

REVISITING OUR HISTORY: BLACK-ASIAN TROPES IN
AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE 1980s TO THE PRESENT

By

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A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

English - Doctor of Philosophy

2016

ABSTRACT

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This dissertation establishes a space to explore Black-Asian tropes in African American literature written since the 1980s. I examine African American literary works that feature Black-Asian relations, encounters, and alliances. I argue that a distinct kind of discourse is occurring when African American literature feature Black-Asian tropes; it is a discussion that decenters and has the potential to disrupt common debates of Black-White readings of American literature, in general. I start my analysis with the 1980s because I am interested in AfroAsian motifs in Contemporary African American literature. In 1984, Velina Hasu Houston's drama, *American Dreams*, was performed on a off-Broadway stage by the Negro Ensemble Company, and featured an African American-Japanese couple coming home to the husband's non-receptive relatives in Harlem, New York. In 1988, Octavia Butler's *Adulthood Rites* was published and depicted a Black-Chinese half-human, half-alien being trying to understand his alterity. In 1993, Ishmael Reed's *Japanese By Spring* was published and illustrated how an African American college professor attempts to politically align himself with a Japanese college president in the hopes of obtaining tenure at a predominantly White college. In the 2000s, Jacqueline A. Sue's *Cornbread and Dim Sum: A Heart Glow Romance* (2004) and Angela Weaver's *No Ordinary Love* (2009) featured romantic relationships between African American women and Chinese men. The core of my analysis is to interpret the shared experiences between African Americans and two Asian

American groups, Japanese and Chinese. Each author's literary imagination seeks to call into existence a Black-Asian presence.

History, law, and some social science help explain the relationships represented in each text. In each chapter, I discuss forgotten histories, such as the impact of Japanese and Chinese emigrants on the American labor force of the 1800s; the relocation of American soldiers to Kansas due to segregation laws in other parts of the United States during the 1950s; African American supporters of the Pro-Japan movements in the 1930s; and the effect of American racial laws on interracial couples prior to the US Supreme Court ruling on *Loving vs. Virginia of 1967*. These historical references are included in literature across genres, including drama, science fiction, satire, and romance, and cover topics on colorism, multiethnic identity, and interracial relationships. Furthermore, in this study, I attempt to address a popular cultural term, Blasian, that encapsulates contemporary experiences of African and Asian Americans in the United States. By the end of the dissertation, I define and discuss what Blasian Narratives are and create a literary and cultural niche for exploring more Blasian experiences.

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To my mother, Sylvia Braddox, for her unconditional loving support; to Victoria Waddell, for being the best friend a person could ever have; and to Ruthie, Lily, and Timothy Eng, who are the source of inspiration for this research endeavor.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Foremost, thank you, Ms. Sylvia Braddox, for going above and beyond the call of duty to assist me through this journey.

Revisiting Our History is the result of the guidance and support received from my committee: Drs. Patrick O'Donnell, Scott Michaelsen, Terrion L. Williamson, Pero Dagbovie, and Geneva Smitherman. Thank you so much for your patience and guidance.

There are a host of individuals and groups that I need to thank for their loving support: Victoria Waddell and the Waddell family; the Braddox-Clapp family; Relly Harris; Tavia and Joseph Gilchrist; Natasha and Kevin Wilson; the MSU Friday lunch crew: Bernadette Sherice Russell, Willa Williams, Anita Eberhard, and Anita Morris; all of the brothers and sisters in Michigan, especially the East Lansing, West Lansing, Okemos, and Central Lansing congregations; my friends in the Broadway congregation (in Brooklyn) and in several congregations in New York City, including: Christopher and Salimi Smallwood, Cathy Michelle Jenkins, Melissa (Wallen) Cofield, Iris and Taurea Glisson, Julia Davis, Marcy Mallory, Maria Dunn, and many others.

I cannot forget the academic and financial support received from: Drs. Zarena Aslami, Judith Stoddart, and Jyotsna Singh; Department of English at Michigan State University; Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship (MMUF); Social Science Research Council (SSRC); The Graduate School at Michigan State University; College of Arts and Letters at Michigan State University; and Williejames and Wanda Dobson. THANK YOU!

Last, but not least, I thank my MSU Writing Center Writing Group: Kamahra Ewing, McKinley Green, and Hogeun Park and my Virtual Support Group (VSG): Dr. Lisa Barksdale-Shaw, Tiffany Player (MMUF), Kamahra Ewing (WCW Group), Emilie Diouf, and Sandra Beals for their moral support while writing the dissertation. A big thank you to the National Center for Faculty Diversity and Development (NCFDD) for their awesome Dissertation Success Program (DSP). I give a whole-hearted thank you to the AAAS and AGEP families at Michigan State University. Most importantly, I cannot forget who planted the idea of pursuing a doctorate and miss this opportunity to thank Mr. Robert Scott, Prof. Margarite Fernández Olmos, and the MMUF family at Brooklyn College-CUNY.

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REVISITING OUR HISTORY: BLACK-ASIAN TROPES IN AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE 1980s TO THE PRESENT

“We have the power to call our reality into existence.”

— from Sam Cacas’ *BLAsian Exchanges*

Sam Cacas’ *BLAsian Exchanges* was the first memoir I read that featured a Filipino man’s adoration for Black women. The epigraph sets the tone for my current research project that discusses the different ways in which African American and Asian American groups have interacted with one another since the 1800s, and how these relationships are represented in American literature. Specifically, I focus on literary works written by African American authors. In this study, I close read the following literature: Velina Hasu Houston’s *American Dreams*, Octavia Butler’s *Adulthood Rites*, Ishmael Reed’s *Japanese By Spring*, Jacqueline A. Sue’s *Cornbread and Dim Sum: A Heart Glow Romance*, and Angela Weaver’s *No Ordinary Love*. The sampling crosses literary genres, such as drama, novel, and memoir, featuring a Black-Asian relationship or trope. The literature was selected based on African American encounters with Japanese immigrants and Chinese/Chinese Americans that featured Black-Asian intimate, familial and political relationships. In addition, I selected these literary works based on when they were published and the period covered. A previous study conducted by Julia H. Lee, in *Interracial Encounters: Reciprocal Representations in African American and Asian American Literatures, 1896-1937*, focused on literary works published prior to the 1940s that were classified as AfroAsian literature. In my dissertation, I focus on works written since 1980, but still cover or use a setting based in the 1950s to the present. This study continues discussions on

works published after 1980s that feature the conflicts and solidarities in the relationships of African Americans and Asian Americans since the mid-twentieth century.

BlAsian Exchanges is the muse for this dissertation project. In general, my research interests include multiethnic identities and passing narratives featured in African American literature and film. Much of the research in the beginning stages of my doctoral candidacy concentrated on Black-White binaries. The more I read about this aspect of multiracial experiences, the more I questioned whether there were other stories to be researched; I needed to know more about the experiences of those who identified with one of many African American cultures and with one of many Asian American cultures. My decision to research and write about the representations of Black-Asian relationships in African American literature was much more deeply pondered for several years. Hence, my interest in how the history of African Americans connects and intersects with the history of Asian Americans is not a new curiosity. My interest aligned with the above epigraph in that the reality of Black-Asian relationships needs to be brought into a more recognizable existence in literary scholarship.

The Black-Asian tropes in the sample of literary works spotlight the long history of encounters and alliances between African Americans and two Asian American groups, i.e., Japanese/Japanese Americans and Chinese/Chinese Americans. I posit that a Black-Asian reading of texts depicting relationships between African Americans and Asian Americans departs from de facto Black-White readings of African American literature. A Black-White reading refers to usual master/slave, majority/minority, oppressor/oppressed, and colonizer/colonized frameworks in which racial injustice and economic inequality are the overarching themes. A Black-Asian reading is not specifically guided by the power dichotomies often argued in Black-

White readings. This kind of reading examines progressive identity politics, self-empowerment, and the formation of alliances. In most Black-Asian texts, the focus is on the relations between African and Asian nations. Encounters with European groups are mentioned; however, the center for Black-Asian literature is the history, the politics, and the cultural exchanges occurring between African and Asian groups.

Before I embark on more in-depth research on the cultural aspects of the relationships between African American and Asian American groups, the research in this dissertation introduces areas of interest in Black-Asian discourse in the United States since the 1980s. The four chapters in this study discuss significant historical moments and American laws that influenced the interactions between African Americans and different Asian groups in America: African American soldiers reassigned and relocated to Kansas, considered a safe space for men who married Japanese women; the hostile labor conditions experienced by both African Americans and Chinese Americans after American slavery was abolished and Asian men sought work on the railroads; Pro-Japanese social movements supported by African Americans in the 1930s; and Chinese men marrying African American women before the U.S. Supreme Court ruling on the *Loving vs. Virginia (1967)* case.

KEY SOURCES CONSULTED

AfroAsian scholarship emerged over a decade after the Bandung Conference of 1955, circa late 1970s. (Raphael-Hernandez and Sheen Location 150). The scholarship was concentrated in either African American (Black) Studies or Asian American studies. In *AfroAsian Encounters: Culture, History, Politics*, Heike Raphael-Hernandez and Shannon Steen

nicely historicize the development of AfroAsian Studies, thus, providing a nascent of when the discourse entered into the academy as a field of study. For the most part, the discourse has painted African and Asian groups as perpetually at odds with one another. Raphael-Hernandez and Sheen's anthology presents another aspect of AfroAsian relations; one of solidarity. The anthologized essays do not ignore the contentions that have existed between the groups, rather, they present opposing views alongside aligning views. Within this struggle, the connections, intersections, and departures that exist within AfroAsian discourse often refer to the history of radical revolutionary efforts of the 1940s to 1960s and visual culture illustrating cultural exchanges, such as in fine art, and the performing arts of the 1960s and 1970s. However, my research primarily focuses on literary works and examines how literature since the 1980s participate in AfroAsian discourse. The goal is to draw attention to current ways in which Black-Asian discourse can be discussed in literature, especially literature that feature Black-Asian mixed-race identity and Black women/Asian men interracial relationships. The literary works I sample show how historically African American and Asian American groups collaborated and had points of departure as both citizens and non-citizens of the United States. Furthermore, I will attempt to discuss the Blasian aspect of AfroAsian discourse. The following paragraphs are a very short list of key sources I have consulted to help explicate my reading of the Black-Asian tropes in each sample text.

Bernard W. Bell's *The Contemporary African American Novel: Its Folk Roots and Modern Literary Branches* is a comprehensive source on the "critical" literary history of African American novels and romances (Bell 1). Even though his critical analysis of African Americanist rhetoric begins with 1853, his study mainly focuses on works written between 1983

and 2001. I consulted several chapters that helped place a text within historical context and consulted specific sections within the selected chapters that helped me understand the social, historical, and literary significance of the text. Bell not only provides a detailed literary history of African American novels, but also explication on the “complex, reciprocal relationship between principles of narrative form and social reality” (Bell 8). Furthermore, I found his current scholarship addresses the new ways in thinking about multiethnic identity and its place in African American literature and cultures. Bell’s criticisms provided a way to expand my claims concerning Black-Asian mixed race identity and its implications.

Johnnella Butler’s article, “African American Literature and Realist Theory: Seeking The ‘True-True’”, in Satya P. Mohanty’s *Identity Politics Reconsidered*, discusses how realist theory “help[s] define an African American literary theory that reflects sociocultural experience and illuminates texts in relation to other texts and in relation to the social, political, cultural, and economic experiences out of which aesthetics emerge” (J. Butler 174). The theory uses rememory to dialectically and dialogically assess literary constructed binaries of African American lived experiences (175). In other words, it endorses learning from the past to see how it affects the present. This aspect of the theory is most useful for my study. A revisit of past relations between African Americans and various Asian American groups help us understand the current identity politics existing among those who identify with both an African American heritage and an Asian American heritage. More importantly, the theory helps us interpret literature featuring the identity politics in Black-Asian relations. Chapter 4 draws from this source to explain how authors of Blasian literature attempt to write against negative controlling images of African American women and Asian/Asian American men.

Greg Carter's *The United States of the United Races: A Utopian History of Racial Mixing* challenges the notion that mixed race individuals are indicators of progress in race relations. Carter thoroughly interrogates United States laws and its history of racial mixing to show how it did not come about and was not a result of peaceful collaborations and alliances. He intersects law, history, and American literature in his analysis of an often overlooked position on today's "fascination with racially mixed figures" and how that notion has "historical roots in how past Americans have imagined" interracial marriages and racial mixing (Carter 3). Moreover, I found Carter's study well-researched, thus, serving as a good source for assisting in dissecting the straight-forward legal language I read in Kevin R. Johnson's *Mixed Race America and the Law: A Reader*. Carter and Johnson's insights help situate the experiences shared in Jacqueline A. Sue's *Cornbread and Dim Sum* within historical context, thus, demonstrating that other kinds of interracial marriages were occurring prior to the landmark case of *Loving vs. Virginia*, which focused on a Black-White couple.

Robert Stam and Ella Shohat's *Race in Translation: Culture Wars Around the Postcolonial Atlantic* cross-examines the term, multiculturalism, and its discourse within postcolonial frameworks. Stam and Shoat trace and map the politics of the culture wars from various points of reference and places them within social and historical context: "decolonization of knowledge, identity politics, multiculturalism, Affirmative Action, postcolonial theory," just to name a few (xiii). I focus on multiculturalism as a through line for three of the four chapters in this research project. Multiculturalism was prevalent during the 1980s and 1990s, thus, I found it hard to ignore during my analysis of Velina Hasu Houston's *American Dreams*, mainstream theater's (read: the Broadway stage's) struggle to bring diverse voices to its forum; Octavia

Butler's *Adulthood Rites*, in which many mixed-race individuals advocated for more options to be included and acknowledged in the census; and Ishmael Reed's *Japanese by Spring*, in which a college campus is featured as one of the institutions affected by the culture wars of the 1990s. Stam and Shoat's discussion on conflicting ideas within the multiculturalism debate support my overall argument about the dissension that occurred during the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s.

Marcia A. Dawkins' *Clearly Invisible: Racial Passing and the Color of Cultural Identity* examines the politics of passing and theorizes that everyone can pass and will pass to access a privileged status in society. The chapter discussing "Passing as Principle" is a useful source for examining the Octavia Butler's *Adulthood Rites* as a passing narrative. The protagonist, Akin, contemplates passing to escape hostile resistance to his presence as a multispecies being. Dawkins' argument also discusses how ambiguity is a key factor in successfully passing for something in part versus something in whole. The passer takes a part of themselves and passes as the chosen whole; for example, a light-skinned Black person passing as a White person, or a bisexual male passing as a heterosexual male. Then, Dawkins dissects the politics of why someone would choose to pass as half and not all of their racial or sexual identities. Passing is not an easy practice and is not a practice that is fully understood. Greg Carter's study correlates with Dawkins' study in that both scholars argue that understanding the historical context of racial mixing and mixed race identities is essential to understanding why passing still exist today, even practiced by individuals who identify with two marginalized racial groups - African Americans and Asian Americans.

Kerry Ann Rocquemore and David L. Brunnsma's *Beyond Black: Biracial Identity in America* examines the ever-changing "meaning of racial identity for mixed-race people in the United States" during the twenty-first century (xiv). Even though this source focuses only on people who identify as having one Black parent and one White parent, I found it useful for explicating biracial identity for Black-Asian mixed-race people. I connect *Beyond Black* with *Clearly Invisible* to explain the practice of passing in Chapter 2 of this dissertation. According to Rockquemore, an unvalidated border identity can easily be misinterpreted as passing for one race over another. The unvalidated border identity of a biracial person usually results in the person performing the race he or she appears to be racially affiliated with; for example, a Black Chinese may look more Chinese than African American. Thus, the person is misidentified solely as Chinese based on appearance. If it happens during several encounters, the person may develop or begin to shape his behavior according to socially constructed Chinese attributes (i.e., the model minority image). The unvalidated border identity is relevant to the experiences of those who openly identify as both African American and Asian American. I begin exploring this theory in Chapter 2 when discussing Akin's positionality as a multiracial, multispecies being.

BLASIAN AND OTHER TERMS USED IN THIS PROJECT

This research project uses several terms interchangeably and exclusively for the discussion on U.S. Black-Asian relations, representations, and discourse. The following terms deserve a definition for usage in this research: Blasian, colorism, ethnicity, multiracial, multiethnic, and literary imagination. I define these terms here to assist in understanding my interpretation of literature featuring U.S. Black-Asian experiences since the 1980s. Furthermore,

my definitions help pinpoint the usage of a particular term, such as Blasian. My goal is to eventually avoid the awkwardness of using Black-Asian to describe AfroAsian contemporary experiences since 2000. The other terms are used to discuss the experiences of those who identify with Black-Asian cultures and politics and how they are socially represented in history and literature.

The study of Black-Asian relations is not new. As discussed in the previous section, the initial discourse on these relations began in the 1970s known as AfroAsian discourse. According to Bill V. Mullen, as an ideology, AfroAsian is “a strategic intersection for thinking through an internationalist, global paradigm that joins the world’s two largest continents and populations, as well as an anti-imperialist, insurgent identity that is no longer majority [W]hite in orientation” (Ho Location 51). Since the mid-1800s in the United States, Africans and Asians have been linked in “traditions of resistance,” racial prejudice and oppression. These two nations have been pitted against each other, yet they have joined forces in various socio-political movements that challenged and opposed the injustices experienced (Ho Location 56).

The most contested term I am using in this research project is Blasian. Foremost and most notably, I am not responsible for coining this term. However, I will attempt to bring this term into an academic discourse and explain the significance of its usage as a label for identifying literary works featuring contemporary Black-Asian relations and as a self-identifying label for members of Black-Asian communities. Authors who write narratives featuring Black-Asian themes have contributed to the social construction and socio-political reality of what is labeled Blasian. The term continued to be guarded by some members of Black-Asian communities. Initially, application of the term, Blasian, was for literary works featuring

romantic and marital relationships existing between Black women and Asian men (BWAM). For this reason, I do not use this term in its fullness until the fourth chapter of this study. The chapters are organized leading up to a full usage of the term, Blasian; hence, in the first three chapters I appropriately use AfroAsian or Black-Asian to identify characteristics of a narrative. This indicates that literary works published prior to 2000 were not categorized as Blasian narratives; afterwards, it became popular among artists, writers, and people with African and Asian ancestries to use the term Blasian to promote solidarity between the two racial groups. The Blasian community acknowledge and share their experiences of tension alongside experiences of solidarity and agency. As previously noted, Black-Asian, or Blasian, identity politics empower the individual and the communities to form alliances and embrace their particular cultural heritages without centering attention on Eurocentric aesthetics and values. Blasian is not anti-Black and it is not anti-Asian. Therefore, Blasian Narratives depict the history, the politics, and the cultural exchanges occurring between African and Asian groups.

The lack of knowledge of past histories concerning the interaction of African Americans and various Asian American groups resulted in the development of a community of people who coined the term Blasian. The initial formation of online Blasian communities, beginning in the 2000s, was based on the coming together of Black women and Asian men in North America. After gaining knowledge about these two distinct groups' experiences with marginalization and underrepresentation as intimate companions in literature and film, individuals within these groups aimed to build knowledge and understanding of their unique relationships. They also had to acknowledge the longstanding history of AfroAsian discourse. This knowledge helped to situate their own dialogue within AfroAsian discourse. On the internet, Blasian communities

were specific to BWAM relationships. However, as time passed, the communities expanded to include any romantic and marital couplings, and individuals who have African and Asian ancestral roots. My study includes a close reading of narratives featuring BWAM relationships in a science fiction novel published in 1987 and a romance novel published in 2009. The former depicts the possibility of a past, a present, and the future, and the latter is the representation of what is occurring today.

The term, Blasian, was used by founders of a blog site entitled, *The Blasian Narrative*, in 2010. Initially, the blog focused on the experiences of and between Asian men and Black women (AMBW). Since its induction the focus has expanded to include other kinds of romantic couplings; however, AMBW romance novels remain at the center for this blogsite. The authors and founders of the site are either African American, Asian American, or identify with both racial groups; they call their own realities in existence by creating a space that allows them to express their thoughts about history, culture, and politics in regard to their own experiences. Their mission statement clearly states,

“There was a time when ‘Blasian’ specifically referred to a person of Afro-Asiatic descent. There was a time when Blasian was spelled ‘BlAsian’, and before that term came into use, it was strictly Black/Asian (or ‘Blackinese’ if the speaker thought they were being funny). Now ‘Blasian’ refers [to] a culture, a shared history, a way of thinking, a style of cuisine, a genre of literature, and last but not least, an ever-growing, vastly diverse community made up of yet smaller communities. In short, for some of us, ‘Blasian’ is a way of life.”

Within this statement, I highlight a genre of literature, because I am interested in this aspect of Blasian Studies. The statement affirms that these self-identified Blasians are already classifying a number of literary works as Blasian, thus, beginning a process of institutionalizing Blasian experiences. Their mission statement and comprehensive blogsite establishes the study of Blasian literature and cultures.

Blasian Studies can fall within the study of African American literature because the literary works depict multicultural and multiethnic experiences of Blacks with Asian ancestry. Black-Asian representations come in many different forms, including cultural exchange (Chapter 1), personal identity politics (Chapter 2), political alliances and solidarity (Chapter 3), and romance (Chapter 4), just to introduce a few. In my research, I became more informed of the ways in which Chinese men lived in African American communities during the late 1800s due to America's restrictions on their movement in society. This fact suggests the possibility that some African American groups have encountered various Asian American groups in shared spaces. A history of encounters suggests many untold stories about U.S. Black-Asian experiences. How have encounters with Asian Americans affected the identity politics of African Americans? History shows or pinpoints how the relationships are impacted.

The history of identity politics begins in the 1960s, during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and in the middle of the Black Power movement of the 1970s. As noted by Satya P. Mohanty, identity politics "historically" have existed as part of activist groups (i.e., Black Lives Matter) and in academia (i.e., feminisms, Asian Studies, etc.) (Mohanty 2). Social movements, such as the women's and civil rights movements, have consciously used concepts of identity to further their demands for social justice and visibility (2). According to Mohanty, 1) "identities

are resources for knowledge” that can assist in social change, and 2) for groups that are oppressed, it is necessary for them to be at the forefront rallying for their own “freedom[s]” (2). Mohanty’s suggestion of when identity politics became a means to foster social change is open for debate. According to AfroAsian discourse, the battle to freedom and basic human rights began decades before by Africans and Asians in America. The racial laws of America resulted in oppressed groups forming alliances to confront injustices and systems of oppression. Even though identity-based groups have made progress over time, it still receives criticism from academics (Mohanty 2-3). Oftentimes, identity politics essentializes the experiences of group members, thus, creating other controlling images of the groups. Despite the problem of essentializing groups, these special interest groups continued to rally for recognition and acceptance. Based on Mohanty’s first reason for using identity, self-identification can serve as a source of knowledge that can affect how group members are seen by others in society. One of the criticisms of identity politics is that identities are socially constructed rather than developed naturally. This criticism sees socially-constructed identities as being “indelibly marked by oppressive conditions that created them in the first place, and therefore, should not be given much weight or importance” (Mohanty 3). Mohanty and other scholars argue that identity politics cannot be dismissed altogether. Rather, identity politics is necessary for calling attention to specifics about a group’s experience and history. No one era in history, and no one genre of literature, can tell us all we need to know about the experiences of various groups in the United States (3). Mohanty argues that history and new accounts help address the “complexity and varieties of identity-based forms of oppression” and it helps create new knowledge and thinking as global citizens moving forward into the twenty-first century (3). In many ways Mohanty’s

second reason for using identity aligns with the Blasian movement's agenda of the twenty-first century. Members of Blasian communities have created their own space to inform society about their experiences. In this study, one of the areas of expression is in literature.

Another notable element that exist in identity-based politics is the promotion of multiculturalism. Christopher A. Shinn locates the beginning of multiculturalism movements between the late 1960s and the 1970s (Shinn 62). Since the 1970s, the multiculturalism debates continued through the 1990s influencing policies in corporate boardrooms, on college and university campuses, and in the arts. Jeff Chang's *Who We Be* illustrates the historical struggles of the multicultural movement in America, specifically in the arts. Notably, the debates surrounding the culture wars and the multicultural movement should not be conflated. The debates are connected, however, they should not be fused. Therefore, here is a brief historical mapping of multiculturalism in the United States skipping ahead to Pat Buchanan's declaration of the culture wars in the early 1980s (Chang 4). Buchanan saw the culture wars in a literal sense of conflict and constant unpleasant friction between existing cultures (Chang 4, 47). According to Chang, the culture wars of the late 1960s began with identity politics and collective groups feeling empowered to name themselves (Chang 72). After this act of self-naming began, the process of learning and sharing cultures between various groups through art forms, including the theater, started to take shape and develop. Chang's research focuses on fine and commercial arts; he does not venture into a discussion about how the multiculturalism debate affected the theater world. In the multiculturalism battle, the attention is always contested in a Black-White binary; thus, the conflict rarely focuses on other kinds of contentions, such as encounters, conflicts, and alliances between African Americans and Asian/Asian Americans.

The ancestral roots of AfroAsian Americans is African American and one of many Asian American ethnicities. This is also the ancestral roots of those who identify as Blasian. Blasian is a blending of Black and Asian intersecting cultural identities. The term, Black Americans, is a collective identification of American people of African descent; it is also used interchangeably with African Americans. The term, Asian American, is a collective identification of American people of Asian descent. In Chapter Two, I use the term, Black-Asian mixed-race figure, to refer to a person who identifies with both African and Asian ancestries. In all other chapters, I use the term Black-Asian to refer to the various relationships between African Americans and Asian Americans. Eventually, the term Blasian replaces the term Black-Asian to eliminate awkwardness. After I have discussed in detail Black-Asian representations in literature in the first three chapters, it became necessary to settle on using Blasian as a term to describe these representations.

For this research project, ethnicity is more than social construction of race. It also the social construction of traditions, learned behavior and customs. For example, two people can be categorized as Black, but they are from two different regions, Puerto Rico and Jamaica. These are two distinct ethnicities with separate cultural traditions. A more direct definition of ethnicity is the state of being united by common traditional, cultural, and linguistic traits. I do not conflate ethnicity with race, nor do I conflate race with culture. The latter assumes there is only one cultural representation of a group of people. In addition, ethnicity allows room to discuss the various ethnicities existing within Asian American communities, such as Chinese versus Japanese, Japanese versus Hmong, or Hmong versus Filipino. The same can be said about African American communities, such as Northeast Black Americans versus Creole Americans,

Creole Americans versus Haitian Americans, or Haitian Americans versus Black Cuban Americans. Blasian Narratives among these ethnic groups will differ from one another. In this study, I start my scholarship by focusing on African Americans and Chinese/Chinese Americans and African Americans and Japanese immigrants. Other Asian groups will be considered for future research projects.

The terms multiracial and multiethnic are not interchangeable. Multiracial is best defined by providing an example. For example, a person is multiracial if she is of African and Asian descents; however, her ethnicities are African American and Korean. A multiethnic refers to both racial and ethnic affiliations, such as in the AfroGerman or AfroChinese. The person not only connects with traditions associated with having an African cultural background, but also connects with either a German or a Chinese cultural background. The cultural influence shapes his or hers cultural identities. The nuances of cultural identities can be interrogated and explained in analyses specific to one's social positionality. One's social position is constructed by the intersections of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, geographic location, and (dis)ability (Mohanty 6-8).

Colorism is a cousin or akin to racism. The term, colorism, is not found in many dictionaries, including the *Oxford English Dictionaries*; however, it is a word used most often by many African American scholars and social scientists. Colorism is a system of prejudice and discrimination based on a person's skin tone, in which lighter skin is often preferred. It is seen in societies that practice pigmentocracy, which is a social science term describing how societies' wealth and social status are influenced by skin color. Oftentimes, this results in reduced opportunities (read: privileges) for individuals who are discriminated against based on their skin

color. Colorism is practiced within various ethnicities in Asian, Latin, and European cultures. The topic of colorism appears in the second and fourth chapters of this dissertation. I touch on the topic in the former and discuss it further in the latter. Within African American cultures, the practice of colorism is more nuanced and is not limited to aesthetics. Since the “Black is Beautiful” movement of the 1970s, colorism became more complex as African Americans, as a whole, gained mobility and access previously-restricted spaces.

The last term is a literary term that appears in a couple of chapters in this dissertation. Literary imagination is a term used to describe the author’s or the writer’s imagination present in the narrative. It often reveals the writer’s “intentions, blindness, [...] and sight” (Morrison xii). Hence, the literary imagination is the construction of the narrative world created by the author (xii). According to Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, an author’s literary imagination is constructed based on the kind of language in use — racial versus racist language (xii). I explore this notion in the fourth chapter, because novelist Angela Weaver attempts to write against controlling images of African American women’s beauty using the semantics of color-blind racism; moreover, the language leans heavily towards a practice of colorism.

