology," as it undermines the "heroism" and "transcendence" of the prose variant. The poem, called "joe louis and the war effort, or how my grandfather acquired the laundromat" (original capitalization), appears in Rekdal’s collection of poetry, A Crash of Rhinos (2000). The bare bones of the story remain the same and maintain a model minority image of Asian Americans: Rekdal’s grandfather drives a taxi; the bombing of Pearl Harbor precipitates the internment of "enemy aliens"; a laundromat exchanges hands from an imminently interned Japanese American to a Chinese American man; Gung Gung (a.k.a. "George" in this version) promises to return the laundromat upon Y’s return. Crucially, the poem places the exchange in an altogether different setting—a gambling hall:

... March 27th, 1942:

at 6 P.M. he and Y, the Japanese neighbor,
sit under spools of lamplight in a wet basement playing cards,

silently wagering the future. Ten years before,

my grandmother wore a placard round her neck that read, “I am Chinese,”

to distinguish herself. But George, now, is willing

to put aside differences for a friend, he says, taking Y

into his confidence. Draw a card. He knows within days

Y will be on a train bound for camp in Idaho.

You’ll give it back? Y asks. When I return? George nods.

Y’s deed for the laundry slips atop their pile of quarters.

And in my grandfather’s hand: pocket lint, a knife-length scar,

a house that’s full of hearts.²

The lyrical version lacks the ringing of a doorbell, a “clean doorstep,” a sober deliberation.

Y and George share a history, if only in an addiction to gambling. Inter-Asian comradery

could be merely a ruse, part of George’s plot to lure “Y into his confidence.” Rekdal casts

doubts on her grandmother as well, for in this version, Po Po actually dons the ethnicity-
declaring-sign that is posted in storefronts in the prose version. In a single hand of poker,

George wins the laundromat. It is not offered out of kindness, imagined fellowship; nor is

it accepted on such principles. In fact, the offer is not accepted so much as won. And even

if luck determines George’s time and place, it does not completely oversee this version of

the transaction; George controls his poker hand with his scarred hand. His bodily hand

reaches into a pocket and finds both lint and the cards that complete a full house—“a house

that’s full of hearts.” At one time, perhaps, this bodily hand has reached into this pocket
before, but when another hand joined it to rake in the kitty, another gambler perhaps contested the victory with the swipe of a knife. A third reference to George’s “hands” relates his “dark side” with his heroic persona as represented in the prose version: “George’s hands have eczema sores the size / of horrible roses his children like to paint with gum / before he rides off in his taxi” (50). Regardless of whether George cheats with his various “hands,” we are to be reminded that he has children and is diligent behind the wheel of his taxi.

In addition, the poem’s meditation on gaming, sports, and gambling resists an interpretation of George as a stereotypically ruthless, Chinese American gambler. Instead, George’s winning (whether by cheating or not) reflects not upon his own morality, but rather on his unwitting complicity with the war effort. Where the first stanza claims that Y and George are “silently wagering the future,” successive stanzas more tightly connect the wartime setting, gambling, and the future of Asian America. Later that same evening, Y contemplates his situation and, on the other side of the country, Joe Louis knocks out Abe Simon:

... this Friday

it’s nine o’clock, March 27th at the Garden, where Simon is getting the worst of it. They’ve unpenned the enlisted Louis from Upton and a sea of khaki greets him ringside. Every fan’s soldiering today: they’ve all got crew cuts, weight pills,
a fascination for sparring. Meanwhile on grandfather’s street, Y sits alone tuned to the match on KCTZ imagining country
brown and flat as an eternal boxing ring. He ticks off destinations like so many famous names: Camp Harmony, Minidoka, Dempsey, Willard, Schmeling, Poston, Baer, Shufflin’ Joe—The Brown Bomber, Manzanar. A seamless stream of faces on cards, weight and shoe size listed next to occupation . . .

. . . We can’t lose, Louis bumbles tonight about the war. ’Cause we’re on God’s side.

Y compares his internment to Louis’s boxing as he intermixes names of camps (Camp Harmony, Minidoka, Poston, Manzanar) with names boxing figures (Dempsey, Willard, Schmeling, Baer, Shufflin’ Joe, The Brown Bomber). Internment relates to boxing by way of Y’s litany, the gambling house, and Louis’s multi-fold contribution to the war effort. Even the nicknames Y lists for Louis–Shufflin’ Joe and the Brown Bomber—poetically connect Louis to cards and war. Louis’s “we can’t lose tonight . . . ’Cause we’re on God’s side” fails to recognize Y, his family, and the countless other Japanese American families who will soon be corralled into internment camps throughout the western U.S. That “even in Chinatown Joe Louis is beautiful” does not mean that Chinese Americans support the war effort simply because the “disaffected regulars” of the Wah Mee Gambling Club “trade green fistfuls under [Joe Louis’s] black and white photo image.” The Chinese American men at the gambling house, “soldiering fans,” are unintentionally complicit with the war effort (50).

