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# American Orientalism & Cosmopolitan Mixed Race: Reading Onoto Watanna and Han Suyin's Asian Mixed Race

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In 1909, Asian mixed race author Edith Eaton revealed her anti-racist beliefs when she wrote in "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian" that "only when the whole world becomes as one family will human beings be able to see clearly and hear distinctly" (223-224). Eaton's "one family" – which is clarified as "the world [being] Eurasian" (224) – blurs racial and national lines: "Individuality," Eaton goes on to claim, "is more than nationality" (230). The anti-racist cosmopolitanism Eaton begins to articulate in her short memoir is in fact part of a pattern that can be traced in the work of other Asian mixed race authors writing during the long period of Asian exclusion and enforced anti-miscegenation when racial mixing was legally proscribed in the United States. This paper offers a brief historicization of early Asian American mixed race representation and then examines texts, like Eaton's, that are written by Asian mixed race authors. While suggesting a larger field of inquiry, I will specifically read the work of Chinese-Canadian author Winnifred Eaton/Onoto Watanna and of Chinese-Belgian author Elisabeth Comber/Han Suyin.[1] I argue that the cosmopolitan existence of these authors allowed them room to shift and reimagine contemporaneous representations of mixed race and ultimately to articulate cosmopolitan visions of unity.

My use of the term "Asian American mixed race" in this paper is qualified. While "Asian American mixed race" is a useful term today, where it designates Asian racial mixture in the United States as well as a connection to an Asian American political identity, it is an imprecise and anachronistic term when used to mark this subject position before the 1960s. As I will develop in this paper, during this time period, Asian mixed race was a necessarily transnational subject position because of U.S. Asian exclusion laws and anti-miscegenation laws. Thus I will use "Asian mixed race" at times to emphasize the mixed race subject position of specific individuals living through this period. The term "Eurasian," often activated during this period around Asian mixed race in literature and film, will be a term used in relation to cultural production. For the purposes of this paper, I will use the term "Asian American mixed race" in order to clearly shape the connections between the past and the present, while

[1] Both Watanna and Han used pen names when publishing; because I am discussing their writing, I will refer to them from now on by their pen names.

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also emphasizing my focus on the particular discourses developed around Asian mixed race in the United States.

Before turning to Watanna and Han, I will discuss the context in which their writings emerged, as well as the dominant figurations of Asian American mixed race that their writings transformed. Early Asian American mixed race literature exists in the context of both yellow peril racialization and what Colleen Lye has described as the "radical informality" of Asian immigrant existence before the 1950s.[2] In *America's Asia* (2005), Lye describes yellow peril racialization as an aspect of American Orientalism, which characterizes Asian Americans as hostile and representative of "a host of modernity's dehumanizing effects" (11). Stemming from anxieties around the economic efficiency of Asia, yellow peril racialization reflected the early 20th century American imperialist concern over "the world becoming American [or] an apocalyptic clash of civilizations" (10). Such anxieties were revealed in Asian exclusion laws, but it is the way these anxieties are particularly revealed in anti-miscegenation laws that influences perceptions and depictions of early Asian American mixed race.

Anti-miscegenation laws, applied to Asians in the United States as early as the 1860s, were sites of "defining, producing, and reproducing racial categories" as the laws required race to be specified, often by blood quantum, immediately identifiable, and legally recorded through marriage licensing (Pascoe 9, 111). They were, in other words, laws that policed the boundaries of racial categories, naturalizing the illegitimacy of interracial love in order to restrict access to basic prerogatives of citizenship while also preventing the "amalgamation" of the races through legitimized marriage and the eventual birth of mixed race children. Anti-miscegenation laws prevented the legal and societal recognition of mixed race individuals. Such regulation was further bolstered by representations in cultural production. It is through literary and filmic stories of miscegenation and mixed race that the yellow peril anxieties of the early 20th century were often examined.

