

## Transracial/Transgender: Analogies of Difference in *Mai's America*

I think there is a continuum of Male . . . to . . . Female; like shades of gray from black to white.

—D. Cameron (1999, 91)

As members of society, most of us see only what we expect to see, and what we expect to see is what we are conditioned to see when we have learned the definitions and classifications of our culture.

—Victor Turner (1967, 95)

**W**hile “colored” and “white” signs separating public facilities in the Jim Crow South have become infamously iconic reminders of past social injustice, signs enforcing another social division remain. In the post–civil rights era, the battle over segregation continues to be waged in what is a historically laden site: the public restroom. As legal historian Mary Anne Case notes, “Very few spaces in our society remain divided by sex. . . . There’s marriage and there’s toilets, and very little else” (quoted in Brown 2005, A14). The division created by “Ladies” and “Gentlemen” signs over restroom doors does not immediately conjure up an analogy to race, so ingrained is the belief in the natural division between men and women. Yet among transgendered- and disabled-rights activists, the bathroom—in Case’s words, that “prosaic fixture of past battles against racial segregation” (quoted in Brown 2005, A14)—is the site of continued contestation involving public accommodation and individual rights.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I am invoking “transgenderism” as a broad term engaging gender multiplicity. Susan Stryker uses transgender “as an umbrella term for a wide variety of bodily effects that disrupt or denaturalize heteronormatively constructed linkages between an individual’s anatomy at

Transgender activist Leslie Feinberg hearkens back to the civil rights movement in calling for the dissolution of gender as a legal category: “I am told I must check off M or F because it is a legal necessity. But when I was a child, I was required to check off race on all legal records. It took mighty militant battles against institutionalized racist discrimination to remove that mandatory question from documents. . . . Why is the categorization of sex a legal question at all?” (1998, 62). Making a similar connection between racial and transgender advocacy, law professor Patricia Williams recounts an anecdote in which a transgender student who is denied access to both the men’s and women’s restrooms at a California law school comes to her hoping for a sympathetic ear. He confides to Williams his intention to seek a sex-change operation in the belief that Williams “might be more understanding” (1991, 122) because she is black.<sup>2</sup> Williams makes the connection that “S.’s experience was sort of a Jim Crow mentality applied to gender” (124). In effect, the student’s access to public facilities was compromised by restrictive social organization: “After the sex-change operation, S. began to use the ladies’ room. There was an enormous outcry from women students of all political persuasions, who ‘felt raped,’ in addition to the more academic assertions of some who ‘feared rape.’ In a complicated storm of homophobia, the men of the student body let it be known that they too ‘feared rape’ and vowed to chase her out of any and all men’s rooms” (122–23). The analogy between race and gender segregation in public facilities strikes Williams not only in a literal sense but also in terms of an abstract connection: both blackness and transsexualism as spaces inhabited by social “no-bodies” (124). Williams’s initial defensiveness, her feeling “put off by the implication that my distinctive somebody-ness was being ignored” (124), is offset by the recognition that she and the student share a nonidentical

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birth, a nonconsensually assigned gender category, psychical identifications with sexed body images and/or gendered subject positions, and the performance of specifically gendered social, sexual, or kinship functions” (1998, 149).

<sup>2</sup> Williams shifts from “he” to “she,” presumably in keeping with the chronology of “S.’s” sex-change operation. In regard to the use of gendered pronouns in reference to transgendered individuals, both Feinberg and Judith Halberstam take the obvious tack: ask what pronoun people prefer (Feinberg 1998; Halberstam 2005). In lieu of this, when dealing with texts I follow the lead of the author or the pronoun corresponding to the individual’s chosen name. In the context of the transvestite character in *Mai’s America*, e.g., I refer to Christy as “she,” Chris as “he.” I recognize that this is not consistent usage; I want to retain a sense of fluidity that is essential to transgenderism in defiance of standardization.

yet similar positionality, one characterized by having “no place else to go” (124).<sup>3</sup>

Feinberg’s and Williams’s parallels between race and transgenderism provoke a logical question: What are the limits or rewards of drawing analogies between race and gender in the context of past and present forms of segregation, of drawing analogies of difference? How might the gender dissonance attributed to transgendered figures contribute to developing a lens for reading the histories of other racial groups under segregation, Asian Americans in particular? What can be gained by drawing an analogy between individuals who are conceptually interstitial to poles that once defined or continue to define legal identity, to Asian Americans and the transgendered?