CONTEMPORARIES IN BLASIAN STUDIES

W.E.B. DuBois set a precedent in AfroAsian studies since the early 1900s and focused on Far East Asian countries, Japan and China. DuBois’ intellectual work reflected his vision for a new and different kind of world and his comparative studies of Japan and China situated his position that Asia and Africa should align to combat their common enemy, Europe, during the

World War I (DuBois 233-244). Since DuBois, many scholars from Africana and Asian/Asian American Studies have focused their research on the different ways African and Asian societies and cultures have interacted. Scholars from various disciplines examine AfroAsian relations in history, social sciences, literature, and film. Among the scholars that are currently conducting research in AfroAsian or Blasian Studies, specifically in literature, film, and popular culture, are Julia H. Lee, Crystal S. Anderson, and Myra Anderson. These three key scholars have important work that connect to what I will continue to expand in my own research.

Interracial Encounters: Reciprocal Representations in African and Asian American Literatures 1896-1937 focuses on literary works of the early twentieth century, such as *East Goes West* and *Dark Princess*, to disrupt the notion that AfroAsian relations have always and will continue to be “hostile” because of “essentialized cultural differences” (Lee 169). Julia H. Lee’s use of law and history help contextualize how these relations should be interpreted. Due to racial laws and the United States’ labor needs, African Americans and Asian emigrants were pushed into complicated situations. Both groups became more marginalized during the enforcement of Jim Crow laws and over time many formed alliances to build a strong force against their greater enemy, White supremacy. While Lee focuses on the early part of the twentieth century, I see a need for research on literature and theater respectively published and performed between 1940s to 1970s can fill in the gap. The periods between 1940s and 1970s mark a long era of socio-political consciousness and protest. Many African Americans sought ways to improve their social and economic situations and were willing to align with other Asian/Asian American groups to achieve a common goal. One way to obtain more insight about this era is to examine

archived plays, short stories, and poems that were produced by members and supporters of the organizations.

In addition to AfroAsian protest literature, there is the ever-growing study of popular cultural production that feature Black-Asian relations. Jeff Chang's *Who We Be* uses art and advertisements to describe and document America's multiculturalism and its culture wars from 1963 to the present, in which the experiences of Blacks and Asians continue to debunk the notion of a unified and all-embracing America. Historically, America has been "defined by whiteness, drawn in grays, shades of white and black" and this is more evident in its contemporary cultural productions in the arts, literature, theater, and film (Chang 2). Crystal S. Anderson concurs positing that American cultural practices tend to gloss over or ignore the "interethnic" representations of various groups, particularly Blacks and Asians (Anderson 3-5). In *Beyond the Chinese Connection: Contemporary Afro-Asian Cultural Production*, Anderson examines the cultural production of Black-Asian tropes in films, novels, and Japanese anime. Her study focuses on the inter-ethnic relationships of African American and Asian American males and how they are depicted in novels and films post 1990s. Interestingly, she notes that what is seen in the cultural production is really "cultural emulsion" (Anderson 3, 5). Cultural emulsion is "when cultures come together, but do not mix," and Anderson's research demonstrates how on the surface it appears that the cultures are connecting and sharing, but if you look more deeply, the cultures are not fully embracing one another (3). In other words, African American and Asian cultures maintain their "respective" identities, yet still engage with one another (Anderson 5). The two groups will acknowledge one another's marginalization and form a solidarity, but will maintain a measurable distance for the sake of retaining one's ethnic and cultural identities.

While Anderson's focus is popular culture focusing on music and films, more research is needed in areas of theater and dramatic literature. There are several plays with Black-Asian tropes that explore Blasian identity. Moreover, artists and writers should be encouraged to write more plays that feature a variety of Black-Asian experiences.

Currently, Blasian identities are the new foci for mixed-race narratives. Myra Washington's scholarship focuses on Blasian identity in contemporary America and how Black-Asian relationships are portrayed in television and film. Similar to playwright Velina Hasu Houston, Washington uses her own experience as a self-identified Blasian to address the lack of representation of Blasian people in television and film. Her research explores how American television continues to dismiss, ignore, and shy away from Black-Asian intimate relationships, especially AMBW couplings. Washington's research parallels my research interest — respectively she focuses on television and film and I focus on literature and theater. Our concentration on representation of Black-Asian figures in both literature and visual culture situate us as contemporaries in Blasian Studies. As demonstrated in the following chapters, there is more to probe and dissect in the Black-Asian trope in contemporary American literature, such as the politics of colorism and gender, history of socio-political movements, Asian American groups living in African American communities after the 1900s, and blended Black-Asian families. These areas of research I plan to expand in upcoming research projects.

BLASIAN NARRATIVES - CHAPTER OUTLINE

“Faced in the twenty-first century with not one but potentially many color lines...that reflect the complexity of...a multiethnic world” (Angela P. Harris 69).

The preliminary research for this project offered only romance novels with Blasian themes, featuring AMBW couples. I aimed to connect AfroAsian discourse with Blasian Narratives and discovered that Black-Asian tropes in African American literature were published since the early 1900s. As mentioned before, I discovered a handful of scholars who have done comparative work on African American and Asian American literature to examine the social history of these two racial groups in America. Julia H. Lee and Klara Szymańko looked at works by both Asian American and African American writers. For this research project, the research focused on how African American writers incorporate Asian American characters in their narratives and how history uncovers various intersecting moments between African Americans and various Asian American groups.

The selection of texts for this research project were based on two factors: when the work was published (after 1980s) and which Asian group will be explored in this preliminary research. Therefore, representation of Blasian Narratives in this study is limited to a fraction of many intersecting Black-Asian experiences. The first group, African Americans, is already a given based on my field specialization; however, research on the experiences of all Asian American groups would overwhelm the project. Hence, I selected the literary works based on two of the most popular Far East Asian groups, Chinese and Japanese. In future research projects, I will explore other Asian/Asian American groups, such as Korean, Vietnamese, Hmong, and Thai. The following section is the chapter outline for this dissertation.

Chapter One - “Black-Asian Encounters in Velina Hasu Houston’s *American Dreams*”

Playwright-scholar Velina Hasu Houston is best known for her trilogy of plays based on her family history highlighting her Japanese and African American ancestries. She was born in Japan and raised in the United States. Her Japanese mother married an African American soldier during World War II (WWII). After serving his time in both WWII and the Korean War, the father moved the family to the middle region of the United States, in Kansas. At the age of twelve, she discovered her love for dramatic literature and playwriting (Houston 207-208). She has written numerous plays and directed many of the productions. In addition to her creative talents, she is recognized as a distinguished professor of Asian American Studies teaching, researching, and lecturing on Asian American plays. Houston’s voice is necessary within the discourse of Black-Asian experiences in the United States. For she states, “I will never cease to be political because I will never cease being female or being a multiracial, multicultural person of color” (Houston 213).

Houston’s play, *American Dreams*, is set in Harlem, New York in 1955. The play focuses on an African American family’s response to a Japanese woman who is brought home by an African American soldier. Creed Banks brings home his Japanese wife after serving in World War II and the Korean War. Not only does the couple experience mixed-reactions to their interracial marriage from the African American community, but also the couple faces the challenge of being relocated to a mid-western state because their marriage is unacceptable in most states in the United States. The drama calls attention to the practice of colorism and its affects on African American women; it attempts to address feminisms practiced by Japanese women as a way to connect with African American women’s experiences with gender

oppression; and it captures Black-Asian relations in the United States during the 1950s, in general.

American Dreams was published in 1984 and, in the same year, was performed 27 times on a New York City Off-Broadway stage by the Negro Ensemble Company during the rise and push to have multicultural representation visible in the American performing arts world. During the 1980s and 1990s, artistic communities, including theater, looked for ways to represent different kinds of ethnicities. My analysis attempts to show how *American Dreams* is a Blasian Narrative and is representational of how such literature maintains and expands our understanding of the history of AfroAsian relations in the United States.

Chapter Two - “*Adulthood Rites: The Black-Asian Mixed-Race Figure in Contemporary African American Literature*”

Octavia E. Butler (1947-2006) is the 1995 MacArthur “Genius” Award recipient and is considered the “grand dame of science fiction.” She was born in Pasadena, California and as a child, she developed a love for books at the age of ten. As a young adult, she attended many creative writing workshops, including the Clarion Fiction Writers Workshop, before finding her own style and niche. She had written numerous novels during the 1970s and 1980s before publishing her most researched and critiqued trilogy, *Lilith’s Brood*, which features multiracial communities and a Black-Asian figure. Many of her works were published during the middle of America’s culture wars in the 1990s and often depicted multiracial communities as spaces for possible social harmony.

Butler's 1988 science fiction narrative, *Adulthood Rites*, is situated on a spaceship carrying casualties of a war on Earth during an apocalypse. The alien nation, the Oankali, have captured humans, reconfigured them for their use, and created communities of human-Oankalis. However, there is a remnant of the casualties that resist reconfiguration and the Oankali way of life. The protagonist in *Adulthood Rites* is Akin, the son of African American Lilith Iyapo and Chinese Canadian Joseph Li-Chin Shing, and figure that is a symbol of cultural harmony. Akin's position as a mixed-race, multispecies with an ambiguous appearance complicates how others interact with him and their difficulty with validating all of his identities. From infancy to young adulthood, Akin learns how to navigate racially divided human resisters while searching for connect both worlds — humans and Oankali. In the Akin character, Butler has positioned him as a symbol of unification. My close reading of *Adulthood Rites* looks at how Butler uses the Black-Asian figure to address the challenges of mixed-race identities and how it represents the alienness multiracial individuals experience when encountering opposition to their presence.

In Butler's *Lilith's Brood (LB)*, the first two volumes, including *Adulthood Rites*, distinctly challenges the marginalization of Black women and Asian men in a fantastical dystopian world. The positioning of these two groups provides a space to question the fluidity of race, gender, and sexuality. Unlike her White contemporaries, Octavia Butler's writing did not avoid providing critical analyses of such contested concepts in her novels (Doerksen 20, 22). As a result, Butler has become a pioneer in featuring Black women and Asian men (BWAM) in intimate interracial relationships, moving away from common Black-White interracial couplings. I include Butler's work in my analysis to provide a nascent for literature featuring BWAM couples that narrate their experiences. In Chapter 4 of the dissertation, I continue a discussion on

how authors of Blasian romance novels of the 2000s continue to expand on representing BWAM relations.

Chapter Three - “*Japanese By Spring*: Ishmael Reed’s Framing of a U.S. Black-Asian Alliance”

Artist-activist and writer Ishmael Reed is responsible for coining the term, multicultural, in the 1970s. He was born in Tennessee and grew up in a working class neighborhood in New York. He did attend the University of Buffalo for three years and later received an honorary doctorate from his alma mater in 1995. For over thirty years, he has taught creative writing at the University of California, at Berkeley before retiring in 2005. Even though he retired in 2005, he holds various visiting scholar/artists positions at a couple of colleges and universities. He has received numerous awards for his creative writing, including the MacArthur “Genius” Award. Among the numerous literary works Reed has published, the novel that captures my attention for my current research is *Japanese By Spring*. This chapter continues a discussion about the aims of the multicultural movement while close reading the novel’s protagonist.

Ishmael Reed’s *Japanese by Spring (JBS)* is a satirical novel on race relations and the culture wars of the 1990s. In Chapter Three, I examine how Reed comments on America’s relationship with the Japanese and within that slice of history is a portion in which African Americans and Japanese Americans shared in the Pro-Japan movements of the 1930s. This moment in U.S. Black-Asian history is the backdrop for the story that follows an African American professor, Benjamin “Chappie” Puttbutt, seeking tenure at the predominantly White Jack London College. When tenure is denied, Puttbutt’s last attempt is to align himself with the

Japanese agenda to take over the university, eventually California, and in Puttbutt's mind, the world. My analysis boldly looks at a specific era in history that discloses that an African American-Japanese American political alliance existed during the 1930s. Depiction of this fictional alliance, and its eventual dissension, maintains idea that the history of AfroAsian relations as being in constant conflict. This notion is worthy for consideration even though the current situation among Black-Asian communities is one of solidarity.

Chapter Four - "Blasian Narratives: Love, Romance, and Colorism"

There is not a lot of information about the two authors featured in the fourth chapter of this research project; however, the small amount of information do state that the authors are African American women who have had interacted with and embraced Chinese culture. Jacqueline A. Sue's memoir, *Cornbread and Dim Sum: A Heartglow Romance (CDS)* reflects on her marriage with a Chinese American man. Sue's memoir alludes to her lack of knowledge about the history of the Chinese in America and her lack of interaction with people outside of her racial group until she met her third-generation Chinese American husband, Soo Keung Wah. Angela Weaver's fictional novel, *No Ordinary Love (NOL)*, attempts to counter negative representations of African American women and Asian men. Her novel features a steamy romance between an African American ex-Special Ops agent and a Chinese businessman. During my preliminary research on Asian Men/BlackWomen (AMBW) romances, the following excerpt of a blog entry was posted by one of the founders of *The Blasian Narrative*, Ankhesen Mié:

“There's a reason this is not an ‘interracial’ blog, it's an AMBW blog. There's a reason we stress the #AMBW focus, and the hashtag is branded on about 90% of our [merchandise]. Because the moment we deviate from the AMBW grouping, the very first thing people want to talk about is anything and everything but Asian men and Black women. Either one or both of us always gets phased out of the conversation.”

The representation of AMBW in any African American narrative is rare. Many contemporary works feature African American men with an Asian/Asian American woman, a common coupling often seen in reality. *The Blasian Narrative* blogsite and authors of Blasian literature addressed this phenomenon occurring in American society today. The fourth chapter of this dissertation proposes a basis for further research to be done in the area of Blasian literature.

In this final chapter, I posit that Blasian studies is a continuum of AfroAsian studies in the twenty-first century. The literary works in this area of interest continue to explore the long history of African Americans and Asian Americans relations — their cultural, social, and political histories. I also argue that further investigation of Blasian narratives is a response to Sam Cacas’ comment, as stated in this chapter’s epigraph: “the power to call our realities into existence.” This is similar to Octavia Butler’s writing mission to create her own reality and to write herself into the narrative. The authors who write stories about Blasian experiences are writing themselves into the narratives or creating their own realities as AMBW Blasian couples or Blasian individuals.

Another point of discussion in the fourth chapter is African American women’s experiences with colorism and how it is subtly intertwined in the character development in both the memoir and the fictional novel. The language of colorism is embedded in the novel; whereas,

the memoir blantly draws attention to how colorism is internalized by many African American women. I address colorism in this chapter to extend my analysis of colorism as discussed in the first chapter of the dissertation; and to spotlight how one can unknowingly and unintentionally pass on self-hatred to another person; there are significant aftermaths of colorism in Sue's memoir.

At the end of this research project, I expect to lay a foundation for more research on Blasian representations and experiences. The possibilities for exploring Blasian in African American literature and culture are: it expands the discourse on African American experiences since the victories of the Civil Rights movements; it acknowledges the cross-cultural experiences of African Americans beyond Black-White dichotomies; and it opens up space to discuss new ways writers are exploring and challenging tropes of Black identity since the 1980s.

CHAPTER 1:

BLACK-ASIAN ENCOUNTERS IN VELINA HASU HOUSTON'S *AMERICAN DREAMS*

INTRODUCTION

Velina Hasu Houston's stage plays depict culturally rich relationships existing between various ethnicities in America. In the first set of plays, she incorporates her own stories of growing up in America and the stories of others who emigrated to America during the 1940s and 1950s. The stories in her dramas harmonizes with current debates about racism and xenophobia, and are most needed now because so many Americans feel that their civil and human rights are being challenged. Moreover, her plays were written and staged after many legislative and legal victories have been made in the previous century. But, what does this mean for a Black-Asian woman playwright of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries? In my analysis, I discuss the trilogy of Houston's family dramas, as a whole, because all three plays were received in different ways. The number of times the dramas were produced and staged provide a barometer of whether Houston's plays have had any success in reaching beyond African American or Asian American audiences. Houston's play, *American Dreams*, provides a glimpse into how an African American family is affected by the presence of a Japanese woman, who is a symbol of an enemy nation. Not only is it a glimpse into a part of American history overall, but also it is insight into the playwright's family history based on her parents' experiences.

This chapter is a textual analysis of Houston's *American Dreams* and a discussion of how the play was staged during the height of the culture wars of the 1980s. During the 1980s's culture wars, multiculturalism was practiced in and outside of the arts. The voices of nonwhite

characters emerged more visibly in American Theater, including stories about cross-cultural experiences. However, some voices were still marginalized to off-Broadway and community theaters, institutions that were considered less mainstreamed. In my analysis, first, I explain the Blasian narrative in *American Dreams*. One key element is that the play features a Black family's response to a Japanese presence in their home. Second, I lay out a brief history of Black Theater to help situate *American Dreams* as a black drama with a Black-Asian relations focus. The characteristics of the play assisted in the play's canonization as an African American drama and not an Asian American drama. A discussion of the two major databases provide examples of how this was determined by scholars of dramatic literature. Third, I provide interpretations of a couple of scenes that highlight forms of discrimination often experienced among persons of African American descent, including the practice of colorism. Even though Velina Hasu Houston features an Asian figure in *American Dreams*, the issues depicted in the stage play are those experienced by members of African American communities.

A "BLASIAN" NARRATIVE IN *AMERICAN DREAMS*

American Dreams is a Blasian Narrative because it depicts an encounter between an African American community with a Japanese immigrant woman and the clashing of their cultures. The drama concentrates on the experience of a Pro-American Japanese woman trying to gain favor of her Black American family through cultural exchange. Setsuko learns that kind gestures and sharing of culture is not enough to soothe the pains and eliminate the loss of loved ones during and after wartime. The play does capture the tension of how African Americans felt

about the war and it does complicate the ways in which war played a role in further disenfranchisement of African Americans.

Blasian as a label and as a term is contested. Not all scholars, regardless of their academic focus, agree on the use of the term in scholarly research. However, the term is used within Black-Asian social groups and among writers who seek to distinguish their frame of reference from other frameworks that perpetuate White culture and politics as the dominant influence affecting their lived experiences. While discussing Houston's dramatic literature, I initiate the usage of this term to connect literary works featuring contemporary Black-Asian relationships. In other words, there are several authors who intend to narrate stories depicting Black-Asian relations in the United States; American stories that are not often placed at the center of "the American" experience. As an American citizen, Houston identifies with both her African American and Japanese heritages. Her works depict one of many family histories that consist of similar cultural backgrounds. In her trilogy, she offers insight into her parents' experience as a Black-Asian couple encountering opposition between two sides within the culture wars - Japan and African America. However, not all of what Houston presents is seen as negative experiences. The experiences are layered and have depth. The core of understanding these experiences is Houston's use of racial language. In other words, the issue of race as a social construct is illustrated in the play's dialogue, such as in epithets and racialized arguments influenced by colorism.

The subtleness of Creed's family members disapproving Creed and Setsuko's marriage symbolizes on a larger scale how American citizens frowned upon anyone bringing home someone who represents the enemy. Setsuko understood this kind of betrayal because of her

own experiences with her father, who was bitter of the United States' occupation in Japan. In this symbolism, Houston shows that both African Americans and the Japanese despised the changes that were happening in their regions because of the war. Since Houston specifically focuses on relationships between African Americans and Japanese immigrants, her play is considered a Blasian narrative under the African American literary canon¹

THE CLASSIFICATION OF HOUSTON'S WORKS

Houston's trilogy of plays are classified under two different ethnic literary repositories. For example, the plays *Tea* and *Asa Ga Kimashita (Morning Has Broken)* are stored in the *Asian-American Drama* database administered by Alexander Street Press; whereas, *American Dreams*, the sequel to *Asa Ga Kimashita (Morning Has Broken)*, is stored in the *Black Drama - Second Edition* database. Interestingly, all three plays are part of a trilogy documenting Houston's family history from Japan to the United States of America. This literary categorization of Houston's plays required further investigation as to why the trilogy is categorized under two distinct databases. Regardless of Houston's ethnic identities, Japanese and African American, her works are classified based on the content of her dramas. The following descriptions indicate why two of the plays were classified in the *Asian-American Drama* database: *Asa Ga Kimashita (Morning Has Broken)* is set in Japan and the main character, Setsuko, decides to break family

¹ Even though this chapter is not specifically evaluating the state of the African American literary canon, here is one of several ways to define it: a collection of literary writings that aim to narrate the lived experiences of blacks in America. African American literature seeks to express political consciousness and agency and seeks to articulate the social and economic positions of people of African descent. The literature has evolved over several centuries and includes the experiences of diasporans in North, South, and Central America.

tradition and marries an African American man. She leaves Japan for the United States after the destruction of Japan's land and America's occupation of Japan. Japanese national sentiments expressed disagreement with the United States' occupation and their promotion of democracy. The aftermath of moving to the United States and experiencing prejudices from both Blacks and Whites, the last drama of the trilogy, *Tea*, is a drama depicting the experiences of Japanese women who married American soldiers from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. However, *American Dreams* concentrates on the reaction of an African American community to the presence of a Japanese woman in their midst and her marriage to an African American soldier. The reaction of the African American family varies from member to member and each encounter attempts to break barriers rooted in the social construction of the Japanese as an enemy to all Americans. The play's significance to African American literature is how it captures an American narrative highlighting the social relations between African Americans and Japanese immigrants during the 1950s, after World War II. For this reason, Houston's body of works is classified according to the drama's subject matter and not necessarily according to her cultural affiliations.

The canon in which *American Dreams* is classified, perhaps, indicates the struggles of unifying racial groups on the basis of a multicultural agenda focused on universalism. For the 1980s, Houston's play poses many questions about the United States' motive to appear as a nation of blended cultures when it has not fully resolved most of its racial tensions of the past centuries. *American Dreams*' 1984 theatrical debut, by the Negro Ensemble Company, is

twenty-one years after the ruling of the *Loving vs. Virginia of 1967* case² that legalized interracial marriages. As of 2014, there are only two noted productions of this play — one staged and another performed as a radio program in 1991. The cold reception of the play is evident in how the subjects are positioned in the play: the play excludes the presence of a White dominant culture from its conversation on colorism³ and gender oppression. Structural racism is abstractly used in the story, but issues concerning colorism and the oppression of women are front and center. As mentioned earlier, *American Dreams* is classified as an African American drama because it upholds the traditions of Black theater, in which the story is by someone who identifies with her African American heritage and presents issues that concern African Americans.

FOR US, BY US: A VERY BRIEF HISTORY ON BLACK THEATER

American Dreams appears in American Theater history during a time when producers on and off Broadway were searching for ways to bring in audiences with diverse backgrounds. This push for diverse representation in the arts gradually evolved since the late 1960s, the nascent of the culture wars. The play's setting engages the audience to witness two distinct historical

² The significance of the *Loving vs. Virginia of 1967* is discussed at length in the second chapter of this dissertation. Even though this Supreme Court case made precedent the legalization of interracial marriages in the United States, the practice of interracial marriages and its legality was already in effect in certain states. The continuous shift of racial categorizations complicates the reporting of the number marriages between different races in the United States since the early 1900s.

³ In this chapter, I introduce the topic of colorism, and I elaborate on the politics of colorism in the fourth chapter of this dissertation. A definition of colorism is provided in the Introduction chapter of dissertation.

experiences during the aftermath of World War II and the Korean War. The audience is thrown immediately into moments of distress that forced Americans, collectively, to face what they have defined as their enemy — Asian nations. Notably, the story in *American Dreams* is more consistent with the mission of Black Theater. A theater that is for, about, and written by people of African descent.

The conceptual development of an official Black Theater⁴ began when W.E.B. DuBois, Alain Locke, Jessie Fauset Redmon, and James Weldon Johnson declared a need for art “for us, by us” (FUBU) that aimed to dismantle the prevalent perception of African Americans as propagated in films and stage performances during the late 1800s to early 1900s (Brooks 11). Over a century and a half, there has been an ongoing commitment to ensure that various narratives of black experiences are seen in stage performances. The following paragraph briefly discusses American Black Theater’s history based on the philosophy of producing plays for African Americans and by those who identify with an African American heritage.

⁴ Prior to W.E.B. DuBois and his contemporaries, William Wells Brown established the African Grove Theater in New York City during the early nineteenth century (Brooks 3, 4). Due to protest and strong opposition to his theater company from white audiences, the African Grove was reincarnated to the African Theatre and the American Theatre (4). Brown’s audience was multiracial; however, the company showcased talented African American performers. The theater company performed both classical and popular productions, including Shakespearean plays and plays written by African Americans (3). Interestingly, Brown’s vision was multicultural in that he blended genres and had a “revisionist cultural repertoire” incorporating both African American and Native American cultures (3). Even though the history of Black performance existed before the socio-political movement of Black Theater initiated in the 1920s by DuBois, Locke, and others, the idea of a multicultural theater catering to a multiracial audience was initiated and implemented by Brown.

W.E.B. DuBois, as a visionary, imagined the progression of people of African descent and celebrated achievements and the future possibilities of creating and controlling an art form of their own. As noted by theater scholar Daphne Brooks, in 1915 DuBois organized and staged a pageant to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the end of the Civil War, *The Star of Ethiopia*. Brooks argues that the pageant “extends the vision” of DuBois’s sociological analysis of African Americans in his benchmark analysis, *The Souls of Black Folk*, published in 1903 (10). The Little Negro Theater was established in 1926 (Brooks 11) with a mission based on four principles: the plays must have storylines revealing African American life; the plays must be written by persons of African American descent who understand what it means to be African American; a theater that primarily considers African American audiences and “be supported and sustained by their [...] approval”; and should be situated in African American communities (Sanders 21). The four principles reveal a Black Theater that is For Us, By Us (FUBU)⁵. Since 1926, many African American theaters aspired to the principles of the Krigwa Little Theatre Movement, including the Billie Holiday Theater in Bedford-Stuyvesant Brooklyn of New York, the New Federal Theater in Lower Eastside of New York, and the Negro Ensemble Company in Midtown Manhattan of New York. The latter staged a production of Houston’s *American Dreams*, thus, recognizing her drama as one of many African American narratives. The play

⁵ Towards the end of the culture wars in 1996, playwright August Wilson delivered a speech to the Eleventh Biennial Theatre Communications Group National Conference at Princeton University. In *The Ground on Which I Stand* speech, Wilson unapologetically speaks about black art, specifically black theater, as having its own values, philosophies, histories, and “creative motif[s]” (29-30). Even though Wilson did not agree with DuBois’s talented tenth ideology, he did advocate for a theater by African Americans that wholly privileged their experiences (39-40).

debuted in 1984 in the middle of the United States' culture wars in the arts and entertainment world occurring between the 1960s and the 1990s.

AMERICAN DREAMS: A CLOSE READING

Initially, Houston's play follows in the traditions of how most plays are classified under African American dramas, it upholds the mission of being both entertaining, yet didactic about the history and cultures of African Americans. *American Dreams* accomplished the Negro Ensemble Company's (NEC) mission to feature the lives of Black Americans not often seen in popular theatrical productions. Many of the plays presented by NEC probed dense topics about family life; political issues affecting African American communities; and counter controlling images portraying black lives, while providing a space for African American performers to develop their craft as performers. *American Dreams* is targeted specifically to an African American audience; thus, indicating that it was a production that did not catch the attention of audiences outside of the African American community. Despite the minimal interest of mainstream theatergoers, this drama is rich with a section of African American history that is often ignored - African American men marrying Japanese women prior to the legalization of interracial marriages in most states. Houston addresses the complexity of such relationships in *American Dreams*. The audience is forced to confront their own prejudices and fears of such relationships. Post-traumatic anxieties as a result of a history of enslavement, alienation, rejection, and discrimination are performed. One of two central characters in *American Dreams* is Setsuko Banks. She is married to African American soldier, Creed Banks, and he brings her

home to his family in Harlem, New York, for the first time. Setsuko is the object of hostility in the family because she represents Japan, an enemy of the United States during the 1950s.

