Asian American Literature: Discourses and Pedagogies
3 (2012) 80-87.

Multiracial Male Masculinity: A Critical Mixed Race Analysis of Brian Ascalon Roley's *American Son*

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Set in Los Angeles in 1993, the year immediately following the historic Los Angeles Uprising, Brian Ascalon Roley's novel, *American Son*, complicates the supernatural/degenerate dichotomy oftentimes present in depictions of multiracial individuals in visual and literary texts.[1] Blending the narrative of two Filipino-white American teenage brothers' coming of age experience with a discussion of their divergent experiences coping with their multiracial identities, Roley's text brings forth a discussion of masculinity and notions of fatherhood in a multiracial context. It is these family relations and the interconnected themes of gender/masculinity, that complicate the experiences of being "mixed race" as not solely tied to one's racial/ethnic background, but also to experiences in the home, among family members and between siblings. Utilizing a critical mixed race studies approach centering multiracial identity as the analytical lens through which to read the novel, this essay will explore Roley's focus on gender and multiracial male identity as compared to contemporary depictions of such characters in mainstream film and literature.[2] Largely tied to the ability of

[1] Note on terminology: Throughout this essay I use the terms "mixed race," "multiracial" and "mixed heritage" interchangeably as all referring to individuals of multiple racial/ethnic backgrounds. For the purposes of identifying specific characters and/or individuals as mixed race, I will focus on the individual's own method of self-identification. For a discussion of the supernatural/degenerate dichotomy present in historical representations of multiracial individuals see Cynthia Nakashima's chapter, "Servants of Culture: The Symbolic Role of Mixed-Race Asians in American Discourse" in *The Sum of Our Parts: Mixed Heritage Asian Americans* and Leilani Nishime's article, "The Mulatto Cyborg: Imaging a Multiracial Future" in *Cinema Journal*.

[2] According to the Critical Mixed Race Studies Association Website, CMRS can be defined as "the transracial, transdisciplinary, and transnational critical analysis of the institutionalization of social, cultural, and political orders based on dominant conceptions of race. CMRS emphasizes the mutability of race and the porosity of racial boundaries in order to critique processes of racialization and social stratification based on race. CMRS addresses local and global systemic injustices rooted in systems of racialization." In his keynote address at the inaugural 2010 Critical Mixed Race Studies Conference, Andrew Jolivette, described Critical Mixed Race Studies as comprised of four basic components: social justice, self-determination, cross-ethnic and transracial solidarity and radical love. In my analysis, I employ the use of a Critical Mixed Race Studies approach foregrounding the lived experience of being multiracial as the primary analytical lens through which to read Roley's novel. Following in the tradition of a critical race/gender framework, this essay seeks to develop the meaning of such an analysis for multiracial figures in film and literature.

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ISSN: 2154-2171

multiracial male characters (actors and literary figures) to replicate the hyper-masculine traits of their dominant (read: non-white) heritage – masculinity for mixed race men has many times been rendered a decision where these men must choose one aspect of their identity over another. Roley's novel takes up this issue by recounting the coming of age experiences of two brothers, Tomas and Gabe, where the reader is simultaneously presented with the divergent examples of each brothers' coping strategy. Although the experiences of Gabe – the shy, quiet, "softer" younger brother – initially stand in stark contrast to those of Tomas who wears "wifebeater" t-shirts and has his arms and upper body adorned with "Mexican-looking" tattoos, when analyzed primarily from a gender lens, the combination of a gender reading with a critical mixed race analysis allows the reader to examine the way that Roley's novel takes up multiracial identity and passing through the lens of gender/sexuality. Therefore, this essay will elaborate on the complex nature of navigating both these identities for Gabe and Tomas in the context of their transition from childhood to adolescence as two mixed race Filipino-white brothers.

