

Cyphers

[How an Anthology Helped a Mixed-Race Filipino American Writer Revise a Novel]

By Brian Ascalon Roley

I.

American Son (W.W. Norton) was described by the *New York Times* in their Notable Books of the Year issue as follows: "Two half-Filipino brothers can pass for white, but their mother cannot; painful conflicts are in store for everybody in this complex exploration of racism in California, starting in 1993, a year after the Rodney King Riots" (63).

One thing they left out was that the novel's mixed-race brothers, Gabe and Tomas, could also pass for Mexican American, which at times they did. This is a different dynamic than passing for white, and a central element of the book. Maybe one of the most distinctive elements, too.

When speaking to classes in which this book has been assigned, I'm often asked how I got the idea of two half-Filipino brothers passing as Mexicans, with one actually joining a Chicano gang. Is it autobiography?

I tell them it's fiction, and though many of the exterior details came from research and observation of real people, the characters were made up. But yes, it's emotional autobiography — most good fiction is.

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Why? Emotional truth is what allows us to connect to other people (conjured and real): shame, embarrassment, regret, grief, family loyalty, love. Such shared emotions allow us to connect with characters in the books I love, such as Anna Karenina. But there was something pressing and confusing in my own emotional life, as a multiracial individual of Filipino and American descent, that I wasn't seeing in mainstream books, which I therefore felt an urgent need to express. I would eventually find a way through my characters of Gabe and Tomas, and discover helpful literary examples in books like *Aiiiiieee!* which contains works by Filipino authors and Diana Chang. But that would come later.

II.

GROWING UP MIXED-RACE

Most of my students and young readers belong to a much more diverse generation than I did, and occupy a different literary and media environment. So it sometimes helps to explain what things were like then as background to understanding some of the struggles many multiracial and Filipino American writers were facing, as well as my own inner confusion.

I grew up mixed-race in Los Angeles, in a household of Filipinos who immigrated as adults, or were visiting us from the Philippines, often for very long stays, which made for a different family life and interpersonal dynamic than what my sister and I and our many Filipino American cousins experienced at school, or witnessed in our classmates' homes.

My sister and I shared a special bond with two of our younger mixed-race cousins, of whom we were protective. This was the 1970s-'80s era of neighborhood bullies and latch key kids.

Like nobody else, they understood what it was like having two cultures, but never quite being considered a fully authentic member of either. This was a different time. Back then, there weren't many mixed-race people, at least not where we grew up, and people like us weren't visible nationally. Mixed-race actors didn't play mixed-race characters; they played full-blooded people of color, or white people with tans. We were forced to check off some other ethnicity box ("choose only one"). Back then, where we lived, when people met a mixed-race person, they usually assumed you were a full-blooded person of some other ethnicity. Mexican. Native American. Turkish. Some sort of Mediterranean. Never Filipino.

None of our classmates even realized that the Philippines was a U.S. colony for half of that century, and Spanish before that. This wasn't Daly City or Torrance. People would try to fit us into various other boxes of other ethnic groups, themselves wrapped in inaccurate stereotypes. And these were insensitive, blunt,

violent times. People would throw racist slurs at us developed for other populations.

So, all this was confusing.

A keen reader, I tried to find answers in literature. But nothing was helping me there, either. We weren't assigned Asian American literature at school, and what little I saw on the bookshelves was from mainstream presses and didn't speak to me at all. I felt an increasing need to write about it. I looked to other traditions. I saw more of ourselves in authors of Latin America, Russia. How so? The characters of Tolstoy and Chekov seemed real and complicated, imperfect, interesting—the authors free to make these people humanly weak. They seemed actual. These characters didn't seem to be required to be representations of anything Russian, of anything but themselves. I would eventually find Asian American literature that spoke to me in similar ways, such as in the anthology *Aiiieeee!* with its realistic characters who didn't seem designed to give white readers what the authors thought they wanted (familiar tropes, both positive and negative). In its pages, I would discover Filipino American authors like Carlos Bulosan, as well as multiracial author Diana Chang. All this would help me to achieve breakthroughs as a writer and reader, which I will detail later in this essay. But that wouldn't happen for several years. First, I needed to find my characters and story.