In Act 1, Scene 1 of *American Dreams*, Creed Banks, tells his brother Manfred about his encounter with discrimination while traveling through the southern states in the United States. Creed does not regret marrying Setsuko, but is sorry that he was not honest in telling her about America's inability to fix its own problems before trying to extend themselves to other countries. Furthermore, he is bothered by the fact that he has not prepared her for the discrimination they will receive as a mixed-race couple and as nonwhites. Their presence incites the following comment from one of the southerners: "they couldn't imagine two people more different than Japs and niggers" (Houston 27). The racist language directed towards the couple shows the hostility they had to face as an interracial couple. They experienced double jeopardy because of the social constructions of their individual ethnic groups. Both individually and as a mixed-race couple, they were the receivers of racial epithets that are associated with their respective groups — African Americans and Japanese immigrants.⁶ Historically in the United States, and as a whole, both groups have been subjected to mistreatment and segregation. During efforts to keep both groups segregated from the majority White population, African Americans still interacted with the Japanese in times of war and alongside one another in labor. Even though the Japanese were referred to as the enemy, many American men married and brought home Japanese brides.

⁶ In this chapter, Japanese will refer to the Japanese as a nation, unless otherwise indicated. The analysis in this chapter (and in Chapter 3 of the dissertation) is tracing the experiences of Japanese immigrants beginning with the labor force of the late 1800s.

Interestingly, African American soldiers who married Japanese women received mixed reactions from people in their community and from their immediate family members. Velina Hasu Houston captures such sentiments in *American Dreams*. The title serves as a signifier to a very important question about what has been propagated to others outside of the United States as the American Dream. Houston is asking, how can one uphold this ideal, yet perpetuate social and structural systems that continue to separate its citizens on the basis of racial difference and colorism? During the early 1950s, Jim Crow was still actively practiced in the South and subtly practiced in the North. Creed is hoping the racial climate in the United States has changed before he returns home with Setsuko. The treatment Setsuko receives from most of Creed's family illustrates how they are grappling with accepting their new family member. Thus, the question outside of the text is whether African Americans, as a whole, will accept persons like Setsuko; in other words, will the Japanese people be welcomed in America, in general?

During the 1950s, many African Americans were heavily participating in the Civil Rights Movement of that era and other nonwhite groups were taking note of their resilience to fight for their human and civil rights. What does this mean for Japanese immigrants? Setsuko's presence is a source of tension for many members of the Harlem, New York community. Regardless that the Japanese have emigrated to the United States several decades before the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, many African Americans were still aiming to gain full assimilation into American society and have adopted the same sentiments of mainstream Americans towards their cultural and political enemy, Japan. As noted by historian Howard Zinn, the United States had a long history with "antagonistic acts" committed by Japan. Thus, the attack on Pearl Harbor was not unexpected (Zinn 410, 411). Historian Ronald Takaki does confirm that the Japanese

presence has been here for over a century, yet through the years Japanese Americans have been treated as an Other to be feared and destroyed in some kind of way. In this chapter, I do not attempt to answer how literature interprets American history, specifically the relationship between African Americans and Asian Americans. However, I do attempt to address, how Houston uses family history to participate in the discourse on multiculturalism occurring during the 1980s. The history Houston depicts addresses the overarching goal of the multicultural movement to allow everyone from different cultural backgrounds, such as representation in public spaces, the workforce, educational curricula, and in the arts, have a voice. Houston's play is an example of how both African Americans and Japanese emigrants want to tell their Black-Asian experiences. At the time of presentation by the Negro Ensemble Company in 1984, the issues the characters re-enact on stage are not often presented on the American mainstage portraying Black life, such as ambivalent feelings towards the Pearl Harbor attack and World War II; how the practice of colorism affects the lives of African American women; and the real meaning of the American Dream for most nonwhites. These points of debate are depicted in *American Dreams*.

First, Houston presents to her audience the possibilities, yet complexities, of interracial love and multiracial families. Immediately, disdain is expressed by Creed's family members, for America's enemy — Japan. Houston begins the play with such tension to counter the love and willingness to achieve peace on a personal level, which is seen in the relationship of Creed and Setsuko. Creed and Setsuko's characters embody multiculturalism's rhetoric of the 1980s even though the play is set in 1950s. The characters embody the liberal thinking of the 1980s concerning race relations and furthering the politics of integration. Their marriage is supposed to

represent what integration should look like between racial groups; their relationship is based on having unbiased approaches towards one another. On an individual level, many persons have achieved this in the 1980s and there were outward signs of it seen in the increase of interracial marriages. However, Creed and Setsuko were living in the 1950s and had to, in some ways, pioneer the idea of interracial relationships occurring between these two distinct racial groups — African Americans and Japanese. The triangulation that appears in their relationship is when Creed receives news from the army that he must relocate to the middle of the United States. Houston does not allow this triangulation of White supremacy dominate the telling of her parents' experience; however, this inclusion indicates the type of challenges they faced as a progressive couple.

Second, Houston does not shy away from connecting Creed's marriage to Setsuko to his previous relationships with women, specifically women who are light-skinned and identify with their multiracial background. There are several lines in *American Dreams* that speak to the issue of colorism⁷. The dialogue between Setsuko and Creed's sister-in-law, Freddie, gives insight into an often hurtful and heated debate among African Americans and depicts a Black-Asian conflict centered on the way in which African American men have sought relationships with women outside of their community. Freddie addresses Creed's color consciousness in the selection of his women (Russell 163-166). For example, the following dialogue occurs between the women in the second act of the play (Houston *American Dreams* 78):

FREDDIE: Girl, leave me alone. What could Creed've been thinkin' 'bout to bring you
back here to live with colored folks? Uh-uh. It ain't never gonna work. I bet

⁷ A definition for colorism is explained in the Introduction chapter.

even colored men talk to you before me though, huh? What's it like? Men whistle at your little rice-paddy face? How many soldiers, colored and white, wanted to marry you? I heard about all you Japs waitin' in the streets for our boys to give you the American dream.

SETSUKO: I do not come from a family like that. I met Creed when I was walking home from dressmaking school. His helmet fell off at my feet. Then I saw him again at the market. I helped him with his Japanese. I almost did not talk to him. I never before seen a man the color of soy sauce.

Freddie antagonizes Setsuko as soon as she enters her home. Within a matter of hours, Setsuko is subjected to cultural traumas that have been internalized by many African Americans. In this case, it is the colorism that Black women experience in intimate relationships, including courtship and marriage. Freddie questions Creed's preference in women because it subtly implies an obsession with identifying with another culture outside of his African ancestry and culture. Moreover, Creed's preference also indicates a desire for acceptance as an American citizen and for all races and cultures to come together. Houston's inclusion of Creed as the embodiment of multicultural rhetoric propagated by the United States to its citizens and to global communities is aligned with the state of multicultural debates of the 1980s. (This is discussed later in the chapter.) In addition, Houston's inclusion of Alexis Morgan, Creed's ex-fiancée, further supports Freddie's assertions about Creed's history with women. She identifies as a Creole woman — African American mother and a French father. Alexis seems to be hurt by Creed's marriage to Setsuko and the implications of a color conscious choice. For she says to Setsuko: "Well, well. What have we here? The China doll. Why, I'm almost as light as

you” (Houston 41, archived material, Russell 166). Alexis’ reaction to Setsuko is based on acknowledging the lightness of Setsuko’s skin in comparison to her own. More importantly, Alexis’ tone is racialized when she uses the term, China doll. China Doll symbolizes a certain kind of exoticism attributed to being an Asian Other regardless of the incorrect specificity. Hence, the issues raised in this play cater to an audience most familiar with the issues arising in the African American community.

The archived material of *American Dreams* at the Schomburg Research Center in Black Culture revealed the following: Many additions that were eventually omitted before production of the play give more insight on the different agencies women exercised during the 1950s. Fumiko Brennan, Setsuko’s cousin, married a White American and comes off more confident than Setsuko and Freddie. Alexis is dating a White stock broker and she appears to lord it over others. Blue, Creed’s sister, has more confidence than Freddie. In other words, the women who are more favored by the men appear to exude more confidence in themselves and their abilities. (Houston *American Dreams* Schomburg Center archives). Houston’s play is gynocentric and empowers women to cope with life-altering traumas. The intersectionality of race and gender is very important to the entire trilogy; it is the women who represent the multi-culture of feminism, race, and ethnicity. The women express different views about their own feminisms, their own experience with racism, and their own identification with racial affiliations. Houston merely points out the numerous ways in which they are different and are the same; however, she does not privilege one person’s experience over another. Houston uses Black-Asian juxtapositions to spotlight the issues that need to be confronted and the women assist one another in resolving the issues. One of these issues is how one chooses to identify.

Racial identification is one area of concern for both women and men. A debate occurs between Creed and Freddie Banks. As a mixed-race man, Creed chooses to acknowledge all ancestries, i.e., African and Native American ancestries; whereas individuals like Freddie feel that racial and ethnic identity is tied to the color of one's skin. Freddie resists Creed's choice to identify with more than one race because her experience with racism and colorism has reinforced that she does not have the freedom to claim more than one ethnicity. When Freddie says to Creed, "You always talking about your mother and the tasteless flat bread she used to make. Boy, you a colored man living in the U. S. of A. You can forget about your mother, forget you got all that mixed blood because nobody gives a darn about it. This country's colored and white, and ain't no room for anybody else" (Houston 12). Not only does the dialogue indicate how some people felt about race during the 1950s but also the dialogue divulges the complexity of identity for multiethnic African Americans and their desire to create some form of racial harmony by embracing all their cultural roots. Creed embodies a segment of multiracials existing within African American communities during his time and that is reflective of ideals of multiracials living the 1980s (Rockquemore and Brunnsma 3, 78). The racial language in this play highlight the external forces that resist individual identity politics. Racial language is not always presented in slurs or epithets; thus, this racialized language places the colorism discourse on center stage, which is often the case with passing narratives. *American Dreams* is not a passing narrative; however, it is a play that addresses the issue of individuals desiring to exercise more agency in self-identity during a time Jim Crow laws were still governing the mobility of nonwhite American people. Not only is *American Dreams'* tone is in alignment with the multicultural debate of the 1980s, but also its acceptance as a voice representing its targeted

audience, African American theater-goers. Thus, this voice maintains the FUBU mission initiated by DuBois, Locke, Redmon, and Johnson.

Third, Setsuko's presence can be read as a form of social ostracism from the rest of the community. For example, the opening scene in Act 1 shows the Banks family planning a welcome home party for Creed; however, the community is not so welcoming when they find out that Creed has married a Japanese woman, a symbol of the enemy. His sister-in-law, Freddie bluntly states how many Americans, including African Americans, feel about the Japanese after the Pearl Harbor bombing: "Ain't nobody comin' to see you and your -- her -- 'cause last thing Negroes need is to be seen favorin' a Jap" (Houston *American Dreams* 11). It was hard for many African Americans after the war to care for basic necessities of life (Houston 10). The discrimination in the North and racism of the South for African Americans with Japanese wives rendered to them an "isolated existence" (Spickard 154). In this situation, newly-emigrated Japanese women did not have many opportunities to interact with Japanese Americans. It also meant deeper isolation for African American men who had already experienced disdain from many White Americans. This double jeopardy fostered a commonality among Japanese wives; however, it ostracized African American men from their home communities and the greater society. Creed's commanding officer reminds him (Houston 73):

"Sgt. Banks, you have to understand, marrying a Jap is no way to be less Negro. No harm meant, but, if anything, you've gone and made yourself twice a nigger. Go to Kansas, Banks. Buy a house. Keep to yourself. Find some other men who brought home Japanese wives. We warned you, didn't we? The war was over and we said leave those Japs alone.

We said go home to the girls you left behind, didn't we? You should have listened. We had your best interests at heart.”

In this brief dialogue in Act 2 Scene 1, Houston states, instead of show, the forced isolation of African American men and their Japanese wives. Houston’s third play, *Tea*, presents what happens to Creed and Setsuko after relocating to Kansas. Isolation from family and close friends severely affected Creed psychologically and, as a result of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), dies of a heart attack (Houston *Tea* 11-12, 31). Setsuko sees that the America that was told to her by her husband is not what she is experiencing during her stay in Harlem and in Kansas. It takes her cousin, Fumiko who is also married to an American soldier, to help her see that the United States still is grappling with the increase of a multiethnic, multicultural population. Hence, Setsuko holds tightly to her Japanese culture and refuses to fully assimilate into American culture (Houston *Tea* 20).

BLACK-ASIAN ENCOUNTERS IN *ASA GA KIMASHITA*: HOW JAPAN SAW AMERICA

Interestingly, *Asa Ga Kimashita*, the first play of the trilogy, was first presented in 1981 and was well-received by the mainstream theater audience, as mentioned in the introduction. Houston’s writing style is different and the tone appeals to an audience that is still not quite ready to face their own racism. In *Asa Ga Kimashita*, the audience sees how some of the Japanese, such as Setsuko and her cousin, Fumiko, try very hard to rid themselves of any racial hatred toward the Americans despite defeat of their country in the war. This first drama shows the challenges Setsuko faced before coming to the United States. She is encouraged by her mother, Fusae, to pursue happiness, even if it means leaving Japan. After such a brutal defeat

during World War II, many of Japan's older generation were angry that the United States, the Americans, have occupied their land and changed laws promoting peace through democracy. This annoys Setsuko's father, Kiheida, because he loses a large amount of his land property and assets. The acres of land once owned by him are distributed to those who work for him, his servants. At this point, the play insinuates that the Americans changed the dynamics of Japan's economic structure and equalized property and assets among Japanese citizens supposedly implementing American democracy. It is uncertain how to interpret this aspect of the play in the wake of the multicultural debates of the 1980s with a setting depicting the culture wars of the 1950s. This drama definitely explores an aspect of the culture wars between the Americans and the Japanese on Japan's soil. The resistance is seen in the male characters and one female character, Setsuko's sister Haruko. Their enemy has defeated them on their own territory and has changed personal freedoms once held. The powerful and rich of Japan suffer the most hurt during this time. After the Americans enforce eminent domain on wealthy Japanese landowners, they are forced to work side by side with the ones who worked for them. Houston's trilogy is an important work to examine and discuss in relation to multicultural ideology; her literary works draw attention to the global clash of cultures.

In *Asa Ga Kimashita*, Houston uses multicultural ideology to draw attention to individuals who have already, before the movement materialized, embraced their multiethnic experience, such as Creed Banks' character. In addition, Setsuko, despite her father and sister's fears, begins to accept the idea that people of different ethnic and cultural roots can love one another. The biggest fear for Setsuko, though, is the idea of rearing multiracial children during a crucial time when Americans and Japanese were not allies. The notion that love conquers all is

at the core of this love story. The play lays this foundation; however, Houston's two other plays challenge such clichéd thinking about love among mixed race couples. The reality is that there are many challenges to the relationship both in Japan and in the United States of America. There are many consequences after the union is made and the couple moves to Creed's home country. Their very presence is a threat to America's Jim Crow and Japan's resistance to anything that is not Japanese.

The reference to Americans as "pigs" is said several times by different Japanese characters and are indicators of Japan's hatred towards Americans; their xenophobic reactions to both White and Black Americans convey their own fears of America's intent to occupy and imperialize Japan. The propaganda the Japanese perpetuate about Americans having "tails" further demonstrate Japan's disgust for America's presence in Japan and object to the changes that are taking place. The following dialogue from *Asa Ga Kimashita* demonstrates that the Japanese are a proud people who do not want to accept defeat (Houston *Politics of Life* 239 [*Asa Ga Kimashita* Act 1, Scene 3]):

HARUKO: Yellow-haired animal⁸. He is like all of the rest. They come here looking for treasures of the Far East. They see us and think we are one of them, a thing to possess, to wear on their fingers like gold rings.

SETSUKO: He wasn't like that, was he?

HARUKO: White pig.

⁸ The Shimada sisters are talking about the professor who stayed at their family's inn several years ago. (Houston *Politics of Life* 238 [*Asa Ga Kimashita* Act 1, Scene 3])

SETSUKO: Oneesan! Such language!

HARUKO: I want everything to be like it was before the war.

SETSUKO: But that can never be, sister. We must go on with our lives.

The women's father, Kiheida, also desires the past; he "grunts" at how the Americans groom and dress themselves (Houston *Politics of Life* 242 [*Asa Ga Kimashita* Act 1, Scene 4]). He taunts Fumiko for adopting an American lifestyle and their fashions. In another scene between Setsuko and Haruko, Haruko shows her ignorance and Setsuko reveals her relationship with Creed. Setsuko responds to Haruko's generalizations about the Americans having bad hygiene, disliking Japanese food, and having big ears and noses (246-247):

SETSUKO: You have never traveled out of the provinces, Haruko-san. You have never even seen an American. I know the war was a bad experience for us all, but it's over now. Americans and Japanese are living together in Kobe and Tokyo and all the other American bases in Nippon. (*a beat*) It is only natural that some of those people are going to fall in love.

Fumiko's acceptance of the American occupation and her working as a translator for the United States incites her uncle, Kiheida (248):

KIHEIDA: (*willing to disown his daughter, Setsuko if she leaves for America*) She will go nowhere, or she will go with the knowledge that she no longer has a family.

FUMIKO: This provincial close-mindedness and arrogance is what brought our country to its knees [...] We cannot go on living like this.

SETSUKO: (*trying to diffuse the heated conversation*) It takes a long time for the caterpillar to become the butterfly, ne, Fumiko-san. Yes, Nippon is

changing, but she must change in her own way.

FUMIKO: She doesn't get her way anymore. It is the morning after a terrible storm and the Yankee benevolence is something we must respect.

KIHEIDA: Your way of showing respect is a disgrace. Take leave of us, Fumiko-san.

Asa Ga Kimashita is the foundation for both *American Dreams* and *Tea*. Houston's decision to tell the story as a trilogy does two things: one, it provides insight to experiences of Japanese war brides from someone who is a product of such a union; and two, it gives more insight to discuss a different kind of identity emerging during the Civil Rights movement. This representation of identity does not necessarily acknowledge and does not exclusively adhere to the integration goals of many White and Black Americans of the 1950s. In *American Dreams*, Creed seeks to move back to Harlem thinking there will be more acceptance of their interracial marriage than if they move to the southern parts of the United States, as instructed by the military. He is unaware that the Army has segregated American-Japanese couples and families to a place in Kansas. It is in Kansas that the Amerasian community establishes their cultural roots. Japanese and Japanese Americans had already been isolated to internment camps. The fact that this exists in America is not clearly stated in *American Dreams*. Perhaps before coming to the United States, both Creed and Setsuko are unaware that over 120,000 Japanese Americans, who were "one-eighth Japanese or more," were interned in concentration camps on the West Coast (Takaki *Iron Cages* 299; Zinn 416; Houston *Politics of Life* 211; Ho and Mullen *Afro Asia* Location 2101). The general public did not know until after the war that Japanese Americans were forced into internment camps. In popular publications, like *Harper's Magazine*, reported

the Executive Order 9066 as “the Japanese evacuation” (Zinn 416). Misleading reporting, such as this, minimized the brutal treatment many Japanese Americans were receiving.

MULTICULTURAL SENTIMENT IN *AMERICAN DREAMS*

In “Out of the Melting Pot and in the *Fontera*,” Michele Janette argues that *American Dreams* purposely excludes the presence of a “white patriarch” as a target for “scorn” (Janette 88). The intent is to shift the focus from a Black-White framework for resolving problems that affect the African American community. The issues will be worked out within the community minus outside influence. Moreover, it holds the community accountable for some of their actions and responses to racism, sexism, and economic inequalities — intra-resolution versus inter-resolution. Houston uses a multicultural perspective in this African American drama to draw attention to issues that historically, and specifically, effect African American communities.

Houston admits that her creative approach is to document history, such as the experiences of Japanese war brides, Japanese immigrants, and Japanese Americans (Janette 89). *American Dreams* stands out from the trilogy because it does not exoticize the experiences of the Japanese war bride. Houston does not use the exotic settings of Japan or the supernatural (i.e., a ghost figure) to draw the audience’s attention to the play’s themes (Janette 91). The use of the exotic is one key factor in depicting alterity, and Houston steers away from this, thus, engaging the audience to consider other contributions to one’s social experience in America. More importantly, *American Dreams* questions the ideals of America and how American culture controls who is allowed to partake of the dream. The character, Setsuko, is puzzled by what she sees in Creed versus what she sees developing in some of his family members, like Manfred and

Freddie. When Creed fails to give his wife the full picture of America, it is precisely at this moment that Houston's questioning of the American dream is also a question about the state of multiculturalism and the battleground of the culture wars. Even though the play is set in 1955, the tone still is 1984. The structure of the play (i.e., costumes, setting, and situation) is set in 1955; however, the 1984-influence is the issues presented in the dialogue that are still concerns for many African Americans in the 1980s. Moreover, the play reflects the ideas of an author whose identity is based in the culture wars existing between African Americans and Japanese immigrants — their fight to establish their voice on the American socio-political stage. As someone who identifies as a multiethnic Asian and African American, Houston is affected by the issues that confront both African Americans and Asian Americans in the midst of the culture wars.

Houston situates the battle for socio-cultural hegemony in 1950s Harlem, New York. Harlem is known for both cultural and political productions. Many African American performers, writers, and artists also participated, or were influenced by, the politics of its time. However, the culture war that is presented in *American Dreams* is not rooted in the artistic representation; it is rooted in the traditional notion of the culture war. The war on stage presents the pitting of ethnic groups who are already marginalized by American society. On the one hand, there are characters who see some investment in maintaining the social hierarchy based on skin color; on the other hand, there are characters who want to divest from maintaining the color caste system and create racial harmony through love and marriage. Therefore, the theatrical depiction of the culture wars is layered and complex to a point that it does not necessarily provide a resolution to end the wars. Houston consistently has Setsuko use the language of

multiculturalism, including expressions like: “[w]e will become a Japanese and American family” (Houston 15); “I hope you can think of me as your sister” (Houston 30); and “all Americans come from foreign lands except the Indians and Creed says they came here from Asia. So it could be that I'm related to the Native American Indians” (Houston 31). Houston’s multiculturalism depicts a society that confronts the issues that divide them, while working towards a truce. Despite efforts to end the culture wars, I see this as an ongoing battle with no end clearly identified. There are a couple of scholars who examine the struggles within the multicultural debate and provide some balance on how to view the outcomes of it.

According to the introduction in *Limits of Multiculturalism*, culture already implies a composition of multiple factors (i.e., customs, language, traditions, values, class, and religion); thus, culture is already multi- (ix). Hence, all racial groups consist of multiple cultures. In addition, I use ethnicity because it acknowledges cultural distinctions that exist within a racial group. For example, there are many cultures existing among black Africans, black Americans, black Caribbeans, and black Europeans. The cultural differences and commonalities are further sorted into distinct cultures that can be compared. For instance, black Americans versus black Jamaicans or black Americans from the northern states versus black Americans from the southern states. Their cultural characteristics are pronounced and identifiable. I am not developing any theory on multiculturalism; however, I am looking at what has been defined as multicultural to initiate my understanding of the debates within the discourse. In the “Introduction” and the “Prolegomenon” to *Limits to Multiculturalism*, state several factors that challenge multiculturalism as a cultural analysis; however, I am only concerned with one idea: The term “multiculturalism” and the attempts to provide a pluralized cultural analysis that

inherently practices a process of exclusion (Michaelsen 11). Whereas *Limits of Multiculturalism* problematizes the word, *Who We Be: The Colorization of America* demonstrates the struggles for establishing multiculturalism in the arts. Thus, both criticisms agree that the ideology has not worked to bring all ethnic groups in harmony; there is continuous interruption in establishing a solid institution for it.

As noted by historian Ronald Takaki concerning the multiculturalism debate, multicultural education is studied in segregation, meaning a scholar focuses on one group during their investigation and usually does not examine their findings against the bigger picture (Takaki “The Making of Multicultural America”). The fact is that these multicultural practices to exclude and segregate counteracts their goal to bring everyone together. As noted by Robert Stam in *Race in Translation*, multiculturalism really is the battle for every group to be downstage center (Stam 84). The term multiculturalism is:

“open to various interpretations and subject to various political force fields; it became a slippery term onto which diverse groups projected their hopes and fears. Intrinsically polysemic, the word simply pointed to a debate. Its very open-endedness made it susceptible, [...], to both idealization and demonization.”

This does not mean that another term is needed to define how cultures cross and engage with one another. Perhaps, the promotion of multicultural ideologies need to be revisited. Despite the aim to correct some of the ideologies, the bottomline is there will always be a struggle to be the center of the debate.

In *American Dreams*, the African American family is depicted as fighting for equality in civil and human rights; whereas the Asians seem to be asking for acceptance by American

society; these are two very different things. For example, fighting entails aggressive action; whereas, asking implies passive action. The Banks family consistently assert how they feel about Setsuko's presence. In response, Setsuko keeps asking for acceptance by the Banks family. Evident in the dialogue, Setsuko is a non-confrontational Japanese, perhaps, alluding to the stereotypical depiction of the Japanese (Takaki 242, *A Different Mirror*). This is later contrasted with Fumiko, who comes to visit her cousin in Harlem at the Banks' home. The feelings expressed by each character about America reveals United States' need to come to terms with its history of racial disharmony and gender oppression. A feminist perspective of multiculturalism is in the dialogue between the women in the play.

In Act 2, Scene 2, Fumiko touches on a commonality among women: "It's hard enough being a woman and wife without having to deal with all the culture differences. Surely you know that, Freddie-san" (Houston *American Dreams* 84). Freddie tries to intimidate Fumiko similar to the verbal assaults she directed towards Setsuko. Fumiko is unmoved by Freddie's guarded insecurity. She sees something most troubling within Freddie and appeals to the commonality of being a woman and a wife. In addition to addressing racial difference, Houston attempts to insert a feminist sentiment. Instead of solely seeing racial and ethnic differences, Fumiko wants to soften Freddie's blows to establish a transnational relationship as women. After a couple of minutes of establishing a common bond, Freddie says: "It ain't fair bein' no woman, not in a cracker's world or in a colored world. I tell you" (Houston *American Dreams* 89). This appeal to common gender issues starts to build trust between the two women, hence, implying that African Americans and Asian/Asian Americans can build trust through similar experiences. I use the word "similar" instead of "common," because the experiences are not necessarily common. The

experiences are similar in they fall under forms of oppression and forms of discrimination. In the United States, from 1930s to 1940s, both African American women and Japanese/Japanese American women worked outside of the home. The difference comes in the types of jobs they held during wartime. Many of the Japanese women worked industrial jobs, while many African American women worked in agricultural domestic jobs (Collins 53, 54). Difference in labor also reveals America's social hierarchy of nonwhite women, and Houston offers a literary depiction of how these women were positioned in American society.

Houston's theatrical approach is not meant to usurp the dominance of Eurocentric ideology; rather, she provides a perspective that narrates the lived experiences of other American-born people whose ancestries are African and Asian. In *American Dreams*, she illustrates the need for one to tolerate and accept what is happening with America's racial makeup; mixed marriages are becoming more common. The dialogue between Fumiko and Freddie implies that mixed marriages should be accepted, instead of fighting against it (Houston 84). The dialogue in Act 2 is representational of the multicultural movement of the 1980s in that it does not acknowledge the long history of AfroAsian⁹ relations in the United States. The dialogue reveals a lack of knowledge about this part of American history, as if Black-Asian relations have not existed prior to the 1950s.

Japanese women's work ethics can be traced back to the investment Japan made in educating its citizens. Determined to compete with other power-driven countries, Japan prepared

⁹ I will not discuss the full history here because it is a topic that has been done by many historians of the African diaspora; however, it is worth noting in this chapter. Essentially, my scholarship examines Blasian literature and cultures. I use the term, Blasian, exclusively for examining the relationships between Blacks and Asians on the North American continent.

itself to work with the United States, under the rulership of the Meiji government in the late 1870s. The Emperor required all persons, both girls and boys, to be educated about foreign countries and “become enlightened as to ideas of the world” (235). The women were influenced and encouraged to travel outside their country and obtain skills that would help them to strive in America (Houston *Politics of Life* 271-274 [*Asa Ga Kimashita* Act 1, Scene 8]). Many of them were willing to work in the United States (234, 235). In 1876, the school system incorporated into its curricula the study of English and Japanese along with mathematics, literature and writing (235). Thus, Japanese women were well-equipped to handle the industrial jobs of the 1940s.

The economic and educational experiences for many African American women were quite different and unlike the Japanese government, the government of the United States of America, as a whole, was not vested in economic growth or success of African Americans. As workers in agriculture and as domestic servants, African American women often experienced obstacles that hindered their progress to obtain more skilled labor (Collins 56). Skilled labor would require more than a basic education and requires vocational training. This is something many Japanese emigrant women acquired before coming to the United States. *Asa Ga Kimashita* provides more insight into Fumiko and Setsuko’s educational background and vocational training. This depiction opens a way to examine more closely the labor experiences of both African American women in comparison to Asian American women.

