Introduction

Thinking Interstitially

The Jim Crow era has produced a powerful visual iconography. Photographs of signs on public facilities demarcating the separation between “white” and “colored” enter our collective memory as potent reminders of past injustice. These signs of racial division in the Deep South make visible the contradictions embedded within democracy, the philosophical commitment to equality against its actuality. The dismantling of the color line in the landmark decision, *Brown v. Board of Education*, became the putative boundary that separated our benighted past from an enlightened future, symbolically dividing past from present, then from now. For better or worse, we have granted the 1954 ruling iconic status as the “Holy Grail of racial justice” (Bell 2004, 3).

Yet that status and the historical periodization that supports it—pre- versus post-1954—nevertheless obscures the ways in which race continues to have force within American culture. It reveals the ways in which the legacy of segregation has come to frame race relations in the United States: first, as the struggle between differential access to rights, and second, as the struggle between black and white. Both, I would argue, have come to constrict our views of what racial difference means. In the first instance, race only becomes intelligible as a problem to be remedied by the state—it is only visible through acts of discrimination antithetical to our notions of democratic universalism. The second struggle frames this book.

The legacy of segregation has come to define the terms of racial meaning in the United States. To wit: the conflation between “black” and “colored.” It is a logical slippage; nevertheless, this book is concerned with what becomes elided in that conflation: 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 black and white? Put another way, where did the Asian sit on the segregated bus?
Interned with other Japanese Americans in Arkansas during World War II, Mary Tsukamoto recounts her first trip out of camp to attend a YWCA leadership training conference. The bus ride to Jackson, Mississippi in 1943, she writes, “was shocking.”

What an eye opening experience it was for us, victims of racial discrimination, to travel far into the deep South. We learned first hand about two centuries of degradation of blacks that was still taking place in wartime America of 1943. . . . We could not believe the bus driver’s tone of voice as he ordered black passengers to stand at the back of the bus, even though there were many unoccupied seats in the front. We wondered what he would do with us, but he smiled and told us to sit in the seat behind him. We were relieved but had strange feelings; apparently we were not “colored.” (Tsukamoto and Pinkerton 1987, 176–177)

But what exactly is “not colored”? To say that Tsukamoto’s experience simply ratifies Japanese Americans as honorary whites would erase the complexity of being situated in between racial categories. In her speculation, “we wondered what he would do with us,” she recognizes that she is required to submit to this representative of white authority who must, both literally and figuratively, put her in “her place.” While her interpretation of the driver’s friendliness implies that the invitation to “sit in the seat behind him” represents a sign of favor, it also ironically affords him the greatest possibility for surveillance, not a trivial point for a prisoner of war on a temporary furlough. Her apparent privilege is offset by the fact that she is subject to the hyper-segregation of the internment camp. Racial separation in this case was in the name of national security: deciding her place in southern culture would be a moot point if she, an “enemy alien,” was to have no place in the national bus, front or back. A straightforward reading of her favored status obscures the multiple axes around which status turns.

Tsukamoto’s front-or-back dilemma and “strange feelings” go unseen in the story of America’s segregated past. 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 might fall (1965, 239). This very metaphor, the color line, admits no middle space and therefore no straddling that imagined border that defines not just social conduct but, in the process, racial identity itself. How could a buffer, a demilitarized zone of indeterminate race relations, exist within a context where it was said that even days of the week were segregated? Unlike apartheid in South
Africa, segregation in the American South made few provisions for gradations of color. *Partly Colored* is interested in those individuals and communities who came to represent a supposed third caste within a caste system predicated on the distinction between black and white. How were Asians, American Indians, or *mestizos* understood within segregation’s racial logic? In other words, what became of other “colored people”?

In his informal ethnography of tri-racial peoples in the South, Brewton Berry 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” (1963, 47). The uncertain position of these “neither fish nor fowl, neither white, nor black, nor red, nor brown” peoples, the so-called Brass Ankles in South Carolina, Melungeons of Tennessee and Kentucky, and Croatans of North and South Carolina, would seem to mark them outside social relations dictated by Jim Crow. As one informant surmises about mixed-blood Indians in his home county, “My opinion is these Croatans don’t want to mix with colored people, and they don’t know how to mix with white people. I don’t think white people would let ’em. That’s how come they keep to themselves” (cited in Berry 1963, 68). This social limbo, a segregation from segregation, would appear to support such groups’ characterization as racial “isolates” whose distance from dominant culture would render their existence inconsequential to racial hierarchy in the South. But however a people “keep to themselves,” there is no outside to social structure even as the history of removal contributes to the romanticized perception of American Indians living beyond the boundaries of civilization. The image of the native living at a remove from American society has its analogue in the figure of the Asian as foreigner. Extending a rare dinner invitation to a Korean anthropologist doing fieldwork in the South in the 1970s, a black manager explains, “If you were a white, I don’t think you’d come in my house for a meal. And if you were a black, frankly I’d be more cautious about invitin’ you to my place. You’re a foreigner. I figure you don’ care for local gossip or anythin’ like that” (cited in Kim 1977, 59–60). Situated as aloof from or inconsequential to the workings of racial hierarchy in the region, neither Asian nor Indian appears to be easily reconciled to black or white association. This misperception impacts scholarship as well; as John H. Peterson, Jr. notes about the Mississippi Band of Choctaw, “Far too many studies of historic Southern Indians have erroneously assumed that they were socio-cultural isolates, existing outside a complex, stratified society” (1971, 116). Whether characterized as sojourner, foreigner, or “cultural isolate,” those who could not be placed as...
either white or black were not exempt from the complex social formations of the American South.

