Racial Interstitiality and the Anxieties of the "Partly Colored": Representations of Asians under Jim Crow

Leslie Bow

Journal of Asian American Studies, Volume 10, Number 1, February 2007, pp. 1-30 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/jaas.2007.0000

RACIAL INTERSTITIALITY AND THE ANXIETIES OF THE "PARTLY COLORED"

Representations of Asians under Jim Crow

leslie **bow**

> [W]hen you look at the Chinese stores down by the river, you get a totally different picture. There're right down in nigger town, and what goes on there, God only knows. When those yellow people first came here, nobody really know what to think, but some of them have proved themselves, and we've accepted them, but those that stayed down with the niggers, well ***we just let them go***.
>
> White informant in Mississippi, 1966, emphasis mine.[1]

"[I]N THE DELTA, HOME OF THE BLUES and Muddy Waters, cooks are sizzling catfish and collards and crayfish every day and night. But you don't expect to find those home chefs stir-frying them or steaming them in a giant backyard wok."[2] So begins a feature about the Chow family of Clarksdale, Mississippi titled, "East Meets South at a Delta Table: Chinese-Americans bring the tastes of their ancestors down home." The hook for the reader's attention is based on simple juxtaposition—Crayfish? Woks?—that trades upon a stereotypical belief in the South's lack of cosmopolitanism. The unexpected hybridity nevertheless produces what is perceived to be quintessentially American: immigrant ingenuity and adaptability. Or so we are led to believe as the triumphant Chows descend upon Washington to demonstrate the aforementioned stir-fry on the National Mall.

In their presumed aberration, the Chows are made to represent American normativity albeit through a circuitous route. They are only representable insofar as their eccentricity is both asserted as a point of

JAAS FEBRUARY 2007 • 1–30

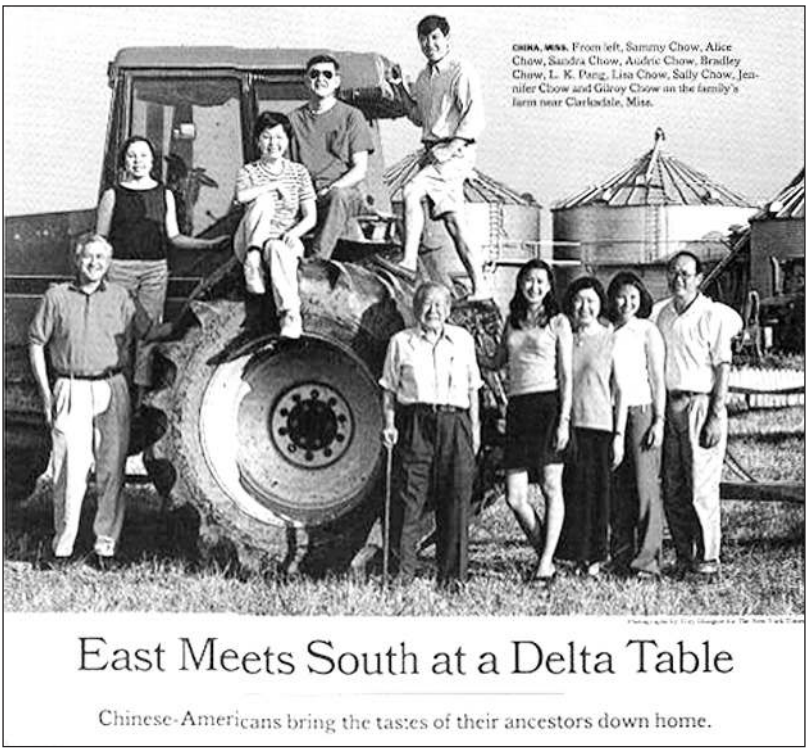

Figure 1. Joan Nathan, "East Meets South at a Delta Table: Chinese-Americans bring the tastes of their ancestors down home," New York Times, June 4 2003: D1–D 5.

interest (Chinese who say "y'all") and reinscribed within dominant values and expectations (Ms. Chow is a finalist in the contest to find a new image for Betty Crocker). This progression is subtly reenacted within the feature as well; it introduces the Chows' backstory, how they came to be in Mississippi, as it is enmeshed in Reconstruction-era politics and racialized labor competition only to end with the image of three generations linking hands around the table to say grace. The radical implications of Chinese presence in a region dominated by black-white relations and the sedimented class hierarchies of the plantation system become resolved by the Chows' use as model citizens; they exemplify adaptation, proliferation, and belief in divine providence. A tall order for a piece about cooking, indeed.

Such a portrayal reproduces a dominant narrative governing American racial representation since the Civil Rights Movement: a progressive

chronology of racial uplift that buttresses a liberal vision of ethnic incorporation. The use of Asians as evidence of this movement has become ubiquitous in popular culture; hence, the simultaneously laudatory and derogatory designation of Asian Americans as "honorary whites" or "model minorities." Thus, the judgment, "the Chinese in Mississippi play the white man's game better than white folks do," elicited by an African American informant during Robert Seto Quan's research for *Lotus Among the Magnolias: The Mississippi Chinese* (1982), prefigures a dominant representation of Asians in the United States.[3] Nevertheless, for this southern community during the era of formal segregation, the ability to "play the white man's game" took on *literal* stakes.

How did Jim Crow accommodate a supposed "third" race, those individuals and communities who did not fit into a cultural and legal system predicated on the binary distinction between colored and white? Put another way, where did the Asian sit on the segregated bus? W. E. B. Du Bois's famous pronouncement that "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line" could not prognosticate on which side of the line an Asian, for example, might fall.[4] The very metaphor admits no middle, or interstitial, space. How could a buffer, a potential DMZ of indeterminate race relations, exist within a context where it was said that even days of the week were segregated?[5] Unlike apartheid in South Africa, segregation in the American South made no provision for gradations of color. Sociologist Max Handman noted in 1930 that American society had "no social technique for handling partly colored races. We have a place for the Negro and a place for the white man: the Mexican is not a Negro, and the white man refuses him an equal status."[6] Brewton Berry's informal, 1963 study of tri-racial peoples in the South, *Almost White*, speculates that a mixed-blood Indian's racial status under segregation "falls somewhere along a continuum, between nearly white on the one hand and nearly Negro on the other."[7] Yet, how can the space between "partly colored" and "almost white" be maintained within a binary caste system?

James Loewen's influential 1972 study, *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White*, offers one such answer. He argues that when faced with a culture that provided no accommodation for a "third" race, the Chinese engineered a shift in status from colored to white in the

course of one generation. The Chinese in Mississippi, Loewen claims, "worked systematically . . . in order to rise from Negro to white status" in the period following World War II and once crossing over, left "the black world behind without a second glance."[8] While the Supreme Court ruling, *Gong Lum v. Rice,* had formally established the colored status of the Chinese in Mississippi in 1927, by the time that sociologist Loewen arrived to do fieldwork in 1967 the Chinese were apparently card-carrying white people—or at least they were according to the "W" on their driver's licenses. His book-length study attempts to show what transpired between the years 1941 and 1966, the twilight of formal segregation. What he postulates is an Asian community's shift from reviled caste to what one could call less reviled caste, but what he chooses to call, perhaps for lack of a better word, "white." Loewen attempts to account for the shift not simply by positing acculturation to white norms and values as intrinsic to the processes of Americanization. Rather, he depicts a community who, not content with their social address as "colored," began to engineer a "transition from near-black to near-white" as a response to segregation's racial dichotomy.[9] This narrative—with differing prophecies and conclusions—is repeated in a number of studies of this community. The resulting archive provides empirical evidence of the ways in which cultural ambiguity became resolved.[10]

I want to take Loewen's thesis in a different direction to engage representations of this southern community in ways that suggest why Asian Americans have become such a fruitful site for uncovering national ambivalences about race, class, and equal opportunity. When I cast my gaze on Asians in the South, my intent is not to replicate Loewen's significant work by focusing on the *historical* process of how the shift occurred—which has do with a certain kind of modeling back of cultural norms including—ironically—the tacit agreement to respect the color line. Rather, I'm interested in what lies in excess of this population's purportedly successful transition. What does it mean to claim "near whiteness" for a population formerly known as "colored?" What becomes erased in its construction, and to what extent do those occlusions disrupt the naturalized teleology of racial advancement that governs American race talk?

