

Writing Mixed Race Asian Americans into the Nation:
Narratives of National Incorporation in the
Bildungsroman and the Multiracial Movement

by

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Class of 2013

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors in American Studies

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Acknowledgements

I would like to first give my heartfelt thanks to my advisor Professor Nguyen, whose openness, patience, insight, flexibility, and kindness inspired me weekly. I couldn't have completed this project without your guidance, humor, unfailing support, and ability to keep pushing me further in my thought process. Your dedication kept this process going. I truly valued our conversations and always left our meetings feeling recharged and much better about my thesis than when I arrived.

To Professor Tang, whose innovative courses provided the foundation for my interest in Asian American studies, literary theory, and critical race theory. Your courses served as the inspiration for this thesis, and your lectures in class and brilliant analyses of literature were a model for me throughout this writing process.

To Professor Karamcheti, whom I admire greatly and whose course last semester helped me to think about my project in new ways. You provided me with confidence but also critical feedback on my writing—and for that I am extremely grateful.

To the American Studies Department, for how it informed the way I approach academia, the way I think about my life in general, for fostering interdisciplinary thought, and for being the most radical major at Wesleyan.

Thank you to my family. To my parents, who have given me everything in order to be able to attend Wesleyan and write this thesis in the first place. You practice the perfect balance between giving me the space I need and offering never-ending sources of wisdom, guidance, and support. To my sister, who understands me

better than anyone else I know. To my aunt and tante gotte Doey, who always has the answer to my questions.

To the fourth floor of Olin, whose desolate and barren landscape allowed me to work in silence for hours on end. (An extra special thanks to my thesis comrades Cory, Ague, Slamming and Andrew- couldn't have done it without your solidarity!)

To my dearest friends, whose camaraderie, generosity, humor, encouragement, and motivation provided me the sanity and support I often needed this year. Thank you, thank you, thank you for being my friends and never failing to make me laugh.

Lastly, I would like to dedicate this project to the memory of my grandmother Natalie Luethi Peterson. You read me my very first novels, hung up my first grade spelling tests on your fridge, gave me my very first copy of *Woman Warrior*, policed my grammar, inspired in my young age a deep love for learning that has (thankfully) lasted to this day, and most of all, provided me with an example of what a strong woman looks like. Without you, I wouldn't be me, and without you, I wouldn't have written this thesis. You will always be my greatest inspiration.

Introduction

In spring 2011, during my sophomore year at Wesleyan, the student group I was a member of, MIX (an acronym for mixed heritage, interracial, cross-cultural), invited Ken Tanabe, a multiracial graphic designer and social activist to host a Loving Day celebration on Wesleyan's campus. Tanabe is the founder of Loving Day, an event that celebrates interracial love, multiethnic identity, and marks the 1967 anniversary of the *Loving v. Virginia* case that legalized interracial marriage. At our own event, Tanabe and a few other representatives of the Loving Day organization gave us Loving Day buttons, showed us a power point presentation, and chatted with us about our mixed race identities. At the end of the hour, Tanabe asked to take a picture of the group, snapping the exact moment the ten of us jumped in the air. About a month ago, two years following our celebration with Tanabe, I opened an email from the Loving Day listserv to find the following:

The Loving Day Project is pleased to announce the launch of Loving Day ON CAMPUS... a resource guide and forum to help students across the country connect, share, and inspire...Students have celebrated this important civil rights milestone in a variety of ways...We want every student and organization to have the best events possible, so we have created the Loving Day ON CAMPUS facebook page.¹

I clicked the link and found the picture of the Wesleyan MIX group on the Facebook page—there we all were, happy and smiling as the unofficial faces of Loving Day ON CAMPUS. I was slightly surprised to see myself there and began scrolling through the rest of the Loving Day website, becoming increasingly aware of the fact that Loving Day's marketing strategy relied heavily on a celebratory "mixed-race" look.

¹ Loving Day ON CAMPUS is a national project.

On the homepage, there is an uploaded video of the most recent 2012 Loving Day flagship celebration in New York City. It is a montage of beautiful young people and children dancing and mingling, all ethnically ambiguous, colorful, with up-beat, jazzy house music in the background. One man says to the camera, “[Loving Day] makes me feel like I’m at home somewhere, it gives me a home, because I come from a multicultural background and it’s beautiful thing!” Another man announces happily, “The love transcends the race!” Throughout the video and the website, the mixed race body figures prominently as attractive, young, racially ambiguous, and exuberantly happy.

Loving Day represents a celebratory accomplishment in the trajectory of the mixed race subject’s relationship to the nation in American history. Prior to 1967, the mixed race subject was rendered institutionally invisible through anti-miscegenation laws, and up until 2000, people of mixed race could only check one box to indicate their race on the census. The multiracial movement of the 1990s, which included students, activist groups, interracial families, and mothers of biracial children, sought to redress this issue, successfully leading to a change in legislation that included the option to check different racial categories on the census for the first time in American history. This institutional achievement rhetorically gave the multiracial population recognition and a “home” in the American body politic.

Public discourse heralded this new acknowledgement of the multiracial population, projecting a multicultural and utopic future onto the body of the mixed race subject. For example, a *Time Magazine* cover in 1993 displays a portrait of a woman created by computer technology to represent a mixture of many different

racism. The headline reads, “The New Face of America: How Immigrants Are Shaping the World’s First Multicultural Society.”² This woman represents all races yet is also racially transcendent, a distinctly American inconsistency that glorifies ethnic difference as long as it is assimilated within America’s “melting pot.”³ The association of multiraciality with a positive future suggests a narrative of development; the mixed race subject’s national invisibility and marginality end in inclusion and visibility, a coming of age story that welcomes the mixed race subject into the nation. *Loving Day* is one such narrative, creating a multicultural “home” as a final destination for the mixed race population. This story, however, disavows the tensions that mark mixed race subjectivity, including the commodification of the mixed race body, the continuing discrimination against those of mixed race, and the acknowledgment that the changed census legislation was only a first step to national inclusion.

In this thesis, I examine the relationship between the multiracial movement, the genre of the bildungsroman, or “coming of age novel,” and mixed race Asian American novels that are contextualized in the decade of the 1990s. The three novels I use in this study are *Paper Bullets: a Fictional Autobiography*, by Kip Fulbeck (2001); *American Son: A Novel*, by Brian Ascalon Roley (2001); and *My Year of Meats*, by Ruth Ozeki (1998). I situate each novel within the rhetoric of the multiracial movement of the 1990s, which forwarded the institutionalization and legitimization of mixed race identity in American society both legally and socially, in

² Elam, Michele. *The Souls of Mixed Folk: Race, Politics, and Aesthetics in the New Millennium*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2011, 44.

³ *Ibid.*, 4.

the government, in education, and in popular culture. Each novel employs different functions of the bildungsroman, narrating the protagonists' complex relationships with the boundaries of the nation, grappling with the notion of national belonging and validation. The bildungsroman structure and the multiracial movement both construct a progressive, teleological discourse, narrating a trajectory from exclusion and marginality to an endpoint of inclusion within the nation as a celebratory affirmation of identity. By focusing on the ways in which these three mixed race Asian American texts subvert, manipulate, or are confined by the form of the bildungsroman and the rhetoric of the multiracial movement, I examine the pathways to inclusion in the American body politic and the positionality of the mixed race Asian American subject within and beyond the boundaries of the America. My studies of each text draw from contentious moments in the United States in the 1990s: the rhetoric of Ethnic Studies and cultural nationalism, the Rodney King beating and L.A. Riots, and the ascendancy of Asian economic power—all discourses that intervene in the narrative progress of the mixed race Asian American subject in American public discourse.

I noticed that many authors of mixed race Asian American novels rely on recurring tropes of multiraciality: phenotypical liminality that results in exclusion; the transcendence of racial borders that contribute to a universal discourse; as well as the distinctive modernity and futuristic qualities attached to the mixed race body. In most cases, these novels are written in the bildungsroman form, reflecting the way in which the bildungsroman has become prolific in ethnic literature, often interpreted as an ethnic author's narrative of assimilation into American society or seen as a resistance to the form that highlights America's exclusion of the "ethnic other." Elements of

resistance and assimilation are evident in the texts I examine but are not mutually exclusive. Instead, I focus on how the complexity of multiraciality relates to the teleological form of the genre, as well as how the authors manipulate the structure and aesthetics of the bildungsroman, offering a dynamic framework that illuminates the historical and social context of the multiracial literature of the 1990s.

In this thesis, I draw on and intervene in several key theories of the bildungsroman, applying various aspects of the bildungsroman to my analysis of mixed race Asian American literature and the multiracial movement.⁴ The bildungsroman has been termed the “novel of development,” a “coming of age novel,” a “rite of passage,” “novel of education,” and “novel of socialization.”⁵ The traditional bildungsroman is perceived as a solution to the conflict between the individual and society, describing the transition from the individual to the universal. *Bildung*, a German word that is fairly untranslatable, describes a “project of civicization, the cultivation of a presumably inherent universal force of human personality...naturally inclined to express itself through the media of the nation-state and citizenship.”⁶ The bildungsroman narrates a story of the individual development,

⁴ The genre of the Bildungsroman has been at the core of literary studies and theory, often highly disputed and contested, considered both broad, applicable to most narratives, and extremely limited, applicable to a select few novels.

⁵ Esty Joshua D. “Nationhood, Adulthood, and the Ruptures of “Bildung”: Arresting Development in “The Mill on the Floss” *Narrative*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (May, 1996), pp. 142-160, 144.

⁶ Joseph R. Slaughter. “Enabling Fictions and Novel Subjects: The “Bildungsroman” and International Human Rights Law” *PMLA*, Vol. 121, No. 5 (Oct., 2006), pp. 1405-1423, 1409.

but individual development is deeply implicated in the social order and becoming “socialized.”⁷

The relationship of the individual to the nation, one of the most important concepts in my analysis of mixed race Asian American literature, is highlighted by two key theorists of the classic bildungsroman: Franco Moretti and Joseph Slaughter. Franco Moretti offers one of the most cited, Eurocentric theories of the classic bildungsroman, positing it as a form that narrates “how the French Revolution could have been avoided.”⁸ The bildungsroman is “a way to heal the rupture that had generated (or so it seemed) the French revolution, and to imagine a continuity between the old and the new regime.”⁹ It is the narrative of the anti-revolution, incorporating an individual seeking autonomy back into the nation, nullifying the individual’s self interests and “restor[ing] harmony within the ruling class.” Moretti claims, “We will see in fact that here there is no conflict between individuality and socialization, autonomy and normality, interiority and objectification. One’s formation as an individual in and for oneself coincides without rifts with one’s social integration as a simple part of a whole.”¹⁰

⁷ Many German scholars have rejected such a broad definition and see the Bildungsroman as a specifically German genre, arguing that the Bildungsroman novel of formation occurs only in Germany.⁷ Some scholars even argued for an incredibly restrictive model of the bildungsroman, of which they considered only one or two novels to represent the Bildungsroman in its “purest” form. (Boes, Tobias. “Modernist Studies and the Bildungsroman: A Historical Survey of Critical Trends” *Literature Compass* 3/2 (2006): 230–243, 232)

⁸ Moretti, Franco. *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*. London: Verso, 1987, 64

⁹ *Ibid.*, viii.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

Moretti also argues that the concept of youth, which is integral to the bildungsroman form, is linked to modernity. For Moretti modernity is characterized by the youthful “attributes of mobility and inner restlessness... Youth is, so to speak, modernity’s ‘essence,’ the sign of a world that seeks its meaning in the future rather than in the past.”¹¹ Youth must reach an endpoint in adulthood. “Just as in space it is essential to build a ‘homeland’ for the individuals, it is also indispensable for time to stop at a privileged moment. A Bildung is truly such only if, at a certain point, it can be seen as concluded.”¹² The bildungsroman is completed when the character reaches maturity within the nation.

Joseph Slaughter similarly theorizes the bildungsroman as the nation’s nullification of individual interests, but contextualizes it within the language of human rights. Slaughter claims that human rights discourse and the language of the bildungsroman both posit the individual personality as incorporated within the nation state, both “managing pressures of...human rebellion and state legitimation” and sharing “much of the same conceptual vocabulary.”¹³ Slaughter argues, “both the bildungsroman and human rights law recognize and construct the individual as a social creature and the process of individuation as an incorporative process of socialization, without which individualism itself would be meaningless.”¹⁴ Slaughter and Moretti both apply the bildungsroman as a narrative device that is, at its core, the

¹¹ Moretti, 5.

¹² Moretti, 26.

¹³ Slaughter, Joseph R. *Human Rights, Inc: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2007, 91.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

“story form of incorporation” and claim for “inclusion in the franchise of the nation state.”¹⁵

Many scholars regard the bildungsroman as a specifically 19th century phenomenon,¹⁶ but the rise of ethnic, post colonial, and women’s studies in the 1980s onward has led to an expansion of the traditional definition.¹⁷ Specifically, ethnic writers have adopted the bildungsroman to use it as a tool to either narrate affirmative claims for inclusion in the nation state or to critique its exclusionary practices.¹⁸ It is often questioned whether the promise of individualism in the traditional bildungsroman offers a source of hope or frustration for the ethnic subject.¹⁹ Is the ethnic bildungsroman a critique of Western individualism or is it simply a revision of the genre?²⁰

According to Martin Japtok, the ethnic bildungsroman offers two pathways to reach development: assimilation into mainstream America or finding community within an ethnic group, or in other words, cultural nationalism.

Reaching harmony within a more or less hostile social order might be a tenuous proposition at best. Not to adjust to that order but to embrace ethnicity as the text outlines it and choose a more “ethnically oriented” life rather than a career in the mainstream offers itself as one other alternative for the protagonist of the ethnic Bildungsroman.²¹

¹⁵ Slaughter, Joseph R. “Enabling Fictions and Novel Subjects: The "Bildungsroman" and International Human Rights Law” PMLA, Vol. 121, No. 5 (Oct., 2006), pp. 1405-1423, 1411.