Women, however, play different roles in the war effort and further complicate the
gendered and panethnic dimensions of the rest of the text: Rekdal’s grandmother “refuses to speak to the Japanese” (51); “Miss June,” a silent, objectified pin-up girl hangs on the wall next to Joe Louis’s picture (49); and “in Shanghai a bayoneted / woman feels what might be the hot / black tip of her cervix peeping from her gown” (51). Rekdal places herself in the poem when she concludes by saying that she now lives in “Seattle’s Chinatown where Y and [her] grandfather lived.” Geographically and socially, their history is part of her own: “Each day I pass the block that housed / the laundromat” (51). But this U.S.-based social history does not fully account for Rekdal’s feminism. Rekdal’s attention to women further establishes her sense of the complexity of loyalty: Whereas George suggested that there was a panethnic bond between him and Y, Rekdal’s grandmother is decidedly more self-preservationist and sympathetic to Chinese nationals in her refusal to speak with Japanese Americans. Rekdal’s imagining of women in China who were being subjected to the brutality of Japanese troops during occupation even further breaks the interethnic bond. And, to be sure, gender loyalties potentially shatter ethnic and cross-ethnic loyalties. Rekdal, however, resists any impulse to manufacture lines of a loyalty which potentially lead to accusations of treachery and betrayal. Literal and metaphorical violence, Rekdal suggests, binds people together, irrespective of identitarian commitments.

Rekdal’s calculated avoidance of identity-based loyalties is part and parcel of her suspicion of nationalism. Her suspicion of U.S. nationalism brings her to question the function of her family’s narrated achievement of the American Dream. She sees in her own family story the makings of a perfect ethnic mythology and she embraces this mythology
while suspending other versions of the story that have as much stake in the truth.

Competing versions do not cancel claims to authenticity. Rather, they call into question the entire notion of truth and reveal our dependence upon stories, true or not.
Epilogue

Before the proliferation of representations of multiracial Asian Americans in the 1990s, a study of mixed race Americans of Asian descent had very few texts and characters to work with—Diana Chang’s *Frontiers of Love*, the work of the Eaton sisters, or characters like Lee in Frank Chin’s play *Chickencoop Chinaman*. To this day, these texts have not yet received a significant amount of attention, partly due to the fact that it was not until very recently that they were available. Scholars interested in the multiracial Asian American figure would likely have turned to narratives of interracial relationships in Asian American texts like Carlos Bulosan’s *America is the Heart* or Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Tripmaster Monkey: his fake book*.

Indeed, the initial spark for this project began with a critical reading of Kingston’s trope of interracial relationships in *Tripmaster Monkey*. I argue that Kingston, in this novel, strategically coarticulates feminism and anti-racism through the trope of interracial relationships—romantic and otherwise. If you’ll remember, there are several interracial relationships in this text—Barbie and monkey, Lance and Sunny, even the conjoined twins Chang and Eng, and, perhaps the most important one of all, Wittman and Taña. My conclusions about Kingston’s successful address of the concerns of both feminists and cultural nationalists set me on an exploration of the possible ways in which tropes of interracial relationships and multiraciality offer us new ways of thinking about multiple categories of identity. This project has been an effort to explore the ways in which mixed race Asian Americans offer us new paradigms of thinking about race and ethnicity, even to the point of reassessing Asian American literary criticism’s own core paradigms.
Revising well-worn race paradigms and theories might bring us to the kind of liberated biracial subjectivity and interethnic resolution that the character Keiko Van Heller in Jessica Hagedorn’s *Gangster of Love* (temporarily) embodies. Keiko resists fixity and essentialism. A pathological liar, Keiko constantly recreates, reconstructs, and variously performs her biraciality by offering different versions of her parentage. Her parents are always of different races from one another, but their racial identifications are never the same in her stories. Notably, Keiko’s stories never involve Asian/Anglo mixes, thus suggesting that the possible future of depathologization of multiracial subjectivity resides in the nonwhite multiracial figure who does not reinscribe the white/nonwhite binary. Keiko exclusively manufactures tall tales of non-white mixed-race ancestry:

Keiko told stories of her childhood, stories that kept changing the longer [one] knew her. Her mother Gwen, was the first Japanese American trapeze artist ever hired by Barnum and Bailey. Her father, Franklin Delano Van Heller, was an artist. ‘Unfortunately, they died [Keiko claims] when [she] was—‘five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten. The fictional story of Keiko’s parents varied along with Keiko’s age on the day they supposedly died. Sometimes her mother was a social worker, the first Japanese American to graduate with honors from Barnard . . . sometimes her father was a respectable black doctor. Sometimes he was more exotic—a blue-eyed, black Cuban boxer who died in the ring, or a blue-eyed, black Cuban artist tortured and killed by Castro’s secret police [or else] Papa managed the Royal Hawaiian hotel on Waikiki, and Mama was one of the hula dancers. [40-1]

There is almost always an element of performativity in Keiko’s tall tales which suggests
that the possibilities for liberative biraciality exists within the domain of performance, or alternating ethnic identifications. When Rocky Rivera, _Gangster of Love_’s primary narrator, meets her, Keiko is on the streets of San Francisco parading as Fantazia Laveaux in an ethnically jumbled outfit. Keiko-Fantazia breathes fire for monetary handouts. When the “what are you?” racializing moment arrives, Keiko exclaims, “Rocky Rivera! _Tú eres Chicana_? No? You in theater? I mean, with a name like that” (38). Rocky responds, mimicking Keiko’s tone, “What about you? _Tú eres Chicana_?” To which Keiko replies, as I say in the preface, “You never know . . . Do you?” Many falsehoods later, Rocky asserts, “it never occurred to me to call her a liar to her face, or to ask Keiko why she felt the need to embellish her life. She was my best friend, my teacher” (42).

But this teacher, a possible model for an anti-essentialist Asian American multiracial subjectivity, could make good use of a 12-step program. Like some of the biracial female subjects presented in chapter two, Keiko is salacious and addicted to drugs and alcohol. One cannot say, however, that Keiko is exactly dysfunctional. Her hazy, hallucinatory photographs skyrocket her artistic career and land her face on the cover of _Newsweek_. Keiko’s frenzied fame and final burn-out, though, lead her to drop the masks and finally tell Rocky the truth—her parents are alive in suburban upstate New York. Keiko does not, however, reveal their occupations and racial persuasions, therefore leaving incomplete her confession and undermining performance as a full-proof resistance strategy.

Despite her disappearance from the final third of _Gangster of Love_ and her tragic biography, Keiko, I would argue, points to a possible future of playful, subversive
multiracial subjectivity. Multiracial Americans star in daydreams about the future; many people imagine that they are the signs of a beautiful future as they forecast a world without race and an end to racism. This is, of course, the most generous take on the products of miscegenation. My own thought is that the current moment of literary production envisions not a world without race and therefore a world without racism, but a possibly nearer time when being a politicized, racialized subject does not mean being the injured, the pathological, or the tragic.
1. Rekdal, 15.


3. "White Danger" was a panel presentation at the American Literature Association in Baltimore Maryland, May 1999. Chuck Jackson presented "Little, Violent, White," an essay that unpacks the discourses surrounding white child killers in recent U.S. history and the film "The Bad Seed." Jackson's essay appears in a special issue of *Journal Popular Film and Television*. Michelle L. Taylor presented "White Supremacist Fantasies and Black Nationalist Dreams: The Perils of Blood, Racial Conservation, and the Black Female Body," in which she discusses the ritual resistance of black slave women through food poisoning. I presented an early version of chapter two of this project. This panel also appeared at the University of Houston Graduate English Symposium, February 1999.

INTRODUCTION NOTES


2. My use of the term "multiracial" here is synonymous with "mixed race." "Multiracial," as sociologist Maria P.P. Root maintains, "refers to people who are of two or more racial heritages. It is the most inclusive term to refer to people across all racial mixes. Thus it also includes biracial people" (*The Multiracial Experience*, Maria P.P. Root, ed., xi).

3. By now, it is often argued that early definitions of Asian American literature were far too exclusionary and limited to select Asian American groups. The seminal *Aiieeeeee!* anthology delimited Asian American to Chinese, Japanese and Filipino American. *Aiieeeeee!*'s sequel *The Big Aiieeeeee!* further restricts its scope to American-born persons of Chinese and Japanese descent. Elaine Kim's groundbreaking *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Contexts* likewise privileges Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino Americans but importantly adds Korean American to the mix.

