MISSISSIPPI TRIANGLE

“It is one of a plethora of works in film and art that show, contrary to popular perception, that the South has never had just two racial groups.”
Imani Perry, The Atlantic

“A mosaic style of editing maintains the filmmakers' neutral theme—the triangle of inter-relatedness—but their use of three racially separate film crews to elicit dramatically honest responses carries its own message.”
Pacific Film Archives

Directed by Christine Choy, Worth Long, Allan Siegel
Produced by Christine Choy
1984, 110 minutes (film version) or 78 minutes (video version), United States, English
Original Shooting Format: 16mm
Screening Formats Available: HD and SD File

Contact:
Third World Newsreel
545 8th Avenue, Suite 550, New York, NY 10018
(212) 947-9277 x 10, twn@twn.org
SYNOPSIS
This is an intimate portrait of life in the Mississippi Delta, where Chinese, African Americans and whites live in a complex world of cotton, labor, and racial conflict. The history of the Chinese community, originally brought to the South to work on cotton plantations after the Civil War, is framed against the harsh realities of civil rights, religion, politics, and class in the South. Rare historical footage and interviews of Delta residents are combined to create this unprecedented document of inter-ethnic relations in the American South in the 1980s.

REVIEWS
"A two-hour immersion in the Mississippi Delta, creating, with no other exposition than is contained in images and the words of persons being interviewed, a rich documentary brew."
Library Journal

"The finished film is peppered with moments that provide an unusual, but quite powerful critique of conventional film expectations with regard to ethnicity."
- Scott MacDonald, A Critical Cinema 3: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers

"MISSISSIPPI TRIANGLE is a film in which acknowledgement of human complexity reveals an extraordinary world among Blacks, Chinese and Whites in the Mississippi Delta. It is moving and powerful because it is not heavy or dogmatic. People will like it, scholars will embrace it."
- Emile de Antonio, Filmmaker

"We see and hear for the first time, personal stories of Chinese families in the Mississippi Delta--their history and their experiences. We recognize people who are Southern and have never given up their deeply rooted Asian identity."
- Louise Lo, Programmer for the Asian American Programming Consortium, CPB
"The work of veteran filmmaker Christine Choy has often been concerned with revising our commonly and uncritically held views, most often with hard-hitting footage that simply marvels."
- All Movie Guide

"...ethnicity, acculturation, racism and interracial associations, poverty, social and economic change, community development and much more."
- Neil McMillen, Prof. of History, Univ. of Southern Mississippi

"MISSISSIPPI TRIANGLE deals with the American heartland, but not the heartland of waving fields of wheat and salt-of-the-earth white farmers. Instead it looks deep into the barren soul of U.S. racial relations… This is an important film of special-textural depth and lyrical toughness that challenges us to take a hard, honest look at ourselves."
  John Kuo Wei Tchen, New York Chinatown History Project

"MISSISSIPPI TRIANGLE uncovers the socio-political and economic roots of interracial tension. This is a critical undertaking because it undermines the notion that racism is simply a question of attitude, or worse, of some ingrained, quasi-genetic antipathy ascribed to ‘human nature.’"
  Richard Fung, Seeing Yellow: Asian Identities in Film & Video

“The directorial team consisted of a Chinese American woman (Choy), a Black man (Worth Long) and a white man (Allan Siegel), and they all interview their own communities (brilliant), so there is some eyebrow-raising truth-telling going on… By deeming Asian Americans as part of the triangle, Choy carves out space for us to have our own voice and agency, and not just be a wedge group that's silenced or pitted against other groups.”
  Saturday School Podcast
  https://soundcloud.com/saturdayschoolpodcast/season-7-ep-1-mississippi-triangle

**SCREENINGS, FESTIVALS & AWARDS**
Independent Feature Market
Berlin International Film Festival
Amien International Film Festival
Carnegie Public Library, Clarksdale, Mississippi
Women's International Film Festival, Minneapolis
Greenville Public Library, Mississippi
Atlanta Third World Film Festival
Dorothy Eisner International Women’s Film Festival
Women Direct Series of New Films by Women
Northwest Film Study Center
Capri Theater
Jacson Historical Museum
Asian American International Film Festival
Filmex: Los Angeles International Film Exposition
Houston Museum of Fine Art
Brooklyn Academy of Music
PRODUCTION CREDITS