¹⁶ Wilhelm Dilthey, a German philosopher and sociologist is credited with introducing the term formally in an 1870 biography of Friedrich Schleiermacher. (Boes, 231)

¹⁷ Ibid., 231

¹⁸ Slaughter, 1411.

¹⁹ Bolaki, Stella. *Unsettling the Bildungsroman: Reading Contemporary Ethnic American Women's Fiction*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011, 65.

²⁰ Ibid., 88.

²¹ Japtok, Martin. *Growing Up Ethnic: Nationalism and the Bildungsroman in African American and Jewish American Fiction*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005, 28.

As Japtok outlines, when the social order is hostile to the ethnic other, the ethnic bildungsroman offers a solution of cultural nationalism as an antidote to marginalization. In either case, some kind of social incorporation or grounding in the sense of “nation” is part of the solution for the protagonist.

The ethnic bildungsroman is further revised by the “mixed race bildungsroman,” which Michele Elam characterizes as the “antibildungsroman.” This version of the bildungsroman exceeds the binary of cultural nationalism versus assimilation, as the mixed race protagonist exceeds boundaries of the nation.

The protagonist is certainly peripheral, but not characterized as atavistic. In fact, correspondence between the novel and modernity is actually magnified: the mixed race protagonist is represented as modernity itself...the protagonist in the mixed race bildungsroman is often represented as not requiring social education- he or she is already modern. In fact, the idea that the racially mixed individual is a modernizing agent of a new multicultural world order is often an explicit theme in these works. But...the biracial characters...are most often represented in the novels as feeling invisible...[t]hese...characters do not come of age by coming into society. Rather, their experiences critique the racial and economic basis by which individuals are incorporated.²²

The mixed race bildungsroman, according to Elam, subverts the classic bildungsroman through the notion of modernity; the protagonist is inherently modern and thus the necessity of education is elided. Inhabiting a mixed race identity produces several outcomes—representing a new, multicultural world, or being rendered as peripheral to society. This dual notion of being heralded as futuristic and universal, but also excluded and invisible, is characteristic of the protagonists I examine in this study.

²² Elam, 126-7.

Mixed race Asian Americans embody a contradictory position within American society, historically marginalized but currently representative of the global future. Historically, the mixed race Asian American subject has been aligned with the perpetual foreigner status of Asian Americans, tied to notions of the “other.” Anti-miscegenation laws, established prior to World War II, along with other acts that restricted Asian immigration to the country, were reflective of the “yellow peril,” linked to white America’s anxieties of the potential threat of Asian “hordes” coming to the United States.²³ Mixed race Asian Americans were also often stigmatized as symbols of war and prostitution, signifying the consequences of interracial relationships that proliferated in the space of the treaty port and military base (specifically, white-male, Asian female relationships).²⁴ In early Asian American literature, the “tragic Eurasian” often embodied all of the above traits.²⁵ While the tragic Eurasian played an important role in early Asian American literature,

²³ Anti-miscegenation laws “policed the boundaries of racial categories, naturalizing the illegitimacy of interracial love in order to restrict access to base prerogatives of citizenship while also preventing the ‘amalgamation’ of the races through legitimized marriage and the eventual birth of mixed race children” Poulson, Melissa Eriko. “American Orientalism and Cosmopolitan Mixed Race: Reading Onoto Watanna and Han Suyin’s Asian Mixed Race.” *Asian American Literature: Discourses and Pedagogies* 3 (2012) 5-13, 6.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 6

²⁵ In “Yellow Peril” fiction, a recurring theme in novels was the concept of the interracial love affair (white/Asian), which encompassed the fear that the white character would become contaminated by deadly diseases. The Eurasian character was always an extension of this idea and often ended up dead or wishing to be white. Literature by Eurasian authors was also deeply embedded in injury or trauma. Edith Eaton, an English/Chinese writer raised in England and North America who went by the pseudonym Sui Sin Far was one of first and most prominent mixed-race Asian authors in the early 20th century. She narrates her identity as nationless, pathologizing her mixed-race identity as constantly conflicted, with competing loyalties to her European and Chinese sides. (Williams-León, Teresa, and Cynthia L. Nakashima. *The Sum of Our Parts: Mixed-heritage Asian Americans*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001, 37-8)

representations of mixed race Asian American have exceeded this model, as the Asian American literary canon has expanded greatly since the early 20th century.

As Asian Americans represent the largest contingent of multiracial Americans,²⁶ they have become increasingly representative of a hybrid, globalized world. According to Jeffrey Santa Ana, the multiracial Asian American face has become associated with the market value of multiraciality.

It is no exaggeration to suggest that the multiracial face has become an icon for America's global economy and its corporate social order...What is interesting about this corporate deployment of multiraciality is its use of Asian hybridity to fuel desires for a planetary market. Capitalizing on the Orientalist model-minority stereotype of Asians as entrepreneurial geniuses and computer experts, global technology frequently relies on models with Asian features to advertise products that promote the borderlessness of information technology.²⁷

“Asian hybridity,” Santa Ana argues, is commodified in the global market, as its connections to the model minority stereotype and a futuristic hybrid identity suggest the dissolving of national borders through globalization. The historical marginalization and ostracism of mixed race Asian Americans, as well as their growing association with the concept of “borderlessness” and globalization offer an important framework through which to analyze mixed race Asian American subjectivity.

Throughout this thesis, I define race as a social construct but also acknowledge its material relevance, as race is deeply implicated in the formation and

²⁶ The US Census Statistics for the 1990s indicate that Asian Americans are among the highest to outmarry. Of the 1,037,420 children reported in multiracial households in 1990, almost one half were from families that had marked on parent as white and the other as Asian. (Ibid., 6)

²⁷ Santa Ana, Jeffrey. “Feeling Ancestral: The Emotions of Mixed Race and Memory in Asian American Cultural Productions.” *positions: east asia cultures critique* 16.2 (2008): 457-482, 459.

preservation of national boundaries.²⁸ I use the terms mixed race, multiracial, and interracial interchangeably. Many scholars argue that terms such as these reinforce biological understandings of race. However, using these terms describes how racial categories are created, reproduced, entrenched, challenged, and still relevant to the lived experiences of many who do not directly fit in one category.²⁹ I rely on multiple terms to refer to racial mixedness in order to refrain from contributing to a perception that “multiracials” are a group in a fixed sense.³⁰ Because the dominant paradigm of racial classification is monoracial, it is difficult to easily define “mixed race.” When I refer to those who are “mixed race” in the literature I analyze, I am defining mixed race as someone who has parents belonging to different racial categories and who deals specifically with issues of having multiple racial backgrounds. However, in reference to the multiracial movement, I also understand “multiracial” to connote a constructed and flexible identity that is not limited to biological terms. In the multiracial movement, activists consciously used the term “multiracial” to create the sense of a group constituency. I emphasize overall that these racial identities are both imposed and asserted, and that the strict categories of race illuminate the necessity of recognizing the lasting power of racial categorization to shape the social positioning of mixed race people in relation to the nation.

²⁸ According to Paula M. Moya and Hazel Rose Markus, race is a “doing,” “associat[ing] differential value, power, and privilege with [perceived physical and behavioral]...characteristics...participating in the maintenance and creation of social and economic structures that preserve a hierarchy in which people associated with one race are assumed to be superior to people who are associated with another; and...justifying or rationalizing the resulting inequalities.” (Markus, Hazel, and Paula M. L. Moya. *Doing Race: 21 Essays for the 21st Century*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2010, 22.)

²⁹ DaCosta, Kimberly M. C. *Making Multiracials: State, Family, and Market in the Redrawing of the Color Line*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2007, 19-20.

³⁰ DaCosta, 6.

America in the 1990s provides a key historical context to situate the complexities of mixed race literature. Specifically, the multiracial movement presents a multidimensional context for understanding how mixed race Asian American authors employ the bildungsroman to expose persisting inequalities that the emerging celebratory narratives of multiracial America obscure. Thus in this thesis I focus on the 1990s multiracial movement, a result of civil rights discourse, the rise of ethnic identity politics, and the impetus to institutionalize mixed race identity through multiple checkboxes on the census, through activist organizations, and through the expansion of scholarship and university courses on mixed race identity. I use Cynthia Nakashima's definition of the multiracial movement:

the emergence of community organizations, campus groups, magazines, and newsletters, academic research and writing, university courses, creative expression, and political activism- all created and honed by mixed-race individuals and members of interracial families, with the purpose of voicing their own experiences, opinions, issues, and interests.³¹

The most publicized struggle for the multiracial movement in the 1990s, which I focus on specifically in relationship to the bildungsroman, was the issue of multiracial classification on the census. Including options for checking more than one racial identification box on the census was not only administrative, it also indicated the desire to destigmatize mixed race families and hybrid identities and allow a space for self-identification. After the Civil Rights Era of the 1950s and 60s,³² the racially

³¹ Nakashima, Cynthia L. "Voices from the Movement: Approaches to Multiraciality." *The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders As the New Frontier*. Ed. Root, Maria P. P. . London: Sage Publications, 1996, 80.

³² The Civil Rights Era in the 1950s and 1960s paved the way for the multiracial movement by initiating a series of legislative changes. The passage Civil Rights Act of 1964 was the pinnacle of the black struggle for equality, putting a closure to a century of systematic oppression. Along with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the

segregated American landscape began changing, and classifying race became necessary to track equal access to schools, jobs, and other public accommodations.³³ The state's reliance on statistics in order to redress discrimination against racial minorities became a rallying point for multiracial activists who felt restricted by having to choose a racial category. As one member of a multiracial activist group stated, "Each and every time we confront one of these forms, we are faced yet again with the awkward, irrational and for many of us the offensive task of selecting a race or ethnicity which does not truthfully identify us and has the further result of failing to count our community"³⁴ Advocating for legislative change in racial collection was a tangible first step for the multiracial movement, a logical place to remedy the restrictions placed on self-identification within governmental systems of racial classification.³⁵

Self-enumeration on the census created the illusion that racial categories were something that only the individual could determine,³⁶ but the choices available were actually five categories designated by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), the office responsible for activities of all federal statistical agencies, including the

Housing Act of 1968 legally desegregated the country. (Ramirez, Deborah A. "Multiracial Identity in a Color-Conscious World." Root, Maria P. P. *The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders As the New Frontier*. London: Sage Publications, 1996, 50.)

³³ DaCosta, 40.

³⁴ DaCosta, 41.

³⁵ Prior to 1970, the US census would assign people racial categories based upon visual inspection called "observer identification," a practice that caused many complications and controversies. (Williams, Kim M. *Mark One or More: Civil Rights in Multiracial America*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006, 18). Eventually by allowing self-enumeration, the states provided individuals an opportunity for choice and agency, within limitations. (Ibid., 41).

³⁶ Ibid., 41.

Census Bureau.³⁷ In 1977, the OMB standardized ethnic and racial data collection in all governmental agencies, a protocol that came to be known as “OMB 15.” It required the use of four standard categories: American Indian or Alaskan Native; Asian or Pacific Islander; Black; White; and one ethnic category inclusive of all races, Hispanic.³⁸ OMB 15 served as the official categorization on racial data collection for the next twenty years. However, the growing racial complexity in American society elucidated the shortfalls of data collection in the census.

For the 1990 census, people who wrote that they were “multiracial” or “biracial” were left in the “Other” race classification. Respondents who wrote “black-white” were counted as black; those who wrote “white-black” were counted as whites.³⁹

These policies of racial classification were unstable, inconsistent, and incapable of accurately portraying the shifting and growing demographic of mixed race people in the United States. The movement of multiracial activist groups in the 1990s marked a shifting point in which people claimed that the individual, rather than the state, should decide how one is racially classified.⁴⁰

The key players in the multiracial movement each had diverse interests and visions, but saw the census—a form of governmental institutionalization—as the

³⁷ Williams, 5.

³⁸ *American Indian or Alaskan Native*: A person having origins in any of the original peoples of North America and who maintains cultural identification through tribal affiliations or community recognition; *Asian or Pacific Islander*: A person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, the Indian subcontinent, or the Pacific Islands. This area includes, for example, China, India, Japan, Korea, the Philippine Islands, and Samoa; *Black*: a Person having origins in any of the black racial groups of Africa; *White*: a person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, North Africa, or the Middle East; And it included one ethnic category inclusive of all races: *Hispanic*: A person of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race. (Williams, 29)

³⁹ Williams, 22.

⁴⁰ DaCosta, 30.

primary way to gain acknowledgement as multiracial individuals. The groups, AMEA (The Association of MultiEthnic Americans), Project Race (Reclassify All Children Equally) and A Place For Us (APFU) all rejected monoracial categories on the census, but had differing expectations of multiracial advocacy.⁴¹ Project RACE advocated a stand-alone multiracial classification, AMEA wanted a multiracial category followed by a listing of racial and ethnic groups, and APFU had the ultimate goal of a color-blind society.⁴² In order to gain state recognition, activists mobilized as a “multiracial community,” suggesting that they represented a cohesive constituency.⁴³ However, the multiracial activist movement was not as solid or united as it appeared; there was not necessarily one large “multiracial” group that represented everyone who was of mixed race.

As the groups fought for varying concepts of multiracial classification on the census, they faced serious opposition from civil rights groups, who feared that multiracial classifications would obscure the tracking of existing racial inequalities and continuing discrimination against monoracial groups.⁴⁴ The black civil rights stance was clear—multiracial categories on the census, while seemingly progressive, would be more harm than help.⁴⁵ Civil rights activists often saw multiracial activism

⁴¹ Williams, 4.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴³ DaCosta, 34.

