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The Center for Asian American Media
Presents

Blurring the Color Line:

Chinese in the Segregated South

Directed and Produced by Crystal Kwok

Executive Produced by Daniel Wu, Lisa Ling, W. Kamau Bell



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**BLURRING THE COLOR LINE: CHINESE IN THE SEGREGATED SOUTH
A DOCUMENTARY BY CRYSTAL KWOK**

Awards:

Audience Award, Georgia Film Festival 2022

Courage Award, DisOrient Film Festival 2022

Mira Nair Rising Female Filmmaker Award, Harlem International Film Festival 2022

Best Documentary Award, JXN Film Festival 2022

Viewer's Choice Award, Best Documentary Award, Black Cat Picture Show 2022

Press interviews: <https://www.blurringthecolorline.com/press>

[The World \(July 20, 2022\)](#)

[She Has the Mic Podcast Interview](#) (June 27, 2022)

[Hawaii Public Radio](#) (April 8, 2022)

LOGLINE

Speaking to today's Afro-Asian tensions, Chinese grocers in the Black neighborhood during Jim Crow disrupt the black and white narrative of America's racial history.

SYNOPSIS

What did it mean to be Chinese in Black space during segregation? Following director Crystal Kwok's personal journey of discovery, she digs into how her grandmother's family navigated life as grocery store owners in the black neighborhood of Augusta, Georgia. The film weaves personal family stories with memories from the larger Chinese and Black communities, opening up uncomfortable but necessary conversations around anti-black racism and the deeply rooted structure of white power and Chinese patriarchy that contributed to this. Which fountain did the Chinese drink from? Where did they sit on the bus? An entrance into our connected histories we never knew or dared speak about as told through the woman's lens.

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**FILMMAKER STATEMENT
CRYSTAL KWOK Q/A**

How did this film come about? What inspired you?

I have always been fascinated by my grandmother's life, growing up in the Black neighborhood in the '30s. She used to tell me stories of life in the deep south, how controlling her parents were, how she was expected to be that respectful dutiful daughter and marry a nice Chinese man arranged for her. She ran away when she was 17. No one in my family seemed to know anything about life back then and what might have contributed to her wanting to leave so I started to dig. Inspired by her unruliness, I started asking relatives about how my grandmother and her sisters navigated life under both a strict Chinese patriarchal structure as well as the larger racialized system during that time.

I am interested in women's stories. I think they reveal a different and more nuanced look into our histories. I decided to focus on the stories surrounding my grandmother's sister's lives since their family consisted of mostly girls. In fact, I originally wanted to do a feature narrative about my grandmother, how she rebelled against the controlling structure around her. But I recognized my lack of understanding of the segregated system that forms the foundation of the story. So I decided to do extensive research into Black history and how it intersects with Chinese immigration history which my family is a part of.

How long did it take to make the film? From concept to finish.

It took around five years to make this film. Starting with casual interviews with relatives in San Francisco, I soon ventured down to Augusta Georgia to meet relatives and hear their stories. While I was there on my first trip, I approached the Lucy Craft Laney Museum of African American History to connect with the Black community and source long time residents who had memories to share about the Chinese run grocery stores. I traveled down there over a three year period. When COVID hit, I switched up ways to fill in the stories by developing animation sequences.

Why did you make this film?

I wanted to make this film because I felt it was an interesting and important entrance into our racial history. I am sick and tired of the black and white narratives of this country. The Chinese experience seems to be shoved aside as a foreign subject, reinforcing the image of Asian Americans as the quiet Others. I was also tired of the Chinese American narrative centered around the railroad laborers and Chinatown. I felt there needed to be a fresh look at our history, a more complex and nuanced one that decenters whiteness, gives voice to marginalized groups, and connects different communities.

What started out as a very personal story quickly turned into a larger critical project that forced me to address issues of race and racism. I couldn't talk about my family without talking about their relationship with the Black community. Growing up in the Black neighborhood, everything they said and did was influenced by the racial structure they lived in. I felt compelled to tell this story.

Share a story about filming:

One of the biggest discoveries in my process was learning that I had Black relatives, that the story was much closer than I realized. Why didn't anyone ever mention them before? What did this erasure in my family history mean? I had to meet them. I drove with my teenage daughter from Augusta to Gulfport Mississippi to meet my newly found cousins. On the way, we stopped in the historically burdened city of Montgomery, Alabama where we stumbled onto the newly opened Legacy museum. It was an incredible experience. The interactive museum was so engulfing, not to mention the building which once served as a place where slaves were sold. It's one thing to learn about the existence of slavery in school. It's an entirely life changing experience to set foot on this history. I have so much admiration for Bryan Stevenson, founder of the Equal Justice Initiative that supported this museum.

