

Article

# Afro-Asian Intimacies: Cross-Pollination and the Persistence of Anti-Blackness in Chinese Culture

Crystal Kwok

Department of Comparative Literature, The University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam 999077, Hong Kong; blurringthecolorline@gmail.com

**Abstract:** America's racial history is largely siloed and compartmentalized, separating minority group experiences as if they were neat rows of isolated, discernable categories. Resisting binary narratives, this article reframes history by focusing on the largely unknown lives of the Chinese immigrants and African American communities in the segregated south. An examination of the intimate histories between the two marginalized groups illuminates how structures of the central white power enforced racial projects that pit Asians and African Americans against each other, laying roots to the tensions we see continuing to play out today. Through my documentary film, *Blurring the Color Line*, which follows my grandmother's family growing up in a Black neighborhood, I dive into the obscure but illuminating space of in-betweenness to disrupt hegemonic productions of knowledge and to reveal nuanced stories of how cross-pollinating communities moved amongst and against one another in order to survive and thrive. Stories of conformity and co-mingling between two disempowered communities beg us to question how the language of skin informs social placement and how silenced histories speak deeper truths about the processes and consequences of racialization.

**Keywords:** Chinese American; Black history; Jim Crow; racism; Augusta; segregation; model minority; passing; documentary

## 1. Introduction

Very little is documented about the Chinese in the American Deep South, let alone the examination of Afro-Asian relationships. I originally embarked on a personal story about my grandmother, Pearl Lum, who grew up running the family store in Augusta, Georgia, during segregation. She ran away when she was seventeen. I wanted to know what it meant to grow up Chinese in a Black space and what pushed her out. As my story was forming, the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 erupted after the deaths of George Floyd (Floyd 2023), Breonna Taylor (B. Taylor 2023), and Ahmaud Arbery (Arbery 2023). This unleashed a sobering reminder of America's racial legacy, burdened with memories of trauma and violence against people of color. Asians stepped up in solidarity to condemn the acts of violence against Black bodies. "We should celebrate the capacity to find love and common ground across differences and feel shame when we step on the necks of those at the bottom while taking a shine to those at the top." (Perry 2022). While there seemed to be a promising coming together of communities to fight injustices, dark histories of tensions loom in the not-so-distant past. In 1991, Latasha Harlins<sup>1</sup> was a fifteen year old African American girl shot and killed by a Korean storekeeper in Los Angeles. In 2014, African American man Akai Gurley<sup>2</sup> was fatally shot by Asian NYPD officer Peter Liang. Both of these stories were made into films (*A Love Song For Latasha* and *Down a Dark Stairwell*) and remind us of the fraught relationship between the two groups.<sup>3</sup>

This history of violence and tensions between the Black and Asian communities changed the trajectory of my film. *Blurring the Color Line* (Kwok 2022), gathering stories from my grandmother's family and the larger community, opened up uncomfortable but necessary conversations about the perpetuation of anti-Black racism within the Chinese community and



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how both marginalized groups worked together around the hierarchical structure of white power. Insights into the dynamics between these two groups in the Jim Crow south offer a more nuanced understanding of tensions that we continue to see playing out today. Back in the 1940s and 1950s, it was not always a strained relationship. The stories of intimacy I share through my film open up a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics between the two groups not seen in dominant history.

The way the Chinese and Black communities became intertwined is premised on exclusion. While the legacy of slavery loomed heavily in the south in the early 1900s, the Chinese were also marginalized, forced to live in ghettos we call Chinatown. My grandmother's family moved from San Francisco to Augusta in 1927. They were part of a growing community of immigrant families that moved into Black neighborhoods in the south to seek better opportunities. When white plantation owners shut down commissary stores that provided basic provisions to freed African-American laborers, the Chinese opened grocery stores to fill this niche. This new merchant class of Chinese immigrants ended up settling into the Black neighborhood and built a thriving community amongst themselves. Despite being defined as non-white, they slipped into an obscure position where they were able to attend white schools and drink from white water fountains, opportunities not afforded to the Black community.

Unlike circumstances of crisis that might have brought these two groups together, like Japanese women and Black soldiers during WW2<sup>4</sup> and Korean women with Black military personnel during the Korean War<sup>5</sup>, the dynamics in the Jim Crow south was a different type of mixing in that the Chinese held this precarious position of being both partially colored and white-adjacent. Not fitting neatly under the binary racial framework, Chinese faced a unique set of challenges in identity and social positioning. They were seen as colored, but not Black. But because of relative economic success and lighter skin, they were accepted into white society as honorary whites. However, it is crucial to recognize that Chinese faced discrimination and exclusion across the Jim Crow period. The difference, perhaps, is that the Chinese immigrants could create a sense of belonging and support system against racial discrimination whereas their Black neighbors were perpetually disenfranchised as the system of white power did everything they could to keep them at the bottom. *Blurring the Color Line* examines how the Chinese in their liminal position between the black and white divide played into the system of the color line. Slipping into an invisible category, the Chinese performed their roles as the quiet and unthreatening group. They distance themselves from Black neighbors in effort to stay higher up on the color line. Vijay Prashad cleverly rephrases W.E.B. Du Bois's famous statement that "The problem of the twentieth century, then, is the problem of the color blind". (Prashad 2002, p. 38) It is not what we do not see, but what we choose not to see.

