

Grits and Sushi

Grits and Sushi. I know grits, and I know sushi, but “Grits and Sushi?” That is the name of Mitzi’s blog. She admits she really wanted to call it, “Grits and Goya,” but “‘sushi’ had a little more of a ring and was more accessible.” Mitzi was born and raised in Texas, something she once tried to deny; the reference to grits exemplifies her southernness. The cornmeal mush brings in her African American father and a heritage that has given her many trials, as it is manifest in various cultural contexts. “Goya” expresses her Okinawan roots, her mother’s heritage, historically distinct and painfully marginalized—the bitter melon symbolizes the invisibility and disempowered status of Okinawa. Mitzi did not use it in her blog’s name as a concession to Okinawa’s invisibility. “Sushi,” on the other hand, is a symbol of Japan that is understandable, even loved by Americans. It is quintessentially Japanese, and Mitzi’s use of it expresses how Okinawans, and Mitzi herself, are both *a part of* and *apart from* Japanese.

Somehow Mitzi brings all these elements together in her blog, because this is who she is; she seeks to create a “communal space” for folks interested in similar issues. Growing up in the U.S. South the daughter of an Okinawan woman and an African American father, Mitzi had to explore many different types of identities: those given to her by others, those she made up to make sense of her daily life, and identities that would make sense to others, depending on their own cultural context.

What does it mean to a child to be “mixed,” in a way that others find confusing? How does a child make sense of others’ stares, labels, and emotions? How does a child learn from others who she is, who she is not, and who she should be?

Mitzi learned early in life who she was from her parents and others around her. Sometimes kids are immersed in culture and it doesn't need to be taught. Mitzi's father never sat down to "teach" her about being black; she says she was surrounded by blackness and lived it, growing up in all-black neighborhoods in Houston, attending predominantly black and Latino schools.

Mitzi actually learned a few things about Southern black culture from her mother, who inadvertently began to speak with a mix of Okinawan and Southern U.S. English, incorporating words like "fixin to" and "ya'll" into her vocabulary. Her fluid combination of grammar, syntax, and multilingual colloquialisms was especially noticeable when she was mad, like when she screamed at the kids to clean up their rooms: "*AGIGIBIYO [Oh Lord!] This room is so dirty. You are a GIRL so you have to be neat. Kusai (stinky) dirty room. Ya'll have to clean NOW.*"¹

Without a natural environment to immerse her children in her culture, Mitzi's mother also fiercely held on to original heritage and taught them, like many women displaced from their homelands who fight isolation and feelings of powerlessness by teaching their children about their native culture. Women who married Americans, like Mitzi's mom or my mom, struggled between making their kids Americans and making them Japanese or Okinawan. Often outwardly they had to satisfy the demands of their husbands insisting that their children were American. But inside the home and in their intimate relations they could make their kids Japanese or Okinawan, sometimes surreptitiously. Having Japanese or Okinawan children gave them company in their isolation and separation from family, community, and country. Mitzi's mother learned how to be a wife of an African American man without giving up her own Okinawan culture.

My siblings and I would stay at my grandmother's house once in a while (she cooked the best collard greens) and when my mom came to pick us up she would teach her how to cook a southern meal for my father. Our meals were an indicator of how much

my mom held on to her traditions. My father made his requests for chicken, steak, or okra and my mom learned to cook these things. Guess who cooked the grits in our house? That's right, my mama. But we always had Japanese rice on the side with nori (dried seaweed) and tofu and fishcake with these really noisome beans that are supposed to be good for you.²

Though she herself was blending cultures, Mitzi's mom distinguished sharply between cultures when she taught the kids how to act, differentiating between Okinawan and American behaviors and values. One was good and one was bad. And naturally, her way, the Okinawan way, was good, and the way the kids should act. The other way, the American way, was bad—and overwhelming in its negative influence, needing to be constantly controlled and subdued.