Feminists have often invoked racial analogies to highlight gender and sexual oppression, from Yoko Ono’s “woman is the nigger of the world” to Monique Wittig’s assertion that the lesbian is an escapee from her class “in the same way as the American runaway slaves were” (1992, 108).<sup>4</sup> Most recently, such analogies have been called into service to highlight the injustice of attempts to prohibit same-sex marriage. Drawing a parallel to antimiscegenation laws, Massachusetts Chief Justice Margaret H. Marshall argued in 2003 that neither interracial unions nor same-sex marriage diminish “the validity or dignity of opposite-sex marriage.”<sup>5</sup> Such assertions recognize the rhetorically persuasive potential of comparison in advocacy at the same time that they link oppressions by acknowledging the contribution of both the civil rights and the women’s movements to the discourse of rights. Yet analogies between sexism and racism also run the risk of being one-sided (more often invoked by white women than by

<sup>3</sup> Williams’s use of the phrase, “no place else to go” can no doubt be taken as a bad pun, disrespectful of the subjects it invokes. Similarly, in what follows, Maia Boswell’s reading of blackness as representing an outside to or an “outhouse” of language may likewise be misread as bathroom humor. On the contrary, I amplify those double meanings here in order to highlight the ways in which the so-called private realm of bodily needs has been a social privilege intrinsically related to the construction of one’s humanity. This is certainly reflected by John Howard Griffin’s *Black like Me* (1961) in which passing as black and thus being denied places to eat, sleep, and, especially, defecate instill in him a constant reminder of his own body. To him, being black means being reduced to one’s physicality.

<sup>4</sup> Ono coined the phrase in an interview in 1969. It became the title of a song cowritten with John Lennon and released in 1972 (Lennon and Ono 1972).

<sup>5</sup> *Goodridge v. Department of Public Health*, 440 Mass. 309 (2003).

men and women of color) as well as disrespectful of historical differences.<sup>6</sup> As the 2008 Democratic primary contest between Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama revealed, race and gender are more readily portrayed as points of competition, as cards to be played, rather than a basis for shared vision. Hence, Williams reacts warily to her transsexual student's expectation that in his black female professor he would find a kindred soul. But Williams's anecdote suggests a more abstract way of looking at the analogy between race and gender, beyond the discourses of rights that have come to frame race in the public sphere.

In taking literal and figurative conceptions of segregation as my context, I want to explore what it means to have “no place else to go” (Williams 1991, 124) as a result of the dictates of social organization and its legacies. In 1930, sociologist Max Handman noted 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” (1930, 609–10). As I have noted elsewhere, Handman's term “partly colored” applied to Asian Americans under formal segregation as well; this historical context asks that we engage a spatially inflected way of looking at the construction of difference by focusing not on the primary categories of division—male or female, “colored” or “white”—but what lies between them (Bow 2007). What does it mean to represent between legal and cultural identities sanctioned by American culture, between the poles of identification and legal subjectivity that enforce social hierarchy?

The term “transracial” has been invoked in other contexts, most notably in reference to transracial adoption, wherein predominately Caucasian parents adopt a child of color. “Transracial” in this sense is intended to convey reaching across cultures, spanning a divide. Theater critic Josephine Lee (1997) has also used the term in regard to transracial stage performance in which multiple characters of different races are played by the same actor; less frequently, it is used to invoke interracial individuals of black and white parentage.<sup>7</sup> Yet invoking the term in regard to Asian Americans highlights not only, in the words of Edna Bonacich, their “middleman minority” (1973) status between black and white but also American investment in those categories and in a racial continuum. In particular, I

<sup>6</sup> Paisley Currah notes that in contrast to the frequent invocation of African American oppression in gay rights rhetoric, this comparison in transgender rights advocacy is rare. Nevertheless, Currah finds that the litigation strategies used by transgendered rights advocates have been informed by those of the civil rights movement (2006).

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Awkward 1995, 180; Gubar 1997, 248; Newlyn 2002.

would suggest that the trans location of Asian Americans in the South forces into visibility the work necessary to claim a status recognized by the state—and the work undertaken by the state to affirm those categories when confronted with anomaly. Asian transracialism could thus be said to queer southern racial codes predicated on division between black and white.

This interruption of entrenched southern race relations forms the center of Marlo Poras's 2002 documentary film *Mai's America*. The documentary promises an "outsider's glimpse inside America" from the point of view of Mai Nguyen, an exchange student from Hanoi, visiting the United States in the 1990s.<sup>8</sup> Following Mai's placement with white and black host families in Meridian, Mississippi, the film provides a portrait of the South as a microcosm of American culture by narrating the experiences of a stranger in a strange land: a Vietnamese girl is plunked down in unknown territory. The viewer follows her quest for a first-world education as she travels to exotic and uncharted landscapes, such as the high school graduation, the prom, the black Baptist church, the redneck family reunion. Her fluid movement among multiple subcultures—black, white, gay, working class, Vietnamese expatriate, and collegiate—delivers a diverse portrait of the United States but one punctuated by racial, class, and sexual division. The documentary narrates a specific story: America's defeat of an intrepid spirit and the illusion of the American dream.

