

## 1 / Introduction

In a speech delivered to the Cleveland Council of Sociology in 1906 on the subject of the “problem” of race, Charles Chesnutt describes the nation’s attitude toward African Americans by comparing them to another racial group: “The Negro is a hard pill to swallow. The Chinese we have sought to keep out—the Negro is too big to throw up” (“The Future American,” 248). Chesnutt’s enshrinement in the canon is based in part on his fiction’s nuanced and complex representations of black-white race relations, but this quotation is striking because it suggests that African American identity is structured in part by its relationship to an Asian other. To put it another way, these lines suggest how closely connected African Americans and Asians are to each other, not just in the nation’s mind but within the author’s own. Far from being a straightforward comparison, however, this linkage prompts an ambivalent and even contradictory response from Chesnutt. On the one hand, Chesnutt uses an alimentary metaphor to link black and yellow bodies as foreign objects that the national body politic either refuses to ingest or wishes to “throw up.” His formulation of race relations as a form of both absorption and rejection indicates how deeply and ambivalently embedded the racial other is in the formation of an ego identity, a process that Anne Cheng calls racial melancholia.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, Chesnutt subtly distances the two groups by using the pronoun “we” to describe those who have striven to keep the Chinese out. The distinction Chesnutt makes recognizes the fact that the two groups were often treated in radically different

ways. The Chinese can be thrown out in a way that Negroes cannot, the implication being that the latter have been in the United States too long and in numbers too large to expel successfully.

The ambivalence that permeates Chesnutt's brief description of the Afro-Asian relationship and the confluences and divergences that it constructs between the two groups are characteristic of writings by both African American and Asian American writers from the early twentieth century and form the backbone of my study. *Interracial Encounters* traces a series of Afro-Asian encounters and relationships that appear in African American and Asian American texts, examining the aesthetic effects they have on those productions and the politically diverse work they do in an era when the nation's racial philosophy presumed, to quote W. E. B. Du Bois, the "high civilization of the whites, the lack of culture among the blacks, the apparent incapacity for self-rule in many non-Europeans, and the stagnation of Asia" ("First Universal Races," 45). The fact that the two communities were often defined, compared, or contrasted against each other in national discourses plays a formative role in understanding how they portrayed each other in fiction and essays from the period. This book tracks the various ways that Asian American and African American textual productions responded to this perception of racial difference and the relationship that the nation conceived as existing between the two groups. The intersectional quality of racial relations, which Chesnutt's speech captures, is central to my book's critical project of mapping the fertile but uneven terrain from which African American and Asian American interracial representations emerged.

As the passage from Chesnutt's speech suggests, African Americans and Asian Americans in the early twentieth century depicted each other in wide-ranging and decidedly conflictual ways. The "Negroes," "Mulattoes," "Africans," "Asiatics," "Orientals," "Indians," and "Chinamen" who mingle and interact with each other in texts by Chesnutt, Wu Tingfang, Nella Larsen, Edith Eaton, Winnifred Eaton, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Younghill Kang fulfill a range of artistic and political purposes, reminding the nation to comply with its democratic principles, pointing to the failures of a racial community, shoring up a racial identity, imagining themselves as aesthetic objects emptied of historical meaning, embodying a gendered conception of the exotic or foreign, exposing the impossibilities of inclusiveness under the rubric of the nation-state, allying with each other in the struggle for social justice and political action, and symbolizing the link between racism within the United States and imperialist projects abroad. The range of attitudes expressed in these

texts indicates the complexity of the interracial relationship between African Americans and Asians in the early twentieth century.

The diversity of these textual interactions also belies a late twentieth-century narrative of Afro-Asian interactions that tends to imagine the relationship in monolithic terms. Since the late 1960s, with increasing racial turmoil and unrest and the emergence of race-consciousness movements, the relationship between the two communities has often been either dismissed as irrevocably antagonistic or romanticized as intrinsically linked by a shared history of racism.<sup>2</sup> As many critics have pointed out, the popular press has been particularly invested in representing the relationship as inherently oppositional, basing this assessment on a highly essentialized view of cultural differences, and clinging to the notion of Asians as the model minority, implying none too subtly that blacks are the marred minority. As Keith Osajima notes, the emphasis placed on Afro-Asian hostility strengthened the notion that the two groups were insuperably different and insinuated that African American culture was somehow lacking when compared to Asian American experiences: “[The] delineation of good and bad culture deflected attention away from societal factors and placed blame for racial inequality on minorities” (217).