Major funding for this film was provided by The National Endowment for the Humanities

A Third World Newsreel Production

MISSISSIPPI TRIANGLE

Associate Producers
Pearl Bower
Yuet-Fung Ho

Original Music
Lee Ray

Unit Cinematography
Ludwig Goon

Principal Cinematography
Christine Choy
Kyle Kibbe

Co-Directors
Christine Choy, Worth Long and Allan Siegel

Producer & Project Director
Christine Choy

Edited by Allan Siegel

Associate Editor
Jeffrey Solomon

Sound Editor
Jeffrey Solomon

Sound Recordist
J.T. Takagi

Sylvie Thouard

2nd Unit Director
Robert Nakamura

2nd Unit Cinematography
John Esaki

Additional Cinematography
Charles Burnett
Steven Ning

Assistant Camera
A.J. Fielder
Stephen Ning
J.T. Takagi

Additional Sound Recordists
Vieda Dette Cambell
Robert Nakamura
Bendali Yaro

Production Assistants
Amy Kato
Nobutaka Matzuo
Sally Smith

1st Apprentice Editor
Lynne Ijima

2nd Apprentice Editor
Carolyn Chen

Assistant Sound Editors
Lynne Iijima
Antoinette Tynes
Ada Gay Griffin

Project Consultants
Oliva de Torres
Juanita Howard
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Archival Footage Research
Allan Siegel

Interviews
Pearl Bowser
Christine Choy
Sam Chu Lin
Yuet Fung Ho
Worth Long
Allan Siegel

Production Stills
Pearl Bowser
Christine Choy
Yuet Fung Ho
Allan Siegel
Sally Smith

Production Secretary
Ada Gay Griffin

Transcription
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Judy Ray

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Martin Stolar Esq.

Accounting
Noah Kimmerling

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John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation

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Greenwood High School
Kenneth Haxton
Honenberg Brothers
Eugene Horowitz
How Joy Restaurant
The Humphreys County Union for Progress, Inc.
The Jackson Museum
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Edward Pang
Pap Pang
William Alexander Percy Memorial Library
Riverview Inn
Jerome Seu
Jacqueline Shearer
Lola Shorter
Sam Sue
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Lessons From Black and Chinese Relations in the Deep South

Baldwin Lee, ‘Mississippi Triangle,’ and the limits of upward mobility

By Imani Perry

June 10, 2022

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*Mississippi Triangle* is a 1983 documentary about the Black, white, and Chinese communities in the Mississippi Delta region, which I rewatched the other day, prompted by a message from a friend. It is one of a plethora of works in film and art that show, contrary to popular perception, that the South has never had just two racial groups.

The documentary had three directors, one from each of the abovementioned groups: Christine Choy, Allan Siegel, and Worth Long, each with their own crew. Two members of Long’s team, Charles Burnett and Arthur Jafa, went on to have illustrious careers as filmmakers. But to the contemporary eye, *Mississippi Triangle* is a humble, if artful, production. The narrative arc is fuzzy, and so is the footage. But still it resonates. It begins with a Black man singing “Amazing Grace,” then pans through the Delta landscape, piney woods and shingled houses. The story is told through voices heavy with the distinctive vowels of the Deep South. A clear assertion is made: Chattel slavery and cotton production are the foundation of this place. Chinese people came as workers—some on the railroad, others in the fields—yet ultimately became situated in local economies as grocers. One white woman comments that the Chinese always seemed to hold themselves apart from white people. Unita Blackwell, then the mayor of Mayerville, Mississippi—a Black woman who was once a sex worker and a plantation worker, and then an organizer with the Student Nonviolent
Coordinating Committee—says, in contrast, that the Chinese people were kinder than white folks. And there was no confusion about who they were: They spoke Chinese, and they were Mississippian.