⁴⁴ In 1994, a coalition statement signed by the Lawyer’s Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, the NAACP, the National Urban League and the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies stated the opposition to a multiracial category proposal.⁴⁴ The coalition was “concerned that the addition of a multiracial category may have unanticipated adverse consequences, resulting Blacks being placed even lower in the existing American hierarchy...[The multiracial initiative has] potential disorganizing and negative effects on Black Americans [and would] distort public understanding of their condition” (Williams, 47).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

as “unpoliticized” in relation to their forebears, who successfully challenged issues of exclusion, oppression, and poverty in the Civil Rights era.⁴⁶

Despite this resistance, OMB finally allowed respondents to check as many boxes as were applicable. On October 30, 1997, OMB director Franklin Raines stated of the new policy, “We are not closing the door on the expression of multiracial heritage. We are allowing people to express their multiracial heritage in whatever way they view themselves.”⁴⁷ MOOM also instigated a new battle—attention turned to how, exactly, the Census Bureau would count all the multiple race responses.

After picking more than one checkbox, respondents were then placed into categories they did not choose,⁴⁸ illustrating that the institutional classification system continued to dictate the assumed perception of self-identification in MOOM. While the multiracial movement attempted to break down oppressive categorization and enact legislative change that would finally recognize multiraciality, set racial categories continued to determine self-identification, and biological notions of race remained entrenched at the center of American logic.

The multiracial movement and the bildungsroman share the same conceptual language, both positing the state as a source of individual identity development and valorization. Multiracial activists not only asserted that people of mixed race-descent needed acknowledgment, but “sought recognition in one form or another from the

⁴⁶ DaCosta, 39.

⁴⁷ Williams, 59.

⁴⁸ Williams, 62.

local, state, or federal government,”⁴⁹ reflecting the similar pathway to identity affirmation and inclusion into the nation that is highlighted in the bildungsroman. Another commonality between the multiracial movement and the bildungsroman is the idea that the individual would be meaningless without socialization, and without seeking expression in public, human personality would be irrelevant. The movement for change on the census indicated that the multiracial movement saw expression of mixed race identity as possible only through the public channel of institutional classification.

Although the multiracial movement did lead to gains in institutional recognition for the mixed race population, it did not entail an automatic incorporation and social harmony within the nation. In the 1990s, other discourses revealed a more negative tone of the decade, challenging the celebratory rhetoric of the multiracial movement. For instance, while the circulation of ethnic studies and cultural nationalist discourse implied greater and institutionalized interest in the politics of race and ethnicity in the United States, it also represented a dire need for the articulation of oppression and marginalization of people of color. The Rodney King beating, trial, and subsequent riots across Los Angeles indicated a loud and clear eruption of racial tension that could no longer be restrained. As America’s economy waned, Asia’s economy was on the rise, producing a sense of urgency to retain hegemonic power. These discourses form a counter-narrative to the celebratory multiracial movement in the 1990s and inform the mixed race narratives I examine in this thesis.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 37.

Turning to my three chapters, I look at each text and its relationship to the bildungsroman, the multiracial movement, and other historical moments in the 1990s that inform the discourse of national belonging and multiraciality in the marketplace in this era. In my first chapter, “*Paper Bullets: The Swinging Pendulum between Freedom and Assimilation*,” I examine the protagonist’s pathway to incorporation in the nation. The concept of the pendulum in the bildungsroman, referring to the fluctuation between the two poles of freedom/individual autonomy and incorporation in the nation, characterizes the fluctuation of Kip Fulbeck’s narrative voice throughout *Paper Bullets*. The novel is set in the era of the rise of ethnic studies and cultural nationalist discourse, both of which prove to offer the mixed race protagonist limited options of belonging. Ultimately, this chapter argues that Fulbeck affirms the narrative of incorporation in the bildungsroman as the protagonist adopts a misogynist, sexist voice. This narration into the mainstream reflects the ease with which the multiracial movement assumed census reform would provide inclusion into society.

Chapter two, “*American Son: Inverting the Bildungsroman through Melancholy and Violence*” explores how racial melancholia in the text references the Rodney King riots in 1992 and disrupts the trajectory of the bildungsroman. The protagonist’s downward spiral into violence is the only way he believes he can affirm his identity. I argue that Brian Ascalon Roley’s novel reverses the bildungsroman structure, as a stagnant and progressively downward-turning narrative marks the masculinist violence associated with being mixed race in the 1990s and the impossibility of inclusion.

The third chapter, “*My Year of Meats: Transcending the Bildungsroman through Hybrid Identities and Agency*,” studies how Ruth Ozeki crafts a narrative that is multivocal and transnational, taking the novel out of the traditional bind of the nation in the bildungsroman. As a documentary filmmaker, the main protagonist actively creates visions of hybrid and multicultural identity rather than allowing the development of identity to be subordinate to the power of the nation. The novel is situated within the 1990s discourse of the growing power of the Asian economy, which I argue subverts the protagonist’s liberal notions of identity and instead posits her as a subject of commodification. I argue that this text produces an ambivalent rendering of mixed race subjectivity, imagining it as transnational but also commodified.

Scholarship on mixed race Asian American literature is generally scarce, and many texts are never pulled out of their obscurity into the realm of academia. Professors occasionally include *Paper Bullets* and *American Son* in college curricula, but critical scholarship on these texts does not exist. *My Year of Meats*, on the other hand, has been critiqued in terms of its possibilities as an ecocritical and feminist text but has not been analyzed in terms of the bildungsroman. Through this project, I seek to expand upon existing scholarship on contemporary mixed race Asian American texts and provide insight on the relationship between a literary genre and a contentious historical era. These three texts represent the possibilities (or lack thereof) for inclusion in the national body politic for mixed race Asian Americans and illuminate the complexity of the rhetoric of belonging in a “multiracial” nation.

Paper Bullets: The Swinging Pendulum Between Cultural Nationalism and Mainstream America

“What is it that makes you immediately turn away from your own reflection? Why is it I wanted to immerse myself in milk? Pouring a vanilla veneer over every aspect of my life all the way up into adulthood- from my clothes to my speech to my tastes? Where is the Peking-duck taste on a woman’s skin and what makes me so sure it’ll be there?”⁵⁰

Paper Bullets: A Fictional Autobiography, written by author, activist, and artist Kip Fulbeck, is a novel deeply implicated in the identity politics of cultural nationalism and racial/ethnic studies rhetoric of the 1990s. This fast-paced, experimental text is saturated with pop-culture references and reflections on Asian American masculinity and mixed-race identity in California in the 1990s. While the narration is not entirely chronological, it follows a developmental arc from childhood to adulthood, and immaturity to wisdom that marks the text’s bildungsroman form. *Paper Bullets* is structured as a sexual “laundry-list” of the Asian American, white, and mixed race Asian American women the protagonist dates throughout his lifetime. The intersection of race and sex is the dominant discourse of this novel.

Fulbeck begins his novel in childhood with a “fictional” version of himself⁵¹ who is bullied for being Asian, lives in white suburbia, and feels isolated from both his white father and Chinese mother as a result of his physically mixed appearance. As he enters young adulthood, his first white girlfriend psychologically abuses him. Later, Kip becomes more confident, dating a succession of women of different races

⁵⁰ Fulbeck, Kip. *Paper Bullets: A Fictional Autobiography*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001, 63.

⁵¹ I use the name “Kip,” to refer to the protagonist and the name “Fulbeck” to refer to the author.

who each offer him a new way to understand his own identity. Eventually he becomes a professor, artist and activist. Finally, he ends the novel in a declaration of love for an unnamed woman, representing a narrative of transcendent romance that overcomes his identity struggles.

Throughout the text, Kip's narrative voice is in constant flux between an Asian American cultural nationalist vernacular that seeks masculinity and ethnic solidarity, a more patriarchal, sexist voice, and a universal voice of multiraciality, the latter two of which represent inclusion in mainstream America. I examine Fulbeck's fluctuating narrative voice in terms of the pendulum in Moretti's model of the bildungsroman, referring to the continuous motion that characterizes modern individuality as it navigates between the poles of individual freedom and national assimilation. The instability of Kip's narrative voice reflects the difficult pathway to inclusion in America for a mixed race subject. Eventually, Fulbeck's voice settles in both a patriarchal and universal tone, suggesting his social integration and expression of individuality has been achieved. Kip embodies the incorporative process of the multiracial movement, becoming subsumed into mainstream America.

Kip inhabits the era of the 1990s, when ethnic studies had grown to become more established in colleges and universities across the nation since its emergence in the 1960s. Ethnic studies materialized out of an empowerment movement in which students of color and their allies organized and protested, resulting in the mobilization of students, faculty, and staff in many colleges and universities to include histories and experiences of non-white groups into their curricula.⁵² In a study on ethnic

⁵² Williams, et. al., 366.

studies courses in the 1990s, one student reported feeling validated by the course he took.

[it] has allowed me to connect my multiple identities and understand my humanity in its fullness. I am biracial Japanese American and white...I am a gay man of color. I am a multiracial, international person...This course legitimized who I am and how I live”⁵³

Ethnic studies courses, in this student’s view, contributed to a validation of identity and provided the language through which to articulate one’s own multiplicity of identities and intersectionalities in relation to the hegemonic center. As Lisa Lowe claims, ethnic studies can be considered an “oppositional site from which to contest the educational apparatus that reproduces and continues to be organized by Western culturalist, as well as developmental, narratives.”⁵⁴ In this way, ethnic studies represents “freedom” away from the dominance of Western thought in the institution of education.

Like the student lauding ethnic studies, Kip implicitly utilizes the language of the field to voice his multiple levels of marginalization in society. He calls himself a “Eurasian, Amerasian, and Hapa,”⁵⁵ who does not “fit the traditional bill,”⁵⁶ “checking “white” on ethnicity questionnaires because there’s no box for mixed-blood Cantonese, English, Irish, and Welsh.”⁵⁷ He can’t stand the “whole exotica crap” and the “white colonialist standards of beauty and desire”⁵⁸ that come with being mixed race. He also notes his perpetual foreigner status as an Asian American.

⁵³ Ibid., 371.

⁵⁴ Lowe, Lisa. *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996, 38.

⁵⁵ Fulbeck, 8.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 8.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 190.

“At twelve, I know all about getting beat up...It’s how I learned I wasn’t quite American. Five white boys in fourth or fifth grade taught me that bit of information in kindergarten on day one.”⁵⁹ Kip’s diction reflects the critical nature of ethnic studies, allowing him to narrate his outsider status and implicit mode of resistance against embedded racist structures that Lowe proposes inheres in ethnic studies. Terms such as “Hapa”⁶⁰ and “white colonialist standards” indicate Kip is well-versed in articulating the racial oppression and power structures that ethnic studies sought to identify.

While Kip embraces this language, he comes to the conclusion that it cannot fully encompass his identity. As Lowe argues, the institutionalization of ethnic studies “submits in part to the demands of the university and its educative function of socializing subjects into the state.”⁶¹ Ethnic studies is counterhegemonic but also implicated in a process of social incorporation by being connected to an educational institution. Kip begins questioning the mass cultural appeal of ethnic studies.

Pop-psychology soundbites, like assimilation and projection and aggressor identification and displacement, only get you so far. It’s too easy to claim some Asian American Studies course and the Joy Luck Club as your wake-up call to identity. It’s not that simple.⁶²

Kip critiques this language, claiming it does not represent him in its reductive psychological jargon. He is wary of the psychological bent of ethnic studies, as it threatens to pathologize identity in a way that is not productive. As Kip fails to find a

⁵⁹ Ibid., 32.

⁶⁰ Hapa is a slang word referring to someone who is of mixed heritage and has Asian roots. It was originally a Hawaiian word, but has become a common term for those of mixed-race Asian American heritage to self-identify.

⁶¹ Lowe, 41.

⁶² Fulbeck, 64.

representative voice through ethnic studies, he turns to an alternate source of vocalization.

Cultural nationalism offers Kip the possibility to claim an Asian American masculine voice, suggesting a desire to align himself with Asian American masculinity in resistance to the white-masculine world in which he lives. Frank Chin's famous and oft-cited anthology *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* refuted white stereotypes by defining "Asian American" strictly in cultural national terms.

Our anthology is exclusively Asian American. That means Filipino, Chinese and Japanese Americans, American-born and –raised, who got their China and Japan from the radio, off the silver screen, from television, out of comic books, from the pushes of white American culture that pictured the yellow man as something that when wounded, sad, or angry, or swearing, or wondering, whined, shouted, or screamed 'Aiiieeeee!' Asian America, so long ignored and forcibly excluded from creative participation in American culture, is wounded, sad, angry, swearing, wondering, and this is his *Aiiieeeee!* It is more than a whine, shout, or scream. It is fifty years of our whole voice.⁶³

The representative Asian America identity that these authors advocate for is aggressive, male, and American born, excluding female and other foreign born Asian American authors whom they believe promote racist and orientalist stereotypes.

In their vision of who represents the true "Asian American," Chin and the other authors rely on a highly masculine voice that, according to Daniel Kim, mirrors the African American vernacular. Comparing Frank Ellison and Frank Chin, Kim argues that both "champion an ideal of literary identity that allegedly takes it cues from the vibrant, muscular, and agonistic forms of cultural expression characteristics

⁶³ Chin, Frank, Jeffrey Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong, eds. *Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Asian American Writers*. New York: Mentor, 1991. Chin et al., *Aiiieeeee!*, xi–xii.

of working-class communities of color- that gives literary form to a vernacular.”⁶⁴ Specifically, Chin asks readers to hear “authentic” texts that have “purportedly taken the schizophrenic yakity yak we talk and made it a backtalking, muscular, singing stomping full blooded language loaded with nothing but our truth.”⁶⁵ The formation of an Asian American vernacular valorizes a masculine figure who appropriates the language of the center and manipulates it aggressively, making this language his own. This form of cultural nationalism makes the center the property of the ethnic, a counter-hegemonic move that, according to Kim, enables “freedom” for the Asian American subject.

As Kip finds the psychologically oriented language of ethnic studies to reinforce his marginalization, he resorts to choppy, confusing speech that is reminiscent of Frank Chin’s attempt at a masculine Asian American vernacular.