Depicting some multiracial men as predominantly super-human and hyper-masculine and others as having an "effeminate masculinity," mainstream contemporary media's portrayals of mixed race men have differed based on the individual's racial/ethnic composition as well as their varying degrees of embrace of their multiracial identity. Gregory Carter (2008) contrasts representations of two multiracial black men, Vin Diesel and Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson. Citing Diesel's inability to relate to his African American heritage growing up in a single-parent household and vague responses when questioned about his racial/ethnic background, Carter argues that the black entertainment community has seldom looked to Diesel as a member of their community. Yet Dwayne Johnson, who proudly proclaims his multiracial African-American/Samoan identity, is well embraced by the Black community having appeared in *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines and BET. Taking cue from the ways in which multiracial men are depicted in mainstream media can help inform the navigation by adolescent mixed race men like Roley's Gabe and Tomas. Jane Park (2008), focusing on the representation of multiracial Asian male action hero Keanu Reeves, in contrast to that of Vin Diesel and Dwayne Johnson, finds that Reeves is depicted as "embodying and performing a softer, somewhat 'effeminized' masculinity that has been associated with men of East Asian descent in the US imaginary…Neo [Reeve's character] does not exhibit the recognizable machismo traits of the traditional Hollywood male action star" (189). Instead, according to Park, Reeves represents the epitome of Asian masculinity, resisting subscribing to a hegemonic worldview centered on the perspective of the heterosexual white male. Commenting on the construction of Asian masculinity from a Western worldview as inferior, Eleanor Ty (2004) explains, "masculinity identity has been problematic for the Asian American male from the start. Historically Asian males were subjected to exclusion laws, regarded as unassimilable, and represented as threats to society. They were also feminized because of their work in laundries, restaurants and tailor shops…" (125). Such notions of Asian American masculinity have found themselves inscribed upon the bodies of mixed Asian males, and thus, depending on the racial mixture of the male actor or character, differing degrees and forms of masculinity are imprinted upon the bodies of these men. Asian male masculinity, as mapped onto the bodies of multiracial Asian men, is thus in direct contrast to the imprinting of non-white masculinity on mixed race Black and Latino men. Cautioning against an easy fix of the men of color emulating the masculine traits of the socially dominant white male, Ty (2008) cites the argument of Kobena Mercer and Issac Julien

that "in order to contest contradictions of dependency and powerlessness which racism and racial oppression enforce, macho attitudes are developed as a form of misdirected or 'negative' resistance, as it is shaped by the challenge to the hegemony of the socially dominant white male, yet assumes a form which is in turn oppressive to black women, children and indeed, to black men themselves…[as well as to other people of color]" (125). Men of color who take part in "macho" negative resistance can also be extended to multiracial men, in particular those who are white-nonwhite. Yet, in this process, heterosexual multiracial males assume gender roles that work to resist the dominance of the heterosexual white male, but simultaneously express a fluid racial identity that moves away from the tendency in popular culture to associate mixed race males with the stereotyped gender role of their non-white selves.

Allowing for a malleable racial and gender identity for each individual character in the text, both Gabe and Tomas in Roley's *American Son,* offer an alternative to these standard media and cultural depictions of mixed race men today. Multiracial Asian males are oftentimes portrayed as being less masculine in relation to their peers due to their partial Asian ancestry. Tomas, the oldest brother, represents an essentialized non-white masculine identity of a Mexican American "gangster" while Gabe is representative of a "softer," Asian masculinity that Park refers to in her analysis. In this context, "passing," which holds particular salience for individuals of mixed heritage, becomes important to explaining the differential experiences of Tomas and Gabe in asserting contrasting racial and gender identities throughout the novel.[3]

Tomas' initial identity as a white surfer was first, not convincing enough to satisfy his peers at school and second, did not provide a defense against taunting remarks from his peers who chastised him for his "inferior" racial identity as a multiracial Asian American. He therefore seeks to pass as a hyper-masculine Mexican gang member to counter white heterosexual masculinity that demeans and marginalizes men of color and communities of color. As mentioned prior, this strategy, while reproducing patriarchal norms within communities of color, is a defense mechanism that non-white males are able to utilize to deflect white hetero-patriarchal norms. In order to assert a more acceptable gender identity from the perspective of the hegemonic white male, Eleanor Ty (2004) argues, "Seeing himself through the gaze of a dominant culture that views him as servile, feminized and different, Tomas is ashamed of being identified as Filipino American…To defend himself against ridicule and prejudice…[he] inscribes his desired Mexican identity onto his body" (123-124). Tomas' identity as a Mexican American does in fact prove useful in certain contexts, for example, to purchase the attack dogs that he trains and sells to wealthy Hollywood actors and celebrities on the Westside. Yet, in other instances, his authenticity as Mexican is challenged by apparently "authentic" members of the community, usually made obvious in his inability to respond to questions and remarks others make in Spanish. This occurs during the brothers' visit to a Brentwood pizza shop where Gabe observes, "A few people watch us eat. Probably they are taking note of Tomas. A fortyish woman in slender black bicycle pants and a pink T-shirt…The wetback behind the pizza counter spoke a few words of Spanish to my brother. Tomas did not understand the Spanish, though he nodded and tried to make it look as if he understood" (39). The hypermasculine identity Tomas assumes of a macho Chicano

[3] According to legal scholar Randal Kennedy (2004) "passing" can be understood as "a deception that enables a person to adopt specific roles or identities from which he or she would otherwise be barred by prevailing social standards" (283).