Meanwhile, in progressive and academic circles, the tendency has been to counter such popular images with narratives of Afro-Asian kinship and affiliation. One of the cornerstones of ethnic studies is its “coalitional and collaborative ethos” (D. Kim, *Writing Manhood*, xviii), an institutional commitment that has both supported and in turn been supported by a scholarship that emphasizes the bilateral potential of Afro-Asian relations. One must be cautious, however, that the legitimacy and urgency of this anti-racist project does not obscure the disharmonies and suspicions that are as integral and formative a part of interracial histories as the convergences. In his foundational essay “Is Yellow Black or White?” Gary Okihiro asserts of Asians and Africans, “We are a kindred people [who] know each other well,” sharing a history of colonization and racial oppression, as well as “migration, interaction and cultural sharing, and commerce and trade” (34). The radical potential of such coalitions, which, as George Lipsitz points out, can be “powerful weapons against white supremacy” (210), does not mean that any Afro-Asian alliance—whether personal, cultural, or political—is by its very essence or existence resistant to racial, gender, or sexual hegemonies. The claim that Asians and Africans have a kinship based on intersecting histories of commerce and oppression operates with the same logic as the notion,

propagated in the past forty years, that African Americans and Asians feel an implacable animosity toward each other. Vijay Prashad reminds us that even interracial relationships can be incorporated into the service of a “color-blind capitalism” and cites as examples films like *Rush Hour* and *Martial Law*, in which Asian and African American identities are commodified in conjunction with each other in order to explore “two ethnic niche markets” (“Bandung,” xiv).<sup>3</sup> Daniel Kim argues in *Writing Manhood* that by paying as close attention to the antagonisms between the two groups as to the affiliations, critics can advance the goal of “more progressive forms of interracialism, for [these antagonisms] speak to the question of why such coalitions seem to emerge with such infrequency and difficulty” (xx).

In looking at the early twentieth century, *Interracial Encounters* complicates these grand narratives of interracial relations by foregrounding the fact that Afro-Asian relations actually have a long and densely complicated history that predates our contemporary moment and that these relationships have been surprisingly ecumenical in their politics. My analysis of the texts in this study is informed by three interconnected points. First, this book is a historicizing project; it assumes that literary representations of interracial relationships are most fully understood by examining the historical circumstances surrounding their production. I ask what kinds of Afro-Asian representations emerged in light of the shifting levels of economic exploitation, physical violence, and political exclusion from the nation’s imagined community that each group endured in the early twentieth century. In other words, Afro-Asian representations are informed by the specific discourses that the early twentieth century’s national anxieties surrounding citizenship and global relations produced. The incredible diversity and surprising ambivalence of these interracial representations notwithstanding, the justification for linking these works emerges from the texts themselves and the buried history of Afro-Asian relations to which they allude but never fully describe. Evidence of a long history of interracial relations between these two groups has always been present in these texts and other historical or cultural documents, but it is only in the past few decades that readers and critics have begun to rethink their adherence to the prevalent racial binary of white/other and adjust their interpretive lenses to detect alternative racial histories. Historicizing Afro-Asian relations and theorizing the importance of such an approach forms the backbone of this book.

The time period of this study illustrates how rich a comparative analysis of African American and Asian American cultural production can

be. My analysis begins in 1896, a time when anti-Chinese sentiment was at its height and the year that the Supreme Court codified black inferiority in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, and ends in the late 1930s, just before the outbreak of World War II would again dramatically alter the way the United States imagined itself, its citizens, and its interactions with the world. This historical context matters in interracial relations if we are to avoid essentializing race (i.e., claiming that all minority groups are similar because they have experienced racism) or reinscribing racial hierarchies (i.e., claiming that African Americans and Asians have the most complicated relationship and therefore are the most worthy of attention), about which I will say more later.

Early twentieth-century America's troubled and multifaceted pairing of African and Asian bodies in a variety of legal, cultural, political, and scientific discourses maintained the racial exclusivity of American identity; at the same time, this pairing embodied the nation's general apprehension about the racialized body's relationship to American identity. This chapter is devoted to explaining this historical context in greater detail, but for now, it is important to emphasize that the literary texts in this study revise a potent national narrative in which American identity emerges from the interplay between the fantasies of the "Negro Problem" and the "Yellow Peril." It is because blackness and yellowness are so intertwined in the early twentieth-century's national imagination that Asian American and African American authors confront that issue through reciprocal representations in their own writings. The interracial representations I scrutinize emerged from the multiple associations that the nation imagined between African Americans and Asians in the early twentieth century, a time that witnessed America's emergence as a colonial power with global reach, a massive influx of foreigners onto its shores, the migration of African Americans from the South to the North, Midwest, and West, and the increasing industrialization of its economy and urbanization of its populace. In my chapters on these writers and their texts, I pay particular attention to what kinds of rhetorical tropes and representational strategies they used when depicting these moments of interracial encounter. However, I also argue that Asian American and African American texts of the early twentieth century acknowledge that multiple logics of exclusion are being constructed and mobilized in order to marginalize not only their own group but the other as well.<sup>4</sup> Because of the way that American popular and legal culture frequently paired the figure of the Negro with that of the Chinaman or Asiatic—or the Negro problem with the "Chinese question" or the Yellow Peril—Asian

American and African American cultural producers acknowledge that tackling the question of inclusion in their work means engaging, however obliquely, with each other.<sup>5</sup>

This leads me to my second point: that these interracial representations express and reveal the extent to which Asian American and African American identities are mutually constituted within these historical moments. The representations of these encounters are also instrumental in understanding how authors from both groups conceptualized their respective communities, their relationship to the nation-state, and their solutions for the problem of race-based exclusion. Being African American in America means negotiating a relationship of some kind with the figure of the Asian; conversely, Asians must take into account the role of blackness in constituting their identities. Blackness played a key role, not only in how Asians were perceived, but also in how Asian authors imagined themselves within a national and then a global framework; similarly, the figure of the Asian was vital in the construction of an African American identity and became an important trope in African American literary texts for expressing black America's relation to the nation and the world. The interracial encounters and relationships that are portrayed in these works capture the extent to which Africans and Asians are imbricated in their identity constructions. That is, racial identity is constantly being shaped and informed by a panoply of forces, and to imagine the formation of a racial identity solely as a contrast to "whiteness" renders other racial identity markers in monolithic terms and reaffirms the power of established racial hierarchies.