Research and interviews for *Blurring the Color Line* began in 2017 and continued over five years. I found one source on the Chinese in the south that actually examined this very community. (Bronstein 2009) My data collection consisted primarily of interviews conducted with the Chinese and Black communities of Augusta, Georgia—specifically, elder residents who lived through segregation and had a connection to the grocery stores within the Black neighborhood. My method of examining racialized spaces lies in the intimate stories rooted in sexual relations and desire, which, I argue, reveals a deeper truth about how racism manifests. I sought out female voices because they reveal important truths about our history that are not documented under male-dominated structures. The women not only dominated the store space, but my relationship and comfort level with my grandmother and her sisters opened up deeper spaces for sourcing rich personal stories. While this documentary serves as a critical body of knowledge to challenge and reframe history, I recognize the limitation and partiality of information due to the personal approach to the subject matter. I also recognize that my position as an Asian American woman might have impacted the way the subjects shared their stories and ultimately framed this new production of history and knowledge.

## 2. Cross-Pollination

Power structures rely on order and boundaries to define who is accepted and who is not. In addition to segregation laws, patriarchal Chinese family structures positioned women as dutiful daughters and wives, which factored into their subservient roles in white America. Pearl Lum and several of her siblings found ways to resist order and secretly created cross-racial romantic encounters that troubled the system. Feminist anthropologist Anna Tsing uses contamination as a term for positive cross-pollination. “Everyone carries a history of contamination; purity is not an option.” (Tsing 2017, p. 28). The self-interest on behalf of white power to uphold racial purity limits and reduces our knowledge of life around us. Like the forest that Tsing examines, species grow and thrive better in diverse spaces. It is a more complicated space but “it is in listening to that cacophony of troubled stories that we might encounter our best hopes for precarious survival.” (Tsing 2017, p. 34). Troubling stories offer truths behind the intertwined histories.

While Black Lives Matter has inspired more critical thought on race relations, there is little research conducted from the perspective of Chinese people in Black spaces. More attention is focused on how Black people are situated in Chinese spaces, such as in China, and how Black people experience anti-Black racism (Street Interview 2021). Like many non-Asian travelers to China, locals are often fascinated by visitors with different hair and skin color. But for Black people, it takes on an entirely new level bordering on spectacle (Davis 2017). A viral video of African kids singing in Chinese about having low IQ sparked an outcry, as covered by BBC Africa (Francavilla 2022). Conversely, far less is known about how Chinese navigated their lives in Black spaces in the U.S. and what contributed to their anti-Black perceptions. Speaking to historical silences, author and activist Helen Zia states that Asian Americans are not “missing in action”; they are “missing in history” (Demsas 2021). Their invisibility played into and contributed to the tensions between the two communities. Why should this migrant group be more accepted than Black people because their skin is lighter? “Is lighter better?”, asks scholar Joanne Rondilla (Rondilla and Spikard 2007). How did the world come to standardize beauty based on whiteness? The long history of colonialism and classism spills over to complicate the development of racialized communities in the segregated south.

Entangling of the two groups forces us to rethink how history is told and how little we know about co-mingling between Asians and Black individuals and communities. Ann Laura Stoler examines Foucault’s notion of bio-power and the colonial justification of sexually policing bodies in order to maintain racial purity (Stoler 1995). She brings attention to racialized practices of European bodies and the sexual politics of class and race. Lisa Lowe, also centering research around colonialism, connects slave history to Chinese immigration history (Lowe 2015, p. 27). My entrance through intimate stories of dating and sexual relationships sheds new light on how the Afro-Asian community across the Jim Crow era built their lives off each other, and how bodies mixed. While the Chinese in Augusta chose to assimilate with the dominant white group, there were encounters that allowed for secret relationships that defied structure and opened up intimate possibilities.

It should be noted that the term “Anti-Blackness” was not a term used within the Asian community. The Chinese community I grew up with in San Francisco did not believe in or care to understand this term. As an elderly Chinese answered on the bus when I asked whether or not he thought Chinese discriminated against Black people, he said, “No, it’s not that we discriminate against them. It’s just that Black people are lazy”.<sup>6</sup> This false narrative unfortunately still remains a prevalent attitude especially amongst the older generation of Chinese people in the U.S.

## 3. The Blurry Middle

Chinese people did not enter segregated spaces with the understanding of being in the blurry middle. They learned quickly to position themselves on the white side of the color line. They did not desire to become storekeepers in the Black neighborhood. It was the racial structure at the time that opened up opportunities to Chinese immigrants. While

clearly less disadvantaged than the Black community, the merchant class Chinese storekeepers built their lives and success off of them. “There is always an excess to the Asian community’s ‘successful’ disassociation from African Americans and its own “partly colored” past” (Bow 2007). By disassociating with them, it would be less uncomfortable building their wealth from disenfranchised people. And by buying into the negative perceptions of Black people, it was easier to feel higher up on the color line. Despite being able to attend white schools, the Chinese were still a marginalized group and the Black community recognized this. On one hand, there was a clear distinction of power to which Chinese people adhered. But on the other hand, they needed each other to survive. As James Brown’s daughter, Deanna explains, “it takes a village to raise a child, but not everybody has to look alike”<sup>7</sup>. (Brown 2018) (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Crystal interviewing Deanna Brown.