4. Maxine Hong Kingston remains an exception here, for her successful coarticulation of anti-sexist and anti-racist discourses in *Tripmaster Monkey* deconstructs anti-white and anti-racism. Kingston’s Chinese American protagonist Wittman marries a white woman Taña. Taña doesn’t let Wittman’s misogyny continue unchecked. Indeed, by making Taña one voice of feminism in *Tripmaster Monkey* (the narrator would be the other major voice), Kingston suggests that feminism, in the novel’s 1960s setting, is indeed very much dominated by white female voices, but insists that a white feminist presence is not the bane of anti-racist Chinese American masculinity. Taña is as much Wittman’s savior as she is a champion of anti-misogyny, for, indeed, she saves him from the draft by marrying him. For more, see my essay "Uniting Discourses: Interracial Relationships and Racialized Feminism in Kingston’s *Tripmaster Monkey*.”

5. Frank Chin delineates the "real" and the "fake" in "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake," in *The Big Aiieeeeee!*. While the "real" and the "fake" are notions spawned by Frank Chin, the *Aiieeeeee!* group’s most outspoken member, these values are omnipresent in Asian American literary criticism, which is to say that these notions sometimes are upheld by critics who would like to think themselves as opponents of Chin and his compatriots.
6. The Association for Asian American Studies’s rescinding of the 1998 association book award for fiction to Lois-Ann Yamanaka for *Blu's Hanging* marks the omnipresent pressure placed upon the Asian American writer to tell stories that uphold panethnic solidarity.

7. The conflation of whiteness and racism creates similar stories for people who look white: one might assume based on white features that another will think a racist joke or comment funny, correct, or acceptable.


9. Again, a note on terminology: The word “Eurasian” means a person of both European and Asian ancestry. The same is true of the word “Amerasian,” a term coined by Nobel laureate Pearl S. Buck, which signifies the children of Asian women and American (of any ethnic persuasion, although predominantly used to mean white) servicemen. Note how Asian Americanists erase the fact of multiracality, but base their notion of Asian American transnational subjectivity on the complexity of multiracial subjectivity: the name “Amerasia” is given to the field’s most well-known, prestigious journal out of UCLA, but little attention is paid to the co-optation of multiracial subjectivity for Asian American “monoracial,” and yet bi- or multi-national subjectivities. Again, I’m aware of the non-existence of “monoracial” Asian Americans, for race/ethnicity is never pure, but I use the term here as I’m bound to the discourse already in play. That Asian America erases the historical mixed race importance of the term “Amerasia” is typical too of the ways in which Asian/Anglo American artists like Hartmann and the Eaton sisters are typed as Asian American not Asian/Anglo American.
CHAPTER ONE NOTES

1. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong is a proponent of revising the definitions for what constitutes Asian American literature. See especially her essay “Chinese American literature” in *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature* where she rehistoricizes the Chinese American literary canon and includes writings translated into English, works by recent immigrants, and even the folkloric traditions of China. Current critical rethinking like Wong’s are sure to displace Edith Eaton from her “first Chinese American writer” position. Such re-visioning are crucial to a re-vision of Asian American studies and a movement away from U.S. identity politics toward a more global view, but are not, unfortunately, within the scope of the project at hand. Under the current rules (“Asian American” equals people of Asian descent born in the U.S.) there seems to be a mini-battle between Winnifred and Edith Eaton for this title. Amy Ling recognizes that Winnifred Eaton’s first novel, *Miss Numè of Japan* (1899), appeared before Edith’s first fictional piece: “[T]hough Edith has been called ‘The First Chinese-American Fictionist,’ the title may by right be Winnifred’s. Undoubtedly, Edith Eaton was the first person of Chinese ancestry to write fiction in English about the Chinese in America and a case may also be made for her being a feminist” (Ling, “Winnifred Eaton: Ethnic Chameleon and Popular Success,” 6-7). In the final assessment, it matters little, I think, who came first, although this seems to be point worthy to some of a duking out.

2. Carol Roh-Spaulding says, “Winnifred Eaton is something of a sticky wicket” and claims that Winnifred Eaton “might have smiled at the use of this British phrase to describe her” (*Blue-Eyed Asians*, 164). Because the “problem” of Winnifred is one that results from Asian American literary criticism’s problematic application of civil rights paradigms and is therefore a post-1960s “problem,” I believe my “Rubik’s cube” metaphor to be more appropriate, although Roh-Spaulding and I are very much in agreement about Winnifred’s posing a difficulty to Asian American studies. Another critic has also noted Asian Americanists’ avoidance of Winnifred Eaton’s tricky ethnic identifications and puts it in similar terms: Eve Oishi writes in her introduction to the 1999 re-issue of Winnifred Eaton’s first novel *Miss Numè of Japan* that Winnifred’s “anonymity is not as inexplicable as it seems...considering the unique set of circumstances surrounding the author’s life, her publication history, and the politics of contemporary Asian American literary criticism. Baldly stated, critics of Asian American literature simply do not know what to do with a Eurasian writer of Chinese and Anglo descent who assumed a Japanese identity and a Japanese-sounding pseudonym—Onoto Watanna—in order to write romance novels about Japanese and Eurasian women” (xi).