Again and again, the texts I examine reveal that Asian American and African American subjectivities require the other's presence in order to articulate themselves as national and racialized subjects. The Chinese passenger riding in the whites-only train car in Justice John Harlan's famous dissent to *Plessy v. Ferguson* and Charles Chesnut's novel *The Marrow of Tradition* highlights the hypocrisy of Jim Crow exclusion and also suggests that African Americans occupy a superlative outsider position in relation to other racial groups. The oriental objects in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* become the models with which Helga Larsen attempts to shield herself from the discursive violence that African American women have endured. The black Jamaicans that appear in the memoirs of the Eaton sisters provide a contrast and lend depth to their respective struggles to locate their own biracial subjectivities. The political struggle against global oppression that W. E. B. Du Bois and Younghill Kang write of in their novels requires a multiracial and multi-ethnic cast of characters.

Thus, the complex relationship that the nation imposed upon African Americans and Asians heavily informed the mutual cultural representations that African Americans and Asian American authors produced.

So what kind of interracial representations emerge when two groups are constantly paired with or pitted against each other to symbolize all that America is—or does not want to be? How do African American and Asian American authors respond to myths of the ideal national subject that are polychromatic in their exclusionary practices? Or, to restate Du Bois's famous question in terms more relevant to this project (if much less eloquent), "How does it feel to be *part* of a problem?" To answer these questions and describe how the literary representations of interracial encounters interact with racial identities and political institutions, I rely on two theories of racial identity, one put forth by Robin Kelley and one by Michael Omi and Howard Winant, to elucidate the relationship between African American and Asian American cultural histories. The theories of polyculturalism and racial formation are useful models for thinking outside the white/other or majority/minority binaries of racial identity and interaction that have prevailed in literary studies; although I do not apply these theories in a systematic way to every text under consideration in this book, I do think they provoke a broad set of questions that ultimately make comparative racial cultural studies not only possible but also exciting. Kelley's polyculturalism focuses on the often unspoken ways that different racial groups influence and borrow from each other, particularly in the realm of culture. I find polyculturalism to be useful in articulating my argument for the relationship between African Americans and Asian Americans in the early twentieth century. Kelley argues for the impurity of all racial identities, both in terms of lines of descent and cultural histories, and suggests that polyculturalism happens everywhere, without a sense of self-consciousness on the part of those individuals who are the products of or borrow from other cultures. In this regard, Kelley is drawing a pointed contrast between his idea of polyculturalism and multiculturalism, a term he dislikes because it "implies that cultures are fixed [and] discrete entities" ("People in Me"). Like Kelley's work, this book counters the multicultural project of the late twentieth century, in which the emphasis was on extrapolating the similarities or equivalences between various racial groups constructed within rigid borders. This study attempts to capture how various racialized groups were shaped and influenced by each other in their struggles to negotiate the reality of the exclusionary nature of the nation and in their imagining of political structures that might rectify that injustice.

Perhaps more than Kelley's, Omi and Winant's thesis on racial formation has played a foundational role in my approach to comparative racial analysis. Their theory of racial formation analyzes how racial identity is constructed by the continuous negotiation between national institutions and discourses and the racialized groups themselves. The identities of these writers as African Americans or Asian Americans emerged not only from their multifaceted interactions with each other, as Kelley suggests, but also from a mythology of national identity that was deeply implicated in anxieties about racial difference. According to Omi and Winant, "Race is a matter of both social structure and cultural representation"; therefore, racial formation is the dialectical process that occurs between institutions of power and ethnic or racial groups (56). One of the "racial projects" that informed how African Americans and Asian Americans viewed their own identities was the pervasive mythology of the "American" so endemic in the early twentieth century. In the words of Omi and Winant, this fantasy of national identity narrates "an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics [in] an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines" (56). The racial project of defining American identity in the early twentieth century was neither trivial nor merely theoretical; many believed that the very survival of the nation depended on who could and should be considered American. Although Theodore Roosevelt's menacing warning in a 1915 speech that "there is no room in this country for hyphenated Americans" refers explicitly to the threat posed by the influx of southern and eastern European immigrants, it also reflects the nation's anxieties that the increasing physical, political, and social mobility of the country's black citizens and the influx of immigrants from other countries, especially Asia, would somehow destroy the natural coherence of the American nation and subject ("Roosevelt Bars the Hyphenated"). This anxiety about American identity can also be seen in Woodrow Wilson's comment in 1914 that "some Americans need hyphens in their names, because only part of them has come over; but when the whole man has come over, heart and thought and all, the hyphen drops of its own weight out of his name" (quoted in Robinson et al., 217). The image of the hyphen dropping out of an identity because of "its own weight" suggests it is a burden that any reasonable person would want to shed at the first available opportunity. The weightiness of the hyphen stands in contrast to the weightlessness of American identity itself, as something natural, dominant, and an end in itself.