RETURN TO LOS ANGELES: BEFORE THE RODNEY KING RIOTS

I had left Los Angeles to go to college, then lived in London, visiting LA often. These were the Thatcher years and their aftermath. In England, everyone knew why there were so many South Asians living in London, Algerians in Paris. Suddenly the invisibility of Filipinos in America, and my history classes, no longer seemed to be so natural, our own fault for being uninteresting or insignificant. It seemed to me that we were a postcolonial population in a nation that didn't want to think of itself that way, and so forgot. It had been humiliating as a child, even embarrassing—now I felt indignant.

Now on return visits to LA in the 1990s, I noticed something peculiar. My two younger cousins, half Filipino like my sister and me, were passing as Chicano gangsters. They'd show up to family parties in gang clothing, which in watered-down form was popular then even among a lot of white suburban kids, but they were actually passing as non-Filipinos. The younger brother, in junior high, wore a hairnet over greased hair with a comb sticking out, and oversized flannel shirts and baggy pants that sagged so much you could see the bunched up tops of his underwear mushrooming out. The adults in our family looked on with bewilderment, but he avoided everyone's eyes and sat apart. His older brother actually belonged to a gang. I won't tell you the name, but it went back generations in LA and was strictly Mexican. He showed up in a white souped-up Oldsmobile wearing gang colors, and sometimes brought his gang friends to the parties, their

eyes red and evasive, snake-cold, smelling of pot. At his school, classmates thought he spoke Spanish and was born in Mexico (which meant he had to hide his mother from them), and although our grandparents spoke to each other in Spanish, he didn't speak it. He'd just sit there quietly, nodding, pretending he understood.

Only a couple of years earlier, he'd been a cute boy who helped me raise stray dogs to save them, went to the beaches or hiking every day in summer, wanting to be with my sister and me and our friends all the time.

Now he sat apart from us. Sometimes some of our older relatives would approach, particularly our uber-successful uncle from Forbes Park, Manila, who would approach in his suit and Italian loafers and directly prod my cousin about his life choices. This tito was no softie, had lived through the Japanese occupation, guerrilla warfare, and poverty, but worked hard to build himself a business empire. He expected similar steel from the nephews in our family.

One afternoon, my gangster cousin started complaining about how white cops had pulled him over that morning and searched him, simply because he looked Mexican; he called the cops racist.

This tito looked him over, up and down. "You dress like a thug. What do you expect? Don't complain. The policemen are just doing their jobs."

Other relatives avoided direct confrontation, but would talk about these cousins from a distance, with bewilderment, glancing at them from the food table.

One of my titas expressed out loud what others obviously thought: "If they're going to pass as something they're not, why not try to pass as white?"

Others laughed at the joke, nodding. But I could see that these relatives were covering up something else: hurt and humiliation. They knew how much white Americans looked down on Mexicans back then, at least in our neighborhoods.

These boys were ashamed to be us.

Trying to understand my cousins' behavior, forced me to look inside myself, to reflect on my own troubled childhood and inner emotional turmoil as a mixed-race

half Filipino American boy. Trying to sort through that confusion is one of the impulses that led me to want to write about it.

And there seemed to be a novel in my cousins' situation. It reminded me of the long tradition of American immigration narratives with the classic theme of assimilation, yet with a complicating twist: instead of trying to become white, they were trying to be Chicano. It reflected changing contemporary demographics of Los Angeles and a shifting, more fluid—and local—sense of status. For in my cousins' world, in their school, being a Mexican gangster was superior to being Filipino or white.

FEAR

Humiliated, our relatives judged these boys harshly. What we didn't really get then was how much my younger cousins—barely out of boyhood—were afraid.