We also managed to visit the Rosa Parks Museum. Outside the museum, I decided to interview some people about where they thought the Chinese sat on the segregated bus. Most people had no clue. This inspired me to begin the story with this question.

Did the film change from your original idea for the film as you were filming or in post?

Several pivotal things happened as I started editing the film, Black Lives Matter and the anti-Asian hate crime in Atlanta. It deeply affected the way I shaped the film. I felt the responsibility to address anti-Blackness. But one version of the cut felt like a big apology letter to the Black community. I felt I was losing my story, losing my voice. Then when all the attacks happened against Asian people, my narrative shifted again, pulling my voice back to how Asians were really situated in America. It seemed like these were signs that my film had a bigger purpose. I had to give up my original idea of focusing on the unruly Lum sisters for a larger troubling dive into the subject of racism.

What were the challenges in making this film?

Writing the narration was my absolute biggest challenge. How to put into words this huge topic of racism, what information to include and exclude, how much historical context I needed to give, these were the most painful moments in putting the film together. I was working with my consulting producer, Contessa Gayles on this. Her critique on some of my initial narration made me want to crawl into a hole. I didn't realize many things about how to properly represent Black people, not that I disrespected them, but how some things might come across as reinforcing a negative impression. I grew a lot in this process. It forced me to confront my ignorance and it opened my eyes to the ways in which racism can be inadvertently or consciously perpetuated. It also pushed me to understand communities from each other's perspective. Then I had to decide who's story to tell and how. Giving up some of the intimate stories was painful.

What were the successes that you had in making this film?

I was able to interview my grandmother and a couple of her siblings before they passed away. Recording their stories was invaluable. Although my Grandmother already had severe dementia by the time I got around to filming, I still am grateful that I was able to capture a part of her life.

What do you want audiences to take away from this film?

For Asian Americans in particular, I want us to reckon with our discriminating views towards Black

people and question how our attitudes were shaped. Or rather, I want this film to spark uncomfortable conversations about racialized attitudes and how we can come together for a transformative and healing experience. I want intergenerational conversations to take place, to learn more about the past through stories from the elders. I want people to discover stories that make them want to learn about each other's histories and cultures, to bridge divides and recognize our connective past. I also want the audience to appreciate the women's stories and what they offer. And I hope we can reflect on what our country was built on, what damage white supremacy has done in its divisive structure of power.

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FILMMAKER BIOS

Director/Producer, Crystal Kwok

Crystal Kwok is an award-winning filmmaker with experience both in front of and behind the camera. Establishing her career in Hong Kong as an Actress, Kwok also has several writer, producer, and director credits to her name. Crystal Kwok's debut feature film, *The Mistress*, won the Audience Choice Award at the Deauville Asiatic Film Festival in 2000. As a strong women's advocate, her talk show, "Kwoktalk" broke boundaries in the Hong Kong media with conversations about women and sexuality. Continuing efforts to create visibility in addressing women's issues, Crystal currently hosts a talk show on KTUH 90.1 FM in Honolulu, Hawaii, where she is also pursuing her Ph.D. in Performance Studies. Crystal also teaches courses in film and the media under the Women's Studies Department and serves as an active member of the University of Hawaii's Commission on Racism and Bias.

Executive Producer, Daniel Wu

Daniel Wu Neh-Tsu is an American actor, director and producer based in Hong Kong. He is known as a "flexible and distinctive" leading actor in the Chinese language film industry. Since his film debut in 1998, he has been featured in over 60 films. He also starred in the AMC martial arts drama series *Into the Badlands*. His recent activism in Anti-Asian hate crimes has made Daniel a prominent voice in the Asian American community.

Executive Producer, Lisa Ling

Lisa J. Ling is an American journalist, television personality, and author. She is currently the host of *This Is Life with Lisa Ling* on CNN. And is currently shooting a new show *Take Out* for HBO. Previously, she was a reporter on Channel One News, a co-host on the ABC daytime talk show *The View*, the host of *National Geographic Explorer*, and a special correspondent for *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and later hosted *Our America with Lisa Ling* on OWN.

Executive Producer, W. Kamau Bell

W. Kamau Bell is a stand-up comedian and the host and executive producer of the Emmy Award winning CNN docu-series *United Shades of America with W. Kamau Bell*. His latest stand-up comedy special, *Private School Negro*, is available on Netflix. Kamau wrote a book with the easy-to-remember title, *The Awkward Thoughts of W. Kamau Bell: Tales of a 6' 4", African American, Heterosexual, Cisgender, Left-Leaning, Asthmatic, Black and Proud Blerd, Mama's Boy, Dad, and Stand-Up Comedian*. He's the ACLU Celebrity Ambassador for Racial Justice and serves on the advisory boards of *Hollaback!* and *Donors Choose*.