SNAP! SNAP! SNAP! SNAP!
and I’m all over the back seat dodging this thing like David Carradine on *Kung Fu*. I mean, I am in the *seams*—I’m up against the back window...She’s 0 for 5 and *I am in the zone!* Come on, green light. Snatch the pebble from my hand and then you can leave. *Yeahhh baby!*...HEY BATTER BATTER!⁶⁶

Fulbeck intersperses this speech throughout the novel without much introduction; it often just “pops up” in a scene without any context. These “explosions” of speech hearken Chin’s emphasis on aggression and “backtalking” to construct an empowered and authentic Asian American voice. Fulbeck’s references to baseball and diction such as “dodging” create a sense of agility and strength, while the pop culture

⁶⁴ Kim, Daniel Y. *Writing Manhood in Black and Yellow: Ralph Ellison, Frank Chin, and the Literary Politics of Identity*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2005, xxiii.

⁶⁵ Kim. 37.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

references are indicative of appropriating the “center.” The exclamation points and capitalization assert Kip’s voice as loud and in-your-face. This implicit alignment with Chin’s vernacular reflects Kip’s longing for a distinctive voice of “freedom” that he believes he will find in Asian American cultural nationalism. As Kim argues, this language recuperates the emasculation of men of color, “speaking back from the racial margins,” and offering a source of solidarity and distinctiveness against white power.

Despite Kip’s cultural nationalist vernacular, he does not fit neatly into Frank Chin’s model of Asian American cultural nationalism. Kip has a conversation with one of his Asian American female friends, asking her what the social implications would be if he were to date a white woman. Kip believes that he would be challenging “the system,” reverting the stereotype of the Asian woman/white man relationships and recuperating Asian male emasculation. Kip’s friend, however, believes otherwise.

You’re not some random Asian guy breaking down the stereotypes of being wimpy and asexual and all that bullshit. You’ve got the complete stereotype of being beautiful and desirable and exotic! You can’t totally identify yourself as an Asian man because you’re not an Asian man! In fact, as a Hapa you’ve got the same stereotypes that Asian women have in this country. Exotic...sexual...beautiful...⁶⁷

Although Kip articulates that he faces discrimination as an Asian American, mentioning that he felt exotified by a white woman he dated in the past, Kip’s friend asserts that he cannot compare oppressions. According to her, he does not experience discrimination to the extent that “full” Asian American men do. Although Kip frequently aligns himself with a strictly Asian American identity, his friend tells him

⁶⁷ Fulbeck, 199.

he has no right to do so as an exotic, desirable sex symbol of mixed race. Finding no stable source of voice in the ethnic studies discourse or the cultural nationalist mode of Frank Chin's vernacular, Kip is left voiceless and searching for another way to articulate his identity.

Kip's inability to find a voice that represents him is indicative of the fluctuating position of modern individuality, characterized by Moretti's concept of the pendulum in the bildungsroman. Moretti describes the pendulum as the perpetual motion between two extremes: the freedom of individualism and the "escape from this freedom," meaning being taken care of and incorporated by the state.

Given, as is obvious, that the weight of each of the two components has varied across time, we must realize that the culture of modern individuality has been from the start a combination of the two extremes: unthinkable without the one or the other. It may be compared to the motion of a pendulum: having reached the furthest point in one direction, it changes course and swings back in the opposite one. Which is to say that the essence of modern individuality lies not so much in the opposite—'pure'—poles of freedom and its contrary, but in the never-ending motion from one extreme to the other, and in the myriad of intermediate positions.⁶⁸

Modern individuality engages this process of continual movement between poles. On one end of the spectrum is the freedom that Moretti sees as un-tethered to the hegemony of the nation and enabled by the French Revolution.

We tend to believe that with the French Revolution freedom finally became a possible ideal. The vision of the strongest continental monarchy falling to pieces, the birth of political parties, the astonishing spread and vehemence of propaganda and political discussion, the discovery of the wholly artificial nature of every law: all this still conveys today ...the image of a world which... 'opens up all possibilities'...Why not recall that liberal thought itself coined a definition of freedom— 'freedom *from*' which points to its privative aspect?⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Moretti, 66-7.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 65.

While freedom from a monarchy implies infinite new possibilities for the individual, Moretti argues that freedom is private, solitary, and therefore “painful.” “Why not admit that freedom—in the only social formation that chose it as its highest principle—is first and foremost solitude, and therefore wearisome and painful?”⁷⁰ Since freedom from the government is actually a burden, Moretti posits the other side of the pendulum as an escape from freedom’s isolating effects. Here, the restoration of national authority relieves the individual from this alienating freedom and reinstates a “feeling of belonging to a system that literally ‘takes care of everything’ as opposed to the possibility of directing one’s life to ‘one’s own risk and danger.’”⁷¹ Moretti argues that the individual fluctuates between these two options—individual freedom and national incorporation, in a “continual co-presence of two opposing tensions.”⁷²

In *Paper Bullets*, the individual freedom in the pendulum is evident in Kip’s adoption of cultural nationalist vernacular and ethnic studies discourse. Mirroring Moretti’s notion of freedom as the rejection of the state and forging an autonomous identity, Asian American cultural nationalism aspires to resist the white-hegemonic nation and create an ethnically autonomous community. Ethnic studies similarly embodies freedom as it challenges the authority of the university specifically. According to bell hooks, ethnic studies provides a liberating new moment of education.

The classroom with all its limitations remains the location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to

⁷⁰ Ibid., 66.

⁷¹ Ibid., 65.

⁷² Ibid., 66.

demand of ourselves and our comrades an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom.⁷³

As bell hooks claims, the proliferation of ethnic studies on college campuses represented a new era of freedom for previously marginalized people, “transgressing” the boundaries that traditionally serve a Euro-centric classroom.

For Kip, cultural nationalist language and ethnic studies discourse connote freedom in an ethnically asserted individuality resisting the hegemonic center; however, as Moretti argues, this individuality is actually alienating. Neither voice allows Kip to feel fully represented, and so he must swing to the other side of the pendulum to national assimilation. He finds a new voice in misogyny, sexism, and universalism, all of which appear to provide him inclusion in America.

Fulbeck establishes a voice of misogyny by narrating Kip’s increasing sexual competence and maturity, which eventually lead him to social integration. Kip’s “first love” is with the most conventionally popular and beautiful white girl in his high school. “At this point, as with any new woman, it is a time of amazing discovery. It’s a time of complete eagerness and anticipation-of their movements, their intimates, their tastes”⁷⁴ Kip’s primary association with women is the body, and his use of the word “discovery” implies a rhetoric of conquering that already begins to assert Kip’s male dominance. Kip defines his relationships with women as physical from a young age—characterizing them only by focusing on their sexuality.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 377.

⁷⁴ Fulbeck, 72.

While Kip narrates a desire for white women that his first relationship sparked, he is literally repulsed by the Asian American women he dates. On one date he takes a Chinese American woman to a Chinese restaurant where they share a meal called “Buddha’s Feast” that Kip finds disgusting. Later, when the night has progressed to a more physical level, Kip describes the following:

Her eyes close. Her lips part slightly. I’m going to kiss her and...

BUDDHA’S FEAST.

BUDDHA’S FEAST.

BUDDHA’S FEAST...

I’ve got no control of it. It’s going through my nose and I can’t stop it. No brakes and I’m heading down Mullholland at rush hour...I’m convulsing deep down like I’ve got some crazy kind of Chinese hiccups. All I can smell, all I can think- all I can see, feel, or taste is Buddha’s Feast...Before I can even feel her, I’m already pulling back.⁷⁵

Kip conflates women with the notion of consumption, objectifying and metaphorically ingesting them to assert his male dominance. This intense, internalized reaction to the Chinese American woman is a manifestation of Kip’s difficult relationship with Asian American racial categories. Racial stereotypes become inextricably tied to the body—and Kip’s resistance to the idea of dating an Asian woman is revealed in physical revulsion.

Kip finds the solution to this physical revulsion by dating someone just like him- Hanako, another mixed race Asian American, and a “politically correct date” who “filled in the blanks”⁷⁶ around Kip. He recognizes that this is a strategic relationship, almost self-indulgent, in which race is a primary motivating factor.

Maybe part of me thought having Hanako attached to my arm might bring out more of who I was for others to see. Maybe this is the feeling I had of coming home. I thought being with her might stop some of the questions...But she was

⁷⁵ Ibid., 118.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 192.

her own woman like any other. With her own particular smell and taste, and her own individual progression of awareness.⁷⁷

The identity conflict that plagues Kip can be simply solved, he thinks, by dating someone “like him.” His notion of finding a “home” is important; without a distinct national identity, he finds solace in his parallel, giving him a sense of belonging based on phenotype. Discussing Hanako’s strict father, Kip remarks, “Sure, I’d forbid her to date me at eighteen. But me at twenty-five? I probably wouldn’t forbid it then.”⁷⁸ Explicitly narrating his process of maturity—his *bildung*—Kip confirms his authority, portraying himself as a cocky, self-assured, young man who has learned to take charge of his own life.

Kip’s objectification of women and accumulated confidence are associated with maturity in *Paper Bullets*, as well as a voice that becomes increasingly masculinist and misogynist as the novel progresses. When describing his experience as a lifeguard, Kip recounts the competition among lifeguards to attract women on the beach.

We learn a lot of things early on that stay with us long after we leave transplanted beaches and mini malls. It’s a coming of age ritual. We’re getting taught an eighties version of hunting for food, building a log cabin, fixing a leaky faucet, and never crying. The only catch is, we’re teaching ourselves. There is no elder here. No alpha male... We’re all the same. Everyone’s a competitor... Phone numbers are field goals. Dates are touchdowns. Sex is a shutout.⁷⁹

Fulbeck uses the first person plural, implying an equal playing field with other men by emphasizing no “elder” or “alpha male.” Fulbeck claims, “I love a trophy girl as

⁷⁷ Ibid., 196.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 196.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 130.

much as the next guy. Probably more.”⁸⁰ Being “the next guy,” or the average Joe, represents a yearning for the mainstream, or a sense of generic male identity. By identifying as a man with sexual prowess, Kip obscures his racial difference. Sex becomes an equalizing outlet, and his “otherness” is erased.

In this masculinist voice, Kip finds belonging on the other side of the pendulum, that of national assimilation. His previous attempts to articulate an ethnic assertiveness fail, thus leaving him in perpetual suspension. However, by using this misogynist voice, Kip’s fluctuations in identity have come to rest. Moretti argues that the constant motion of the pendulum is solved in the bildungsroman when “the logic of social integration has been interiorized, turning into a desire that the individual perceives as his ‘own,’ ...then socialization is no longer felt as a mere necessity, but as a value choice: it has become legitimate.”⁸¹ Moretti sees individual autonomy as giving way to social integration when social norms are internalized. Failing to find an individual identity of freedom in Asian American cultural nationalism or ethnic studies discourse, Kip eventually internalizes social norms of patriarchy and sexism which position him as an empowered man within the nation.

As Fulbeck finds belonging in mainstream America by adopting a sexist voice, he finds comfort in a universalist articulation that represents all of humanity, reflecting the notion of mixed race identity as “racially transcendent” and futuristic. This universal voice appears at the end of the novel. The last chapter of *Paper Bullets* diverges greatly in tone, style, and content from the rest of the novel. It ends on an amorous declaration to Kip’s “final choice,” a white woman with whom he has fallen

⁸⁰ Ibid., 132.

⁸¹ Ibid., 67.

in love and whose “name isn’t important, because everything I’ve written here has been for her.”⁸² The novel shifts in an entirely different direction; it is not about the fluctuation of mixed race subjectivities but about his infatuation with this woman.

Sometimes all I see is what we could be doing, and what we could achieve together. Sometimes all I see is the possibility of transcending our daily activities and errands and affairs with something bigger than the two of us.⁸³

The ending is addressed in second person directly to the woman and is imbued with cliché and generic declarations of love. “Nothing in this world makes me feel half the person I am when I’m with you. You make me feel more alive, more important, than anything else in my known existence. When I’m with you, I feel like for the first time I’m doing what I am supposed to be doing.”⁸⁴ Kip is “completed” by her, and she becomes his other half. Kip finds affirmation and legitimization through a conventional romance that he casts as universal in nature.

Kip thus positions himself as a mixed race subject who is representative of all humanity, speaking in a generalized tone about the human condition. “Occasionally people listen. Our lives overlap and we tune to each other like schooling fish. For a moment, we sense some kind of meaning in our existence besides work, money, or sex. For a moment, we sense a purpose bigger than avoiding embarrassment or affording titanium sunglasses.”⁸⁵ The references to the human condition and the use of “we” reflect an impulse towards universality that challenges Kip’s previous isolation within cultural nationalism while also utilizing his mixed-race identity as a source of wisdom.

⁸² Ibid., 263

⁸³ Ibid., 262.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 267.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 247.

The multiple voices that Kip deploys throughout *Paper Bullets* suggest the difficulties the mixed race Asian American subject faces when trying to find a symbolic home in different communities within the nation. Kip's appropriation of ethnic studies rhetoric and Frank Chin vernacular does not offer a direct pathway to ethnic inclusion; so instead, Kip resorts to misogynist language and a universal tone that, to him, provide a stronger sense of belonging within mainstream America, bringing the motion of the swinging pendulum to rest. *Paper Bullets* presents a narrative arc that resolves the mixed race subject's marginality through the concept of social integration in the nation-state and the institutional legitimation of identity that multiracial activism promoted.

As Moretti claims, in the bildungsroman,

It is also necessary that, as a "free individual," not as a fearful subject but as a convinced citizen, one perceives the social norms as one's own. One must internalize them and fuse external compulsion and internal impulses into a new unity until the former is no longer distinguishable from the latter. This fusion is what we usually call "consent" or "legitimation."⁸⁶

In Moretti's bildungsroman, one can only become an individual through internalizing the norms of the nation, which multiracial activists also did by pushing for census reform and affirming governmental classification and recognition as the key to national incorporation. The activists in the multiracial movement reflected what Moretti would call "convinced citizens," proponents of legitimation through the state, just as Kip's identity is legitimated through the language of the hegemonic center.