male, stands in stark contrast to the effeminate masculinity inscribed upon multiracial Asian males in mainstream media, and that Gabe, his younger brother, is accused of portraying. When a client visits the family's home early on in the text for a demonstration of the attack dog's abilities, Tomas becomes impatient with Gabe's pestering for him to come into the house and tells him to "go back inside" because "...if the client sees you standing there like that he's gonna think you're my houseboy" (18). Similar to the fear Gabe harbors when traveling with the truck driver worrying that he may be identified for not being mono-racially white and instead, part Asian, Tomas too fears being identified as "a fraud." Tests of cultural competency such as the ability to speak Spanish are viewed in this instance as more thorough and legitimate than phenotypical appearance or behavior. Yet, according to Maria Root's "Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People," multiracial people who navigate and assert multiple racial/ethnic identities have the right to identify themselves "differently than strangers expect me to identify, differently than how my parents identify me, differently than my brothers and sisters identify and differently in different situations" as an act of resistance, "refusing to fragment, marginalize or disconnect ourselves from people and from ourselves" (6-7). While a significant challenge for multiracial individuals who assert identities different than how their peers perceive them to be, exerting a non-dominant or non-mainstream identity can also be viewed as an act of exerting one's agency. This act of resistance to dominant categories by exerting multiple racial/ethnic identities in various circumstances is a right, but also an act of countering essentialized racial categories and a stringent racial order built upon the assumption of clearly cut, mono-racial identities for all people, eliding the very existence of multiracial people and their multiple racial identities/experiences. Though Tomas himself is not racially Mexican, his "ambiguous multiracial identity" and ability to pass as a hypermasculine Chicano, illustrates how passing is largely based in the power-differential/power relationship between the viewer and subject. In this case, passing is not merely a powerless act in which mixed race people engage to suppress certain aspects of their racial identity, but can also function as a strategy to conveniently exert an entire new identity in itself.

For Gabe, his ability to pass as white, is most useful when he runs away from home and finds himself in Central California, among a homogenous white American community and be-friends a truck driver who treats him as his own son. Acting as a foil to the construction of masculinity exhibited by Tomas, Gabe finds himself passing as the figurative white "son" of a racist truck driver who makes derogatory comments with regard to Asian and Latino immigrants in Southern California. While these comments make Gabe uneasy, he finds himself constantly under pressure of being discovered as mixed race: "Suddenly I notice my reflection in the mirrored glass and it appears so obviously Asian I almost stop in my tracks. My eyes look narrow, and my hair straight and coarse and black. He must be blind…My heart thumps in my throat – if someone recognizes me after what I said to him about Asians – I don't know…" (90-91). Similar of the scrutiny under which Tomas' finds himself while asserting a hypermasculine Mexican identity, Gabe too finds himself under scrutiny, mischaracterized as a Mexican, by men Roley describes as behaving in a way that Tomas seeks to aspire to emulate. Left alone in the kitchen while for a few minutes, Gabe is confronted by a group of Mexican men who ask, "So what are you doing around here?...Who do you run with?" (100). Mistaking Gabe for one of their own, the two brothers' interactions with passing or failing to pass as Mexican takes on an interesting characteristic – advantageous for Tomas who seeks to improve his ability to

disassociate himself from an effeminate Asian masculinity, but threatening to Gabe who instead asserts the dominance of his white racial identity seeking to pass as monoracially white.