*Mai's America* is thus intended to be a national meditation but one that is, I would suggest, dependent on Mai's ambiguous place within the subcultures established by semirural poverty and the residues of Jim Crow. Even as Mai fails to find a sense of community within the racial communities split by the legacy of segregation, she develops a sympathetic attachment to someone who likewise inhabits no place in rural Mississippi: a white male drag queen. The Vietnamese foreign student finds community in the United States through her friendship with Chris, also known as Christy, a southern, Pentecostal cross-dresser. In the gender-ambiguous figure of Christy, *Mai's America* finds an analogue to its protagonist, one who becomes an interstitial figure in more than one sense. Through this trans twinning, the film models the ways in which gender dissonance challenges our investment not merely in the division between black and white but in category distinction writ large.

In seeking a parallel between two arenas of trans or interstitial status, I want to stress not the progressive or temporal movement of liminality

<sup>8</sup> Cited on the PBS Web site publicizing the film, <http://www.pbs.org/itvs/globalvoices/maisamerica.html>.

per se but a spatial notion of racial or gender formation that highlights incompleteness. That is, both represent the never-finalized oscillation between, as my first epigraph suggests, poles of a socially enforced continuum. As transgender theory reveals, the interstitial subject is a site of both cultural anxiety and potential disruption, a site where status hierarchies are made visible and potentially reconciled to cultural norms. Anthropologist Turner's commentary on social expectation in my second epigraph resonates with both race and gender: to what extent do the prevailing "definitions and classifications of our culture" (1967, 95) constrict our vision and do violence to those who inhabit the space between them? In highlighting two distinct but intersecting continuums, race and gender, I draw an analogy between forms of cultural difference in order to return to an earlier moment in feminist thinking, retaining the interventionist possibility of comparison while exploring its theoretical complexity.

My interest in twinning the terms "transgender" and "transracial," two historically distinct discourses, lies in understanding the abstract nature of interstitiality, the political valance of those who represent between the dominant racial and gender symbolics characterized (today) by the signs over segregated bathroom doors or (then) by segregated drinking fountains. Thus, I begin by invoking Jacques Lacan's iconic image of the gender-divided restroom doors marked "Ladies" and "Gentlemen" (1977, 151) as a gateway for thinking about not only the gender dichotomy challenged by transgender theorists but also the structuralist underpinnings of racial discourse in the United States. That is, how does the iconic division between Ladies and Gentleman resonate with the division between black and white inherited as part of segregation's legacy and continuing to frame racial thought in the United States? Subsequently exploring the ways in which gender dissonance provides a lens for reading race, I turn to *Mai's America*, which suggests that shifting one's perspective to the transspace between normative social categories allows us to envision other forms of social organization that exceed those passed down by history. Crucial to the film's portrayal of its Asian protagonist's transracial status among southern subcultures is her gender ambiguity: she is a girl who transforms herself into a boy for a man who is dressed like a woman. For a lone and sojourning Asian foreigner in a landscape saturated with the history of black-white relations, integration takes on another cast. The film suggests that trans status enables the formation of alternative concepts of community, of alliances that contest those sedimented by nationality, belief in biological inevitability, and the ongoing legacy of segregation.

Considering Asian Americans within and against the South's investment

in a black-white distinction does not simply perform the work of idealistic pluralism by demonstrating an alternative cosmopolitanism that is expected to wipe clean the slate of a hoary past, whether that past is violently repudiated or mired in nostalgia. Nor do transgendered individuals merely ask us to expand categories of gender identity. Rather, such perspectives question loyalty to entrenched histories and suggest alternative ways of reading difference as consisting not only of mutually constitutive and intersecting categories but also of continuums linked through conceptual parallelism. As in the analogy between race passing and closeted sexuality, I am interested in questions of epistemology, but, in contrast, I want to look at overt moments of category ambiguity that force interpretation and resolution.<sup>9</sup> While feminists have often called on racial analogies to support women's liberation, I want to reverse that gesture in order to consider how gender theory might enhance our understanding of race relations. In drawing from transgender theory a parallel concept of trans-racialism, enabled by shifting the racial gaze to that of Asian Americans, I want to explore both the fruitfulness and the limits of analogy and analogy's implications for feminism beyond intersectional analysis.