When we disobeyed my mother's rules or screamed, we were being too "American." If I ever left the house with rollers in my hair, my mom would say I shouldn't do American things. "Agijibiyo . . . where you learn this from? You are Okinawan too. Damedesuyo [don't do that]. Don't talk so much like Americans; listen first." My mother always told us: never be too direct, never accept gifts from people on the first offer, and always be humble and modest. Those were cultural traits and values that I inevitably inherited (and cherish) being raised by a Japanese mother.³

Why did Mitzi's mother insist, "You are Okinawan too"? Perhaps she was just trying to provide balance as society told her kids that they were black. Maybe she just wanted company, to be more than a group of one. Parents can also work out their feelings about their partner and themselves by projecting qualities onto their children. My mom also taught us that Japanese and Irish were different, and you know who were smarter and who were lazier. Fortunately, my dad agreed so there were no arguments, only jokes about the Irish. Mitzi's mother saw positive and negative qualities as coming from genes or blood, with Americans and Okinawans different, and mixed kids having some of each.

"I don't know why but I think Okinawans have a different blood—we don't act like

Americans.”

“Um . . . What about us mama?”

“Oh, you have mixed blood, so that’s why sometimes you are good and sometimes bad.”⁴

Mitzi’s mother’s teaching about being Okinawan shows how identity can become a battleground for loyalty when each parent insisting that the child belongs to their ethnic group. The child may be pulled back and forth between parents and extended family members, each wanting the child to claim affiliation. Or conversely, they may be pushed away, to the other side, rejected for being too much like the other parent, the other group.

The ethnic mixture in the child is framed in different ways. The child might be told she has the “best of both worlds.” Some parents encourage their children to accept who they are as a mixture, rather than choosing one side over the other, or needing to reject any part of themselves and their family. Today, more parents insist on their child’s right and need to identify with all parts of their heritage. But it wasn’t so long ago that parents taught kids like Mitzi that they should just accept being black because “society won’t see you as mixed or Japanese but black.” The “one-drop rule” dictated that any amount of black blood made a person black. But times are changing and you might wonder why Obama is not the 44th white president as well as the first black president.

Every black Asian I have interviewed says that black communities are more accepting of multiracial people than any community. Among those individuals who wish to accept all the parts of their heritage with equal weight, however, some feel that they are excluded. If you identify as other than black you can be criticized for wanting to escape from that designation and climb the social ladder by claiming to be something else, whether Indian, Japanese, or passing as white. When Tiger Woods explained to Oprah in 1997 that he identified as “Cablinasian” (Caucasian, black, Indian, Asian) rather than black, he set off a storm of controversy. Critical comments came from those who denounced what they saw as a denial of being black, while multiracial advocates argued that Tiger was positively affirming all of his ancestries, finding wholeness by embracing

all of his parts.

Identification with the parent's ethnic group can also be a matter of loyalty. Mitzi's mom was the target of jokes and derogatory comments since she had her first child with an African American man. She learned to walk hand in hand with her children while being stared at and hearing people talk. Mitzi saw her mom rejected by relatives in her father's family too, and perhaps keenly felt her mom's isolation and wanted to align with her for mutual protection.

It was my mother who told us that they we would be discriminated against because of our color, and it was my Japanese mother to whom we ran when we were called niggers at the public swimming pool in Houston. To say to this woman, "Mom, we are just black," would be a disrespectful slap in the face. The woman who raised us and cried for years from her family's coldness and rejection because of her decision to marry interracially, who cried when my father's sister wouldn't let her be a part of the family picture because she was a "Jap"; this woman, who happens to be my mother, will never hear "Mom, I'm just black" from my mouth, because I'm not, and no person, society, or government will force me to say that and deny my reality and my being, no matter how offensive I am to their country or how much of a nuisance I am to their cause. I am Blackanese.⁵

I personally identified as Japanese, because as a child this identity was thrust upon me by others, but Mitzi's affirmation of her Japanese and Okinawan heritage flew in the face of American society's labeling of her as black.