Constructing American identity as weightless is also a double-edged

sword; the metaphor itself betrays the anxieties that inspired discussions about what it means to be an American. On the one hand, American identity can easily be taken up and worn without any trouble; on the other hand, its lack of heft suggests that it might be lacking in substance. In other words, despite the “naturalness” of such an identity, it is also, ironically, extraordinarily fragile if it can be obliterated by the existence of a hyphen. Roosevelt alluded to that fragility when he thundered in the same 1915 speech, “The one absolutely certain way of bringing this nation to ruin, of preventing all possibility of its continuing to be a nation at all, would be to permit it to become a tangle of squabbling nationalities” (“Roosevelt Bars the Hyphenated”). With his apocalyptic vision of a nation on the brink of ruin, Roosevelt no doubt means to evoke the memories and fears associated with the chaos of the Civil War, which was at that point a fairly recent memory, as well as point to the horrors unfolding overseas during the First World War; however, his language also suggests that being American as such endows its citizens’ lives and their nation with a unique and transformative meaning that is more than just the sum of its parts. Within the operative mythology of the nation, being American meant something more than one’s legal status; it constituted the core of one’s identity as a citizen and as a person and was inextricable from one’s essential self.

Omi and Winant’s theory of racial formation takes into account the power of these kinds of foundational cultural narratives to structure a racial community’s (and by extension the nation’s) thinking about identity and difference; whether or not we like it politically, it is through the interplay between communities and institutions that racial identities are formed and re-formed. I have located my own work within the dynamic between social structure and cultural discourse that Omi and Winant and Kelley theorize. The cultural, historical, and legal texts that pair African Americans and Asians within their pages reveal how closely linked the histories of these two racial groups are and also influence how the two groups view themselves and each other. Each writer examined in this study positions his or her text differently vis-à-vis American identity, but each position pressures others and alters the terms of the entire discourse. Through these representations, these texts explore the common ground and tensions that exist between Asians and African Americans because of their uniquely linked and imbricated positions in the national fantasy of American identity. At this specific moment in history and on this particular issue, African Americans and Asian Americans were responsive to prevailing notions of citizenship and American

identity in such a way that one *cannot* understand the history of national identity in this country without examining both groups' responses. As John Torok argues in "Reconstruction and Racial Nativism," his analysis of the congressional debates surrounding the Reconstruction amendments, the history of Chinese exclusion "cannot be understood outside the context of the late nineteenth century evisceration of the protections extended to black freedmen and women by the Reconstruction amendments and laws" (69); conversely, the slow judicial and legislative erosion of black civil liberties in the post-Reconstruction era was also informed by anxieties surrounding the presence of the "foreign" Chinese in the United States.<sup>6</sup>

My third and final point is that while inclusion into a national body politic preoccupies the writers under examination, it is equally important to emphasize that several of the authors included here question the nation-state as the only option for political organization. So while the writers I discuss often represent the Afro-Asian encounter in ambivalent, contradictory, and conflicted terms, they share an awareness that the nationalist fantasy of "American identity" from which they have been barred vitally depends upon the complicated juxtaposition and joint exclusion of both African Americans and Asians. The novels of Du Bois and Kang and to a lesser extent the works of the Eatons and Larsen respond to the assumptions articulated by Roosevelt and Wilson specifically and by the culture more generally: that an American national identity was natural, desirable, universal—and utterly impossible for African Americans and Asians to attain. Instead, the nation situates Africans and Asians in a series of shifting interrelationships in order to support its political need for a mythic, racially homogeneous civic population and its economic need for a readily available, racially stratified pool of labor.<sup>7</sup>

The engagement with another racial group within the nation, ironically enough, serves as a launching point for imagining the limits of and alternatives to the nation. Some of the texts under consideration go so far as to imagine alternatives to the nation-state, different kinds of spaces where Africans, Asians, and other traditionally oppressed peoples can claim political power while contesting racism and colonialism. Almost all of the texts, however, push against a binary that insulates the domestic from the global.<sup>8</sup> The relationship between Africans and Asians has never been bounded geographically. The colonial exploitation that characterized the nineteenth century, America's rising position as a global, economic, and political power, and the Third World's emerging independence and resistance campaigns all contributed to a

growing sense that any Afro-Asian American relationship might have implications that exceeded U.S. borders. One of the threads I follow in this project is how these authors and texts recognize and represent the inextricable, if unseen, links between racial exclusion within this country and the colonizing efforts of the United States and Europe in the Third World. The interest in the nation-state's exclusionary policies and mythologies did not prevent most of these authors from critiquing its ideological requirements and even from imagining alternatives to it. If being an American national subject and being of African or Asian descent were mutually exclusive, then perhaps the problem was with the concept of the nation itself. Thus, the depiction of Afro-Asian encounters also signals the materialization of a kind of postnational awareness. The postnational is figured in two ways in several of the texts: as a globalized site outside of but intimately tied to the nation-state, in which Western colonizers can practice on a global scale the economic persecution and racial stratification that they advance at home, and conversely, and ironically, as a geopolitical space that makes possible interracial resistance and communities.