3. While many of Hartmann’s texts were published at the turn and early part of the century by small presses, most are currently out of print. He never published his autobiography. A trip to Riverside California, a few short miles from Hartmann’s final home in Banning California on the Morongo Reservation, brings one to the rich Hartmann archives housed at the University of California at Riverside Library.
4. While it may sound as though “Sidney Allan” is a Jewish identification, there is no known comment from Hartmann on what kind of white racialized identification he meant to suggest by assuming this name.

5. Note too that the mythical claims of Asian American literary history also suspend thoughtful analyses of the Eaton sisters’ Canadian roots in order to forge a pragmatically sound literary history. Work on the Eaton sisters’ Canadian roots is in progress: Tomo Hattori delivered a paper at the 1998 Association for Asian American Studies conference (June 23-28, 1998) entitled “The Location of Origins: The Eaton Sisters and Nationalist Imagination” on a panel named “On the Line: Conditions of Asian Canadian Emergence Across Borders.” I expect that Hattori addresses the ways in which Asian American critics of the Eaton sisters pragmatically elide Canada into America by using the term “North American,” and rethinks the place of the Eaton sisters within the canon of Asian American literature. This point about the national identification of the Eaton sisters is peripheral to my interest in them, although it fortifies my claim about how Asian American critical political imperatives dictate what can be said and what must be hushed.


7. By saying “long-standing,” I invoke, again, the gendered culture wars in Asian American literary production and criticism which has characterized the field since its inception in the late 1960s, early 1970s. While I sense a general reluctance among Asian Americanists to discuss what is often called “the Kingston-Chin” debate, I do so here, for a moment, in order to show that although Kingston and Chin may be no longer players in the polemic, the terms of the debate are still very much in operation.

8. I draw this idea of “racial formation” from Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s now classic sociological text, *Racial Formations in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s.*

9. Indeed, these logics are at the root of the Kingston-Chin debates within Asian American literary studies where Asian American feminists, according to the Chin faction, are supposedly fake, popular, and white racist for their advancement of feminist issues. See especially, Chin’s “Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake” in *The Big Aiiieeeeee!*

10. See King-kok Cheung’s introductory essay to *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature,* pp. 15-17 especially. Where Cheung earlier characterizes the split as communal responsibility versus postmodern possibility, she collapses the binary later into community versus individual.


13. For an argument about Edith Eaton’s early death due to the physical burden that racism imposed on her, see White-Parks.


17. I call Edith Eaton by her given name in contrast to the bulk of contemporary critics because I feel that to call her only “Sui Sin Far” is a mistake, one that is indicative of the ways in which Asian American critics wish to uncritically appropriate her strictly for reasons of ethnic authenticity (read ethnic purity and segregation). I’m cautioned against my own singular identification but choose to do so for reasons of economy of language. Furthermore, it is, after all, Edith Eaton who manufactures the “Sui Sin Far” nom de plume and persona, and in that way, I understand and suggest that we read “Edith Eaton” to signify both of her names.

18. This invocation of Confucius demonstrates her knowledge of Chinese cultural heritage and carefully resists exoticization because it appears only moments after deriding editors’ directives for her to forget “making [herself] familiar with the Chinese Americans around [her and instead] discourse on [her] spirit acquaintance with Chinese ancestors and quote in between the ‘Good mornings’ and ‘How d’ye dos’ of editors [by quoting] ‘Confucius, Confucius, how great is Confucius, Before Confucius, there never was Confucius. After Confucius, there never came Confucius,’ etc., etc., etc.” (230). Eaton declares that such reiteration of Confucian thought is “both illuminating and obscurring, don’t you know” and she declares that her refusal to quote Confucius is not an indication that she doesn’t know Confucius or is not familiar with Chinese cultural heritage by reminding readers of her cultural authority: “They [editors] forget, or perhaps they are not aware that the old Chinese sage taught ‘The way of sincerity is the way of heaven’” (230).