The putative status shift of the Chinese in Mississippi represents one resolution to what I call racial interstitiality, the space between norma-

tive structures of power. If the context of American apartheid codified what continues to be the dominant narrative of American race relations, the black-white binary, what of the space that lies within its interstices? Edna Bonacich's concept of "middleman minorities," those who "occupy an intermediate rather than a low-status position," speaks to the tri-part class divisions that arose under colonialism as nonnative, diasporic ethnic minorities filled the gap between indigenous peoples and colonial elites.[11] The context of Asians in the South might thus be said to reflect the American version of what Avtar Brah calls "the colonial sandwich": "Europeans at the top, Asians in the middle, and Africans at the bottom."[12] To what extent does the interstitial begin to suture those relations? To what extent does the existence of intermediacy need to be repressed for the smooth functioning of that racial hierarchy? The period of legally enforced segregation only exaggerated and codified the racial hierarchy existing elsewhere within the nation and outside it; in this sense, southern regionalism is not, to invoke Richard Gray's terms, an aberration to the nation, but a site where the implications of racial classification played out in heightened relief.[13] The emergent status of the Asian under formal segregation thus suggests that what appears to be unaccommodated within a system of relations may serve to unveil the structures and interests that support it—even as such communities did not offer a primary challenge to the system of segregation. Nevertheless, the "partly colored races" are potentially productive sites for understanding Jim Crow's investments and the meanings accrued to "white" and "black"—or, more appropriately, "not white" and "not black."

Loewen has suggested that Chinese transition to "near whiteness" in Mississippi was enabled, among other things, by their willing disassociation from African Americans—and, ironically, from whites as well:

> The final step [of status elevation] was for the Chinese to convince Caucasians that they too believed in racial integrity and had no intention of mixing with anyone. . . .[T]he Chinese simultaneously denied that they married Negroes and explicitly vowed that they would never marry whites in the future.[14]

The paradox of caste elevation was that it seemed predicated on respecting Jim Crow's primary distinction. Thus, as revealed in my epigraph,

the "acceptance" of "those yellow people" depended upon upholding the color line in both directions or suffering the consequences of historical oblivion, of being "just let go." The theoretical implications of his findings for comparative ethnic studies are suggested not simply by the metaphor of racial triangulation as the documentary film that took those findings as a script, *Mississippi Triangle*, suggests. Rather, they suggest a spatial metaphor that emphasizes the condition of being *between* the terms that define a dominant social hierarchy, the condition of interstitiality. Thus, Gary Okihiro's ontological question, "Is Yellow Black or White?" might be reconceived: what does the intermediate space between white normativity and black abjection look like?[15]

Like *The Mississippi Chinese*, a number of works in American Studies have engaged this as an empirical question: Karen Blu's *The Lumbee Problem* (1979); Neil Foley's *The White Scourge* (1997); and Clara Jean Kim's *Bitter Fruit* (2000), to name a few.[16] But, what is particularly suggestive about representations of Asians in the segregated South, and of this Chinese community in particular, is the way in which social status becomes measured within the black-white dichotomy through degrees of distance or proximity. This historical process occasioned by Jim Crow's legal regime underscores the very interplay between likeness and difference inherent within subject formation, as Judith Butler has theorized in regard to gender:

> Identifying with a gender under contemporary regimes of power involves identifying with a set of norms that are and are not realizable, and whose power and status precede the identifications by which they are insistently approximated. This "being a man" and this "being a woman" are internally unstable affairs. They are always beset by ambivalence precisely because there is a cost in every identification, the loss of some other set of identifications, the forcible approximation of a norm one never chooses.[17]

Locating gender as the "forcible approximation" of normative conceptions of male and female offers a ready analogy to race, particularly in the heightened context of race relations under formal segregation. In this case, racial identity must emerge out of a prescribed identification with the "internally unstable" categories, "colored" and "white," forcing the inverse process of identification into relief: that of disavowal. The "near

whiteness" of the Chinese in the South—their caste elevation—required a dual engagement: both white identification and black disavowal.

As Toni Morrison has noted, black abjection lies at the foundation of national community. The emergent status of immigrant groups is negotiated not merely through an engagement with the dominant, but through the repudiation of those who lack social power. "A hostile posture toward resident blacks must be struck at the Americanizing door before it will open," Morrison argues. "The public is asked to accept American black as the common denominator in each conflict between an immigrant and a job or between a wannabe and status."[18] A wave of academic studies highlights this dynamic in order to challenge the ahistoricity of European "whiteness" in the U. S.—hence the proliferation of the provocative titles that intend to question any notion of naturalized white identity: to wit, *How the Jews Became White Folks*, *How the Irish Became White*, *Are Italians White?*[19] These titles are reflective of what has become known as "critical white studies," works such as David Rodieger's *The Wages of Whiteness* (1991), Alexander Saxton's *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic* (1990), Ruth Frankenburg's *White Women, Race Matters* (1993), Ian F. Haney Lopez's *White by Law* (1996), and Mike Hill's *After Whiteness* (2004).[20]

Robyn Wiegman locates three strains of thought within "Whiteness Studies":

> [T]he race traitor school (which advocates the abolition of whiteness through white disaffiliation from race privilege), the 'white trash' school (which analyzes the racialization of the permanent poor in order to demonstrate the otherness of whiteness within), and the class solidarity school (which rethinks the history of working-class struggle as the preamble to forging new cross-racial alliances). [21]

One tenet of the latter is that white privilege is the compensation for the labor subordination of the European immigrant working class. Yet it can only be realized through its antithesis, the inverse of Zora Neale Hurston's recognition, "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background."[22] The "class solidarity school" establishes how a group's apprehension of and collusion with (a white/black) racial hierarchy is intrinsic to the process of ethnic acculturation. Such scholarship has transfigured the understanding of race: it is conflictual rather than self-evident,

juridically legislated rather than organic, state-imposed or legitimated in addition to collectively imagined, contextual rather than timeless. It has provided one answer to the first part of the narrator's musing in Chester Himes's novel, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*: "I began wondering when white people started getting white—or rather, when they started losing it."[23] But to push the borders of inquiry further, it could be claimed that any number of communities feel "most white" when "thrown against" a sharp black background—even those whose whiteness never became naturalized.