These three threads of Afro-Asian literary representations—historicity, mutual constitution, and postnational imaginings—are woven through the close readings I perform throughout the book, with some chapters emphasizing a particular thread more heavily than others. Later, I describe in more detail what each chapter aims to accomplish, but for now, I would like to pause and note two important clarifications of my argument. First, although I am focusing on the literary dialogue that emerged between African American and Asian American authors as a result of the mutual relationship imposed upon them by the nation, it bears repeating that I am not suggesting that their histories within the United States are the same, parallel, or analogous, or that what might be pertinent to one group is equally pertinent to the other. For example, Asian American authors routinely depict characters debating whether or not they should return to their country of origin (whether or not the authors themselves have actually ever been there), and several of the texts in this study represent or take up the question of the differences between Asian national groups, often in terms of their treatment within the United States, but also to depict certain groups as more deserving of inclusion than others. The African American authors I focus on do not address ethno-national distinctions within the black community or agonize over a return to Africa. Likewise, the long history of chattel slavery obviously looms large in African American writings of the early

twentieth century in a way that is specific and unique to that community. I highlight these very different histories—without falling prey to what Grace Kyungwon Hong has called a “logic of similarity”<sup>9</sup>—while exploring what it means that the nation insisted upon seeing the two groups as connected to each other. The anxiety that a comparative analysis might wind up reifying racial categories is addressed by Werner Sollors in his study of how prohibitions against interracial marriage constructed racial identity and communities. Sollors wonders whether what he calls an “interracial focus” might “inadvertently [strengthen] a biological concept of ‘race’ that it promises to transcend” (3). I take Sollors’s warning to heart, but I agree with him when he argues that such a risk must be taken if the critic is to understand “the cultural operations which make [categories of race] natural or self-evident” (3). One of the ways I avoid this pitfall is by acknowledging, capturing, and historicizing thoroughly the variations in attitudes between and within this set of African American and Asian American texts. My goal is to analyze how Asian American and African American cultural representations responded to an imposed narrative of Afro-Asian racial difference while at the same time recognizing and insisting upon the incommensurable histories that make up and distinguish Asian American and African American experiences. These historically contingent depictions of interracial relations also meant that Africans and Asians constructed America in vastly different ways. In other words, while “Negroes” and “Asiatics” were often imagined in relational terms by the nation, the distinctive histories of Africans and Asians in the United States meant that each group put different pressures on what it meant to be American, or on what it meant to be one who was excluded from the American identity.

The second aspect of my argument that requires clarification pertains to my choice to focus on the links between African American and Asian American literary productions, as opposed to looking at another interracial pairing or including several racial groups into the mix. Needless to say, the kind of relational positioning that I have described thus far has never been limited to just Asian Americans and African Americans. The literatures of Native Americans, Mexican and Latin Americans, non-Anglo ethnic groups such as the Irish, Jewish Americans, and even Anglo-Americans are always complicit in the kind of interracial formation that I am examining. African Americans and Asians were two of the racial groups that were excluded from claiming an idealized national identity, but they were by no means the only two, and each of them was also scrutinized and constructed by the nation in relation to other

groups who were perceived as being “other” whether racially, ethnically, or religiously. The scholarship that performs this kind of comparative analysis, whether between two groups or among several, is impressive and growing in the humanities and social sciences.<sup>10</sup> In delimiting the boundaries of my study to African Americans and Asian Americans, I do not mean to reify racial identities and racial communities, nor do I mean to privilege Afro-Asian interactions as more complete, progressive, or revelatory of American racial dynamics than other kinds of interracial contact. Neither do I wish to suggest that the racial binary of black-white relations that has so long dominated the national consciousness (at times to the exclusion of other narratives of racial difference) should be replaced by a racial trinary that automatically includes Asians or Asian Americans.

My justification for looking at this particular relationship as it played out through African American and Asian American works is rooted in the extent and depth to which the two groups were paired with or pitted against each other *in this period*. In other words, I am not suggesting that this interracial relationship is representative of interracial dynamics so much as it exemplifies a particular historical narrative of racial difference and national identity that has a long and deep past in the United States and that continues to be relevant today. One of the premises of this book is that the persistence and intensity of this pairing during the approximately forty-year span of my study explains why black characters appear so frequently in Asian American literary works and Asian figures in African American literary works in the early twentieth century. In other words, my argument for reading Asian American and African American literatures in relation to each other in the early twentieth-century is historical and textual—historical because the two groups were linked in and through national dialogues about what constituted the limits of American identity, and textual because the prevalence of these discourses meant that Asian American and African American authors who were interested in issues of inclusion and exclusion inevitably had to grapple with each others’ communities. Not only do these authors represent the Afro-Asian relationship more frequently than other kinds of interracial relationships, but they seem to invest those relationships with a tremendous amount of political capital.