19. Lorraine Dong and Marlon K. Hom are critical of Edith’s notion of the mutual exclusivity of Asians and whites, for they feel that as a Eurasian author, she above all others, should be able to articulate connections between the two: “No interracial
relationship has a happy ending. The message is again clear: the Chinese cannot and should not integrate into the American mainstream. The root of this attitude is no different from that of Sui Sin Far’s anti-Chinese contemporaries who, in their xenophobic hysteria, stress the incompatibility of the Chinese and American cultures. Although sympathetic and empathetic in her gallant defense of the Chinese, the writer also could not help but be influenced by the contemporaneous belief that the Chinese and white American cultures were mutually exclusive and could not be mixed. This is a sad commentary, especially when it is made by an Eurasian” (165). Dong and Hom see this oversight as proof of Edith’s being a “product of her time.” I would agree to an extent, but believe that their analysis is somewhat incomplete. Her concern is always for the Eurasian characters, whose lives are predicated on the relationship between whites and Asians. She does not agree that Chinese are unassimilable and “should not integrate into the American mainstream.” She recognizes the inability of Chinese and white Americans to come together in meaningful ways, based on their treatment of Eurasians and the marginal status of Eurasians by both groups. Edith also stresses constantly not only the difference between Asian and white Americans, but the differences of Eurasians from these groups. Her conclusion about the dichotomous nature of whites and Asian Americans is predicated upon a sense of how they have mixed in the Eurasian, and how that mixture is disdained. Moreover, let me remind the reader that the mutual exclusivity of Asian and white Americans is something that mixed race people, in general, interrogate and bring into relief. As well, this binary opposition is still very much in play, nearly a century after Edith’s time.


21. “What about the Cat?” was originally published in Good Housekeeping in 1909, then later collected in Eaton’s 1912 edition of Mrs. Spring Fragrance. My quotation of it comes from the 1995 edition of Mrs. Spring Fragrance.

22. See Dominika Ferens’s essay “Tangled Kites: Sui Sin Far’s Negotiations with Race and Readership” for a reproduction of the first page of “What about the Cat?,” with Kerr’s illustration (120). Ferens offers several reproductions of first pages of several of Edith Eaton’s short stories in their original in order to buttress her own sense of Edith’s complex negotiation of stereotype and resistance in her early journalistic pieces and short children’s stories. Importantly, Ferens is a new voice in criticism of Edith Eaton. She, like Dom and Hong, questions the uncritical celebration of Edith Eaton, and suggests that Edith, like her sister Winnifred, affected a sometimes Orientalist persona and occasionally participated in the exoticization of her Chinese subjects.

23. Ferens also makes a convincing argument about the ways in which Edith Eaton used children’s fiction and tales that were only superficially simple to discuss more complicated questions. Amy Ling reads “What about the Cat?” as a tale of feminist subversiveness (“Edith Eaton: Pioneer Chinamerican Fictionist,” 292 and Between Worlds, 167).

25. Note Edith's use of the language of "halves." In recent years, proponents of multiracial people have sought to put an end to calling biracial people "half this" and "half that" because of the ways in which that belittles mixed race experiences. Some offer as alternative terms like "doubles" which adheres to additive equations rather than notions of fractions.


27. Me, 153-4.

28. Me, 194.


30. A Youngster Dons Mikado Garb, 2.

31. A Youngster Dons Mikado Garb, 1.


35. Quiet Fire, ed. Juliana Chang, xvi.

36. Weaver, 12.

CHAPTER TWO NOTES

1. Predominately, male mixed race Asian American characters are nonwhite mixed race Americans: in the U.S. Filipino literature by Peter Bacho and Jessica Hagedorn, male mixed race characters appear, but are notably nonwhite mixed race; Bacho’s character Johnny Romero is Filipino/Native American and Hagedorn’s character Joey Sands is Filipino/African American. Chang, in Sigrid Nunez’s Feather on the Breath of God is Chinese Panamanian.

2. I am grateful to Hiram Perez’s thoughtful response to a version of this chapter that I delivered at the 2001 AAAS meeting in Toronto, Canada. Hiram’s response initiated a dynamic discussion with panel attendants about possible intersections between African American and Asian American literary studies. I look forward to incorporating those discussions in a future version of this chapter.


4. See Wendy Brown, States of Injury, for an extensive discussion about narratives of injury and politicized subjectivity, in political theory terms.

5. See Frank Chin, Jeffrey Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Hsu Wong, “Preface,” in Alieeeee!: An Anthology of Asian American Writers (New York: Mentor, 1991): xi-xxii. Chin, Chan, Inada, and Wong’s overview of the literature by and about Asian Americans, Chinese Americans most specifically, names different kinds of Asian writers in the United States: Those who are included in the anthology are writers whom the editors deem political; They are “Asian American.” Other Chinese American writers who have assimilated to white America are called “Americanized Asians.”

