

# ■ Relational Interracialism and the American Dream of Race in Ha Jin's *A Free Life*

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## Abstract

Critical discussions in the new millennium have augured an interracial turn in both theories and literary scholarship. This paper argues that interracial harmony is the American dream of racial relationships that American writers, including Ha Jin, explore in literary narratives and poetry, and I will illustrate this American dream of interracial harmony with his novel *A Free Life* and examples from other novels and poems. Through four of John E. Farley's models of racial theories this paper analyzes collaborative interracial relationships in the division of labor, adoption, romance, and friendship in Ha Jin's novel *A Free Life*, while advancing a relational interracialism, a term I coined as a viable theoretical grappling with the subject of race between races. Relational interracialism studies the relationality between races and suggests that multiculturalism in practice can be revised so that interraciality is premised on interracial cooperation and cultural infiltration with conflicts constrained within a resolvable range. *A Free Life* starts constructing an American dream of modern human relations and emotions less in their contradictions than in their relationality in which cooperation and mutual infiltration supersede conflicts to define interraciality. Ha Jin in *A Free Life*, *Nanjing Requiem*, *A Map of Betrayal*, and poems and John Okada in *No-No Boy* paint a vision for the time to follow.

**Keywords:** Ha Jin, *A Free Life*, interracial harmony, transracial adoption, relational interracialism

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## Introduction

The old focus on the clashes between races in the new millennium is being superseded by a surge of scholarship focused on other possibilities of interracial relationships and their complexity in terms of time and space, and within national, transnational as well as global matrices. This paper argues that interracial harmony is the American dream of racial relationships that American writers, including Ha Jin, explore in literary narratives and poetry, and I will illustrate this American dream of interracial harmony with his novel *A Free Life* (2007) and examples from other novels and poems. Through four of John E. Farley's models of racial theories—functionalism, the split labor-market theory, multiculturalism, and cultural immersion—this paper analyzes collaborative interracial relationships in the division of labor, adoption, romance, and friendship in Ha Jin's novel *A Free Life*, while advancing a relational interracialism, a term I coined as a viable theoretical grappling with the subject of interactions between races. Relational interracialism has been inspired by two cardinal concepts of critical race theory, “differential racialization” and “intersectionality and antiessentialism” (Delgado and Stefancic 9-10). The first concept, “differential racialization,” denotes the racialization of people for “shifting needs” at diverse historical junctures (Delgado and Stefancic 9). In agreement with Stuart Hall and others on culture, the second concept, “intersectionality and antiessentialism,” suggests that an individual could have multiple identities, not all of which are in concord all the time, and that people could belong to more than one community (Delgado and Stefancic 10). Sharing with these two concepts the theoretical underpinning of the plurality of identities and communities conditioned by historical circumstances and formed out of taxonomic motives, relational interracialism studies the relationality between races and suggests that multiculturalism in practice can be revised so that interraciality is premised on interracial cooperation and cultural infiltration with conflicts constrained within a resolvable range.

## Four Interracial Theories

In this paper ethnicity refers to communities evolved historically, socially, or politically around differences in physical features, religions, languages, customs or along the borders of other boundaries. The paper reserves race to denote ideas contiguous with physical traits in a more constricted sense, such as skin color. The paper maintains that race has both inherent and constructed

dimensions just as George Lipsitz delineates:

Racial identifications and identities . . . are based on legacies of belief as well as of blood and bone. Their noises and echoes come to us by choice as well as by chance; they are inherited *and* invented, found *and* fabricated, determined *and* dynamic. (30)

In addition to the double attributes of race, four theories about interracial relationships Farley outlines in *Majority-Minority Relations* can elucidate the relations between races in *A Free Life* as oftentimes more collaborative than incongruous. While it does not apply well to the novel, assimilation theory will be examined as well, since it is one of the most cited concepts of interracial relations. The first two theories, functionalism and the split labor-market theory, explain crossracial contact from a structural and economic perspective respectively, and the third and the fourth theories, multiculturalism and cultural immersion, deliberate crossracial interaction from a cultural viewpoint. Farley maintains that after World War II, capitalist factors including “industrialization,” “modernization,” and “urbanization” relaxed the once rigid interracial interplay (214). Functionalism believes in the force of capitalism to rule out inefficient and irrational behaviors including discrimination for the economy to yield the highest productivity and for the well-being of the majority of people (Farley 264). The centerpiece of the theory of functionalism is “the self-correcting stability and equilibrium of the ‘social system’ as always able to absorb and nullify the chance emergence of social and political crises, conflict and disorder” (Law 15). For this reason, for functionalism the “understanding of the whole” takes precedence over its explanation of the parts of the whole (Barnes 37). Much in sync with the functionalist view, Gary Becker maintains that in an industrial society, discrimination will dissipate with time because discriminatory practices reduce the employer’s and society’s profits (Farley 264). Functionalism and Becker’s view concur with Marxist and socialist perspectives in perceiving race as a capitalist mechanism in society.

With the second theory, the split labor-market theory, Enda Bonacich explains that “economic competition” rather than “racial and cultural differences” is the “fundamental” causation of “ethnic antagonism” (548). A split labor market “must contain at least two groups of workers whose price of labor differs for the same work, or would differ if they did the same work” (Bonacich 549). Moreover, “ethnic antagonism first germinates in a labor market split along ethnic lines” (Bonacich 549). In addition, “exclusion and caste systems” are “victories for higher paid labor” in resisting “being displaced” by lower paid labor (Bonacich 554). William Julius Wilson applies the split labor-market theory to explain black slavery prior to mid-nineteenth century and black workers in

industries in the North “[i]n the first quarter of the twentieth century” (42, 83). The labor market was “split in the sense that slave labor was considered cheaper than free white labor” (Wilson 42). Moreover, in the North, “racial antagonism” developed between “working-class whites” and “black workers” hired “as strikebreakers” (Wilson 83). The split labor-market theory interprets interethnic relations as a congeries of relationships that fluctuate with the tides of group interests and power in an economy (Farley 265). For example, when Lipsitz sketches racial identities as “historical, socially constructed, and strategic,” he imagines these identities not just as externally constructed and subject to change—“not good sources of safety, security, or certainty”—but also as swayed by group interests and power according to the split labor-market theory (30).