Of course, every scholarly endeavor must make choices about what or who will be its focus. Comparative research projects, including this one, must be transparent about their rationale for yoking together its objects of inquiry; as Sollors suggests, this vigilance is necessary in order to

avoid unwittingly reinscribing the racial hierarchies or binaries that they are attempting to dismantle in the first place. However, I believe that this kind of scholarship is worth the intellectual risks it poses because it can deepen and enrich our notions of what makes up American literature as well as present us with an array of compelling and significant alternative literary histories that do not fit easily or at all into the norms of the canonical narrative. In the past decade or so, there have been many works that, like this one, attempt to unearth the potential for interracial dialogue that has long been embedded in traditional literary scholarship. These works participate in a rich critical dialogue currently ongoing in American literature that seeks to identify the interrelationships between various racialized groups in cultural productions. I consider my own work to be enabled by critics such as King-Kok Cheung, Daniel Kim, George Lipsitz, James Lee, Lisa Lowe, Bill Mullen, Gary Okihiro, Vijay Prashad, Brook Thomas, and Penny Von Eschen, all of whom have written about the intersections between African and Asian diasporas in the United States and elsewhere. While I might take issue with some of their claims about the politics that drive Afro-Asian encounters, I consider my work to be very much in sympathy with their aim of elaborating a history of interracial relations that has been obscured or ignored. I also consider my work to be in line with those literary scholars who promote the idea that no one group (minority or majority) can narrate a definitive account of race in America. For example, in *To Wake the Nations* Eric Sundquist argues that neither a black nor a white perspective alone can “account for the ongoing crisis over race in American cultural and political life, just as neither black nor white authorship guarantees any sort of univocal vision or moral advantage” (7); his study thus focuses on the interplay between African American and Anglo-American writers and their texts. Less than a decade later, Wai Chee Dimock, advocating for a more globalized understanding of canonical American literature, echoes Sundquist’s sentiment when she states, “Neither a single nation nor a single race can yield an adequate frame for literary history” (757). Speaking more particularly for American literary studies, Daniel Kim, in his reading of the novel *Native Speaker* by Chang-rae Lee, speaks of challenging an “optics of racial politics that is calibrated to register only shades of black and white” (“Do I, Too, Sing America,” 233). In this book, I take up that challenge, recognizing not only that Asian communities existed in the United States between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries but also that they affected the discourse of citizenship and American identity and produced work that dealt with other racial minorities,

whether directly or indirectly. Kim's point about recalibrating the lens of criticism to register more than black and white is a response to a history that has often deemed Asians "tangential" to American anxieties about race and culture.<sup>11</sup> The question of interracial relations between African Americans and Asians has only recently been asked.<sup>12</sup> Similarly the overwhelming reality of white violence and oppression against African Americans has meant a steady and important emphasis on black responses to white racism. Like the critics I cited earlier, I argue for a more complicated investigation of American literature, one that minimizes the binary narrative of racial contact and oppression and instead takes into account the cultural productions and histories of communities that do not fit into the binary. I hope my research exposes the limits of any kind of master narrative of race and that it reveals the necessity of historicizing the racial differences that we take for granted. More critical work needs to be done to investigate the various ways that America perpetuated its project of exclusion, even while it maintained its rhetoric and mythology of inclusion and individual rights. My project aims to do just that; it points to the ways African American and Asian American writers were aware of each other and interested in examining how the other group's plight affected their own. If we are to look at the early twentieth century as a moment in which the shifting relationship between politics, demographics, and economics profoundly affected how Americans viewed themselves, then we absolutely need to understand how African Americans and Asians were influencing that narration of American identity. By focusing on two so-called minority cultural traditions, I de-privilege European American culture as the dominant tradition in interracial relationships and discourses, against which all other cultural productions must measure themselves.

The complex interracial dynamics between African Americans, Asian Americans, and the nation that juxtaposed them inform my project's literary analysis. That is, I am setting forth an argument about the relationship between these two literary cultures that is grounded in a very particular if complicated historical period of racial relations in early twentieth-century America. This period marks an important juncture in the histories of both African American and Asian American literary production; it offers a fruitful and heretofore underappreciated site for cross-cultural literary study. Once dismissed as a time when African American and Asian American cultural works were aesthetically unformed and politically suspect, both African American and Asian American literary scholars have increasingly come to understand the

first third of the century as of central importance in understanding the ebb and flow of their respective literary traditions.

Within the past several years the significance of this time period has been well established in African American literature. Although this period has often been called “the nadir” because of the violence and political backlash that blacks faced, African American arts and letters were thriving and exploring new avenues in the wake of Reconstruction. The rise of Paul Laurence Dunbar (the first African American able to make a living as a writer), the proliferation of magazine culture, the popularity of dialect and plantation tales, the public’s curiosity about ethnography, the growing presence of African Americans in American cities, and the increasing embourgeoisement of certain segments of the black community—these were just some of the factors that contributed to the flourishing state of African American literature at this time. Writers such as Dunbar, Chesnut, Du Bois, Frances Harper, Pauline Hopkins, and James Weldon Johnson were at the height of their creative powers at the turn of the century; many went on to influence the next wave of prominent African American writers during the Harlem Renaissance.