Our bodies, our presence, our reality are a nuisance to some because we defy a definite and demarcated set of boundaries. We confuse those who try to organize ethnic groups by highlighting these boundaries because they don't know how to include us or exclude us. We are Blackanese, Hapa, Eurasian, Multiracial.⁶

We are "offensive" and a "nuisance." Offensive because we raise disturbing thoughts of interracial sex? Offensive because our very bodies destroy the neat

boundaries cherished by so many people trying to control and order their world into boxes of white, black, and yellow? A nuisance because we threaten the rigid racial categories and authority of established interest groups and those heavily invested in maintaining distinctions and barriers to membership? Mitzi's multiracial identity was attacked by those threatened by it.

Nigga-chink, black-Jap, black-Japanese mutt. The neighborhood kids, friends, and adults labeled my siblings and me with these terms especially after they recognized that my mother was completely intent on making us learn about Okinawan culture. On New Year's Day, we had black-eyed peas and mochi. We cleaned the house to start the year fresh and clean. "Don't laugh with your mouth too wide and show your teeth too much," my mom would always tell us. "Be like a woman." I had not realized that I covered my mouth each time I laughed until someone pointed it out to me in my freshman year in college.⁷

When Mitzi was in high school an exchange student from Brazil told her that she did not need to identify as black when "you're so much better." Her identity was nurtured by meeting others who introduced her to new possibilities of identities beyond monoracial labels. In college she found cultural anthropology, a field that is about identity and how identities shift, to be a great tool for helping to learn about the world and explore her own identity.

As I began to travel and see how race played out across the world, I started to have more clarity in how race is shaped by so many other factors. . . . I began to really listen to how articulations of race and blackness could maneuver and shift in various spaces—neoliberal, rural, militarized, etc. . . . That work propelled me into my own identity work even further, with new tools on how to ask better questions.⁸

Mitzi also explored the Asian American world on campus and began to write.

"On Being Blackanese"—I first wrote this essay back in my undergrad years at Duke for a friend who was the editor of a cool little zine called "The Raging Buddha." It

was a publication for progressive Asian-Americans on campus. I had never felt totally included in the Asian American community on campus but that request to write something for them shifted my identity at that time in more ways than they ever realized. I saw an Asian American community that was radical, inclusive and wanting to learn the best ways to embrace me as a blackanese woman—by first understanding where I saw myself. It moved me to think about my identity with much angst and joy.⁹

Blackanese

Mitzi met other black Japanese—who she called Blackanese—such as Tatsu Yamato, the son of a Japanese father and African American mother. Hair was once a big thing for Tatsu. There’s “good hair” and “bad hair,” and you don’t always get the kind of hair you would want. Tatsu’s hair subjected him to ostracizing comments from black kids growing up in Seattle. He now cuts his hair short, but there was a time in his youth that he wished for longer hair.

I just looked at pictures of my hair when I was a baby and thought that if I let my hair grow out long enough it could be healthy and non-kinky, shiny, black, beautiful flowing locks. I wanted to look like some cool-ass samurai dude, his hair blowing in wisps in front of his face. Weird racial identity games were going on in my head. Secretly, I hoped that my hair would tell me which way to swing and more secretly, I hoped it would swing toward the brown-black straightness of my father’s Japanese head. However, as my hair grew out, it seemed pretty obvious to others that such was not going to be the case. . .

Yeah, so see, I wanted people to just know—to feel uneasy as I walked around with my brown skin beneath a head of flowing samurai hair, messing with their conceptions of race. I wouldn’t say anything. I’d just be one bold, beautiful statement of defiance against America’s whack color game. Or maybe I just wanted to escape my blackness . . . ¹⁰

Tatsu's musings about wanting to look like a samurai touch me because I too have wanted that. Unlike Tatsu's, my hair is just a little wavy so I have no problem with growing it long. But wanting to look like a samurai raises a similar question: am I just wanting to escape my whiteness?

Like our hair, faces, and clothes, our names also signal to others who we are. "Tatsu Yamato"—could there be a more Japanese sounding name? Did his parents imagine what happens when the bearer of that name is perceived to be black? Tatsu's name has been a source of tension. In Japan, he would write it in kanji characters, but others would write it in katakana, indicating that it was a foreigner's name. He suspected they changed it so that he did not "trick" anyone into thinking he was "really" Japanese before meeting in person. By writing his name in katakana, were they reminding Tatsu that regardless of what he might think, he was not really Japanese? But to Tatsu, and to other Americans, his name is a constant reminder that he is Japanese.