In a self-critique of his book, *The Wages of Whiteness*, Roediger has suggested that the "weakness in recent histories of white racial formation" was that they contributed to the "tendency to see racial formation in Black and white."[24] My intent here, however, is not to provide a triangulated "corrective" to critical white studies by emphasizing the role of Asian Americans in the consolidation of whiteness. Rather, if one could say that the Irish, Italians, or Jews represent the "success" of white identification as it translated into both state and cultural recognition *and* an affective though invisibly normative identity, what of those who failed? By "failed," I mean those who remain within the gap between white identification and black disavowal, who may have taken on the prejudices of the elite without ever gaining entry into their society—that is, those who remain, in Handman's terms, "partly colored." In contrast to such European groups, the Asian's supposed caste rise can only be characterized as partial, as a registered incompletion, a "near whiteness."

My intent is not to add to the empirical evidence of in-between status—or to show that there are varying degrees of whiteness. Rather, I want to suggest that this registered incompletion is reflected in the discourses that have sought to represent interstitial status. Looking at the other end of the spectrum, "failure" has different connotations: representations of Asians under segregation reflect the anxious, contradictory, and, I would argue, incomplete attempts to convince of African American disassociation. As Loewen suggests, caste elevation is dependent upon repressing a history of intimacy with African Americans, yet figures of Chinese-black amalgamation are never wholly buried or repressed. Representations of the Mississippi Chinese in particular reveal the fraying edges of accepting whiteness as the ego ideal coupled with the failure to disassociate

completely from African Americans, the simultaneity of being oppressor and oppressed.

Casting one's gaze on the interstitial reveals not only the anxieties of the "partly colored," but also of representation itself. I want to focus on these anxieties as they appear within academic and popular cultural depictions of Asians in the South: Jonathan Daniels' memoir, *A Southerner Discovers the South* (1938); the documentary film, *Mississippi Triangle* (1984) by Christine Choy, Worth Long, and Allan Siegel; Ruthanne McCunn Lum's *Chinese American Portraits: Personal Histories 1828–1988* (1988); Choong Soon Kim's *An Asian Anthropologist in the South* (1977); and Judy Yung's *Chinese Women of America: A Pictorial History* (1986).[25] In surprising ways, the class and caste position of the Asian in the South is at times mediated through representations of gender and sexuality, underscoring the interaction between axes of difference. My focus lies on the jarring moments and incommensurabilities that attend depictions of racial status in these portrayals of Asians in the Deep South. Interestingly, the same anxieties of representation evident in early attempts to fix the status of this interstitial community reemerge in subsequent depictions of the post-segregationist moment. The anxieties of the "partly colored" are thus revealed in ruptures to logic, in discursive contradiction, and in the spaces between visual and narrative signification—in short, within the *failures* to convince of idealized status on the part of both interstitial subjects and those who seek to represent them.

Asian Interstitiality

The legal status of the Chinese as "colored" was formalized in the 1927 Supreme Court ruling, *Gong Lum v. Rice*, which assigned members of the "Mongolian race" to "colored" schools. In 1924, Gong Lum brought suit against school trustees in Mississippi district court charging that his daughter, Martha, had been unfairly prevented from attending Rosedale Consolidated High School where the student body was exclusively white. Upon the court's decision in her favor, school officials appealed to the state supreme court, which reversed the decision. In upholding the Mississippi Supreme Court's decision against the plaintiff as the case went before the U.S. Supreme Court, Chief Justice Taft asserted that as a "member of the

Mongolian or yellow race," the plaintiff was "not entitled to attend the schools provided by law in the State of Mississippi for children of the white or Caucasian race."[26] "The question here," Taft wrote,

> is whether a Chinese citizen of the United States is denied equal protection of the laws when he is classed among the colored races and furnished facilities for education equal to that offered to all, whether white, brown, yellow or black. Were this a new question, it would call for very full argument and consideration, but we think that it is the same question which has been many times decided.[27]

The decision both fixed the intermediate racial status of the Chinese in the South and was the occasion to affirm the constitutionality of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). This use of the Chinese in the affirmation of "separate but equal" is indeed ironic as the dissenting opinion to *Plessy* invoked Chinese privileges under segregation. "A Chinaman can ride in the same passenger coach with white citizens of the United States," wrote Justice Harlan in his dissent, "while citizens of the black race . . . who are entitled, by law, to participate in the political control of the State and nation . . . are yet declared to be criminals, liable to imprisonment, if they ride in a public coach occupied by citizens of the white race."[28]

That seeming privilege notwithstanding, sociologist Robert O'Brien prophesized in 1941, "[A]s the number of Chinese in the Delta increases it will become more difficult to maintain an intermediate position between the Negro on one hand and the whites on the other. . . . [A] study of the relationship of the Chinese, whites, and Negroes [in the Mississippi Delta] seems to point inescapably toward an inferior position of the Chinese in the southern communities."[29] While recognizing the pressures of intermediacy that occasioned such a prophecy, twenty years later, however, others were coming to the opposite conclusion. Despite *Gong Lum* and an earlier association with African American labor, third-generation Chinese Americans were, George Rummel III concludes from fieldwork done in 1964, "trying to live down their previous image" and had formed an "almost exclusive social and economic identification with the dominant white community rather than with the lower-class Negro community."[30] As if to confirm that Asian identification with the dominant culture in the South is articulated via white approximation, filmmaker Rene Tajima Peña interviews a pair of aging Filipina sisters in New Orleans while on

the road to find "Asian America" in the 1990s for the documentary, *My America (. . . or honk if you love Buddha)*. In the course of recounting their pasts as belles of the French Quarter, the sisters cheerfully assert their white status as it is confirmed on their birth certificates and by their schooling, romantic partners, and the cemeteries that house their ancestors: "Filipinos were not considered a race other than white. Because Spain owned the Philippines. So they were just considered white."[31]

The emergent class status of racialized individuals no doubt generated southern discomfort in a white population confronted with the specter of the Asian professional who had to be interpolated into the elaborate codes of southern etiquette. One catches a glimpse into how the incommensurability between race and class status was reconciled—or rather, failed to be reconciled—within the incidental depiction of "four Chinamen" in Jonathan Daniels's 1938 memoir/travelogue, *A Southerner Discovers the South*. Here, the invocation of sexual deviance queers the testimony about the Chinese status rise and functions as one anomalous moment that cannot be wholly reconciled within the narrative of Chinese American arrival. Daniels describes a casual exchange on a ferry crossing the Mississippi River:

> A fat and effeminate man got out of the sedan in which he rode with four Chinamen.
>
> I looked at him with careful distaste but I asked, 'Tell me, what do the Chinese do for a living in Mississippi? Do they farm?'
>
> He looked back at his companions. 'Oh, no, they're business men. And that one yonder is a preacher, a Presbyterian preacher. Oh, they're fine gentlemen.' His eyes filled with a pleasant dream. 'You ought to see a Chinese boy I know. He's just fifteen. I tease him. And he just smiles so sweet, so sweet!'
>
> He mimicked a monstrous coyness. And he pursed, in imitation of the China boy's smiling, a mouth like the sessile, fleshy suckers on the tentacles of an octopus.
>
> 'I'm sure of it,' I said, 'Excuse me.' [32]

Here, the status of these Chinese Americans as "fine gentlemen" is not only overtly confirmed, but validated circumstantially: they travel in the company of a white man. But, their professional status is marked as grotesque and unnatural as it becomes grafted onto the queerness of the messenger.