The third theory, multiculturalism, “is not about difference and identity *per se* but about those that are embedded in and sustained by culture,” as Bhikhu Parekh aptly defines it (2). Parekh suggests as well that multiculturalism advances “the cultural embeddedness of human beings, the inescapability and desirability of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue, and the internal plurality of each culture” (338). “Multiculturalists . . . approve of the presence of multiple cultures within a single society,” or cultural pluralism, “and accord public recognition and support to those cultures” as George Crowder maintains (2). Followed by “other liberal democracies,” “Canada and Australia in the early 1970s” adopted multiculturalist policies (Crowder 3). “In different degrees in different places,” multiculturalist policies have manifold dimensions spanning the recognition of “multiculturalism as official policy,” curricula, media representation, daily practices, “ethnic cultural activities,” “dual citizenship,” language, and “affirmative action” (Crowder 3). Multiculturalist agendas diffuse from culture to “disability, sexual orientation,” “religion,” “race, socioeconomic status, and gender” (Grant 3). By contrast, the fourth theory, cultural immersion, is an educational strategy of contextualized learning of a culture not one’s own. As Etta R. Hollins describes, the “practice of cultural immersion involves repeated exposure of students to curriculum content, instructional approaches, and a context based on a culture other than their own” (150). Indiana University’s “cross-cultural immersion projects,” for example, subsume “substantive community involvement, as well as student teaching” (Sleeter 131).

Another theory, assimilation, is associated with Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess and the Chicago School in the 1920s (Cutler 7). Park and Burgess define assimilation as “a process of interpretation and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons or groups, and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a common cultural life” (735). Milton M. Gordon suggests further the “three

main axes” of assimilation theory:

“Anglo-conformity” theory demanded the complete renunciation of the immigrant’s ancestral culture in favor of the behavior and values of the Anglo-Saxon core group; the “melting pot” idea envisages a biological merger of the Anglo-Saxon peoples with other immigrant groups and a blending of their respective cultures into a new indigenous American type; and “cultural pluralism” postulated the preservation of the communal life and significant portions of the culture of the later immigrant groups . . . and political and economic integration into American society. (85)<sup>1</sup>

Assimilation is criticized most astringently for its “forced conformity” and even more for incurring the “danger” of a vision of either “a common national culture” or “cultural homogeneity” while confronting existent cultural heterogeneity (Farley 456; Parekh 197; Cutler 1). The theory of assimilation is invalid for its impracticality, as, in Farley’s words, “to expect complete assimilation” “is unrealistic,” and as Farley maintains, diversity can conduce “a richness in society” (457). A European term in this millennium, “integration,” presages a unified culture even more devotedly than the neighboring American idea of assimilation (Schneider and Crul 3). On the American side, the descriptor for the homogenized culture in the assimilation theory is “the mainstream” (Schneider and Crul 2). Though “the American notion of ‘mainstream’ does not preclude variety and diversity, European ‘integration’ predominantly carries the implicit ideal of (a minimum degree of) cultural homogeneity—especially referring to language” (Schneider and Crul 2).

## **Relational Interracialism**

My theory, “relational interracialism,” is founded on four concepts. First, human behaviors and culture form by imitation among people in relationality and through learning from one another in society in a historical process. Second, founded on this view, the best practices of ethnic relationality can be paragons set up as a trend instead of an antidote to or repercussions of a trend. For example, advocating relational interracialism can accelerate cooperation and other positive interaction among races as well as the infiltrating exchange of culture. Third, within the concept of social constructivism—defined by Robin Cohen as “a mode of reasoning . . . which suggests that reality is determined by social interaction (or intersubjectivity), rather than by objectivity . . . or by

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<sup>1</sup> While the last idea of “integration” may be an element of assimilation, not all scholars agree that it describes cultural pluralism as well (Gordon 85).

subjectivity”—I propose an ideational constructivism that forges social culture from theories and ideas, which turn into, partially and after transformation, reality (178). Rather than depicting imagined processes, relational interracialism gives a factual account of the centrality of ideas as historical causations of “differential racialization” in the forming of society, its culture, and its customs and practices (Delgado and Stefancic 9). Fourth, to account for time and changes that are time’s marks, both underlying “differential racialization,” relational interracialism claims that the paragons in the second concept are points—the starting points or origins of progress or social reforms of a society (Delgado and Stefancic 9).

### The Interracial Turn

While the four theories illuminate the purport of race within society, other critical discussions in the new millennium have augured an interracial turn in both theories and literary scholarship as the larger context within which relational interracialism is born. Both Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Susan Koshy in the 2008 special issue “Comparative Racialization” of the *PMLA* see interracialism as the gleam of the future for race studies. Gates, for example, maintains that scholars across racial backgrounds join the ranks of race studies and diffuse into fields not of their own races: “we have deracialized the study of race and of literatures created by people of color” (1536). Koshy suggests that the new millennium coincides with a watershed in race studies, which she defines “as a shift from *strategic essentialism*,” or the “coalitional” and identitarian politics of the civil rights movement, “to *strategic interracialism*” (1546-47). To clarify the latter term, Koshy concludes that the new permutation “demonstrates the need to understand race through the lens of intersectionality as well as through an analytic of interracialism” (1548). Koshy conceives that factors underlying the interracial turn range from new immigrants, class within the minorities, the post-9/11 religious racialization, “the selective incorporation of minority identities into neo-conservative, liberal, and conservative politics,” Latino population growth, Caucasian American regionalism, and multiraciality (1546-47).

Koshy’s thesis of examining race in the relations between races echoes the tenets of an early development in racial studies, critical race theory, a “[r]adical legal movement that seeks to transform the relationship among race, racism and power” (Delgado and Stefancic 159). Two primary arguments of critical race theory are more pertinent than other notions to elucidate this turn to interracialism, and I appropriate them in configuring my relational interracialism. The

first notion, “differential racialization,” contends that the mainstream society racializes minorities at diverse times of history to serve disparate “needs” such as the demand for labor (Delgado and Stefancic 9). It can be imputed from this notion that owing to the reasons and times of racialization of ethnic groups, the relationships between the mainstream and various minority groups are divergent and should not be mixed as one. Pursuant to this argument, minorities are discrete groups of variegated histories and social causations rather than a totality. Another thesis of critical race theory, “intersectionality and antiessentialism,” argues against the immutability and unification of identity and envisages, for a person, multiple and “conflicting” identities, which may belong to more than one ethnic community (Delgado and Stefancic 10). If Koshy’s “*strategic interracialism*” punctuates differences founded on interests and the acquisition of power, my neutral term of relational interracialism, which is not as vested in interests as in a principle of networks, defines ethnicity and race by locating them between other ethnicities and races as the differential and nonessential theses of critical race theory that has already heralded this epistemic transmutation (1547). While relational interracialism also probes interracial interaction and mutual cultural imbuelement, relational interracialism emphasizes the relationality and positive aspects of interracial relationships. By contrast, Douglas Hartmann and Joseph Gerteis’s concept of “interactive pluralism” stresses the recognition of differences through interaction (231).