I would later learn that on the younger brother's first week of school in Venice High (long before gentrification and Silicon Beach), a bloody kid ran through the crowded hallway clutching his stomach and shouting, "He shot me, he shot me!"

The students swarmed outside after him, into the glaring sunlight, to watch and see if he would bleed out.

The terrified boy had met my cousin's eyes. There was blood on the asphalt.

VISIT FROM A MANILA COUSIN

Fear and humiliation can lead to some bizarre and irrational thought processes. I remember a particular, disturbing conversation, in which my gangster cousin was confronted about the way he chose to dress and act by a cousin visiting from Manila.

She was the daughter of the rich uncle I told you about.

She went to posh Catholic schools, grew up in Forbes Park, and was proud and confident, as well as beautiful. Among white Americans, she handled herself with the confidence of an equal, held the eyes of even rich adults confidently. And they reciprocated respect. She had the poise of someone who went to school in Switzerland and learned horseback riding at the Makati Polo Club, and preferred without question the English riding style, learning with astonishment that my sister had chosen Western. She had the mannerisms of somebody who'd grown up surrounded by people who looked up to her, rather than down, and you could feel its presence radiate beside you.

She walked right up to our gangster cousin and asked why he was ashamed of being Asian.

He looked up at her, up and down. "I'm not Asian."

She said, "Yes you are."

He said, "No, Asians are wimpy skinny guys who take accent classes to sound white and end up sounding like nerdy radio announcers." He then did a mock accent, which sounded something like the Mike Yanagita character in *Fargo* that some people find offensive, and others find funny. Then it morphed into a generic talk radio weatherman's voice, but still with that hint of fake accent. My cousin actually delivered it perfectly, and it was funny, in an aggressive way, which made the rest of us deeply uncomfortable, and we nervously laughed. But then he noticed our nervous smiles, and seemed serious as he said that Asians were losers whom nobody respected, at least the males. When asked why he belonged to a gang, after all, most Mexicans were not thugs, he said, "When a little dark-skinned Mexican walks down the street, white people don't look at them. Or they look at them and think 'wetback' and then look past. It's a lack of respect. But if they dress like a gangster, people look at you, or they're afraid to. They might gaze down. They might even cross the street." He smiled darkly. "That's different."

Remember, this was before the Rodney King Riots, which would change Los Angeles—but not yet.

Back then, there was no Silicon Beach; Venice was considered gang infested and gangs would shoot members of a different race just for standing on the sidewalk, and Abbot Kenny was a run-down street you couldn't park your car on at night without worrying about break-ins and dog fights for money still happened in the blocks nearby. Back then schools weren't as sensitive. Classmates at mine would taunt an autistic boy and shove him into a trashcan during lunch break and roll him around without consequence. In math class, a popular older white boy once called a Taiwanese girl who always got A's a "human calculator" and said we should put her in a cardboard box and slap on the label, "Made in Taiwan." I sat in the corner waiting, in terror, for the Asian jokes to be aimed at me. That fear of humiliation was a constant traumatic state. A real thing. A tangible thing. My face would heat up, my body tremble violently, and I'd grow tongue-tied, even stuttered. My tongue would go numb with pins and needles, a sign of anxiety so bad I wasn't breathing properly enough to get sufficient oxygen. I was in frequent fear that people I didn't know well would think I was white and begin to make racist jokes, as many did when they thought they were around only white people.

I know my cousins were going through similar traumas at their schools; we would talk about it in later years; but back then our inner lives were private secrets we tried to hide.

At my school people did know I wasn't white. I won't repeat the racial slurs that got thrown my way. Nobody seemed to know what a Filipino was, let alone that we were a former U.S. colony, so kids used slurs meant for Japanese, Chinese, Vietnamese, Mexican and African-Americans (yes, the N word creatively combined with words like "yellow" "slant-eye" "coconut" "gook" and "monkey") among others.

