

© Mixed Roots Stories 2013

JINGLE

I feel the train coming

I hear the whistle blowing loud

It's calling out my name

Rumble in the ground

I swear it sounds a lot like...

Change...

...calling out my name.

I. OPENING

Chandra Crudup: Hi and welcome to the MXRS Podcast – sharing the story behind the stories.

This week's podcast is hosted by Chandra Crudup, Fanshen Cox DiGiovanni and Mark R. Edwards.

Fanshen Cox DiGiovanni: Today's guest is Lawrence-Minh Búi Davis, the editor in chief of the Asian American Literary Review. The Asian American Literary Review is a space for writers who consider the designation Asian American a fruitful starting point for artistic vision and community.

In the fall of 2013, the AALR launched its Mixed Race Initiative, which includes a special issue of their magazine, and a Synchronous Teaching Program with over seventy-five classrooms in 9 countries. Today's podcast focuses on the stories behind story of Lawrence and the Mixed Race Initiative.

II. MIXED ROOTS STORY

Mark R. Edwards: So the first question I have is, what is your Mixed Roots Story? And I would start with your name. Because I imagine when people hear your name they have questions.

Lawrence-Minh Búi Davis: Yeah people have a hard time keeping it straight or spelling it right. So, when I was a kid I just went by Larry Davis; that's what teachers would call me to simplify things, but my full name is Lawrence-Minh Búi Davis and my parents - my mom immigrated from Vietnam in 1966 and she came to attend grad school at the University of

Kansas. And so my parents met - my dad was also a grad student at the University of Kansas, and my parents met in Lawrence, Kansas. Hence, my name. They decided to hyphenate it, so my first name is Lawrence-Minh. Minh is also part of my mom's name. Her name is Minh-Tâm, and Búi is my mom's maiden name, her family name. And my father's name is Davis.

I started going by my full name probably late in high school, and when I got into college - I'd used shortened versions before that - but then it started becoming important for me to identify (I also look, phenotypically I look white), and so I always kind of passed as white, or had always been identified as white. So it became important for me to announce that I don't identify that way - that I identify as mixed, or in certain spaces I identify as Vietnamese American, other spaces as Asian American. And so having my full name was one way to do that.

MRE: So when was the first time you considered yourself mixed?

L-MBD: When I was two or three my mom started sponsoring our uncles and aunts to arrive from Vietnam. This was in Florida - Gainesville's where I grew up, near the University of Florida - and so I'm attending school, I'm identified primarily as white, people think I'm white, talk to me as white, and I have a certain kind of racial existence that I'm not really thinking about much when I'm attending preschool, kindergarten and beyond. And throughout my childhood we were sponsoring our relatives coming over as refugees from Vietnam, and so I have a stream of uncles and cousins sometimes as many as 8 or 9 at a time, and so I think I was pretty acutely conscious at an early age - at 4, 5, 6 - that my experience was not the same as everyone else's, but that it was not the same as my cousins' who were arriving as refugees either and that I was not Vietnamese in the way that they are. I would come to identify as Vietnamese but my experience was very different from theirs both in terms of how I looked, but also culturally, my relationship to both my parents and the ways I could move through American society in ways that they couldn't. So I think I had some sense of mixedness at a pretty early age.

FCD: Lawrence, did you speak Vietnamese at home?

L-MBD: I did not. I have a sort of ear for it and so I can understand some but when my mom came over in 1966, and I was born in 1977, the environment that she felt that she was in, even though she was surrounded by plenty of anti-war protests on college campus where she was a grad student, she felt very conscious of her difference in her Vietnameseness, and she was very concerned that as a child I would face some of the kinds of discrimination that she faced, and so she wanted to shelter me from that in some sense by helping me to - not assimilate, because I was born here - but helping me to be as American as possible, and focus on me, making sure that I spoke English fluently and concerned that if I spoke two languages somehow I would stick out in ways that she was worried about. And so, much later she would really strongly regret that decision, but that was how she approached it at the time.

CC: Did you have siblings?

L-MBD: Nope I'm an only child. After me my mom was like, that is the end of that. We're not doing that again.

CC: We're done.