#### **Race and gender interstitiality**

In highlighting how a focus on interstitiality might challenge normative concepts of difference and the hierarchies they support, I turn to an alternative iconography of segregation: gender-divided restroom doors (see fig. 1). The illustration is well known in literary theory; it accompanies Lacan's discussion of the illusory transparency between signifier and signified in "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious; or, Reason since Freud." His point is conveyed in an amusing anecdote centering on innocent misrecognition: "A train arrives at a station. A little boy and a little girl, brother and sister, are seated in a compartment face to face next to the window through which the buildings along the station platform can be seen passing as the train pulls to a stop. 'Look,' says the brother, 'we're at Ladies!'; 'Idiot!' replies his sister, 'Can't you see we're at Gentlemen?'" (1977, 152). In depicting this mistake, Lacan briefly references

<sup>9</sup> That is, shifting to questions of gender passing or ethnic closeting can evoke powerful comparisons. For example, Sandy Stone criticizes transsexuals who "pass" by assuming "monistic identities" located in either male or female. They have, she argues, "chosen invisibility as an imperfect solution to personal dissonance" (1991, 298). Nevertheless, the parallelism I seek puts stress not so much on concepts of impersonation, masquerade, or veiled authenticity but on the social practices that signal communal incorporation.

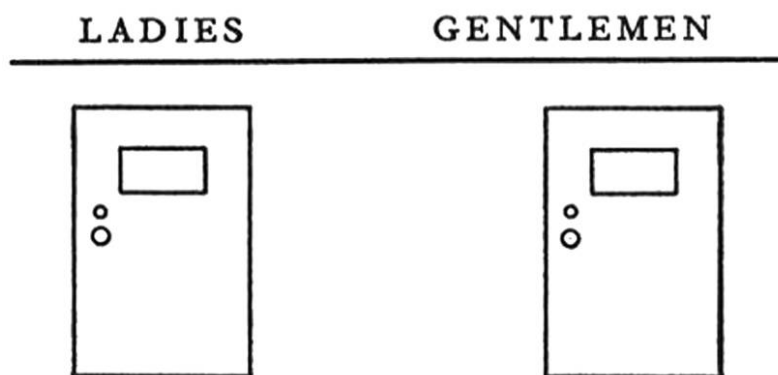


Figure 1 From Jacques Lacan's *Écrits* (1977), 151

the politics of gender division in a way that enforces the genders' dialectical dependency but nevertheless also ironically supports the notion of separate but equal. "Ladies and Gentlemen," he comments, "will be henceforth two countries towards which each of their souls will strive on divergent wings, and between which a truce will be the more impossible since they are actually the same country and neither can compromise on its own superiority without detracting from the glory of the other" (152). In *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, Jane Gallop (1982) references this image in order to establish the significance of Lacanian psychoanalysis for Anglo-American feminist thought. Lacan, she argues, asks us to "consider as illusory the entire structure which makes the realm of Gentlemen and Ladies appear as defined and absolute as they do in the one-to-one correlation" (12). In keeping with her analysis, I would argue that Lacan draws our attention back to the social not only in terms of arbitrary and mutually constitutive gender division but in terms of the division between races that continues to affect American social organization. Read within the context of American southern history at the time of Lacan's writing in 1966, race resonates within the reference to "two countries" that "are actually the same country."

I invoke Lacan's structuralist iconography here not to gesture to the importance of Lacanian readings of race but to highlight the other symbolic division that this iconography implies, one that likewise defines social status: the division between white and black. In "Bathroom Doors and Drinking Fountains: Jim Crow's Racial Symbolic," Elizabeth Abel (1999) foregrounds Lacan's indirect invocation of segregation suggesting French cultural awareness of racial segregation in the United States in 1966. Lacan's reference to "urinary segregation," Abel writes, "undermines,

rather than reinforces, the primacy of the sexual division. . . . The racial reference signals a return of the Lacanian repressed, not a putatively natural body behind the bathroom door, but the mutual constitution of diverse symbolic systems that disrupt as well as mimic one another” (439). One can say that this indirect invocation of race denaturalizes gender segregation by pointing to its social constructedness even as Lacan bypasses discussion of the arbitrariness of gender distinction in favor of emphasizing the cultural imposition of privacy ironically ascribed to “Western Man” (Lacan 1977, 151). I say “ironically” because his unspoken analogue is not “Western woman” but “primitive man.” This implied racial division predicated on a distinction between nature and culture and signaled by the presence of doors to veil the bodily needs of the “civilized” informs Maia Boswell’s (1999) Lacanian reading of race in regard to Toni Morrison’s novel *Sula*.