The two women groups can be studied in relation to one another, instead of separately. The examination of their labor contributions in the United States will reveal the social hierarchy these two groups hold. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, both African American women

and Japanese/Japanese American women had to work outside of their homes to contribute to their households. While providing for their families, they had to contend with societal issues that reinforced their status quo among all American citizens. Their perspective on life in America is based on the treatment received by the larger society and their cultural roots. By cultural roots, I am referring to the systematic ways in which the women were educated and cultured to think of themselves in contrast to their male counterparts. Perhaps, a more in-depth study of the relationships between African American women and Japanese American women will provide us with more insight on the dynamics of the Black-Asian relations.

THE PLAY'S DIALOGUE AND HISTORY REVEAL

As discussed in this chapter, Houston's depiction of Black-Asian relationships in the 1950s implies that multiculturalism existed well-before the term was coined in the mainstream of American culture. In the field of Mixed Race Studies, the scholarship points to earlier representations of blended cultures that date back since the beginning of human existence. The distinctions among ethnic groups in America surfaced during the birth of American politics and power. The policies created controlled how America's residents interacted with one another both in social and political settings. Historically, the relationship between African Americans and Asian/Asian Americans is premised on divide-and-conquer. For instance, the first set of Asian immigrants were the Chinese and the second set were the Japanese at a later date¹⁰. Similar to the Chinese immigrants, Japanese emigrants came to the United States of America in 1890s with "dreams of making money" (Takaki *A Different Mirror* 231). The Japanese Meiji government

¹⁰ A discussion of Chinese immigrants is presented in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

sponsored their emigrations and this included many women (236). As noted in the previous section, the Emperor Meiji felt that women should be educated and afforded the same opportunities as men in the United States (235).

The Japanese women who embraced American democratic ideals came to the United States to freely live the ideals they have adopted; this is the case with Fumiko and Setsuko. Houston sets up in the drama polyphonics for and against the notion of a “melting pot” often promoted by supporters of multiculturalism. Perhaps, the Black-Asian dialogue demonstrates the larger debate as to why there is still a struggle in bringing all the different cultures and ethnicities together — America’s refusal to face its legacy of exclusion on the basis of cultural alterities and the policies developed over decades to maintain segregation and homogenization of groups in the United States. This debate helped establish an ignorance towards one another’s histories in America. For instance, Creed fails to be fully honest in his portrayal of America, partly because he refuses to accept his own subjectivity in America’s status quo for African Americans. Another instance, Houston posits a lack of knowledge of the Japanese presence prior to bombing of Pearl Harbor (Takaki *A Different Mirror* 236-237). *American Dreams* does not venture to this point of American history; however, it is a part of history that is worth mentioning when exploring the relationships between African Americans and Asian Americans during the 1900s. Their encounters do have significant points of reference, especially since these two racial groups were consistently pitted against one another in labor situations.

After the abolishment of slavery in 1865, Japanese emigrants came to the United States to work. This meant that they were competing for the same jobs that newly freed African Americans were pursuing. The family dynamics and economic situations for the Japanese were

different from the Chinese. Many of the Japanese had brought their families with them. Unlike Chinese culture, their relationships with their parents were not as “tightly bonded” (Takaki *A Different Mirror* 236). Their wives and children traveled with them to the United States. Many of the women worked with their husbands in the workforce, including construction, coal mines, and textile mills (234). The social construction of the Japanese (and the Chinese) was their willingness to do hard labor, thus, many White business owners took advantage of their ambition to make money, even though they were thought of as “supplies” for labor, goods to be imported (237). Similar to African Americans, Asians were imported as replacements to the African American workforce, wage-earners or not. In the United States, this is the first critical encounter between African Americans and Asians. For many decades to come, Black-Asian relationships developed both in conflict and solidarity.

Possible points of contention can be how African American men were treated after WWII and the Korean War. The bitterness that is displayed by the African American community in *American Dreams* are rooted in these two factors: black men were used on the front lines during battle and were killed; and the Japanese, initially, were able to live a life in America free from forced immigration (read: slavery). These experiences with discrimination between the two groups are quite different and denote a social hierarchy that still places African Americans on the bottom of the color pyramid. This is well-depicted in the dialogue of Houston’s other play, *Tea*.

In *Tea*, the audience learns that Creed suffered from PTSD because he saw fellow soldiers torn to pieces during battle, and he killed a young Japanese soldier (Houston 24). As reported in American history, many African American soldiers were placed on the frontline in direct line of fire (Houston 24). According to a 2014 article in the *Marquette Elderly Advisory*

journal, directly after the Korean War about 80 percent of American veterans suffered from PTSD (Kabatchnick 272). The deliberateness of placing African American men in the frontlines of gunfire was questioned by several African American newspapers and were featured editorials for several months (Ho and Mullen Location 735). This decision was the center of a 1950 court case, in which the military was under investigation of how well they implemented integration policies within their units (Ho and Mullen Location 722-740). Factor in the trauma of warfare and racism that were experienced by many African Americans during the two wars (i.e., World War II and the Korean War), it is not far-fetched to see how Creed's desire to be near family is motivated by the isolation and pain he may have felt while away from home. The added trauma of finding out that he will not be stationed near his loved ones and to be displaced to the middle of the United States in Kansas, based on his choice to marry a Japanese woman, is discouraging to him. Furthermore, it reinforces that the freedoms he fought for during these two wars did not guarantee his own freedom to live where he desired.

Another point of contention is that Setsuko is upset with Creed, because she feels he lied to her about America and its treatment of all people. Creed feels he "just" did not tell her the whole truth (Houston *American Dreams* 106). For instance, Creed says to Manfred, earlier, "I don't feel bad about my marriage because of it being mixed. I feel bad for Setsuko. How could I tell her what this great country was like? How could I tell her that we fought a coupla wars to fix the problems of the world, but we can't even begin to clean up our own back yard?" (Houston 26) Then, he comes home and is reminded that America has not fully changed, nor has it embraced their own integration policies. Setsuko is confused by the American democracy rhetoric promoted in her country and its hypocrisy to fulfill those ideals on its own soil.

Regarding the second factor and as noted earlier, the Japanese came to the United States willingly to settle with their families and pursued jobs that would help establish citizenship. African Americans not only competed with White Americans, but also Japanese issei and nisei for employment. Many of the opportunities during the 1950s were for skilled jobs in industrialized cities. Labor eventually led to cultural encounters; these cultural encounters have been a part of American history and life since the mid-1800s. Over time, cultural encounters developed into exchanges and embracements that manifest themselves in art, literature, film, and politics. In continuing with the solidarity theme in Black-Asian relations, there is a demand for more contemporary literature devoted to telling of Black-Asian, also known as Blasian, narratives.

Similar to Velina Hasu-Houston, author Ishmael Reed portrays a Black-Asian political relationship in one of his novels, *Japanese by Spring (JBS)*. Reed's novel continues the through line that Japan is the enemy, but vividly depicts the fears of most Americans. The irony of this novel is the protagonist, Benjamin "Chappie" Puttbutt. Chappie represents the desire to be on the right side of history, even when the right side is not necessarily the right side. Reed uses the Black-Asian trope to interrogate the conflicts arising during the 1990s multicultural debate. In the third chapter of this dissertation, I continue to look at African American-Japanese/Japanese American relations in *JBS* and discuss Pro-Japanese social movements of the 1930s.

CHAPTER 2:

ADULTHOOD RITES: THE BLACK-ASIAN MIXED-RACE FIGURE IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

“I began writing about power because I had so little. I began to write consciously, deliberately, about people who were afraid and who functioned in spite of their fear... Every story I create [...] helps me to understand people and grow [...] Every story I create creates me. I write to create myself.” — Octavia E. Butler, “Why I Write”

INTRODUCTION

Octavia E. Butler is one of the pioneers of speculative fiction in the late twentieth century who left an indelible mark in literary studies. Her fiction gives voice to those who have been muted in society, as indicated in the epigraph. Even though Butler writes from an African American perspective, her narrative settings depict multiracial societies. Settings of multiracial societies are often included in science fiction written by African American authors; whereas, in the general field of science fiction, racial factors are often dismissed or upstaged by class and gender. Butler was not reluctant to address the complicated intersections of race, gender, and class. Her desire to write herself into the narratives resulted in creating a world where she is able to confront the issues that threaten her existence as a Black woman. However, Butler takes this a step further by providing a prescriptive to addressing the world’s problem with “project[ing] alienness onto one another” (Butler “The Monophobic Response” 415). In *Adulthood Rites*, published in 1988, Butler creates the multiracial, multicultural, multispecies protagonist, Akin.

Akin is positioned in the narrative as the possible answer to correcting humans' innate desire to dominate one another using racism, classism, and sexism as tools to exert power. Akin embodies two racial groups in North America that experienced oppression, segregation, and isolation — African Americans and Chinese/Chinese Americans. Even though the protagonist ideally symbolizes racial mixing as an answer to improve race relations, Akin's human racial mixture is of two races that have been historically and socially constructed as inferior Others in Western societies. I argue that the Black-Asian mix figure also depicts the unvalidated border identity of many persons who self-identify as both African American and Asian American. As a Black-Asian mixed-race being, Akin's experience is a historical representation of how many mixed-race Black-Asians interacted with the general society before the demands for self-identification by multiracial movements were accepted.

This chapter discusses the social histories of African Americans and Chinese Americans to provide a close reading of a Black-Asian mixed-race figure. First, I focus on when the Chinese first entered the United States and Canada to work on the railroads. In addition, I will attempt to explain how their arrival to the Americas shifted race relations for African Americans, who received their freedom about three decades after the Chinese entered the Americas. Second, I examine how the Exclusion Act of 1882 affected the lives of many Chinese men; thus, the need to have families resulted in Chinese men marrying African American women forming Black-Asian families. Third, I discuss the second volume of the *Lilith's Brood* trilogy, *Adulthood Rites*, as a passing narrative. Within the passing narrative discourse, I compare *Adulthood Rites'* mixed-race character, Akin, with the mixed-race character, Birdie Lee, in Danzy Senna's

Caucasia. This chapter is not solely interested in mixed race identity politics¹¹, but rather it is interested in the history of mixed-race identity and how it is represented in literature.

Experiences of Black-White mixed ancestries are usually the primary focus of inquiry in both literary studies and the social sciences; however, the discussion rarely reaches beyond such racial experiences to include other kinds of mixed race experiences. For many in the multiculturalism debate, the focus is on the hope of dismantling the racial divide and encouraging racial mixing as the remedy for this problem. In Butler's *Adulthood Rites*, Akin is seen as a messiah, among his people, to bring humans and aliens together. This mission that is thrust upon Akin is not far-fetched from how Lilith is seen among human resisters. In many ways, Lilith¹² initiates this mission through Akin because she is so hated by the human resisters; she is seen as a traitor. While in captivity, Akin has the potential to redeem her reputation and to

¹¹ In this chapter, I will not provide an in-depth analysis about mixed-race identity politics. This topic is a separate research project beyond this dissertation.

¹² The name or label, Lilith, is based in several Eastern folklores. Historically, "lilith" has appeared in ancient myths and one Biblical reference. According to Bible scholar, Janet Howe Gaines, the character, Lilith, has its origins in "Babylonian demonology," and as an imagined figure, she has appeared in the mythical and biblical narratives of various cultures and nations, including the ancient Egyptians, Israelites, and Greeks. Lilith is referred to by other names in other cultures. For example, the Sumerians called her "Inanna," the Akkadians called her "Ishtar," and the Mesopotamian myths called her "Lilith," a winged demon that seduces men and kills pregnant women and babies (Gaines). There is one mention in the book of Isaiah, Chapter 34, in which the "wild goat" creature refers to a "goat-like demon" (vs. 14 footnote). In Jewish scholarship, Lilith is associated with a demon that has sex with men while they are sleeping, a powerful figure who "embodies the demon-lover myth" (Gaines). This Talmudic version of Lilith is offered as a general perception of Black women in Butler's trilogy. In *Lilith's Brood*. Butler's interpretation of the "lilith" figure draws on a social practice of demonizing Black women, thus, further marginalizing them in society. The marginalization of Black women and Asian men are discussed in Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

show humans that they can be saved from deterioration if they change the way they think about Human-Oankali constructs. In essence, Butler's narrative shows how multiracial individuals have been positioned in society to exemplify cultural exchanges among different racial groups. However, this argument raises other questions about the experiences of multiracial individuals, including those who can pass for one race over another. In *Beyond Black: Biracial Identity in America*, Kerry Ann Rockquemore identifies several kinds of border identities; however, I discuss one kind in the experience of Akin. Rockquemore builds upon Gloria Anzaldua's concept of the border identity as an "individual's existence [is] between two socially distinct 'races.'" (Rockquemore 43) Under this concept, the individual identifies as both races; however, self-identification is in conflict with how society identifies them. According to Rockquemore, a person's identity can be validated or unvalidated by others. The unvalidated identity is what Akin experiences while residing with the human resister groups. An unvalidated identity is when a person looks more like one race than the other resulting in the person being seen as one race, not both races. (Rockquemore 44-45). The concept applied in Akin's circumstance is that, as a child, he looks more human than alien. Thus, as a Human-Oankali, he has a border identity. The border identity is experienced by many multiracial persons regardless of their ancestries. The following sections will discuss how Butler inserts the voice of multiracial individuals to address the race problem during the height of the multiculturalism debate of the late 1980s. Their lived experiences are supposed to be signals of racial harmony; however, their presence create more fear and tension.

In Butler's *Dawn*, the first volume of the *Lilith Brood's* trilogy, the protagonist Lilith Iyapo stands in the middle of a great culture war between human resisters and the Oankali. Lilith

and Joseph Li-Chin Shing represent a Black-Asian alliance; however, this abruptly ends when human resisters assassinate him. Despite attempts by human resisters to destroy this alliance, the Oankali are able to obtain and store DNA from Joseph. Hence, Joseph's sperm and Lilith's eggs procreate several offspring, including a son, Akin, which symbolizes the Black-Asian mix symbol appearing in the second volume, *Adulthood Rites*. In this volume of the trilogy, the multi-species experience of Akin demonstrates the external and internal conflicts of persons who identify as multiracial. The history of racial laws in the United States provides insight on how we interpret Butler's novel.

Since the seventeenth century, the United States has issued laws restricting how groups interact on both social and economic levels; this has affected family structures and traditions. The State of Maryland issued the first statute against interracial marriages in 1661 restricting marriages between White women and Black men (Johnson Location 454). However, more laws legislating the socialization of race were enforced in the nineteenth century, as fears heightened around the prevalence of miscegenation and the "progeny of interracial intercourse [of] White fathers" and Black mothers, in which the children became the White father's property (Johnson Location 464). Legislation could not entirely prevent different ethnic groups from creating families and building cross-heritages. In *Mixed America and the Law*, it notes that any discussion about the "*history of antimiscegenation* laws must begin with the regulation of black-white intimacy, but *must not end there*" (Johnson Location 402, italics mine). I highlight *history of antimiscegenation*, because the greater argument posited by Butler is that many African Americans and Asian/Asian Americans have been on the receiving end of rejection, isolation,

and taciturnity in American society. These three important factors were strongly illustrated in the first volume of the trilogy, *Dawn*.

In *Dawn*, readers are introduced to Lilith Iyapo, an African American woman who survives the war on Earth and is rescued by an alien nation of Oankali. In the first chapter of the novel, the narrative tone is the captivity and bondage of a Black woman, thus, immediately the reader is reminded of the beginning history of Black women in America. This narrative speculates whether African Americans will ever receive true emancipation in the future. On the other side of this question is, will Asian Americans ever be seen as an ally instead of an enemy in the future? Butler attempts to answer her own questions through the character development of Akin in *Adulthood Rites*. As a proponent of expanding the discourse on cross-cultural encounters with other cultures other than European, African Americanist scholar Bernard W. Bell argues for the importance of acknowledging how African Americans have been influenced by cultures outside of African and European cultural practices and traditions (Bell 383). Butler's body of work does expand multiple discourses within African American literary studies, including an AfroAsian discourse. During the height of her writing career in the 1980s, inquiries about interracial relationships and persons who identify as mixed race were on the increase during the late 1980s' multiculturalism debate and the media's coverage of professional golfer Tiger Woods, who identifies as both African American and Asian (specifically Thai.) In a final comment about his ethnic affiliations, Woods stated he embraces both cultures, but wants to be wholly seen as an American, "a human being" (Carter 185). Butler illustrates this in the character Akin as,

“He came to perceive himself as himself — individual, defined, separate from all the touches and smells, all the tastes, sights, and sounds that came to him. He was Akin” (Butler, *Adulthood Rites* 6).

Butler’s second volume, *Adulthood Rites*, complicates the fluidity of identity through the character of Akin. Immediately, readers are immersed in his world, his adventures, his problems, and his triumphs. For following sections of this chapter, I briefly discuss the identity politics that is often read in analyses of this text. Then, I extend the discussion on how the human resister communities react to Akin’s presence and how this is reflective of how various homogenized communities or groups that advocate monoracial identity have reacted to the presence of mixed individuals throughout American history. Historically, mixed race offspring were often seen as distasteful and an annoyance to many White Americans because they “did not fit into the [W]hites’ vision of the natural order of things” and persons who did not fit were considered unnatural and “dangerous” (Johnson Location 798-810). Butler captures this reaction of disdain for mixed race individuals in the characterization of the human resisters. The human resisters’ reaction to Akin is their anger towards the Oankali, who implemented restrictions on procreation, thus, taking away their rights to preserve human life. Similar to how American laws legislated the social behavior between racial and ethnic groups, the Oankali control the behavior of humans to advance their own mission.

Marcia A. Dawkins’ socio-historical analysis, in *Clearly Invisible*, provides a framework to examine how multiracial individuals have practiced passing and argues that a mixed race person exercises the “principle of passing” by making choices on how to identify and executes these choices despite the challenges and opposition (81-82). Dawkins’ argument correlates with

Octavia Butler's notion of empowerment and agency. She argues that one's declaration to identify with a specific group can be interpreted as "a commitment to [the race] rather than as a genetic calculation assigned by law" (Dawkins 82). In *Adulthood Rites*, Butler's mission to create a space and to provide an example of what agency looks like for muted marginalized beings are depicted in Akin. Akin's presence forces the people he encounters to confront their fears about an ambiguous difference they think poses a threat to their monoracial identities.

A specificity often overlooked is the co-existing histories of African Americans and the Chinese in America; Butler alludes to the history of Chinese immigrants that settled in Canada through the character Joseph (Butler *LB 120-121*). This allusion strongly suggested that there are several generations in Canada with African and Chinese ancestries. Butler's inclusion of Chinese Canadians seems random, at best, because the entire narrative within the *LB* trilogy merely mentions this aspect of the North American Chinese experience. In the latter part of *Dawn* and in the beginning of *Adulthood Rites*, Butler does briefly acknowledge Chinese culture in terms of location and physical characteristics. However, she implies physical markers of difference, based in biology, and that such things are still of great concern for humans after many terrestrial societies are destroyed and many humans are captured by extraterrestrial aliens (Butler *LB 159-161, 258-260, 501-513, 564, 696-697*). Butler's inference is situated in the middle of the multiculturalism debate; she does not obscure notions about difference and sameness simply because it is not necessary. Since the discussion in this chapter is about the encounters that occur between African Americans and Chinese immigrants, the following paragraphs provide some historical background about Chinese immigrants in North America.

Similar to Chinese immigrants in the United States on the West Coast, the Chinese immigrated to Canada seeking employment in railroad construction during the mid-nineteenth century (Yung, Chang, and Lai 39). While working on the railroads, the Chinese were subject to harsh working conditions and racial discrimination; whereas, African Americans experienced harsh treatment under both slavery and Jim Crow segregation (Yung, Chang, and Lai 48-54). Even though the forms of oppression differ, the fact remains that mistreatment under White supremacy were experienced by both groups (Lee 29).

As early as 1830s, the Chinese have immigrated to the United States as sailors, laborers, and merchants; many of them sailed “from plantations in the West Indies and [disembarked] in New York City (Carter 81). According to historian Ronald Takaki, the Chinese population increased in the United States from 7,520 to 105,456 between 1840 and 1880 (Takaki *Iron Cages* 216). By 1870, the Chinese were 8.6 percent of California’s population and represented 25 percent of the workforce (216; Carter 81). This historical fact reveals an influx of nonwhites that entered the mainstream workforce. Takaki noted the general reaction to the presence of the Chinese and the recent emancipation of many African Americans expressed in two major newspapers, *The New York Times* and *The San Francisco Chronicle*, fearing the two groups will be a threat to “republicanism and free labor society” (216-217).

The Exclusion Act of 1882 had a great affect on families left in China and on the men who immigrated to the United States and Canada; the exclusionary law prevented Chinese men from bringing the wives and other family members to the United States. Prior to the Exclusion Act, there were a small number of women who did come to America in the nineteenth century. According to a summary to Sing Kum’s “Letter by a Chinese Girl,” some women came as wives

of merchants, but many of them were “kidnapped, tricked, or purchased from poor peasant families in southern China to be prostitutes” (Yung, Chang, and Lai 15). These women experienced “brutal, degrading conditions, and died from disease and mistreatment” (Yung, Chang, and Lai 15).

The essay, “Documents of the Chinese Six Companies Pertaining to Immigration,” is a long document that speaks in behalf of the Chinese and counters negative stereotypes regarding the Chinese community. The Chinese Six Companies, also known as the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, was a key organization in the nineteenth century that helped many Chinese immigrants, since the first group arrived in 1850, by providing many social and economic services, including employment, medical care and legal representation (Yung, Chang, and Lai 17-20). The Six Companies also corrected the notion that some Chinese men did not bring any family members to the United States. The fact is hundreds of Chinese families were brought to countries in North America. Most of the women stayed home to take care of the children and thousands of Chinese children were born in America (Yung, Chang, and Lai 20). Some Chinese were part of multiracial communities.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF MULTIRACIAL COMMUNITIES

Historically, American racial laws influenced the socialization of groups that led to unions of these groups even in areas of matrimony. The *Plessy v. Ferguson* of 1896 case established “separate but equal” laws, which actually questioned America’s racial classifications. This case is significant to Butler’s answer to the race question, because the case was argued by Americans who were of mixed heritage arguing for equality for minority groups, whether they

were of mixed heritage or not (Carter 77-79). It was during the defense in this case in which a “utopian vision” of racial harmony and de-stratification was presented using a racially ambiguous person to establish the case¹³ (Carter 78-79). The vision is steeply based in ideologies still promoted by the Multiracial Movement of today that believe that interracial marriages and their offspring will “sabotage traditional racial categorization, leading to its dissolution” and the elimination of racism (Carter 79). The defendants in this case, Albion Tourgée and Comité des Citoyens (a Creole of Color group of New Orleans), attempted to challenge Louisiana’s *Separate Car Act* of 1890 that prohibited passengers of different races from occupying the same car, specifically a separation of White passengers from Black passengers. However, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of maintaining this segregationist system until *Brown v. Board of Education* of 1954 dismantled legal segregation of the racial and ethnic groups in public spaces.

The *Brown v. Board of Education* case initiated a succession of cases that led to a more significant case concerning intermarriages between different racial and ethnic groups, *Loving v. Virginia* of 1967. This landmark Supreme Court case affirmed that the *Racial Integrity Law* of 1924 was unconstitutional and violated United States citizen’s personal rights to marry someone outside of one’s racial classification. Regardless of legal laws prohibiting interracial marriages and people’s personal reservations against interracial dating and marriage, these relationships continue to happen and is part of America’s culture (Johnson Location 432). This is America’s history and its narratives. According to Kevin R. Johnson’s analysis, “American” means all

¹³ For more details on this case, see Chapter 3 of *The United States of the United Races: A Utopian History of Racial Mixing* by Greg Carter.

persons born in the North American continent, inclusive of all ethnicities. This notion should eliminate the thinking that “American” is synonymous with White, but this continues to be a muted debate. Literature written by Americans from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds since the 1980s reflect the experiences of various ethnicities and has continued to grow to include more narratives about America’s multiethnic population. Included in this collection is literature by African American writers that continues to expand its genre to include experiences that stretch beyond Black-White binaries.

Butler’s narrative may still reflect a Black-White binary on the surface; however, underneath the surface are other kinds of binaries, such as the Black-Asian trope, to demonstrate how cultural hegemony still plays a major role in the development of those subjected to its influence. Part of cultural hegemony is the perpetuation of colorism, a form of racism. The importance of understanding how colorism works in North America plays a major role in understanding how ethnic groups are categorized under the color system within their own groups. This is a factor considered within Butler’s positioning of an African American woman and a Chinese man. Where do dark-skinned Lilith and dark-complected Joseph fit on the colorism chart? The social construction of race in America places both Lilith and Joseph at the bottom of the color pyramid; however, Butler elevates their positions in her trilogy. Socially, Akin represents the union of an African American and a Chinese, his position is informed by two separate terrestrial cultures of pre-war Earth that were lower ranked in humankind’s social hierarchy. (Akin’s positionality is discussed later in this chapter.) During pre-war Earth, Joseph Shing was a citizen in Canada, a part of North America that has a slightly different history than for Chinese immigrants in the United States. Butler does not provide much historical reference

in *Adulthood Rites* regarding Joseph's history. His character barely survives his first awakening on the Oankali ship in the first volume, *Dawn* (Butler LB 223-224). However, the introduction of Joseph helps us begin a discussion about his pairing with Lilith, a Black woman. Butler's pairing of an African American woman with a Chinese man provides a basis for further exploration of this romantic pairing. In what ways is this pairing a reference about the ancestral connections between many Americans of African and Chinese descent?

According to United States laws on naturalization during the early twentieth century, any nonwhite person was not considered a citizen of the country (Johnson Location 8964). This fact regarding social status begs a question of whether the marriages between Chinese men and African American women were recognized as legal. (Legality of marriages does not negate the intimacy of such unions. This aspect of Black-Asian unions will be discussed in the fourth chapter.) For example, historian Greg Carter notes the Chinese were aware of the social status of others, with Whites in the dominant position and Blacks in the lowest position of the social stratum (81). He further notes that even though, as a whole, the Chinese did not marry outside of their ethnic group, they did "form unions with [B]lacks and [W]hites" (81). For instance, a small group of Chinese men in Louisiana intermarried with those around them, including African American and Native American women (81). Louisiana did not prohibit the Chinese from marrying anyone outside their ethnic group (81). In fact, the state of Louisiana's culture welcomed and embraced "in-between racial groups more readily," and the Chinese "blended into the population more readily" (Carter 81). During the mid to late 1800s and as unmarried Chinese men stayed longer in the United States, many Whites saw the Chinese as a threat to free labor, public health, and "cultural norms" that the Chinese Exclusion Act 1882 was passed by Congress

to prevent Chinese from coming into the United States (81). This act still did not prevent marriages between Chinese men and American women; according to Carter, this “contradicted the image of them as deviant, nearly asexual” (81). However, the Chinese were seen as a threat in the labor force.

In America’s multiracial labor force, tension increased and the Chinese were victims of mob violence, and in many situations, the Chinese miners were caught off guard, unable to defend themselves. President Grover Cleveland sent in troops to help protect the Chinese workers, despite his beliefs that the Chinese did not want to assimilate into American society (Yung 48-4). The rising tensions between White Americans and Chinese immigrants forced the Chinese to live in predominantly African American communities or forced to form their own communities (Carter 81). The Chinese continued many cultural traditions while establishing a life in the United States. As mentioned before, the Chinese’s encounter with African Americans led to marriages between Chinese men and African American women. This accounts for the cultural diversity seen in some African American cultures. Many African American cultures intersect with Chinese culture, such as food, clothing, and the arts. These intersections result in alliances and in alliances, exchanges take place. One area in which exchange occurs is matrimony.

The acronym, AMBW, stands for Asian Men dating or marrying Black Women, needs to be further deconstructed within historical context. As discussed in this section, an examination of the histories of Blacks and Chinese in America further situates how AMBW relationships are

represented in fictional works, such as the science fiction genre¹⁴. Octavia Butler's inclusion of this kind of intimate coupling is featured to illustrate how both, as a whole, Asian men and Black women, historically, were feared and devalued. The question still remains as to why. Since this is Butler's literary imagination about these two distinct groups' connections, I can only interpret what is happening in Butler's narratives. My research on this topic yielded very little information on Chinese men forming companionship and marriage with women of color, specifically African American women. This may account for the brief encounter between Lilith and Joseph in *Dawn*; the rest of the speculation for this possible union is left for the reader to imagine and explore (Butler *LB* 223-224). However, in *Adulthood Rites*, the exploration of the possibility of a more blossomed relationship is inserted in the character, Akin (Butler *LB* 246).