Back to Japan

Before going to Japan, Tatsu had been warned by Americans that Japanese are prejudiced toward blacks and have rigid stereotypes, having absorbed Western racism. Magazine articles told him Japanese were worse than Whites, and scholarly work on the Japanese perceptions of Blacks, warned that there is a long history of bias toward blackness. Some prejudice is class-based, with the upper classes favoring their own whiteness which they preserved by not having to work in the fields. Tatsu read that black Japanese since the Occupation have had a hard time and been forced into the entertainment industry. He read accusations that even the patron saint of Amerasians, Mike Sawada, had racial stereotypes that their African blood made black Amerasians especially endowed with athletic and musical ability.

But Tatsu had reasons to go to Japan and find out for himself. What he found was a deep and mysterious connection that kept him in Japan for eight years and moved him to

seriously consider living there forever. Although he went with great expectations of what he would find, he was surprised at how well he was received. He came close to setting down permanent roots where he was living in rural Japan and eventually separated from the country only with tremendous difficulty. Before leaving he wrote to Mitzi: “I don’t know how long this is gonna last, so you’d better get your butt out here before your blackness goes out of style.”

Despite Tatsu’s reassurance that her blackness would be in style, Mitzi still wondered how she would be treated—exotified? ignored? disdained? She too had heard stories of Japanese racism towards blacks in the dismal literature that never failed to mention racist statements by Japanese government officials in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Before going, Mitzi recalled childhood memories and how they had affected her life. She knew that skin color mattered in Japan. She heard enough from her mother and from friends who have experienced direct and oppressive forms of racism to know that blacks have been treated badly in Japan. Mitzi wanted to go to Okinawa, where her family was from, and where mixed race kids have been caught in a tough situation complicated by the tense climate created by an extended Occupation and subsequent colonial-like status. Amerasians have been vulnerable to being targeted by local citizens’ anger and frustration toward their occupiers from Washington and Tokyo. Being Black and Okinawan, although Mitzi had been raised in the U.S. in a totally different context, still she knew that she would be affected by Japanese and Okinawan attitudes about skin color.

In my family we too were aware of Japanese attitudes toward skin color. One sister, Margie, had almost pinkish fair skin and the other, Jo, much browner skin. I once heard my Japanese grandmother tell my mom, “Too bad Jo doesn’t have skin like Margie.” Mom got mad, and was always annoyed when my grandmother scolded her for letting Jo play in the sun.

Mitzi's mom also kept her inside to make her more Japanese.

I was never allowed to play outside until the sun went down or else she warned me, "I would become more like my father's color" and therefore less Japanese. Perhaps many of her fears came from the uneasy times she spent with my older sister living in Korea, Thailand, and Japan in the 1960s and 1970s. She was constantly the object of harassment for having a "sambo baby," and was called the nastiest names for betraying the nation with her sex. She was immediately associated with military domination, with prostitution, with misplaced allegiances.¹¹

Mitzi had heard her mother's stories of how she left Japan to shield her children from abuse, having lived through volatile times of virulent anti-military sentiment and prejudice directed at the women and children of the Americans.

My mother had told me many stories about why she refused to enroll my sister in a Japanese school and they all seemed to stem from the belief that it would be detrimental to her daughter's self-esteem. She would rather leave Japan than have my sister suffer from the kind of name-calling she received outside of school hours. My cousins who are half Okinawan and half white American had similar stories of buses passing them by and stories of bullying in school and how even later, signs on certain dance clubs in Koza City would not only say, "no Americans" or "no GIs" but also "no haafus" allowed. The undercover Japanese have the potential to be the most threatening because our allegiances are hard to place.¹²

But Mitzi was drawn to Japan to search for her roots. She ended up going as a JET (Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme) teacher, an assistant English instructor. She requested Okinawa as her first choice but was sent to Sado Island, off the west coast of Honshu. There Mitzi witnessed changing images of blackness; she did not doubt the kinds of prejudice and discrimination she read about still exist, but she questioned the stereotypes that Japanese are racists who accept blackness only through consumption of popular images. She wondered how racist accounts about Japanese benefited those who

promote them by “mystifying their own xenophobia.” Through her experiences, Mitzi learned about everyday practices and the ways that blackness is negotiated. She found herself unexpectedly included in inner circles. She wondered if this was happening because she was *haafu* (half Japanese), or was it possibly because she was black?