Both the aping of femininity by the white man and the aping of gentility by his Chinese companions inspire the curiosity and distaste of the white, middle-class speaker. His response indicates how the "fat and effeminate" man's status as white—and indeed, given his bestial description, as a *man*—is demoted by his presumed homosexuality. His pedophilic desire—he is not quite right—renders him the fit companion of the not quite white. The class status of those formerly known as "colored" becomes queered and thereby challenged: through associative intimacy it is not true gentility, only a "monstrous imitation." In this portrayal, the bourgeois status of the Chinese is only an approximation revealing how social status is multiply mediated: color triangulated by queerness emerges as a class sign. Here, anxiety about the middle class person of color becomes grafted onto other signs of difference. The "careful distaste" that their professional status inspires, and here expressed by contiguity, must be distinguished from the violent repercussions suffered by middle class African Americans and other "partly colored" people in the South.

These representations attest to the ways in which racial ambiguity became adjudicated, disciplined, rationalized or subject to divination in disparate cultural forums; what remains constant from the 1920s through the 1990s are the narratives in which this interstitial community was placed: they were represented as either backsliding into blackness or extolled as exemplary citizens "accepted" by southern whites. As Loewen has suggested, the community's repudiation of African Americans (and those Chinese who were intimate with them) was crucial to its status rise, demonstrating their apprehension of what Ariela Gross has called, "race by association," determining racial status by one's associates.[33] While I do not doubt that those acts of repudiation existed in multiple forms, what I would like to question here is how successful they were. That is, it would seem that the repression of cross-racial intimacy within the discourse of Asian American subjects and those who represent them is itself only approximate.

Eruptions of "Funk" in *Mississippi Triangle*

By the early twentieth century, Chinese Exclusion laws and their gendered precursor, the 1875 Page Act, had severely restricted the immigration

of Chinese women to the U. S., truncating the growth of Chinese communities across the country. At the same time, Mississippi's anti-miscegnation laws expressly forbade intermarriages between a "white person and negro *or Mongolian*" (emphasis mine). [34] In looking at interracial marriage between Chinese and blacks, then, documentary filmmakers Choy, Long, and Siegel recognized that they had a visceral template for depicting Chinese caste movement: the transition from black to white intermarriage. To introduce this racial chronology, the film, *Mississippi Triangle*, gives symbolic centrality to the figure of Arlee Hen, an elderly Afro-Chinese woman. The film grants her prominence not only in its frequent return to her narration, but also in her use as a framing device. Beyond her value as an informant imbued with privileged access to the history of Chinese origins in the Delta, the filmmakers clearly found in her a symbol of black/Chinese amalgamation, the embodiment of the original taboo. This proof of intimacy between two "colored" races had to be repressed in order to facilitate Chinese status shift, but to what extent does her representation exceed its intended use?

Both Loewen and the filmmakers acknowledge Hen's exile from the Chinese American community in the Delta. As Loewen notes in a caption to her photo included in the 1988 edition of his book, "[Arlene Hen] was living in Greenville when I did my fieldwork, but because her mother was black, the Chinese community never mentioned her, and I learned of her lonely existence only when Third World Newsreel filmed her just before her death in 1982." As Christine Choy writes, the "discovery" of Hen was policed by the community to the extent that the crew had to concoct an elaborate ruse to gain access to her without the awareness of the community:

> [The Chinese American community] refused to take us to the black-Chinese areas. No one wanted us to talk to the elderly black-Chinese woman who became a major character in the film. So we made an announcement in Greenville that we were leaving town. Word traveled quickly from Jackson, Mississippi to Memphis, Tennessee. All the gossips spread the word. We went down to Jackson, spent the night, and then sneaked back into Greenville. We parked the car in an alley behind the woman's house, and stayed in her home for two days of filming. The Chinese community didn't know we had any relationship with this woman. When they saw the final film they were very upset.[35]

In documenting Hen's communal repudiation, the story lends credibility to Loewen's assertion that the majority of Chinese in the Delta was white-identified and actively disavowed the existence of interracial marriage between blacks and Chinese as part of their bid for acceptance among the white elite. In a subtle parallel, with its hints of skullduggery and doubling back in the dead of night, the story resembles those of Civil Rights activists trying to do their work under threat of violence by white supremacists, only in this case it is Chinese Americans whose disapproval—and implied power—provokes such machinations. What the story also conveys is Hen's significance to the filmmakers who went to such lengths to secure her interview.

The film chooses to use Arlee Hen as a reminder of the ignominious class and color roots of the community. A symbol of black-Chinese amalgamation, Hen exists, in the words of Toni Morrison, as that eruption of "Funk" that disturbs the dearly won near-white status of the pillars of the Chinese community. In Morrison's conception, such eruptions represent the unwelcome reemergence of the residues of a past strategically left behind. Emphasizing the domestic context of upward rise, she critiques those class-conscious African American women who work assiduously to cultivate "thrift, patience, high morals, and good manners" while subduing—however incompletely—the "base" passions that demarcate the line between "colored" and "nigger":

> Whenever it erupts, this Funk, they wipe it away, where it crusts, they dissolve it; wherever it drips, flowers, or clings, they find it and fight it until it dies. They fight this battle all the way to the grave. The laugh that is a little too loud; the enunciation a little too round; the gesture a little too generous.[36]

For the Chinese, Hen represents one such eruption; racial amalgamation is a class sign that lingers. Nevertheless, the film's staging of Hen's pariah status as proof the community's racism is somewhat undermined by an alternative assessment of her place in the community: in *Chinese American Portraits: Personal Histories 1828–1988*, Ruthanne McCunn Lum reports that Hen worked in the most prominent Chinese grocery store in Greenville, Mississippi. While focusing on Hen's triple ostracism, McCunn Lum nonetheless notes that "Arlee and her sister, . . . were both accepted by the

local Chinese community and never left Greenville."[37] The disjunction bespeaks a potential rupture in the narration of Chinese caste elevation: to what extent is the disavowal of African American intimacy (Hen's "lonely existence") a matter of public self-representation to the outsider, whether filmmaker or scholar?

Throughout the film, she testifies to discrimination against blacks and Chinese perpetuated by whites even though, ironically, one of the film's few "integrated" scenes occurs at Hen's birthday celebration in which, bedridden and frail, she receives black and white well-wishers and congregants led by a black minister. In effect, the party is filmed as if it were a funeral; Hen's supine body lies in-state to receive those who pay their last respects. It is as if the tri-racial society can be so sanguine in this scene precisely because she—and what she represents—is likely to die soon. All can afford to be gracious at the demise of those lingering signs of a past intimacy.

The film pointedly addresses southern Asian racism via Hen's actual death in ways that bolster Loewen's thesis on Chinese American crossover—at the same time, I would argue that Hen's use in the film can be said to question it. At the end of film, we see a coffin being lowered into the ground. Hen's voice rises over the image of a field in spring, her words depicted in subtitles for emphasis: "I couldn't be buried in a Chinese cemetery . . . I'm mixed with Negro, you know . . . and I couldn't be buried in a Chinese cemetery." Choosing to end with this image of burial, the film achieves multiple purposes: it signals the "end" of the community as a natural conclusion to the testimony of Chinese Americans, who express the financial insupportability of the small grocery businesses and prophesize the next generation's out-migration. More importantly, what is being buried is evidence of amalgamation now lost to near-whiteness. Choosing to close on these words, the filmmakers succeed in conveying that Hen's ostracism represents a collective repudiation of the community's previous racial status—that past is being buried with her.