The paternal disciplinary model under a fierce patriarchal system at times seemed to work within this mixed community. Marion Williams, who once worked as an errand boy, recalls how his Chinese boss would often give parental advice in avoiding bad influences and working hard.

“He always told me to do right. He always encouraged me to not to follow no bad boys. He said those are bad boys, he would tell me.” (Williams 2018)

With many Black youths on their own while their parents worked, this neighborly watch came naturally and was appreciated. Childhood memories around the store from the Black community were particularly endearing. Many young people fondly remembered buying cookies, pickles, and snow cones. Marvin Davies (Davies 2019) recalled how he convinced the store keeper to hire him as an errand boy when he was barely tall enough to ride the delivery bicycle. This was a time when both communities trusted each other, unlike the Civil Rights era when violence and hatred brewed and erupted into riots. “As far as we were concerned, we were all community”, says long-time resident Lourdes Coleman (Coleman 2018); “Anything any child was selling for whatever, they would buy ‘em. Everybody supported everybody else”. The Chinese offered a credit system, allowing customers to pay at the end of the month when they had the means. They also cashed checks for their customers who were often turned away at white run banks. The relationship was mostly transactional but there were mutual benefits that made things work. They trusted and supported each other as both groups struggled to survive. Leon Maben stated plainly, “And there was respect. I go to Mr. Paul’s and I was never called a nigger”<sup>8</sup>. While these two communities enjoyed mostly harmonious cohabitation, things got complicated when sexual intimacy was involved. I share several stories of cross-racial intimacy that illuminate the complications that come with cross-pollinating. Barbara Lum Morgan is

my grand aunt who married a Black man from Mississippi; Jack is a Chinese storekeeper who maintained his secret relationship with a Black woman; most disturbing is the murder of Chinese grocer J.K. Joe by three Black men. All three of these situations were complicated by sexual intimacies, shedding light on the concept of racial purity, desire, and the performance of white supremacy in their lives.

#### 4. The Language of Skin

With the brutal history of slavery, Black bodies have historically been marked, abused, and commodified in order to serve and maintain white power. Their dark bodies are the marker of Otherness, drawing attention to their difference based on color. Pigment, the language of skin, then, as Vijay Prashad suggests, becomes the defining concept of acceptance and placement. In his critical work, *Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting*, Prashad points out how English troops during the Opium War (1839–1842) were called “white devils” because of their pale skin while Indian troops were called “black devils” because of their dark skin. (Prashad 2001) Some Chinese people, with relatively fair skin, have sometimes managed to slip into white spaces as the quiet and invisible group.

Beyond the color of skin, wardrobe and mobility were markers of privilege during segregation. My grandmother and her sisters dressed elegantly in western fashion, revealing their comfortable status as successful merchants and modern women. Unlike their Black neighbors, they were able to freely enter shops from the front entrance and try on clothes. Performance scholar Stephen Berrey (Berrey 2015) suggests how there was more mixed space than we would like to believe, and how encounters between different races were common and not so clearly segregated between Black and white folks during Jim Crow. On the streets, Black and white people would often share public space except for specifically designated segregated spaces such as restaurants and theaters. As my family story illuminates, the same was true of Chinese and Black people; however, little is documented about these experiences. What contributed to their invisibility both in history and as visual markers of everyday life during Jim Crow?

One reason is that the Chinese in Augusta minimized their time on the streets. Living upstairs from their stores, they rarely had reason to venture out other than to go to school or some Chinese cultural activity. The other reason is what became known as the model minority myth<sup>9</sup>, an inaccurate, harmful stereotype created by white Americans to drive a wedge and shame other minority groups. The minority myth plays into anti-Black racism. Chinese people were quiet, hard-working, and unthreatening, and stood in contrast to Black people who were labeled as violent, lazy, and threatening. While the Chinese enjoyed this privileged space, these false narratives kept Black people down and disenfranchised. This distancing of the Black community was embedded in Chinese residents' everyday lives, and no one seemed to think anything of it. When asked whether the Lum sisters made friends with their Black neighbors, my grand Aunt Mildred, said matter-of-factly, “No! Thumbs down”.<sup>10</sup>

The invisibility of Asians in the segregated south and the negative narratives against Black people created a breeding ground for racial conflicts. Adding to the tensions was the unequal distribution of wealth. As the Chinese were able to build their wealth and send their kids to college, the Black community were trapped in a vicious cycle of oppression, leading to resentment and frustration. In a group interview with the First Baptist church community of Augusta, Chinese church member Ray Rufo (Rufo 2018) recalled how awkward it was to pass a Black school in order to get to the white school he attended. Was it awkward because he felt bad for the Black kids' situation or that he felt comfort in his privileged position? Ellen Dong explained, “Ultimately the goal was to not have to run a grocery store for the rest of your life, to get into the professions” (Dong 2018).