Editor, Kyung Lee

Kyung is an Oakland-based filmmaker. She was born and raised in Japan and is of Korean descent. She made her directorial debut in 2014 with *TELOS: the Fantastic World of Eugene Tssui*, a portrait of a visionary Bay Area architect. The film has been screened at film festivals worldwide

and is currently being broadcast nationally on PBS. She is also an experienced documentary film editor. Her editing credits include *Big Joy: The Adventures Of James Broughton* (2014, SXSW, Tribeca, Frameline, Mill Valley) and *Ottomaticake* (2017, Hawaii Intl.). Kyung is also currently editing multiple documentary films; *Homecoming* (2021), (dir. Gemma Cubero del Barrio), *Tokyo Hula* (2020)(dir. Lisette Marie Flanary), and *Mr. Immortal Jellyfish Man* (dir. Dicky Dahl).

Consulting Producer, Contessa Gayles

Contessa is an award-winning documentary filmmaker and journalist, and an Emmy-nominated producer. She tells stories about identity, movement and social change, with a focus on race, ethnicity and gender. From 2014 - 2018, she was a producer at CNN, where she created, produced, directed, shot and edited award-winning original series and documentaries, including *The Feminist on Cellblock Y*, *Women Who March*, *Women Who March: The Movement*, *This Is Birth with Lisa Ling* and the 2016 News & Documentary Emmy-nominated *Feeding America's Most Vulnerable Children*. She has additionally contributed to PBS NewsHour, PBS Frontline, VICE, CBS, Al Jazeera, Vox, WIRED, AFROPUNK and forthcoming independent documentary features, including *Going to Mars: The Nikki Giovanni Project* (dir. Michèle Stephenson, Joe Brewster), *Black Mothers* (dir. Débora Souza Silva) and *Surge* (dir. Hannah Rosenzweig, Wendy Sachs). Contessa holds a B.A. from Columbia University and an M.A. in Journalism from New York University, with a concentration in Documentary Film. She is currently creating independent film and media projects under her production company, Cocomotion Pictures, and has been awarded a 2020 SFFilm FilmHouse artist residency.

Consulting Producer, Jennifer Liu

Jennifer Liu is an entertainment executive and producer with expertise in strategic partnership development in the US and China. Her background is in project planning and development, production, marketing, and distribution. She produced Disney's first US/China co-production "Trail of the Panda". She was instrumental in bringing Bob Marley's reggae music into China through Universal Music and Island Records. Jen's other credits include producing an NAACP-nominated film "Walking on Sunshine" for Black Entertainment Television and co-producing "Roads and Bridges" with Robert Altman.

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CREDITS

Crystal Kwok director, writer, producer
Daniel Wu executive producer
W. Kamau Bell executive producer
Lisa Ling executive producer

Contessa Gales Consulting Producer
Jen Liu Consulting Producer
Ann Marie Flemming Consulting producer

Kyung Lee Editor

SF crew:

Lou Nakasako DP
Lauren Kawana assistant camera
Rachel de Leon sound

Augusta crew:

Lester Lowry DP
Regynal McKie assistant camera
Matthew Hashiguchi camera
Abbey Hoekzema camera
Kelsey Posey assistant camera
Nick Laws camera
Gerald Espinal Jr. camera

Mississippi:

A.J. Williams Camera

Hong Kong:

Choi Siu On camera

Suky Zhao animation
Fly Yin chinese graphics
David C.P. Chan motion graphics
Mimi Ann Jung Title graphics/website
Yee Man Mui music composition
Heidi Chan music composition/Soundscape

Amy Naylor	music composition
Christina Hoang	post-production supervisor
Red Wertheimer	post production PA
Roberta Chow	Chinese translations

Special Thanks:

NACA National Association of Chinese Americans - Atlanta chapter
OCAW Organization of Chinese American Women - Hawai'i chapter

21 Pell Street

Consolidated Chinese Benevolent Association of Augusta

Milledge Murray, historian

Tina Monaco, Augusta Library

Mr and Mrs Chong Park Wrightsboro store

Mildred Lum Loo

The Africa Center of HK Innocent Mutanga

First Baptist Church, Augusta

Augusta Museum of History

Lucy Craft Laney Museum of Black History

The James Brown Family Foundation

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Research References:

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