A discernible interracial turn can also be described in literary criticism with various terms tossed around including “polyculturalism,” “interethnic literature,” and literature about transracial adoptions (Prashad 66; Rody ix). For example, to Jeffrey F. L. Partridge, Gish Jen’s and Jeffery Paul Chan’s novels on interracial themes demonstrate that culture is no longer secure with clear-cut boundaries, and Robin Kelley’s “polyculturalism” deftly recapitulates this crossethnic switch both between and within ethnicities (Partridge 250). Like Partridge, Vijay Prashad maintains that “most of us live with the knowledge that the boundaries of our communities are fairly porous and that we do not think of all those within our ‘group’ as of a cohesive piece” (66). Likewise, in *The Interethnic Imagination*, Caroline Rody “claims that what we have long thought of as ethnic literature is becoming interethnic literature” not only because in the year 2000, multi-racial became a selectable category on the U. S. census but also because global interconnections catalyze “new transnational and anti-identitarian scholarly paradigms” (ix, 146, 7). Like Rody, Martha J. Cutter maintains that American literature should be read intertextually and not bound by old borders: “storytellers can enable the dialogical quality of an ‘American’ story by showing that it takes on meaning only in relationship to other stories” (7). Two studies of interracial

adoption literature, Mark C. Jerng's *Claiming Others* and Cynthia Callahan's *Kin of Another Kind*, maintain that identities are founded on one's relations with others and other communities. Jerng, for instance, feels that "these adoption stories make clear" "the ongoing struggle to articulate the various modes of relating to another that continue to remake who we are" (244). Like Jerng, Callahan contends that literature about transnational adoption registers "the changing meaning not only of transracial adoption but also of individual and collective identity" (3). Belonging, culture, and race are dramatized in adoption stories to illustrate that family is also "a racializing force" and to question cultural essentialism "upheld . . . in order to respond to differences in the family" (Callahan 27, 39). These concepts will be further elaborated when discussing the adoption in *A Free Life*.

### The American Dream of Race in *A Free Life*

Against the backdrop of racial theories and literary criticisms, Ha Jin's *A Free Life* that germinated in 1992 but was not composed until 2000 presents and prefigures a future of what I call relational interracialism, according to which a person's racial identity is wrought by relationships with other people and other communities, and an ethnicity is defined in its relations with other ethnicities, just as an ethnic literature can be interethnic if it inherits the literary traditions of other ethnicities as well, or if it portrays characters in a crossethnic world (Fay 139; qtd. in Shan 143). *A Free Life* is interethnic for the latter description. Melody Yunzi Li and Steven Belletto also notice the relational trend in Ha Jin's recent writing career. To Li, both Ha Jin's "literary identity" and *A Free Life* reflect "the old world (China) and the new world (America) pushing and pulling diasporas constantly, forcing them to be always en route between the two" (203). The migrant may be a fitter descriptor for Ha Jin as he names his essay collection *The Writer as Migrant* (2008). On the relationality among nation-states, Belletto maintains that in his novel *A Map of Betrayal* (2014), Ha Jin gives his "analyses of the relationship between China and other countries, principally the United States" (806).

Ha Jin's race-transcending relational interracial thoughts unfold in interviews, *A Free Life*, and his recent poetry. To Ha Jin, *A Free Life* holds a mirror to American society of this century: "I wanted a book that reflects the American experience," says Ha Jin (Italie). I argue that it also projects an idealistic prospect of interracial cooperation. For example, Ha Jin hints that his works are crossracial when he responds to Jerry A. Varsava's question about race: to him,



race is “always there, but there are things that transcend racism” (“An” 21). The protagonist Nan Wu also states that to him the beau ideal in verse is a “poetry that could speak directly to the readers’ hearts regardless of their cultural and ethnic backgrounds” (*Free* 473). Ha Jin’s recent poem in Chinese “The Land of Flight” or literally “Fei’s Land,” with a pun on his first name Xuefei, imagines a borderless utopia, a dreamland of linguistic and racial equality:

It is a serene land where  
 innumerable languages are spoken,  
 each with its independent  
 yet mutually infiltrating space.

It is a versicolored land where  
 people of a spectrum of skin colors inhabit.  
 The shades converge and  
 fuse into a long lasting peace.

It is a land in flux  
 belonging to no nation-states (*Ling* 55).<sup>2</sup>

The novel unfolds by carrying on the tradition of diasporic stories “of political exile and of Cold War politics” and later that of adoption novels on “dislocation by celebrating the creation of roots separate from original ones” (Lim 162; Singley 86). For instance, the novel *A Free Life* spins the story of a life of freedom, independence, “loneliness,” and “uncertainty” of first-generation immigrants Nan Wu, his wife Pingping, and his son Taotao, who scuffle for survival through working for a livelihood, while they form their family as well as wrestle with the meaning of the American dream (Smith 29). The Wus build relationships with expatriates as well as other immigrants, and later, after their naturalization, with fellow Americans, the land, and its creatures. Through the exegesis of relational interracialism, the interethnic relationships expressed by the characters of *A Free Life* have given new valence to labor in capitalism, the tension between capitalism and racism, first-generation friendships between families, surrogate mothers, transracial adoption and cultural immersion, guardianship, godparents, creativity in life, interracial romances, extramarital interracial sexual relationships, the abjuration of violence, and second-generation friendship. For instance, after her husband accidentally drowns, Heidi Mansfield hires the Wus, a black cleaning maid named Pat, and a gardener named Tom (*Free* 14-15). The crossracial relationship between the Wus and the Mansfields is one between employees and employers. Pingping cooks and does the

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

housework (*Free* 14-15). Nan drives the Mansfield children to and from school, and the Mansfields provide housing and a good school district in exchange (*Free* 14-15). The Mansfields belong to the upper-middle class; Mr. Mansfield is “a plastic surgeon,” and Mrs. Mansfield “owns half a bank and an insurance company”—wealth accumulated for generations by her New England family (*Free* 14, 41-42). By contrast, the Wus, first-generation immigrants in the United States, are obliged by circumstances to be self-made entrepreneurs though they start by serving the Mansfield family. For the Wus, the jobs at the Mansfields come just in time after Nan gives up his scholarship in political science, a major designated by the Chinese government.