⁸⁶ Moretti, 16.

American Son: Inverting the Bildungsroman through Melancholy and Violence

*The Mexicans come up and it's like they're still roaming all the barrios killing each other down in Mexico. They have their neighborhoods they mark up with graffiti. Like pissing dogs. The new ones have macho mustaches and slick their hair back like they're some kind of Spanish Casanovas, but they're like these short Indian looking guys. The Cambodians are the worst. It's like their war isn't over yet.*⁸⁷

While *Paper Bullets* narrates difficulties in attaining social integration in the discourse of racial/ethnic identity politics of the 1990s, it also projects a version of the mixed-race Asian American bildungsroman that narrates resolution in the concept of national belonging and universality. Fulbeck's novel reflects one strain of multiracial activism in the 1990s—specifically, championing the rhetoric of choice in the search for self-expression as well as the legitimization of identity through institutions. Brian Ascalon Roley's debut novel, *American Son*, situated in the brutality and violence of the Rodney King era in 1990s Los Angeles, narrates a more dismal mixed-race coming-of-age story. Although *American Son* portrays family relationships and the immigrant experience, it narrates against the American dream; ironically, being the “American Son” is not attainable and self-determination is also a distant and hopeless goal for the protagonist.

Although Kip in *Paper Bullets* is characterized by the perpetual motion of the swinging pendulum, Gabe, the protagonist of *American Son*, is characterized by

⁸⁷ Roley, Brian A. *American Son: A Novel*. New York: Norton, 2001, 86.

stagnancy, caused by the permeation of melancholia in the novel that disrupts the developmental telos of the bildungsroman. As the classic bildungsroman intended to make social order out of unrest, offering a pathway to citizenship and upward mobility through socialization, *American Son* executes the exact opposite, producing a narrative that is the inverse of the classic bildungsroman. Instead of being contained, social unrest expands and swells throughout the novel, paralleling the increasing violence of the LA Riots following the Rodney King verdict.⁸⁸ The education that Gabe receives makes use of violence in a downward spiral that transforms stagnant melancholy into active brutality. This novel offers a bildungsroman that represents the complete failure of social belonging in the American body politic for mixed race Asian Americans, reflecting the pessimism of the era that the multiracial movement eclipsed in its celebratory rhetoric.

The Stagnancy of Racial Melancholia

American Son is written in the first person from the perspective of half-white, half-Filipino Gabe, who tells the story of his relationship with his mother and brother in Southern California over the span of five months in 1993. Tomas, the older brother, presents himself as a Mexican gangster, wearing wife beaters and a Virgin of Guadalupe tattoo and selling attack dogs to Hollywood celebrities. Gabe is younger,

⁸⁸ In 1991, an African American man, Rodney King, was beaten brutally by five L.A. police officers. A nearby witness videotaped the incident and the footage became nationally distributed, increasing public sensitivity to police brutality and racism, and sparking outrage in communities with high racial tensions. In 1992, the police officers were acquitted by an almost all-white jury, initiating the LA riots— six days of intensive violence, murder, arson, and looting.

soft spoken and often passes as white. He tends to stay out of trouble until he eventually begins to embrace his brother's violent lifestyle. Their Filipina mother, divorced from their American father, struggles to stay afloat, working two jobs while expressing both faith and disappointment in the American Dream.

The novel is separated into three sections, entitled "Balikbayan," "American Son," and "A Dirty Penance." The first part establishes Gabe's alienation, ashamed by his mother's ethnicity and often bullied by his older brother. The next section follows Gabe after he steals his brother's car and escapes to northern California. The final section of *American Son* could be characterized as Gabe's downfall. Upon his return from northern California, Tomas continually punishes Gabe for his transgression, forcing him to commit increasingly serious acts of crime. Gabe's relationship with his family falls apart, and he becomes increasingly violent.

American Son is situated in the racial/ethnic tension of the 1990s in the wake of the L.A. Riots, which drew attention to deep inequalities in American society and erupted in social uproar and violence. The riots signaled an era of profound pessimism and national decline.⁸⁹ The neoconservative direction of the post-Cold War government attempted to alleviate this economic downturn through unregulated economic opportunities and cutting down social services. In fact, these "solutions" were actually symptomatic of and contributed to the social rifts in society and deeply seated pessimism about the future.⁹⁰ The profound social unrest in the early 1990s also foregrounded anxieties concerning the influx of new immigrants. Along with the

⁸⁹ Song, Min. *Strange Future: Pessimism and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005, 3.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

declining capital of the white middle class, the “alien invasion” of immigrants such as Mexican, Japanese, Korean, Chinese and Chinese Americans into already racially stratified poor, black urban communities in Los Angeles caused racial tensions to heighten. The L.A. Riots were a symptom of these societal changes that caused a destabilization of the black-white discourse of race in American society, highlighting the limitations of this framework in recognizing the “racial other.” The expression of disenfranchisement ended up targeting “those who [were] most nearby,” as opposed to directly expressing anger against the state.⁹¹

The L.A. Riots are more than just an event in history, but also a cultural and literary event, manifested in tropes that symbolize the unraveling of America’s future. These tropes “lead us to a particular vision of the future that is replete with uncontrollable change, social disorder, and wholesale violence...this happens because our future has become populated by foreigners, nonconformists, and racial others.”⁹² Roley employs these tropes in the setting of *American Son*, highlighting layers of racial and ethnic hierarchies and class collisions in California in 1993, bringing to attention issues of racialization, racial strife, and barriers to inclusion.

While in *Paper Bullets* Kip often represents a universal, positive and modern version of mixed race subjectivity, in *American Son*, Roley positions Gabe and Tomas as the universal representation of all marginalized peoples. Roley aligns Gabe and Tomas with black, Latino, and Asian identities. The mixed race body in *American Son* is posited as a universal trope of oppression; Gabe and Tomas literally

⁹¹ Song, 4.

⁹² Ibid., 3.

embody racial hierarchies and conflicts, representing the subordination of all people of color in the wake of the Rodney King trial. Drawing on the cultural-literary trope of the LA Riots, Roley articulates a vision of the nation that rejects all racial others, all unincorporated into the fabric of American society.

The movement that Gabe and Tomas experience as racial chameleons, shifting identification between different racial groups, is a horizontal and stagnant movement that remains embedded in a feeling of disenfranchisement and internalized racism. As opposed to the pendulum in *Paper Bullets*, which offers the option of social integration, there is no option for Gabe and Tomas to reach any sort of national incorporation. Instead, Gabe and Tomas disrupt the telos of the bildungsroman as they experience a persistent and pervasive racial melancholia throughout the novel. The process of “grievance” of racism and ostracism never finds resolution in *American Son*. Without relief from this grief, no smooth and triumphant Bildung into maturity and incorporation occurs.

In *The Melancholy of Race*, Anne Cheng elaborates on Freud’s definition of melancholia to construct a definition of “racial melancholia.”

Racial melancholia tracks a dynamic of rejection and internalization that may help us comprehend two particular aspects of American racial culture: first, dominant, white cultures’ rejection of yet attachment to the racial other and, second, the ramifications that such paradox holds for the racial other, who has been placed in a suspended position. I will suggest that racial melancholia is both the technology and the nightmare of the American dream.⁹³

Racial melancholia as experienced by the “raced subject” is not purely marked by the vernacular sense of “sadness,” rather, it is a deeply internalized sense of despair and

⁹³ Cheng, Anne A. *The Melancholy of Race*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2001, xi.

disenfranchisement. The hegemonic center rejects the raced subject, causing a sense of loss.

The racial other is.... uneasily digested by American nationality. The history of American national idealism has always been caught in this melancholic bind between incorporation and rejection...While all nations have their repressed histories and traumatic atrocities, American melancholia is particularly acute because America is founded on the very ideals of freedom and liberty whose betrayals have been repeatedly covered over.⁹⁴

In *American Son*, there is no healing and no upward progress into maturity for Gabe or his brother; their pathologized racial melancholia prevents any kind of closure to the bildungsroman, and presents the darker side of the “American Dream.” Both brothers are “stuck” in a suspended state that Cheng emphasizes as the psychic condition of racial melancholia, internalizing the rejection of white America as they move horizontally between identities that are aligned with black, Latino, and Asian Americans but promise no upward mobility.

Roley often describes Gabe in terms of double consciousness, a trope in the African American literary tradition, suggesting Gabe’s alignment with African Americans. W.E.B. Du Bois coined the term, referring to the way in which “the Negro...[has] this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity”⁹⁵ (3). Double consciousness forces black Americans to see themselves through a white lens and through white standards, rather than to develop their own personal

⁹⁴ Cheng, 10.

⁹⁵ Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1903, 3

identities.⁹⁶ Similarly, Gabe feels completely invisible, but also observed by the people he sees in various diners and gas stations throughout his trip to Northern California when he steals his brother's car. Sitting alone at a diner, Gabe glances at his own reflection in the window.

Suddenly I notice my reflection in the mirrored glass and it appears so obviously Asian I almost stop in my tracks. My eyes look narrow, and my hair straight and coarse and black...I have slender Asian hips, and my cheekbones are too high. The way the sunlight hits my face you cannot even make out my eyes. My eyes jerk away. Everyone will be able to tell. I might even look Mexican, but not white.⁹⁷

Gabe pathologizes an inferiority complex, racializing himself through a white lens and echoing the concept of double consciousness in the African American literary tradition. Like the “Negro” that Dubois describes, Gabe “measures his soul” by a world that sees him with contempt and pity.

Double consciousness is also an element of racial melancholia, which Anne Cheng articulates as “teetering between the known and the unknown, the seen and the deliberately unseen, the racial other constitutes an oversight that is consciously made unconscious—naturalized over time as absence, as complementary negative space.”⁹⁸

Gabe is simultaneously hyper visible and invisible, “seen and unseen.” As Roley aligns Gabe with an African American literary tradition, he implies that Gabe experiences a similar feeling of internalized oppression as a person of mixed race.

Gabe and Tomas' mixed race identities are applicable and transferrable to other racial identities, allowing them to racially “pass” in different contexts; however,

⁹⁶ According to DuBois, “the Negro is...born with a veil” which obscures black humanity and authenticity. This veil must be lifted to reveal the genuine black self.

⁹⁷ Roley, 90.

⁹⁸ Cheng, 20.

this flexibility produces alienation. Both brothers are often confused for being Mexican, and while Gabe is embarrassed by this mistake, Tomas embraces it, using a Mexican identity to assert his masculinity. Tomas “always wears a sleeveless T-shirt so people can see the tattoos along his muscled arms. The tattoos are mostly gang, Spanish, and old-lady Catholic.”⁹⁹ Gabe mentions,

At my school- Saint Dominic’s- everyone thought I was white, for a while. Tomas had gone there first and he had passed as a white surfer... Then he began hanging out with Mexicans, who are tougher. He stopped surfing and dyed his hair black again. If anyone tried calling him an Asian he beat them up, and he started taunting these Korean kids who could barely speak English.¹⁰⁰

Tomas attempts to subvert his racial self-hatred and Asian male emasculation by assuming a Mexican identity, seeing it as one step up the racial hierarchy. However, in this performative act, Tomas is never fully assimilated. When selling a dog to a Mexican American woman, he feels highly self-conscious. “She studies him- probably wondering if he is a real Mexican...He has worn his thin T-shirt again so the...client can see the Virgin of Guadalupe through it. In front of her he seems embarrassed, though, and he keeps it turned away.”¹⁰¹ While Tomas’ Mexican persona is frequently accepted by white society, representative of the interchangeability of people of color, “authentic” Mexican Americans see through his act.

Roley emphasizes that Tomas’ racial passing as Mexican is a horizontal movement, rather than a vertical movement. Tomas’ mother is frustrated with him, not comprehending why he would try to be Mexican when she sacrificed everything

⁹⁹ Roley, 18.

¹⁰⁰ Roley, 30.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 45.

for her sons to become *American*. Gabe mentions, “it troubles our mother that he does this. She cannot understand why if he wants to be something he is not he does not at least try to look white.”¹⁰² Mexicans, like Filipino immigrants are also on the margins in American society, as Tomas and Gabe’s mother acknowledges that trying to be Mexican will simply reinforce the position of the “racial other.” As Tomas and Gabe embody multiple racial identities, they still remain embedded within a state of racial melancholia.

Another identity that remains open to the two brothers is a diasporic option; that is, returning to their “ancestral homeland” of the Philippines where “mestizo” identity is desirable. However, this implies that asserting their Asian side would be possible only outside of the American nation. Each section of *American Son* is prefaced with a letter from the Philippines, written by “Uncle Betino,” addressed to Gabe’s mother, urging her to send her two boys to him in order to reconnect with their “Asian” roots. While the epistolary form connotes intimacy, this addition in *American Son* simply serves to reinforce the sense of disconnection and alienation.

In the second letter, Benito writes with purpose about Tomas and Gabe, imploring their mother to send them to their homeland.

With their mestizo looks they would have been very successful with the girls, no doubt, which perhaps can give quiet boys confidence that will leave them with a serenity allowing greater application to their studies...I would teach them the values of education, work discipline, and respect for their elders and Asian and Spanish heritage...Parting could be very difficult. But may I suggest that it is not too late for you to return as well...This fetish you seem to have for being an American seems to me quite disconcerting.¹⁰³

¹⁰² Ibid., 15.

¹⁰³ Roley, 134.