In “‘Ladies,’ ‘Gentlemen,’ and ‘Colored’: ‘The Agency of (Lacan’s Black) Letter’ in the Outhouse,” Boswell’s (1999) analogy between racial segregation and Lacan’s gendered signs focuses on the materiality of the printed letter, its blackness on the page, as an excess to signification. Race is the excess of the gender binary “‘Ladies’ and ‘Gentlemen’” (123), she argues, a relation made visible in a scene in which an African American woman, Helene, travels to the Jim Crow South by train. The character suffers the indignity of being ejected from the whites-only coach and having to urinate outside, in nature. In the novel, Helene questions a darker-skinned black woman as to the location of the restroom. The woman gestures out the window and replies, simply, “Yonder.” Morrison depicts the scene thusly: “While Helene looked about the tiny stationhouse for a door that said COLORED WOMEN, the other woman stalked off to a field of high grass on the far side of the track. . . . [Helene] looked around for the other woman and, seeing just the top of her head rag in the grass, slowly realized where ‘yonder’ was. All of them, the fat woman and her four children, three boys and a girl, Helene and her daughter, squatted there in the four o’clock Meridian sun” (1973, 24). As Morrison’s work makes clear, the nicety of privacy granted by the gender-divided restroom and intrinsic to the notion of womanhood itself is a whites-only privilege, highlighting the erasure of gender within race: “All of them, the fat woman and her four children, three boys and a girl . . . squatted there.” For African American women, the nonexistent racial sign (“yonder”) trumps gender distinction, an erasure that is potentially constitutive of the civilized. Boswell puts pressure on the word “yonder” in order to indicate that facilities for the colored exist somewhere beyond the realm of the social: “Designated to a space ‘yonder,’ among the grass, the leaves, and

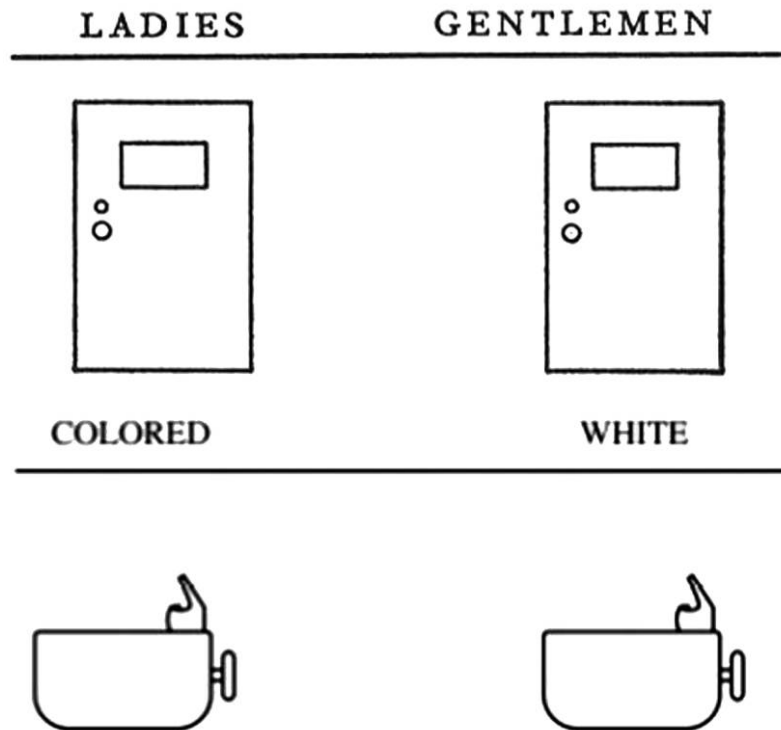
the animals, Helene and Nel are not defined as either ‘Ladies’ or ‘Gentlemen,’ ‘white’ or ‘colored,’ but as figures of elsewhere. They are placed outside ‘place,’ without privacy, perhaps in a space of the nonhuman” (1999, 123). Blackness becomes excess, what exists as waste within signification, a gesture outside (the “outhouse”), beyond culture’s defining terms and meanings.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the distinction between the doors veils the fact that the feminine is itself “no place” within the Symbolic; women represent a Lacanian “yonder.” This abstract resonance is belied by the iconography of “Ladies” and “Gentleman,” which implies “separate but equal” and might be more accurately rendered by alternative signs above the restroom doors: “Men” and “Not Men.”<sup>11</sup>

In the context of gender division, race functions as a “return of the Lacanian repressed,” as in Abel, or a means of conveying an “elsewhere,” as in Boswell, “a realm of nonsignification and nonsignificance” (Boswell 1999, 119). Yet a secondary level of repression, a secondary elsewhere, might be recalled by posing the question, which race? That is, in the context of Abel and Boswell’s excellent analyses, African Americans logically serve the symbolic function of abjection as historical targets of segregationist philosophy. But what meaning might be generated by shifting the perspective away from the primary division between black and white? In other words, what might be gained by considering the place of Asian Americans under segregation, by considering the place of the racially interstitial, the transracial?