Furthermore, aside from the differential construction of multiracial Asian masculinity, Roley's text also includes a complicated web of father-son type relationships beginning with the failed relationship between Gabe, Tomas and their father and continuing with Gabe seeking mentorship from both Tomas and the truck driver. While masculine relationships for adolescents such as Gabe and Tomas, are often built upon or rooted in their relationships with their fathers or a father figure in the household, Tomas and Gabe do not have access to such a figure. Related to the issue of passing, father/son relationships are important to the boys' decision in terms of how to engage with their white heritage. Because they do not associate very often with white family members and did not grow up with their father they do not know about white culture. The boys' mother seeks to find a replacement for this void and, responding to pressure from their Uncle Betino in the Philippines, even considers sending Gabe and Tomas to live with him and his family in Forbes Park. All these relationships, while shortsighted attempts at replacing the void left by their biological father, point to the novel's use of male relationships and mentorship as the primary means of Gabe and Tomas finding their place in society as "American Sons." Gabe and Tomas' white American soldier father and their Filipina mother moved to the United States when Gabe was 6 years old. The boys' father, absent for the majority of their lives, returns briefly for a few days, becomes drunk and irate one night and eventually leaves never to return. During his drunken tirade, their father insults the boys' mother and her Filipino family: "On his third night home he got drunk and started mashing my model rockets and I tried telling him to stop and he struck me…He wiped his forehead and then looked up at my brother…and told him he only married her [my mom] because he wanted someone meek and obedient, but had been fooled because she came with a nagging extended family. He said he never intended to come back to us permanently and only wanted to sleep with her, and now he had gotten what he wanted he would leave… (24). Notions of a meek, servile Asian woman, contrasted with an abusive white American man are reminiscent of a legacy of U.S. militarism in Asia and children resulting from unions between Asian women and American soldiers. In this scene, Tomas both literally and figuratively pushes the father out of the house and symbolically ascends to the dominant male position in the household. The absence of the father in these situations is generally attributed to not caring or not wanting to be present in the lives of the children. While this may be the case, Tomas, as he comes of age and gradually asserts a more masculine identity, views it as his responsibility to protect his mother and younger brother. Though this can be read as an act of concern and care for their mother and Gabe, it also functions as an opportunity for Tomas to exert his hyper-masculine identity, a persona that marginalizes Gabe and the mother's ability to act freely and independently. This reinforces Merner and Julien's argument that while this exertion of a hyper-masculine identity serves as a defense for men of color against white male dominance, it does so at the expense of others in the community.

Nonetheless, Tomas' attempt at guiding his younger brother into adulthood, despite his dominant position in the household, is initially unsuccessful; Gabe often reminisces about how he feels that Tomas is ashamed of him and eventually runs away to Oregon finding the truck driver to whom he looks for fatherly acceptance and guidance. Still searching to fill the void of an older male figure, Gabe, notices that

"Suddenly he [the truck driver] looks upon me with fatherly concern. An overwhelming warmth spreads over me…Blushing, I turn away" (86). Physically distant, but constantly updated as to the boys' status by their mother, Uncle Benito, whose letters preface each section of the novel, reminisces about how Gabe and Tomas were "nice young boys" during their last visit to the Philippines, but is upset upon hearing their mother's description of the boys' increasingly deviant behavior: Tomas being kicked out of Catholic school and Gabe's declining grades. The novel ends, however, with Gabe and Tomas' relationship becoming reconciled as Tomas succeeds in completing the transformation of Gabe from a soft, shy younger brother to a hypermasculine macho male such as himself. This initial distinction between Gabe and Tomas' assertion of their masculine identity is important in that Tomas' fatherly guidance of Gabe into adulthood is signified by his ability to transform Gabe from a stereotypical "weak, effeminate, de-sexed Asian male," into a masculine, violent man of color. Had the boys' actual father been present, a similar transformation may have taken place, but one that was modeled after a dominant white masculinity in contrast to the stereotypical non-white hyper-masculinity that Tomas models for Gabe.

In order to bring about Gabe's transformation from exhibiting a more effeminate masculinity to a macho hypermasculinity, Roley uses Gabe's behavior following his return home from Oregon and the "penance" he must pay his brother for stealing the car and selling his dog. This particular "favor" Tomas has Gabe carry out for him, stealing a portion of marijuana hidden in the glove box of Eddy Ho's car, is much riskier than the others as it takes place during the day and Eddy Ho is a former classmate of the brothers. During the attempt to break into Eddy's car, Eddy emerges from his apartment and pulls out a knife, with which he threatens Gabe. At which point the author describes Gabe wielding a tire iron and standing across form Eddy Ho, who is holding a knife, both boys starting at each other down to see who will make the first move. This confrontation proves to Tomas that Gabe is in not what everyone expects him to be: a quiet, shy, passive Asian male. After Gabe has shown his willingness to confront Eddy and appeased by Gabe's expression of aggression Ho, Tomas steps in to defend Gabe, and finishes the job himself. Describing Eddy Ho as he lies on the ground and the imminent beating he will receive from Tomas, Gabe remarks, "My brother has steel-toed boots. When he descends on him, Eddy is all curled up against a corner, and for a moment I see Eddy's eyes pleading for help. Tomas kicks the back of Eddy's knuckles and they look crooked and broken, bleeding, the skin torn off the thumb. The sound of his boot slapping into Eddy's back and legs sounds like a hammer thumping into raw meat" (155). Reminiscent of a gang initiation, Gabe's transformation is both an exertion of his newfound masculine identity and an attempt to reconcile the lack of a father figure with his yearning for such an individual in his life. Commenting not on the transformation that he is undergoing, but on the shift in his brothers' treatment and attitude towards him, Gabe reflects, "He's been especially nice ever since we went down to Eddy Ho's. Since then he has not beaten or picked on me in front of his friends…A couple of times he has even taken me with him to hang out" (171). As a multiracial male, it is difficult for Gabe to decide what racialized form of masculinity applies to his Filipino-white body, but following the example of his older brother, he decides upon one mimicking that of Tomas. Later, Gabe and Tomas collectively engage in exerting their non-white hypermasculinity by attacking another classmate from school, Ben, whose mother publicly embarrassed Tomas and Gabe's mom in the school parking lot. At the end of the text, it seems that Tomas' transformation is complete in that he no longer feels for the victims of the violence he and his brother enact. After the