Nevertheless, this figure of miscegenation does not remain underground: Hen's voice, and with it the community's "colored" past, pops out of the grave to haunt what the film has previously inscribed, albeit ambivalently, as Chinese American crossover to white norms and values. In refusing to "just let go" of a figure like Hen, the filmmakers ensure that

black-Chinese intimacy, the origin of community, is not erased. The film pointedly refuses to mark Hen as an abject figure and sees to it that, even in death, she has the last word. Nevertheless, the only overt testimony of Chinese racism that she makes in the film is given prominence. Thus, the film has it both ways: it documents the crossover at the same time that it tethers the crossover to the community's deliberate repression of the Chinese who, in excess of Loewen's thesis, became black. In allowing for eruptions of "Funk" in biracial Arlee Hen, the film succeeds in marking white status as contingent—it does not dispute the fact that white-identification has occurred, but it does mark that status as tenuous. In addition, the penultimate sequence witnesses three separate racial spheres in the Delta: a white country club and bar, black workers in a fish-processing plant, and a Chinese American wedding. This visualization of the ongoing processes of segregation is certainly ironic in the context of the film's chronological progression depicting Chinese crossover: in effect, it wants to show the Chinese as *de facto* white people without ever showing them *with* white people.

This absence produces a rupture similar to that in Loewen's study: the "middlemen" have taken on the prejudices of the elite without ever gaining entry into their society. Community reaction to the film reveals a similar slippage indicative of approximate status, the anxieties of interstitiality: when the film premiered in town, Chinese Americans were not happy with it. Rather than being angry about their portrayal as racists mouthing the pieties of a white elite, they were upset that they were not portrayed as white enough. That is, in the peculiar tangle of class-as-race logic, they were not represented as being more prosperous or successful. As Adria Bernardi reports, "Most said they didn't think it portrayed the progress of the Chinese-Americans. Some objected because they thought it left the impression that Chinese are linked more closely with the black community than the white. Certainly the scenes in small country stores and interviews with people of Chinese and African-American ancestry did not sit well with the Chinese audience, most of whom were successful merchants."[38] This response conveys an inherent duality: on one level, in expressing anxiety about black association as class demotion, the reaction lends credibility to sociological claims of their white, middle-class

identification. At the same time, it reveals the degree to which they feel the incompletion of status elevation: the fact that it needs to be publicly validated testifies to its fragility. This vulnerability is likewise uncovered in Robert Seto Quan's fieldwork done over a decade later. "In nearly every conversation, the Delta Chinese of the first two generations spoke of the respect shown them by the whites," he writes. "Such emphasis may mean that some Chinese have doubts as to how the whites feel about them."[39] The fact that white association needs to be publicized and affirmed bespeaks both its desirability and the awareness of its instability. The need for reassurance unveils tenuousness; the claim of status shift, postulated under segregation, remains incomplete.

These discursive ruptures emerge out of an inherent contradiction: the move to document the transference of white status to an "outsider" population proceeds against the common-sense awareness that people of color can never "be" white. This contradiction presented the filmmakers with a visual conundrum: how to depict the community's "whiteness" when confronted with Chinese faces, especially if its achievement means embodying what is normative and, hence, invisible. The disjunction reveals itself in the rhetoric of both researcher and informant. As one college-age, southern Chinese American remarks in an interview with Quan in the late 1970s, "The whites will accept you at every level, but not socially."[40] The contradiction of the statement is readily apparent: if whites do not accept you socially, then they don't accept you. "Near whiteness" is revealed to be an inadequately blunt instrument to define the nuances of social status. Loewen marks the incommensurability between racial classification and equal treatment: "Although they still do not enjoy full equality, the Chinese are definitely accorded white status, affirmed for example by the "W" in the appropriate blank on their driver's licenses."[41] His statement questions the determinants of white classification above and beyond the study's self-conscious examination of its artificiality: in other words, what is the value of "white status" if it does not ensure full equality? That is, "whiteness" (or proximity to it) is not an independent indicator of social status and does not guarantee entry among social elites. Each citizen's constitutional guarantee of equal rights, his presumed abstract universality under the law, does not obviate the material enactments of racial hierarchy attend-

ing the citizen's embodiment. Such dissonance in this case points to the disjunction between the state's [or, rather, the oligarchy's] interpellation of the Chinese as "white" as bestowed by a single capital letter on state identification documents and the social practice of whiteness. Thus, even as Chinese American informants attest to the privilege of inhabiting an invisible norm—their ability to avoid being targeted as the objects of racial violence, ridicule, ostracism, or discourtesy, for instance—their testimony reveals ambivalence.

Scholars are themselves not immune from rationalizing their own treatment within an unjust system. In documenting his fieldwork in *An Asian Anthropologist in the South: Field Experiences with Blacks, Indians, and Whites* (1977), Korean American anthropologist Choong Soon Kim poses the question, "Had a proverbial 'southern hospitality' been extended to Asians?"[42] His answer simultaneously acknowledges racism as it is expressed via social etiquette at the same time that he negates the possibility that he himself has been a target of it: "The early Chinese in the Mississippi delta might have a different answer, but most Asians, including myself, who came to the South recently, would have a positive answer to the question." [43] While one can grant the autonomy of the individual's mediation of his own experience, Kim's affirmation of the courtesies whites show him provokes the same uneasy questioning that underlies those expressed by the Chinese in the Delta:

> Despite my observations of racial discrimination exhibited toward others, I wish to emphasize that I have never been subjected to it during my ten years of living in the South. It is true, though, that southerners are more openly ambivalent about foreigners. . . . Sometimes, whites have refused to shake my hand or to have close contact. . . . However, these incidents should not be interpreted in terms of racial discrimination. Such curiosities in relation to foreigners are rather natural.[44]

Kim's analysis of his own racial status in the South points to the inherent unreliability of the ethnographer as ethnographic subject; there is simply no alternative interpretation that can logically supplant the one that he chooses to deny—he is snubbed because of his race. What his testimony reveals is that one cannot enter an embedded system of social relations without developing elaborate mechanisms as a hedge against internalizing one's inferior status. The psychic violence that segregation enacts appears

in the form of denial and rationalization. Both are readily apparent within the discourse of the willfully unknowing subaltern subject in ways that undermine any uncomplicated understanding of his status, even at the moment when he wants to render it straightforwardly.

In highlighting what lies in excess of the subject's apprehension of the social meaning of his own experience—even one who makes his living analyzing the social behaviors of others—I do not mean merely to substitute one presumably more authentic narrative for another, in this case, one in which the evidence of racial oppression counters the assertion of its attenuation. Rather, the pressures of representing incompletion produce a contestatory counter-narrative existing in dialectical tension with the narrative at hand. Here, the narrative situating Asian Americans as a vehicle for measuring and affirming racial progress generates its own excess at the moment of enunciation. At times, the duality of representation that creates both dissonance and the ever-presence of a counter-narrative is overtly acknowledged; contradicting points of view are portrayed side-by-side in competition and irresolution. Historian Judy Yung's representation of the Asian American experience in the South engages this strategy; in *Chinese Women of America*, the contradiction produced by the simple question, "How were Asians treated in the Deep South?" must be resolved by the reader-viewer who is confronted with two versions of the Asian southern debutante: a cheerleader and a debutante

While the parallel images might speak to the assimilationist success of the Chinese, the captions deliberately introduce dissonance between the image and the text. Whereas one caption attests to the fact that the girl from Arkansas "experienced no prejudice," the other caption cites its subject from Mississippi as saying, "We were made fun of all the time . . . [and had to] deal with those who could not totally understand us as Chinese." [45] Such a schizy division generates no comment in this pictorial history; rather, it merely asks the reader/viewer to process the contradiction as a result of individual experience—or, perhaps of the difference between Mississippi and Arkansas.