The lesson of the documentary is crystallized in the story of Martha Lum, the child plaintiff in *Gong Lum v. Rice*, a case decided by the United States Supreme Court in 1927. The Lum children had been attending white schools in Mississippi, but in a wave of renewed anti-Chinese sentiment fueled by the 1924 Immigration Act (which banned all immigration from Asia), they were expelled and told they must attend the schools for African American children. They fought back, all the way to the Supreme Court. The Court sided with Mississippi, declaring that excluding Chinese children from white schools was not a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment. The Lum family was told that their children could either attend Black schools or create their own Chinese school. Anywhere was fine, as long as it wasn’t white space.

I teach *Gong Lum v. Rice* in my class on race in American legal history. It was a “Jim Crow” case that affirmed the exclusion of all nonwhite people, and not just Black people, from white spaces. But its particulars are important, too. And this is what *Mississippi Triangle* shows. It was not the case that Chinese Mississippians occupied the same social location as Black people. But as nonwhite people they were subject to the whims of a white-supremacist order. Theirs was an intermediate status.

Chinese American commentaries in the film describe the injustice of Jim Crow, and how they were ultimately beneficiaries of the civil-rights movement. When desegregation came, their fortunes changed in school and business. And yet, they also describe being hesitant to get too close to Black people. Teenager Linda Wing explains how even though she grew up with Black people, her family doesn’t want her to date Black boys. Her speech pattern, interestingly, is not only southern, but it is Black and southern, and she says she has nothing against Black folks; she grew up with Black folks. But her reality is that she “don’t have nobody to be with.” The color line of the society, and her family’s insistence that she not become immersed in the Black community, leaves her lonely.

More melancholy still is the voice of elderly Arlene Hen, the daughter of a Black mother and Chinese father. She describes in harrowing detail the debt bondage of the sharecropping system, how akin it is to slavery. Viewers are reminded that, by 1983, the laws have changed, but the economy, not so much. Workers in catfish plants, like those on cotton plantations, aren’t even scraping by. And they are overwhelmingly Black. They are too poor to patronize the Chinese-owned groceries, which in turn suffer.

Young Chinese Mississippians are described as departing for big cities. An interracial relationship between two groups that was forged during Jim Crow has fallen apart. In the Mississippi of 1983, Arlene Hen’s story is juxtaposed with that of other Chinese families whose children have attended white schools and who have created Chinese American religious communities. She tells her story to her granddaughters, Black girls with monolidded eyes and heavy dark hair, and notes that because she is biracial, mixed with Black, she cannot be buried in the Chinese cemetery.

Racism is not just a matter of animus. It is produced by stratification. It is made by a social architecture of history, human relationships, laws, and the economy. It would be easy to watch this documentary and naively wonder: Why are Chinese Mississippians discriminating against Black people, when they themselves are discriminated against? The documentary’s useful revelation is that when people are stratified, those who are neither at the top nor the bottom work mightily to preserve their position in the middle. The architecture is designed that way.

Those of us who are not middle-to-upper class and white, yet are also not quite at the bottom due to our class, ethnicity, or education are—in the vulnerability of our status and the marketability of our privileges—incentivized to sustain hierarchies. Among African Americans like me, that can show up in the form of anti-immigrant politics, xenophobia, and classism. For others, it can rather easily manifest as prejudice against African Americans, particularly African Americans who have been poor for
generations. As one of the Chinese American commentators in the film notes, Black people are so stigmatized, it feels imperative to maintain a distance from them.

Years ago, I coined a term about how, at a personal level, we might reject these inclinations: critical exceptionalism. I used it to describe the way we might use our “not quite at the bottom” social locations to expose injustice. Or, as I’ve said in another way, “be critical at the site of our own privilege.” And that brings me to something else I’ve been thinking about: the work of photographer Baldwin Lee. It exemplifies critical exceptionalism and so much more.