Nor were they necessarily central to it. Jim Crow culture’s treatment of Asians, American Indians, or mestizos does not fundamentally alter our historical understanding of segregation; they may simply be positioned as anomalies to the overall functioning of white supremacy in the South. Moreover, the cultural record of “other” nonwhites in the South during the rise of segregation is sparse, eclectic, quirky, and partial. Consequently, one could say that it can yield only a partial truth.

Nevertheless, I pose the question, “What became of other ‘colored people’?” not to add another piece to the puzzle of disenfranchisement in a region often mythologized as unrepentantly racist. Rather, anomaly is a productive site for understanding the investments that underlie a given system of relations; what is unaccommodated becomes a site of contested interpretation. Postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha conceptualizes the interstitial as the “passage between fixed identifications [that] opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (1994, 4). The interstices between black and white forces established perspectives and definitions into disorientation. The racially interstitial can represent the physical manifestation of the law’s instability, its epistemological limit, the point of interpellation’s excess. Yet it may also be the site of cultural reinscription, the place where difference is made to conform to social norms. Partly Colored thus investigates the anomalous subjects and communities that must be brought to heel within a prevailing cultural logic—whether by exclusion, erasure, or incorporation. At one level, their presence could be said to introduce a complicating dissonance to a system of governance and cultural practice that could not perceive gradations of color. Conversely, treatment of nonblack, nonwhite peoples confirmed the flexibility and resourcefulness of white supremacy’s apparatus. What is eccentric to race relations serves both to suture and to disrupt.

Interstitial populations unveil the mechanisms, political processes, and stakes behind the making of status. Looking at individuals and communities on the black/white continuum has turned up multiple and varied stories about how status is affirmed, conferred, or denied within the intersection of regionalism, governmentality, and economic privilege. Thus, to ask, “How did the system of segregation accommodate a supposed ‘third’ race when faced with those who were neither-nor?” is to question the logic of racial
classification and to foreground the mutually constitutive nature of racial construction. But in situating this as a cultural problematic, I do not primarily seek to offer an ethnographic or empirical account of American Indians, mestizos, or, in particular, Asians in the South. I am interested in how color lines are drawn and what racial identity segregation demanded of those who seemed to stand outside—or rather, between—its structural logics. In taking interstituality as a conceptual lens, I explore how subjects are made within the space between abjection and normative invisibility as revealed by government documents, sociology, anthropology, history, autobiography, visual culture, and fiction. The pressures of racial polarity challenged the assertion of other racial identities both during the Jim Crow era and afterward, producing narratives that only uneasily resolve ambiguity. While such a lens may appear to reify the black-white binary that is part of segregation’s legacy, I also want to understand how status—racial or otherwise—arises out of multiple axes of differentiation: concepts of class, foreignness, sexuality, gender—what lies between the divisions we draw between rich and poor, citizen and alien, ability and disability, illness and wellness, heterosexual and homosexual, male and female. Thinking interstitially is a matter of turning one’s gaze toward the space of the in-between to envision alternative connections and affiliations that complicate black and white.

Sociologist Max Handman noted that American society “has 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” (1930, 609–610). What is the fallout of a failure to be socially “handled”? How does being neither-nor translate into a mindset, a psychology? Partly Colored traces narratives that attempt to reconcile Asian or American Indian communities and individuals to the seemingly uncompromising distinction between black and white. Or, conversely, those that refuse reconciliation, highlighting the very contradictions and irrationalities at the heart of white supremacist thought. In this sense, the “partly colored” subject thus represents, as in Mae Ngai’s conception of the illegal alien, an “impossible subject,” “a person who cannot be and a problem that cannot be solved” (2004, 5). In exploring the repressed stories of southern segregation, I consider what theorizing racial interstitiality might contribute to Asian American Studies, American Studies, New Southern Studies, and comparative race studies, and what the exaggerated context of southern race relations tells us about the cultural anxieties that frame the space of the in-between.
Segregation's Interpretive Necessity

Since their arrival in 1870, the presence of Chinese immigrants in Arkansas and Mississippi offered a challenge to a society polarized by color. With no formal statutes on how the Chinese were to be treated, their presence called for creative interpretations of Jim Crow etiquette that made for ironic, if not humorous accounts of segregationist logic. David Cohn’s memoir-cum-sociological treatise on life in the Mississippi Delta in 1935, *And God Shakes Creation*, depicts just this sort of inconsistency. He recounts an instance in which a Chinese man in need of emergency surgery is denied admission to a hospital for whites, one to which his father has donated money. On being admitted to a hospital for African Americans, he is yet attended by a white surgeon and “assigned a private room so that he would not have to share quarters with a Negro” (1948, 235). When his white wife gives birth to his child in a hospital for whites, he is not permitted entrance. This story of moving between locations illustrates the middle status accorded the Chinese within a binary caste system: the Asian is not quite white but granted privileges above that of the lowest caste. What goes unmarked in the testimony, however, are the taboos already transgressed and racial accommodations already presumed or negotiated by the Chinese: the man sought treatment at the white hospital first, he had (unlawfully) married a white woman in Mississippi, and his father had strategically donated to a White’s Only institution from which he himself is barred.