In posing the question, I turn to Abel’s investigation into the dual symbolics of the bathroom door in order to parallel it to another iconic representation of social differentiation, not the segregated restroom but the segregated drinking fountain (see fig. 2). Taken side by side, the dual images highlight a structural parallelism and represent twin forms of segregation, one repudiated in 1954 with *Brown v. Board of Education* and the other ongoing. In thinking about how the question of the segregated drinking fountains might be different from the question of segregated

<sup>10</sup> Boswell’s emphasis here uncannily dovetails with what Harun Karim Thomas points out as the historical asymmetry of drinking fountains labeled white and colored in the Jim Crow South: “The whites-only fountain,” he notes, “[often] seems to be constructed in a way that appears to provide the water for the ‘colored’ drinking fountain via its excess or run-off” (personal communication, April 15, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> I thank the anonymous reader for *Signs* who highlights the abstract convergence between racialization and gendering in noting that “within the landscape of segregation, the ‘colored’ position is . . . implicitly aligned with the ‘feminine.’” This association is also noted in Abel’s (1999) feminist reading of segregation-era photographs.



**Figure 2** From Wisconsin Union Graphics, 2005, incorporating an image from Jacques Lacan's *Écrits* (1977), 151.

bathroom doors, I would emphasize that the fountains suggest not so much a question of having no place else to go, of being relegated to a putative outside of culture or signification, but of being resolutely yet ambiguously interpellated within them. The shift to the imagery of the drinking fountain does not allow us to invoke race on the basis of the nature-culture, primitive-civilized divide or as something beyond the gendered signs, as in Boswell's reading, in which blackness is spatially "yonder" and conceptually parallel to the "outhouse" of language. In effect, the place of the Asian in the segregated South is marked by the ambiguity of simultaneity—as both like blacks and like whites—putting pressure on that distinction in obvious ways. But it also suggests another excess to binary differentiation, the space of, to invoke Handman, the "partly colored" (1930, 609). Here, the interstitial denaturalizes the meanings we ascribe to both black and white by exposing race as a continuum of cultural value. Black is not a site beyond signification, the place

of the nonhuman, but one of hypersignification, the place where the individual submits to interpretation and surveillance. But it can also be the site for exposing the stakes underlying these terms of social division.

This is, not coincidentally, a claim similar to some leveled by transgender theorists regarding gender. As Susan Stryker notes, “‘Transgender phenomena’ emerge from and bear witness to the epistemological rift between gender signifiers and their signifieds. In doing so, they disrupt and denaturalize Western modernity’s ‘normal’ reality, specifically the fiction of a unitary psychosocial gender that is rooted biologically in corporeal substance. As such, these phenomena become sources of cultural anxiety and semiotic elaboration” (1998, 147). The “cultural anxiety and semiotic elaboration” of the transspace might find material resonance in the choice of one door or fountain or the other, a choice that constitutes a public performance of the subject’s identification as, and culture’s designation of that subject as, definitively sexed or definitively raced. In the case of the fountains, how those identifications have been made or refused both by subjects and by culture is worthy of a longer discussion; for Asians under segregation, racial meaning is created through the interplay between two signs, “colored” and “white,” and ultimately can only rest uneasily in ever-increasing or ever-decreasing proximity to either. How the individual chooses either door or fountain is a matter of both identification and coercion. Judith Butler’s engagement with gender play in the context of drag performance articulates this double valence. She notes, “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” (1993, 126). Butler’s awareness of gender as an unrealized and unstable norm that can only be approximated highlights gendering as a cultural process. Moreover, it is a coercive process that, in essence, can never find stasis. Locating gender as the “forcible approximation” of normative conceptions of male and female offers a ready analogy to race. In this case, racial identity must emerge out of a prescribed identification with the “internally unstable” categories black and white, forcing the inverse process of identification into relief: the process of disavowal. My twinning of the graphics and invocation of the admittedly contested phase “gender segregation” suggests that oscillation: to represent as trans or between categories is to be subject to the sometimes obvious, sometimes nuanced

pressures of conformity. For Asian Americans, this “forcible approximation” becomes visible in pre-1954 southern culture.

