

# The Asian Reporter

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Please send all correspondence to: The Asian Reporter  
922 N Killingsworth Street, Suite 2D, Portland, OR 97217  
Phone: (503) 283-4440, Fax: (503) 283-4445

News Department e-mail: news@asianreporter.com  
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Publisher **Jaime Lim**  
Contributing Editors

**Ronault L.S. Catalani (Polo), Jeff Wenger**  
Correspondents

**Ian Blazina, Josephine Bridges, Pamela Ellgen, Maileen Hamto, Edward J. Han, A.P. Kryza, Marie Lo, Simeon Mamaril, Julie Stegeman, Toni Tabora-Roberts, Allison Voigts**

Illustrator **Jonathan Hill**

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**MY TURN**

■ **Dmae Lo Roberts**



## Patti Duncan, my mixed-race friend

Growing up in rural Oregon, I didn't encounter other mixed-race Asians. As an adult, I have cherished opportunities to talk with mixed-race people about our shared experiences. One person I've talked to throughout the years is Patti Duncan.

An associate professor of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Oregon State University (OSU), Patti Duncan has authored and co-edited several literary collections such as *Tell This Silence: Asian American Women Writers and the Politics of Speech*, *Mothering in East Asian Communities: Politics and Practices*, and *Women's Lives around the World: A Global Encyclopedia*. At OSU, she's the editor of *Feminist Formations*, a leading scholarly journal in women's, gender, and sexuality studies found at <www.feministformations.org>. She's also co-editing an open-access online digital textbook for colleges and universities that is scheduled for release this spring.



Patti Duncan, associate professor at Oregon State University.

This accomplished woman and I have had similar experiences as the daughters of military brides from Asia. My Taiwanese mom and Oklahoman dad met when my mom worked at the PX store in Taiwan after the Korean War. Patti's mother was in Seoul, South Korea, working at a U.S. military base when her father, a white American, was stationed there. After they married, her family lived in America. Moving to the U.S. became a difficult experience for our moms as they left their languages and cultures behind.

Before moving here, my family lived in Japan, where I recall my happiest childhood times. Patti lived in Tehran, where her father was stationed, and she has "very beautiful fond memories of the time living there."

Our first experiences with racism occurred in America. We were both told not to speak our mothers' languages. Neither of our mothers had a formal education and both grew up in war and poverty, so it was important for their children to excel in school and we were allowed to forget our first languages.

"Once I started in public school in the U.S.," Patti said, "there were incidents of kids calling us names and doing the slanty eyed thing to mock us when we were growing up."

While my brother and I didn't know any other mixed-race kids during our youth, Patti fortunately

lived near a military base where she was part of a social club with other multiracial girls. She said those friendships were empowering because they talked about their identities and experiences. Yet the racism against her mom continued and kids in their neighborhood mocked her.

"They put a snake in our mailbox and that terrified her," she said. "... And once they burned something in our front yard I thought was meant to look like a cross."

Patti said her mom was frightened, but the police determined there was "nothing to be done." Another time some boys said "something really awful" to her mom while she was watering in their backyard, and she turned the hose on full force and sprayed them. Patti loved that response.

I too can remember times when neighborhood kids told my brother and I to "flake off, you Chinese!" Hearing my mom tearfully recount how her co-workers belittled her at the plywood mill where she worked as "that little Chinese lady" was heartbreaking. Like Patti, those events shaped our lives.

"Witnessing it, experiencing it, but also being mixed-race and being Asian American myself," Patti said, "... it's like all of the ways that I think growing up, being treated like I was exotic or different, or somehow not belonging ... for me, I think it was being mixed-race and struggling sometimes with feeling like I'm in this in-between space where it's like you're never Asian enough, or you're never like fully Korean."

I understand and share Patti's feelings. We're lucky to know each other because it's been rare in my life to meet people of my generation who entirely get what it means to be a mixed-race Asian American. Hopefully younger generations are able to connect with other mixed-race youth so they don't feel the isolation we once felt. It is my wish they aren't resigned to the fate of being "out of the norm."

For Patti, hope lies in her 11-year-old son and his generation. She says it's important to her to tell him about his family history and identity.

"He is so proud to be mixed-raced, and he claims his Korean-ness," Patti said. "He claims all of it."

To listen to a podcast of my and Patti's conversation about being mixed race, please visit <www.theimmigrantstory.org/i-claim-it-all>.