In *Dawn*, Butler uses a Black-Asian trope to depict a possible coalition despite the dissension occurring among humans who are held captive by an alien nation, the Oankali. The narrative continues in *Adulthood Rites* with the protagonist, Akin, who is constructed as a complex multispecies being, sees the world with very different eyes than his parents and their contemporaries (Butler *LB* 255). Akin's worldview is a threat to the human resisters; his ambiguous presence and high intelligence frightens them (Butler *LB* 259-260). Akin's character represents the multiracial individual often feared in a dominant society. Alien attributes are assigned to such individuals constructing them as Other among Others. The experience of Akin's character suggests that the multiracial individual has to navigate the fears of people who

¹⁴ Chapter 4 of this dissertation discusses a memoir written by an African American woman who married a third-generation Chinese American man.

do not accept their ambiguity and has to continuously find ways to protect themselves against such fears (Butler *Adulthood Rites* 113).

A PASSING NARRATIVE

“Human beings fear difference [...] Oankali crave difference. Humans persecute their different ones, yet they need them to give themselves definition and status. Oankali seek difference and collect it. They need it to keep themselves from stagnation and overspecialization. If you don’t understand this, you will. You’ll probably find both tendencies surfacing in your own behavior. [...] When you feel a conflict, try to go the Oankali way. Embrace difference” (Butler *LB* 329).

Akin is Octavia Butler’s answer to xenophobia. *Adulthood Rites* is a precursor to arguments posited about the complexity of biological and social constructions of race in some twenty-first century novels, such as *Caucasia*. The main protagonist in *Adulthood Rites* has a similar self-discovery journey as the main protagonist in Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia*. Both literary works present a revisionist view of the social construction of race and that the choice on how to identify resides with the individual despite a history of controlling one’s racial experiences. Butler features the Black-Asian mix as a trope for racial ambiguity; whereas, Senna continues with the Black-White mix is not a trope, but rather a platform to argue for an individual’s choice to claim racial solidarity. Butler’s presentation of a mixed race character with African American and Chinese ancestries compounds the marginalization of Black women and Chinese men in

North America¹⁵. As a Black-Asian mix, Akin's character seems to be Butler's answer to curing xenophobia by creating a character that has the ability to move between racial groups as well as among species. However, Butler's character development is shortsighted because Akin is constructed with a protean identity. A protean identity is one that "adjusts [his or her] identity" to different circumstances, despite how people visibly see them (Rockquemore 47). This implies that the individual exercises autonomy to pass for one race over another. This assumption incorporated into Akin's character does not remove the social conflict that he continually encounters throughout his life. The characteristic of a protean identity places *Adulthood Rites* in one of many literary genres, including the passing narrative.

Butler's novel does not shy away from showing the reality of race and its impact on one's life. She considered racialism to be the reality of the future, yet with a hope of forming peaceful alliances for a better society. A society that acknowledged all humans and was not predicated on the social construction of racialized groups. *Adulthood Rites* was correct in its prediction about the state of race relations in the twenty-first century. Philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah posits the possibility of racism and color consciousness ending in the twenty-first century; however, both socio-political praxis continue to haunt many ethnic groups regardless of domestic and global positionalities (Appiah 37, 78, 113; Stam 103-104, 214, 232). In *Adulthood Rites*, Butler continues to question race from another angle, from the point of view of a child. Akin is curious about the world around him and how humans think. His assessment of Oankali, human constructs, and humans is constantly changing as he grows in understanding why humans resist

¹⁵ The marginalization of African American women and Chinese American men is discussed in Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

the Oankali. As a symbol for unification, he is used as a barometer for determining the moods of human resisters to convince them the Oankali are not their enemies.

As depicted in the character of Akin, racialized beings negotiate, shift, and compromise their positions on a daily basis, both consciously and unconsciously. The embedment of American racialism is governed by several decades of enforced legislation of racial laws. According to Butler, it is how the Oankali are able to correct this experience. However, even though the Oankali have done extensive and ongoing studies of human behavior, they still cannot completely control the actions of humans. When they cannot control humans, humans are rendered useless and are sterilized to prevent any reproduction of its kind. Akin is aware of what the Oankali do with humans and why, yet he is conflicted because of his human side and his experiences with the human resisters. Symbolically, the internal conflict of Akin resembles the internal conflict of many multiracial characters depicted in twenty-first century passing narratives, such as *Caucasia*. Fictional mixed-race characters, Akin and Birdie Lee, experience similar situations during their development from infancy to adolescent years. In the following paragraphs, I discuss common depictions of mixed-race characters that are featured in *Adulthood Rites* and *Caucasia*, published respectively 1988 and 2000.

In *Adulthood Rites*, Akin is captured by human resisters who desire to have children, but cannot because they were sterilized by the Oankali. Akin's outer appearance looks human and while in captivity, Akin reasons that he will not show any signs of being half Human, half Alien by showing this tongue. His long dark tongue and his highly intelligent speech reveal that he is a Human-Alien construct. Even though he is only eight months old, Akin chooses to pass for human, because he does not want to scare the human resisters with his alien features (Butler *LB*

341-345, 381). Akin's mother, Lilith, prepared her son for the possibility of being kidnapped by human resisters, because a male Human-Construct is a highly valued commodity. They value the Human-Oankali that looks most human, least Oankali, and Akin is a perfect fit for their desires (Wallace 106). Most notable is the human resisters' reaction to Akin and Akin's fear of detection. Most human resisters hate the presence of Akin and mistreat him, while others are indifferent towards him because they cannot trust him. Akin's position is contested because on the one hand, he is forced to choose his human heritage and betray his alien heritage; and on the other hand, he is encouraged to embrace all differences, as stated in the opening epigraph of this section.

Butler's narrative is a precursor to the mission of the multiracial movements of the late 1990s. Multiracial movements fought to add more categories to the census forms, and other forms requesting racial identity; eventually, their general aim was to prove that racial categorization and monoracial identity should be eliminated (Carter 162-163, Rockquemore 1). Butler illustrates that the Oankali's mission to bring humans together through scientific interventions resembles how policymakers have used laws and amendments to regulate the socialization of all races. As a result, scientific interventions and laws have created more categories for racial and ethnic groupings. Thus, new ways of defining race and ethnicity have taken shape and perpetuate the practice of colorism. This practice of colorism is seen in the following depiction, in which the character, Birdie Lee, is rejected for her skin tone and she tries to belong in a predominantly Afro American school.

Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* is about a young biracial girl's experience with race and racism during the late twentieth century. The social construction of race exercised by external forces

disrupts her family's life. The protagonist, Birdie Lee, and her older sister, Cole, are the offspring of an African American father and a White American mother. The two girls are divided based on the practice of colorism. When the parents are wanted by federal government for sedition, the family has to go separate ways to escape capture. It is decided that Birdie will go with the mother and Cole will go with the father. The decision yields two distinct racial experiences for these biracial girls. In my analysis of this novel, I focus on Birdie's unvalidated border identity.

Colorism is illustrated in the school scenes in *Caucasia*, with darker skin tone being privileged in this environment. While attending Nkrumah, Birdie Lee does not blend in with the other Black children at the Boston school. Her darker skinned sister, Cole, has to validate Birdie is Black in order for Birdie to be part of the community. Unlike Akin, Birdie uses a racial performance (i.e., speech and fashion) to deflect from her more obvious markers of difference. (Senna 26-29, 62-71) Young Birdie is bullied during her first week of school at Nkrumah because her physical features imply that she is not African American. There are assumptions made based on her physical appearance and she is challenged by her peers to prove her blackness. The school promotes the Black Power politics of the 1970s, in which the slogan, "Black is Beautiful," is shouted, awarded, and embraced by many African Americans in various ways. Young Birdie is influenced by this ideology, but learns quickly outside of the home that not everyone saw her as Black, but as a little White girl. Her appearance placed her at the different end of the spectrum, while her cultural experience, beginning at home, is at the other end of the color spectrum. It is during her "passing" that she fills in the gaps between physical appearance and cultural practices.

Social interaction becomes even more important as the young characters enter their adolescent years. For Birdie, she suffers an identity crisis while running away with her mother; her mother forces her to pass for a half-Jewish girl to go undetected by federal agents who are looking for the mother (Senna 131). Thus, categorically, Birdie will not pass for a WASP, like her mother. Birdie's appearance will always be in question by others who continue to use skin tone as a way to identify one's ancestral roots. Sandy, her mother, clearly tells Birdie that she is not "really passing because Jews weren't really white, more like an off-white. She said they were the closest [Birdie] was going to get to black and still stay white" (Senna 140). Not only did Birdie struggle with physically passing as Jewish, but also struggled with culturally passing as a mixed-race Jewish girl.

In contrast, Akin decides not to pass for either Human or Oankali. He embraces both sides of his cultural influences. However, during his young adult years just before going through his metamorphosis stage, Akin spends more time with his Human side instead of his multiracial, multispecies community in Lo. He empathizes with the human resisters' desire for independence and their desire to have children. (Butler *Adulthood Rites* 177-184) At this stage, he is moving between two different worlds and receives disapproval of his actions from both sides. Akin's young adult life allows him more freedom to explore both sides of his cultural heritage. The Oankali are concerned that the human resisters will have greater influence over Akin and thought that gene design would have prevented him from wanting to socialize with what is considered the inferior side. According to the Oankali, Akin's genetic mixture should override inferior traits inherited from his human side. His explorations taught him that "[h]e did not have [the human] flaw. He had been assembled within the body of an ooloi. He was Oankali enough to be listened

to by other Oankali and Human enough to know that resister Humans were being treated with cruelty and condescension” (Butler *LB* 404). Butler is alluding to a privilege of multiracial individuals who have access to both worlds and have developed skills to navigate both cultures; possibly, this is Butler’s interpretation and expansion on W.E.B. DuBois’ social theory on double consciousness.

Akin’s double consciousness is between his human and alien sides. His twoness is tied into the battle between human resisters and their desire to keep their identity and the Oankali and their mission to improve human conditions through their bioengineering, thus, creating new kinds of species. However, Akin holds a third consciousness that is not fully developed in regard to his biracial and bicultural roots - African American and Chinese Canadian. While nursing Akin, Lilith taught him her African American cultural roots; and when he spent time with his alien parent, Dichaan, he was told about his father’s ancestral roots in China. Akin lived in a community that consisted more of his mother’s cultural background and not any of his father’s background, yet both Lilith and Dichaan felt it was necessary for Akin to know and learn about Joseph’s people when he is older (Butler *LB* 262-263). The information received from his human and alien parents is stored and sustains Akin’s curiosity even during his captivity with the human resisters. He had hoped to encounter people that were from his father’s culture and it remained a missing piece of his biological and cultural histories. The complexity of Akin’s consciousness and yearnings are representations of how mixed-race characters have been depicted in passing narratives since the 1920s. Thus, it can be concluded that regardless of the mixed-race character’s ethnicities, the common desire is to piece together all parts of a whole and to find persons in similar situations — a sense of belonging. However, Butler’s use of the

Black-Asian mix trope adds another dimension to the mixed-race character in a passing narrative. Butler's narrative explicitly illustrates the alienness experienced by the mixed-race character by depicting Akin as a biracial, multicultural, multispecies creature. A figure exclusively representing alterity.

In *Caucasia*, a revelation happens for Birdie concerning the issue of race and racial identity. After Birdie runs away from her mother and reconnects with her father, she realizes that she wants to be around people who are like her, mixed race, where no one has to choose. Similar to Akin, when Birdie is able to escape she gains the mobility and access to confront her father's theories on race and to reconnect with someone who is in a similar situation, her sister Cole. It is during her meeting with her father that she shares with him her experience with race and racism as a multiracial person. Also, during this visit, Birdie learns of the end result of her father's life-long racial project about the fate of multiracials according to his theory: "the fate of the mulatto in history and in literature, he said, will manifest the symptoms that will eventually infect the rest of the nation" (Senna 392-393). Later, she meets up with Cole and Birdie states that she will not choose between being White or Black; however, Cole reminds her that there are consequences whether you choose or not (Senna 408-413). As a result, Birdie does choose; she chooses to associate with those who have similar experiences as her, as a multiracial person. Birdie's decision resembles the argument for the current Multiracial Movement. The premise of the movement is based on persons who have experienced difficulties establishing connections or bridging connections between multiple ethnicities. The goal is to expand options for racial and ethnic identities. On paper and in surveys, Americans want options to choose their identities, even though many continue to experience racialism in their daily social interactions with others.

Birdie and Akin's decisive actions to identify with the culture that is least valued in the greater society illustrate their understanding of how threatening their respective multiracial or multispecies presence is in a dominant society (Dawkins 87). According to Dawkins, the individual who values the least dominant culture over the more dominant culture works against the wishes of those who hold the power to control mobility and privilege (87-88). The dominant culture sees acceptance and visibility as a means to "attain economic resources and social rewards" (Dawkins 87). The reading of these characters as post-1980s mixed race characters illustrates that the means differ and settle on "rhetorical sincerity rather than a form of property" (Dawkins 87). "A form of property" can be replaced with social acceptance, because the young characters do not have economic wealth to negotiate their positions in society. Hence, passing narratives since the 1980s demand a deeper discussion that goes beyond social mobility and economic privileges.

According to Richard Schur, passing narratives, like *Caucasia* and *Adulthood Rites*, create "a discursive space that allows for the recognition of the complicated and heterogeneous ways race operates, linking one's persona and self-understanding to a shared history and common set of experiences" (Schur 245). Schur further posits that passing novels since 2000 do not reflect a post-racial myth; rather, the literature "suggests not the end of race but a major revision of how race gets represented" (Schur 251). Senna's *Caucasia* confronts the theory on race as a social construction while illustrating the social reality of this construction and its impact on an individual's self-identity. Butler's *Adulthood Rites*, in keeping with the function of science fiction, predicts what race will become in the future. According to Butler's literary imagination, racial division will continue among humans despite how destructive it can be to them. Even

though Butler inserts the Oankali as an alternative to correct the dissension occurring among humans, there is still no guarantee that genetic mixing performed by the Oankali will fix the race problem for humans. The genetic design of Akin and other ooloi creatures is still in question and is continuously tested, because their genetic construction destabilizes their identities (Mezler 71). Thus, Butler suggests that mixed-raced individuals can represent in a greater society the crossing of boundaries creating new groups of belonging. Instead of the history of anti-miscegenation as propagated in the United States, Butler demonstrates the possibility of pro-miscegenation in a multiracial, multispecies society.

Dawkins' *Clearly Invisible* posits that to pass for black at a time of great risk against one's personal safety is based in historical context (84). Dawkins' reading of the Iola character in the passing narrative *Iola Leroy*, originally published in 1892, is that "multiracial identity has meaning "within the legal, political, and social constraints of blackness" (84). In other words, the historical markers are based on when one can exercise their freedom to identify as monoracial or multiracial is bounded by legislation, which is one of several factors. Legislation does not consider the personal aspect of self-identification; it does not operate on this premise. On an individual level, the multiracial person decides to refute laws that affect their personal lives, such as joining a social group and advocating for that group's civil and human rights (Dawkins 84). According to Dawkins, the principle of passing is in operation; that is, the boundaries to move between ethnic groups is fluid for the multiracial person who has this clear option to practice passing (Dawkins 85; Appiah 79). This principle of passing can be applied to Akin's situation during his captivity. Akin's human appearance defies the laws that bound him to one racial group. Unlike Human-Oankali siblings Amma and Shkaht, whose appearances are

obviously alien, Akin is able to physically hide his alien features. Obvious difference poses a threat to the human resisters because these are constant reminders that they are on the lowest social structure in the New World with the Oankali ruling and bounded to uselessness.

INCLUSIVITY EXPANDS A LITERARY GENRE

Inclusivity is crucial to the expansion of African American literature; thus, it is important to include literature that may have been marginalized even within the African American literary genre, such as narratives about mixed race identity that gained popularity since 2000. The debate about Black authenticity is often explored in novels, such as *Caucasia*, Emily Raboteau's *The Professor's Daughter*, and Heidi W. Durrow's *The Girl Who Fell From the Sky*. Although this chapter is not seeking to discuss Black authenticity in novels featuring a mixed race character, I would like to acknowledge that this is a debate since the resurgence of passing narratives in 2000. History of the passing narrative can be traced to James Weldon-Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, written in 1912 but published in 1927. Hence, passing narratives prior to 2000 were categorized under African American literature. For the purpose of this chapter, I am acknowledging writers who identify as African American whose literature focuses on a black experience featuring mixed race characters. Richard Schur notes that Senna "reveal[s] a broader appreciation for the complexity of African American identities and seek[s] to expand the very category of African American literature to include these 'new' narratives" (Schur 238). This includes narratives featuring Black-Asian mixed-race characters and their experiences. Furthermore, Schur argues "that 'mulattoes' are not the only people who struggle with issues of 'passing' but they serve as one of several categories, including gender, sexuality,

and social class, against which racial identity is crafted and deployed” (241). Both Senna and Butler’s mixed-race characters explore intersections of gender and sexuality while grappling with racialized encounters that question their presence. Their presence in the respective narratives imply the lines are blurred regarding sexuality and race, but not necessarily their gender. Each character is distinctly identified as girl or boy; but when they encounter another character who engages in a non-heterosexual act or the character does a gender neutral gesture, there is a declaration of blurred sexuality and gender roles. Ambiguity of the mixed-race character is, thus, maintained in other areas in question, such as gender and sexuality. In comparison to Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929), in which the intimacy of Claire and Irene’s relationship is disguised, *Adulthood Rites* and *Caucasia* explicitly state ambiguity as a concept and as an experience for their mixed-race characters. Both Butler and Senna provide a continuum for positing new Black identities as argued for in Trey Ellis’ 1989 article, “The New Black Aesthetics.”¹⁶

As posited earlier, Butler proposes the possibility of Akin being the symbol of racial unification. All three volumes of *Lilith’s Brood* agree that the battle to end racial stratification is long and hard. As posited by Kevin R. Johnson regarding the status of race relations both globally and domestically,

“[Humans have] a long history of racial classification and discrimination, even when, as in the case of nineteenth-century Irish and Eastern European immigrants, ‘racial’ differences are subtle or non-existent. Rather than the demise of racism, *the increase of multiracial people may result in new forms of racial subordination*. Society will construct

¹⁶ See Chapter 3 for further discussion about new Black identities since the 1980s.

new races, perhaps based on lightness or darkness of skin color, language, culture, or religion” (Location 10339-10342, italics mine).

Hence, this debate seems to always fall on racism, when in fact, the core of the arguments for all national groups, including Africans and Asians, is colorism. Skin color in any society is still a measure used to decide who will have and who will not have accesses and privileges. In Butler’s literary imagination, the have and have nots still are distinctive in humans versus aliens, despite the Oankali’s mission to put all humans on the same level regardless of their pre-war social status. However, this is contingent upon the humans cooperating with the Oankali’s system of control. In other words, the Oankali species stratification replaces human’s racial stratification.

ADULTHOOD RITES: CLOSING COMMENTS

Adulthood Rites, as well as *Dawn*, is a Blasian Narrative. *Adulthood Rites* uses the Black-Asian trope to answer the race problem and illustrate the fluidity of identity. Octavia Butler’s contribution to the science fiction genre is her creative and effective approach to address the intersections of race, gender, and culture. In her narratives, she acknowledges the experiences of individuals who inhabit multicultural communities and the experiences of those who embrace more than one ethnicity and culture. This chapter does not spend a great amount of time discussing the identity politics of mixed-race Black-Asian persons; however, it does provide a basis for considering the relationships between African Americans and Chinese/Chinese Americans. Butler’s *Lilith’s Brood* trilogy is the pioneer of depicting Asian Men/Black Women

(AMBW) Blasian relationship. In addition, this chapter is a foundation to discuss further depictions of AMBW narratives.

Octavia Butler's brief introduction of the AMBW relationship in *Dawn* led to the second volume, *Adulthood Rites*, in which a product of the AMBW relationship is a Black-Asian son. In this novel, the reader is drawn into the experiences of a Black-Asian Human-Alien. The multi-layered identities of this figure provides an alternative way to discuss racial discourse. While using the Black-Asian trope to spotlight race relations, Butler advocates the recording of one's history and the sharing of cultural traditions as ways to improve relationships between ethnic groups, not perpetuate division. Unlike most of her science fiction literary contemporaries, Butler does not erase the fact that race as a political system will still be in operation as part of humankind's' future (Mills 126, 127). Rather, the violent struggles, as depicted in the entire *Lilith's Brood* trilogy, illustrate the hard work needed to overturn deeply entrenched perceptions held by many individuals.

As a Blasian Narrative, *Adulthood Rites* features a young Black-Asian male yearning to learn and understand all of his cultural roots and narrates his struggle to bring all the things he embraces into universal harmony, an idealism often promoted within multiculturalism promoted during the 1980s. Butler's novel parallels the hopefulness of many at the time, and through the protagonist Akin, she shows his striving to bring this ideal into reality. Akin's struggles begins from the time of his birth to his accepting his assignment to help the human resisters re-establish a home on Earth (Butler *AR* 239). Similar to the subjects in *Adulthood Rites*, systems of division, and the struggle to belong are portrayed in many contemporary African American fictional works since the 1990s, such as *Japanese by Spring*, *Caucasia* and *Americanah*. Such

literature feature multicultural characters that challenge twentieth century racial discourse; however, one may argue new concerns for racial identity will surface and take shape. For example, Howard Winant argues, in *The New Politics of Race*, that new political demands of then marginalized groups will take shape under a “new situation of racial hegemony” and new movements will be formed to address current racial tensions and demands for political self-determination (216). This is happening as the Multiracial Movement strongly advocates for their right to racially self-identify (Dawkins 27, Carter 166) and, for some members, a move that places them far away from being affiliated with a racial group that has been most disenfranchised (read: African Americans) (Carter 165). In my analysis of Butler’s novel, *Adulthood Rites*, she is not advocating this politic for mixed-race individuals. Rather, she purports that such individuals be allowed to self-identify and embrace all of their cultural roots.

As discussed in Chapter 1 of this research project, Blasian Narratives have existed for several decades before Octavia Butler featured Black-Asian communities in literary works. In addition, American history reveals that African Americans have encountered various Asian groups in America for decades and producing many narratives — stories about political conflict and stories about love and family. Black-Asian tropes often go beyond the power of race to address cultural differences and similarities; the cultural aspect of these two racial groups often expose the complicated ways in which individuals have been conditioned to see one another. In addition, focusing on narratives that feature Black-Asian relationships encourage other aspects of African American culture to be explored in literature in more complex narrative structures, as demonstrated in *Adulthood Rites*.

Blasian Narratives not only tell stories about Black and Asian groups, but also represents histories of people of African American and Asian American ancestries. Oftentimes, the experiences of Asians in Black communities are rendered to stories of conflict; however, there are other kinds of stories that are told that feature romance between members of the Black and Asian communities. This latter is worth exploring further to provide a full scope of all kinds of Black-Asian relationships. The first chapter of this research project discussed both conflict and love; while, this chapter discussed the inner struggles of a Black-Asian character. The next two chapters follow the same pattern of conflict and love. As of a result, all four chapters will show the Black-Asian trope that exists in literature across literary genres, such as drama, science fiction, satire, and romance, respectively. The next chapter looks at political satire in Ishmael Reed's novel *Japanese By Spring*, using the contextual lens of the Pro-Japan movements of the 1930s and the multiculturalism debate of the 1990s, to show another part of history of African Americans and the Japanese.

CHAPTER 3:
JAPANESE BY SPRING: ISHMAEL REED’S FRAMING OF A U.S. BLACK-ASIAN
ALLIANCE

INTRODUCTION

“The *multi-cultural* movement is the movement of the Seventies. In the Sixties you had the Black Arts group, which was very narrow and Black; and the counterculture movement, which was very narrow and [W]hite. Now you have the *multi-cultural* movement, which is mixed up. This is the wave of the future for the whole country” (qtd. Ishmael Reed, Chang 76).

“...in order to create the universal, you must pay very great attention to the specific” (114) -- Lorraine Hansberry, *Her Own Words: To Be Young, Gifted and Black* (1969).

The first epigraph points to how Ishmael Reed introduced the multicultural movement to the public in December 1975. Popular culture critic Jeff Chang notes that the editor of *Berkeley Barb* hyphenated the word *multicultural* “to highlight how paradoxical” it seemed to pluralize a term that was already based on a concept embracing multiple factors and differences, *culture* (Chang 76). The second epigraph is a reminder that specifics help with understanding a phenomenon occurring on an universal scale. Specific characteristics of the Black-Asian trope can be useful to explain the overarching and ongoing debate of multiculturalism. In Ishmael

Reed's *Japanese By Spring*, intersecting moments in history are factors to consider, rather than an emphasis on embracing another culture outside of one's initial cultural roots. In my close reading of the novel, I argue that African Americans and Japanese Americans continue their history of contention and solidarity in the struggle to dismantle racialized social constructions of their respective groups. This chapter will discuss a specific era in history that discloses that an African American-Japanese American political alliance in the 1930s inspired Ishmael Reed's depiction of a Black-Asian alliance in *Japanese By Spring*.

My close reading of the Black-Asian trope in the novel focuses is on Reed's literary contribution to the multiculturalism debate of the 1980s and 1990s, new Black identities since the 1980s, and a socio-political history that existed between African American and Asian American organizations in the 1930s. First, I will discuss Reed's novel in relation to films directed by African Americans that were released within a six-year period that feature the culture wars, such as Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing* and John Singleton's *Higher Learning*. Second, I will present a close reading of two significant chapters in *Japanese By Spring* featuring historical references of a Pro-Japan socio-political movement that existed in the 1930s.

Ishmael Reed is not the pioneer of AfroAsian solidarity in cultural representation; rather is, a supporter and promoter of such relations within the arts. Reed's illustration of cultural encounters aligns with his personal politics about and support of multiculturalism. In the arts and entertainment field, the battle for artistic representation in literature and film is very important to Reed. Reed is a key advocate for multiculturalism since the 1970s. He sees the multiculturalism movement as the artistic arm of the civil rights movement, reasoning that the civil rights movement broke down "legal barriers" in integration and now, the multiculturalism

movement will break down “cultural barriers” (Chang 76). The latter movement centered on showing respect and acceptance of difference, rather than appearing to be homogenized in cultural values. For instance, Reed and Al Young founded the journal, *Yardbird*, that promoted a “multiracial counterculture” that featured works by African Americans and Asian Americans, including Frank Chin, June Jordan, and Terri McMillan, to name a few (Chang 75). The mission of the multiculturalists is to exchange cultures, not assimilate into one bland dominant culture. Integration, as a practice, provided an opportunity for more exchanges between different racial and ethnic groups. During the 1970s, this idea ironically was not accepted in the United States; thus, Reed made the announcement about the multicultural movement to an underground press in Paris, *Le Monde* (Chang 76-77). Most Black nationalists were starkly opposed to integration as a political strategy, which meant they were at odds with the multiculturalism movement. The multicultural movement’s ideals predicated on integrating and assimilating into other cultures, particularly dominant Western culture. Reed was more interested in exchanging cultures than assimilating into a culture¹⁷.

Similar to Reed’s other literary works, *Japanese by Spring* grapples with multiple voices participating in the culture wars of the 1990s (Anderson *Beyond the Chinese Connection* 98-99). The novel uses all of the synonyms that mark it as a satirical look at the culture wars of the multiculturalism debate. Satire is characterized by the use of irony, sarcasm, mockery, and absurdity; hence, in *Japanese By Spring* the setting and characters are exaggerated to mock and

¹⁷ See the following two articles written by Ishmael Reed: “The Yellow and The Black” (anthologized in Fred Ho and Bill V. Mullen’s *AfroAsia: Revoluntary Political and Cultural Connections Between African Americans and Asian Americans*) and “Beijing: Is Americanization ‘Cool?’” (published in *Black Renaissance*, Spring 2013, Volume 13, Issue 1).

criticize the politics of the culture wars. The dissension in establishing multiculturalism in the United States is depicted in the ridiculousness of the protagonist, Benjamin “Chappie” Puttbutt, who embodies what it means to exchange cultural values. Chappie’s quest for tenure at a predominantly White college demonstrates pacifism of many African Americans who seek career advancements and the quest illustrates the frustration of some who realize that integration and assimilation do not always translate into equality for all. Before I discuss the Black-Asian trope in *Japanese By Spring*, the next section will consider new Black identities shaped since the 1980s.

NEW BLACK IDENTITIES SINCE THE 1980s

“...for all our academic enthusiasm to deconstruct monolithic impulses in the name of a diverse blackness, we must recognize that some cultural markers have remained remarkably stable in practice, albeit not in their precise meanings” - quote by Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr. (Japtok 44).