L-MBD: That's right. Shop is closed. This kid is already a handful.

III. ORIGINS OF THE MIXED RACE INITIATIVE

CC: So can you talk to us a little bit about the project and where the idea came from, how it came to be, and why it matters for the public to know about.

L-MBD: Sure. So the name of the project is the Mixed Race Initiative. The origin story, so my non-profit is the Asian American Literary Review, that I founded in 2010, and one of the assistant editors is an old friend of mine named Alicia Upano, and she's originally from Hawaii and we both went to grad school at San Diego State. We got in touch and worked together and had been friends for a while. And she also identifies as mixed. And so for years we would have conversations about mixedness, but always noting that me growing up in Florida and then on the east coast (I moved up to Maryland when I was eight), and her experience in Hawaii is just so radically different - how people think about race in those areas and how they think about mixedness. And as we had these conversations it struck me how important it was to be thinking about ideas of race across region and we had done some stuff with the literary journal for the non-profit with having it taught in multiple classrooms before, but we'd never thought about linking them up, and so I thought this would be a perfect opportunity if we devoted a special issue on mixed race and then use that as an opportunity to open up a conversation across the country, across classrooms to talk about race and mixed race - putting region at the forefront. And as it developed - my immediate network is in Asian American studies, but then, of course, I was in touch with a lot of folks that were teaching Mixed Race studies classes. Then I started reaching out to folks in other fields in American studies, Ethnic studies and also Native American studies, Indigenous studies, African American studies, Women's studies, and it became increasingly apparent to me that this could be an exciting project to be thinking across regions, but also across disciplines - so, how Asian American studies approaches race in conversation with how Native American studies approaches race in conversation with how an African American studies class approaches race and how they overlap and how they differ and what kind of conversations can emerge from that. And I've always thought that Asian American studies could profit quite a bit from thinking more deeply about mixed race and histories of racial mixing, but I also think that there are approaches within Asian American studies that would help this emerging field of Critical Mixed Race studies.

So I'm hoping that this project can be a start to getting scholars and getting teachers to think about how bringing some of the tools from Critical Mixed Race studies into their classrooms and into their scholarship will enrich their work and then vice versa. And so this

network that's a feeder system in both directions is what I'm hoping for.

IV. WHY 'RACE'?

CC: Do you want to talk a little bit about why you chose the word race?

L-MBD: Yeah. I do. We decided to call it the Mixed Race Initiative as a way of signaling what we're up to and as a way of broadcasting that this is anti-racist work - and that may seem counter-intuitive if we're taking the idea of saying mixed race reproduces these problems of thinking of race as a biological construct, say, or race as anything but a social construct that we always need to be pressing on and questioning - and that was my idea. Because coming from an Asian American studies background, in Asian American Studies the term Asian American for many of the scholars in the field there's this idea that Asian American itself has always been a troubling concept because it yokes together people who are fundamentally very different from each other. And saying Asian American historically referred to Chinese Americans first and foremost, and then Japanese Americans and Chinese Americans and maybe to East Asians - and so what about South Asian Americans? And what about Filipino Americans? And what about Southeast Asian Americans? And then more recently there's the troubling fuzzy edges and where we start thinking about what about Central Asians and West Asians and who all gets included in this grouping of Asian American, and who's getting excluded or whose experiences are getting erased, or when funds go to supporting Asian American ventures, who's getting that money, how's it getting distributed, who's thinking about representation - and then basically it all breaks down and the answer is that it never works very well and that people are always getting left out and excluded and nobody is happy. It's a compromise all the time. So how do we continue using the term Asian American with any faith? And the answer for many of us, is, we use it not as a descriptor, of 'these people' 'these communities,' but that we're holding up as an idea, or as a critique, like when we say Asian American, that notion is always up for criticism and continual criticism of who's using it and how, and what are we doing - as teachers, as scholars, as community members when we say Asian American? What are we doing when we say that? Always assuming that that term is not fixed. It's not static. And it's something that we need to continually press on, especially in our own usage of it. And so I always approach the Mixed Race Initiative with this idea, or how I think of mixedness. So I say that I'm mixed, but when I say what we're up to or what we're talking about is mixed race, my idea is that that's an idea that's meant to be in question. I'm hoping that what we're doing is destabilizing that idea always and consistently throughout the teaching practices and throughout the issue that we produced, and the work that we've asked the contributors to produce - and so mixed race as a way of destabilizing race, which I think is at the heart of anti-racist work. One is recognizing the continual violence conducted in the name of race, but the other is acknowledging that race itself is a construct that we need to question and we need to push on and that we continually need to ask other people around us to question.