*When working in Sado Island, a fellow colleague from the United States who had been in Japan for much longer than I, was a bit shocked when I told her that I was being asked to cut the persimmons and help serve tea in the mornings. She exclaimed, “I don’t know any other gaijin (foreigner) teacher that’s been asked to help out like that, regardless of how demeaning that may be as a woman and a newcomer. It means you’re being pulled into a more uchi (insider) role and that the other teachers trust you.”*¹³

Tatsu’s and Mitzi’s experiences are not exceptional. My sister-in-law Ann is a native of Kenya, who met my wife’s younger brother Taiji when they were graduate students in anthropology at the University of Nairobi. They have lived in Tokyo for nearly twenty years and she has become part of the family. While she admits the excessive rules sometimes bother her, she mostly describes her experience in Japan as positive. When we are together in public I have not noticed any signs of discrimination, hostility, or neglect. On the contrary, I have seen Ann treated extremely well by Japanese. At a sports day event at my son’s school, I marveled as several people approached her out of the blue in a friendly and outgoing manner that I have never received. She also has a steady stream of students at her private English language school.

Ann describes many experiences of being drawn in and embraced by Japanese. Perhaps some of those Japanese are friendly to all foreigners. But I wonder if others find white foreigners to be intimidating and strange and feel more comfortable with Ann, allowing her into certain intimate spaces. While Japanese who feel the opposite may be numerous, Ann’s experience is that many people see her as approachable and engage with her easily. Could this be because of her non-whiteness, as they view her as occupying some space in the world as a black African woman, which they long for?

Having grown up as a majority person in Kenya, Ann may be insensitive to racial microaggressions which may occur more than I know. But my friend Howard Irvin, who grew up in pre-Civil Rights Virginia, just loves Japan, vacationing there nearly every summer. I wonder what it is that he likes so much about it. Though he is sensitive to race relations and microaggressions he has not felt offended. I suspect that the language barrier, not knowing what people are saying, and not picking up the nonverbal cues may be insulating. Perhaps Howard finds release is no longer being a black man in a white man's world. It is a whole new context. Is he exotic? Are Japanese eager to show their nonchalance in accepting a black man as a visitor or even as a neighbor? In any case, he likes what he finds. He doesn't like seeing the Africans selling hip hop goods by pretending to be from LA, but he's cool with Japanese people:

“Japanese aren't obsessed with skin color in the same way as Americans. Of course, I'm sure there is discrimination and racism, but it seems more about, “you're Japanese or you're not.” I don't feel that being “a big black guy” is held against me. If I choose to live in Japan I can go anywhere in the country and never walk in fear of a hate crime against me or being pulled over for “driving while black.”

Mitzi's experiences were not all wonderful. Like Tatsu, she did not encounter full acceptance as Japanese. Perhaps if they had, they would still be there. She was often made to feel not Japanese, but did not see this as because of blackness as much as “halfness,” her incomplete, impure Japaneseness.

I had a feeling at times that I was on the border of disappointing everyone for not knowing better and on the edge of forgiveness because my blood has betrayed me from ever really becoming Japanese. However, never did the issue of me being half black ever come into those feelings of non-belonging I may have felt, neither was that ever raised or insinuated in any context. I do not take my experiences to be universal but I think there is still a hole in academic literature in regards to this issue.¹⁴

Mitzi's experiences may not be universal. Like Howard's, they may be favorable partly because she was there temporarily and therefore perceived to be a guest. What if they were permanent residents? What problems might occur in marriage, in employment? What about the treatment of their children? Would racism then raise its ugly head?