In particular, the rise of black women’s domestic fiction signals the proliferation of a black, middle-class readership but also speaks to the determination of black writers to produce narratives that were engaged in the political and social struggles of their communities. Speaking of the genre that she calls novels of “genteel domestic feminism,” Claudia Tate reminds her readers that the post-Reconstruction period is often called one of the “most violent periods of white/black race relations” (*Domestic Allegories*, 4). In the past, critical inquiry into this particular historical moment has tended to paint the literature produced as operating under “the influence of white America, creating inauthentic light-skinned mulatta characters designed to accommodate their white readers’ tastes in heroines” (duCille, 7). However, a new wave of critics has questioned the easy dismissal of these works based on their distinctly non-revolutionary political moorings. Ann duCille, for one, argues persuasively that these sentimental novels force readers to see “the humanity of a people they otherwise constructed as subhuman—beyond the pale of white comprehension” (8). The importance of this particular moment in literary history has been recognized because critics have come to understand that black writers were using a multitude of aesthetic strategies to convey their political point. The trope of “racial uplift,” once dismissed because of its supposed devotion to middle-class values and goals, has garnered

the renewed interest of African American literary and feminist scholars invested in re-examining such works.

Asian American literature follows a very different trajectory, and my privileging of this particular moment in Asian American literary history might be considered unusual. Critics often consider the publication in 1912 of Edith Eaton's collection of short stories, *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, to be the first important marker in the history of Asian American literature. *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* is the first work of fiction by an author of Asian descent about Asians in America.<sup>13</sup> Edith's sister, Winnifred (whose pen name was Onoto Watanna), was the first North American of Asian descent to write a novel, *Miss Numé of Japan* (1899). As the title suggests, the narrative is set in Japan and contains American and Japanese national characters. Other known works by Asian American authors in this time period are few and far between.<sup>14</sup> That absence stems from a combination of factors: the relatively small size of the Asian population in the United States, which was kept low due to exclusion and anti-miscegenation laws; the labor-intensive nature of the work that most Asians were forced to accept; and the hostile environment that Asians faced in their daily lives.

However, despite the absence of texts by Asians and Asian Americans in English, Victor Bascara rightly points out that Asian American literary critics should not ignore the importance of this time period in understanding Asian American literature. He states that the late nineteenth century and early twentieth set "the terms and conditions of Asian incorporation into the national collective" ("Following the Money") and that the significance of this era in Asian American literature stems from the emergence of U.S. imperialism. American imperialism abroad and racism at home "persist[ed] in the regulative narrative forms of U.S. national culture and in the place of Asian racialization in the new empire's management of difference." Bascara's formulation relies in part on the scholarship of Lisa Lowe, who argues that Asian American cultural productions constitute a site of resistance to American capitalist and imperialist projects. Lowe posits that nineteenth-century America racialized and gendered Chinese male immigrants in order to mask the differences between America's capitalist and political projects; thus, one can assume that it is only by knowing the racializing and gendering imperative of Chinese immigrants in the late nineteenth century that the literature published after 1965 can be understood (16). The conflict between capitalism and nationalism that Lowe chronicles in *Immigrant Acts* has its beginnings at the turn of the century. This conflict informs Asian American literary works of this period and afterward because they, as Lowe

puts it, remember that which the “U.S. nation seeks to forget” (17). But this period in Asian American cultural history operates as more than a mere barometer for the work that followed. Within it, we can see how modern American notions of race, citizenship, identity, and racial difference were emerging.

Chapter 2 delineates in further detail how the late nineteenth century and early twentieth juxtaposed African American and Asian bodies in a variety of historical and cultural productions. That chapter ends with an analysis of Justice John Harlan’s dissent to the Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which I argue is a foundational document in understanding how the relationship between African American and Asian figures was constantly shifting depending upon how the nation and its citizenry were constructed. Chapter 3, “Estrangement on a Train: Race and Narratives of American Identity,” introduces the terms and conflicts that the following chapters will explicate by exploring how the dynamics of interracial triangulation that first appears in Harlan’s dissent are taken up by Charles Chesnutt in his novel *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) and by Wu Tingfang in his memoir *America through the Spectacles of an Oriental Diplomat* (1914). Both Chesnutt and Wu describe a scene in which a black man is forced to ride in a colored train car while a Chinese man is permitted to ride in the white section. Chesnutt and Wu explore the sense of estrangement that arises when African Americans and Chinese confront each other in a space that is a symbol for the nation’s progress and freedom and yet is unjust in its spatial division of blacks and whites, as well as inadequate in accounting for race outside of a black-white binary. My focus in this chapter is examining how the estranging effects of train travel intersected with the estrangement produced by interracial recognition in *The Marrow of Tradition* and *America*. This moment reveals how African Americans and Chinese are alienated from each other as communities with potential political common ground in order for an ideal American identity to maintain its racial exclusivity. Chesnutt and Wu expose the chasm between America’s rhetoric of equality and inclusion and the reality of race-based exclusion, but they also betray their own unease over the possibility of presenting an alternative model for American subjecthood that can include *both* Africans and the Chinese. I argue that neither of the texts can imagine a resolution to this scene of direct racial confrontation.