James Loewen’s *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White* represents one study of such approximation. He argues that when faced with a binary racial system that had no accommodation for a third race, Chinese southerners engineered a shift in status from “colored” to white in the course of one generation. Loewen writes that they “worked systematically . . . in order to rise from Negro to white status” (1988, 72) in the period following World War II and, after crossing over, left “the black world behind without a second glance” (194). While the Supreme Court ruling in *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 around 1967, the Chinese were apparently card-carrying white people—or at least they were according to the *W* on their driver’s licenses. Transracialism thus found ambiguous resolution in caste elevation.<sup>12</sup>

The historical process that Loewen traces is abstractly articulated in what is perhaps an unexpected choice of sources, Sandy Stone’s discussion of transsexualism in “The ‘Empire’ Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto” (1991). In critiquing the ways in which individuals undergoing the first sex-change operations were pressured into making definitive gender choices, she writes, “The highest purpose of the transsexual is to erase him/herself, to fade into the ‘normal’ population as soon as possible” (295). That is, the cultural imperative faced by the transsexual is to represent oneself as either male or female, a condition of communal incorporation that requires making oneself legible according to social norms. Loewen’s work reveals a racial parallel to this cultural imperative: the Asian American represented an intermediacy that was subject to the pressures of the state, and the very certainty of what being Chinese signified became questioned, especially for the second generation. As in the case of transsexual individuals, transracial populations can be seen as sites where culture’s investments in category distinction become visible. What Loewen posits as a kind of resolution to intermediacy—the Chinese transition to “near-white status” (1988, 176)—can be seen as a concession to racial apartheid. Its success, although incomplete, validates the unnamed universal of white normativity. What Butler has identified as gender approximation thus finds its historical analogue in Loewen’s work on race, the putative caste elevation of the Chinese in Mississippi. In portraying the community’s asymptotic relationship to an idealized whiteness, his work

<sup>12</sup> *Gong Lum v. Rice*, 275 U.S. 78 (1927).

unveils the pressures of social conformity and, as I have discussed elsewhere, the failures of such approximation (Bow 2007).

Yet if Loewen's community study reveals the untenability of intermediacy, in what ways does transgender theory reveal the conceptual promise of interstitial status? How does transgender theory underscore the potential of exploring intermediacy in ways that do not merely call for additive categories or a greater tolerance for gender variation? As Paisley Currah (2003) notes, transgender rights advocates are concerned not merely with expanding and amending legal categories of gender but with dismantling gender as a legal concept. The promise embedded in drawing analogies of difference is suggested by Stone's manifesto on transgenderism before it became known under that rubric.<sup>13</sup> Foregrounding the practice of reading and interpretation occasioned by transsexual subjects, Stone suggests "constituting transsexuals not as a class or problematic 'third gender,' but rather as a genre, a set of embodied texts whose potential for productive disruption of structured sexualities and spectra of desire has yet to be explored" (1991, 296). Thus, early on, she signaled transsexuality as a site for a deconstructive methodology that, in the words of Christopher Norris, "seeks to undo both a given order of priorities *and* the very system of conceptual opposition that makes that order possible" (1982, 31). Likewise, Marjorie Garber does not view cross-dressers as the expression of gender's "third term" but rather views "'the third' as a mode of articulation, a way of describing possibility" (1992, 11). Stryker similarly reveals, "I began to see transsexuality not as an inauthentic state of being but rather as yet another communicational technology . . . for generating and sustaining the desired reality effects of my gender identifications through the manipulation of bodily surface" (1998, 151). Locating in the hermaphrodite the potential for the disruption of biological sex distinction, Anne Fausto-Sterling writes that "society mandates the control of intersexual bodies because they blur and bridge the great divide; they challenge traditional beliefs about sexual difference. Hermaphrodites have unruly bodies. They do not fall into a binary classification; only a surgical shoehorn can put them there" (1993, A29). By delinking birth sex from gender, this unruly figure exposes reliance on gendered epistemologies, be they systems of etiquette, sports, marriage laws, or "urinary segregation." Whether addressing transsexuals, trans-

<sup>13</sup> In regard to her title, Stone has since noted that "'posttranssexual' was an ironic term, since when this essay was first published [in 1991] everything in theory was post-something-or-other. I was looking for a way forward. 'Transgender' is way better" (<http://www.actlab.utexas.edu/~sandy/empire-strikes-back>).

gender rights, cross-dressing, or intersexuality, transgender theorists see in the interstitial body a critical methodology with widespread implications: “in the transsexual’s erased history,” Stone suggests, “we can find a story disruptive to the accepted discourses of gender” (1991, 295). One logical offshoot of this disruption is social reorganization, revised concepts of belonging that challenge the sedimented histories that have come to define community.