People weren't very sophisticated in their awareness of different Asian ethnicities, even in the publishing world, even editors with PhDs, even where I grew up in California. People were blunt. One professor asked me, "What the fuck are you Brian, Mexican, Cherokee, Italian, Jewish, Chinese or what?"

People said shit like this all the time, I tell my diverse and astonished students.

This is the environment in which we lived and where my cousins and I tried to find our places in the world, and which I was trying to understand by trying to find a way to write about it. It was my emotional autobiography that would be the core of my novel, *American Son*.

TURNING POINT: DRAFTING THE NOVEL

Because I was hungry to write this book and thirsty for interesting details to give it its imaginative texture, I hung out with my cousin and his gangster friends as "research." His friends would talk about brutal Venice dog fights and laugh over the losers, at the wimpy canine's suffering or even death. They used racist terms to describe African Americans and Jewish people and various incarnations of Asian. Yes, Asians. They spoke of violence. Maybe some of this was bravado, but I know for a fact some of it was real. Some had lost relatives, friends. There was no sense of camaraderie or common cause among minorities, that was for sure.

One day I got a call for legal advice I could not provide. A couple of weeks later, I saw them on trial in a courtroom, looking like the scared teens they were, still boys really, pretending to be something they were not. The jury saw two Chicano hoodlums. After returning from court and county jail, too late with the \$20,000 bail money (cash only) to get them out, we had to leave behind my kid cousins whom I'd played with and protected for years, left them to be communally washed down by a power hose, like timbers of a building in flames, in a single aluminum room, huddled and naked with about twenty others and a single stall-less toilet in the corner.

They hosed that off too.

I went home and wrote a short story that would be the seeds for my novel.

That experience would be a turning point for my cousins, their turn to a different life, two successful lives, a maturation, but it was also a part of my own process of working through my childhood traumas in the form of writing, because I saw in their struggles some of my own troubles as a mixed-race Filipino American male growing up in the late 20th century. Not long afterward, I finished a draft of *American Son*.

Now I read it over. The characters I created—Gabe and Tomas—were fiction, more parts of myself than portraits of anyone else. I'd put parts of myself into their situations, an alchemy born of emotional empathy and connection. Emotional autobiography.

CYPHERS

I recently heard a leading neurologist say that our fear of humiliation can be stronger than our fear of death. It's primordial. It's linked with our need to belong to the tribe, because in the conditions in which humans evolved, if you got kicked out into the wilderness, you died.

Humiliation, I tell my writing students, is one of the most powerful emotions. It can make people do strange things.

Embarrass, humiliate and shame your characters and readers will feel what they feel, will bond with them (even unsympathetic ones, the interesting and complicated ones), because we all fear being cut off.

My cousins' passing behavior was born of humiliation, and a desire to belong. That's what I connected to. I never tried to pass as a white person or anything else, never wanted to: just the opposite. I suffered a terrifying anxiety in childhood and adolescence that came when white people mistakenly thought I was one of them, and would begin to make racist jokes. I would blush, mortified, paralyzed, tongue-tied, fingertips-numb, afraid of being caught out, wanting to flee.

We were cyphers: people took us for what they wanted to see, or what they knew, which wasn't us. The half century of U.S. rule over the Philippines had been erased from our history classes. Thus, people projected onto us something else.

At home we belonged. But outside this life, we were outsiders to all the different tribes.

III.

STUCK AND UNSTUCK: DISCOVERING NEW LITERATURE AND THE REVISION PROCESS

So, I'd written my novel draft.

But then I put it down, looked at it, reread it, and became doubtful. Stuck. Worried my characters weren't Asian American enough, or positive enough renditions.

I worked on other things. I read widely. A year passed, maybe more. At some point I found some works that helped, including *Aiiieeee!* I must say it had a huge impact. First, it is astonishing to think this, but I hadn't read any of the Filipino American authors in the book—not Peñaranda, not Tagatac, not even Bulosan! Nobody I knew had read *America is in the Heart*. So I read them, was surprised to find out that not only did Filipinos write, but they wrote well and remarkably. It meant a lot that they existed, and were taken seriously enough by people (the editors and publisher) to be anthologized. Most importantly, the anthology led me to read *America is in the Heart* and that book, more than anything, had a profound impact on my revision process.