Susan Koshy's *Sexual Naturalization* (2004) traces the ideological function of such interracial romance narratives, suggesting that they provide "imaginative resolutions of social contradictions and offer ways to make sense of the social world" particularly around questions of race, gender, and class (19). Such regulation and representation of Asian American interracial love directly influenced early 20th century discourses around Asian American mixed race. Koshy importantly suggests that the depictions of Asian American interracial love in the United States exist in two spaces, the territorial and the extraterritorial; it is a split reflected also in conceptions of Asian American mixed race. In the early 20th century, territorial interracial love was both necessitated by a forced Asian bachelor society and restricted by highly regulative anti-miscegenation laws. Anti-miscegenation laws "police[d] the sexuality of a primarily male immigrant work force" and guaranteed that men of this bachelor society could not marry (Koshy 6, 7). Anti-miscegenation law and the cultural representations of doomed interracial love rendered Asian American mixed race as illegitimate and unnatural.

At the same time that interracial love within the nation was highly regulated, interracial coupling in the extraterritorial space of treaty port and military base proliferated, although in the specific form of white male-Asian female (Koshy 10). As

[2] Here I understand Lye to be referring to the discrepancy between the experience of Asian Americans as an organized, politically recognized and legally legible group in the latter half of the 20th century versus the existence of Asians in America at the turn of the century. It is an anachronism also existent when speaking about Asian American mixed race.

such, extraterritorial interracial relations meant an increase in the birth of mixed race children, and resulted in the association of mixed race children with stigmas of war in Asia like licentiousness and prostitution, abandonment and orphanages. The increased number of mixed race children born from these marriages helped to legitimize Asian American mixed race and laid the groundwork for the multiracial movement of the 1990s just as extraterritorial interracial couplings ultimately gained legitimacy and legibility for interracial marriage as postwar immigration law normalized the relationships (12). Before this kind of legitimacy gained traction in the 1950s, however, Asian American mixed race was marked by illegitimacy and unnaturalness, in part fostered by social conceptions of the territorial and extraterritorial existence of interracial love.

Reflecting their connection to the discourses of interracial love and yellow peril explored above, Orientalist texts, or texts emerging around American Orientalism, deploy Asian American mixed race in the early 20th century in a variety of ways. Texts such as Rex Beach's *Son of the Gods* (1929) and films including *Limehouse Blues* (1934) all feature Eurasian figures, most often abroad, who function symbolically to work through racial anxieties. As Gina Marchetti (1993) suggests in her exploration of yellow peril discourse in Hollywood film, "virtually every sort of interracial romantic narrative Hollywood has produced features Eurasian characters" and these characters' "association with one racial identity or the other varies according to the needs of the narrative" (68-9). In texts like Paris' *Kimono* (1921), for example, the Eurasian character is treacherous, connected to occult, and threatening Asia; other texts, like *Shanghai* (1935), feature a Eurasian character who is tragically torn, like stock 19th century tragic mulatto characters. Still other representations, such as those featured in versions of the Madame Butterfly story, suggest that Asian mixed race children can successfully assimilate into U.S. culture. Despite the variation in representation in these Orientalist texts, however, the mixed race individual is always symbolic, as Cynthia Nakashima (2001) has suggested, although it is a constantly shifting symbolism that juggles the territorial exclusion and extraterritorial existence of mixed race individuals. Such dual existence influences the network of texts this paper will now examine, as Asian mixed race authors and artists counter the proscription of mixed race in the United States and abroad by both embodying and writing mixed race in a cosmopolitan subject position.

While there are relatively few texts written by Asian mixed race authors in the first half of the 20th century, the authors and artists who were producing texts were well-known and, for the most part, successful. Authors and artists like Sadakichi Hartmann and Isamu Noguchi, for example, were key figures in modernism and moved in elite circles; Onoto Watanna and Han Suyin enjoyed commercial success and recognition. These mixed Asian authors and artists – who also include Diana Chang and Kathleen Tamagawa – were often born or raised abroad and traveled extensively within and outside of the United States over the course of their lifetimes. They were cosmopolitan figures, citizens of the world who travelled throughout Asia, Europe, and the United States, not permanently settling in one place. Yet this cosmopolitanism was not the "luxuriously free-floating view from above" of older cosmopolitan models, but a "plural and particular cosmopolitanism," a "reality of (re)attachment, multiple attachment, or attachment at a distance" (Robbins 1, 2-3). Living in transnational movement that reflected the material consequences of being Asian mixed race, particularly in a time of legal proscription and cultural discrimination, Asian mixed race authors and artists could encounter and represent the mixed-race figure outside of Orientalist deployments. Works by but not limited to Han Suyin and by Edith Eaton's

sister, Winnifred Eaton, negotiate Orientalist representations of mixed race while working towards flexible, non-symbolic representations of Asian mixed race, and articulating their own cosmopolitan visions.