The capitalist work relationship between the Wus and the Mansfields can be examined through the propositions of functionalism, according to which the market would “reward efficiency and rationality” and discipline irrational acts such as discrimination (Farley 264). In *A Free Life*, for instance, the Wus gain the opportunity to acquire the Mansfield job because of past employment records. Mrs. Mansfield’s sister-in-law, Nan’s former supervisor, recommends Nan to Mrs. Mansfield (*Free* 14). Moreover, Mrs. Mansfield impulsively hires the Wus, judging by their character: Mrs. Mansfield “was so pleased when she saw the young couple, who looked steady and were so polite and cleanly dressed, that she hired them on the spot” (*Free* 14).

The relationship between the families is collaborative and reciprocal rather than interest-laden. Under these circumstances, the split labor-market theory does not interpret the relationship as appositely as functionalism can. Likewise, Wilson opines that “protective union legislation during the New Deal era and . . . the equal employment legislation in the early sixties” forestall businesses from splitting the labor market racially (Wilson 110). Moreover, the work relationship between the two families is inversed as the novel unfolds when Pingping employs the Mansfields’ daughter Livia, who runs away from home, as well as her own son Taotao to work at the Gold Wok, the restaurant they now own (*Free* 384). Yet the motivation this time is not for economic gains, “because their wages might consume a good part of profit the business could fetch in a slow season,” but to have them under the “watch” of Nan and Pingping (*Free* 384). Just as the Mansfields once employed and provided housing for the Wus, the Wus now hire and shelter Livia. The two families have exchanged their roles in capitalism. Mrs. Mansfield thanks the Wus for retrieving her daughter Livia: Mrs. Mansfield “hugged and kissed both Pingping and Nan and thanked them for accommodating Livia” (*Free* 389). Furthermore, motivated by the incentive of a wage, Livia and Taotao work at the Gold Wok with delight: “Never paid five dollars an hour before, they followed Pingping’s instructions with alacrity”

(*Free* 385). The relationship between the two families is one of collaboration and one that complements the functions of family through employment. Functionalism can explain the employment process to a certain extent, but the split labor-market theory does not apply as well because the new literature is both interracial and relational with other agendas other than power, such as the family.

Functionalism is challenged by Tim, an African Canadian and Nan's fellow security guard at Hampden Park condominium complex. Tim complains that only lower-level jobs are left for Blacks in the American job market, and Nan proves the validity of Tim's statement with his observation that he has "never seen a black postman or fireman in Woodland," the town where he lives (*Free* 65). Yet Tim chooses capitalism over racism since undeniably, the capitalist dream to strike gold and succeed in life is more likely to be realized in the United States. An example Tim gives is the strength of the U. S. dollar: "for a pack of toilet paper you pay three bucks here, but you have to pay four in Canada" (*Free* 64). Tim holds "two full-time jobs, running like a machine" to build a mansion in the suburbia of Toronto where he will retire owing to the discrimination in the United States (*Free* 64-65). In an intriguing exchange of dialogues, Nan asks Tim to compare the status of Blacks and that of the Chinese in Canada, trying to gauge one mainstream-minority relationship with another, which is an example of relational interracialism by defining race in its relationships with other races:

"How do they trit Chinese?"

"Similar to blacks, I would say."

Nan remembered something. "I have a question for you, Tim."

"What?"

"Is a Chinese also cahlored?" . . . Wasn't white also a color? . . .

Logically speaking, everybody should be "colored." (*Free* 65)

Though Nan criticizes Tim's "illusion of getting rich," which harnesses people to their jobs, in *A Free Life*, the first step of maintaining steady interpersonal relationships is to achieve independence and freedom, which connotes being able to take responsibility for oneself, make one's own choices in life, and support one's family: Nan "would have to earn a living by himself and also support his family. He was free, free to choose his own way and to make something of himself" (*Free* 17). Ha Jin explains that the novel's initial titles were *A Beginning* and *The Follower of the Heart*, yet he eventually chose *A Free Life* because the fiction focuses on freedom and its price (Smith 29). Ha Jin's early poem "Gratitude" on "knowing one price of freedom" foreshadows *A Free Life's* theme that exerting oneself for economic independence in the capitalist society of the United States is, for immigrants, concomitant with newly gained freedom (*Facing* 40):

Freedom here is not a way of living  
 but a way of selling and buying. To survive  
 one has to learn how to sell oneself  
 and how to trim oneself into a bolt or a nut  
 to match the machine of a profession. (*Facing* 39-40)

The freedom Nan feels after the Wus have paid off their home mortgage attests to the functionalist premise, which compares society to a capitalist market and judges a person accordingly: freedom is “not owing anybody a penny and having no fear of being fired” (*Free* 418). This image of a self-made man is wrought from the early work experience of Ha Jin and his wife Bian in the United States (Fay 118). Before he started teaching, Ha Jin took odd jobs “as a custodian” for restaurants and libraries, as “a busboy at a Friendly’s restaurant,” and “as a night watchman in a factory” (Fay 134, 118). His wife babysat, “made bonsai trees,” and worked for a restaurant and a laundromat (Fay 134). This and other of Nan’s views on economic independence in capitalism are proud statements rather than mordant remarks. In a capitalist society, freedom is premised partly, if not mostly, on one’s ability and functions in it, Ha Jin’s poetry and Nan in *A Free Life* suggest.

As the dominant economic system, capitalism reigns in American life. In the novel Nan thus interprets the power of capitalism in American life: “money was God in this place” (*Free* 66). On two occasions, serving as a *deus ex machina*, capitalism abates racial tension and even resolves interpersonal conflicts. Competition in capitalism terminates the racist discrimination at a supermarket and dislodges inhabitants based on their functions in capitalism and not races. For instance, the A & P supermarket whose two cashiers are racists closes down and vanishes out of the neighborhood (*Free* 222). Moreover, one day the Wus find that the bank has evicted their neighbor Gerald Brown, of whom other neighbors disapprove for not cleaning his yard and mowing the lawn (*Free* 392).