Over time, many members of Augusta's Black community came to see the Chinese as benefitting from their own struggle and resented the fact that they could flow between Black and white spaces. While there were many warm memories from both sides up to the mid-1950s, the success of Chinese merchants did ultimately contribute to growing ten-

sions leading up to the Civil Rights era. When I asked the Black community whether they thought the Chinese looked down on them, Francine Scott answered, “In a way, yes. I really do think that, you know, we’re the storekeepers and we got the purse and you need us. Clearly it wasn’t, we’re equal” (Scott 2018).

While growing success may have strained the Chinese community’s relationship with their Black neighbors, this was not the way the white community felt. Deacon of the First Baptist Church, Anna Bannister, explains, “I just accepted the Chinese that I didn’t think much about it” (Bannister 2019). She did not have to think about it because the Chinese did not threaten the balance of white superiority. More troubling is what the Minister’s wife, Mrs. Charlotte Robinson, said, after I asked how she felt about the peculiar position the Chinese were situated in during segregation, “We just accepted them, and loved them, and loved their culture and loved their presence, everywhere. And we still do” (Robinson 2019). This begs the question, what exactly were Chinese residents being accepted into? And were they supposed to be grateful for not being treated like Black residents? The First Baptist Church members listened quietly (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** First Baptist Church Chinese members.

The Chinese community of Augusta performed a behavior that worked well with the dominant white group. Keeping quietly polite with heads down, it was easier to slip into societal acceptance by not drawing attention to themselves. “Commonly we find that upward mobility involves the presentation of proper performance and that efforts to move upward and effort to keep from moving downward are expressed in terms of sacrifices made for the maintenance of the front” (Goffman 1959, p. 36). The narrative of Chinese being pleasantly quiet and relatively invisible compliments white power. In addition to their effort to gain the respect from the white community, their visual markers as “near whiteness”<sup>11</sup> allowed them to slip under the radar.

The position of Chinese as white-adjacent needs to be distinguished from “passing”, which referred mostly to mulattos, the term used at the time for mixed Black and white individuals. Passing was a way improve social mobility for fair skinned Black people but often carried deep psychological burdens and consequences<sup>12</sup>. It pit Black people against their own kind for giving up their African heritage pride to masquerade in whiteness (Fikes 2014). While the discourse around passing for the privilege of access to white space is vital to understanding blurry in-between spaces, it focuses on the binary black and white divide. Paul Spickard, in his essay about racial change, cleverly coins a term, “shape-shifting” (Spickard 2022), to unpack the complexities of racial formation due to different circumstances that were not limited to Black identity. The Chinese version of passing, un-

like Black passing, was a privileged position, a precarious placement that was coded to distinguish the more acceptable “Others”. While Black passers implied a harsher reality to survive, Chinese in the segregated south might have shifted their racial identity in order to become a part of society, a luxury Black people were denied. This complexity of identity entangles with colorism and classism, especially in many Asian countries where fairer skin is seen as more beautiful and therefore more marriageable (Rondilla and Spikard 2007, p. 4). Laying low and keeping quiet helped Chinese residents remain under the radar of categorization, hence their invisible and silent place in America’s racial history during Jim Crow. While the Chinese were not completely accepted into white society, their fair skin privileged them with a position of invisibility, a marker of privilege and a ticket to mobility under the hierarchy of white power. They performed as near-white citizens. To the Black community, the Chinese performed a different front. Being courteous and respectful to their Black customers, they maintained a harmonious relationship despite the transactional nature. Meanwhile, in the “back” region where guards are let down, negative attitudes dwell. Some slangs referring to Black people like “black bean” and “soy sauce chicken” were shared during an interview with some Chinese folks. Then, of course, there is the front from the Black community in which they shared mostly positive stories to me when being interviewed.

Chinese in the American south were not always accepted into white spaces, and it differed from state to state. In the historic 1927 Supreme Court case, “Gong Lum v. Rice”<sup>13</sup>, a Chinese girl, Martha Lum, was barred from going to a public white school in Rosedale, Mississippi, because she was considered colored.<sup>14</sup> In Augusta, the First Baptist Church advocated for the Chinese to be able to attend white schools, possibly in response to this set back. This shows the instability and ambiguity of the Chinese position during segregation. Many Chinese families living in other southern states sent their children to live with relatives in Georgia so that they could attend white schools. Sending a child to a Black school was not an option for the Chinese. The burden of being seen as partially colored cast them in a precarious predicament that sometimes worked in their favor and sometimes not. They blurred the color line.

In effort to remain undetected and avoid attention, Chinese storekeepers created a self-contained and self-isolating lifestyle. They did not need to go out much, nor was it encouraged. Long-time resident James Riles (Riles 2019) recalls how Chinese kids were driven to and from their white schools and back to the stores. The Chinese hardly walked around the streets in the Black neighborhood. They were unseen because they literally kept to themselves on a daily basis. Pearl Lum’s sister Mildred recalls not even knowing how to use a fork because they were never permitted to go to western restaurants by their strict, controlling parents. Their Chinese cultural behavior of being quiet and obedient reinforced their invisibility. Upholding deep-seeded Confucian beliefs, many of the families adhered to these traditions of being dutiful and respectful, which further contributed to their privileged position in the segregated south.