Born to a Chinese mother and British father, raised in Canada, and living in various U.S. cities before settling permanently in Canada, Onoto Watanna masqueraded as a mixed race Japanese woman and wrote numerous novels and short stories about Japan. While she is often critiqued as a racial traitor and sellout because she disguised her Chinese background as a Japanese background and because she wrote within dominant stereotypes to sell books, Watanna has more recently been reclaimed by Asian American scholars and feminists who recognize Watanna as an early Asian American woman certainly writing to make a living, but also at times resisting dominant stereotypes in her writing.[3] Watanna's short stories and novels, as well as her invented identity, offer important insight into the self-representations of mixed race Asian authors published in the United States at the beginning of the 20th century *because* they were commercially successful. Watanna wrote stories and novels that at once conform to popular stereotypes of mixed race *and* contest these characterizations.

The short story "The Maneuvers of O-Yasu-San: The Little Joke on Mrs. Tom and Mr. Middleton" (1908) presents an apparently stereotypical mixed race character while also transforming her into a shifting, trickster figure.[4] The story follows mixed race protagonist Yasu as she comes between her aunt, Mrs. Tom, and Mrs. Tom's lover Mr. Middleton. Yasu is characterized early in the text as "entirely Japanese, in spite of her blood," interpreting Yasu's mixed race through both a blood and cultural racial logic, while privileging the latter (Watanna 97). Such hypodescent logic, enabling readers to identify Yasu as an Oriental other, is interrupted by assertions that "the history of her blood" accounts for "her uncertain temperament" (98). Yasu's mixed race identification, though erased by the logic of hypodescent, is thus rendered visible. Yasu herself denies that she is culturally "*all* Japanese" or entirely English (99). Instead, she clings to her identity as a mixed race woman, agreeing that she is "half-and-half" though that may make her "ridiculous" in the eyes of others (99). Such a confirmation, rather than presenting a tragically torn mixed race woman, reveals instead a strong and stubborn character.

Like her shifting identity, Yasu's apparent betrayal of her aunt simultaneously works to support and contradict the institution of marriage. Yasu intervenes in Mrs. Tom and Mr. Middleton's relationship in order to ensure that Mrs. Tom no longer cheats on her husband. In order to intervene, however, Yasu marries Mr. Middleton while insisting that this marriage will be a "liddle marriage" until her aunt leaves at which point she plans on "getting divorce, ride away" (107). Yasu's playful, scandalous, and contradictory "joke" could easily be read as a competition between women. At the same time, however, it bolsters *and* mocks marriage, a literary move that at once references the status of marriage in Japan – where marriages between white men and Japanese women were often short-term and disconnected from the connotations of

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[3] Linda Trinh Moser and Elizabeth Rooney offer a summary of Watanna's reception by recent critics in the introduction of *'A Half Caste' and Other Writings* (2003). Viet Nguyen's *Race & Resistance* offers perhaps the most trenchant analysis of the sisters' relative roles in Asian American studies, while Dominika Ferrens' *Edith and Winnifred Eaton: Chinatown Missions and Japanese Romances* offers an in-depth consideration of both Eaton sisters.

[4] Here I use the term trickster following Jonathan Brennan's use in *Mixed Race Literature*. Brennan understands trickster narratives as playful narratives that "overturn and undermine fixed expectations of identity and appropriate behavior" (8).

marriage in Europe and the United States – while also critiquing and playing with the anti-miscegenation laws which were at their peak during Watanna's career.