Another, if not more crucial, interracial relationship is the first-generation friendship between the Wus and the Mitchells, which evolves around issues including interracial cooperation, cultural infiltration, interracial parenthood, and transracial adoption. This friendship in the novel impels one to question the various assertions of essentialism and culturalism. The relationship between the Wus and the Mitchells is one example of interracial cooperation and cultural infiltration. For example, Janet assists the Wus in their imbroglio with their lawyer by teaching them that they can change the restaurant’s ownership at the deeds office themselves without a lawyer, and she informs them about Americans’ habit of suing when they feel that their rights are being infringed upon, which the Wus will not do fearing the costs (*Free* 213-14). Janet, “fascinated by

Chinese medicine” and having received an acupuncture treatment, acquires Chinese culture from the Wus as she asks Pingping about herbs and acupuncture (*Free* 242). Janet further seeks Pingping’s advice when the Mitchells adopt a Chinese girl (*Free* 255, 312).

However, the friendship between Janet and Pingping reaches a tense moment when Janet inquires of Pingping if she is willing to be a surrogate mother for her and her husband. Janet’s concept of surrogacy transcends raciality: the child could be either Asian by Nan and Pingping or biracial by her husband Dave and Pingping (*Free* 242). Pingping ruminates over the possibility because she can use the money from Janet to pay their home mortgage and help her “friend” as well, but Nan objects on the grounds that it is like selling a child: “the fact is that you’ll have to disown the child if you accept her money” (*Free* 244). Pingping agrees with her husband on the proposition’s moral conundrum and declines Janet’s idea of surrogate motherhood (*Free* 245). Surrogate motherhood involves the problems of biological and legal ties between the baby and parents, kinships, monetary transactions, the risks of pregnancy and delivery, which may cause diseases and even deaths. Nan’s question is whether money and laws can sever biological kinships once and for all. Nan’s response reveals that he is still skeptical about whether the sanctity of the integrity and privacy of the body can be violated without moral consequences, and whether the traces of exploitation and commodification of the maternal body and the baby can be altogether erased. Curiously, in the novel Janet is not at all flustered by having an Asian or biracial baby, testifying to the ever more transracial nature of the ideas about both progeny and family today.

Next, the Mitchells mull over adopting a Chinese girl because the adoption process within the United States is long, “complicated and expensive. That’s why a lot of people go to other countries to adopt babies,” according to Janet (*Free* 255). In the United States, toward the end of the first decade of this century, Caucasian Americans adopted predominantly “from Russia, China, and Guatemala” (Callahan 6). The relationality among nation-states is growing ever more intimate owing to transnational adoption. Catherine Ceniza Choy observes that with the number of adoptees rising “by 42 percent” from 1998 to 2004 and their nations of origins dispersing from Asia to Eastern Europe, Latin America, and Africa, transnational adoption that burgeoned in the 1970s “has become a truly global industry” (161). As Janet in the novel reveals, domestic adoption policy, body politics, and geopolitics contribute to the rise of foreign and interracial adoption. International transracial adoption rates soared “in the late twentieth century,” a time when controversies over transracial adoptions fermented within the United States (Callahan 36). For example, adopted

children's request for "the opening of records" about their biological parents reveals that knowledge about one's origins and the quest for authenticity are still essential to one's personhood (Callahan 104). Just as Callahan suggests, where transracial adoption is at stake, issues of both collective and individual origins are inextricably implicated (Callahan 166). Likewise, Jerng maintains that a person's birth holds a reservoir of knowledge about "the origins, continuities, genealogies, and histories that provide the conditions for legibility" in society (vii).

In addition to one's biological origins, in transracial adoption, a questioning of culture as the sole determinant of race or ethnicity occurs and poses a challenge to cultural essentialism. Callahan suggests that

culture is, paradoxically, something both innate and learned. . . . "Culture" becomes almost interchangeable with "race". . . . [A]doption disputes the very notion of inherency, but . . . it does not necessarily eradicate the tremendous appeal of inherent identities. (39, 160)

Callahan therefore suggests that both biologism and culture have claims to one's individual and collective identities, and that neither could be utterly occluded from being part of one's self.

Within this matrix of the historical reality of and critical views on transnational adoption, *A Free Life* engages the reader with an episode in the Mitchells' adoption of their daughter, a Chinese girl named Hailee. *A Free Life's* literary treatment of transnational adoption exemplifies two traits of relational interracialism, the cooperation and relationality among racial and cultural communities. When Hailee suffers from leukemia and must undergo a bone marrow transplant, the hospital cannot find a match in the National Bone Marrow Donor Registry owing to its small group of Asian donors (*Free* 521). When her doctor suggests that they have a better chance of finding a match "among people of the same ethnicity," the Mitchells first turn to China for donors and search for Hailee's biological parents and kin (*Free* 521). Next they turn to local Asian Americans, the Wus, who then call Mei Hong for help from the Chinese diaspora (*Free* 522). Nan finds her repulsive because Hong, a graduate student's wife, once adamantly solicited a donation from them for flood victims in China (*Free* 232). A character portrayed as having a strong sense of community, Hong contacts "the Chinese churches," "Chinese students and the people in Chinatown" about this business (*Free* 522). With the publicity of the event in a local newspaper in Chinese and a makeshift clinic, a teenage donor, a recent Chinese immigrant named Moli, is found to be a match for Hailee (*Free* 522). Hong further tells Moli and convinces Moli's parents that as a member of the community, Moli must donate bone marrow because if they do not "help to save Hailee, they'd be despised by all the Chinese here" (*Free* 522). Hong finds her

rationale for saving Hailee in Chinese American ethnic group consciousness and the Chinese diaspora: “Every member of my family had our blood tested. Hailee is a Chinese girl, so we must do whatever we can to save her” (*Free* 523). In the novel, Hong stands for the power to hold an ethnic community together and one’s belongingness to an ethnic community. When asked if she is frightened, Moli responds—calling Hong “Aunt,” a familiar expression of endearment—by expounding Hong’s idea of communal solidarity and reciprocity: “Aunt Hong says I should help save Hailee, and if I were sick, others would do the same for me” (*Free* 523).