## 5. My Black Cousins

I did not know that I had Black relatives until I embarked on this documentary project. This part of my family history was intentionally erased by relatives who were too horrified and embarrassed that someone in the family would actually marry a Black man. Not only was inter-racial marriage unacceptable at the time, but it complicated the dominant structures that held systems in place. It was a messy category that highlighted the narrow, binary structure created by white power. The Chinese slipped comfortably into white spaces, which signified being higher up on the color line. This means that they had to step on others in order to achieve this more privileged status. This white-adjacent space that the Chinese occupied “required a dual engagement, both white identification and black disavowal”.<sup>15</sup>

Barbara Lum married her husband, a Black man, in 1971. Because of the color of his skin, he was marked to be someone who would not be able to provide for her and potentially bring danger into her life. The negative impression of Black people being dangerous

and unworthy was distilled in the Barbara's family's way of thinking. This perhaps made it easier to disassociate themselves from them and to justify their position higher up on the color line. Entangling Chinese patriarchal attitudes with racial rules at the time, Barbara tried to make sense of the reasons for her parent's discriminating views. "My mom, because she was in an arranged marriage, we had to deal with her bitterness throughout her whole marriage and my dad was very prejudiced. I guess he thought his race was more superior or something. He was afraid someone would shoot me or we wouldn't be able to get housing or my husband wouldn't make enough money". (B. Wong 2019) These fears and stereotypes of Black people persisted within the Lum family. Even though this was during the desegregation period, Barbara's parents would never find it socially acceptable for a Chinese woman to marry a Black person. The Chinese patriarchal order complicated the already prevalent discrimination.

Marked by her black skin, Barbara's daughter, Leanne, was told that she could not play outside her Chinese grandparent's house in the predominantly white neighborhood of Santa Barbara. She was unaccepted because of her dark skin, because of what this implied and performed. Her mixed Chinese and Black identity blurred her position under the looming hierarchical color line. Leanne's nineteen year old daughter, Asia, tried to make sense of her position as a mixed race girl.

"I had some Asian friends growing up. I don't think the Asians really...I just don't see a lot of Asians hanging out with Black people. I don't. I feel like they fall more in line with the White people because...I know Asians can get dark like Filipinos, I've seen a lot of darker Filipinos and stuff like that but they're not Black...I also feel like they feel they don't fit in with Black people." (Stribling 2019)

There were many pauses in Asia's thoughts (Figure 3). She struggled to find the right words to comprehend this anti-Black attitude even within her own family.



**Figure 3.** Interview with Asia Stribling.

## 6. Jack's Secret Romance

Miscegenation laws banned interracial marriages up until 1967; marriages between Black and Chinese people did not upset white power in their agenda for racial purity. While Walter Lum, Pearl's youngest brother, had to drive to South Carolina to marry his Caucasian wife, Willy, in 1960, Afro-Asian romances were self-censored because neither community would accept them, even if it was not illegal. According to a rumor told by Tyrone Butler<sup>16</sup>, Jack was a Chinese grocer during the Jim Crow period who developed a secret relationship with a Black woman. They had several illegitimate children together. No Chinese community member shared this story or cared to validate it. The secrecy of their intimate relationship further contributed to the invisibility of these mixed-race ro-

mances. Residues of a racial project are manifested through the erasure of mixed-race bodies. Even today, mixed-race marriages carry a burden of nonacceptance. Influencer Ryan Alex Holmes shared on a panel discussion that as an Afro-Asian mixed-race kid growing up in a Chinese household, he was Chinese inside the house, but the moment he stepped out of the house, he was Black.<sup>17</sup> In the real world, he is ultimately defined by the language of his skin.

Black–Asian romance is nothing new. Co-mingling is natural when circumstances bring different groups together. In Japan, there were many inter-racial intimacies between Japanese women and Black soldiers during WWII that complicated the U.S. regulation of bodies based on color (Gomez 2019). From a transnational context, these stories not only reveal inter-racial encounters created by war, but also highlights the United States' problematic racial history and its entanglement with sexual relations on a global scale. Black servicemen found romance with Japanese women while serving in Tokyo, and it complicated their lives back in the U.S. with immigration restrictions and mixed-race children. Back in Augusta, Jack built his secret family around racial codes that largely went undetected. While he might have taken care of the children with access to limitless food and supplies from the grocery store, the lives of these mixed-race children were most likely reduced to a life of oppression because they were still Black in the Jim Crow south.

