

The Asian Reporter

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MY TURN

■ **Dmae Roberts**



History makes a difference

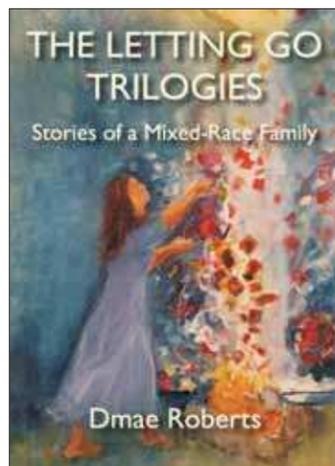
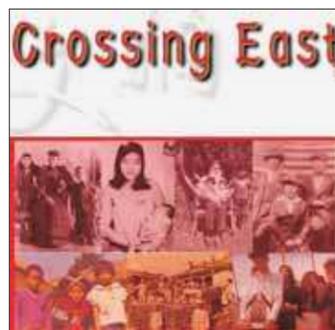
Most of the time, I think the growing-up process for young people is hard. But sometimes I envy them for being able to live at a time when there is a whole month designated to recognize the heritage of Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs). For more than a decade, the month of May for me has been a strange mixture of missing my mom on Mother's Day and honoring the cultural heritage I inherited from her. When she was alive, AAPI month celebrations, like those that are now held in May, did not exist. I think she would have enjoyed attending heritage events and learning more about the culture and traditions of all AAPI ethnicities.

When I was growing up, Asian-American history wasn't taught in school. I learned about Chinese railroad workers on "Kung Fu," a 1970s television show about a biracial Shaolin monk played by white actor David Carradine. My first exposure to the Japanese-American internment was during a television movie called *Farewell to Manzanar*. It wasn't until I was an adult that I learned about the exclusion laws enacted in the mid-1800s in America that continued until 1943. Initially, the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act barred the immigration of Chinese laborers to the United States. Chinese workers who had laid railroad tracks across America were allowed to stay. This law opened the floodgates for anti-Chinese violence including mobs of people chasing out the Chinese in Oregon City and Portland.

These days it's more common to meet interracial families, but when my parents married, interracial marriage was illegal. The Supreme Court didn't outlaw anti-miscegenation laws until 1967. Interracial marriages were banned in Oregon in 1866 between anyone who was more than one-quarter Chinese or Hawai'ian or more than half Native American. It was previously illegal for whites and blacks to marry.

Today, young people want to learn about their ethnic history. Locally, the API Leaders for the Liberation of Youth (ALLY) organization got Portland Public Schools to adopt their youth-led ethnic studies resolution and implement it into the

school curriculum. In Southern California, youth-led petition drives gathered thousands of signatures to require the Los Angeles Unified School District to add ethnic studies classes. For the most part, however, AAPI history is still minimally taught in public schools.



Since the '90s, when May was officially declared a heritage month, I've tried to help create programs and events highlighting AAPI history, whether it was for public radio or theatre or in my personal writing. Yet it's still an uphill climb. The mainstream public might know about Black History Month in February from PSAs on national television, but many people are still not aware that May is nationally designated as a heritage month for AAPIs.

After my mother's death, I took on the production of the first Asian-American history series on public radio. Called *Crossing East*, the project spanned three years and featured eight hours of documentaries focusing on 50 scholars, producers, and artists. Hosted by George Takei and Margaret Cho, it aired on 230 public radio stations, many of which had not featured Asian Heritage Month programming before, and received a Peabody Award in 2006.

It's hard to believe, but it's been 10 years since the series premiered. In recognition of the 10th anniversary, rebroadcasts of the series are planned. On Oregon Public Broadcasting (OPB) radio, it will be featured on Tuesdays at 10:00pm for eight weeks beginning May 24; on KBOO radio, it is airing from 10:00am to 6:00pm on Memorial Day (Monday, May 30). I'm currently embarking on building the "Crossing East Archive," a multimedia website available to the public that will house the 300 hours of oral-history recordings created for the series.

When I think back to some of my projects and pieces over the past three decades, I wonder if they amounted to anything. At the same time, I feel I should preserve them just in case they do matter. So I've been gathering my old works to document them permanently as well as give them new life. Soon they will be released to the world. I've also compiled many of my essays about growing up as a biracial

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