Chappie Puttbutt embodies the New Black Aesthetic (NBA) of the late 1980s; a cultural

theory coined by Trey Ellis in his 1989 essay¹⁸. Reed's depiction of a transcultural being mocks some aspects of the theory in that it shows a character shifting between multiple ideologies struggling to establish agency in academia. However, Chappie's agenda is curtailed when he realizes that his pacifism will not ensure tenure at Jack London College, a fictional predominantly White institution soon-to-be a predominantly Japanese institution. Throughout the novel, Chappie's allegiance is called into question by his family, colleagues, students, and neighbors. His colleagues are more puzzled by his betrayal when the Japanese college president overhauls the entire Jack London institution. Bernard W. Bell argues that "[c]ontemporary African American novelists deploy these characters and symbols to reconstruct imaginatively our tragicomic struggle as individuals and as a people for authority, authenticity, and agency" (Bell 303). Kathleen N. Cleaver identifies it as an internal struggle of "competing values" for most Black intellectuals — the struggle to hold onto values embraced by one's family or alienate such values and responsibilities to conform to a system of values that do not honor "communal solidarity" (Cleaver 284). Chappie Puttbutt symbolizes the conflict that many Black intellectuals face on college and university campuses since the 1970s, when predominantly White institutions

¹⁸ The well-known Trey Ellis article, "The New Black Aesthetic," was published in *Callaloo*. In this article, Ellis posits that many African Americans are "cultural mulattos." Cultural mulattos usually fall between several different cultures and easily navigate through them; however, they are keenly aware of their social status in the greater society, including intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality. They do not feel the need to suppress or deny their affinity for other cultures. Ellis acknowledges predecessors of the New Black Aesthetic (NBA) (238). Hence, the NBA is not necessarily "new" in its ideology. Ellis' argument is making a case for young African Americans who embrace both their Black cultural roots alongside cultural traditions often promoted by Whites. However, in current Black cultural studies discourse, the cultural mulatto is now considered transcultural. The term, transcultural, expands the definition that includes the crossing of two or more cultures.

of higher education admitted large numbers of African Americans. In this section, I argue that Chappie Puttbutt's identity politics is transcultural - African Americanism with an Asian affinity.

First, it should be noted that Black identity politics since the 1960s are most memorably connected to several significant ideologies embraced by many African Americans over time, such as integration of public spaces, black nationalism (i.e., Black Panther Party, Nation of Islam, etc.), voting rights, civil rights, to name a few. Second, the arts and entertainment world, peopled with African American writers, poets, musicians, performers, and artists, has also fought to have their creative expressions in the mainstream. In literary studies, African American scholars aggressively sought ways to establish their own literary critical lens to articulate and interpret literature, including revisionism informed by aforementioned African American ideologies (Ellis 239).

African American authors since the late 1980s expanded the critical lens that peered into Black American life that consisted of a broad range of topics, such as revisionist historical fiction about African American slaves (*Beloved*); a coming-of-age narrative of an African American man a couple of decades after the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s (*The White Boy Shuffle*); a coming-of-age story about a Haitian woman (*Breath, Eyes, Memory*); experiences of a young biracial girl during the 1970s (*Caucasia*), and the hostile takeover of a predominantly white college by a Japanese war criminal (*Japanese by Spring*). Such compelling narratives and many others were written by Black Americans from various ethnic, cultural, and economic backgrounds, respectively Toni Morrison, Paul Beatty, Edwidge Danticat, Danzy Senna, Ishmael Reed, Colson Whitehead (*The Intuitionist*), and Trey Ellis (*Platitudes*), to name a few. In the area of literary criticism, Toni Morrison's significant work, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and*

the Literary Imagination, examined how White authors used a Black presence in their literature to contrast the experiences of White Americans. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. identified speakerly text featured in African American literary traditions in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism*. Barbara Christian and Barbara Smith not only initiated platforms for black feminist thought during the second wave of feminism, but also Hortense J. Spillers demonstrated the intersections of history, cultural studies, and race. These contemporary contributions to African American scholarship and literary traditions established the relevancy of Black identity as a personal pursuit, as well as artistic, political, cultural, and intellectual engagement.

As mentioned before, Ishmael Reed is among the authors who demonstrate the complexities of Black American identity in his literary works. Reed, as a central figure of the multiculturalism debate of the 1990s, unsurprisingly illustrates how Black Americans have cultivated multiple identities since the 1960s, a time signifying when many legislative battles were won and many Blacks were able to envision exercising freedoms of mobility within major institutions, such as education, employment, and housing. Thus, their newly-acquired freedoms resulted in constructing their own identities in defiance to the abuse and ignorance directed towards them.

Japanese By Spring's protagonist, Benjamin "Chappie" Puttbutt, is a product of an era that was in transition. His parents, George and Ruby Puttbutt, grew up during a time when African Americans did not have equality and were subjected to numerous injustices. The Puttbuts have found a way to use their newly-acquired access and privilege to right some wrongs by operating within the system — the military and central intelligence (Reed 3).

Chappie chooses another path, which is typical of many of his generation. Chappie has observed how his parents' answer to obtaining justice does not guarantee equality; thus, he chooses to operate within another system — higher education. Chappie not only operates within another American institutional system as a professor, but also opts to align himself with an outside culture, an enemy to the United States — the Japanese.

For several decades, scholars and public intellectuals of African American studies have debated against the notion of a monolithic representation of black identity and cultural expressions. This is not a discussion about Black authenticity, but rather a signaling of where the shifts are in Black identity in America and how that identity has included other cultures. This also is indicative of the multicultural aspect of Black identity. In agreement with Martin Japtok and Jerry Rafiki Jenkins' article, "What Does It Mean to Be 'Really' Black? A Selective History of Authentic Blackness," someone's blackness is informed by many different experiences, including gender, age (read: based on historical shifts), religion, economics, sexual orientation, abilities/disabilities, and education. This also can be said of someone who identifies with an Asian culture. Thus, the social construction of one's cultural experience is continuously shifting. However, it should not be dismissed that there are collective experiences; these are common experiences of a racial or ethnic group, such as the collective trauma of slavery in America and the internment of Japanese Americans. Such collective traumas are significant historical factors that must be addressed when discussing the connections between African Americans and Asian Americans. Film and literature are areas of interest for exploring such relationships.

THE MULTICULTURALISM DEBATE IN AFRICAN AMERICAN FILMS

As the primary advocate for writers of color to be included in the mainstream arts and literary worlds, Reed and many other artists created their own ventures to foster a multicultural representation of artistic talents. Reed's vision for multiculturalism¹⁹ was "temporarily" ignorant of the challenges to be faced by opposers, especially during the 1960s and 1970s (Chang 76-77). He saw cultural exchange as a normal everyday existence for Americans, even if people did not acknowledge how influenced they were by others outside their cultural and ethnic groups. Cross-cultural interactions were most evident in how individuals presented or performed their art discipline. Reed demonstrates this in his writings, particularly apparent in *Japanese By Spring*, though well-intentioned, how these exchanges were limited. He fuses different narrative structures, such as literary, filmic, and historical, to demonstrate the problems of multiculturalism's ideals. In this section, I connect Reed's filmic novel with films that featured the difficulties of multiculturalism, and I discuss the novel as a historical fiction incorporating a Black-Asian history in the midst of America's culture wars.

¹⁹ Christopher S. Shinn's article, "The Art of War: Ishmael Reed and Frank Chin and the U.S. Black-Asian Alliance of Multicultural Satire," places the beginning of the multiculturalism debate between the late 1960s and the 1970s and its climax at between the late 1980s and early 1990s (62, 64). He argues multiculturalism has "become by no means obsolete but rather has functioned as a dynamic concept and has left its indelible imprint in the world of social criticism," such as commentary from Gloria Anzaldúa (cross-cultural studies on the border), Ronald Takaki's "Multicultural America," and Robert Stam and Ella Shohat's "critical analysis on the interrelations of multiculturalism, postcolonality, and transnational media" (Shinn 62). Interestingly, Shinn notes the irony of Reed as a promoter of multiculturalism, yet a harsh critic of those who use multiculturalism as a means to divide and conquer or to further a self-serving agenda. Shinn demarcates Ishmael Reed and Frank Chin as points of reference for the ongoing debates on multiculturalism as practice and policy in the twenty-first century (Shinn 62).

Reed's introduction of the arrival of America's multiculturalism movement was done in a Paris newspaper because there were so many opposers in the United States. Ironically, the United States is a place that in public propagated peace and unity among its citizens, yet their laws governing people's socialization and economics proved quite the opposite (Chang 76). As noted by Jeff Chang, "integration meant one thing in education, [in] public accommodations, and [in] housing. In culture, it meant another" (76). American culture looks distinctly White and Black on the surface, but much of the artistic and literary contributions are influenced by many different ethnic groups. However, as Chang states, American culture "implied cultural inferiority as much as structural inequality" for persons of color and often meant that they had to assimilate into the predominant culture (76). In other words, as America saw strategies to bring various cultures together championing their propaganda to the world, a battle to usurp Eurocentric hegemony exploded and manifested itself in significant institutions, such as university and college campuses and the arts.

Political commentators, such as Pat Buchanan, aimed to "prevent Western civilization from being buried in the landfill of multiculturalism" and to preserve "Euro-American ideals" and culture, essentially declared "a culture war" (Reed 220; Chang 119, 121). Reed's illustration of how opposers saw multiculturalism exposes how opposers were the instigators of the dissension that infected the spirit of multiculturalism. The readers are immersed in the battles taking place on the Jack London College campus. While Reed was providing the literary version of this battle, two African American film directors illustrated their versions of the culture wars — Spike Lee and John Singleton. Their vision of the multiculturalism debate debuted prior to Reed's novel. Their films' targeted audiences were all Americans from different ethnicities and

cultures. My inclusion of film in this analysis is not to deviate from my literary analysis of *Japanese By Spring*. Both Lee and Singleton's works are included because I find it useful to see how other cultural critics in the film industry²⁰ have captured the brutality of the culture wars taking place in various institutions, including higher education.

Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing (DTRT)* released in 1989 demarcates the culmination of the culture wars as depicted in cinema; whereas Ishmael Reed's *Japanese by Spring* is one of many literary works that comments on the culmination of the culture wars and its significance to American society. There are two significant scenes in *DTRT* that brutally illustrate culture wars of the late 1980s — one, the sequence of monologues spewed by a Korean storeowner, an Italian-American police officer, Radio Raheem, and Buggin' Out; and the other, the riot scene. The culture wars are occurring on a boiling hot summer day on a block in Brooklyn, New York. The melting pot is boiling and by the end of the film, it boils over resulting in the killing of Radio Raheem at the hands of police officers. The clashing of cultures and economics are the core of the film.

In contrast to Lee's masterpiece is Reed's *Japanese by Spring (JBS)*. Reed's melting pot is not as inflamed as Lee's, yet it still culminates to a hostile takeover by the Japanese. Reed's

²⁰ See Ishmael Reed's interview regarding his reaction to and support of Spike Lee's film, *Do The Right Thing* and his reaction to John Singleton's *Higher Learning* in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed* (Dick 322, 378).

depiction of the culture wars resembles the Yellow Peril of the 1950s²¹. Reed uses a Black-Asian trope to call attention to the socio-political history of African Americans and Asian Americans. He illustrates a specific moment in history to address the universal conflicts within the culture wars, which functions as a microscope. In the novel, the problems of the culture wars are magnified similar to how Lee scrutinizes race relations in his definitive film, *DTRT*. In *DTRT*, director Spike Lee focuses on a particularly hot day, in 1989, in the heart of a New York neighborhood populated with people from various ethnic and racial communities. The closeness

²¹ According to historian Ronald Takaki, the Yellow Peril existed since the mid-1800s, when the first group of Asians migrated to the United States for labor. Their initial arrival was temporary; however, many Asians decided to make the United States of America their home and raised generations of Asian Americans of various ethnicities, including Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, and Korean. Hence, the Yellow Peril is more than a fear of a nation attacking America on its home soil; this fear includes emigrants from areas of the continent of Asia settling on American soil establishing businesses and home life. During the 1860s when the Meiji empire ruled, many “distressed” Japanese farmers took advantage of an opportunity to come to America to increase their financial income and pay their debts (Takaki *Issei and Nisei* 19-21.) In 1882, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act to ban Chinese immigrants, but American plantation owners and businessmen still needed workers in the fields. By 1888, after American slavery was abolished in 1865, the first set of Japanese laborers arrived to “pick fruit” in California (21-22). Interestingly, Japanese immigrants came to the United States educated and “not desperately poor,” unlike the Chinese (22). The Japanese government monitored who were sent to the United States; the immigrants who received permission to go had to “uphold national honor abroad” (22). Japan still desired to best the Anglo-American power and promote nationalism among its citizens. In 1905, the Japanese entered a treaty with the United States to limit the emigration of Japanese called the Gentlemen’s Agreement, but by the 1920s almost half of the Japanese were women taking advantage of a loophole that allowed Japanese immigrant men to bring their parents, wives, and children to the United States for emigration (24). Racial prejudice towards the Japanese in the 1920s forced the first and second generation of Japanese Americans to form social and economic bonds that also “cultivated ethnic solidarity” (33-34). Similar to African Americans, Japanese Americans were not welcomed in sundown towns and rendered second-class citizens across the United States (36).

of their proximities to one another contributes to the tension brewing between the communities. The most visible elements of this neighborhood's culture wars are a brownstone owned by a Jewish man, a boom box toted by a Black man, a Black radio station, a pizza shop owned by an Italian man, and the Korean corner store. All elements symbolize points of contention in that Brooklyn, New York neighborhood. Lee's depiction of the culture war is his response to the multicultural movement's short-sightedness in promoting assimilation as the resolution to improving race relations. His approach is similar to Black Power ideology of self-empowerment and self-containment. In comparison, Ishmael Reed's depiction of the culture wars has similar points of contention leading to Benjamin Puttbutt's forming a Black-Asian alliance with his Japanese tutor. The points of contention on a college campus are academic departments and their promotion of Western cultures over other cultures. These other cultures are specifically those located in Ethnic Studies, who continue to compete for center stage in the culture wars. Reed drills down to specifics to point to a larger problem. For instance, Reed's *JBS* highlights the fact that the United States has never emotionally recovered from the attack on Pearl Harbor and feared that after defeating the Japanese in World War II and the Korean War, they would retaliate on different kinds of battlefields — education and economics.

Within a span of a couple of years of Lee's cinematic classic, John Singleton's *Higher Learning* depicts the culture wars on a college campus. Similar to *JBS*'s fictional Jack London College, the fictional Columbus University is depicted as a campus that is open to diversity and nurtures multiculturalism. In the film, hopeful student activists plan a multicultural event amid several hostile interactions. The culmination of hostilities occur during the event planned by student organizations, spearheaded by a feminist group. Singleton's film continues the discourse

on the culture wars by extending it to the early 1990s, towards the end of the multiculturalism debate and the culture wars of that era. As the film illustrates, the short-sightedness of multiculturalism's application of universalism and assimilation fails and results in further fragmentation between the groups. In comparison, Reed's satire of this dissension goes a step further in showing a Black-Asian framework versus the usual Black-White framework that Singleton uses. Hence, both film and novel are participating in the multiculturalism debate. Furthermore, the participation of Reed, Lee, and Singleton in this discourse demonstrates the current concerns of many African Americans during the 1990s and that the arts are powerful tools for bringing to center the greater issues at stake. In this sense, film and literature are intertextualizing the multiculturalism debate.

Aside from the novel and notably, the approach used in the two films featuring the culture wars do vary. For example, in *DTRT*, Lee frames the culture wars by focusing on intersectionals of race and ethnicity. He zooms in and out of characters' relationships and uses the dutch camera angle in medium close-ups of individuals ranting about an opposing ethnic group. The way they are communicating their thoughts shows how the group are not listening to one another, having perspectives of one another without truly understanding one another's history in America and cultural values. These rantings appear throughout the film. For example, the Puerto Rican neighbors spewing racial epithets about the Koreans, and the Korean store owner spewing racial epithets about the Jews. In *Higher Learning*, no special signature camera angles are used; however, Singleton's sensibilities about race and culture are captured in the dialogue, in the rhetoric of the characters. For instance, at the beginning of the film, Professor Phipps introduces his lecture on the first day of class by providing an example of how the free world does not give

handouts because of one's presumed privilege. As an example, he dismisses students who have not paid their tuition bills. These students represent various cultural, ethnic, and economic backgrounds illustrating the complexities of how one's social status works in a multicultural environment. Two of the main characters are depicted as victims of a society that predetermines one's fate based on colorism, gender, and economics — Malik Williams and Kristen Connor. By the end of the film, these characters, Black and White respectively, realize that the United States has constructed two different worlds for them. The college campus symbolizes the potential for progress and the amalgamation of different cultural groups living in harmony despite disparating schools of thought. However, despite the promotion of multiculturalism's ideal for unity and cultural representation, college and university campuses in the 1990s became hotbeds for individualism.

Singleton, Reed and Lee challenge whether the battle was won in the area of race relations; the war certainly was not won, especially when one examines what is happening during the twenty-first century. Outside of film and literary imaginations, African Americans and Asian Americans continue to be targets for attacks and denied access to certain levels of privilege. The most recent incidents of the 2000s include the massacre of nine churchgoers in Charleston, South Carolina and cases of police brutality in Missouri, Illinois, and Maryland. For many years, the United States has tried to regulate people's behavior through education, housing, and economics. However, the regulation of human behavior is also complicated by other factors, such as history and cultural values. Reed uses history to encourage readers to reflect on America's long history of cultural wars between ethnic groups. He sees art as a platform for

better communication between communities; that communication is through cultural exchanges in language, food, and artistic disciplines (Ho Location 2760-2785).

For African Americans, contemporary literature and film are narrative forms used to present their various cultural expressions and identities. During the late 1980s and 1990s, African American artists and culturalists experienced a renaissance in both literature and film, hence, the availability of both genres featuring similar social concerns. *Japanese By Spring's* setting is similar to *Higher Learning's* mise-en-scène. While *Higher Learning* did begin a dialogue about race relations on American campuses, *DTRT* maintained an overarching dialogue about race in America. Spike Lee's film continues to receive accolades in the twenty-first century for his contribution to American culture. *JBS* has the potential to continue discussion about race, too, focusing specifically on the history of Black-Asian relationships in America. The relationship between Benjamin Puttbutt and Dr. Yamato is close read in the following section.

THAT RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHAPPIE AND DR. YAMATO

In Chapter 21, Puttbutt receives the news that he has not made tenure at the college and he is very upset about this decision. He has done everything in his power to move beyond his year-to-year employment in the African American Studies department and obtain a tenured position in the English Department (Reed 69). Puttbutt has denounced affirmative action, has criticized Black professors for "exploiting white guilt," has advocated that "racism is an illusion," and he has privileged Western culture over other cultures, including his own cultural background (Reed 70). Despite his efforts, he receives a letter denying him tenure and the department asks him to continue with them on a year-to-year basis. This news sends Puttbutt

over the edge. He re-strategizes and takes advantage of the new administration controlled by the Japanese. Chappie Puttbutt's alignment with the new Japanese president signifies a suggestion initially documented by W.E.B. DuBois in his 1937 essay, "The Meaning of Japan." DuBois posits that Japan, as a "colored nation" is an example of "one of the problems of the world" (233). According to DuBois, Japan is already a nation of mixed Asian ethnicities — Chinese, Korean, Malaysian, and Indian — looking to expand its culture to other parts of the world. (DuBois 233-237; Reed 108). DuBois' vision of a political alliance between Africans and Asians are depicted in the fictional relationship between Chappie and Dr. Yamato. This fictional representation of American history is noted later by Ernest Allen, Jr., in "Waiting for Tojo: The Pro-Japan Vigil of Black Missourians, 1932-1943," which expands the Black-Asian discourse on African Americans' long history of seeking to align themselves with other nonwhite nations in search for political solidarity to confront issues of inequality.

Allen details the history of the Pacific Movement of the Eastern World (PMEW), a pro-Japan organization of the 1930s in two journal articles, "Waiting for Tojo" and "When Japan Was Champion of the Darker Races." Interestingly, one of the group's founders was Policarpio Manansala, a Filipino with Japanese ancestry who often "presented himself as a Japanese citizen" (Allen "Waiting for Tojo" 40). In 1932, Manansala used over a dozen aliases during his activism with PMEW. The alias most often used was Ashima Takis; he used this pseudonym while speaking before audiences of the pan-Africanist organization, Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) (40). Ishmael Reed uses a fraction of this history to develop Dr. Yamato's character. This loosely based portrayal of Takis suggests that Black-Asian alliances of 1930s on the surface appear positive and progressive in race relations; however, the ulterior

motive on the part of the Asian counterpart distorts the actual meaning of alliance. This betrayal did not discourage some African Americans who were vested in finding an alternative to acquiring equality in American democracy. According to Allen, the Japanese did not initiate the alliance; it was African Americans who sought their partnership (Allen “When Japan Was Champion” 29). As noted by Crystal S. Anderson, W.E.B. DuBois observed that African Americans have always had an “intense personal interest in [the] discussions as to the origins and destinies of races” (“Racial Discourse and Black-Japanese” 380-381). Anderson’s commentary on DuBois’ scholarship on the socio-historical relationship between African Americans and Japan continues to place the U.S. Black-Asian discourse in continuum with AfroAsian global discourse.

DuBois not only observes but also offers insights on why African Americans of the 1930s would seek to form an alliance with a nation that has made itself an enemy of the United States. In the 1905, Japan had already established itself as a country that “[broke] the myth of [W]hite world domination” (DuBois “The Meaning of Japan” 238). Japan refused to be controlled by European forces. In addition, the Japanese nation aimed to thwart the plans of Europe to obtain China and “to lead in the future economic development of the East,” excluding European countries (239). In Reed’s literary imagination of this mission, the Japanese takeover is exercised on a personal level, which seen in the relationships between Chappie Puttbutt and Dr. Yamato.

Chappie’s last attempt to obtain tenure is to consume Japanese culture, but it is to his own detriment. He promotes himself as an “existentialist,” however, he still relies on others to achieve his ultimate goal of tenure (Reed 83). For Chappie, tenure symbolizes security, immutability,

and achievement, especially during the height of the culture wars. Reed's candid depiction of the turmoil happening across the nation on American university and college campuses during the mid-1980s to 1990s spotlights my reading of Chappie finding himself trapped between two major schools of thought, Black nationalism and Eurocentrism (82-83). Chappie spent the majority of his career fighting against the former and siding with the latter in attempts to not to appear radical and confrontational.

The following close reading reveals a historical representation of black liberation that Puttbutt had embraced overtime. While soothing his soul with sake, he plays John Coltrane's "Blue Trane," tears down a portrait of Thomas Sowell²². He almost takes down Booker T.

²² Thomas Sowell is an American economist, social theorist, and political philosopher who has commented on such topics, like multiculturalism and economic empowerment. Sowell is often labeled a Black conservative speaking against the cultural practices of poor African Americans. In more recent years, he makes the argument that the key for success and economic advancement is linked to culture not genetics. As a whole, the African American community has to encourage and support education as a means to success and stop using discrimination and the "legacy of slavery" as obstacles to economic success. He believes the government policies in place prevent individuals from achieving economic equality.

Washington²³, but changes his mind. He takes out a “framed photo of Malcolm X²⁴” (Reed 71). Puttbutt is reconsidering his allegiance to his previous heroes by posting photos of them on the wall, thus, symbolizing his contemplation of finding a new leader, someone who will take him to the next level (read: guarantee him tenure). Historically, Sowell is the most present figure and possibly accessible since he is considered a living legend according to Chappie Puttbutt; whereas, Malcolm X and Booker T. Washington are the forerunners of leading African Americans for self-empowerment and liberation. All three men represent economic progression and self-containment; hence, these men represent the three different ways Chappie has attempted to establish his own permanent socio-political existence. He is not empowering himself to create his own path; rather, he seeks to form alliances with those in positions of power. Chappie is paying attention to how Asian groups are dominating the cultural structure of California;

²³ Booker T. Washington’s agenda for obtaining economic equality consisted of non-transparently challenging white supremacy. He was a civil rights leader for most African Americans during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Washington believed not only that African Americans should obtain their economic wealth through vocational training, but also they should not appear to compete with whites in obtaining such economic progress. By the early 1910s, many middle-class African Americans became impatient with Washington’s approach to fighting for civil and human rights and began following the leadership of W.E.B. DuBois. A new kind of leadership was needed to move forward towards full emancipation from white supremacy and economic advancement.

²⁴ Malcolm X (later El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz) was a strong symbol of leadership for many African Americans during the 1950s to mid-1960s. His self-motivated search for true brotherhood and knowledge spearheaded the mission for self-empowerment through both spiritual enlightenment and economic autonomy. He is most noted for his affiliation with the Nation of Islam, his gift as an orator, his strong commitment to self-education, his call for action to raise the dignity of Blacks in America, and his radicalism for Afro-Americans to exercise power within their communities. The spirit of Malcolm X continues to thrive long after his death in 1965, especially during the 1970s and 1990s, respectively.

however, he is unaware that it will directly effect him when his Japanese tutor is selected to serve as the president of Jack London College. He prides himself for making such a strategic career move despite the fact that this new administration has no intentions of keeping him on staff.

The disappointment of not making tenure and the realization of being exploited by others to further their agendas forces Chappie to reconsider his own professional agenda. He questions whether his strategy is working for him. Chappie embodies a black identity often mistaken for Uncle Tomism. This socio-political strategy includes the practice of brown-nosing and accommodating, thus, appearing to be subservient. Despite this interpretation of his actions, Chappie aims for peaceful relations between different cultures. He believes he must be non-confrontational with his colleagues to gain their acceptance and his tenure. However, his family sees him as a pacifist and opportunist. For General Puttbutt, states,

“When you thought that your tenure was automatic, you preached against affirmative action, but when those white people whom you thought were your colleagues denied you tenure, you turned against them and sided with Dr. Yamato in an effort to humiliate them. You don’t have no convictions, Son. You’re all over the place. *A product of this age. Join whatever side that can advance your thing*” (Reed 180, italics mine).

This excerpt is the summation of Benjamin “Chappie” Puttbutt’s character. Furthermore, Chappie’s alignment with the Japanese represents a history of many African Americans politically joining forces with Asian American groups. Reed observably illustrates this in the relationship between Chappie and Dr. Yamato, his Japanese instructor, who later becomes the president of Jack London College, eventually an enemy. In Chapter 54, Reed inserts this long-

standing Black-Asian history towards the end of the novel as a closing summation of Black-Asian political alliances. Perhaps, Reed intended to show the false reasonings of many African Americans on how they were going to obtain equality in American society through forming alliances with other non-Whites, such as Japanese Americans. The failure to look at how oppressive systems inevitably repeat the same outcome — leading to nowhere, no satisfaction. Oppression exists because of, thus deserves repeating, humans' innate desire to exert power over one another.

Reed labels Puttbutt's politics as a brand of conservatism based on pacifism (Reed 122). Puttbutt forms superficial alliances with each group on campus: the feminists, the Western culture enthusiasts, and now, the so-called Japanese colonizers. These superficial alliances result in his not achieving his ultimate goal of tenure. Puttbutt's failure to sustain a strong political alliance can be read against the history of African Americans forming political alliances with various social groups during the 1930s. In the 1930s, African Americans did attempt to align themselves with Asian American union groups and social movements to obtain equality in economics and the job market. Allen's article, "Waiting for Tojo," notes the problems that occurred while building their coalition with Asian Americans and the results of these inconsistent attempts did not culminate in any progress for most African Americans. Despite the injustices experienced by many African American members of the PMEW and of the Original Independent Benevolent Afro-Pacific Movement of the World, Incorporated (OIBAPMW) and their decline in numbers as members of these organizations, some African Americans continued to show support for the Japanese nation well after that historical moment at Pearl Harbor (Allen 52).

Historian Ernest Allen, Jr. contends that the alliances formed between African Americans

and Japanese Americans were noticed by American law enforcement agencies. Allen's insight on this part of United States' history points to how two ethnically distinct groups are connected and have intersected on issues of injustice and invisibility for decades. He notes that the Black-Asian organizations of the 1930s were a hodge-podge of apocalyptic millennialists and political subverters (Allen "When Japan Was Champion" 27). Historian Ronald Takaki also argues for the necessity to "re-learn" the history of America "to study racial inequality" through comparative methods (Takaki *A Different Mirror* 444). Ishmael Reed not only inserts comparative history in his narrative that exposes an erasure of history, but also an admission that the promotion of multiculturalism to the masses is slippery.