### 7. JK Joe and the Violence of Interracial Mixing

I first learned about JK Joe (not to be confused with Jack who had children with a Black woman) when we were setting up to interview some Augusta Chinese community members. The camera was not rolling yet but mics were attached and audio was on. Chinese storekeeper, Ray Rufo (2018), started to talk about this case of a Chinese grocer killed by several Black men. When he realized we might be recording, he quickly changed the subject. This was a story the Chinese did not want to tell. When I mentioned the murder to members of Augusta's Black community, they all openly confirmed the case. The Augusta Chronicle documented it as a case of simple robbery, but many folks knew the truth behind JK Joe's romantic involvement with a Black woman. Stephen Wong ended up sharing some gruesome details of the crime. "When they got in (the store), they jumped him and they tortured him. They tied him to a chair and they say they cut his penis off and stuck it in his mouth". (S. Wong 2018) Was this a manifestation of violence built up from the history of horror against Black bodies? Did these Black men feel this was an opportunity to reclaim power over any group they could target after being so brutally controlled by white dominance throughout American history? The legacy of slavery and the unequal distribution of power created a tension that consequentially ended in tragedy. Not only did it reinforce stereotypes of the violent Black man, it also framed the Chinese as the victim. These tensions persist through the present and have exacerbated anti-Asian hate crimes.

Self-interests and efforts to build social and economic mobility created almost a denial of discrimination on behalf of Augusta's Chinese merchants. Storekeeper Ida Tom opened up some uncomfortable truths: "They (Chinese) don't want nothing to do with the Blacks but yet they want their money, you know" (Tom 2018). James Riles further explained, "They played the Chinese against the Blacks like the Chinese were a little better than the Blacks and the Whites were a little better than the Chinese. That's the way it went." (Riles 2019). The tensions between the two communities was complicated by sexual intimacies and magnified the entanglement of race, gender, and power.

The refusal to discuss and document such troubling stories results in an erasure of truths and leaves a distorted and reductive version of history. This story not only reinforces the overlapping space both communities occupied, but it reveals the ways in which power performs in the production of history. The Augusta Chronicle's coverage of the 1949 murder (Figure 4) simplified the story as a case of robbery at the expense of the deeper context that shaped this murder. (Augusta Chronicle 1949) Framed through a white lens, the story seemed to justify the death penalty for the three convicted Black men. The unfortu-

nate story of J.K. Joe brought attention to Black struggle, white power, and the Chinese in the precarious blurry middle.



**HELD ON MURDER CHARGE** — These three young Negro men were booked on murder charges yesterday in connection with the brutal slaying of a Chinese merchant last Monday morning. Police have statements from all three in which they implicate one another and also two other Negro men with the slaying of J. K. Joe in his grocery-residence, 1256 Wrightboro road. Officers are seeking the other two men in distant cities. Left to right the accused are: John Richard Harge, Curtis Wynn Jr., and Charles L. Cade, all residents of Augusta. (Robert Wilkinson Photo)

### Three Negro Men Are Booked in Murder Of Chinese Merchant and Others Sought

(Continued from Page One)

ed by the others and carried to the bedroom.

**No. Warning**

A cut of ham on the block and the butcher knife was nearby, which was evidence enough to show that the merchant had no warning of an impending attack and was going to accede to the customer's wishes, officers said. It was then, police believe, that Joe was seized and hustled to the bedroom. That the torture was begun in this room was evidenced by the large amount of blood in the room. Police believe that he was then bound by the feet and dragged into the kitchen and forced to open the safe after which the death blow was dealt.

Chief Green said that robbery was the motive, nothing else. He said that he is of the opinion that the slayers secured around \$1,000. Besides the murder charge the trio are also charged with armed robbery.

Chief Green was high in his praise of the work accomplished by the police and detectives, stating that none of them quit or gave up hope until suspects were behind the bars.

### New Training Device for Pilots Big Step Toward Safety in Air

NEW YORK, Dec. 26. (INS) — The altimeter shows 10,000 feet—and it's still climbing.

The crew and passengers settle down to the comfortable routine of an overseas flight. And then, with galvanic suddenness, a bell rings out. Red lights flash nervously on the pilot's control panel.

The number two engine is on fire. And the automatic fire extinguisher isn't working.

The pilot tries to cut out the engine and switch on an auxiliary extinguisher. But something has gone wrong with the electrical equipment.

**Losing Altitude**

The ship begins losing altitude. The blazing engine gasps convulsively and goes dead. That, at least, eliminates the drag.

But now—the right wing flap is jammed. The pilot tries frantically to juggle it. The large hand on the altimeter spins more and more quickly. Nine thousand feet . . . eight thousand . . . seven thousand . . .

The terrifying, minute-by-minute account of an ocean air tragedy? Well—it might be.

But this time, happily, the frightening sequence of events occurs in a hangar at LaGuardia airport in New York City—and not ten thousand feet above the ocean.

The Boeing strato-cruiser is not an actual plane—but a Dehmel electronic flight trainer which precisely duplicates the flight deck of the trans-oceanic clipper.

The flight "trainer" or "simulator" is the invention of an electronic engineer, Dr. Richard C. Dehmel. It is manufactured by the Curtiss-Wright airplane corporation at a cost of about \$250,000 a unit.

Pan American Airways has been using the device for the last year

Police were frank to state that they are not giving out any part of the statements made by the three due to the fact that they believe they have the right men, that they want to keep secret all evidence they can until the case is presented to the grand jury.