V. WHY THE BOX?

FCD: So generally the Asian American Literary Review comes in the form of a magazine, but the Mixed Race issue was delivered inside of a box. Can you talk about the genesis of the box?

L-MBD: The genesis of the box. Well there were a number of influences but I guess the most immediate is this idea that race is a construction, and so I wanted to have a box as a construction, like mixed race is a box. This idea of making literal or concrete the construction of race so this box is race, supposedly. It's something we built and so we're going to question that building. So that's a reference, or an allusion, to the Census box, of course, is one of the boxes of race that we think of immediately, but then within the issue when you open it up there's multiple pieces inside: there's three different books, there's a foldout map, and there's a deck of playing cards and so we've named each of the books. One is Pandora's Box, one is Black Box and one is Inbox. And these are all three different boxes that we thought would be fun ways to thematize mixed race.

So mixed race as Pandora's Box, or this idea of mixed race miscegenation historically as trouble or as this kind of continual bad surprises or the end of, when you have miscegenation bad things are going to happen, this is the ruin of society in the way that Pandora's Box is the ruin of mankind.

But then on the other hand you have Black Box and our idea is like the Black Box in an airplane as historical memory, or what survives. So mixed race in the bodies of mixed people as supposedly some kind of record of histories and of migration and movement and war and colonization and mixed people as a way of thinking about human experience in a different way, and remembering human experience, or a lasting record of human experience.

And then mixed race as an Inbox is the other book and so another way of thinking about mixed race in terms of exchange and communication and sending and receiving ideas and, but also increasingly even part of the Initiative that we're really interested in is digital mixed race - what happens to ideas of race and mixing in this age of social media, age of new media, when we have new kinds of community forming and we have new kinds of exchanges - what happens to discourses about race? And so, Inbox, mixed race as Inbox - thinking in terms of technology and how that fundamentally shifts how we think about race.

And I always designed this with the idea that I'm going to teach this thing. I think of myself as an editor, I think of myself as a teacher, and thought, "I want to make something that I can teach in my class," and I always envisioned if I'm going to have students, if I'm going to make the ideal text for me, something that I think will be interesting and fun to teach, I want to have this experience where students get it and they're like, "Woe! What is that!? I'm excited to work with this!"

FCD: It's so great for an educator because you can't teach a teacher-centered class using this box because it forces interactivity – and that's the mixed experience is this interactivity.

CC: As an instructor you want to have your box of tricks. You could have an entire class to talk about the symbolism of the box, which is brilliant.

L-MBD: It does invite interactivity amongst the students, but also across the classrooms. Like my class right now, we're working with a class at UMass Amherst that's taught by a professor there named Asha Nadkarni, and she came up with the idea of, "Let's make a mixed race glossary" where the students in our two classes will trace some of the terms for mixedness across the issue, and then will go out and do this extra research: what are the word origins, where it's been used, how's it evolved over time, and then we'll look at how it's treated in the issue itself.

I'm working with another class at Brown with a professor by the name of Alexandrina Agloro. Our classes are going to work together. We're going to do a Skype session and have our classes interact directly, and then we're going to do a Twitter session where we're going to kind of tweet at each other a discussion about some of the pieces in the issue. So yeah, I like that it opens up possibilities of working across classrooms in really exciting ways.

VI. DECK OF CARDS

CC: So you talked a lot about the visual component and I'd like you to speak a little more about the idea around the deck of cards within the box.