Yung's representation introduces an inherent duality in the ways one can read history by presenting the viewer-reader with the incommensurability between two women's experiences as well as between the verbal testimony and the image. Both photographs ask the viewer to infer

Figure 2. Judy Yung, Chinese Women of America: A Pictorial History, ed. Crystal K. D. Huie (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1986), 92.

a relationship between each girl's class position and femininity and her level of integration. While both are depicted in poses of heightened civic presence—the school and church as twin stages for the production of public femininity—according to no apparent logic, feminine sexuality deflects race-baiting for one but not the other. Yung's choice to represent the community in a disjunctive parallel partially undermines situating the photographs as evidence of Chinese American class attainment in the South via the communal rituals of womanhood. While the cheerleader confirms a salutary racial invisibility as a testament to achieving white normativity, the other provides evidence of the obverse. The photograph captures the latter subject side-by-side with her white female peers as if to imply that she is their equal, but her accompanying testimony betrays what the photograph makes obvious: she is different. Rather than attempt to reconcile the two experiences, Yung places them in dialectical tension.

The "Death" of Segregation?

To what extent does the duality of such a representation question the narrative of progressive modernity as it is affixed to this "rising" interstitial population? At one level, such contradictions succeed in questioning a broader narrative based on a pre-and post-1954 periodization, a before-and-after national snapshot that locates the end of segregation as the dividing line between racial ignorance and enlightenment. Because one difference between the study and the film, *Mississippi Triangle*, is its historical address, the filmmakers attribute Chinese status elevation not, like Loewen, to behind-the-scenes concessions to white oligarchy, but to the Civil Rights Movement. For example, one Chinese American public official—his position itself a testimony to change—testifies, "The Civil Rights Movement helped the Chinese to attain certain status among the white world, more or less, whereas we didn't have anything to gain in the black world because they didn't have nothing for us to step in to."[46] Nevertheless, the film perhaps unintentionally presents a more complicated and inherently ambiguous picture of post-Civil Rights race relations in the Delta and its mediation of a segregated past in ways that question a progressive chronology, which can often conflate the end of state-enforced segregation with the end of racism. Yet that historical cusp occludes a more fragile boundary between past and present, a fragility that is disturbed, as I have highlighted here, by discursive dissonance and contradiction. After establishing that the demise of Jim Crow created opportunity via education, the film cuts to a high school pep rally as the site of integration, as a symbol of the fruit of civil rights activism.

As if to support Loewen's comment in a new afterword to his study that the 1980 Greenville High School yearbook is an "integrationists' dream," the camera pans the bleachers of a Delta high school to give evidence of black and white fellowship in this "new" era of race relations. The cheerleading squad, the marching band, the pep rally performers, and the general assembly all display blacks and whites (and a few strategically placed Chinese Americans) mutually involved in constructing school spirit. The sequence carries the weight of the film's suggestion that public education was the white supremacists' last line of defense. Yet this sequence, designed to convey at least the surface-level success of de-

segregation, ends up witnessing something beyond the filmmakers' overt intent. Serendipitously, the crew witnesses a student pantomime that is itself highly suggestive when read in the context of Chinese crossover to "near-white" status.

After establishing shots of interracial unity, the film briefly depicts a performance being enacted at the rally: a mock funeral complete with coffin, distraught mourners dressed in black, and a minister of ceremonies. After calling for silence, the student playing the preacher ponderously intones over intermittent cheering, "We have gathered here, my children, on this very sorrowful occasion to pay our last respects to our dearly, *dearly* departed School Spirit of 1982." His discourse is rudely interrupted by the presumed corpse who, to the horror of the mourners and delight of those in the bleachers, leaps from the coffin. The "Spirit," a girl made up in ghostly white, scampers around the floor of the basketball court only to be chased down by the funeral-goers who, to the glee of the crowd, catch her, hoist her aloft, and triumphantly bear her back towards the coffin. The scene reverses melancholic mourning: the lost love object's restoration erupts, in Anne Cheng's terms, as pathological euphoria.[47] The scene confronts the viewer with a positive image of desegregation: boys and girls of all races together enacting the (very vocal) rituals of shared community. It intends to confirm the Civil Rights Movement's reach into the institutional state apparatus of the public school system. But, the sequence carries meaning beyond that intended by the students (school spirit is not dead) and by the film (segregation *is* dead).

But, what to make of this sequence in a film about the *Chinese American* transition from "colored" to honorary white, a sequence in which few Chinese Americans appear? Fittingly—or perhaps ironically—school spirit in the pageant is performed by an African American girl in what one could interpret as "whiteface." Intended merely to give her an otherworldly appearance as a ghost (significantly, not a corpse), the costume does not intend to invoke racial mimicry. Yet I would argue that her get-up carries other resonance in a film *about* race relations and the attempts of a formerly "partly colored" community to elevate its status within the context of the historically saturated tradition of blackface minstrelsy in the South. In effect, the figure is a subtle reminder of the assimilative pres-

sure to mimic whiteness as a condition of people of color's civic presence. Thought to be "dead" in this new era, this symbolic figure instead rises up to disturb the recently achieved interracial harmony. This ghost of the past cannot be fully contained and thus must be subject to capture: ironically, the film portrays African American students giving chase. The white paint cannot disguise the performer's blackness; whiteface becomes an offense to the interracial assembly. Yet there is inherent ambiguity in the film's witnessing of this meaning-saturated pageant: the sequence cuts off at the moment that the African American girl in whiteface is borne away amid the crowd's increasing hysteria. Is the Spirit of 1982 going to be restored to her grave to make way for the Spirit of 1983, for example, or does she symbolize a unity triumphantly resurrected and now displayed to former naysayers? In either case, the figure is positioned in the film ambiguously: as the crowd roars its approval, the students lay hands upon her either to restore her to her rightful death or to fete her as the embodiment of their solidarity, a solidarity then contingent on whiteface. The sequence at the high school ends moments later with a similar image: two male students, one black, the other white, are lifted above a crowd—presumably the football team—as a token of honor, their heroism on the field celebrated as a point of school pride and unity. The girl is made to fulfill a similar symbolic function, but—as with all women made to serve as symbolic boundary markers of community—she figures more ambivalently: is she a symbol of communal loathing (bury her) or the corporeal icon of their collectivity (parade her)?

Reading this visual pantomime as an instance of whiteface is certainly a subtle interpretation beyond the intent of the film. Yet the parallel does open up the space of farce and the performative. The newly acquired racial status of the Chinese in the Delta can likewise be read as merely "acting" white, a tomfoolery that deserves, like the School Spirit of 1982, to be buried as a retrograde artifact of the past. If touted as a sign of unity between "colored" and white, the performance reveals the uneven, incomplete transference of status, one that is so blotchy that the darker shades cannot help but show through. Designed to incite unity in a high school gymnasium, the students' staging of this mock funeral is certainly beside the point of the film's own self-conscious staging of race, but like the ghost

itself, it pops out perhaps inopportunely to disrupt any uncomplicated or unironically celebratory portrayal of a post-Civil Rights landscape. The pep rally introduces the inherent ambiguity in the film's attempt to validate Loewen's findings on Chinese status shift by asking the viewer to consider what lies in excess of those findings, not only for the Chinese but for African Americans as well.