**Brutal Slaying**

The murder of the Chinese merchant was one of the most brutal in the annals of the police department. All evidence in the man's kitchen pointed to the fact that he was first tortured by his slayers before he opened a safe in which he kept his money. He was first slashed about the face, arms and back, this torture probably taking place in the bedroom. His feet, it was believed, were then bound and he was dragged to the safe, in front of which the body was found. It had been opened. Officers are of the belief that after he opened the safe he was stabbed in the throat, the wound which probably caused his death. A large butcher knife was on a meat cutters block nearby. This knife was bloody and police are of the opinion it was the murder weapon. It is now in possession of the police.

Chief Green said that it was learned that the five men met at Ninth and Gwinnett streets on Sunday night, December 18, and plotted a robbery. Apparently it made no difference who the victim might be. However, the five went to Joe's place of business around 11 o'clock and looked the place over. They did not go in at that time because some customers were in the store, officers said. Later on, probably midnight or after, one of the men went in and sought the purchase of a piece of ham. It was then, police said, that Joe was seized

ed by the others and carried to the bedroom.

bound by the feet and dragged into the kitchen and forced to open the safe after which the death blow was dealt.

Chief Green said that robbery was the motive, nothing else. He said that he is of the opinion that the slayers secured around \$1,000. Besides the murder charge the trio are also charged with armed robbery.

Chief Green was high in his praise of the work accomplished by the police and detectives, stating that none of them quit or gave up hope until suspects were behind the bars.

The reactions of pilot and crew are traced on a circular chart or "scraper." These charts later are analyzed to determine the promptness with which the men responded to the various situations; the efficiency with which the problems are solved, and the degree of coordination achieved between the pilot and crew.

### Senate Payrolls To Be Published

WASHINGTON, Dec. 26.—(INS) —Senate Secretary Leslie Biffle said today that publication of senators' office payrolls, halted two years ago, will be resumed.

Biffle made the statement as Sens. Humphrey (D-Minn.), and Morse (R-Ore.), demanded full public reports on senate salaries as a safeguard against "kickbacks."

The secretary said that senate leaders have decided to resume the inclusion of senators' aides in their annual publication of salaries and expenditures.

He said it was discontinued two years ago because leaders thought it would be too voluminous as a result of the employee turnover that followed the taking over of senate control by Republicans.

Figure 4. Augusta Chronicle, 7 December 1949, page 3.

### 8. "Me Soul Brother"

Even as the Jim Crow era came to an end, underlying racial tensions continued to fuel discord in Augusta's Black and Chinese communities. In May 1970, Augusta expe-

rienced a large racial uprising, triggered by a tragedy in prison where a mentally challenged teenage Black boy, Charles Oatman<sup>18</sup>, was beaten to death. Mass destruction was unleashed against any businesses owned by non-Black residents. Chinese store owners created a sign, “We Soul Brothers”, in a desperate attempt to save their stores from being burnt down. In using “We”, Chinese store owners were seeking to claim a kindred relationship with the Black community. In Chinese, the term 兄弟 means brotherhood, similar to the implied term for African Americans, a bond that runs deeper than friendship, that you will have each other’s back. While this was not true for most of the Chinese, there were a couple of grocery families who actually built authentic ties with their neighbors. Bot Lee was one of these storekeepers. Daughter Peggy recalls that “Daddy was thinking about closing and Mom said no, don’t close, just leave it open. Well, the part about it is that we weren’t afraid, because our neighbors, we all were like one big family and they vouched for us and nothing happened”. (P. Wong 2018) Peggy’s family store was left untouched because of their genuine relationship with their Black neighbors.

The sign “Soul Brother” (The 1970 Augusta Riot 2022) (Figure 5) might have been a clever way of connecting with their Black neighbors, but for most of the stores, it was an empty gesture that came a little too late. While most of the Chinese residents of Augusta may not have made the effort to embrace the Black community in which they lived, they were empathetic to their struggles. They entered Black space to create wealth off their customers, but at the same time, they contributed to the livelihood of the Black community, offering convenience and access to goods. Even in the post-segregated south, it was a blurry relationship.



Figure 5. “Soul Brother” sign by Chinese during 1970 Augusta race riot.

## 9. Conclusions

The Chinese people who lived in Augusta’s Black neighborhood during the Jim Crow period complicated the racial dynamics imposed by white supremacy. Whether they want to believe it or not, Chinese were intimately intertwined in Black history, as were the Black community an integral part of the lives of the Chinese community at this time. The difference is that African American identity was premised on a severing of language and culture during slavery while Chinese immigrants had a support structure that enabled them to assimilate, build their wealth, and maintain their language and culture. Their relation-

ship played out during the 1970 riot, not unlike other historical race riots such as the L.A. Riot<sup>19</sup>. What was not factored in were the intimate stories of love and friendships across racial lines, the intimate everyday encounters between Chinese storekeepers and Black customers, or the sweet memories of young Black neighborhood children growing up around Chinese-run stores. Marion Williams (Williams 2018) claims he still loves broccoli because of the many Chinese meals he ate while working at the store.