Direct racial confrontations seem to play minor roles in the memoirs of the Anglo-Chinese North American authors and sisters Edith and Winnifred Eaton, who are the subject of chapter 4, “The Eaton Sisters Go

to Jamaica.” And yet, these face-to-face meetings, which are deployed in radically different ways in each author’s text, play crucial roles in how each woman attempts to represent her biracial subjectivity. In her memoir *Me: A Book of Remembrance* (1915), Winnifred Eaton uses black figures to solidify her claim to the privileges of white womanhood and authorship—a claim that would have been rendered tenuous historically by her biracial status. In particular, she describes several scenes in which she is the object of black Jamaican male sexual desire. If white womanhood is defined by the desirous gaze of the black man, then Winnifred’s constant staging of situations in which she flees the advances of black men strengthens her claim to white womanhood and the privileges associated with it. Edith’s interactions with Afro-Jamaicans in “Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian” (1909) have quite the opposite effect from Winnifred’s; rather than shoring up her sense of entitlement as a white woman, Edith’s interactions with Afro-Jamaicans remind her how contingent and imperfect her own mimicry of white womanhood is. Keeping in mind the postcolonial critique that pervades “Leaves,” the second half of this chapter foregrounds the links between the racist domestic practices of the United States with the colonial project of exploitation in Jamaica. Within this transnational context, I then focus on the linguistic and rhetorical strategies employed by Edith in the short stories “Mrs. Spring Fragrance” and “The Inferior Woman” (1912). Edith calls into question terms such as “inferior,” “superior,” “romance,” and “American”—concepts that are central not only to the progress that undergirds the narrative of Americanization, but also to the racialized biology and anthropology of the time. By including in her critique the (literal) science behind racism, which was being employed against multiple minority groups, Edith implicitly includes Africans in her defense of the Chinese. I argue that by uncovering the racialization behind the rhetoric of American identity, Edith critiques the laws and hierarchies that keep both African Americans *and* Chinese out of America.

Although the black Jamaicans who populate the Eatons’ works are allegorical figures rather than fully drawn flesh-and-blood characters, they are characters with whom our authors can interact, no matter how briefly. But my analysis of the Eatons raises this question: Can an interracial encounter occur without the appearance of a second, racialized character? In chapter 5, I argue that it can. “*Quicksand* and the Racial Aesthetics of Chinoiserie” examines how Nella Larsen’s novel, published in 1928, uses figurations (rather than actual figures) of the Orient to explore Helga Crane’s biracial, gendered, and transnational identity. This

chapter explores a question that has yet to be articulated in scholarly accounts of Larsen's novel: What is the significance of the oriental images that Larsen inserts throughout the narrative? I claim that the chinoiserie in the novel offers Helga Crane an alluring, if ultimately deceptive, model for subjecthood that decouples her black female body from its history of sexual, economic, and racial oppression. Helga realizes, to her dismay, that such a radical decontextualization of herself from a racial and gender history represents another kind of discursive violence. Her orientalism represents a search for safety from racial, sexual, and gendered prerogatives; despite her failure to find such a refuge, the novel forges a connection between the histories of African Americans and the Chinese. Significantly Helga's attempt to aestheticize and deracinate herself begins domestically but reaches its apotheosis in Europe. *Quicksand* differentiates the racism that Helga encounters in Denmark from what she experiences in the United States, but by setting a substantial portion of the novel in Europe Larsen underscores the connection between the local and global in projects of racial oppression. Helga's inability to escape racist economies suggests that any solution that does not recognize the global and transnational effects of race will be inadequate for dismantling the hierarchies of West over East or citizen over savage.

Chapter 6, "Nation, Narration, and the Afro-Asian Encounter in W. E. B. Du Bois's *Dark Princess* and Younghill Kang's *East Goes West*," tackles the question of what Afro-Asian political alliances and personal relationships might look like, and in what kinds of spaces they might exist and flourish. I argue that *Dark Princess* (1928) and *East Goes West* (1937) imagine an Afro-Asian alliance in the early twentieth century through their revisions of novelistic conventions. This chapter makes the case that the Afro-Asian encounters depicted in these novels are deeply invested in bringing a transnational perspective to explicating and resolving tensions in interracial relations; they attempt to further undercut the power of the nation-state to exclude on the basis of race and to stratify labor by reworking the conventions of the genre most closely associated with that political body: the novel. Each writer theorizes exile as a structuring novelistic paradigm and as an alternative to the exclusions perpetrated on their group in the name of the American nation-state. The figure of the exile enables *Dark Princess* and *East Goes West* to make central those who have been pushed outside of normative political and cultural boundaries as well as to privilege the unique, global perspective that these figures bring to bear on narratives of American nationhood and citizenship. Both authors recognize that racialized labor exploitation

acts as the bridge between a domestic program of political exclusion and the West's colonizing projects in Africa and Asia. Unmasking the racist imperatives of the nation and the nationalist imperatives of the novel allows each author to imagine the close political ties that bind Africans and Asians together.

Contemporary racial tensions inevitably serve as a backdrop to this project, and I end the book by thinking about the relationship between past, present and future. By juxtaposing Asian American and African American cultural productions, *Interracial Encounters* provides a historical context for an interracial relationship that has a more sustained and complicated past in the United States than commonly thought. What this study intends to show is that the oppositional, overlapping, and complementary relationships between these two groups have been necessary to the emergence of a certain fantasy of modern American identity. By examining what African Americans and Asians have written about each other, we can see how these writers coped with nationalist imperatives and imagined each other as being more than merely problems or perils.