Such instances reveal the system’s ready but inconsistent accommodation of ambiguity. Incorporating others into segregation’s caste system required on-the-spot interpretation that could not rely on the conventions of custom or history or on legal statutes. Like those contradictions already repressed in Jim Crow treatment of African Americans, the illogical and uneven treatment of Asians stretched the plausibility of the system itself. As Cohn notes regarding the difference between institutions of worship and those of education:

The minds of the Delta Chinese, already confused by the complexities and contradictions of the alien civilization in which they live, are thrown into utter confusion by the fact that their children who are denied access to the white schools are eagerly received by the white churches. The public-school superintendent views them with a fishy eye but the Sunday school leader welcomes them warmly. They stand before God in equality with white children on Sunday, but on Monday they cannot stand together before the same blackboard. (1948, 156)
Cohn points out the irony of the disjunction between institutions charged with racial uplift: education and religion. While Mississippi deemed it permissible to inculcate the Chinese with the spiritual beliefs that would integrate them into community, it nonetheless barred integration by enforcing the link between race and educational opportunity as it did for African Americans. That one might stand in equality before God was never incompatible with standing in inequality before the state.

Uncertainties about where the color line was drawn and for whom take on both spatial and temporal dimensions. Documenting the tenuousness of Asian placement in southern culture, ethnographer Maxine Fisher recounts an instance in which South Asians driving through the South in the 1960s were denied motel lodging “because the manager saw them as ‘Black’”:

He did, however, provide them with the name and address of a place where he was sure they could stay. They arrived, exhausted, at a Black establishment only to be turned away on the grounds that they weren’t Black. Their solution finally lay in contacting the nearest university several hours drive away where they finally received accommodation. (1980, 124)

The travelers are perceived to have no place to go; the fact that they are accommodated at a distant university implies that only at a site of liberal education and at some remove can they be acknowledged in their cultural specificity. Nevertheless, it is precisely where “Asian” assumes uncertain content that the historical investments and work of social classification become visible. Similarly, as Berry notes, segregation’s etiquette involves negotiation; he finds that whites and American Indians came to a tacit agreement about the shared use of a prime swimming hole in North Carolina: “If some white children went out there to go swimming and found some Croatans swimming there, they would either go away or wait until the Croatans came out. They don’t object to swimming in the same place, but not at the same time” (1963, 79).

If segregation was a system that required interpretation and negotiation, the contradictory nature of those deliberations produced obvious ironies. The disjunction between culture’s enforcement of racial hierarchies and the Fourteenth Amendment’s provisions for due process are evident, for example, in Hernandez v. Texas (1954) in which a state court decided against a Mexican American plaintiff who hoped to reverse his conviction for murder on the basis that Mexican Americans had been excluded from the jury. The court ruled that Mexican Americans were white for the purposes of the
Fourteenth Amendment and therefore had not been excluded from a jury comprised of whites. As Ian Haney Lopez points out, the ruling took place within a courthouse with segregated restrooms—one unmarked and the other bearing two inscriptions: “Colored Men” and “Hombres Aquí” (“Men Here”) (2003, 77).\(^6\) Instances such as these recover from historical amnesia what the iconography of both segregation and the Civil Rights Movement have hidden from view, that Jim Crow created other “colored” people as well. My intent is not simply to establish that this derogatory appellation applied to groups other than African Americans. These anecdotes signal the irrational nature of white supremacy, those moments in which its requirements stand out in heightened, but ambiguous relief. To look at the “partly colored” is to look at the points at which Jim Crow became subject to interpretation, the instances before it enters into common sense as invisibly normative. While these incongruous moments and the narratives they spawned do not fundamentally change traditionally conceived understanding of southern race relations, I am nevertheless interested in the nuances of comparative race relations and the ways in which comparison challenges or confirms our sense of both the objects of racial hatred and the subjects of racial grievance. What lies outside the frame of historical memory reveals the subtle—and at times not so subtle—workings of southern culture. Moreover, what is forgotten, buried, or repressed for the smooth functioning of racial hierarchy can complicate the ways in which the Jim Crow era is itself rendered as history.

\textit{Theorizing Racial Interstitiality}

The “partly colored” pose not only historical and cultural questions—were they or weren’t they—but a theoretical one as well. The schematic imposed by the law invites an examination of what lies between, as well as a critical lens on the ways in which the legacy of segregation has both informed and constricted our vision. To explore the uses of a spatial metaphor to talk about relations of power and status, I turn to the iconography of segregation itself. What does it mean to represent between these legislated identities? For the Asian, Indian, or mestizo under segregation, racial meaning is created through the interplay between two signs, “colored” and white, and rests uneasily in ever-increasing or ever-decreasing proximity to either. How the individual comes to drink from either fountain is a matter of both identification and coercion, the affective associations of individual subjects as well as the state’s imposition of legal identities.
In this sense, the subject formation of the “partly colored” does not depend upon an epistemological certainty—I know that I am “really” Chinese, for example—but upon submitting to a disciplining social field governed by historically naturalized norms. Theories of multiracialism and passing have likewise exposed the fiction of naturalized racial identity; however, I am not interested in simply unveiling that ficticity. All ethnic identifications (“Chinese” or “Choctaw”), national affiliations (“Mexican” or “American”), or racial identities (“Indian” or “Asian”) are no less socially derived than those imposed by Jim Crow culture. Nevertheless, the drinking fountain binary makes obvious what Judith Butler has theorized regarding gender, that all subjects are essentially failed approximations of an idealized norm. Introducing a spatial metaphor into that process, the historical schematic foregrounds not only the process of identification that goes into the formation of the subject, but its inverse—disavowal. The oscillation between two unstable categories reveals not only the individual processes of racial and class subject formation, but community self-conception and political visibility as well. Within this movement between black abjection and white normativity I want to locate a particularly American dynamic enabled by the southern context: that of racial interstitiality.

