

## **Interracial Romances in Asian-American Literature** **Sydney To, Class of 2019**

Each week, I would usually read two novels and secondary sources, while also writing a 4-6 page response paper for my Friday meetings with Professor Kong. In preparation for my project, I read Erika Lee's historical account *The Making of Asian America* and Kumiko Nemoto's *Racing Romance*, a sociological inquiry based upon interviews with white-Asian couples.

The first part of my project officially began with the famous Orientalist text, "Madame Butterfly" by John Luther Long, in which a Japanese woman falls in love with an American official and commits suicide when she learns that he has abandoned him. This text is infamous for its depiction of the relationship's power dynamics: the American official is indifferent to his lover and treats her as a toy, whereas the Japanese woman remains devoted to him for years after he leaves and kills herself out of the sadness he has caused her. I also read Mitsuki Nishimoto's Honors Project which analyzed "Madame Butterfly" from a postcolonial perspective and its rewritings in other texts which I also got a chance to read: "Tea" by Velina Hasu Houston, *A Pale View of Hills* by Kazuo Ishiguro, and "Chinglish" by David Henry Hwang.

I continued by reading works which described the interracial relationships which emerged from the Asia wars: *A Map of Betrayal* by Ha Jin, *Comfort Woman* by Nora Okja Keller, and *The Foreign Student* by Susan Choi. *The Foreign Student* is a fictionalized account of the romantic encounter between Susan Choi's own parents, a trend which continues with her other novels, *American Woman* and *A Person of Interest*, which speculatively illustrate the Patsy Hearst kidnapping and the investigations into the Unabomber Ted Kaczynski, respectively.

The third part of my project examined interracial romances in America from the 50s to the 80s through various novels: *Tripmaster Monkey* by Maxine Hong Kingston, *Everything I Never Told You* by Celeste Ng, and *Native Speaker* by Chang-Rae Lee. These works describe the disillusionment of Asian characters who believed that they had successfully assimilated into white American society, while describing the process by which they reclaim their unique places in America nevertheless. Finally, I looked at works which emphasized the increasing globalization of our society, as well as futuristic fiction in which historical racism reappears in different modes. These works were Janice Y. K. Lee's *The Expatriates*, Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl*, Ted Chiang's "The Story of Your Life," and Ken Liu's *The Paper Menagerie and Other Stories*.

While I had originally set out to write two 12-15 page essays as the capstones to my project, I ended up writing a 30 page essay about Choi's *The Foreign Student*. My paper has two parts. The first half looked at the failures of the relationships between politically dominant and politically subordinated characters. I leaned upon the thoughts of postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha, who argues that colonial relationships are characterized by a mimicry of the elite. Bhabha argues that this mimicry always reveals an *ambivalence*, in which the contradictions of the colonizing project is realized through the colonized's dual attitudes of obedience and mockery. The second part of my essay analyzed why the relationship between the two main characters, Chang Ahn and Katherine Monroe, is successful despite--or because--of certain obstacles: different identities, lack of communication, and minor prejudices towards one another. Here, I turn to Hannah Arendt's insights in *On the Origins of Totalitarianism*, and argue that the identities of both characters are *split* from political oppression and social exclusion, but becomes reunified through the witnessing presence of an affirming other.

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