In the same year that *Mississippi Triangle* was released, Lee, a Chinese American professor of photography at the University of Tennessee, set off on a trip across 2,000 miles of the American South. MIT- and Yale-educated, he settled in Knoxville and became the first director of the photography program at UT. He was already recognized as a gifted artist. And he has been a celebrated professor for decades. During that trip that began nearly 40 years ago, he took up what might seem to be unexpected subjects: Black folks, and particularly poor Black folks. Casey Gerald, a brilliant Black southern writer who published an essay about Lee last year (it will be included in the book *Baldwin Lee*, coming from Hunts Point Press this fall), has noted that this is not voyeuristic work. Rather, its intimacy proves that he earned the trust of his subjects. I agree.

Walker Evans was one of Lee’s teachers. Like Evans, Lee has a sensitive eye for both poverty and dignity. But Lee’s southern exposure wasn’t overwhelmingly white, as it was in Evans’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Quite the contrary, Lee is a witness to those at the bottom of U.S. stratification, and their refusal to swallow that status. In one image, little girls are outfitted in their Sunday best while standing on the porch of a dilapidated shotgun house in a rural Mississippi community that has no sewage system. Pristinely dressed, tenderly cared-for children live where sewage runs in the open. That is a South I know. Lee’s subjects, often children, pose, aware of their own elegance or grace or beauty.

The work is political, because it exposes the violence of poverty inherited from the plantation-economy past. But it is most of all attentiveness to the composure of his subjects that is echoed masterfully in the composition of his shots. A lean Georgia woman with what in another context might be called a patrician slouch gingerly carries a bouquet of collard greens. She looks delicate, but her thickly veined hands are clearly strong. In Mrs. Fulton’s kitchen in Natchez, Mississippi, everything in the room is in a state of disrepair but the cornflake boxes covered with faces: a little white boy in a Robin Hood costume, a Black woman, an Asian woman in a cheongsam, and a Latino baseball player are arranged, quilt-like, on a table. It looks to me like some kind of cultural-bricoleage wallpaper.

We are a motley assortment of people in the United States. Our relations are not tidy, not in their beauty, not in their disastrous disassociation and cruelty. It matters for us to witness today the daily violence experienced by Asian Americans, the horrific persistence of anti-Black racism, the dispossession of Indigenous people, the inexcusability of immigration and detention policies, and so on. We should celebrate our capacity to find love and common ground across difference, and feel shame when we step on the necks of those at the bottom while taking a shine to those at the top. And importantly, we shouldn’t be so sanguine in thinking that greater diversity in any place, or the “browning of America,” as some call it, means that we will treat people fairly. We’ve been trained in the exact opposite way. The work of witnessing might make us better, or at least more honest.
Welcome back to Saturday School! This is our 7th season, and this semester, we'll be exploring Asian American interracial cinema. When we signed off last season, coronavirus had just taken hold and the nation had erupted with protests for George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Black Lives Matter.

As racial tensions escalated, it had many Asian Americans grappling with questions like: What is our place in this? How can we help? How are we complicit? What can we do moving forward? And for us, thinking about our podcast, are there ways that Asian American film can cross racial lines to show that Asian Americans don't exist in racial silos and need to confront inter racial issues?

As with most things, if we go back into the vault, we realize that there is a long history of Asian American interracial cinema, including some films in the spirit of social activism and solidarity.

This semester, we start with Christine Choy. She's most known for co-directing the seminal documentary "Who Killed Vincent Chin?" Before that, she co-directed the 1984 documentary "Mississippi Triangle," which looks at the intersections between the white, Black and Chinese communities in the Mississippi Delta from the late 1800s to the 1980s.

The directorial team consisted of a Chinese American woman (Choy), a Black man (Walter Long) and a white man (Allan Siegel), and they all interview their own communities (brilliant), so there is some eyebrow-raising truth-telling going on. Some of it feels dated, while other parts feel uncomfortably current. But by deeming Asian Americans as part of the triangle, Choy carves out space for us to have our own voice and agency, and not just be a wedge group that's silenced or pitted against other groups.

10 films, 10 weeks. Join us in our exploration.