Watanna's "The Maneuvers of O-Yasu-San," then, reveals one way early Asian mixed race authors negotiated representations of mixed race. Playing with racial logic around mixed race, Watanna creates a culturally Japanese mixed race character who can be read as reproducing or as challenging racial and moral boundaries. It is a move present in Watanna's other texts, including stories like "A Half Caste" (1899). Watanna's characters' trickster identities are further reflected in Watanna's own posturing as a mixed race woman of Japanese descent fully acquainted with Japanese culture and society, despite gathering most of her information about Japan from travel narratives by authors including Pierre Loti and Lafcadio Hearn (Ferrens 44). Playing, like Yasu, with racial and moral boundaries, Watanna denied her Chinese-Canadian background, passing herself off instead as a Japanese-English author. Using this manufactured identity, Watanna was able to establish herself as an authority on Japan. Yet, as her success increased, she began to interrupt her created identity and assert the full extent of her cosmopolitanism, suggesting she was "'not Oriental or Occidental either, but Eurasian'" and "'Irish as well as English – Chinese as well as Japanese,'" so that her multiple affiliations meant she "'must bleed for both [her] nations'" (Watanna qtd in Ferrens, 139). Rather than identify herself as a culturally Japanese mixed race author *only*, Watanna, much like her character Yasu, asserted her multiple affiliations. Both in her career and in many of her stories, Watanna reinforces perceptions of Asian American mixed race on the surface of texts while surreptitiously disrupting them.

Han Suyin's *The Crippled Tree* (1965), written almost sixty years after Watanna's work, sheds light on the negotiations of Asian mixed race authors as they shift over time. Born in China and spending most of her adult life abroad in Europe and Asia, Han had very little connection to the United States. Yet her texts, particularly her book-turned-movie *A Many-Splendored Thing* (1952), were popular in the United States and thus became part of U.S. discourses around mixed race. *The Crippled Tree*, the highly-crafted first installment of a six-volume memoir, recalls Han's Chinese father and European mother's courtship as well as her own early childhood.[5] Han's sophisticated text embodies a fluid multiplicity in form and subject in order to reveal a functioning, non-symbolic, mixed race identity that extends to a cosmopolitan vision.

*The Crippled Tree* begins by setting up several "tragic" Eurasians, who are stock figures in Orientalist texts. There are descriptions of the "Annamite Eurasian," a "half-breed" who "behave[s] arrogantly" and tries to "curry favour with his white master" (160). The treacherous Eurasian is supplemented with a tragic description of Han's brother George/Chou Tzechun who has "two identities through his two names, rich heir to two cultures, two races, two of everything but his own torn self" (204). As Han describes, "being Eurasian was a calamity in those days," and her Eurasian characters, as well as monoracial characters, reflect upon such an experience (200). Han's mother, for instance, voices that her "children…belong nowhere" because "Eurasians are despised by everyone" (280). Han imagines her relatives describing her "like excreta," and, paralleling her description of her own parents' history, Han suggests that "if [her] parents' alliance was a quirk of history, so was [she]" (196). These kinds of descriptions

[5] Han's *China, Autobiography, History* memoir consists of *The Crippled Tree* (1965), *Mortal Flower* (1966), *Birdless Summer* (1968); *My House has Two Doors* (1980); *A Share of Loving* (1987); and *Wind in my Sleeve* (1992). *My House has Two Doors* is sometimes split into two texts, with the second text called *Phoenix Harvest*.

lead Han to write both her parents' relationship and her own existence through the metaphor of a crippled tree, an idea that resonates with assumptions of the biological and cultural inviability of mixed race individuals and interracial love.

These initial discourses around mixed race contrast with a new and prescient theorization of mixed race identity developed at the end of *The Crippled Tree*. Han describes her childhood as one that "from the start was duality, an other life, a saving otherness which was also self" (352). Such duality, representing her European and Chinese heritage, is revealed in *The Crippled Tree* through the two different voices of Han's childhood persona, Rosalie. These voices communicate with one another, "Rosalie to Rosalie," and Han records their conversations (370). This representation of duality is infused through the text formally as the story unfolds through Han's father's memoirs, her mother's voice, an authorial "I," and finally Rosalie's split voice. The duality in the narrative is thus a multiplicity, which develops also within Rosalie as she thinks about "all the Rosalies, all the different Rosalies-to-be" (371). Han clarifies that where others "who chose not to accept this splitting, fragmentation of monolithic identity into several selves, found themselves later unable to face the contradictions latent in their own beings," Rosalie learned that this is "the only way to live on, to live and to remain substantial" (369). Multiplicity, the text seems to argue, is the only way a complete and non-stereotyped mixed race identity can exist.