Mitzi believes that racism in Japan does not reduce blacks to mere victims, but that they still have agency. She believes this to be true not just from her personal experience, but also from the growing collection of narratives of blacks who have had positive experiences either as tourists, temporary workers, or permanent residents. She insists that their experiences cannot be simply dismissed as anomalies to the academic images of blacks as objects of consumption, asserting that there is no universal "black experience." Her co-author, Aina Hunter warns:

*Racial essentialism fails to account for the many different variations on . . . "the black experience" . . . of a black British model in Shibuya, an illegal immigrant from Ghana, an American banking executive in Tokyo, an American GI stationed in Yokohama, and an English teacher in rural Japan could ever share a similar "black experience"?*¹⁵

But is Japan really any different today? What does Jero's popularity tell us? In 2008 he emerged as a rising star in a most unexpected way, creating harmony and dissonance by singing the traditional form of Japanese blues called *enka* in hip hop clothing. He appears to be Black, but his Japanese sounds smooth. His recording company wanted him to dress in kimono but Jero said no, that would not be him. Is it a bold move to sing *enka* in hip hop clothes, refusing to bow to tradition, asserting himself as he is? Or is it resignation to the way people would look at him as if it was incongruent, seeing a black man in Japanese clothes?

Jero is not technically *haafu* (adopted from "half") as he is "one-fourth" Japanese. He is the next generation of mixed ancestry people who broaden the meaning of *haafu*. Is he authentically Japanese? I think of my own nieces, also one-fourth Japanese, and wonder. I guess it depends on the person. Because his grandparents were divorced and his

mother was also divorced, Jero ended up being raised largely by a Japanese immigrant and her mixed ancestry daughter and hearing and studying Japanese.

Crystal Kay is another popular performer who offers a smooth racial mixture—her face her skin and hair familiar, yet strange. Her blend of Japanese and English brings both comfort and authenticity. Yet, despite spending her whole life in Japan, she describes herself as Korean (her mother's ancestry) and American (her father's) rather than Japanese. What does this tell us about acceptance and rejection of mixed people as Japanese? Is Jero that good, or just a curiosity? Does the popularity of Jero and Crystal Kay mean that Japanese are no longer prejudiced toward Black people? That depends, of course, on which Japanese you are talking about—and which black people. Those like Tatsu or Mitzi who write about their experiences are highly educated, and a great number of them are Americans; they encounter good treatment partly because of their social capital. Other blacks are not so fortunate.

In my research on mixed ancestry people in Japan I found race and class differences to be significant factors in their experiences. One young man told me that the black mixed experience is totally different from the white mixed experience, claiming he fought every day as a child. I realized that his experiences as a kid from a single mother home and public school, were far different than Blackanese in international schools or those in schools on the military bases, often raised in two parent homes. In Okinawa they are identified as *shima haafu*, locals who grew up without their fathers and can't speak English.

Besides class, another difference in black experiences is contextual. Mitzi's mother's home of Okinawa has the highest concentration of so-called Amerasians, or *haafu*, because of the large military presence there. The racial dynamics and political climate are unique in a place where the U.S. occupied, colonized, kept political control for 27 years after the end of World War II and even today maintains extensive military bases. Some claim that Okinawans, as dark minorities themselves, feel affinity with

Blacks and Black Amerasians. But they are still caught in the complex politics of Okinawan nationalism, Japanese state interests, and American hegemony.

Mitzi knew Okinawa through her mother's imaginative reconstruction.

The Okinawa I imagined in my head as a child was full of homes with sweet, well behaved children who followed their mother's every orders. I know because my mother told me every time we misbehaved. Or played us that song Tinsagu nu hana. (What does that song mean mama? It means obey your mama! Like all Okinawan kids do). The Okinawa I imagined was also scarred. I imagined my mother as a child walking through a war torn place, over the dead bodies she saw during the bloody battle of Okinawa in WWII. I recreated the nightmares she might have had. (I never forget, those dead bodies. Yes, the Okinawa I imagined was a blend of diasporic memories, militarized memories, my mother's own idiosyncratic ideas (some personal, others cultural) about race, gender, blood...and my southern lens which had formed to see those same things in other ways.¹⁶

I noticed that Mitzi sometimes refers to her mother as Japanese while her mother calls Mitzi Okinawan. This distinction is rich with meaning about identity, as is her mother's use of not only Japanese but also Okinawan language amidst her English. For Mitzi, the careful choice of terms is a question of audience and context.