Comparative Race Relations and the Black-White Binary

In occupying a space of racial interstitiality, the Asian in the segregated South suggests a conceptual lens for reading comparative race relations. At one level, as the archive that I discuss here has shown, interstitial populations serve to unveil the mechanisms, political processes, and stakes behind the making of status. Cultural documents across disciplinary boundaries by Robert O'Brien, George Rummel, III, Jonathan Daniels, James Loewen, Christine Choy, et al., Ruthanne Lum McCunn, Judy Yung, Robert Seto Quan, and Choong Soon Kim explore the answer to the question, "How did the system of segregation accommodate the aberration of the neither-nor?" This archive reveals the ways in which both "colored" and "white" become enmeshed within the interplay of other oppositions that construct American norms, particularly those regarding class advancement: progressive vs. regressive; modern vs. feudal; prosperous vs. indigent. The context of Asian racial indeterminacy in this context highlights the emergence of subjects whose values and beliefs were either recognized as potentially worthy of incorporation—hence, "near whiteness"—or, conversely, unworthy.

In contributing to an empirical understanding of how segregation's "third space" was perceived and managed, such work represents a perhaps alternative southern archive. Yet, I would make clear that while resurrecting such an archive might contribute to a more multi-faceted understanding of the South, my intent is the continued exploration of what Michael Kreyling has called one of the "old categories" of Southern Studies, that is, race in black and white.[48] But, I hope to contribute to the "new Southern studies" insofar as I situate southern regionalism here not as an exception to national processes, but as a site where the production of

racial hierarchy is rendered in hyper-relief. In this sense, the South itself might be seen not, in the words of Houston Baker, Jr. and Dana Nelson, as the "abjected regional Other" enabling American cohesion, but, in effect, as a microcosm of the national.[49] Looking at Asians—or Latinos and American Indians—under segregation does not fundamentally challenge the South's historically embedded investment in a black-white binary, nor does it simply offer a pluralist corrective that prefigures the emergence of a more multicultural South. Rather, in the spirit of Baker's and Nelson's 1991 call for "a new Southern studies"—one echoed in Smith and Cohn's *Look Away: the U. S. South in New World Studies*—I would suggest that "aberrant" groups can be sites in which to explore the epistemological instability—or retrenchment—of Jim Crow itself, with particular relevance for the ways in which race in the U.S. continues to be read along a black-white continuum.[50]

As a model for Ethnic Studies, then, the concept of racial interstitiality emphasizes the tri-part, comparative nature of U.S. race relations. It highlights the antagonism (and coercion) underlying Toni Morrison's assertion that the Africanist presence underwrites immigrant acculturation. "Only when the lesson of racial estrangement [from African Americans] is learned" she writes, "is assimilation complete."[51] Yet for Asian immigrants formerly known as "colored," such assimilation is never complete; what I focus on here are the jarring moments that indicate its failure, what refuses to be buried. As I discuss, if one of the determinants of status is perceived to be "race by association," to what extent does the history of intimacy with African Americans suffer historical erasure, and to what extent does the individual's apprehension of his treatment as "partly colored" suffer erasure as well?

What becomes apparent in these temporal unearthings is the way in which class mobility in this southern context becomes articulated in racial terms; communal representations of interstitial populations reflect two options: backsliding into blackness or racial uplift. As the physical manifestation of the law's instability and the point of interpellation's excess, such populations and their histories nonetheless reflect an American racial epistemology applied both within the confines of the nation and within its imperialist endeavors. The racial "other" becomes knowable

within the crucible between "not black" and "not white," within a society where, in Cherríe Moraga's words, "Black is divided from white and the rest of us are required to fall inside that great divide."[52] In reading Asian Americans through the lens of racial interstitiality—between black and white—I am reminded why they are such a significant cultural site: they are uneasily positioned in American culture as American but not quite; as middle class—almost; as minority but not one of "those" minorities; as like us but not like us.

What I highlight, then, is not merely the resurrection of an incidental southern archive, but its contribution to our understanding of how social status becomes articulated via racial discourse and, more particularly, via the space between racial abjection and normative invisibility. The Asian's uneasy relationship to power in this historical context is likewise reflected in the uneasy discourses that intend to convey it. Whether one of liminality, stasis, or indeterminacy, this gap, the space between black and white, is, in Judith Butler's words, "beset by ambivalence." For the "partly colored races," identifying with whiteness involves, to draw an analogy to Butler's analysis of gender, "identifying with a set of norms that are and are not realizable."[53] The space between the social enactment of an identity and its idealization reveals the structures that consolidate social power in its multiple manifestations.

Yet this ambivalence surfaces not only as an anxiety *about* status, but as an anxiety within discourse. As I have shown, the residues of a repressed or unacknowledged history—of intimacy, of discrimination, of collusion, of self-degradation—emerge within a field of representation surrounding the historical context of racial interstitiality, a context produced by the hierarchies of segregation. What surfaces only as a discursive haunting nevertheless interrupts the drive to create linear chronologies out of the messiness and untenability of middleman status. Racial interstitiality, then, may be conceived as a site where identifications with power go unrecognized or remain incomplete. It is a site where social norms are themselves "insistently approximated." Within every narration of status transformation, there lies both an ambivalence and an incompletion that can unveil the stakes underlying its emergence. If there is a messiness to living in the interstices, it is revealed in the very discourses that seek to represent it.

Notes

I would like to thank Victor Bascara, Shilpa Dave, Grace Hong, Lisa Nakamura, and Michael Peterson for their insightful comments on an early draft of this work.

1. Cited in George Rummel III, "The Delta Chinese: An Exploratory Study in Assimilation" (MA Thesis, University of Mississippi, March 1966): 34.
2. Joan Nathan, "East Meets South at a Delta Table: Chinese-Americans bring the tastes of their ancestors down home," *New York Times*, June 4 2003: D1.
3. Robert Seto Quan, *Lotus Among the Magnolias: The Mississippi Chinese* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1982).
4. William E. B. Du Bois, "The Souls of Black Folk" in *Three Negro Classics* (New York: Avon, 1965 [1903]), 239.
5. As Mamie Garvin Fields notes, whites did not go into town on Saturdays, reserving that day of the week for blacks to do their shopping: "They frowned on black presence in town on the weekdays because it connoted leisure time." Cited in Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of a New South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 132.
6. Max Sylvius Handman, "Economic Reasons for the Coming of the Mexican Immigrant," *American Journal of Sociology* 35. 4 (Jan. 1930): 609–610.
7. Brewton Berry, *Almost White* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 47.
8. James W. Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White* (Prospect Heights, Il: Waveland Press, 1988 [1971] second edition), 72; 194.
9. Ibid, 135.
10. Other ethnographies include Kit-Mui Leung Chan, "Assimilation of Chinese-Americans in the Mississippi Delta, (M.A. Thesis, Mississippi State University, 1969); Pao Yun Liao, "A Case Study of A Chinese Immigrant Community" (M.A. Thesis, University of Chicago, 1951); Sieglinde Lim de Sanchez, "Crafting a Delta Chinese Community: Education and Acculturation in Twentieth-Century Southern Baptist Mission Schools," *History of Education Quarterly* 43. 1 (Spring 2003): 74–90; Robert W. O'Brien, "Status of Chinese in the Mississippi Delta, *Social Forces* (March 1941): 386–390; Robert Seto Quan's *Lotus Among the Magnolias*; George Rummel III's "The Delta Chinese"; Mary Jo Schneider and William M. Schneider, "A Structural Analysis of the Chinese Grocery Store in the Mississippi Delta," in *Visions and Revisions: Ethnohistoric Perspectives on Southern Cultures*, ed. George Sabo III and William M. Schneider (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 83–97; Shih-Shan Henry Tsai, "The Chinese in Arkansas," *Amerasia Journal* 8.1 (1981): 1–18; and *The Chinese in Arkansas: Final Report* (Little Rock: University of Arkansas, 1981). For historical context surrounding this community, see Gunther Barth, *Bitter Strength: A History of the Chinese in the United States, 1850–1870* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964) and Lucy M. Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South: A People Without a History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984). For a personal narrative regarding the Chinese community in Georgia, see John Jung,