Moreover, acknowledging that Hailee is from an ethnic background different from theirs, the Mitchells educate themselves as well as Hailee about her ethnic heritage via the approach of cultural immersion. These measures include the whole family learning Chinese and celebrating Chinese festivals, and finding role models from the child’s very ethnic community, such as having Pingping and Hong as godmothers (*Free* 369-70, 524). Cultural immersion improves the academic performance of minority students through education via selecting role models from students’ “racial or ethnic background” and instilling positive views about the worth of their ethnicity and cultural heritage (Farley 398-400). The concept of “mutual adoption” that the Mitchells believe in motivates both the parents and the child to learn each other’s culture, which is another example of the infiltration among cultures (*Free* 370). Janet explains the concept to Pingping: “You know, the adoption of a child is actually mutual. Hailee has adopted us, so Dave and I must also try to adjust” (*Free* 370). For instance, Dave will learn Chinese, and Janet enrolls in a Chinese class to be able to teach her daughter Chinese (*Free* 369-70); she believes that Hailee “should know her mother tongue,” and that “Chinese is her heritage” (*Free* 370). However, Hailee also has other non-Asian godparents, which illustrates that the family adopts an open-minded attitude toward race, recognizing the differences while also engaging other races in a relational interracialism (*Free* 395-98).

Adoptions involve primarily a change of identity as Callahan and Jerng maintain. In Callahan’s view, adoption stories contest concepts and concerns including “multiracial identity, mixed-race families, social change following the civil rights movement, tribal autonomy,” biologism’s “inherency,” “and immigrant identities” (25, 160). Jerng maintains that these issues are reexamined because adoption presupposes a change of identity, whose diverse meanings are historically, socially, and politically imbricated:

Adoption in this sense assumes that adopted persons will change identity—they will take on a new name, become part of a new family and sometimes a new country. And yet the precise parameters of this shift in the social standings of adopted persons

have been unclear, contested, and negotiated in ways that reveal the interrelated construction of the categories of family, nation, and race. (vii-viii)

Attitude is a more apposite term than identity in characterizing the dynamism and flux of the significance of interraciality and racial relationships between a person and others and within a family. Through 18 “interviews with 23 white adoptive parents who were participating in culture camps” from 2007 to 2008, Carla Goar finds that the awareness of race fluctuates even for the same person (Goar 195, 191, 202). Some of the parents interviewed have “colorblindness and race consciousness” simultaneously or one or the other at diverse times (Goar 202).

Transracial adoption situates the problems of ethnicity and differences at the center, calling attention to the racialization of family (Callahan 27). Elizabeth Bartholet maintains that transracial adoption indicates a shift to what I call relational interracialism, with differences being noted in the family yet without destabilizing it (112). In literature, relational interracialism can be a trope for crossracial collaboration, accord, and acceptance within a nation-state. For example, when Pingping asks Janet if she minds that people can see that a Chinese girl is “not your daughter,” Janet says that Dave and she “won’t mind,” and in fact, they “like Chinese babies” because it is “very hard” for them to adopt an “American baby” (*Free* 255). For the Mitchells, having a child weighs more than having one from one’s own race. The adoptees test a family’s and a nation-state’s accommodation of multiple races and ethnicities since their “social identities” must turn into a *tabula rasa* prior to adoption, and as Jodi Kim suggests, after the adoption “a restoration of social identity and personhood” ensues (857). Myriad scholars concur with this view concerned with the adoptees. Fu-jen Chen maintains that transracial adoptees embody the ideal of multiculturalism (182). Tobias Hübinette and James Arvanitakis suggest further that “interracial families and transracial adoptions” realize one’s “desire to live with and become the Other” in this era (703). Moreover, transracial adoption subserves as a test to strangers’ rights within and beyond the family as Caren Irr suggests, questioning the right of strangers to the formation of a transracial family (394).

Closely related to the roles of foster parents are those of guardians, godparents, and the nominal father and mother or *yifu* (義父) and *yimu* (義母) in Chinese respectively. “Guardians fulfill the state’s role as substitute parent” “legally entrusted with supervision” of the child (“Guardian”). In contrast to guardians, godparents and nominal parents are chosen from friends or relatives by the parents to expand the child’s network of relationships in the older generation. In Sinophone culture, grown-ups can select nominal parents as they wish. All of these relationships—guardians, godparents, and nominal parents—refer to



adults who are not a child's biological parents, yet who act on the child's behalf either to supervise the child and manage the property, in the case of a guardian, or to have honorary titles for parental functions. For instance, because the Mitchells are "good-hearted and financially secure," are "fond of children and could give Taotao a loving home," the Wus and the Mitchells sign an agreement to make the Mitchells Taotao's guardians, who will take both Taotao and the Wus' property in their care if Nan and Pingping both die before their son reaches adulthood (*Free* 274). The agreement is signed before the Mitchells have an adopted daughter. The Wus do not choose other Chinese couples because they have "children and might not treat Taotao like their own" (*Free* 274). Their lawyer has doubts about this crossethnic choice: "Everybody can tell he's adopted by them, not their own," yet Nan answers, "We don't mind that" (*Free* 275). Pingping asks Janet the same question about their adoption of Hailee as well, and Janet gives an identical answer (*Free* 255).

The transracial substitute parenthood is mutual between the two families because the Mitchells also ask the Wus to be Hailee's godparents, and Pingping agrees. However, Nan thinks that the responsibility—according to "Chinese custom," "to raise Hailee as his own" if the Mitchells leave this world—is too grave for him to take on, and he does not promise to be Hailee's godfather (*Free* 364, 367). In truth, it is a personal choice whether or not to assume the parental role of raising one's godchild if the child's parents die. Nan admits another reason is that he is not "very fond of children," and he is not very pleased that the Mitchells have no intention of bequeathing their property to them, yet give them the responsibility of godparents (*Free* 367). In addition to Pingping, Hong, who plays an important role in saving Hailee's life, becomes her godmother as well (*Free* 524). Other friendships within the network of the Gold Wok also grow, such as that between Janet and the waitress Niyang; Janet goes to a home sale with Niyang and her husband Shubo Gao to give them support (*Free* 412). Overall, in the interracial relationships between the two families, as well as within the Mitchell family, functionalist considerations rather than race build and cement kinship and friendship.