"As a child I would say my mom was Japanese because I didn't quite understand how Okinawans were different from Japanese mainlanders. It was not especially clear to me until I went to Japanese Saturday school (in high school) and my Japanese language teachers would correct the words in my skits because they couldn't understand what I thought was actually Japanese. When I would show my mom, she'd just laugh and say, "of course your teachers don't know what this is, it's Okinawan!"

Now, it's a question of audience. For my internet audience, I think most people don't understand how Okinawa as historically, politically, and culturally been positioned between the US/Japan so I will first start with grits and sushi. . . for instance, or I'm

black/Japanese. . . and then after drawing people in will challenge that naming. I start with the outwardly familiar to draw in interested parties and then educate once I've got their attention. At least that's what I hope I'm doing. It's a very strategic and conscious decision on my part how I will name, dename, rename, and challenge certain concepts. It's all about context, projection, audience, and recontextualization. To a lesser degree, it's also how I fluctuate between the terms black and African-American. It's a conscious choice. My mom also sometimes uses Japanese and if she's talking to someone who is totally ignorant for instance and she knows if she says, "I'm Okinawan," it might as well be Timbuktu. They might not be able to map it mentally so in those instances, she decides what the hell--I'll go with Japan on this one. If I say "I'm blackinawan," I guarantee you that most people will think it's an actual ethnic group instead of me playing with the ways we are racially cataloged. At least w/blackanese, most folks can grasp that . . . it's a way to engage with the familiar and then I later say, I'm really black and Okinawan."

When she eventually did return to Okinawa, Mitzi's aunt took her to the family tomb to pay homage to their ancestors and discuss the duties that must be performed to honor them at the tomb and home. Another relative took her to a spot where they could peek over onto military property and see an Okinawan family tomb. They noted the irony that family members cannot freely perform these rituals, because they need special permission each time to go on base. While Americans move freely all over, Okinawans are restricted from many parts of their own island.

Mitzi still has work to do in Okinawa. She wants to explore how the racial meanings of blackness vary by space—in the militarized zones, urban centers, and rural villages. She has already helped create a rupture in the prevailing theories which have argued that imaginings of blackness are wholly imported from the United States and that mirrored racial ordering exists transnationally. She has challenged how current discourse positions Japanese as having fixed notions of blackness. There are deep-seated prejudices and discrimination, but there are also evolving images of blackness and benevolent

treatment as well. Essentializing blackness and black experiences is dangerous if we are to understand the complexity of the lived experiences of people in Japan.

Back in the USA

Mitzi returned to the U.S., married, and had two children, another generation of mixed Asian Americans. Her life is now further complicated by her children's racial appearance. In a reversal of her mother's situation in which the children are darker than the mother, raising assumptions about the woman as one who bears the children of a black man, Mitzi is darker than her children, raising different assumptions about who she is in relation to the children. Mitzi married a light-skinned Cuban man and her two children are remarkably light skinned, showing the incredible variety of the next generation of mixed Asians, who would be genetically $\frac{1}{4}$ or $\frac{3}{4}$ Asian. Her children are "1/4 Japanese," light skinned, white enough to be mistaken for someone else's kids. Mitzi asks, "Are these mongrelized bodies or the embodiments of the wonders of hybridity?"

"I was in a post office, in a pretty mixed neighborhood in Oakland. I was putting a box together. My son was in a stroller next to me, very light skinned. A woman approached us and said, "Are you allowed to do personal errands while you're on duty?" And I was kind of looking at her like, what is she talking about . . . because it was such a weird question. Then I realized, she thought I was the nanny and she was totally policing, our proximity, our union. And when I told her, "This is my son." She backed away, upset, not at herself, more at the situation, our being together, in that space. She didn't apologize, just walked away."