Second, and this was important, the contextualization in the preface and introductions were the first analysis of Asian American literature I'd read that spoke to me, that seemed honest and real. It was the first text I read that took Filipino American literature seriously, gave it depth and space—indeed, respect. It acknowledged our unique history. I'm not saying there weren't other good commentaries out there; but this is the first one I found that I connected with, that didn't seem designed to simplify things for white readers or to water-down analysis in order to appeal to ethnic communities hungry for positive role models or representations to outsiders.

I realized that I'd been held back by the burden of some misguided notions of what I was supposed to do as an "Asian American writer," notions that seemed to be predominant at the time as evidenced by the continual recycling and regurgitation of simplistic tropes in much of the Asian American literature being picked up by mainstream publishers then. I think I had already known this in my bones, but I would self-doubt. I thought I was supposed to "represent" some sort of an authentic Asian American culture, but that as a mixed race half-Filipino, my own experience (and those of people like me) weren't authentic or complete. Discovering books like *Aiiieeee!* and *Charlie Chan is Dead* helped to free me from these burdens.

Importantly, the *Aiiieeee!* editors gave attention to mixed-race characters, both in Frank Chin's essay, with its mention of Diana Chang and Han Suyin, and in the inclusion of the Diana Chang selection, to which I felt particularly drawn. The acute social and psychological observations of her mixed-race character, Sylvia (from *The Frontiers of Love*) are particularly compelling:

And as for Chinatown, Sylvia could not even bear to think of it to this day, that ghetto begging tourists to inspect its shame. And, of course, there were other things...that unhinged her...she discovered that her mother's America was an illusion and was, for her at least, untrue. How terrible it was that she had given the first twelve years of her imagination to such a lie. (38)

I identified with Sylvia's emotions, indeed recognized them as my own.

Sylvia is the daughter of a Chinese father and white American mother. Seeing people like me in print, taken seriously, was of course an affirmative act that gave me a boost as a writer. But Chang also provided an example of how one could use a mixed-race perspective to her advantage — not by giving us some generalized representation of a “mixed-race experience,” but rather by giving us a character with a unique, sensitive and nuanced perspective on two cultures, their interplay, conflicts and ironies. As in many 19th century social novels, Chang selected an ideal point of view character according to Henry James' admonition: choose the person who has the broadest knowledge and perspective of the situation observed. In *The Frontiers of Love*, Sylvia might not have understood America as well as her American mother, Helen, or China as well as her Chinese father, Liyi; but she had a broader understanding than either of her parents about many of the cultural differences, and how such differences affected their marriage, family life, and children. As Sylvia reflected: “Helen loved Liyi and would always love him. But she didn't love China (why should she?), and she did not recognize the conflict, an inheritance she did not even know that she had given her children” (Chang 39).

I went back to my draft, read it over, newly inspired, and went to work.

FINAL NOTES

The original version of this anthology had also opened the door to discovering other Asian American writings, works that were out there but unknown to me, untaught, not on the bookshelves, but which called to me and inspired my revisions. Writers like Bienvenido Santos, José Garcia Villa and N.V.M Gonzalez.

Even the anthology's commentary and selections devoted to literature written by Japanese American and Chinese American authors helped because I'd been raised with stereotypes applied to Chinese and Japanese Americans thrown at me,

by people who lumped all Asians together. By contrast, this anthology helps readers to understand the history behind them and also the perils of Asian Americans trying to write fiction to please white editors and journalists—even the well-intending kind.

As a teacher in Ohio, I have found this anthology to be a useful requirement. The historical background is concise and comprehensive; the literary selections are worth reading in their own right; and it's all great preparation for the more recent literary works I assign later in the semester. So I am excited that a new edition is forthcoming.

Works Cited

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