The circles of poets and artists in *A Free Life* symbolize "the spiritual dimension" of the lives of immigrants, who "came to this country not just for material opportunity," and attest to interracial harmony at the spiritual level (Fay 143). Ha Jin was inspired to write this "immigrant novel" when the poet Jennifer Rose showed him a book of poetry self-published by a new immigrant Franky from Hong Kong, the owner of the restaurant Hula Hula in Waltham, Massachusetts (Varsava "An" 20; qtd. in Shan 143). Ha Jin speculated that this story "might capture the metaphysical" as well as "the physical . . . dimension

of the experience,” and after eight years, he started composing his novel *A Free Life* (Varsava “An” 20). In this novel, Nan’s interracial friendship with the poets Sam Fisher, Dick Harrison, and Edward Neary nurtures Nan’s creativity and kindles his ambition to become a poet. For example, both Fisher and Harrison urge Nan to write poems in English, and Harrison invites Nan to Neary’s poetry reading (*Free* 231, 262, 299). Moreover, Harrison encourages Nan to apply for the Iowa Writers’ Workshop and even suggests that he may get Nan a scholarship (*Free* 577). Nan is portrayed separately from his family and the world of the Gold Wok in his associations with these poets. To Nan, these poets are the embodiments of individualism, freedom, and independence, in addition to the realizable dream of writing poetry as a career. For instance, Nan sees in the Jewish poet Fisher “the free spirit of a poet who wasn’t afraid of anything or anybody, a complete individual” (*Free* 153). Moreover, Nan is surprised to hear that Neary, a MacArthur fellow and anthology editor, lives a rich life with fellowships and reading honoraria (*Free* 305-06). Contrary to Nan’s idea that “poetry seems useless,” a resident poet at Emory University, Harrison, states explicitly to Nan that poets can have “fame, money, and women” (*Free* 426, 259); in other words, they may enjoy material comforts and worldly fame and pursue a career of creativity. Nan wonders if the Chinese model of poets, who eulogize “poverty” and whose poems “mature with hardship,” can be wrong (*Free* 426). In the novel the poet Harrison reflects Ha Jin’s experience of teaching the craft of poetry in universities (qtd. in Shan 148). From Harrison, Nan learns that art can sustain life rather than being in strife with it: “if I didn’t write, I don’t know if I could have lived so long,” Harrison confesses (*Free* 481). Furthermore, Nan finds that interracial and interethnic relationships are at times more congenial than intraracial and intraethnic relationships because personality and other factors may play a more crucial role than race and ethnicity in interpersonal communication. For example, Nan feels nonchalant conversing with the painter Kent Philips, but he does not feel the same during his palaver with a fellow Chinese, Bao Yuan, “despite having known him for years”: “with Kent Philips, a stranger, he was at ease, not having to weigh his words” (*Free* 485-86, 401).

Chinese artists and Nan’s literary friends—including the editor in chief of *New Lines* journal and dissident painter Yuan, the novelist Danning Meng, the political economist Manping Liu, and the painter Uncle Zhao—keep Nan informed on the status quo of literature and art in China. Through these characters, the novel explores the reception and evaluation of art and literature when art and literature cross national borders and change languages. For instance, Nan thinks that Meng’s novellas, though drawing readership with both their “exotic details” and “nationalistic sentiment,” may actually “mislead the Chinese

who have never been to America" (*Free* 473, 249). Nan also discovers that Yuan gains fame among his Chinese readers by manipulating "the gap between the two languages," promoting his own paintings by publishing a translated journal article in a Chinese-language newspaper and a magazine (*Free* 459).

Like the circles of poets, the two interracial romances in the novel illustrate a milieu of more relaxed interracial relationships. Through Nan's eyes, the novel criticizes people incapable of forming interracial relationships. Nan's black graduate classmate from Sudan, Maurice Fomé, who speaks French and English fluently and studied at the Sorbonne before coming to the United States, has "many girlfriends, both white and black," with some coming all the way "from England and France to visit him" (*Free* 86). One night's intimate relation with Fomé's girlfriend Heather Burt disturbs Nan for health reasons, and not because he has crossed the racial line (*Free* 88). In another interracial romance, the Chinese waitress Maiyu leaves her husband Heng Chen, who was once "a promising young historian," to marry an African American private investigator named David Kellman (*Free* 138, 116, 284). For Nan, the episode evokes the phrase "small man" bantered in the Chinese newspapers and magazines of the Chinese diaspora, referring to an ill-adapted immigrant man who cannot "blend into American society" (*Free* 285). They "refuse to learn anything from other cultures," including another language, and have "no friends of other races," and their more resilient wives become "strong women" in this new environment to compensate for the dysfunctional roles of their husbands (*Free* 285-86).

Compared with first-generation friendships and romances, racial essentialism has even less impact on second-generation interracial relationships. The interracial friendships between Taotao and Livia and between Taotao and his classmate Loreen are natural and nurturing. Though the Wus are employed by her family, Livia teaches Taotao English and treats "him like a friend" (*Free* 36). Livia does have a harmful influence on Taotao because she gives him marijuana, but they are caught by Pingping, who keeps the girl under their care until Mrs. Mansfield arrives to take her home (*Free* 387-88). Moreover, at school Loreen reads to Taotao and gives "him her milk at lunch" (*Free* 37). Though there are name-calling incidents at school and physical violence on the school bus, the novel treats these brawls as daily conflicts between people and does not ascribe them to racism (*Free* 37, 267). Taotao is taught by Pingping and the waitress from Malaysia, Tammie, to hit back and protect himself, and the bullying stops after Taotao punches one of them "in the cheek" (*Free* 267-68, 169).

Moreover, violence of any form in interpersonal relationships is condemned in *A Free Life*, including the death of a soldier in Tiananmen Square, Hansong's murdering of a homeless man, Nan's own contrivances about a kid-

napping scheme, owning a gun, Nan's spanking of Taotao, and intimidating sexual advances (*Free* 12, 16-17, 16-17, 34, 347). After the Tiananmen Square Massacre, Ha Jin, at that time a graduate student in the United States, made the decision to immigrate to the United States and remain within its borders, hoping that his son "at least does not have to live in history's cyclic violence" (qtd. in Shan 132). Despite his teenage experience of army life in the People's Liberation Army beginning in 1969 for five and a half years, Ha Jin reveals his distaste for human combat and for violence in his comment on *War Trash*, a novel composed "to remind people that war is the most terrible human activity" (qtd. in Wang; "Conversations"). *A Free Life* imagines the United States as a place with less enmity between people: "Zere you have to fight to survive, but here I don't want to fight wiz anyone," says Nan (*Free* 51). Moreover, appended to the end of the novel, Nan's poem "Homework" describes Taotao's dream about a country that is not militaristic: "For a child a country is" "unmarked by missiles / and fleets" and does not "rattle nuclear bombs like slingshots" (*Free* 352, 649-50). Interracial violence with regard to sex finds an example in Nan's own unpleasant experience with a couple's sexual advances, specifically when the woman calls Nan "an Oriental man" (*Free* 32). The man and woman, "both in black leather jackets and jeans," pursue Nan until he threatens to shoot them after he runs into a factory (*Free* 31-34). Interracial sexual harassment is likewise treated as dangerous in another conflict taking place at a strip club between a dancer and Meng, who touches the dancer since he is both unfamiliar with the rules and too impudent, being under the influence of alcohol (*Free* 597).