L-MBD: The inspiration for the cards - I attended Natasha Trethewey's inaugural reading – she's our current U.S. Poet Laureate. She gave a reading at the Library of Congress and she read a poem that we've included in the box with a response to it. She also read another poem about Casta paintings. And I'd heard of them vaguely before, but I hadn't spent much time thinking about it. So she has a poem about Casta paintings. They're these paintings that visually categorize race and mixtures of race with the idea that, OK, so here is one half and here is one quarter and here is one eighth, and by introducing enough proper Spanish blood at the time, you could purify people and kind of breed the native out of people and make them "properly" Spanish again. And so these paintings were a visual categorization for that. And I found this absurd and horrifying and fascinating at the same time, and so I was thinking, "Where else have we tried to do this?" and that idea reflects across so many ways we try and categorize race, but especially visually. And I got to thinking about how in popular culture across multiple cultures we've tried to do this. And so I thought about the cards as a way to tackle that pervasive mandate to need to enforce visually upon people that this is how race works, and these are the taxonomies and these are the hierarchies. Visually we need to kind of code superiority.

So the idea of the cards is a standard deck of playing cards – we want them to be functional as a deck of playing cards, so on the faces, where you'd normally have Jack,

Queen, King, we have images of popular representations of mixed race from all over. And on the flip sides, on the backs, rather than the pattern you have on a standard card, we just have straight text. So from a distance they all look the same because they're just text, but the text is something related - sometimes directly, sometimes more obliquely - to the image on the other side that does some kind of work to help us think about the logic or illogic of that image. So, either contextualizing it or in some cases explaining it, but always trying to undermine it, parody it, or point out the absurdity of what that image is trying to do. Doing it as a deck of cards gives us opportunities to think about race as this kind of grand game, but to play around with things. Also to put all of these separate visual logics together and see them as similar but functioning in different ways at different time periods, in different regions. And one of the immediate things that came to me is this idea of asking students or asking anybody who's looking at these to play the game of, like, make a poker hand out of them, since there's no Jack, Queen, King, based on the pictures and the histories that they contain, make a Three of a Kind and a Pair. So what would pair with, say, an image of a Hip Hop Video Vixen whose mixedness is sexualized in certain ways? If we reach across histories or outside of U.S. space or outside of 1990s/2000 era phenomenon, where else can we find something that pairs with this that uses a similar kind of logic to think about race? And I think that's a fascinating exercise.

And it's very, very important to me and I've gotten questions about this, "What does it mean to take those often extremely offensive and painful images and reproduce them?" And I think the important thing is that these images are out there and they circulate, so reproducing them is kind of bringing to the surface what is there fundamentally is there, and out there, and findable - and not just findable - that we're bombarded with in some form or another - but that you cannot see these in these instances, in what we're doing, you cannot consume these images uncritically because they are always paired with text that works against them, that undermines their logic. I see the text as anti-racist work. This is the writing that we do that says these visual representations are not who we are, they do not encompass our existences, they do not speak for us and they shouldn't speak about us. They're there, but we can do the work of speaking back against them, and we can pass it along. We can ask other people to question the expectations and the ideas of these representations.

VII. ON ACCESSIBILITY

FCD: My question is: how do we make this work accessible to the very people that need the benefits of anti-racist and anti-classist...how do we make this accessible to those folks?

L-MBD:

We as cultural producers working in many cases working in the academy working in as students of university level classrooms or teaching in university level classrooms, we are reaching a small fraction of the population and in many cases not necessarily the people who need it most. Or at least we're not reaching many of the people who need it most. We

are reaching the people who have the privilege to be in college classrooms and have a tremendous amount of money and resources to put themselves in that position and so, yeah. That's a great question. It's something that I think it behooves us to keep thinking about.

I envision this project as a feeder system and so I feel like, 1) starting with teachers and asking them to shift their pedagogy, asking them to think about what they're doing when they're teaching race, giving them more tools and more resources, helps them. I know how beleaguered teachers can be, how hard it is to make a living and make a life in this country as a teacher. And so recognizing them as people who have limited time on their hands in many cases, are stretched very thin and giving them free resources and saying, "Here. We want to help," and that helps them and it helps their students and it creates this system where they can help each other, and they can continually help new waves of students coming in.

And then the students themselves, with any luck, are leaving the classrooms thinking more deeply and feeling more deeply than they have when they walked in. And we're hoping that that radiates outward to people who are not in those college classrooms.