Her interracial family is policed by others who appear somehow upset by the nature of the family, particularly disturbed by the relation between Mitzi and her children. Now Mitzi is thinking about changing her last name to her husband's because she may need to prove they are her kids. She has her own experiences and is gathering stories of

multiracial families that illuminate this dark area where strangers exert their privilege to insert themselves as saviors for white children seemingly threatened by black kidnapers.

She also maintains her blog, *Grits and Sushi*, hoping to move it to a space beyond the “boring/exotified ‘I’m mixed and I’m proud’ stance” with a blend of her musings on race, family, Okinawa, militarization, transnationalisms, blackness, and the south.” She wants to show how she sees “race moving across these different contexts, to jot down the patterns I’ve noticed and try to make sense of the changes and how those meanings affect people who are in or between Okinawa and the U.S. either physically or emotionally.”

Mitzi is engaged in other forms of cultural healing activities. For the Critical Mixed Race Studies conference in Chicago she brought a group together, including transnational adoptees, and Yumi Wilson, another Blackanese with her own healing story of searching for roots in Japan. Mitzi was also involved in the *Lessons of the Battle of Okinawa* exhibit at the National Japanese American Historical Society in January 2011. She hopes that such an exhibit provides remembering that, though painful, nurture healing from the traumas of war, even 65 years later. She was deeply moved to see the conversations between her and her mother on display. Mitzi has been receiving her mother’s story about that sorrowful time for many years, in hopes that she can help close the gap between parents who have experienced such extreme horror and their American children and grandchildren for whom such experiences are beyond their imagination. She wants to help younger generations to learn how to listen to war stories as a healing gift.

In February 2011, she organized an event in Berkeley with fellow Blackanese Eriko Ikehara, an Okinawa native, that they called, “Blackness in Flux in Okinawa.” They brought together academic presentations and artistic performances by black-Japanese who shared their poetry, art, and other creative works which speak to blackness in flux in their own lives. She presented again in Berkeley with Eriko on Okinawa in April of the same year at the Hapa Japan Conference. Now she is on her way back to Okinawa, this time with her whole family, including her mother, for a longer stay of nearly a year, that

promises to be transformative for the whole family.

In her blog, Mitzi wrote that the Okinawa battle event ended with dance. *For those of you readers who don't know about Okinawa or Okinawan dances for that matter, this is the music that moves nearly every able-bodied Okinawan to jump up and start moving (and also, I admit I'm being a bit essentialist, but we really can't help but do that particular whistle when it's really calling us. It's in our blood).*¹⁷

I notice that when speaking about Okinawans, Mitzi says “we” and “us,” and even uses the expression that it is in “our blood.” I feel her connecting with all her parts, and engaging in activities bringing others together to also connect with themselves and others—the university and community, artists and academics, Blacks and Japanese, Okinawans and Japanese, Whites and Blacks, Latins and Asians—healing the hurts of human suffering caused by illusion of our separation.

¹ Mitzi Uehara Carter, “Grits and Sushi,” (March 15, 2011): <http://gritsandsushi.com/>.

² Mitzi Uehara Carter, “On Being Blackanese,” Pearl Fuyo Gaskins, *What are You?* (New York: Henry Holt, 1999a), 204.

³ Carter, “On Being Blackanese,” 203.

⁴ Carter, “Grits and Sushi”.

⁵ Carter, “On Being Blackanese,” 205.

⁶ Ibid, 202.

⁷ Ibid, 203.

⁸ Carter, “Grits and Sushi”.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Tatsu Yamato, “Roots,” in Pearl Fuyo Gaskins, *What are You?* (New York: Henry Holt, 1999: 168-169.

- ¹¹ Mitzi Uehara Carter and Aina Hunter. "A Critical View of Academic Perspectives of Blackness in Japan," in eds. Nelson Graburn, John Ertl, and R. Kenji Tierney, *Multiculturalism in the New Japan*, (Oxford: Berghahn, 2008), 194.
- ¹² Carter, "Grits and Sushi".
- ¹³ Carter and Hunter, "A Critical View," 195.
- ¹⁴ Ibid, 196.
- ¹⁵ Ibid, 194.
- ¹⁶ Carter, "Grits and Sushi".
- ¹⁷ Ibid.