Reed's setting the plot on a college campus implies that at the core of dissension is the control of knowledge and curricula. *Japanese By Spring* illustrates how controlling knowledge is synonymous with attaining power. How a nation's history is disseminated affects all aspects of their society. History, depending on who holds the dominant position, is shaped by that power entity. The multiculturalism debate taking place in the storyline reflects the same concerns of many during the 1990s. Reed narrowly focuses on the Japanese invasion because the fear of Asian domination has haunted the United States since the early 1800s, when the first group of Asians, the Chinese, came to work on the railroads. He points to America's fears of miscegenation and cross-cultural alliances by using the Black-Asian trope. Reed's illustration is more than a trope of such relationships. He explicitly states which Black-Asian alliance posed a threat to America's idea of cultural dominance in Chapter 54 — the African American-Japanese American union.

Although the focus of the novel is on Chappie's internal and external battles with himself

and his family, his pursuit to align himself with America's enemy nation is the larger concern in the narrative. On a domestic and individual level, his choice to align himself with an enemy nation proves to be futile. He has to accept what his parents has taught him — trust no one. A reading of Chappie's relationship with Dr. Yamato suggest that the specific agreements and contentions existing between these two is a representation of a historical moment that existed in both African American and Asian American histories and on a much larger scale American history of the 1930s.

Interestingly, General Puttbutt provides the historical for his son explaining Dr. Yamato's history of deceit and sedition. The ultimate disappointment is the revelation that Dr. Yamato used his college president position as a cover to plan his assassination of the Japanese emperor and the prime minister (Reed 175). Dr. Yamato represents the "old Black Dragon group," who wanted to restore "shogun rule" and remove Western influences from the Japanese nation. The program consisted of "military men, businessmen, gangsters, and religious fanatics" (Reed 175). This description refers to the American social movements that consisted of such individuals, as documented by Ernest Allen, Jr. Reed's inclusion of this piece of history reminds the reader that nonwhite groups are not so disconnected in their histories, thus, positing that a re-examination of African American and Asian American histories may prevent the current generation from making the same mistakes as their predecessors. Chappie Puttbutt represents the current generation; his grandfather represents the past. Grandfather Puttbutt is also a Japanese sympathizer. Their common affinities for Japanese culture bonds grandfather and grandson. However, General Puttbutt does not support either family member because it jeopardizes not only American-Japanese political relations, but also his military career (178).

After receiving such news about Dr. Yamato, a reading of Chappie's reaction is disappointment and anger. Chappie is still on the outside, ostracized in more ways than one by the very system he had put so much faith and work in to achieve tenure. During his pursuit of upward mobility in the academy, he has slighted all cultural and socio-political groups on campus, thus, making enemies in every department and at every level of the Jack London College. He has truly destroyed his relationships with many of the staff and faculty. As a result, Chappie's last resort is to form a Black-Asian alliance, but it backfires causing him to re-examine himself and re-strategize for the sake of his professional career and self-worth. In his depiction of Chappie, Reed sees multiculturalism in American society as both a collective and a personal identity formation. What is at stake for America to promote multiculturalism collectively, and what is at stake for an individual to pursue or claim to be multicultural?

First, Dr. Yamato's invitation to Chappie to join him as a supporter of his agenda shows Chappie's ignorance of the underlining tension existing between nations on a global scale. In Chappie's mind, his \$245.00 investment is finally paying off and he should expect big returns on it (85). A reading of this suggests Reed's sarcasm and skepticism of how little investment is made on the part of Americans to truly establish a multicultural society, especially when a nation continues to monopolize all cultures outside of it and trample on any culture deemed inferior. According to Reed and historian Ronald Takaki, at the core of promoting multiculturalism on a political level is to have dominance over all aspects of pursued nation. This is evident in the Japanese takeover on the Jack London College campus (fictional) and Western culture in all parts of the world (nonfictional).

Second, the direct interpretation of this relationship is Reed's assessment of the Black-

Asian political alliance. As should be noted, Dr. Yamato is the trickster in this African American tale. He deceitfully exploits his power and Chappie's blind ambition to achieve a vision of Asians becoming world leaders. Puttbutt believes the events in development signals the "yellow century" (Reed 131). Is this really a resurgence of the "Yellow Peril" in the 1990s? Reed's response to this question is no, but the changes in society certainly give the impression that Asian nations are acquiring dominance. The protagonist, Chappie Puttbutt, still attempts to remain in good favor with the Japanese college president; however, his employment is terminated at the beginning of the fall semester (Reed 149). This new development forces Chappie to be aware of his positionality before the Japanese; he was merely used to further their mission for dominance. This play on the character infers the position of the nameless protagonist in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Chappie is invisible to the Japanese, too; Dr. Yamato's failure to see that Chappie as an equal in the fight for justice and equity in the culture wars.

In Chapter 54, Chappie receives the truth about Dr. Yamato's identity from his father, General Puttbutt. Chappie feels the General's aggressive approach in removing Dr. Yamato from his post was unnecessary; he also feels a peaceful negotiation is a better tactic in addressing Yamato's imperial mission. However, General Puttbutt and Ray Tanaka-san are there for something far more worse than changing the culture of a college campus; Dr. Yamato was plotting to assassinate the emperor and prime minister of Japan (Reed 175). At this point in the narrative, Reed specifically proceeds to explain the U.S. Black-Asian political history.

Reed's depiction of this part of history seems like a rebuttal to scholars, such as W.E.B. Dubois, who imagined the union of Africans and Asians coming together to fight their greater enemy (Raphael-Hernandez 245-248; Lee 6, 137-139). He counteracts the ideal approach to

resolving differences and their attempts to create multiculturalistic spaces. For instance, Chappie's father and Tanaka-san describe how Dr. Yamato infiltrated American organizations and changed his identity to appeal to businessmen, religious fanatics, and political extremists while working with secret societies that wanted to restore old Japan, prior to the Meiji era (Reed 175). General Puttbutt wants to expose Japan's sentiments towards the United States, specifically towards Blacks, to open his son's eyes. Chappie acts as if he is unaware of Japan's prejudices against Americans, other Asians, and Blacks. Thus, General Puttbutt questions his son's consciousness and actions. In its entirety, Chapter 54 exposes not only the intentions of Dr. Yamato, but also exposes Chappie's ignorance.

However, Chappie is aware of Japan's ability to stand alone as a nation politically and their stance, on an economic level, against Europe and the United States (Du Bois "The Meaning of Japan" 241). Chappie's aligning himself with Japan is representational of how many African Americans during the 1930s who became pro-Japanese. Reed sporadically provides clues in a couple of chapters that point to the 1930s as an era in which African Americans attempted to form alliances with other ethnic groups, including Japanese Americans, with a mission to establish a political voice and to create a movement. Both ethnic groups were excluded from participating in the mainstream labor force during the 1920s to 1930s due to the enforcement of Jim Crow laws; thus, their coming together as socio-political groups is not surprising. African Americans, as mentioned earlier, sought to position themselves politically with the Japanese — a nation of people who unitedly stood strong despite attempts to diminish their dignity. Under the Meiji rule, the Japanese aimed to compete with Western nations in economics, education, military force, and culture. Their objectives to achieve global dominance meant mimicking, to a

certain degree, Western cultures (Takaki *A Different Mirror* 231). Japanese work conditions surpassed Western nations in that the “return in satisfactions” were much greater — “better nourishment, clothing, and shelter” (DuBois “The Meaning of Japan” 242). Regardless of how much Japan tries to be an equal to the West, it will never be seen as such (DuBois “The Meaning of Japan” 243). During the early 1900s, there were some who were hopeful that eventually Japan would become an equal to the West on a global scale. W.E.B. DuBois hoped that Japan’s “possible leadership of the world will make for industrial democracy and human understanding across the color line” (“The Meaning of Japan” 243). In the twenty-first century, the Anglo-American power is still a cultural superpower and Asian nations, including Japan, are still finding ways to compete both economically and culturally. DuBois’ vision of a Black-Asian alliance still remains to be seen on a larger scale. Black-Asian, or AfroAsian, unions are forming, but on local or regional levels. The American Black-Asian formations are in pockets of Western societies. Ishmael Reed features the domestic Black-Asian alliance to show the global Black-Asian connection; he incorporates Yoruban language to show similarities between Japanese and Yoruban cultures; this is demonstrated in Chapter 32. His depiction of such relationships advocates that multiple cultures already cross one another without intent. Reed’s observation of these connections reinforces how some African nations are connected to Japanese culture in language, religion, and values.

During the campus’ culture wars, Chappie’s maneuvers are a matter of survival and of hope. His goal to obtain tenure is based on surviving the hostility of the campus environment and on a more personal level, on his escaping his family legacy — a military career or a career in government. He avoids having to conform to such traditions. In his efforts of doing so, he

finds out that he is not the pioneer of such deviance in his family. His grandfather has already situated himself in Japanese culture, denouncing his African American cultural roots. The idea that one denounces their cultural roots and acculturates to another culture is contested by some opposers of the multiculturalism movement, particularly Black nationalists. The actions of Chappie and his grandfather are interpreted as anti-Black. Reed does not support this notion; therefore, he spotlights this ridiculousness in the character development of Chappie Puttbutt. Exchanging culture or having cultural connections is not the same as acculturation; one does not lose and denounce their cultural roots and values. There is no need to do this since the idea of culture is multifaceted and influenced by multiple factors, including the interaction between ethnic groups.

Ishmael Reed's interpretation of how he sees multiculturalism developing in California's Oakland still promotes his initial vision of multiculturalism as noted in the epigraph for this chapter. For he states in his epilogue, "Oakland's multicultural population is streaming into the park [...] Cambodians, Laotians, Vietnamese, Chinese, Japanese, Africans, Latinos (there are parts of Oakland now that resemble Mexico City) [...] This is the way the United States would look in twenty-five years" (Reed 224). Societies will be more multiethnic in the United States; however, these societies are heavily populated on the coasts of the United States. The very middle of Mid-Western America has not caught up with the rest of the United States and it is 2016! The kind of cultural connections that Reed implies in his novel, *Japanese by Spring*, is in how language and other cultural values, such as knowledge systems and religion, are exchanged. According to him, selfishness and individualism are threats to moving forward in race relations. The politics presented in the novel demonstrates the danger of not acknowledging the social

history of all groups in America (Reed “Beijing” 1) .

JAPANESE BY SPRING: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Japanese By Spring (JBS) uses a Black-Asian trope calling attention to the political history of African Americans and Japanese Americans. I have extended my analysis of the African American-Japanese American relationship from the first chapter of this research project, “Black-Asian Encounters in Velina Hasu Houston’s *American Dreams*,” focusing on what happened after the Pearl Harbor attack and World War II. Houston’s play, staged and published in 1984, signals the need to continue to explore the American Black-Asian trope in works by African American authors, playwrights, poets, and filmmakers. *American Dreams* appeared at a time when multiculturalism was the focus in the arts as well as a mission of transnational corporations (Shinn 1-2). The financing of such artistic projects was popular. Interestingly, Ishmael Reed, as a promoter of the multiculturalism movement prior to the 1980s, ends the culmination of the multiculturalism debates of the 1980s to 1990s with his novel *Japanese By Spring*, which was published in 1993. In this chapter, I continued the discussion of the historical relationship between African Americans and Japanese Americans to highlight the contemporary debates on the topic of multiculturalism and African Americans. In a previous chapter discussing Houston’s play, the focus is on the social aspects of their relationship; whereas, this chapter focuses on the political relationships that were formed in the recent past. Even though the analysis focuses on a specific historical era, the 1930s, this specific decade provides us with a starting point to examine political, social, and cultural relationships between these two groups in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Fast forward to the 1960s and this decade reveals

another point in time in which the two groups come together. This is during the Black Power Movement, an era that deserves more attention, because some Asian Americans were very active participants and supporters of many African American civil rights groups and leaders, such as the Black Panther Party and Malcolm X. Even though this chapter spotlights the political history of U.S. Black-Asian relations, I am more interested in how novelists and playwrights have included parts of this history in their literary works, as demonstrated with this close reading of *Japanese By Spring*.

The significance of *Japanese By Spring (JBS)* is its boldness to expose the problems of the culture wars and the lack of knowledge concerning this history in its entirety, including triumphs, victories, and ambiguities. I categorize this novel as a Blasian Narrative because it maintains a link between an Asian culture with a Black culture. In more specific terms, *JBS* depicts an African American man who attaches himself to Japanese culture. The protagonist is centered in American culture as a Black man, yet adopts Japanese culture as part of his identity. Based on the current aims of Blasian interest, this Blasian Narrative is not an Asian Man/Black Woman (AMBW) type. *JBS* does not focus on the experiences Black women, and it does not privilege the experiences of Asian men (Manning 129). Moreover, the novel is not classified as a romance, which counters how most Blasian Narrative fiction have been published and promoted since 2000. Rather, *JBS* is a Blasian Narrative that is a political satire reminding readers of the long history of Black-Asian social and political relationships.

This Blasian tale hyperbolizes the actions of the characters to illustrate a greater meaning about these relationships — the absurdity of Benjamin “Chappie” Puttbutt and Dr. Yamato and the absurdity of the self-serving actions of various groups participating in the culture wars. The

two extreme representations do provide an interpretation of American history's socio-political movements of the 1930s appeared to onlookers. As discussed earlier, Ernest Allen, Jr.'s documentation assists with unfolding the complicated relationship of these two groups. Reed's interpretation of such connections demonstrates his understanding of both domestic and global politics and global history. Ishmael Reed's novel also is a docudrama²⁵ in print, because it has a cinematic feel in the storytelling.

For some African Americans, participation in the multiculturalism debate is more about inclusivity than exclusivity. This is most evident in many of the civil right movements of the twentieth century, in which much of the protest and advocacy fronted integration. In contrast, in the late 1960s to 1970s, Black nationalists rejected integration and assimilation as a means to empowerment. On an individual level, Reed's portrayal of an African American in the midst of the multiculturalism debate exemplifies the invisibility of such a being in a society that claims to welcome people from many different economic, social, and cultural backgrounds. Chappie's decision to accommodate everyone renders him invisible and does not quite address or resolve the problem of invisibility of nonwhite people.

The history of socio-political connections between African Americans and Japanese Americans is one of many platforms that Ishmael Reed uses to bring to the fore the problems within the multiculturalism debate. The Black-Asian trope presented in this novel is a response to W.E.B. DuBois' vision of the darker races coming together to confront their global oppressor, Anglo-American powers (Raphael-Hernandez 249). The narrative in *Japanese By Spring* says

²⁵ Docudrama is a satirical literary genre that uses factual records or reports in the narrative structure.

that multiculturalism is not about one culture dominating another culture; it is about the exchanges that take place between the different cultures. The reality is that everyone has different ideas and meaning for multiculturalism. Oftentimes, the implementation of it in a society means one culture dominates or overshadows others. In other words, Western culture has spread so far and wide that it dominates the globe; whereas, other cultures are marginalized and eventually diminished in cultural value. In addition, Reed demonstrates that all cultures have the potential to dominate; thus, there should be some checks and balances to prevent such volatile dominance. Lastly, America's version of multiculturalism works on an individual level and not necessarily on a global scale. The individual choice to cross culture has not been difficult for most people; however, when a society decides for the masses to cross culture there is resistance to what is crossed and exchanged.

In the previous chapter, during my discussion about the Black-Asian trope in Octavia Butler's trilogy, *Lilith's Brood*, I assess her philosophy on hegemony: man's innate desire to exercise power over another man. According to Butler, racial categories are not the basis for the culture wars; rather, it is the self-serving aims of appointed leaders of the various cultural groups that perpetuate the conflicts. Racism is one of the tools used to push agendas to obtain and or maintain the power position. So far in my analysis of the American Black-Asian trope in African American literature, the thread that connects Velina Hasu Houston, Octavia Bulter, and Ishmael Reed's literary contributions is acknowledging the long history of African American and Asian American groups and their resilience amid hostile racial and ethnic climates. The next chapter draws further conclusions about the Black-Asian trope in literature published since 2000 featuring romances between African American women and Asian American men.

CHAPTER 4:
BLASIAN NARRATIVES, LOVE, ROMANCE, AND COLORISM

INTRODUCTION

“I had known several black/white couples and even a Korean woman married to a black man, from Naval associates in my previous marriage. But never had I heard of a Chinese man marrying an African American woman. We would be such a rarity. Could [Seung] and I survive the madness of bigotry?” — *Cornbread and Dim Sum*

Blasian Narratives were introduced by a group of writers whose mission was to shift attention to relationships existing between Asian men and Black Women, also known as the AMBW Blasian Narratives. This genre of literature exploded during the early 2000s and continues to gain new readership. The mission of the writers in this literary genre wanted to provide alternative romantic couplings spotlighting Asian men and Black women as aesthetically desirable characters in romantic novels. As noted in the epigraph, the notion that Asian men and Black women as romantic couples is not often seen in Western society because of how both groups have been socially constructed. The controlling image of Black women is based on negative characteristics that imply that she is unlovable or undesirable to an Asian man. The notable characteristics often associated with contemporary African American women is loud and belligerent; characteristics that are in complete opposite to the controlling image of Asian women. As for Asian men, the controlling image of them is small-framed, unattractive, and feminized; characteristics that could not possibly attract the attention of Black women. The

superficial constructions of these two distinct gender groups render the AMBW coupling an anomaly. Historically, interracial couples are either Black and White or White and Asian. However, Black and Asian couples are part of the long history of AfroAsian relationships; the coupling that is often seen are Black men with Asian women (BMAW). The social history of BMAW is often associated with narratives of African American soldiers with Asian women while serving in World War II and the Korean War. In the epigraph, the author of *Cornbread and Dim Sum: A Memoir of a Heart Glow Romance* is expressing her reality of being part of a rare romantic coupling. Her reality and Sam Casas' novel, *BLAsian Exchanges* are the basis for further exploration of AMBW romance novel. I propose that not only literary genres, such as novels, plays, poems, and film, but also memoirs are narratives about Blasian socio-historical relations, politics, and cultural exchanges. However, in this chapter, I focus on how African American women and Asian/Asian American men are constructed in Blasian Narratives.

Immediately the word, Blasian, attracts both negative and positive attention. It is a term that some Mixed-Race Studies scholars avoid using because it is seen as offensive and equivalent to other derogative and antiquated terms, such as mulatto, half-breed, or mongrel (Carter 9). However, Blasian is a positive self-naming of individuals and groups who choose to identify with African and Asian cultural roots and the crossing of these various cultures. Blasian is also a derivative of the term AfroAsian. But, some may be questioning, what is the difference between the two terms? AfroAsian is an academic label that encompasses the study of African and Asian relations on a global scale; whereas, Blasian is an informal label used in popular culture referring to people and cultures that are part of AfroAsian lived experiences. The term became very popular at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Hence, going forward in my literary

scholarship and my study of contemporary AfroAsian experiences, I will use the term, Blasian, to demarcate the narratives of such experiences since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Blasian will replace Black-Asian in this chapter's discussion.

This chapter discusses how intimate relationships of African American women with Asian American men are depicted in memoirs and romance literature. First, I discuss the historical significance of the *Loving vs. Virginia 1967* case in relation to interracial marriages outside of common Black-White interracial coupling. Second, I do a close reading of Jacqueline A. Sue's memoir, *Cornbread and Dim Sum* discussing how colorism has effected her life and her relationships with Chinese American husband and African American daughters. Her experience is representational of many African American women and girls who have experienced rejection based on the practice of colorism. Jacqueline's husband is very encouraging and supportive of his wife despite the challenges he has to face as a Chinese American male - a history of violence directed towards Chinese men in America. Jacqueline and her husband manage to keep their relationship in tact despite the mistreatments they have experienced under colorism and racial violence. Third, I do a close reading of Angela Weaver's fictional Blasian romance, *No Ordinary Love*, focusing on the author's attempt to counter stereotypical representations of African American women and Chinese men. Fourth and lastly, I provide an overview of other literary works that feature Blasian experiences and are the basis for future research projects.

BEFORE *LOVING VS. VIRGINIA*

Prior to laws allowing for matrimony between persons of different racial groups, the confusing language of America's racial laws created many problems for Black-Asian interracial

couples. The laws stipulated strict binary segregations between White and Black; thus, public spaces became complicated areas for Black-Asian interracial couples to navigate. For instance, military men, who were raised as African American and can pass for White, married Japanese women. For these couples and depending on their military base locations, the women experienced segregation from their husbands in public places that enforced Jim Crow laws, such as movie theaters (Carter “Loving Day”). In addition to this experience is the reality of multiracial families existing even during the time of enforced racial segregation. White supremacy tried to suppress such formations and oppressed those who were part of such unions. What does this imply regarding the experiences of African American women who married Chinese men?

The *Loving vs. Virginia* (1967) U.S. Supreme Court ruled that state bans on interracial marriages are unconstitutional. Prior to this constitutional law, an interracial marriage consisted of matrimony between a Black person and a White person. But, how did the bans affect other kinds of interracial marriages? For example, in the case of *Perez vs. Sharp* (1948)²⁶, California’s Civil Code Section 60 prohibited marriages between Whites and other non-Whites, including Malays, African Americans, etc.; however, it did not rule against marriages between non-Whites (Johnson Location 1193; Sue 85). Therefore, even before the landmark 1967 U.S.

²⁶ The *Perez vs. Sharp* case was considered the first to invalidate a state’s anti-miscegenation statute. Andrea Perez, a Mexican American identifying as White, and Sylvester Davis, an African American, applied for a marriage license and were denied. Under California’s law, Mexicans are classified as White because of their Spanish heritage. According to two statutes of 1850 and Civil Code Sections 60 and 69, Blacks, “mulattos,” and Indians are prohibited from marrying a White person and no license should be issued (Johnson 1173). The judges who ruled on this case based their decisions on the couple’s strong adherence to their Catholic beliefs and the rulings were not based on arbitrary percentage categorizations of racial ancestry (Johnson 1198).

Supreme Court ruling, in some states marriages between African Americans and Asian Americans were not prohibited. This further implies that there were no legal preventions for Chinese men to marry African American women.

During the 1880s, Chinese men who married non-Chinese women became apart of their wives' communities and became less visible in mainstream society. Of these Chinese men, a small percentage of them married African American women, including those categorized as mixed-race (Cohen 147, 149, 156). The union between Chinese men and African American women led to "complex realities of social classification of the Chinese" (Cohen 150). According to historian Lucy H. Cohen, many of the children of these unions were classified and reclassified as Black, Indian, or Chinese, eventually some were reclassified as Creole (156, 157). In a region, such as Louisiana, which is known for it multiethnic population, the speculation for these ever-shifting ethnic identities is dictated by the desire to assimilate into White society. By the 1890s, mixed-race Chinese descendants were so dynamic that it resulted in no fixed categorizations. Cohen further notes, "in the absence of a separate color category for the Chinese before the census of 1870," they were classified as White (166-167). This changes in 1870, when the Chinese category is added to the census. One source revealed that a child of a Chinese man and a Black woman was "classified as mulatto" (Cohen 167). The categorization in the census continued to shift between White and Black for children of Black-Asian interracial couples. Eventually, the 1900 census settled on recognizing that "people born in China or people born in the United States with two Chinese parents" are classified as Chinese (Cohen 168).

The practice of colorism "reflected shifts in the [public's]" perception and influence on one's cultural identity (Cohen 168). Some Chinese descendants passed into White society, while

others “merged into Black communities” (168). Noteworthy, classifications for Chinese ancestry are “vague” and reveal that persons from “branches of the same family had adopted separate values and identities” (168). There is no single narrative for Chinese Americans and no single narrative for Black Americans. Hence, by acknowledging this aspect of American history, Blasian narratives are worthy of further investigation.

As discussed in Chapter 2 of this research project, Octavia Butler is the forerunner in depicting an AMBW couple in literature and featuring Black-Asian communities. Both literature and history have revealed to us that the United States has a legacy of multiracial communities despite anti-miscegenation laws. Sue’s memoir reflects that many Americans are unaware of this fact, and she wrote her story with an objective of introducing a “new” way of thinking about race in the United States. Interestingly, her story has a multicultural framework premised on embracing cultural difference and tolerance; her memories are historically contextualized referring to events of the 1960s to 1980s. Sue’s inclusion of history provide some insight on how Americans lived during the most crucial times in race relations. The next section is a close reading of Sue’s memoir and her experience as an African American woman married to a Chinese American man.

CORNBREAD AND DIM SUM: A MEMOIR

Before a close reading the central characters in the fictional novel, *No Ordinary Love*, this section is a close reading of a memoir that features a Blasian family. Three years before the Supreme Court ruling of *Loving vs. Virginia*, Jacqueline Sue married Soo Keung Wah in the state of California. Not only does Jacqueline Sue provide insights on her relationship with her Chinese

American husband, but also reflects on her own insecurities based on intersections of love, colorism²⁷, and gender. The memoir opens with Jacqueline Sue preparing for her daughter's, Candace, wedding on the day of the ceremony. During this moment, she reflects on past relationships that led her to this joyous moment in her life. Her memories are filled with pain, searching for love and she immediately draws attention to the very thing that causes her to question and reflect on her mixed-race marriage — the racial difference between her and Keung, her husband. Looking at a picture featuring the two of them taken eight years ago during their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, she ruminates, “Keung is standing beside me, with his arm protectively around my shoulder, smiling blissfully at my dark chocolate face” (Sue 1). In realist theory, as explicated by Johnella E. Butler in “African American Literature and Realist Theory: Seeking the ‘True-True’”, Sue’s reflection of this moment “allows for [an] epistemic dimension of [an] African American experience [with colorism] to serve as a [...] basis for an objective understanding of [her] lived experience and [a] literary representation” (J. Butler 172). Jacqueline Sue’s reflection candidly draws attention to her dark skin tone, thus, implying that her dark complexion has been rejected by others, even by members of her own race. In addition, it draws immediate contrast regarding their racially constructed differences as an African American-Chinese American interracial couple. Notably, Sue describes Soo Keung’s arms as being “protectively around” her; this pose in the picture suggests she feels safe in her relationship with her Chinese American husband. The symbol of Soo Keung’s protective arms is different from what has been socially constructed about Asian/Asian American men, in general.

²⁷ A definition of colorism is stated in the Introduction chapter of this dissertation.

Notably, the entire memoir reflects on relationships with three husbands and her two daughters while reminiscing on the history of race relations in the United States.

Novelist-scholar Elizabeth Nunez posits that memoirs are more limiting to the writer because the writer is reliving the most devastating moments of their lives while writing. According to Nunez, fiction “allows more freedom of exploration and interpretation for both writer and reader” (Nunez 503). In other words, the memoir can be embellished to hide the pains the writer experienced; however, fiction provides the liberty to tell their story through the fictional character. The fictional character is the guise used to exploit the most vulnerable and sensitive experiences in a narrative. Nunez’s argument suggests that much more would have been revealed if Sue wrote in a different literary format about her marriage to Keung and the relationship with her daughters. The next few paragraphs discuss one significant problem experienced by many African American women and one significant threat to Chinese American men.

Colorism has crucially affected the lives of many African Americans, especially women. There is evidence of this brutal practice in the stream of consciousness of Sue’s thinking about how different her daughters’ experiences were during the 1960s to 1980s. After the birth of her second daughter, Candace, Sue reflects on the difference of how her first daughter, Khedda, was treated by persons they encountered:

“Looking into the vanity room mirror at my own reflection, I think about how hurtful it had been to Khedda that in America, the general populace appeared to like the Chinese people more than they did African-American people. I myself often felt the slights, but I was an adult who long ago had learned to insulate myself from the many degrees of racial

intolerance that were part of my daily life. But for Khedda it was different...Keung would hold her and whisper in her ear, 'Both of our people have suffered discrimination in this country, little one, but you must never let your anger at the bad people cause you to strike out against the Chinese'" (254).

Despite Keung's words of encouragement, Khedda thinks that Keung does not understand how she feels when people tease or say something insensitive about the color of her skin, because he is Chinese and has a much lighter skin tone. However, Keung assures her that he understands and "feel[s] more than [she] realize[s]. Chinese people are not fooled by this country's demoralization of black people. Black and Chinese history in America is somewhat parallel. The same hatred has been directed at us both" (254). Keung understands the pains of discrimination because of his own experience with racism and his own social position in society (255), but Khedda's experience is also tied to colorism exercised in both public and private spaces of society. Khedda's experience with her dark skin is a reflection of how her mother feels about her own dark skin. Sue internalized her experiences and perhaps, unknowingly influenced how Khedda saw herself. This influence coupled with her experiences in institutions, such as school settings, intensifies Khedda's self-perception as a dark child is negative and isolating.