beating of Ben, Tomas assumes the fatherly position in Gabe's life: "He [Tomas] looks forward again and seems to ponder this. He nods. He sets his hand on me and I tense because he has never done it this way before, but the gesture feels somehow familiar. Then it dawns on me [Gabe] that this is probably something that my father used to do to both of us" (216). Yet, following this transformation, Gabe is unsure of the implications of this shift in the family structure and of what his newfound hypermasculine identity means and what other "chores" his brother will ask him to carry out next, he runs away.

The hypermasculinity Tomas and now Gabe exhibit is constructed at the expense of reinforcing the image of a weak Asian female character: the boys' mother. The construction of the boys' masculinity is epitomized by the direct comparison of Tomas' behavior and Gabe's transformation with the foil of their Filipina mother. When Tomas steals items from people's homes, he looks for things his mother would like and brings them into the house. Though her income is not enough to provide these items, Tomas views it as his responsibility to try and provide them for her. And when Gabe's mom is humiliated in front of parents and other students at school, Gabe and Tomas take it into their own hands to act on her behalf, beating Ben and threatening him unless he tells his mother to stop pursuing his mother for money to fix her car. Angry at Tomas after he tells the truck driver she is his maid, their mom does not scold him, but instead sulks in silence, alone. Rendered as quiet and submissive, holding limited, if any authority, she speaks infrequently throughout the text.

Despite her lack of dialogue, Roley also uses her character to illustrate an important aspect of the mixed race experience – racial misclassification. Though not identifying as multiracial herself, she is the mother of two mixed race children, and in two of the novel's scenes, is misidentified by observers as both the family's maid and as a complete stranger. As noted by sociologists Mary Campbell and Lisa Troyer (2007), racial misclassification has negative effects and causes anxiety for individuals who identify differently. Further, the social and psychological stress for multiracial individuals who identify oftentimes as members of multiple cultures and/or racial/ethnic groups constantly find not only the legitimacy of their social identity constantly challenged, but so too the legitimacy of their family relationships. Questions by outsiders such as "oh, is that your son?" or "is that your mother?" are not uncommon experiences for those in mixed marriages or for "monoracial" parents who are seen with multiracial children, in which case the children are mistaken as not theirs. For Gabe, because of his ability to pass as white and his mother's non-white identity, neither the truck driver nor the store clerk sees a family relationship or connection between the two. Able to assert a privileged mono-racial white identity, Gabe also understands the experiences of non-white racial discrimination through his situational identity as a Filipino American. This unique characteristic of multiracial identity is therefore extremely challenging as such individuals seek to navigate the meaning of multiple cultures/identities, but also in particular when one of these identities holds more privilege over the other(s). Coupled with issues of fatherhood, adolescence and the formation of a masculine identity, Roley's novel reveals that these facets of Gabe and Tomas' life are much more interconnected than may initially be seen.

Beginning with the question of how differential gender identities affect one's racial identity, in particular if the individual self-identifies as multiracial, this essay extends the work undertaken by mixed race scholars that has primarily focused on the extent to which one's sexual orientation impacts the formation of a multiracial identity. Building on the work of contemporary film scholars who have begun theorizing the

meaning of gender for mixed race actors and celebrities, what I've tried to analyze in Roley's text is the socially constructed nature of mixed race identity, and also its intersection and relationship to other social constructed identities, more specifically, gender. Influenced by a variety of other socially constructed identities, multiracial identity can and does oftentimes manifest itself as a unique experience for each individual. Although one could assume an individual's racial and gender identities, while mutually constituted, develop independently from the perception of others, as highlighted by Gabe and Tomas' experience, the context of one's multiracial identity complicates this process of racial and gender identity formation, two processes that the novel demonstrates are inextricably linked and co-constituted. Documenting the experiences of two Filipino-white youth's transition into adolescence, *American Son* traces the socially constructed nature of gender and racial identity, while highlighting the various mechanisms and strategies used to cope with the complex nature of these identities.

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