6. By “that invented hegemonic memory,” Palumbo-Liu refers to a “process of memory transfer” by which the U.S. acculturates its newest immigrants: “the migrant’s past is to be rescripted and given a content of secondhand histories and values, integrated with his or her own into a functioning psychic reality, and this will allow the state to continue its course through modernity” (Palumbo-Liu, 297). Obviously the intricacy of Palumbo-Liu’s argument in Asian-Americans is well beyond the scope of this chapter. Risking oversimplification, I draw out a single thread—the relationship between cultural nationalism and pathologized racial subjectivity—from Palumbo-Liu’s delicate, elaborate tapestry.

7. David Palumbo-Liu sets it up as a question: “How was the recourse taken to ‘cultural nationalism’ the logical response to this stigma, and yet how does this alternative remove from view other modes of identification?” (Palumbo-Liu, 298). While I feel that Palumbo-Liu is superlative in his analysis of how cultural nationalism is a “logical response” to the pathologizing of racial and cultural identities, he devotes less energy to the second half of this question.

8. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, King-Kok Cheung, Elaine Kim, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Rachel Lee, David Li, and Amy Ling are notable among the many Asian American literary critics who deal with the balancing act many Asian American feminist authors must perform in response to cultural nationalism’s claim that feminism is a white female concern that contributes to the white racist notions about Asian American men and masculinity.
Garrett Hongo provocatively suggests that the eruption over gender in Asian American literature is a debate manufactured by the white, mainstream American press. He worries that American culture is overly concerned with opposition and that Asian Americans were far too quick to take sides. By separating into camps that debate about the authenticity of Asian American literature/experience, Asian Americanists, Hongo argues, exhibit a "mimetic desire," in that similar debates characterize African American and white American literary discussions. Hongo’s a very tempting argument, for he obviously values the boundary expansion of Asian American literary history and definition. Certainly, his argument promises to radically alter the prevailing sense of Asian American literature’s gender divide. The argument, however, is one that is difficult to swallow for those used to the placebo pills, sweet and easy, but nonetheless bitter, that we are offered by the paradigm of a gendered culture war in Asian America. I am made aware of my reinscription of the debate in very oppositional terms, and would argue that while the opposition may have been the product of certain institutional racisms that would like to force the internal division of Asian Americans, it is clear that there is little to suggest that the debate does not have real meaning to Asian Americans. This is not unlike the argument that grants that race in America is a social construction, a fiction, yes, but there are lived experiences of the fabrication.

9. See, for instance, Garrett Hongo’s elegantly argued introduction to Under Western Eyes.


11. Notably, the two major women in the text are “unmixed” Filipinas and are opposites—one a ruthless entrepreneur, the other a god-fearing Catholic. Both are somewhat desexualized. I am aware that this is a bit of a misconception for Filipinos are always understood as mixed. The difference here, with Remedios and Clara is that they are not Filipino/Anglo/American mixes.

12. All the rules of popularity that function with the Eaton sisters are very much in play for The Hundred Secret Senses. See chapter one, section “Fame and (Dis)Fortune, Eurasian Sister Style.”


14. See Sau-Ling Wong’s Reading Asian American Literature for a compelling discussion of food pornography and literary tours of Chinatown.

CHAPTER THREE NOTES

1. The Woman Warrior raises a number of questions about the role of Asian American cultural production that are far too extensive to deal with here. For my purposes here, I want only to demonstrate that Asian American literary studies has contested the generic category “autobiography” and that this history ushers us back to the formation of Asian American literary studies in the late ’70s. David Reiwei Li devotes an entire chapter—“Can Maxine Hong Kingston Speak? The Contingency of The Woman Warrior”—of his text-length exploration of Asian American literature to the debates surrounding Kingston’s The Woman Warrior. In this chapter, Li reveals that Chin and Kingston exchanged correspondence before The Woman Warrior was published. In his letter, Chin encouraged Kingston to drop the “autobiography” label given to the text by her editor at Knopf. Chin argued that he could give the text a lot more license if it were marked as fiction. Such information changes the way that the debates between Kingston and Chin are often characterized. See David Reiwei Li, Imagining the Nation: Asian American Literature and Cultural Consent (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

2. Li, 51.

3. Li, 49.

4. Li, 51.


10. Adam Begley, “A Song of Myself: From Benjamin Franklin to Lee Iacocca, from Frederick Douglass to Colin Powell, from Jane Addams to Julia Philips, the first-person singular is our national anthem,” Newsday, November 5, 1995, p. 33.