African American letters have continually asserted that black repudiation lies at the foundation of national community. Jamaica Kincaid writes, “Everyone in every place needs a boundary; in America the boundary is the phrase ‘I am not black’” (1997, 73). In other words, the costs of immigrant self-definition and assimilation are disproportionately borne by African Americans. The emergent status of immigrant groups is negotiated not merely through
the dominant, but through the apprehension—and rejection—of those who lack social power. A black resident of Miami claims about newly triangulated race relations in the 1960s, “Many Cubans are so eager to Americanize that they take on the worst habits of the white Americans”—the “worst” habits being a mimicry of whites’ treatment of “Negroes.” Charting this genealogy highlights a comparative script, but with essentially two players: ethnic acculturation and national incorporation are predicated upon a group’s inculcation to racial norms. “A hostile posture toward resident blacks must be struck at the Americanizing door before it will open,” Toni Morrison argues. “The public is asked to accept American blacks as the common denominator in each conflict between an immigrant and a job or between a wannabe and status” (1994, 98). This is the schema posited by Critical White Studies: identity negatively derived out of self-differentiation from blackness, an identification with “whiteness” that erases ethnic particularism as a condition of national belonging. Critical White Studies has highlighted the very processes that I look at here, those of identification and disavowal. As numerous scholars have suggested, European immigrant acculturation does not merely take place through the apprehension that one’s ethnic difference must be erased, but through the apprehension of a more reviled Other who must be repudiated as a condition of entry. The immigrant will to incorporation, they suggest, manifests itself as a learned racism against the African American, the performance of which is not primarily addressed to its abjected object, but to power. In Colored White: Transcending the Racial Past (2002), a study that follows upon his influential work, The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class (1991), David Roe-diger includes a chapter entitled, “Inbetween Peoples: Race, Nationality, and the ‘New-immigrant’ Working Class” that uncovers the “not quite white” status of eastern and southern European immigrants in the beginning of the 20th century. He asks, “What . . . did it mean to live ‘inbetween’?”—in this case, between the African American and the Anglo Protestant (2002, 139). The answer, as numerous scholars have revealed, is that there are degrees of whiteness or, as historian Matthew Frye Jacobson notes about Leo Frank, a Jewish man lynched in Atlanta in 1915, those who represent as “inconclusively white” (1998, 65). It is in the spirit of this questioning that I likewise explore the black-white binary with an eye to uncovering the comparative processes of racial formation and the ways in which the boundary, “I am not black” was both literally and figuratively enacted. But I would also like to put those processes into greater relief by taking that body of work in another direction.
Interstellar Narratives

If the Irish, Italians, or Jews, for example, represent the “success” of white identification as it translates into state and cultural recognition, 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. In other words, this work is interested in those who bear an asymptotic relationship to the normative, abstract subjectivity coded—and what Jim Crow made manifest—as whiteness, and whose “colored” status was likewise, to echo Jacobson, inconclusive. Moreover, in what ways does the racial continuum enforced by segregation’s dichotomy intersect with or parallel the gender and sexual continuums that also define communal belonging and degrees of, to invoke the historically laden term, integration?

Jim Crow’s racial continuum underscored the interplay between likeness and difference inherent to subject formation and set the terms by which communities became visible to the state. James Loewen’s excellent study, The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White (1972), represents the definitive ethnography of what I am calling racial interstitiality in the South. The Chinese in Mississippi, he shows, did not accept their designation as “colored,” a designation formally established in the 1927 Supreme Court ruling, Gong Lum v. Rice. Loewen’s study reveals what transpired between the years 1941 and 1966 as the community engineered a “transition from near-black to near-white” (1988, 135). His study of caste shift develops a significant lens for comparative racialization: racial meaning becomes resolved for these Asian Americans through degrees of distance or proximity along a black-white axis. To focus on the interstitial is to focus on the space between normative structures of power—but also, I would emphasize in excess of Loewen’s work and its unacknowledged inauguration of Critical White Studies, its incompletion and irresolution. That is, what anomaly reveals is not merely a more nuanced account of racialization, but the counter-narratives that interrupt the work of the dominant, the partial stories that characterize the unevenly oppressed.