And I know of some folks that are planning to do some kind of community projects that I'm hoping we can archive, and that we can hold up as models for future work, and that we can encourage people to conduct.

On the other hand I think what's more important is having folks from different organizations or who have different kinds of projects underway to sit down and have a conversation together and put access right at the top of the list, and put communities right at the top of the list. How do we make it accessible to people? How do we get outside of this very limited circuit of high-end scholars that are headlining this event, or artists? How do we make work that speaks to people who may not make it into a college classroom at any point in their lives, and would not be interested in attending a college classroom? I think that that's a vital conversation that we need to have together - in a matter not of just saying, "Here's what we're doing. Can you help me with this?" but what should we be doing together?

CC: Be critical about the work and the disbursement of the work.

MRE: So how do we take very dry material and...

L-MBD (laughs)

MRE: ...and turn it into a digestible story? Once people have a chance to sit down and start saying what brought them there, to do the research - that's revelatory, and that's what gets people excited.

L-MBD: I agree that impulse is one we always have to keep in the front of our minds - that

whatever the work that we're doing and how important the theory, the scholarship and research that's being conducted - that it has to be accessible to a broader public, or it only does so much good. It was part of the reason why I got into non-profit work in the first place. I'm a PhD student, and I've been a PhD student for a long time. I was looking at my work, and I was working on my dissertation and I was thinking to myself, you know I think I'm doing important work and I think all of ten people are going to read it. And I have these ideas to do other stuff that I think would reach a lot more people and could be a lot more meaningful and impactful - which is not to say scholarly work isn't impactful - but it needs to think about what it's up to and who it's serving and who it's reaching all the time.

A part of this project that I haven't talked about that speaks directly to this question was throughout the life of the project I conducted internships at the University of Maryland with Maryland students who have been on board doing everything with this project from top to bottom. And I've tried to give them as much responsibility as possible, and they were making major decisions about what would be included in this issue. We acknowledge and value the perspective of young people. And there was some pushback in that there's people that got really pissed at me. They were like, "I'm a tenured professor with five books. I'm not going to have my proposal weighed by a nineteen year old kid who hasn't read anything and hasn't thought very much about race."

CC: But why not?

L-MBD: Well I think that's a great question. A) why not and B) why are you so mad about it?

CC: Let's talk a little bit about this. Where does that hesitance come from?

MRE: Right, speaking of constructs.

L-MBD: I agree and so I asked the students that question, I said this is what people have...or sometimes they got it directly, sometimes they were the ones fielding those emails, and we talked about it, "How do you feel about this? Where do you think it's coming from?" We can easily just say, "Ugh, it's ageism," or, "It's this hierarchy and you've got to pay your dues," or we can try and step back and understand it and not take it personally, and try and make sense of it, and then figure out how to work around it - we're not changing our position - you still have the authority, and that responsibility of making the decisions about what this project is ultimately going to look like, but we've got to think about why people are upset about it. And I think that was a good process for them and a good process for the larger project to try and come to terms with some of that resistance. And I agree in some sense that these students have a tremendous responsibility to read and to learn more, but I was always very loathe to say just because they're young and just because they haven't read as much and experienced as much, as some of us who are getting a little older now (giggles), doesn't mean that their perspectives aren't extremely valuable.

IX. CLOSING

Jingle

Mixed Roots Stories wants to thank Lawrence-Minh Búi Davis for being our first guest. We also want to express our gratitude to Rachel & Thu, also known as *The Singer and The Songwriter*, who created our wonderful jingle. Thanks also to Jon Crump and Teri LaFlesh of TightlyCurly.com for helping with our website, and Benjamin and Tamika at zerflin.com for designing our logo - which we'll be unveiling in a couple weeks. You can subscribe to our podcasts on iTunes, and while you're there we'd appreciate a review. Our mission at Mixed Roots Stories is to celebrate and strengthen diverse communities through the power of sharing stories - and we'd love to hear and share your story. Please visit the 'promote your story' link at www.mixedrootsstories.org to tell us about you.

We can't wait to hear your story!