*A Free Life* is not an isolated work of optimism in American fiction. Other high-profile milestone Asian American novels portray likewise positive interactions and cultural imbuelement among races. Centered on the interracial charity and altruistic protection American Minnie Vautrin gave to the Chinese during the massacre by Japanese troops in Nanjing, China in World War II, Ha Jin's novel *Nanjing Requiem* values interracial friendship even more than *A Free Life* does (282). A section title of *Nanjing Requiem*, the "Goddess of Mercy," compares Vautrin to a Buddhist deity, and the novel sets up a contrast between Vautrin's true devotion to fellow human beings and the Japanese's falsely professed inter-ethnic and crossnational cooperation exemplified by a Japanese slogan in capital letters: "WE MUST UNITE TO BUILD A PROSPEROUS EAST ASIA" (91, 198). As in *Nanjing Requiem*, a foreign woman embodies interracial goodwill in Ha Jin's novel *A Map of Betrayal*, in which Ben admits that his Ukrainian girlfriend Sonya is one among the few people he can trust (153). Racial conflicts in history and today with their excruciating presence cannot deter American writers from imagining a bright future symbolized by transracial families when

the import of race will be much less significant than in our era. For example, even in John Okada's *No-No Boy*, a novel protesting racist relocation in World War II, Kenji, a Japanese American who volunteered to serve in the army and was injured in war, tells another Japanese American, Ichiro, jailed for refusing to fight during the war, about a future of interracial mixing, a time when race is eliminated: "Marry a white girl or a Negro or an Italian or even a Chinese. Anything but a Japanese. After a few generations of that, you've got the thing beat" (164). Ichiro replies that more than one American has that reverie: "It's a fine dream, but you're not the first" (Okada 164). Kenji admits that "it's just a dream," and so does Kenji's girlfriend Emi (Okada 164). To her, the talk represents Kenji's interracial ideal: "He [Kenji] only meant that things ought to be that way, but I think he knew he was only dreaming" (Okada 170). Kenji's project of intermarriage and transracial family is a trope of love, acceptance, and unification among races. Unlike Kenji, Milton Vickerman notes "four overlapping themes" of post-racialism—"political post-racialism," "color blindness," "[d]iversity," and "the ending of racism"—but maintains that as a foundation for "group formation and the competition of resources," racial distinction will persist as a social factor in the near future (35, 143). The United States has not "entered a post-racial state" as Vickerman suggests, but racial reality does not stymie novelists' imaginings of a relational interracial prospect (Vickerman 35).

## Conclusion

Functionalism, cultural immersion, and relational interracialism could more aptly explain the racial interaction in *A Free Life* than the split labor-market theory. Moreover, relational interracialism emphasizing cooperation, relationality, and cultural imbuelement among races foretells a more harmonious prospect of interraciality in the United States. Through ideational constructivism—the formulation of social culture and our living spheres by ideas—relational interracialism suggests that ideas generate breakthroughs in not just patterns of thoughts, but also actions, cultural milieus, and social practices, inducing the transformation of portions of, if not the whole, society. While Ha Jin's other novels often explore the themes of a clash between "party ideologies" and "human emotions and drives," and even humor engendered by this discord, *A Free Life* delves deftly into modern day interracial relationships with a generous mind and undaunted spirit (Geyh 195). *A Free Life* portrays draconian adaptation and cultural disparities in understatement and with precision, or what Brian Bethune calls "objective recording" (Bethune 131). Varsava describes

these qualities as Ha Jin's "signature style—an unadorned realistic prose punctuated with understated irony" ("Spheres" 130). Ha Jin says in *The Writer as Migrant* that literature has the "capacity to illuminate life" (ix). In *A Free Life*, the characters' lives are judged by their individuality, capability, and endeavors, as well as by individual and collective origins. If Ha Jin's other stories capture "the breakdown of morality and the cruelty that was so pervasive in China during the Cultural Revolution" and the "domination of both the private and public spheres in modern, post-1949" China by the state machinery, *A Free Life* starts constructing an American dream of modern human relations and emotions less in their contradictions than in their relationality in which cooperation and mutual infiltration supersede conflicts to define interraciality (Yee; Varsava "Spheres" 128). Ha Jin in *A Free Life*, other novels, and poems and Okada in *No-No Boy* paint a vision for the time to follow.

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## 關係跨種族主義與哈金《自由生活》中 美國夢的種族關係

### 摘要

此千禧年之際已預言理論與文學研究跨種族的趨勢。本文主要以哈金的小說《自由生活》、其他小說與詩為例，認為種族和諧是哈金等美國作家在故事與詩中探討美國夢的種族關係。以約翰·E·法爾利的四個種族理論模式，本文分析哈金的小說《自由生活》中分工、收養、羅曼史與友情等合作的種族關係，另提出自創的「關係跨種族主義」一詞，此主義認為將種族置於種族間看待為一種可行的理論。關係跨種族主義探究種族間的關係，提出多元文化主義在實施上的修正，將種族間的關係奠基於種族間的合作與文化的相互影響，且將衝突限制於可解決的範圍內。《自由生活》開始建造與現代人際關係與情感有關的美國夢，以合作與相互影響取代衝突來定義種族關係，其中合作重於衝突。探討的作品包括哈金的《自由生活》、《南京安魂曲》、《背叛指南》與詩歌，與約翰·岡田的《雙不男孩》，兩位作家描繪的未來遠景。

**關鍵字：**哈金，自由生活，種族和諧，跨種族收養，關係跨種族主義