The tone of this letter is moralistic, critiquing the mother's choices and painting America as a place that has ruined her sons. In another letter, Uncle Betino says,

With Gabe I think it may still be possible to instill in him some of the Asian virtues of our family heritage, of discipline and education and respect for elders and history, as well as some of the European virtues of our Spanish and German heritage...However, with Tomas, I fear you have waited too long and not listened to me, and that it is too late. He has become a gangster and is in my mind no longer a Filipino.¹⁰⁴

According to Betino, it is the mother's fault for believing in the American Dream, not the structural exclusion the two sons have faced their whole lives. The Philippines represents all that is moral and pure, while the United States is corrupting the two boys. Returning to the ancestral homeland suggests that success is not possible in the United States, and implies a reversal of progress in the traditional bildungsroman—this is about fleeing the country, not becoming incorporated.

These letters represent escape rather than closure and heighten the sense of racial melancholia. While letters from a family member would normally denote love, Betino's letters are cold and distant. The letters themselves are italicized, creating a visual separation from the rest of the prose, but Betino's authoritative and disparaging voice too varies greatly from Gabe's quiet, observant tone. Rather than symbolically bridge gaps as letters as known to do, these letters actually amplify distance. For Gabe, the letters never represent reality. "Yesterday I found a letter from Uncle Betino with post stamps from Manila. It was on my mother's makeup drawer and I could tell from its crinkles that she had read it many times."¹⁰⁵ This is all the letter is

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 201-2.

¹⁰⁵ Roley, 201.

to Gabe, a crinkled page of empty words to his mother, not a promise for a happier future or a refuge from his violent life.

Gabe and Tomas's mixed race identity allows a universal applicability that aligns and positions them with other racial minorities throughout *American Son*.

While being mixed race implies a universal representation of the racial other, the brothers cannot even find positive affirmation in their biological racial identity.

David Eng builds on Anne Cheng and Freud's model of melancholia, examining the condition of the "racial other" in the United States.

As Freud's privileged theory of unresolved grief, melancholia delineates a psychic condition whereby certain losses cannot be avowed and, hence, cannot be properly mourned. In our argument, racial melancholia describes both social and psychic structures emerging from Asian immigrant experiences that can be worked through only with considerable pain and difficulty...When one leaves a country of origin, voluntarily or involuntarily...losses both concrete and abstract must be mourned. To the extent that lost ideals of Asianness- including homeland, family, language, property, identity, custom, status- are irrecoverable, immigration, assimilation, and racialization are placed within a melancholic framework, a psychic state of suspension between "over there" and "over here." In Freud's theory of mourning, one works through and finds closure to these losses by investing in new objects and ideals- in the American dream, for example.¹⁰⁶

While attaining the American Dream implies a conclusion to the process of mourning, racial melancholia prevents this from happening. Eng argues that specifically for Asian Americans, the condition of racial melancholia is particularly jarring. Considered perpetual foreigners, Asian Americans always remain peripheral to American society, neither attaining ideals of whiteness nor connecting to their lost "Asianness."¹⁰⁷ The brothers' disconnection from the Philippines and their inability

¹⁰⁶ Eng, David L. *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010, 116.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 116.

to reconcile their mixed race identities in the United States reinforces racial melancholia and narrates against the telos of the bildungsroman.

Gabe and Tomas' fluctuating racial identities stand for a universal oppression and subordination of people of color in the United States, echoing the racial climate of the Rodney King era. The constant rejection by white America and inability to escape the horizontal bind of racial subordination contributes to an overwhelming sense of stagnancy. However, Roley narrates Gabe and Tomas out of this stagnancy through the conception of violence as a source of education. Instead of becoming socially integrated, the two brothers resort more and more to brutal acts of violence.

An Education of Violence: Moving out of Melancholia

Martin Japtok asserts that the traditional bildungsroman “provide[s] a fertile ground for nationalist tendencies, since nationalism, too, imposes a kind of order onto chaos by appearing to provide clear boundaries. The eighteenth century thus witnesses the birth of both the Bildungsroman and of nationalism as a political philosophy in Europe”¹⁰⁸ This order implies a social education, an “anti revolution” as Moretti would argue, bringing the individual towards citizenship. This education means youth follows an upward development to maturity. Instead, in *American Son*, chaos remains unleashed, paralleling the outburst of social unrest during the LA riots. There is no nation that incorporates its citizens; people of color are simply rejected. Tomas provides Gabe's social education, which is a sad, violent attempt at resistance in their highly racially stratified society. Gabe's downward spiral moves him out of

¹⁰⁸ Japtok, 24.

stagnancy but towards brutality that seems to be the only option, completely reversing the teleological direction of the bildungsroman.

What links *American Son* most clearly to the LA riots is the culmination of violence by the end of the novel. Each section of the novel is prefaced with a page listing the date; Roley takes the reader through five months in Gabe's life in 1993 as his life becomes increasingly violent. The speed of this short period of this downward turn echoes the quick progression into chaos in the four days of riots in Los Angeles following the Rodney King verdict. In the riots, tension exploded in mass violence across the city. The built up anxiety, anger, and chaos following the Rodney King verdict is reflected within Gabe's psyche as the novel progresses.

Tomas forces Gabe to commit a series of petty crimes as atonement for stealing his car, pushing Gabe into a more and more violent personality. Initially, Gabe is frightened by the tasks he must do. In one scene, Tomas makes Gabe steal drugs from Eddy Ho, Tomas' high school friend.

Don't look so sick, Junior.

I'm not sick.

He studies me. You look like you're about to vomit. You better get outside. If you mess up my upholstery I'm going to add it onto your bill.

I clench my teeth and try to let the angry feeling pass. How many more times are you going to make me do this?¹⁰⁹

Gabe accepts the abuse from his brother, forced into incredibly dangerous and violent situations. Eddy Ho recognizes Gabe, and proceeds to attack him.

Is that Gabrielito Sullivan?

I say nothing.

What the hell are you doing here?...What the fuck do you think you're doing?

...I hope he might simply be scaring me and will put the knife down. Then he

¹⁰⁹ Roley, 148.

lifts it and starts towards me...For a second I worry he will scar my face, and my eyes shut as if this could stop it.¹¹⁰

Tomas' attack dog intervenes in the right moment, brutally maiming Eddy and saving Gabe. This scene is the first scene of violence in *American Son*, and serves as Gabe's "initiation" into the world of brutality that seems to be his only option in life.

Gabe often restrains his violent tendencies, but the tension slowly builds up throughout the novel. When Gabe's mother accidentally rear-ends a very rich white woman's car, Gabe watches at the sidelines. The woman says out loud, not directly to Gabe's mother, but for everyone standing nearby to hear, "the idiots they let send their kids to school here...People who can't afford insurance should ride the bus."¹¹¹ The woman's son is also present, and Gabe feels a burning resentment towards him. "Her son, Ben, glances up at me, shifts on his feet, and though he seems embarrassed, fingering his stupid red vest, I'd like to put my ice pick through his cheek."¹¹² Gabe's reaction is to act out in aggression, yet he internalizes this impulse and remains silent.

Later, when Gabe interprets a social situation as an act of racism against his mother, he similarly vocalizes the desire to "hurt."

We near a group of skinny college-student types...I would not normally get out of their way. But even though the pale one in a yellow-button down shirt sees Mom, he acts as if he does not notice her, and she actually has to squeeze beside a bench to let them pass. The biggest one clips her shoulder. I freeze. I glare at them, aware of the ice pick tucked behind my wallet, but they don't even notice me.¹¹³

Gabe's aggressive intentions are sparked by moments of racism and feeling invisible and disempowered. He feels the need to act, yet is still aware of how impotent he is.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 153.

¹¹¹ Roley, 178.

¹¹² Ibid., 177.

¹¹³ Ibid., 179.

Eventually, Gabe mobilizes this feeling of impotence through an incredibly disturbing final act that represents an achievement of his education and the ultimate downward fall.

In the last scene of the novel, Tomas takes Gabe to the home of Ben, the son of the rude mother's house. This is a result of building tension as the rude white woman continues to harass Gabe's mother, calling their home and repeatedly demanding payment. This building tension reflects the racial tensions that were running high as the boundaries of national inclusion were already under dispute prior to the Rodney King trials, waiting to explode in mass violence.

Although the violence began as a response to a verdict passed by an almost all-white jury against an almost all-white set of police officers, quickly other people of color- those deemed foreign or foreign looking- were engaged in the deadly exchange. The meaning of racial and national identities were consistently at issue...with serious and sometimes bloody outcomes for all participants.¹¹⁴

As the brothers arrive at Ben's home, the scene slows down in suspension, as Tomas questions Ben about his family background.

Hey, that's a nice vest you got there.
Thanks.
Polo?
Ben nods.
Where'd you get it?
Israel.
You had to go all the way over there to get a Polo vest?
No, my grandma got it for me. She buys me presents every time we go there.
Is it true all the men over there have to join the military and learn martial arts and shit?
Yeah.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Sanchez, George J. "Face the Nation: Race, Immigration, and the Rise of Nativism in Late Twentieth Century America." *International Migration Review*. Vol. 31, No.4 (1997):1009-1030, 1011.

¹¹⁵ Roley, 212.

Not only does Roley accentuate Ben's class privilege, but the fact that Roley mentions Ben's ethnicity seems to be a remark on the relevance of racial/ethnic background in the early 1990s and the hostility that undergirded relations between different racial and ethnic groups. Gabe and Tomas' frustrations in life—of being put down, of not attaining the American Dream, and of being systematically pushed out of white America, come to a head when they approach Ben. Ben represents someone up a few steps up the racial ladder from them, and the brothers' retaliation is a manifestation of years of restrained tension.

This is the only part in the entire novel in which Gabe feels confident, not invisible, and does something proactive—his language is active, representing a divergence from the racial melancholia in the rest of *American Son*. In this scene, Gabe achieves his education of violence, providing him a source of empowerment.

I feel a rush of not anxiety but of confidence. In a scary way I realize I like it...Tomas holds out the tire iron...By this time I have finished swinging it across Ben's legs and arms and his shirt is torn and damp. My blood is hot and beating in my hand where I grip the tire iron.¹¹⁶

The brutality the two brothers exercise is reminiscent of the many senseless and atrocious violent acts that occurred in the wake of the Rodney King verdict. These violent acts were all fueled by similar senses of urgency and racial grief that have plagued minorities in a racially stratified American society.

After the two brothers leave Ben, Tomas rests his hand on Gabe, a gesture of intimacy that Gabe does not expect.

He sets his hand on me and I tense because he has never done it this way before, but the gesture feels somehow familiar. Then it dawns on me that this is probably something that my father used to do to both of us...After a while

¹¹⁶ Roley, 215.

he turns onto Allenford and we start to head south. I ask him where we are going.

How's your appetite?

Actually I have none, but I do not want to admit this.

It's strong, I say.¹¹⁷

The reference to his father in the end initially seems to suggest a return to familial connection that replaces the sense of loss with their absent father. Yet the only thing that bonds them together is violence. Gabe's final sentence in the novel is based upon a white lie, and his confidence is called into question—overall leaving behind a strong sense of melancholy in the novel. The atrocious beating of Ben seems to leave a bad taste in Gabe's mouth, and does not seem to bring any sense of closure. If anything, the ending is ambiguous, and one does not feel the triumphant or conclusive feeling of self-affirmation that a traditional bildungsroman would evoke. Rather, this is the failure of the bildungsroman, one that reverses the process of mobility to a downward spiral of violence, forcing the protagonist to act out in a final expression of desperation.

American Son is an alternative to the shortsighted narrative of the multiracial movement that heralded self-affirmation by simply filling in a box. Instead, Roley elaborates on the racial oppression that people of color faced in the 1990s, reflective of the critique that the multiracial movement distracted from real civil rights discourse and failed to acknowledge structural barriers to racial equality in the United States.

The multiracial movement assumed the role of the traditional bildungsroman, conflating the census with a form of social order, using it to appease the complicated

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 216.

issue of mixed-race identification in the 1990s. The quick solution of filling in a box and of self-identification turns grief of racial exclusion into an act of speaking grievance and political agency, a process that Anne Cheng would see as shortsighted.

The contemporary American attachment to progress and healing, eagerly anticipating a colorblind society, sidesteps the important examination of racialization... While much critical energy has been directed toward deconstructing categories such as gender and race, less attention has been given to the ways in which individuals and communities remain invested in maintaining categories, even when such identities prove to be prohibitive or debilitating. The rhetoric of progress or cure can produce its own blind spots.¹¹⁸

As the multiracial movement attempted to redress institutional exclusion through including more options for racial enumeration on the census, activists and advocacy groups participated in the rhetoric of racial “healing.” However, the idea of redressing, or “fixing” racial identification was not about actually challenging processes of racialization in the United States. Kimberly DaCosta, in an examination of the multiracial movement, argues that the multiracial movement actually maintained racial categories and reified the categories they were trying to break down.

The idea that racial identity can be freely chosen appeals to the high value Americans place on individualism. The novelty of a mixed racial identity makes one stand out against dominant modes of identification. At the same time, the elaboration of a sense of multiracial group identity makes one feel as if one belongs to a community where one is, if only in one’s perceived marginality, just like everyone else. The irony here is that while the discourse of choice in racial identification suggest we as individuals are determining for ourselves who we want to be, in fact we are “choosing “ within a given set of epistemological, social, and political conditions that make only certain choices possible.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Cheng, 7.

¹¹⁹ DaCosta, 179.

DaCosta sees the multiracial movement as functioning within a restrictive framework that only has a set of proscribed choices; that is, the discourse of “choice in racial identification” remains tied to set categories and is perhaps not quite the exercise of agency that multiracial activists advocated. Instead, she calls to attention “epistemological, social, and political conditions” that prohibit complete freedom in choice. These are the conditions that Roley addresses in *American Son*: the forces of exclusion, the overwhelming internalized racial melancholia, the racial hierarchies, and the tension that all prevent Gabe and Tomas from “finding their place” and belonging in any community. *American Son* offers a reversed bildungsroman, a vision of American society that is hostile to the mixed-race individual. Situated against other mixed-race Asian American narratives of the period, *American Son* suggests that the more pressing problem facing mixed-race individuals is being a person of color in face of white hegemony, rather than an issue of racialized sexual preference or grappling with the commodification of “hybridity” as *Paper Bullets* seems to emphasize.