11. Black/White multiracial personal narratives frequently announce unlikely combinations such as “white mothers of black children.” Such statements suggest to me not “an end to race as we know it,” but a reification of racial logic, specifically the one-drop rule. See, for instance, these titles: James McBride’s The Color of Water: A Black Man’s Tribute to His White Mother (New York: Riverhead Books, 1997) and Jane Lazarre, Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness: Memoir of a White Mother of Black Sons (Durham, N.C.: Duke U.P., 1996). In James McBride’s humanistic memoir, The Color of Water: A Black Man’s Tribute to His White Mother, the rejection of the multiracial label does not carry the same political motivation as it does for Danzy Senna.


13. Food analogies are not borne out in titles of autobiographies of mixed race Americans in the way that Senna suggests. Which is to say that it’s not very often that we find multiracialities self-identifying in terms of “cute food analogies.” Instead, it is often the case that cultural reviewers will employ a food analogy to describe the conflict of cultures. Witness, for instance, the opening of a review of Thaddeus Rutkowski’s Roughhouse: “I like kim chee and peanut butter sandwiches. Most people don’t. Whatever. It’s an acquired taste. Thaddeus Rutkowski’s new novel Roughhouse is also not for everyone . . . Roughhouse emerges as a work that will appeal to many readers and repel even more. An acquired taste? Absolutely.” (Nick J. Lee, SCRAAL: Seattle Contemporary Review of Asian American Literature, <http://www.scraal.com/roughhouseto.html> 25 January 2001.) This holds true for non-mixed-race Asian Americans as well. See chapter two of this project with regard to the Jerusalem Post review of Amy Tan’s The Hundred Secret Senses; And, in Tripmaster Monkey, Kingston addresses the tendency of reviewers to treat an engagement with Asian American culture as an experimentation with food: Wittman rants about how reviewers “wrote us up like they were tasting Chinese food”(307-8).


16. The zine genre is increasingly under scrutiny, particularly for scholars interested in Generation X, popular culture, grrrl culture, queer culture, etc. See Lauren Berlant with Elizabeth Freeman, “Queer Nationality,” especially 169-173, in *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*; and *A Girl’s Guide to Taking Over the World: Writings from the Girl Zine Revolution*, edited by Karen Green and Tristan Taormino. A series of chapbooks called “Mixed Up” include the poetry and brief prose by and about mixed race Asian Americans. “Mixed Up” is self-published by isangmahal arts collective and mixt up productions, out of Los Angeles. The first issue was released in 2000 and more are in the works (for information, contact “m mixt_up@hotmail.com”.


CHAPTER FOUR NOTES


2. See Sheng Mei Ma’s The Deathly Embrace for a persuasive, extended discussion of the co-dependency of Orientalism and anti-Orientalism.


4. Reviewer for the online publication SPIKE Magazine, David Remy, reads the title story differently. I find little in Rekdal’s opening essay that suggests that the Chinese American restaurant workers are holding onto a vision of China that Lee disrupts to their chagrin. He disdains their vision of China and things Chinese, to be sure, but it is more clear to me that they see him as a pariah because he is so foreign, so “real Chinese,” that is Chinese Chinese, not Chinese American. In contrast, Remy states that Bruce Lee “represents a new China, one far-removed from the refined world of Ming vases and handsome calligraphy they have been taught to uphold. Lee creates an image of China that defies the accepted version of what the Chinese should be, and for this they regard him as an outcast.” I quibble with Remy too on the role that culture and race play in the different levels of success that Rekdal’s mother and Lee achieve. I agree that racism plays a role in Lee’s success—he is fetishized and Orientalized and plays into such expectations and therefore “does not,” as Remy says, “transgress the cultural boundaries that have been mapped out for him—at least not those established by white society. One only has to think of Charlie Chan and Dr. Fu Manchu to understand that Lee acts in a manner expected of him.” But I see race as superceding culture in this moment, rather than what Remy takes from the scene—that “it was their cultural identities, as much as anything else, that shaped the futures of these two young people.” (David Remy, “Chinese Puzzle,” SPIKE Magazine, December 2000. 12 January 2001. <http://www.spikemagazine.com/1200/paisleyrekdal.html> ).


6. Issues surrounding the “model minority” myth are much larger than can be dealt with here. See, particularly, David Palumbo-Liu’s Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier for an outstanding reading of “model minority discourse” and Asian American literature, in general. Notably, Palumbo-Liu warns his readers that “model minority discourse” is an ideological construct not coextensive with the texts themselves, but rather designating a mode of apprehending, decoding, recoding, and producing Asian American narratives” (396). This point is crucial, for while I suggest that Asian Americans themselves have rules about how Asian American literature should represent the community, I agree that we should be vigilant about the counterdiscourses at work in
Asian American literature, in contrast with popularized readings of the field.


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