Another aspect of colorism that Khedda experiences is the values often assigned to monoracial Blackness versus mixed-race Blackness. Khedda feels that she will always be compared to her younger sister through the lens of colorism. The lens of colorism still places her dark skin at the bottom of the color pyramid, despite people insisting they are colorblind; yet their treatment of her conveys the opposite. The treatment one receives from others in and outside of their ethnic communities determines on a personal level whether they feel inclusion or

exclusion. According to the practice of colorism in Western societies, Candace as a Black-Chinese female will be considered more desirable because she is fair-skinned, exotic-looking, and presumed to be smart based on her Asian ancestry (Wu 66). On the other hand, Khedda as a dark-skinned African American female will be assigned attributes often designated for Black women that are not considered attractive — broad nose, full lips and kinky hair (Collins 89). Prior to 2000, standards of beauty were not blurred and were clearly articulated in mainstream media and within various ethnic communities (Russell 108-109, 135). Sue's own personal account helps contextualize what scholars have articulated in their research since the 1990s concerning standards of beauty perpetuated in dominant Western culture (Russell 107-108). Kathy Russell and other scholars who study colorism examine the effects of controlling images on Black women's character and challenge that such flat assignments of characteristics do not allow others to see their humanity (Russell 111, 136). Real lived experiences as depicted in Sue's memoir influence fictional representation of Black women in both literature and film, such as Angela Weaver's Blasian romance, *No Ordinary Love*. Not only does Sue's memoir exposes the effects of colorism on Black women, but also spotlights that Black women, regardless of skin tone, are seen as desirable to men outside of their racial group, including Asian men. This is the literary mission of writers of romance Blasian literature.

Sue's candor about her personal experience reveals that an interracial relationship does not cure one of deeply internalized feelings of rejection and self-hatred. On one occasion, Keung reveals to Jackie that his mother wants to prepare his father's birthday meal at their house and she does not want Keung's mother in her home. So, Keung replies, "Oh hell, Jackie, I am tired of walking on eggshells around you because you're black. I love you. My mother and

father adore you -- you have never heard them say one racial thing about you. You are a black woman married to a Chinese man” (233). In this instance, Sue shares how her own insecurities about her dark skin and how that influenced how she thought others saw her. Keung’s response to his wife aimed to convince her that he loves her regardless of her color, and his response to his step-daughter was to assure her that she is not alone in the struggle for acceptance. Interestingly, Keung’s reactions to Khedda’s situation and Jackie’s insecurities lead one to ask what challenges faced him as a third-generation Chinese American man. As mentioned in Chapter 2 of this research project, the history of the Chinese in the United States began with strong opposition and discrimination. Many Chinese men were subjected to violent attacks. Based on his knowledge about the Exclusionary Act, Keung probably quite aware of the history of violence experienced by many Chinese. Even though Sue does not give any personal accounts of Keung’s experience with violence, it is still worth noting how many Chinese men were victims of violence. Often the violence was based on the social construction of Asian men as either the martial art warrior, or the feminized nerd.

The death of Chinese American Vincent Chin in 1982 (Yung xix) is the result of a racially-motivated attack. Chin died when he was fatally struck in the head by a baseball bat by a White autoworker in Detroit, Michigan. Similar to labor force of the late 1800s, Chin was accused of taking away jobs from White autoworkers. Prior to the beating, hurtful and demeaning racial epithets referring to him as a Japanese were directed at him. This escalated into a physical fight. As a result, two White men violently murdered a Chinese American man because of they were casualties of the auto industry’s recession in the 1980s. This was an act of injustice; however, it was further aggravated by the criminal court’s light sentence given to the

perpetrators of the crime — Judge Charles Kaufman sentenced Ronald Ebens and Michael Nitz to 3 years probation and a fine of \$3,780 (Wang). The judge dismissed the actions of Ebens and Nitz; however, in 1984, many Asian Americans were not satisfied with the sentence and founded the American Citizens for Justice group to lobby for a federal trial. The lobbying and rallies in Detroit, San Francisco, and Los Angeles attracted national attention in the media. As a result, the federal courts charged both Ebens and Nitz with violating the civil rights of Vincent Chin. The Detroit federal jury delivered their decision as Nitz not guilty, but Ebens guilty. In 1987, the defense lawyers for Ebens and Nitz won a federal retrial to acquit them, and this last trial still remains as the final judgment for the crime committed against a Chinese American man (Wang). The murder of Vincent Chin galvanized many Asian American communities to fight for acceptance in American society. Even though this incident occurred after Keung and Jackie are married, it does provide insight on the kind of threats and anxieties that loomed over Keung's life because of his race and ethnicity.

Jacqueline Sue tells not only their experiences with racism, but also she expresses concerns about cultural differences in adulthood and independence. For instance, Sue is shocked to find out that Seung is 29 years old and still living with his parents. His response, with a chuckle, is: "Chinese men live at home for a long time. I suppose it's hundreds of years of conditioning that we are slow to leave our parents. You probably don't know much about Chinese history in this country, but the Exclusion Acts of 1880s caused many a Chinese man to live separated from his family most of his life" (58). Nearly a hundred years later and Seung admits there is a lack of knowledge about the Chinese in America. Prior to Seung's revelation, Sue admits her own "limited exposure to other ethnic groups" and how her "racial landscape"

was fixed in “black and white hues of Middle America” (56). Seung further explains to Sue that he is taking care of his aging parents and he is responsible for them. A cultural practice found in many Asian and Caribbean families and is practiced by many families on the east and west coasts of the United States. Generations within an Asian or Caribbean family will live in the same household for several reasons, including economics and as care-givers for the elderly. For Jacqueline, this was not a reality for her because she was sent away by her mother to live with her grandmother, then an aunt, because her mother could not care for her and her father was institutionalized for mental illness (12). Hence, Seung’s attentiveness to Jacqueline is appreciated, because she had not experienced that kind of genuine interest and care. His gentleness towards her “took away [her] fear and filled [her] with anticipation,” (84). This is a consistent characteristic of Keung; thus, Jacqueline’s love deepens for Seung. Jacqueline’s heart is open to love someone she might not have considered in the past. Keung’s inner qualities attracted Jackie, thus, confirming what some social scientists have theorized, some people marry outside their race because they have “found someone whose exterior [and cultural] differences [far outweigh] inner qualities” (Russell 118). Kathy Russell’s social theory on interracial relationships should not be read as a negative against African American men, and Jacqueline Sue’s spotlighting the positive qualities of her Chinese American husband should not be read as anti-Black. Sue’s memoir does not compare her husbands on the basis of race, but rather she compares how they have treated her. Throughout the memoir, she describes the qualities that initially attracted her to her husbands. Keung’s genuine love for her stood out among all of her husbands.

The romance between Jacqueline Sue and Keung is desirable and in some chapters, appears to be constructed as a fantasy. For many authors of romance Blasian literature, the aim is to create the fantasy of the ideal man, but with a twist. Readership of Blasian literature increased as of 2010 because it presented an alternative romantic interest — an Asian man. According to the *Blasian Narrative* blogsite, the pairing of Black women with Asian men in romantic situations should not be an anomaly in literature. These stories should be a reflection of what is occurring in society today. Angela Weaver's novel *No Ordinary Love* a good example of such stories. Many romance Blasian novels lack sophistication and complexity in the narration, often creating flat characters. However, Weaver's novel attempts to complicate the character development in her story.

NO ORDINARY LOVE: A NOVEL

Bridging both memoir and fiction: "*I place much trust in the power of fiction to reveal truths not only to the reader, but also to the unsuspecting writer*" — Elizabeth Nunez, "Truth in Fiction, Untruths in Memoir."

In *No Ordinary Love (NOL)*, Weaver attempts to write against stereotypes often associated with African American women and Asian men. As mentioned above, the controlling image of the loud Black woman and the nerdy, timid Asian man are often seen in film and television shows. Weaver's protagonist, Alex Thompson resembles twenty-first century television characters, such as *Scandal's* Olivia Pope and *Quantico's* Miranda Shaw, who are completely opposite of the controlling images often associated with African American women.

Even though Weaver tries to move away from negative stereotypes of African American women, she still creates the fantasy of an extraordinary woman. She ensures the match-up for Alex is someone of equal or greater value in intellect, physical stature, and attractiveness. Alex Thompson's love interest is Xian Liu, a Chinese businessman. The characters travel exotic places. They are cosmopolitan. Both Alex and Xian are fluent in several languages and travel across the world for their careers. The most prominent cultural exchanges are American and Asian. The construction is of an African American woman who does not show any signs of influence from an Africanist presence can be read as anti-Black (Sexton 233-234). Perhaps, a particular reading of this character suggests that the most desirable aspect of this Black character is the erasure of negative and racist characteristics that are often associated with blackness. The only indication that the reader has about the Alex's racial affiliation is clearly stated by the author. Weaver maintains a level of ambiguity for her characters; she guides readers to discover her characters' racial and ethnic identities. She does not immediately state the racial affiliation of her characters; she develops her characters allowing the reader to see the characters' inner qualities before stating their socially constructed racial affiliation. This narrative strategy builds up the romance between the two unlikely persons — a Black American woman and a Chinese man.

Fictional depictions of love and romance are more concerned with "stylized figures" than with creating "real people" in the narrative (Frye 304-305). Archetypes of the exotic Black woman and the smart Asian man shape the presentation of these characters that can be interpreted as an allegory about something; however, this is unclear in Weaver's novel (Frye 304). The archetypes exploit several controlling images constructed about Black women as

desired sexual objects (read: hypersexualized jezebel image) and the Asian male as a Bruce-Lee model (read: smart, martial art warrior). However, Weaver adds another layer to the controlling image and attempts to provide an alternative image of African American women. According to Bernard W. Bell, “refined heroes and heroines involved in elaborate disguise, mistaken identity, passwords, and violent episodes,” were signature characteristics of the dime romance novels of early African American literature, such literary works were written prior to the 1970s (Bell 90-91). Weaver follows a similar formulaic pattern in her novel, *No Ordinary Love*. The protagonist is an ex-agent for Special Forces, working as a school teacher to get away from a life in the military, who is called into an assignment to save her adopted uncle. The ex-agent’s love interest is a businessman in the Information Technology industry, who conducts business in the United States and China. Alex Thompson’s double life as an agent puts her in dangerous and exotic situations that may seem to be a threat to the average man, but Xian Liu is attracted to the mysteriousness of Alex. She grew up motherless on a naval base in Japan (Weaver Location 127, 181), and had a upper middle-class upbringing while her father served in foreign countries. After she leaves the military, she moves to San Francisco, a place with a high population of Asian American groups (Weaver Location 199). Weaver situates Alex in an area with a high potential of encountering someone with an Asian ethnicity. In addition to her domestic location in California as an elementary school teacher is her global location to Hong Kong as a Special Forces agent working undercover. Weaver’s fictional world is cosmopolitan and technology-driven often marked by color.

Color as a marker of difference is also an indication of the author’s attempt to depict a different kind of Blackness. Weaver’s literary imagination is constructing a Blackness that does

not necessarily assert any kind of radicalism nor does she ignore Blackness altogether. For example, when Alex is changing into her karate uniform for a practice session, she stares “at the darkness of her skin next to the whiteness” of her uniform and sees how “her African American features appeared displaced by the Asian costume” (Weaver Location 331-347). The word, *displace*, strikes a rigid contrast of Black and Asian, a vivid reminder of difference in culture for African Americans and Asian Americans. However, in a later scene when she disciplines two of her students for name calling and fighting, she dismisses one child’s specific ethnic affiliation in favor of an all-inclusive American identity. Chou wants his fellow classmate to know his correct ethnicity as Chinese, not Japanese (Weaver Location 445). However, Alex dismisses Chou’s ethnic identity and re-assigns him to an American national identity. Alex’s correction uses the semantics of color-blind racism; in other words, Alex is instructing her students not to “see” race as part of one’s cultural identity. This signifies the double talk that is often debated in twenty-first century racial discourse. Double talk causes more confusion and division than actually discussing the issues that directly affect one’s lived experience. Realist theory suggests there are ways of expanding an understanding of a person’s lived experience if certain factors that inform one’s experience are not dismissed or ignored. Some may argue that there is danger in applying this theory to African American literature because of the potential to essentialize African Americans; however, Johnella E. Butler offers a strong argument for using realist theory to unpack a reading of a character’s development and for a better close reading of how a character is situated in a text. Butler expands Satya P. Mohanty’s realist theory and sees the theory allowing for “social realities or experiences to be considered [as] referents, and their varying degrees of socially constructed truth or error [...] as sources of objective knowledge or socially

produced mystification” (J. Butler 172). Unpacking the two main characters in *No Ordinary Love* can provide insight on how authors of Blasian romance novels are attempting to write against controlling images of Black and Asian people.

For example, Alex’s character is very aware of her physical and cultural differences that mark her as an African American woman. However, as a teacher and referee of the students’ quarrel, her tone and delivery is unracialized. In other words, she does not give neither the mammy image (read: caregiver) nor the angry Black lady image. Rather, she maintains a very neutralized tone to console both students. In this instance, Weaver is writing against these stereotypes often associated with Black women. She constructs an alternative image of the Black woman in Alex’s character. A Black woman who is approachable, loving, understanding, educated, privileged, and well-traveled. Not only does Weaver construct an alternative image for Black women, but also she attempts to construct an alternative image for Asian men. Alex’s Asian love interest is also attracted to her physical attributes that imply an exoticism.

As the narrative unfolds, Alex meets and falls in love with Chou’s father, Xian. Xian is attracted to Alex because she looks like a “fashion model, [...] tall and slender with sculpted features and straight black hair,” like “an Egyptian princess” (Weaver Locations 1297-1298, 3322-3324). Even though Weaver attempts to write against the negative images often associated with African American women’s physical appearance, she invokes a standard of beauty that is often desired by many men and women (Harris 56). Alex looks like the fashion models we see in fashion magazines and on runways at fashion shows. Fashion models are often desired by many men from various ethnicities; however, the beauty that is admired most is influenced by Eurocentric standards of beauty.

For the first part of *No Ordinary Love*, Weaver constructs an image of the Black Woman as an exotic companion to the Asian man. Not only is Alex Thompson beautiful in appearance, accessible as a person, and possesses high intelligence, but also she is able to rescue herself in dangerous situations. Alex's Special Force military-training is connected to an image that implies "standards of respectability" (Thompson 3). An image that moves away from long-standing controlling images, such as the mammy, the jezebel, and the welfare queen. Weaver implements a strategy that deflects how people perceive dark-skinned women and attempts to provide an alternative reading of a segment of Black women who fall into this color classification (Harris 59). Legal scholar Angela P. Harris identifies this strategy as "performativity," in which a person, in this case the author, disassociates themselves from activities that have been coded as non-white to avoid being perceived as "angry or political" (Harris 60). Couple performance with colorism and identity (read: perceived image) becomes a more complex "interplay of perceived physiognomy, behavior, and culturally-transmitted expectations and assumptions" (Harris 60). Alex Thompson represents the cosmopolitan Black woman, similar to the protagonist seen in Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche's *Americanah*.

Weaver attempts to create a desirable and accessible Chinese man in Xian Liu, a widower from Hong Kong. Xian is rich, well-educated, cultured, and fluent in several languages (Weaver Location 3675). The most interesting quality Xian possesses is his loyalty. He loved his wife and never fell in love with anyone else until he met Alex. The relationship that develops between him and Alex bemuses him. It is the combination of "beauty, mystery, and danger" that overwhelms him (Location 2434). Even though Weaver gives some desirable traits for Xian, the

focus shifts back to the desirability of Alex. As an African American female character, this kind of focus is important in creating an alternative representation of the modern Black woman. The construction of Xian's character suggests that for a Chinese man to be desirable to a Black woman, he must be strong, compassionate, smart and a self-made man. Even these qualities play into a myth that is not easily attainable by all men. However, by revisiting Northrop Frye's criticism about character construction in romance novels, readers see that Weaver incorporates the literary function using highly "stylized" characters. Both Alex and Xian are painted as heroic figures countering the negative images of African American women and Chinese men. In comparison to Sue's *Cornbread and Dim Sum*, the constructed "realness" of Jackie and Keung prevents them from being flat and mythical, thus, demonstrating that *No Ordinary Love* is more than a possibility and reassures that heroic qualities are not necessary for the relationship to work. This is a reality for some Blasian interracial couples and families.

There are many Blasian romance novels that deserve close readings. *No Ordinary Love* was selected because of its literary quality: well-written, well-developed characters, and coherent storyline. In addition, this novel was selected to advocate for more scholarship on literature written since 2000 that feature Black-Asian themes and experiences. Jacqueline A. Sue's memoir reaffirmed that Blasian romance is actually a lived experience. The next section discusses other types of Blasian Narratives that intersect with other literary genres.

MORE BLASIAN NARRATIVES

Blasian Narratives should be a continuum of AfroAsian literature of the twentieth century. Literature classified as Blasian Narratives should expand upon what was written on

AfroAsian relations since 2000, both contentions and solidarities. People who identify as having both African and Asian ancestries today are living under very different set of circumstances than those who lived prior to 2000. Their lived experiences in narrative form can capture the nuances of how relationships are developing within Blasian communities. This section provides an overview of Blasian Narratives written by African American and multiracial authors since the 1980s. The purpose of providing such an overview is to encourage more research and writing in this area of literature and in other areas of published texts that feature Black-Asian histories and experiences.

There are Blasian Narratives that tell the experiences of Chinese Jamaicans, such as Kerry Young's fictional novels *Pao: A Novel*, *Gloria*, and *Show Me a Mountain*. *Pao* is set in 1938 and chronicles the life of a young Chinese man, who emigrates to Jamaica after his father dies while fighting China's civil war. He quickly becomes a major operator and boss of a racketeering business. Even though Pao aims to improve his socio-economic status by marrying a respectable Afro-Chinese woman, Fay Wong, he falls in love with a Black prostitute, Gloria. Amidst the political turmoil taking place in Jamaica, the love between Pao and Gloria steadily grows.

The follow-up to Pao's narrative is *Gloria*. Gloria tells her story of how she and her sister escape sexual assault and run away to Kingston, Jamaica. Gloria and her sister are taken in by a brothel, where she meets Pao. Not only do Gloria and Pao fall in love with each other, but also their passion for social justice increases. Both *Pao* and *Gloria* share similar settings and political tensions, and both stories feature heightened awareness about the social injustices taking place in Jamaica.

Forthcoming and rounding out the trilogy is *Show Me a Mountain*, which narrates Fay Wong's experience as a privileged multiracial woman. Fay's world is governed by colorism and family secrets that cause her to pursue her own independence from a restrictive elitist upbringing. The history featured in the three novels are basis for a future research project that examines the social and political histories that exist between Africans, Chinese, and Indians in Jamaica.

Young adult literature feature many novels that concentrate on multicultural experiences, including stories that intersect race, gender, and sexuality. Nina Revoyr's young adult novel, *The Necessary Hunger: A Novel*, tells the story of two teenage girls who share a love for basketball. This narrative features a blended Blasian family and two types of Blasian couplings — Japanese American man and an African American woman; Japanese American girl and an African American girl. The romance that occurs between the two girls complicates further the romantic relationship between their parents. The story takes place in Southern California, a region well-known for its intermingling of many ethnicities and cultures and the inevitable possibility of yielding many Blasian Narratives. The blended Afro-Japanese family is a basis for future research that investigates the politics of love and sexuality between African Americans and Japanese Americans.

A literary genre that is closest to my research interest is drama. During the beginning stages of my research endeavor, I focused on finding dramas that feature Black-Asian relationships. I discovered Velina Hasu Houston, whose contributions to American theater is discussed in the first chapter of this research project. Among the piles of researched information, I discovered other multiracial authors who featured the relationships between African Americans

and Asian Americans. Elizabeth Wong's *Kimchee and Chitlins* dramatizes the heated boycott of a Korean grocery store in Brooklyn, New York. The dramedy is about how the Caribbean community seeks justice for a Black woman who was assaulted by a Korean storeowner. Even though the play is about the serious issue of race relations during the 1990s, it has a comedic tone. The stage directions imply that the play's setting needs to be less intense because the topic itself is so fiery. Not only do the dramatics of this incident take place in the streets, but also the drama is captured by the news media, which has the reputation of framing the story in favor of the "model minority." Even though the play is similar to Anna Deveare-Smith's *Fires in the Mirror*, Wong's approach to highlight the culture wars of the 1990s taking place in the streets of New York presents a different reading of conflicts between Black Americans and Koreans in America.

The search for Blasian Narratives is like searching for a needle in a haystack, at the risk of sounding cliché. The previous paragraphs show a small number of stories with strong narrative plot and character development. However, there are many Blasian Narratives that only feature the erotica aspect of the relationships between various Black American and Asian American groups; and there are many Blasian Narratives that concentrate on the conflicts occurring between the two racial groups. However, this project brings both extremes, and whatever is in the middle, together to show all facets of Blasian Narratives. This is also a rallying cry for more stories to be conjured up, shared, and read. One example of why further research is needed is found in Shalena Duong's *Blasian Drive*. *Blasian Drive* is a coming of age narrative about a teenage girl growing up mixed raced in a predominantly African American community. Duong's story is a part of a phenomenon of young people sharing their multicultural

experiences under the umbrella of “Black and Yellow: Blasian Narratives” (Murphy-Shigematsu *Psychology Today*). “Black and Yellow”²⁸ is a project premised on self-identity, in which mixed-raced Black-Asian youths are defining who they are and making connections by sharing their diverse cultural backgrounds. They are the ones contributing to the current field of Blasian Studies that is a continuum of AfroAsian Studies in America.

²⁸ A cultural event called, “Black and Yellow: Blasian Narratives,” joined students of Stanford University and various historically Black universities and colleges to perform monologues and tell stories about their cross-cultural experiences as Black-Asian youths. The event was interactive, fostering dialogue about race and sharing histories of oppression of Blasian people.

THE EPILOGUE: BLASIAN IN AMERICA

“I will never cease to be political because I will never cease being female or being a multiracial, multicultural person of color.”

— Velina Hasu Houston (*Politics of Life* 213)

An examination of American history reveals that Black-Asian encounters are as old as the 1800s (and longer, if you consider the long global history between Africa and Asia). This project’s objective was to lay a basis for further study in literature that features Blasian encounters, alliances and solidarity, and identities. For me, American history and laws helped to see how law effects the socialization of marginalized groups in the United States and how history can construct a collective experience of individual groups. Historian Ronald Takaki greatly advocated against the study of groups in isolation from other marginalized groups; he advanced the idea of studying groups in parallel to arrive at a greater understanding of how groups effect one another’s histories and experiences. When I read African American literature, I often ask myself: besides their experiences with White Americans, what are the experiences of African Americans with Japanese Americans? Chinese Americans? Korean Americans? And many other Asian American groups? What do the history books, the archives, and digital repositories reveal about these experiences? Lastly, how does one begin a discussion about the interactions between these various groups in a literary forum?

Sam Cacas’ *BLAsian Exchanges* certainly opened the idea to explore this thing called Blasian. Blasian was a word I had never heard before embarking on this foundational project.

Cacas introduced a concept that is still being defined by those who participate in the discourse, the cultures, and the lifestyle. Cacas' Blasian experience begins with the interaction between a Filipino American and his adoration for African American women. His exploration of this romantic possibility began with online encounters with Black women and his inquiries about their dating interests. He wanted to know if Black women were attracted to Asian men. This simple inquiry led to his narrating his own experiences with African Americans, in general. First, he introduces himself as, "I'm an Asian man who grew up in a Black city where I became politicized and socialized by Black men, Black women, Black organizations and news events that concerned the Black community" (Cacas 9). Second, his semi-memoir proceeds to document his involvement with social movements and events at Howard University (Cacas 51). Third, he creates a niche to discuss his socio-political stance to bridge Black and Asian experiences (Cacas 11, 15-28). Hence, Cacas' story demonstrates the power of introducing new identities in literature.

Sam Cacas' call to action can be answered in a number of ways. As demonstrated throughout my dissertation, my approach to investigate further Blasian narratives begins with an examination of history, law, and social science. Greg Carter's study, *The United States of the United Races: A Utopian History of Racial Mixing*, on the history of racial mixing in the United States reminds us that there are other kinds of racial narratives that should be told regardless of the opposition. Opposition arises when the prominent narrative about race relations in the United States is challenged forcing its citizens to rethink their status in society. In addition, Marcia A. Dawkins' study, *Clearly Invisible: Racial Passing and the Color of Cultural Identity*, about the practice and principle of passing informs us that people who choose to pass do so in response to

the rejection they have received from people they have encountered. The rejection could be shallowly based on appearance or the complexity of their racial ambiguity. For many individuals who identify as both African American and an Asian ancestry, these encounters are consistently contested; however, it is the personal politic of the individual that can possibly set a precedent for writing about and sharing their Blasian experience. The voluntary contributions of these experiences help others to begin to expand the discourse on Blasian cultures and narratives. As previously stated, Sam Casas began the conversation in early 2000s with the hope to encourage others to join in the conversation. Blasian discourse can include discussions on how colorism affects members of Asian groups and African American groups, and then explore the effects between the two groups. During my preliminary research, I came across several sources that hinted at the comparisons occurring between those who identify as Eurasian (i.e., White American and Asian) versus Blasian. What are the implications of this color consciousness happening among multiracial Asians? On the surface, the discussion will be a dichotomized Black-White framework, but it will force the conversation to go much deeper. Satya P. Mohanty and Jonnella E. Butler's application of realist theory, in this foci, will yield more critical readings of Blasian identity politics.

As discussed in Chapter 1 of the dissertation, literature is not the only area of interest but also theater is another point of exploration to draw attention to Black-Asian experiences. In the anthology edited by Velina Hasu Houston, *The Politics of Life: Four Plays by Asian American Women*, there are a couple of plays that feature the relationships between Black Caribbean Americans and Koreans in New York City. Elizabeth Wong's *Kimchee and Chitlins* dramatizes an actual event that occurred in Brooklyn, New York. In comparison to Kerry Young's novels

that feature the Chinese in a predominantly Black country, Jamaica, Wong's play exposes an often overlooked relationship between Asians and other Black cultures, such as Caribbean groups, in and outside of the United States. This aspect of a Blasian experience needs further exploration and presentation.

Dramatic literature and theater are areas that present a challenge for researching Blasian representation. In New York City, the off-Broadway stage often pushes the envelope in presenting underrepresented groups, such as plays that feature multiethnic experiences of marginalized groups. For instance, David and Jamilah Lamb's Afro-Latino play, *Platanos Y Collard Greens* features the relationship between African Americans and Latinos in New York City. The play was presented on an off-Broadway stage in 2003 and received numerous awards, such as the AUDELCO Award. *Platanos Y Collard Greens* received similar reception as Houston's plays that feature multiethnic experiences. These plays are received well on small stages in major cities, instead of on the Broadway stages located in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. *American Dreams* and *Platanos Y Collard Greens* preceded the extraordinary success of Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*. Perhaps, it is time to reconsider how Black-Asian experiences can be presented on the main stage.

Furthermore, I want to continue to explore the different ways African Americans choose to identify with different Asian cultural traditions, other than Japanese and Chinese, since the 1980s. As discussed in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, new Black identities include individuals who openly identify with a Black-Asian culture. In addition, Chapter 4 mentioned the importance of acknowledging how today's generation see their Black-Asian presence. Their identities intersect with class, gender, and sexuality, and how will these intersections affect the

narratives they share in various media forums? For example, young adult literature seems to be open to tell different kinds of stories that feature youths coming of age and confronting their insecurities about race and sexuality. How does one's multiraciality affect these points of intersection? Such an inquiry will create more questions as the study unfolds, thus, a worthy topic for extended research.

My close reading of Ishmael Reed's *Japanese By Spring* revealed a hidden history about African Americans supporting Pro-Japan organizations during the 1930s. This fact inspired me to learn more about the history of Blasian socio-political movements. As mentioned above, Sam Cacas documents his political involvement with issues affecting African Americans. His memoir fostered more questions about the possibilities of Asian/Asian Americans were members of civil rights groups led by African American leaders. This interest led to some data that recorded such activities between 1930s and 1970s. Not only in the 1930s, but also during the height of the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, African Americans and Asian Americans came together in solidarity. I am interested in key figures that participated in these movements, such as Richard Aoki's leadership in the Black Panther Party and Mary Yuriko Nakahara, who worked alongside Malcolm X in the Organization of Afro-American Unity. These historical figures are examples of how Blasian discourse can expand and influence literary production.

As outlined in this epilogue, there is a need for continuous research on Blasian themes in all literary genres. My preliminary research reveals that my interests are beyond literary studies. The research started with literary works, but it took me to other disciplines that intersect with literature, such as history and law. The intersections helped shape my readings of the texts, and

pointed me to more research possibilities; thus, my scholarship in Blasian Studies is just beginning.

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