My Year of Meats: Transcending the Bildungsroman through Hybrid Identities and Agency

*“All over the world, native species are migrating, if not disappearing, and in the next millennium the idea of an indigenous person or plant or culture will just seem quaint.”*¹²⁰

Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats* is a transnational, multi-vocal, multi-genre novel— simultaneously a feminist text, an ecocriticism text, and a call for social activism. It presents a transgressive mixed race Asian American narrative that expands and extends the bildungsroman form evident in *Paper Bullets* and *American Son*. Kip Fulbeck's protagonist finds incorporation by assuming a voice within patriarchal white America, while Roley locates and aligns the mixed race subject with other marginalized peoples, unable to penetrate the borders of the nation. Ozeki renders the possibility of inclusion versus the reality of exclusion in the hegemonic nation a false binary, instead forging a vision of mixed race identity that extends beyond national boundaries and biological tropes. *My Year of Meats* thus intervenes in the form of the bildungsroman as the protagonist is an active agent, appropriating American social categories to create new transnational visions of hybrid identity that exceed preexisting constructs of identity within the nation. However, I argue that this optimistic revision of hybrid identity is also bound up in circuits of commodification; Ozeki situates the novel in transnational discourses of the 1990s concerning asymmetries of globalization and the increasing fear of Asian economic ascendancy.

¹²⁰ Ozeki, Ruth L. *My Year of Meats*. New York: Viking, 1998, 15.

Instead of stressing a narrative of the “individual,” Ozeki crafts a parallel structure in her novel, following the two primary voices of Jane Takagi-Little, a half-Japanese, half-American documentary filmmaker, and Akiko, a reticent and abused Japanese housewife. Jane’s narrative, written in first person, follows her life as she works for a television show sponsored by an American beef company, BEEF-EX, that represents American meats in Asia. The purpose of the show is “to foster among Japanese housewives a proper understanding of the wholesomeness of US meats.”¹²¹ Jane travels across the United States meeting different women, spinning stories and creating narratives out of their lives for the television show, *My American Wife!* As Jane makes the documentary programs in the United States, Ozeki includes Akiko’s interpretations of the show, written in third person. As the wife of Jane’s Japanese boss, Akiko must watch the show weekly to provide feedback to her husband. Ozeki shifts the narrative back and forth between the two women, conveying the power of *My American Wife!* to transnationally contribute to Jane and Akiko’s increasingly intertwined lives.

(De)constructing the Nation: Jane’s New America

Ozeki begins Jane’s narrative by establishing Jane as a character who is competent, mature, and in charge of her life. Jane relays her specific, idealistic goal with *My American Wife!*

I honestly believed I had a mission...I had spent so many years, in both Japan and America, floundering in a miasma of misinformation about culture and race. I was determined to use this window into mainstream network television

¹²¹ Ozeki, 10.

to educate. Perhaps it was naïve, but I believed, honestly, that I could use wives to sell meat in the service of a Larger Truth.¹²²

Jane is incredibly assertive, exhibiting an agency that Gabe never achieves in *American Son*, and that Kip drowns in misogynist language in *Paper Bullets*. Instead, Jane has a “mission to educate,” implying a self-assurance that she *knows* the “truth” better than others and is capable of using her knowledge, through her documentary programs, to engage in a process of enlightenment. The confidence in Jane’s voice bolsters her position as a mature protagonist who is not marginalized but rather has the power to negotiate the complex world that she lives in.

The “truth” Jane speaks of is portraying an American identity that is hybrid at its core, which she sees as a genuine representation of authenticity. Jane explicitly tells her boss she would like to use the show to construct a specific image of what it means to be American.

Up until now we have chosen our American Wives based on characteristics that market studies indicate will be attractive to Japanese married women...I would like to continue to introduce the quirky, rich diversity and the strong sense of individualism that make the people of this country unique.¹²³

My American Wife!, as the title suggests, is intended to portray American families to Japan, which Jane’s Japanese bosses imagine as attractive, “all-American,” clean, and wholesome.¹²⁴ Jane takes this opportunity to intervene in what she believes is a false portrayal of authenticity. Instead, she sees American identity as “quirky” and “diverse,” emphasizing the power of individuality to create a sense of “uniqueness.”

¹²² Ozeki, 27.

¹²³ Ibid., 64.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 12.

Jane focuses on positive visions of multicultural and diverse families in her documentary programs, conveying what she believes to be the *real* Americans. The Martinez family, for instance are farm workers in Texas. The parents Alberto and Catalina emigrate from Mexico so that their son Bobby can be an American citizen. They work hard in low- paying jobs and finally save enough money to buy their own small farmhouse and a few acres of land. Jane describes the sublime moment of filming the scene of young Mexican boy, Bobby, with his 4-H piglet.

So there we were, in the chigger- filled field, filming little Bobby in a sea of golden grass that rippled in the wind...He had given the piglet a bath and the animal was still wet, sending glistening droplets into the sunlight as it squirmed in his arms. Bobby smiled at the camera, a little Mexican boy shyly offering his American supper to the nation of Japan. Everything was in a slow motion. It was a surreal and exquisite moment.¹²⁵

Ozeki suffuses this scene with a sweet quality, using diction such as “golden,” “glistening,” and “smiled.” It has a “feel-good” tone, and is only one of many lighthearted scenes sprinkled throughout the text. The positivity in this scene presents the Mexican migrant, traditionally an excluded subject, as fully incorporated in American society, in fact, *representative* of the possibilities American dream and what it means to be American. Through her camera, Jane creates her America, projecting her understanding of American authenticity.

Jane takes the notion of “diversity” a step further when she documents Dyann and Laura, a vegetarian, interracial, lesbian couple with two twin daughters who were conceived through a sperm donor. Jane is captivated by the lovingness in their family and with their daughters.

¹²⁵ Ozeki, 61.

The two little girls, seeing the potential for a tumble, squirmed in my lap, and I set them on their feet and pushed them forward. They didn't need encouragement. They careened across the room and hurled themselves into the thick of it. Suzuki snatched the camera off the tripod head and followed them. Oh brandished the fuzzy boom-pole animal and the made the little girls squeal. Again, I felt the warm smugness that comes over me when I know that there is another heart-wrenching documentary moment at hand, being exquisitely recorded.¹²⁶

Jane intends to prove that such families are the “authentic America” by capturing the sweetness of the girls, thereby demonstrating that the intersectionalities of race, sexuality, and alternate forms of conceiving are entirely normal. She gives new meaning to a mixed race identity, taking it beyond biological racial mixture and instead imagining it as a confluence of identities that together create a positive fusion. Jane develops a narrative through her documentaries that challenges the hegemonic center of the nation, shifting the center to portray transnational, multicultural, and traditionally “marginalized” peoples as the new norm of American identity.

This revision of hybrid identity in *My Year of Meats* directly subverts the nation-state bind that conventionally marks the bildungsroman. In the traditional bildungsroman, Moretti and Slaughter conceive the genre as managing the relationship between the individual and the state. In the ethnic subgenre of the bildungsroman, the nation often alienates the ethnic protagonist, thus leading the protagonist to an “ethnically-oriented lifestyle.”¹²⁷ The assumption in the ethnic bildungsroman is that closure is dictated by either cultural nationalism or assimilation, taking for granted “that an individualist category like the Bildungsroman will be “communalized” by the ethnic authors in order to buttress ideals of solidarity

¹²⁶ Ozeki, 175.

¹²⁷ Japtok, 28.

and unity.”¹²⁸ Both Fulbeck and Roley navigate this binary in their novels. In *Paper Bullets*, when Kip fails to find solidarity in cultural nationalism, he seeks inclusion in the mainstream. *American Son* narrates the alienation Gabe experiences from both his ethnic community as well as the nation. In the case of the traditional bildungsroman as well as the ethnic bildungsroman, the nation exists as some force exerting influence on the character. However, Ozeki refuses to narrate her protagonists into this bind.

In *My Year of Meats*, Ozeki challenges assumptions that the nation holds power over the individual’s construction of identity and that “ethnic community” represents the only other option. Jane is the agent of nation-creation, rather than being restricted by and subject to its terms. Her vision of multicultural, hybrid identity already represents the center. Multiple pathways to inclusion exist, as American identity is forged through various channels, crossing national borders (Alberto, Catalina, and Bobby) as well as sexual and racial borders (Dyann and Laura). Multiculturalism, diversity, and transnationalism represent the norm.

The structure of *My Year of Meats* is also a revision of the bildungsroman, as Jane and Akiko’s alternating, interwoven voices in the novel deconstruct the focus on the individual in the bildungsroman. As Bolaki claims, “the Bildungsroman lends itself well to approaches that draw on deconstruction...there is room to dismantle the genre’s aesthetic architecture, in other words, room for alternative formulations of development.”¹²⁹ Jane and Akiko’s interconnected relationship as manifested in the

¹²⁸ Bolaki, 29.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 19.

form of the novel subvert the individualistic focus of the bildungsroman, and instead imagine identity development as communal and transnational.

As Akiko watches episodes of *My American Wife!*, she is deeply influenced by the possibilities Jane offers her, reflecting the transnational scope of *My Year of Meats*. Akiko's life in Japan is restricted as her husband, Joichi, forces her to watch *My American Wife!* daily to provide him with feedback, but often physically and psychologically abuses her when she does not provide him with the answers he wants to hear. When Akiko watches Jane's shows, she experiences Jane's notions of authentic, multicultural America that enable her to imagine a freer life.

The most influential show for Akiko is the Dyann and Laura episode, offering an empowering, feminist vision of a loving family that Akiko is lacking yet desires in her life. Ozeki describes the episode in greater detail, portraying the image that Akiko is watching in Japan.

The camera hold steady on the black woman's face. She falters, her voice cracks, and she frowns with concentration to control it...Wonder underscores her words, belies her ferocity. She scowls through filmy tears at the white woman, who reaches over and gently touches her cheek. The two girls throw their arms around her, kiss her, and she gives in to it all and starts to laugh.¹³⁰

Jane's powerful assertions of "authentic" America have a concrete audience, embodied in Akiko. Dyann and Laura represent a positive vision of life and identity that Akiko had not previously imagined. Akiko reacts emotionally to the scene, crying at the moving portrayal of love.

She was kneeling on a cushion, hugging herself, rocking slowly back and forth...she realized that her tears...were tears of admiration for the strong women so determined to have their family against all odds. And tears of pity

¹³⁰ Ozeki, 181.

for herself, for the trepidation she felt in place of desire and for the pale, wan sentiment that she let pass for love.¹³¹

As Ozeki offers both a construction of this scene through Jane's voice, and Akiko's subsequent consumption of it, she reinforces the transnational dimensions of the novel. Dyann and Laura represent for Akiko strong women with affirmative identities, transgressing constructs of race, sexuality and heterosexual reproduction.

Specifically, the show provides the impetus for Akiko to rethink her sexuality, a part of her identity that, prior to watching *My American Wife!* she had previously never allowed herself to explore. Akiko buys a "play-boy" type magazine, and enjoys looking at the pictures of the girls. "Even though they weren't so authentic, she found them sexy- but she was not sure whether she wanted to make love to the girl or simply to be her."¹³² Akiko acknowledges that the sexualized women in the magazine are not authentic, in comparison to Dyann and Laura who represent real, true love. However, Dyann and Laura's episode affects Akiko in powerful ways, allowing her to interrogate her own identity and perhaps imagine new options for herself outside the realm of what she thought was possible in Japan.

The Commodification of Jane's America: The Rise of Global Capitalism and Japanese Economic Power

My American Wife! links Jane and Akiko to one another in the text and produces a broader conceptual vision of hybrid identity constructions that

¹³¹ Ozeki, 181.

¹³² Ozeki, 188.

interpenetrate and influence one another. However, Jane admits that these hybrid constructions of nation and identity are actually commodified.

Being racially ‘half’—neither here nor there—I was uniquely suited to the niche I was to occupy in the television industry. I was hired by Kato to be a coordinate for *My American Wife!*, the TV series that would bring “the heartland of America into the homes of Japan.” Although my heart was set on being a documentarian, it seems I was more useful as a go-between, a cultural pimp, selling off the vast illusion of America to a cramped population on that small string of Pacific islands.¹³³

Although Jane is insistent on creating an “authentic” vision of America, deploying her understanding of both the United States and Japan to direct the show, she is implicated in a process of the market, “selling” one culture to the other. She uses her identity to fuel the channels of global capitalism in an increasingly hybrid world.

As Jane constructs images of a multicultural, diverse America, she is also implicated in “panethnic entrepreneurship,” described by Viet Nguyen as the product of “the dialectical relationship between a capitalism that exploits race and the democratic struggles that have fought for greater racial and economic equality...transform[ing] race and racial identity into commodities.”¹³⁴ While Jane wants to open up previously restrictive visions of national identity, she must also emphasize this diversity in a way that capitalizes upon her documentary subjects. For instance, she travels to Mississippi to film a segment of Miss Helen Dawes, the wife of a preacher in a black church. Jane describes her experiences observing the Preacher as she is scouting the location for the episode.

And now, suddenly, he was overcome with spastic convulsions...and the Yamaha punctuated each syncopated spasm with a chord, and the harmony

¹³³ Ozeki, 9.

¹³⁴ Nguyen, Viet T. *Race & Resistance: Literature & Politics in Asian America*. Oxford [England: Oxford University Press, 2002], 4.

Five roused the congregation to a frenzy. They were waving their palms over their heads, shouting out “Praise the Lord!” and “Amen, brother!” and “That’s right, tell it like it is!” The young man threw his head back and fell to the ground, kicking his fee until his shoe loosened, flew through the air, and landed in Ueno’s lap.¹³⁵

Although Jane intends to portray the many types of diversity in the United States, she participates in panethnic entrepreneurship, manipulating the scenes so that they seem more “diverse,” and more “colorful,” emphasizing racial difference in a way that would appeal to a mass audience.