Interstitial populations reflect the cultural ambiguity of what anthropologist Victor Turner has theorized as “liminal personae,” initiates who are temporarily shorn of social status prior to undergoing ritual transformation. His work suggests both a spatial and temporal understanding of status transition, most usually, social elevation. Following the work of Arnold van Gennep on rites of passage, Turner conceives of the period of liminality as one in which the ritual subject “passes through a culture realm that has few or none of the...
attributes of the past or coming state” in symbolic preparation for assuming a new social position (1967, 94). During this phase, these “transitional-beings” temporarily “fall in the intercises of social structure”:

The attributes of liminality or of the liminal personae (“threshold people”) are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate status and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and [ceremony]. (1969, 95)

“Liminal personae” may be seen not merely as initiates en route to heightening their social status, but as sites of interpretive necessity: they must be read differently as a result of their symbolic spatial placement. In drawing an analogy to interstitial communities or individuals under segregation, I am not suggesting a ritual shearing of status—rank, kinship position, sex, or property. Rather, the “liminal personae” of this book are obliged to struggle with the destabilization of established social categories—caste being primary but not singular—until some moment (if ever) of presumed stasis. These transitional moments may also refuse resolution; in other words, they precipitate moments in which indeterminate status is forced into conflict. For Turner, the “phenomena and processes of mid-transition” is both a “moment in and out of time” and one “in and out of secular social structure” (1969, 96). One cannot actually “elude or slip through” the classifications that inform one’s position in culture; nevertheless, positing an outside to them, however illusory, forces into visibility the processes and values that underlie both reinsertion and rejection, or more subtly, contingent incorporation and partial rejection.

One can say along with Turner that the promise of looking interstitially lies in the exposure of terms of inclusion or, in this case, integration. What intrigues me, then, about the cultural question to be posed about Jim Crow’s anomalies is the larger vision that such a question implies. To what extent does racial, class, gender, or sexual intermediacy reproduce hierarchies of status? Or conversely, to what extent does the existence of intermediacy need to be repressed for the smooth functioning of those hierarchies?

The first part of this book explores instances of disavowal—repudiating likeness to African Americans—as key to the status elevation of ambiguous communities over time, but also within the individual’s narration of the self. Whether overt or lingering on the borders of discourse, this disavowal never-
theless produces an interruption, what cannot be reconciled to segregationist logic or the “successful” establishment of a third space within it. In contrast, the second part of the bookforegroundsliterature, autobiography, and film produced in a post-segregationist moment, texts which either deliberately engage an earlier period in southern culture or mark segregation’s continuing legacy. From the perspective of the outsider and with an emphasis on sexuality and gender, the texts in chapters 5 and 6 shift the political valence of interstitiality by exploring alternative ways of thinking through the South’s—and the nation’s—centering of a black-white frame. Beyond feminist critic Elizabeth Abel’s recognition that, as a denigrated term, “colored” “occupies the place of the feminine” (1999, 453), I establish that the forced or veiled assertion of identity around the color line intersects with questions of gender and sexuality in ways that suggest parallel continuums. Whether engaging anti-miscegenation law, women’s “assimilation,” southern “perversity,” analogies to gay migration, or gender ambiguity, the archive surrounding the “partly colored” in the South is one that invites intersectional analysis of, I would claim, a palimpsest of caste systems.

In spite of institutional memory, Jim Crow did encode other subjects of segregationist prohibition and in doing so, created other “colored” subjects. Chapter 1 thus examines 19th-century and 20th-century representations of Asians, American Indians, and mestizos in southern culture. Situating the “partly colored” as interpretive occasions, the chapter witnesses segregation-era attempts to force subjects into recognizable roles, focusing on the ways in which “Asianness” in particular became articulated in terms of its proximity to the “Negro.” Moreover, chapter 1 looks at one arena in which the administration of segregation simultaneously acknowledged and erased gradations of color: anti-miscegenation law. In recalling the ways in which state laws prohibiting marriage between “Negroes” and whites implicated and created other “colored” subjects, the chapter argues that such erasures have specific consequences for conceiving African Americans as the proper subjects of grievance in the post–Brown v. Board of Education moment. At stake is not so much a new conception of white supremacy, but an understanding of the ways in which American racism becomes narrated.

Chapters 2 and 3 focus on two southern communities that have been the subject of intense cultural, governmental, and academic speculation: the Lumbee Indians of North Carolina and the Chinese in the Mississippi Delta. As case studies of the forced assertion of identity, both these ethnic enclaves have generated voluminous records: they are widely recognized to be “successes” in that, even after being subject to forcible reincorporation into south-
ern culture and its racial norms, they were seemingly able to achieve collective caste elevation during the Jim Crow era. In both chapters, my question is not “Are they or aren’t they” but, “How is the space of intermediacy created and how is it maintained?” Taking the oscillation between white normativity and black abjection as an ordering lens, both chapters explore the representation of interstitial communities and the ways in which their ambiguity found uneasy resolution.

Chapter 2 explores one arena in which segregation forced the question of color and status: when faced with the pressures of white or black association, the Lumbee of North Carolina became, ironically, Indian. As late as 1980, anthropologist Robert Thomas noted about the community that some whites “think Lumbees are really a mixture between black and white. They use the word Indian, but they use it to mean a middle ground status position” (1980, 55). This chapter traces the ways in which that position was fought for and won. Following the rise of Jim Crow, school segregation compelled the assertion of their Indian identity in ways that prefigured ongoing arguments for tribal federal recognition. Crucial to this process was the discourse of blood: differentiating from blacks had to be visually inscribed while claims to whiteness—the oral lore of being descended from Raleigh’s Lost Colony—ironically contributed to Lumbee claims of Indian specificity. The chapter engages legislative documents, community-generated petitions, popular cultural histories, and visual culture in order to consider the ways in which “Indian” emerged out of differentiation and racial latency surrounding the discourses of class and racial uplift. The chapter suggests that segregationist commitments to the theory of hypo-descent eventually clashed with blood quantum-level requirements and fears of progressive whitening in contemporary determinations of Indianness and sovereignty at the end of the 20th century.

