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Introducing Mixed Heritage Asian American Literature

By Wei Ming Dariotis

AALDP is motivated by an interest in foregrounding scholarship that is useful for pedagogy. We are concerned with reshaping Asian American literary studies discourse towards practical applications in the classroom or in learning environments.

What is special about this issue is the focus on mixed heritage Asian American literature. When I started working on this topic as a graduate student in the early 1990s, I worked in what felt like almost complete isolation. I had discovered Asian American literature as a senior in college, when the poet (then my creative writing classmate) Brian Komei Dempster dragged me, almost kicking and screaming, into a class taught by Shawn Wong on Chinese and Japanese American literature. By the end of my senior year, I had taken 4 classes from Shawn Wong, and served as his research assistant for the Before Columbus Foundation. His buddy, Frank Chin, came and spoke in our class and I was charged with babysitting Chin's mixed heritage son. The poet Li-Young Lee came and spoke with a small group of Wong's students. My biggest thrill, however, was meeting Jessica Hagedorn on a hot New York sidewalk outside the Nuyorican Poet's Café, inside which the Before Columbus Foundation was celebrating it's annual American Book Awards. Hagedorn was to be an awardee for her novel, *Dogeaters*, which had just blown my 20-year old mind. I had already applied to grad school with the intention of studying medieval English literature, but there was no going back.

When I began my PhD program in the fall, I was firmly determined to study Asian American literature. At the time, I knew this field was marginal within English literary studies, a fact further reinforced when one of my new professors asked what I intended to study. When I told him, "Asian American literature," he said, "I don't know anything about that," turned and never spoke to me again for 4 years. He was Chinese American. Luckily, Shirley Geok-lin Lim taught in my program, and we had a strong cohort dedicated to Asian American, African American, Chicano/a and Latina/o and post-colonial literature. My classmates and I mentored each other, and we had a few supporters amongst the faculty. Through my studies with Prof. Elliot Butler-Evans, in particular, I began to explore themes of mixed heritage identity in African American literature, and thus grounded, I sought them in Asian American literature as well. But I had few sources to study—the now substantial field of publications on the Eaton sisters, for example, had yet to begin. Prof. Lim's introduction to Diana Chang's *Frontiers*

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of Love was published in 1994—just when I was finishing my graduate coursework and it thus was a critical piece for me as I began to write my own dissertation.

Now, instead of just the Eatons, Chang, Han Suyin, Ai, Mei-mei Evans, and Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, there are so many mixed heritage Asian American poets, novelists, memoirists, and short fiction writers out there that I can barely keep track of them all. And now, instead of working in isolation, I find myself surrounded by a deep and broadening community of scholars dedicated to mixed heritage Asian American literary studies.

Just as we were finalizing editing on this issue of *AALDP*, I got a call from Lawrence-Minh Bùi Davis, asking me to consult on a special issue of the *Asian American Literary Review* focusing on . . . mixed heritage Asian American literature! I'm so excited that we seem to have finally reached critical mass as the mixed heritage Asian American population has not only increased exponentially, but has also come of an age to be writing and reading prolifically. This third issue of *AALDP* has the largest number of articles of any of our issues so far—eleven critical articles, one book review, and one interview with an author.

In some ways, mixed heritage Asian American literature needs no introduction because the Eaton sisters, Chinese North Americans of mixed heritage, were among the earliest published Asian American authors, and the themes and issues explored in their work, as well as those expressed by other well-known authors such as Han Suyin and Diana Chang, were recognized as part of the Asian American literary landscape in Chan et al.'s canon-building essay, "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake." However, mixed heritage Asian American literature remains outside Asian American literary studies in terms of other kinds of formal institutionalization. There has yet to be published an anthology of key texts in mixed heritage Asian American literature the way there have been for Korean American, South Asian American, Filipino American, and of course Chinese and Japanese American literature, though some mixed heritage writers have been included in each of these. This literature has yet to be thoroughly studied as such, to be analyzed for specific themes, issues, and even forms that might connect authors across time, space, and culture. The articles in this Special Edition of *AALDP* are the beginning of such an analysis, but I hope this is just a seed planted that will grow into forests I cannot yet imagine or see.

We start this issue with Smoke & Flowers: An Interview with Olivia Boler, a San Francisco-based author who's first novel, *Year of the Smoke Girl*, was published in 2000, by Dry Bones Press. Boler's second novel, *The Flower Bowl Spell*, was just published as an ebook. Both of her novels feature mixed heritage Chinese American protagonists, and the protagonist of the second novel is also a witch. It is Boler's interest in multiple forms of liminality that drew me to her work.

The foundations of Asian American literature from a mixed race perspective are investigated by Melissa Eriko Poulsen in her carefully researched and clearly articulated essay, "American Orientalism and Cosmopolitan Mixed Race: Early Asian American Mixed Race in the American Literary Imagination." Poulsen historicizes these works in the context of what Colleen Lye calls "yellow peril racialization" and the tension of interracial romance narratives. Poulsen hinges her argument on Susan Koshy's description of Asian American interracial

relationships being split between "the territorial and the extraterritorial," which is a particularly useful point of analysis for mixed heritage Asian American literary studies because of the particular ways war and colonialism have shaped mixed heritage Asian American identities. Juanita C. But's article, "The Making of a Eurasian: Writing, Miscegenation, and Redemption in Sui Sin Far" provides a very close reading of a particular key passage in the work of Sui Sin Far, thus offering a useful pairing with Poulsens's overview approach. Through Lacanian –influenced analysis, But reads Sui Sin Far as an "advocate" of those marginalized by virtue of their mixed heritage.