Southern Fried Rice: Life in a Chinese Laundry in the Deep South (Ying and Yang Press, 2005).

11. Edna Bonacich, "A Theory of Middleman Minorities," *American Sociological Review* 38 (October, 1973): 582.
12. Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996), 1.
13. My usage here deliberately invokes Richard Gray's *Southern Aberrations*, which highlights the ways in which southern self-fashioning proceeds with the self-consciousness of its own "otherness" to the North and the nation: the South "is placed on the boundary, posed as an (albeit preferable) aberration." Such regional theorizing acknowledges an overt debt, ironically, to Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Richard Gray, *Southern Aberrations: Writers of the American South and the Problems of Regionalism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 500.
14. Loewen, 79.
15. Gary Y. Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), 34.
16. Karen Blu, *The Lumbee Problem: the Making of an American Indian People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Clara Jean Kim, *Bitter Fruit: the Politics of Black-Korean Conflict in New York City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).
17. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: on the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 126.
18. Toni Morrison, "On the Backs of Blacks," in *Arguing Immigration: Are New Immigrants a Wealth of diversity or a Crushing Burden*?," ed. Nicolaus Mills (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 98. See also her fictional restatement of such sentiments in *Sula*: "As a matter of fact, baiting [black people] was the one activity that the white Protestant residents concurred in. In part their place in this world was secured only when they echoed the old residents' attitude toward blacks" Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Plume, 1973), 53.
19. Karen Brodkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999); Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1996) and *Are Italians White?: How Race is Made in America*, ed. Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno (New York: Routledge, 2003).
20. David Rodieger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991); Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-century America* (London: Verso, 1990); Ruth Frankenburg, *White Women, Race Matters: the Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Ian F. Haney Lopez, *White by Law: the Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 1996) and Mike Hill, *After*

Whiteness: Unmaking an American Majority (New York: New York University Press, 2004).

21. Robyn Wiegman, "Whiteness Studies and the Paradox of Particularity," *boundary 2* 26. 3 (1999): 121–22.
22. Zora Neale Hurston, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," in *I Love Myself When I am Laughing*, ed. Alice Walker (New York: The Feminist Press, 1979), 154.
23. Chester Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (New Jersey: Chatham, 1973), 41.
24. David. R. Roediger, *Colored White: Transcending the Racial Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 130–31.
25. Jonathan Daniels, *A Southerner Discovers the South* (New York: Macmillan, 1938); *Mississippi Triangle*, dir. Christine Choy, Worth Long, Allan Siegel, 80 min., New York: Third World Newsreel, 1984, videocassette; Ruthanne McCunn Lum, *Chinese American Portraits: Personal Histories 1828–1988* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1988); Choong Soon Kim, *An Asian Anthropologist in the South: Field Experiences with Blacks, Indians, and Whites* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1977); Judy Yung, *Chinese Women of America: A Pictorial History*, ed. Crystal K. D. Huie (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1986).
26. *Gong Lum v. Rice*, 275 U.S. 78 (1927).
27. Ibid.
28. *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896).
29. O'Brien, 386.
30. Rummel, 49.
31. *My America (. . . or Honk if You Love Buddha),* dir. Rene Tajima-Peña, 87 min., 1997, New Jersey, videocassette. On the racial classification of the Chinese in the 1870, 1880, and 1900 census records, see Cohen, p.p. 167–170. Cohen notes that Chinese in Louisiana were either classified as white, black, or mulatto. Interestingly, the mixed-blood descendents of Chinese who immigrated from Cuba mistakenly believed that their forebears came from Mexico and were classified as Mexican, an identification that ironically allowed them to pass as white (Cohen, 170).
32. Daniels, 194.
33. Ariela Gross, "Litigating Whiteness: Trials of Racial Determination in the Nineteenth-Century South," *Yale Law Journal* (October 1998): 111.
34. Mississippi Code Ann. 2361 (1930) 1158.
35. Cited in Eric Dittus, "Mississippi Triangle: an Interview with Christine Choy, Worth Long, and Allan Siegel," *Cineaste* 14.2 (1987), 40.
36. Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970), 68.
37. Ruthanne Lum McCunn's *Chinese American Portraits* devotes a chapter to Arlee Hen, giving a full page to her portrait and using her family's history, like the film, as an origin point for the Chinese community in Mississippi. While *Mississippi Triangle* impresses upon the viewer Hen's distance from the community, McCunn characterizes that relationship as one of qualified integration (McCunn, 82).

38. Adria Bernardi, "Heat in the Delta: Reactions to the Triangle," *Southern Exposure* (July/Aug. 1984): 22. This reaction is confirmed by Ray Lou who worked as a consultant on the film. Personal communication, April 15, 1999.
39. Quan, 86.
40. Cited in Quan, 124.
41. Loewen, 96.
42. Choong Soon Kim, "Asian Adaptations in the American South," in *Cultural Diversity in the U.S. South: Anthropological Contributions to a Region in Transition*, ed. Carole E. Hill and Patricia D. Beaver (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 138.
43. Ibid, 138.
44. Kim, 1977, 122.
45. Yung, 92.
46. Cited in *Mississippi Triangle*.
47. In Cheng's view, the over-the top-display of national belonging on the part of the marginalized is a veil for its lack. Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
48. Michael Kreyling, "The South in Perspective," *Mississippi Quarterly* 54. 3 (Summer 2001): 383–91.
49. Houston A. Baker, Jr. and Dana D. Nelson, "Preface: Violence, the Body and 'The South,'" *American Literature* 73. 2 (June 2001): 236.
50. I am aware of the contentiousness surrounding the homogenizing tendencies of positing a single southern regionalism; for my purposes, I choose to invoke "one South" along the lines suggested by W. J. Cash's *The Mind of the South*, which identifies "a fairly definite social pattern—a complex of established relationships and habits of thought, sentiments, prejudices, standards and values, and associations of ideas" that emerge across the region. W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1941), viii. On "new Southern Studies," see Houston and Baker and *Look Away!: The U.S. South in New World Studies*, ed. Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).
51. Morrison, 1994, 98.
52. Cherríe Moraga, *Loving in the War Years*, expanded edition (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000 [1983]), 183.
53. Butler, 126.