Chapter 3 focuses on narratives articulating Chinese caste elevation in the Mississippi Delta within academic studies, popular culture, film, and memoir. James Loewen’s aforementioned study, *The Mississippi Chinese*, argues that when faced with a binary racial system that had no accommodation for a third race, the Chinese engineered a shift in status from “colored” to white in the course of one generation. My interest here lies not in how the shift occurred, but in what becomes repressed in positing racial uplift in response to intermediate status. In contrast to European immigrant groups, the Asian’s supposed caste rise can only be characterized as a registered incompletion, as near-whiteness. I suggest that this incompletion is likewise reflected in the discourses that have sought to represent such status, the scholarship sur-
rounding and generated by Loewen’s thesis, including the 1982 documentary film, *Mississippi Triangle*. Chapter 3 thus focuses on what discursive contradictions were generated in the incomplete attempts to convince of African American disassociation, specifically, the repression of Chinese-black intimacy. While caste elevation is dependent upon repressing this history, figures of Chinese-black amalgamation are never wholly buried or repressed, interrupting assertions of this southern Chinese community’s approximate whiteness. The space of the interstitial is thus not necessarily an alternative “third space,” but the crucible of both race and class differentiation and normalization.

While chapters 2 and 3 engage academic, governmental, and popular cultural discourses surrounding interstitial communities, chapter 4 turns to the question of the individual to investigate how intermediacy might be reconciled—or fail to be reconciled—by the subject. Highlighting the ways in which the figure of the Asian “stranger” becomes implicated in southern racial hierarchy, I examine two Asian American southern memoirs—Choong Soon Kim’s 1977 work, *An Asian Anthropologist in the South: Field Experiences with Blacks, Indians, and Whites*, a personal narrative about the ways in which his role as “foreigner” impacts his data collection, and Ved Mehta’s *Sound-Shadows of the New World*, his 1985 autobiography depicting his tenure as a student at the Arkansas School for the Blind in the 1950s. Both contribute to our understanding of how Asian self-awareness becomes mediated between “not black” and “not white”: in Kim’s text, the individual’s response to his uneven cultural assignment exerts curious pressure upon the text’s overt commentary on race relations. In Mehta’s southern engagement, race becomes legible through an analogy to attempted integration, that of the blind among the sighted. For this transplanted South Asian writer, caste takes on a double meaning, one that remains largely unseen within the work. The individual’s anxiety about social demotion surfaces within narrative traces.

Yet the space of the interstitial where culture is consciously interpreted—whether minutely, forcibly, or over an extended period of time—can be a site where the terms of culture not only become visible but are subject to potential reenvisioning. Homi Bhabha signals this reorientation in theorizing the radical potential of culturally hybrid art and critique. The “in-between” spaces, he writes,

provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.
It is in the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated. How are subjects formed “in-between,” or in excess of, the sum of the “parts” of difference? (1994, 1–2)

The poles that define the space of the interstitial are multiple; in Bhabha’s account, it is not merely the division between black and white that defines culture, but that between the past and future, the home and the world, signifier and signified, theory and activism, history and literature. The collapse of such divisions enables a potential re-ordering: “Private and public, past and present, the psyche and the social develop an interstitial intimacy. It is an intimacy that questions binary divisions through which such spheres of social experience are often spatially opposed” (13).

Thus, at the same time that I read the signs of cultural reinvestment in those oppositions, I want to keep open the possibility of the interstitial’s deconstructive reorientation; chapters 5 and 6 engage this promise, marking an alternative political valence. What is queer to Jim Crow, what is unevenly accommodated within the racial schematic it imposed, may not only reveal the investments that uphold white supremacy and its underlying cultural norms, but also a means of rethinking those investments as post–*Brown v. Board of Education* writers and filmmakers gesture beyond the race-based forms of communalism to envision other forms of affiliation. The Asian in the South, for example, represents not merely a space of putatively disinvested race liberalism born of intermediacy, but a reorienting lens; the postcolonial Asian brings with her a “worlding” perspective that exposes the South as what is repressed in the U.S. imaginary, Third World within. Moreover, the figure of the foreigner, the outsider, may be a site of productive estrangement. Chapters 5 and 6 suggest that Asian American literature and film contribute to New Southern Studies not merely as proof of a new diversity. Rather, they engage the very dynamics at the heart of the southern canon, relations between blacks and whites, in perhaps surprising ways. The presumed objectivity or innocence of the foreigner serves as the platform not only for post–1954 race liberalism, but for rethinking embedded forms of alliance or communal belonging. “When we consider cultural institutions,” Turner writes, “we have to look in the interstices, niches, intervals, and on the peripheries of the social structure” in order to find forms of *communitas* or comradeship that realign those traditionally conceived (1974, 268). My turn to the ongoing legacy of segregation in chapters 5 and 6 shifts away...
from understanding the processes of state and cultural legitimacy toward an understanding of how segregation continues to impact our ability to recognize each other beyond and across the racial schematic imposed by history.