The use of multiplicity to depict mixed race and to compose her autobiography continues in other volumes of Han's memoirs. Han continues to refer to multiple Rosalies, multiple identities, and reveals her own shifting identity and affiliations as she moves through careers and nations. Further, she continues to construct her texts by giving voice to many narrators, whose narrated sections – often pages of texts – are bracketed by quotation marks, relinquishing Han's authority for that of her narrators'. Mixed race identity is arguably confronted the most in *The Crippled Tree* and *Mortal Flower*, but the earlier semi-autobiographical book *A Many-Splendored Thing* begins to articulate a cosmopolitan vision born of Han's experience as a mixed race woman living in and around China, Asia, and Europe during a series of wars, namely the Chinese Civil War, the Second Sino-Japanese War, and World War II. In a move similar to Edith Eaton's, referenced at the opening of this essay, Han claims in *A Many-Splendored Thing* that Eurasians are "the fusion of all that can become a world civilization" and "the future of the world" (208). This cosmopolitan vision of a future world civilization is predicated on affiliation through race, albeit mixed race. Han tempers this statement, however, with her later proclamation that "racial Eurasianism is not worth talking or writing about" but instead "intellectual Eurasians" who are "brought up between worlds" (235) should be discussed. Han begins to articulate, then, her cosmopolitan vision not as predicated on affiliation through race, but on a mixing and melding of thought, culture, and belief, on the recognition of multiple affiliations. The multiplicity theorized in Han's memoirs emerges as a cosmopolitan solution to Han's experience of war in the early half of the twentieth century.

Han's text expands Watanna's resistance by operating through innovations of subject and form, and by creating new theorizations of Asian mixed race, suggesting a literary genealogy for current texts by and about mixed race subjects. Han's *China, Autobiography, History* memoirs, and *A Many-Splendored Thing*, illustrate the shift in how mixed race authors could express and challenge depictions of mixed race at the end of the period in which mixed race was legally proscribed. Both Watanna and Han bring up questions about the negotiation of Asian American mixed race in literature in the early half of the 20th century, highlighting the importance of location and affiliation in such a

negotiation. In fact, it is perhaps the cosmopolitan identity of many of these early mixed race authors and artists that allowed the kinds of subversive explorations present in their work. This unique, transnational, and privileged position allowed acceptance of the experimentalism as well as the challenge to racial hierarchies which characterize their work because their location and the location of many of their stories was outside of the United States, which veiled the implications for American audiences. The relative privilege and acceptance of the authors also helped to ensure their texts and art would be maintained into the present. As such, these texts offer important glimpses into the way mixed race artists negotiated and used their identities to develop specific forms and themes to counteract dominant discourses. Continued readings of Han's other texts, as well as the works of the Eaton sisters, Hartmann, Chang, and Noguchi, will aid in expanding and addressing these explorations and implications of progressive mixed race themes and forms.

With the passage of legislation like the *War Brides Act* (1945) and legal victories like *Loving v. Virginia* (1967), the forced cosmopolitan existence of Asian mixed race began to shift as an increasing and legitimized population and representation of mixed race emerged in the United States.[6] Yet the progressive mixed race themes and forms these authors and artists produced continue to resonate today. With the current proliferation of mixed race and specifically Asian American mixed race representation – in film, literature, and advertisements – tracing early figurations of mixed race becomes even more crucial. Not only does it reveal convergences and divergences with American Orientalist tropes, but also connections and disconnections with the thematic and formal models of multiple affiliation imagined by early Asian mixed race authors and artists. Continued work uncovering this genealogy of Asian American mixed race cultural production will offer context and new ways of understanding contemporary figurations of Asian American mixed race.

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[6] Susan Koshy offers an exploration of immigration and antimiscegenation law in relation to interracial romance in *Sexual Naturalization*.

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