Jane is also implicated in a process of commodification because she is bound to the mandates of BEEF-EX, the company that sponsors *My American Wife!* Beef-EX, represents American meats like beef, pork, lamb, as well as livestock producers, packers, pharmaceutical companies, and agribusiness groups. According to Jane, they “had their collective eye firmly fixed on Asia.”¹³⁶ Jane is responsible for not only directing the documentaries for BEEF-EX, but for forging a synergy between the commercials and the documentaries in order to stimulate consumer motivation, making sure that “the commercials...bleed into the documentaries, and the documentaries...function as commercials”¹³⁷ The notion of merging commercials and documentaries disrupts Jane’s desire to be completely “authentic,” as she cannot completely represent her show without being connected to the marketplace.

In *My Year of Meats*, BEEF-EX represents the era of globalization and the American fear of Asia’s growing economic power. Jane’s carefully crafted television

¹³⁵ Ozeki, 113.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 10.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 41.

shows, although intended to represent multiculturalism, are ultimately used to reassert American economic power, convincing Japanese housewives to buy *American* beef. Specifically, the positioning of America in relation to Asia in *My Year of Meats* reflects the “Pacific Rim Discourse,” which Sau-ling Wong notes emerged in the mid-1970s,

diffus[ing] into American culture as an Asia-facing orientation (as opposed to an earlier preoccupation with Europe) and a general awareness of the interconnectedness of Asian and US fortunes. Among the contributing factors...are...the recognition of Japan’s economic power and the worldwide economic downturn that forced the US to acknowledge its loss of hegemony.¹³⁸

Although Jane modifies the goals of BEEF-EX by producing multicultural versions of identity, *My American Wife!* is still a player in a competitive relationship between Japan and America.

Wong also notes that the Pacific Rim Discourse is not Asian-specific, but reflective of a transnational, global trend.

The increased porosity between Asian and Asian American is but one constituent in a global trend...the universe is shrinking. In light of the aforementioned combination of multinational capital, cultural homogenization through commodification, and advanced communications technology, not only the Pacific Rim regions, but all regions of the world can be said to be interpenetrating.¹³⁹

In *My Year of Meats*, the transnational dimensions of the text, seen in Jane and Akiko’s relationship to one another and the new hybrid identities in Jane’s documentaries, are also complicit in the rhetoric of capitalism and increasing “interpenetration”. The Pacific Rim discourse and the rise of capitalism anchor the

¹³⁸ Wong, Sau-Ling C. “Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Cross Roads.” *American Journal*, 21:1&2 (1995): 1-27, 6.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

text, providing the context for Jane to articulate transnational constructions of identity, but also requiring the commodification of identities in an economically interconnected world.

Although Jane's documentaries solicit notions of hybrid identities that transcend racial mixture, her own racial background is commodified and symbolic of the global marketplace. She represents the concept that American capitalist power is linked to representing the mixing, "borderless" world of the future. Jane, as a mixed race Asian American, is the ideal candidate.

Being half, I am evidence that race too, will become relic. Eventually we're all going to be brown, sort of. Some days, when I'm feeling grand, I feel brand new- like a prototype. Back in the olden days, my dad's ancestors got stuck behind the Alps and my mom's on the east side of Urals. Now oddly, I straddle this blessed, ever-shrinking world.¹⁴⁰

The reference to "prototype" dehumanizes herself, indicating her value as a commodity in a global context, her identity symbolizing globalization. As Jeffrey Santa Ana argues, the multiracial Asian face is an icon for America's global economy.

What is interesting about this corporate deployment of multiraciality is its use of Asian hybridity to fuel desires for a planetary market. Capitalizing on the Orientalist model-minority stereotype of Asians as entrepreneurial geniuses and computer experts, global technology frequently relies on models with Asian features to advertise products that promote the borderlessness of information technology.¹⁴¹

According to Santa Ana, multiraciality signifies the "euphoric triumph of global capital."¹⁴² Jane's embodiment of these ideals represents an arc of development for the mixed race subject that extends beyond the nation into universalism, but

¹⁴⁰ Ozeki, 15.

¹⁴¹ Santa Ana, 459.

¹⁴² Ibid., 461.

necessitates a distinctive Asian “look” that reflects technology and the future. Her own commodified identity problematizes the notion of an “authentic” American, calling to attention the complicity of globalization and hybrid identities.

The Closure of *My Year of Meats*: Where does it leave us?

At the end of the novel, Akiko flees to the United States, which actually posits America as a site of liberation as well as symbolically represents the “triumph” of *My American Wife!*; the Japanese consumer has internalized the message, choosing America over Japan. Although Jane emphasizes a hybrid, multicultural identity through her documentary programs, Akiko’s choice in the end of the novel problematizes the concept of a positive transnationalism. Following suit with 1990s discourse, Ozeki narrates America back to the center, reasserting its dominance.

Akiko’s decision to move to the United States to have a baby¹⁴³ exhibits this ambiguity in the ending of *My Year of Meats*. After being raped by her husband in Japan and becoming pregnant, Akiko decides to flee to America. She takes all of her money out of her shared bank account and books a one-way ticket to the United States. On the plane, she listens to Bobby Joe Creely, an American musician who throughout the novel inspires Akiko to become stronger as she watches *My American wife!*. “Akiko smiled. Finally she’d done something—something worthy of the women in Bobby Joe’s songs. And it pleased her to think that John would never know the reason why, that right now they were headed in opposite directions and that in a

couple of hours they would be passing each other in midair.”¹⁴⁴ Akiko’s journey to the United States is based on the hope that her daughter will become American. “Since she’s a girl, I want her to be an American citizen. So she can grow up to become an American Wife.”¹⁴⁵ She also writes a defiant letter to her husband Joichi. “I am writing to tell you that I am fine. I have left you and I am never coming back.”¹⁴⁶ Although Akiko is more resolute than ever before, the notion that she must have her baby in the United States is problematic, considering Jane’s construction of identity through *My American Wife!* imagines a multitude of options for identity formation. Akiko’s return to the United States repositions the nation at the center, as opposed to allowing a transnational articulation of development.

However, Ozeki is continually ambivalent about this final development. As Akiko travels alone to the American South on a train, Ozeki describes an implausible scene.

Akiko was surrounded by people offering her drumsticks and paper plates of potato salad...Akiko clapped her hands in time and looked around her at the long coach filled with singing people. This would never happen on the train in Hokkaido!...She’d felt...as if somehow she’d been absorbed into a massive body that had taken over the functions of her own, and now it was infusing her small heart with the superabundance of its feeling teaching her taut belly to swell, stretching her rib cage, and pumping spurts of happy life into her fetus. ...This is *America!* she thought. She clapped her hands and then hugged herself with delight.¹⁴⁷

Ozeki’s language, describing the feeling of being subsumed, indicates Akiko has found herself in the United States. But the scene is blatantly exaggerated, drawing attention to its unlikeliness. *My Year of Meats* is strictly realist until this scene, which

¹⁴⁴ Ozeki, 320.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 318.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 346.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 339.

becomes increasingly unbelievable as the passengers surround Akiko and begin singing a song about “Chicken Bone.” This narrative slippage is ambivalent; simultaneously celebrating Akiko’s arrival in the US, but almost too celebratory to not be considered ironic.

Ozeki directly acknowledges this ambivalence in the end of the novel, self-reflexively challenging the authenticity of the story through Jane’s voice. Jane reflects on her past year, saying, “There’s no denying, I thought. In the Year of Meats, truth wasn’t stranger than fiction; it was fiction. Ma says I’m neither here nor there, and it that’s the case, so be it. Half documentarian, half fabulist...Maybe sometimes you have to make things up, to tell truths that alter outcomes.”¹⁴⁸ Jane discusses the shortcomings of the happy ending right in the middle of a happy ending, inciting the reader to reassess this narrative closure. She also affirms the power of imagination, arguing that if a better world does not exist, one must imagine it, creating fiction in order to alter the truth.

While hopeful, this ending does not provide a clear plot of development for the mixed race subject. Jane’s agency in imagining a transnational, hybrid identity, and Akiko’s consumption of it initially offers a narrative that transcends the bind of the nation and the subordinated individual in the bildungsroman. The formation of transnational identities, however, are complicit in a system of capitalism as the entire novel is situated in the Pacific Rim discourse. Akiko’s return to the United States threatens to reassert America as the center, something that Jane so assertively deconstructs in her documentaries. While Ozeki’s ending is indeed ambiguous, *My*

¹⁴⁸ Ozeki, 360.

Year of Meats as a whole in its innovative structure offers a broader option for the mixed race bildungsroman, confronting head on the reductive tropes that often plague mixed race Asian American bildungsroman narratives and offering alternate vision of hybridity in contemporary America.

What is left to discern is where the mixed race Asian American subject, Jane, stands by the end of the novel. As a forward thinking, assertive and competent woman, she subverts the trope of the conflicted mixed race Asian American male that *Paper Bullets* and *American Son* emphasize. She actively creates the nation, instead of the nation restricting, confining, and framing the terms of her identity development. However, Ozeki makes it clear that Jane is still part of a capitalist system, her own identity also implicated in the marketplace. This trajectory of mixed race identity into commodification on an international scale offers a narrative that the multiracial movement never accounted for. Strictly focusing on mixed race subjects in relation to the nation, the multiracial movement sought to make those of mixed race “American.” *My Year of Meats* shows us, however, that mixed race identity is bound up inside and beyond the nation, exceeding concepts of biology and of national borders.

Has the Mixed Race Asian American Subject Reached its Destination?

The mixed race Asian American subject has advanced from tropes of the “tragic Eurasian” to a globalized hybrid identity in literary imaginings, mirroring the move from invisible mixed race subject to celebrated representative of the multicultural nation, which, in turn, reflects the teleological process of national incorporation in the bildungsroman. However, as Kip Fulbeck’s *Paper Bullets*, Brian Ascalon Roley’s *American Son*, and Ruth Ozeki’s *My Year of Meats* demonstrate, this assertion belies the more vexed mood of the 1990s, as other social, political, and cultural forces persistently delayed or prevented the incorporation of the mixed race Asian American subject into the nation. Ozeki offers the most accurate representation of how the mixed race Asian American subject is currently positioned in American society. Multiracial identity, although celebrated in events such as Loving Day, is inextricably linked to systems of commodification.

In the Loving Day video, amidst the dancing, young, and racially ambiguous New Yorkers, recurring images of PUMA and Asahi Beer logos flash throughout the scenes, presumably as corporate sponsors of Loving Day. On the webpage, there is a section entitled “Corporate and Individual Sponsorship” where the text reads:

Showcase your diversity initiatives by sponsoring Loving Day. Use multiple media channels to reach a progressive young audience by supporting our multicultural community work. Sponsor the Loving Day Flagship Event in New York City and become a part of the world’s most hip, popular and savvy multicultural events.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ <http://lovingday.org>

Although Loving Day aims to spread awareness about mixed-race experience and history, it is implicated in its own commodification of race. Inciting the reader to participate through “media channels,” Loving Day perpetuates and reinforces this racial commodification. The website even has a store for various Loving Day merchandise, including T-shirts, Iphone cases, and mugs all sporting the same Loving Day logo. The website blatantly sells mixed race identity: it’s “popular” and it’s “savvy;” and you can, quite literally, buy diversity. This is where the mixed race subject is today—hip and “for sale.”

This celebratory, commodified narrative unfortunately dominates the critical reception of the novels that I examine in this thesis. In one of the few reviews of *Paper Bullets* available online, author Terry Hong¹⁵⁰ writes a review that exoticizes Fulbeck.

Kip Fulbeck is not your average performance artist. At age 35, he’s a tenured professor at UC Santa Barbara, does outreach programs for at-risk kids, was a nationally ranked swimmer, and he even ferries bugs outside instead of brutally squashing them. Most recently, he published his first book, *Paper Bullets: A Fictional Autobiography* (University of Washington Press). And, at a rather buff 6’1” with long, dark brown hair, a more Asian-than-not-mix of a Chinese mother and a Welsh, Irish, and English father, he sports a definite resemblance to Disney’s version of Tarzan.¹⁵¹

The review includes a photo of Fulbeck standing with arms crossed, staring straight into the camera in a masculine stance. Hong’s insistence on including a photo and a physical description of the author in a *book* review represents just how much physical appearance plays a role for mixed-race individuals. Hong’s review repeats a dominant

¹⁵⁰ This review is from aMagazine, a popular Asian American magazine on Asian American culture and politics

¹⁵¹ <http://bookdragon.si.edu/2001/06/01/paper-bullets-a-fictional-autobiography-by-kip-fulbeck-author-profile/>

discourse of mixed race identity, that, like *Loving Day*, relies on the visualization of mixed race identity as a tool of marketing.

As Jeffrey Santa Ana argues, the antidote to such racial commodification is “feeling ancestral,” or reviving the memory of ethnic origins to find self-identification in history.¹⁵² Mixed race Asian American authors evoke their ethnic histories in order to resist their commercialization, narrating stories of the fears and anxieties associated with living as subjects of globalization. Santa Ana offers this framework as a way of reading contemporary mixed race Asian American texts, yet this posits a “reverse” bildungsroman, narrating *away* from the nation and *backwards* in time. In this increasingly globalized, hybrid world, many mixed race Asian Americans may not have a distinct “ancestral homeland” to symbolically return to. Is this the only alternative imagining for mixed race subjectivity in the contemporary world? Although the binary of “feeling ancestral” or being commodified through globalization transcends a discourse bound in the nation-state, it is nevertheless a binary that keeps the mixed race Asian American subject suspended in the perpetual motion of the pendulum that will perhaps never come to rest.

¹⁵² Santa Ana, 466.

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