In turning to Asian American southern literature in the context of feminist theorist Gayle Rubin’s continuum of erotic practices, chapter 5 situates the Asian outsider as a figure of productive alienation and imperfect correspondence, one who questions the ways in which lines of affiliation and connection become drawn and policed. In both Susan Choi’s 1998 novel, *The Foreign Student*, and Abraham Verghese’s 1994 memoir, *My Own Country: A Doctor’s Story of a Town and Its People in the Age of AIDS*, embracing “foreignness” from the position of postcolonial exile can be read as a means of suspending loyalty to stratified social structures, both racial and sexual. In both texts, sexual transgression precipitates a renewed understanding of not only the ways in which color lines are drawn, but how points of human division and intimacy, of home and belonging, might be reconfigured. In looking at these two narratives that center on the latency of racism “outed” by proximity to sexual “perversity,” the chapter suggests that Asian American literature does not merely add diversity to a now integrated southern canon, but provides a conceptual frame for highlighting other lines that divide and connect.

Chapter 6 returns to the question, “What does it mean to represent between categories of state-enforced identity?” in order to draw an analogy between the “transracial” and “transgendered.” In thinking about how transgenderism contributes to a deeper understanding of segregation’s legacy, my interest lies beyond the focus on transgender civil rights that is nonetheless a compelling and continuing struggle waged within law and public policy. In advocating for the importance of analogy to the project of social justice, I highlight the interstitial as a means of making visible social structure while seeking another language to describe intermediacy without recourse to the historically denigrating term invoked by my title. Like feminist theorists of transgenderism, I am interested in the conceptual challenge that interstitial individuals and systems of representation might pose to gender binarism and the hierarchy it supports—not incoincidentally, a mirror to my interests in the legacy of southern race relations. The chapter focuses on the depiction of a relationship between a Vietnamese exchange student from Hanoi and a cross-dressing white Mississippian in Marlo Poras’s documentary film, *Mai’s America* (2002). As the film situates both its protagonists as occasions for interpretation and targets of forced conformity, it suggests an alternate lens for conceiving collectivities beyond those inscribed by identity—“trans”
status enables the formation of other concepts of community, of alliances that contest those sedimented by nationality, belief in biological inevitability, and southern history. My interest in twinning the terms “transgender” and “transracial” lies in understanding both interstitial subjects with rights and the abstract nature of intermediacy, the political valence of representing between dominant symbolics.

With the exception of chapter 2, I focus primarily on Asian Americans not only because of the surprising richness of what at first may appear to be an eclectic and undercontextualized archive, but because of the very ways in which the context of southern regionalism exaggerates Asian placement in the United States. As Lisa Lowe has noted, “Throughout the twentieth century, the figure of the Asian immigrant has served as a ‘screen,’ a phantasmatic site, on which the nation projects a series of condensed, complicated anxieties regarding external and internal threats to the mutable coherence of the national body” (1996, 18). Asian Americans are already situated as the national in-between; they do not merely triangulate relations between citizen/noncitizen or black/white, they invoke cultural anxiety as American but not quite; as middle class—almost; as minority but not one of “those” minorities; as like us but not really. This conundrum of place is likewise reflected in the history of the Lumbee Indians; in the absence of removal, their history marks them as somewhat anomalous to that of other American Indians. Portrayed as, to invoke sociologist Edna Bonacich’s term, “middleman minorities,” both the Indians of North Carolina and the Chinese in Mississippi occupy an uneasy place between the dominant and the minor. Thus, this work does not attempt to replicate ethnographic and community studies exploring the tri-part structure of race relations in the United States among them, studies such as Neil Foley’s The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture (1997) and Claire Jean Kim’s Bitter Fruit: the Politics of Black-Korean Conflict in New York City (2000). In contrast, drawing upon literary methodology, I seek in this subject matter not necessarily the definitive answer to the question, “are they or aren’t they,” but an extension of Toni Morrison’s recognition that the “Africanist presence” infuses our American imaginary (1992). I want to examine that “thunderous, theatrical presence of black surrogacy” not in regard to the history of the victors, in this case, the canon of American literature, but elsewhere. I want to see where such a presence shadows the admittedly quirky archive of the minor. In the context of southern segregation, everywhere within the narratives produced by and about Asian Americans and others of uncertain belonging one sees the signs of the Africanist presence that “hovers in implication, in sign, in line
Thinking Interstitially

of demarcation” (1992, 45). Morrison’s emphasis on the metaphoric uses of difference offers a potent critical methodology; likewise, I highlight what is hidden, repressed, and partial—and what lies outside the frame of historical imagining.

It is thus that Jane Gallop’s commentary on Jacques Lacan resonates with my reading practices here: “The psychoanalyst learns to listen not so much to her patient’s main point as to odd marginal moments, slips of the tongue, unintended disclosures. Freud formulated this psychoanalytic method, but Lacan has generalized it into a way of receiving all discourse, not just the analysand’s” (1985, 22). Reading the unintended disclosures within discourse ironically parallels my study, the anomaly of the “partly colored.” That is, the subject matter occasions a parallel critical methodology, reading anomalously for the signs of both racial and racist latency. Moreover, as a literary scholar invested in fiction as well as legal, visual, anthropological, governmental, popular cultural, sociological, historical, and theoretical discourses, I focus not on the events that have traditionally established race’s relevance to the panorama of the nation—genocide, lynching, unionization, armed resistance, collective protest. Rather, I highlight the nuances of racialization, what falls in between the gaps of history, in order to scrutinize the overlooked, what Foucault calls the outer limits of power, “the point where it becomes capillary” (2003, 27). The Asian’s uneasy relationship to power in the South is reflected in the uneasiness of the narratives that seek to convey it. For the “partly colored,” such ambivalence surfaces not only as an anxiety about status, but as an anxiety within discourse itself.