The Chinese grocery store was a performative space that highlighted class and racial differences. At the same time, they were sites where Chinese and Black residents built unique relationships. Some merchants like my grandmother's family might have kept their walls high, which exacerbated discriminating attitudes towards Black people. Fortunately, some families like Bot Lee and Tom Lim<sup>20</sup> developed life-long friendships and precious memories of their children playing with their Black neighbors. Long-time resident Lourdes Coleman (Coleman 2018) distinguished, "They knew that as far as the world was concerned, they were white. And we knew that. But as far as our community was concerned, we were all community". While some members of Augusta's Black community shared Coleman's attitude, I do not think the Chinese would have said the same thing. What African Americans really feel about Asian Americans, I will never quite know. It is in a partial perspective that I receive these stories.

The research I conducted for my film and the oral histories provided by family and community members of Augusta bring to surface anti-Blackness by the Chinese. But it also sheds light on the small gestures both communities made to cohabitate under an oppressive system of white supremacy built to pit them against each other. As tensions between Black and Asian communities continue to play out today, we might look to the past to understand the Afro-Asian solidarity that grew out of a system that pushed them together, when neighbors looked out for each other and shared common memories around the grocery store. The troubling stories of secret relationships and forbidden love across racial lines reveal resistance to oppressive systems of power. Despite the destructive efforts to control and divide these marginalized groups, the intertwined lives of both communities highlights the natural cross-pollination of people in a shared space.

The Black and Chinese communities played their roles on the Jim Crow stage. They treaded carefully on a precarious foundation built by white supremacy that surveilled and marked bodies based on color. The Chinese, in their white-adjacent role, performed silence and invisibility. Blurred by the precarious language of skin, the Chinese and other fair-skinned Asians were able to conceal themselves under the radar of racialization. The persistence of anti-Blackness will endure as long as the power structures maintain privileges based on race. But it does not mean that people will not find beautiful entanglements that resist order and blur the color line.

Since the release of my film, there have been a couple of noteworthy documentaries that have addressed race relations between different communities. *Bad Axe* (Sieve 2022) is about a Cambodian Mexican family struggling to keep their restaurant afloat during the COVID-19 pandemic and renewed white supremacy. *Liquor Store Dreams* (So Yun Um 2022) follows two Korean American children of immigrant store owners in Los Angeles grappling with racial equity and intergenerational differences. Closer to my subject is a charming play, "Gong Lum's Legacy" (Gluck 2022), written by Charles White about a fictional love affair between a Chinese man and a Black woman in 1925 Mississippi. The play was inspired by the Gong Lum vs. Rice case mentioned earlier. There are many more stories to be told, stories that reveal foundational racial structures upon which this country was built and how the struggles among different minority and oppressed groups continue to push against the persistence of racism.

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## Notes

- 1 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Killing\\_of\\_Latasha\\_Harlins](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Killing_of_Latasha_Harlins) (accessed on 1 December 2023).
- 2 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Killing\\_of\\_Akai\\_Gurley](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Killing_of_Akai_Gurley) (accessed on 1 December 2023).
- 3 [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8993180/?ref\\_=fn\\_al\\_tt\\_1](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8993180/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1) (accessed on 1 December 2023), <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt11941042/> (accessed on 1 December 2023).
- 4 (Gomez 2019). Gale Academic OneFile, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A606100419/AONE?u=anon-71ca2397&sid=googleScholar&xid=ff0d7e76 (accessed on 23 March 2024).
- 5 <https://www.americanwarlibrary.com/personnel/dkc2.htm> (accessed on 10 April 2024)
- 6 Chinese man on bus interview with Crystal Kwok, *Blurring the Color Line*, 00:02:50.
- 7 Deanna Brown runs the James Brown Family Foundation. Her son married a Japanese American woman and now has a biracial grandchild.
- 8 Leon Maben, discussion at Lucy Craft Laney Museum of African American History, Augusta, December 2018.
- 9 This term implies a stereotypical impression that they are more educated and respectable in order to distinguish against the negative perception of Black people.
- 10 Interview with Mildred Lum at Pearl Lum's house, San Francisco 2017.
- 11 Leslie Bow draws attention to unstable categories of identification when referring to the placement of the Chinese in-between Black and White space.
- 12 In the 2021 film, *Passing*, directed by Rebecca Hall, the character, Clare who passes for white ends in tragedy.
- 13 Gong Lum v. Rice, 1927. <https://calendar.eji.org/racial-injustice/nov/21> (accessed on 23 December 2023).
- 14 Mark A. Gooden, "Gong Lum v Rice", Britannica online. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Gong-Lum-v-Rice> (accessed on 23 December 2023).
- 15 Bow, "Racial Interstitiality and the Anxieties of the 'Partly Colored'." 5.
- 16 Story was told by Tyrone Butler who worked as an errand boy at one of the Chinese run stores. *Blurring the Color Line* 00:56:57.
- 17 Ryan Alex Holmes at Asia Society Southern California discussion of *Blurring the Color Line*. November 7, 2022.
- 18 The 1970 Augusta Riots Observance. <https://1970augustariot.com/> (accessed on 6 November 2023).
- 19 Historically, race riots in the States had a familiar narrative, an upheaval triggered by an unjust death of a person of color.
- 20 Bot Lee and Tom Lim were the owners of the two grocery stores that did not get burned down during the riots. According to interviews, it was because of the relationships they established with the Black community.

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