Building on the concern with how extraterritoriality shapes mixed heritage Asian American identity, Rania Youssef's "Betwixt and Between Past and Present: Cultural and Generic Hybridity in the Fiction of Mary Yukari Waters" constructs an analysis of the short fiction writer's historical fiction based in theories of liminality and the Anzalduan borderland. Analyzing another historical fiction, Chia-rong Wu's article, "Revisiting Local History and Ghostly Memory in Shawna Yang Ryan's Locke 1928," uses primarily a close reading of the text to analyze Ryan's ghost storytelling.

In "Realizing blacknpinay: Negotiating Notions of Authenticity in Janet Stickmon's *Crushing Soft Rubies,*" Teresa Hodges explores the experiences of being African American and Filipina, and provides concrete lesson plans for teaching Stickmon's work as well as related texts.

Women predominate in both writing mixed heritage Asian American literature and in analyzing it, but there is some concern with masculinity and identity being explored, as demonstrated in Cathy Irwin's "The Abjection of James Dean: Mixed Media/Mixed Race Performances in Ai's Poem, 'James Dean,'" which explores how the narrator of the poem "*dis*identifies with the cinematic image of hetero-normative white masculinity in order to integrate a sexuality usually abject or "outside" the domains of the ideal."

Kevin Escudero's "Multiracial Male Masculinity: A Critical Mixed Race Analysis of Brian Ascalon Roley's 'American Son'" analysis of Roley looks at constructions of fatherhood and family relationships, gender, and masculinity in a multiracial Asian American context, while Jaime Cleland's strongly pedagogical article, "Teaching Chang-rae Lee's *Aloft*: Exploring the Limits of Race and Ethnicity" provides a deep analysis of how the mixed race family in Lee's novel can be explored in a literary studies classroom. Audrey Wu Clark continues the analysis of Chang-rae Lee in "Disturbing Stereotypes: Fu Man/Chan and Dragon Lady Blossoms," which "focuses on the ways in which mixed heritage Asian Americans are abjected and also subjectified by anti-miscegenation sentiment in contemporary Asian American fiction" through her analysis of Lee's *A Gesture Life* (1999) and *Aloft* (2004) in the context of common Asian stereotypes.

Providing a much-needed meditation on how and to what effect we name ourselves, Nicole Myoshi Rabin's "Excursus on "Hapa;" or the Fate of Identity," explores the use of the term Hapa, noting in particular that "It is a term that in some ways depends on and produces the very notions it hopes to subvert… [because it is] bound to the discourse of division." Finally, in a very different kind of article, Elizabeth Liang write about her unique experience of staging a production of Chekov's *Three Sisters* with three mixed heritage Asian American actors in the title roles. Quite honestly, when I first received "A Hapa Family in

Chekhov's Three Sisters," I was not sure how it would fit in this volume—it is not literary analysis and it is not pedagogy. But as I worked with the author to help her respond to our reviewers' questions, I began to see how her exploration of the process of educating her director, cast-mates, and audience could work as a kind of pedagogy. Most importantly, her self-reflection about her own difficulties communicating about some of the issues that came up in the process provide a useful guide for teachers who may want to explore similar issues in their own classrooms. This is not just intellectual work—it can be personal, and it can be emotional. There is a reason that every semester, out of all the classes I teach, it is the course on Asian Americans of Mixed Heritage in which the students bond the most deeply. They connect so much with the material that they come back for visits, just to see how the next class is doing; every semester, a different group of students will do this. And in the 12 years I have been teaching this course, I have never failed to learn something about myself in the process. This material can bring up difficult things, and I hope that reading about Liang's journey will inspire similar reflections.

Our *AALDP* review this issue is by Cathy J Schlund-Vials and focuses on *This is All I Choose to Tell: History and Hybridity in Vietnamese American Literature*, the new, comprehensive analysis of and introduction to Vietnamese/American writers by Isabelle Thuy Pelaud. This first book on the topic has garnered much critical acclaim, and Schlund-Vials notes the texts' pedagogical impulse as well as the focus on a transnational theory of hybridity, which, according to Pelaud, is "useful because it incorporates all Asian American identities regardless of politics" (50).

This inclusivity really is the goal of this special issue—it is meant to show that mixed heritage Asian Americans are Asian America and we are in the center of Asian American literature because we must reconceptualize our borders so that there are no longer any margins.

Acknowledgements:

Everyone at *AALDP* would like to thank Steve Jones for generously donating his skills and time in designing the cover of this volume of *Asian American Literature: Discourses and Pedagogies*. He is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Design and Industry at San Francisco State University. He is also a co-founder of Plantain Studio, a multidisciplinary design studio in Oakland, California. Their website is www.plantainstudio.com.