The Southern Anomaly, the Anomaly to the South

For Asian Americans in the South, the period of legally enforced segregation reveals the literal stakes behind historian Gary Okihiro’s question, “Is yellow black or white?” (1994, 34). Mary Tsukamoto’s experience on a segregated bus might offer empirical evidence as to one answer, but for the nagging question of how she, a Japanese American, came to be riding a bus in the Deep South in the first place. Posing that question and looking at the space of intermediacy might disrupt easy associations between mobility and racial privilege, front and back, that the legal symmetry of segregation has asked us to draw. My goal, then, is not to seek a more accurate or pluralist understanding of southern race relations by restoring lost histories to memory or expanding an archive to supplement demographers’ data. The claim that one in ten inhabitants of Atlanta is now either Latino or Asian is deliberately
unsetting, designed to signal that a different, “multicultural” South is emerging. This is the intention behind writer Richard Rodriguez’s musing, “You go to these small little towns in South Carolina and there’s all these Mexicans, and they’re painting their houses Mexican orange and Mexican red. It’s like this advancing army” (cited in Torres 2003, 182). This “New South’s” racial dimension is suspiciously like that of the nation’s: we are colorful, now what?

But that narrative is limiting if it begins and ends with a plea for inclusion or pluralist additions to a scholarly canon. Rather than document this shift from Old South to New in terms of demography, I seek to complicate what we think we know about discrimination during an era that rendered it in black and white terms. My intent is not to restore diversity to a southern (or national) archive (to establish, for example, Susan Choi or Abraham Verghese as southern authors), but to witness what pressures a repressed history poses to traditionally conceived narratives about power and disempowerment. In exploring how racially interstitial communities became visible to the state and on what terms, this project involves establishing not only a more complex understanding of white supremacy and the communal values that undergird it, but a critical relation to how Jim Crow is remembered. The era of segregation is often relegated to the past in ways that belie its conceptual legacy. Yet the era that formalized a racial schematic that continues to resonate today is not itself an anomaly to history; thus, throughout this work, each chapter engages both the period of legal segregation and its aftermath in order to establish a continuity between historical periodizations, pre– and post–Brown v. Board of Education.

Nor is the South—contrary to its representation as the rural backwater against which a progressive, modern, and liberal North sought to define itself—a regional anomaly. 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 an aberration to the nation, but a site where the implications of racial classification played out in heightened relief (Gray 2000). In eccentricity one can find the nation writ large. In this sense, the South itself might be situated not as the “abjected regional Other” enabling American cohesion, but, in effect, as a microcosm of the national even as “the South” itself resists homogeneity (Baker and Nelson 2001, 236). Looking at the “partly colored races” 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. This project contributes to Baker and Nelson’s 2001 call for a new Southern studies and echoed
in Smith’s and Cohn’s *Look Away!: The U.S. South in New World Studies*—one that resurrects a “civily disappeared history, the history of indigenous, black, Latino, and Asian laborers and their families” (Baker and Nelson 2001, 236). In focusing on race relations in the South, one of the “old categories” of traditional Southern literary studies (Kreyling 2001, 385), I situate “aberrant” groups as sites revealing the epistemological instability—or retrenchment—of Jim Crow itself, with particular relevance for the ways in which race in the United States continues to be read along a black-white continuum. In this, the South renders the nation’s normative racial organization in exaggeration and hyper-relief. How does the South contribute to Asian American comparative ethnic studies not in spite of, but because of, its investment in the black-white paradigm?

A Chinese American grocery store owner once articulated his place in the South thusly:

> We stick together, work, and don’t bother nobody. We don’t mix with nobody, we keep our mouth shut, no talk, just work. . . . We don’t want to become *Bok Guey* [whites] and we sure don’t want to become “colored” like the *Hok Guey* [blacks], no sir, those people were treated worse than dogs. We don’t want that to happen to us anyhow, anywhere, anyway. We just want to be ourselves, *Hon Yen* [Chinese]. (cited in Quan 1982, 43–44)

The grocer’s wistful hope projects a desire for a hypothetical third space. But is it possible “to be oneself” in a context in which there is really no segregation from segregation? Looking at the ways in which the color line was drawn here does not so much affirm the existence or denial of such a space as it foregrounds a genealogy of repressed dissonance. The interstitial is the site of multiple forms of cultural anxiety, as well as a place where status hierarchies are publicly interpreted and subject to evaluation and discipline. Bhabha notes that “it is the ‘inter’—the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture” (1994, 38). My hope is that *Partly Colored* will uncover where and how that burden falls within the narration of American race relations.
“Drinking Fountains in a Tobacco Warehouse” by Esther Bubley, 1946. Standard Oil (NJ), 1946 courtesy of Special Collections, Ekstrom Library, University of Louisville.