In thinking of transgenderism as a genre interstitiality, a racial parallel emerges: the transracial individual does not so much constitute a third race in the South as much as she provides a similar site of cultural disruption that may likewise signal the limitations of existing social organization and our investment in similarly naturalized racial categories. In this context, my twinning of race and gender continuums finds perhaps unlikely resonance in Turner’s concept of liminality and his belief that new forms of community emerge from it. Writing in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Turner highlights the ways in which social structures become visible through ritual practices, turning his gaze not only on tribal cultures but on Western culture as well. Liminality is a “midpoint of transition in a status-sequence between two positions” that attends the ritual processes of initiation (1974, 237). Those undergoing new status definition, liminal personae or “threshold people,” are “necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space” (1969, 95). Turner writes, “A society’s secular definitions do not allow for the existence of a not-boy-not-man, which is what a novice in a male puberty rite is (if he can be said to be anything)” (1967, 95). I invoke Turner’s discussion of liminality here because it suggestively places subjects ambiguous to established social structures within a spatial and temporal abstraction, a place of nebulous signification. The condition of those who “fall in the interstices of social structure” (Turner 1969, 125) speaks to the cultural placement of transgender and transracial individuals: not female-not male and not black-not white subjects. While for Turner the liminal “betwixt-and-between period” (1967, 110) of the ritual process is transient, a temporary state in which an initiate is stripped of rank, he nevertheless engages the concept in order to speak more broadly about moments of cultural flux and potential reorganization. Thus, states of liminality become productive sites for unveiling the attributes of societies informed by hierarchy and differentiation, in other words, the attributes that separate “men in terms of ‘more’ or ‘less’” (Turner 1969, 96).

It is within the liminal period, he suggests, that nonhierarchical forms of social relationships emerge, what he calls forms of “*communitas*.” Ex-

isting in dialectical relationship to social structure, *communitas* describes a community in equality, or what Marxist theorists might deem horizontal comradeship: “It is in liminality that *communitas* emerges, if not as a spontaneous expression of sociability, at least in a cultural and normative form—stressing equality and comradeship as norms” (Turner 1974, 232). In the case of the initiates in male puberty rites, a form of *communitas* or shared fellowship emerges among those “not-boy[s]-not-m[e]n” (Turner 1967, 95) awaiting an elevation in social status. Nevertheless, *communitas* “is a fact of everyone’s experience”: “It becomes visible in tribal rites of passage, in millenarian movements, in monasteries, in the counterculture, and on countless informal occasions” (Turner 1974, 231).<sup>14</sup>

Turner’s work reveals that gender and racial intermediacy might not only perform a kind of status dissonance but signal the development of new forms of nonhierarchical community that emerge within and potentially against established social norms.<sup>15</sup> The analogy between forms of interstitiality, both racial and gendered, might suggest ways of conceiving kinship that are based not on identity categories but on shared positionalities. In witnessing the relationship between a Vietnamese exchange student and a white cross-dresser in the Deep South, *Mai’s America* offers one way to rethink identity-based concepts of alliance and community as the subjects of the film, an Asian in the South and a transvestite, model a form of *communitas* based on what they share: trans status.

#### **“Do I look like boy now?”: Race and gender liminality in America**

To return to the image suggested by the divided restroom doors and drinking fountains, to what extent does having no place to go expose the continuums that define social norms, whether racial or gendered? In *Mai’s America*, it is the liminal personae who reveal the limitations of cultural

<sup>14</sup> Robert Crouch finds Turner’s concept of liminality useful for understanding the medical discourses surrounding intersexed children. The surgeon, he suggests, “sculpts the genitals of the intersexed person not because there is a medical dysfunction . . . but rather because the physician cannot fit the intersexed child into one of two available sex and gender categories” (1999, 39). Thus, Crouch invokes Turner in order to understand the medical establishment’s investment in intervening in intersexuality; doctors see themselves as aiding an individual’s transition rather than correcting pathology.

<sup>15</sup> In linking Turner’s work to the work of transgender theory, I do not intend to imply that all trans people are liminal in the sense that they are merely in suspension, waiting to achieve gender fixity. By the same token, I do not mean to imply that Asian Americans maintain white identification.

organization predicated on race-, sexuality-, and, I would add, nationality-based communities. As they bare the processes of cultural inclusion and exclusion, they ask us to see alternative forms of connection that challenge loyalty to entrenched histories. Through a productive twinning, the documentary's portrayal of Asian transracialism in the South queers the black-white division that has come to frame American race relations. While the film initially intended to follow the experiences of a number of Vietnamese exchange students across the United States, Mai's presence within a racially segregated atmosphere generates the film's suspense, centering not only on her educational quest but on the degree to which she can be integrated into either the black or the white community.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, as a central figure, Mai blurs other, nonracial boundaries: while the film does not overtly mark her urban background and class privilege, in the United States she is nonetheless viewed as a citizen of the third world ("What do you eat? Coconuts? Squid?"). As a Vietnamese person among U.S. high school seniors, including the children of Vietnam vets, learning about the Vietnam war, she is an ambiguous former adversary: she is on the side of victors who conspicuously lack global leverage in a world system dominated by the United States. Her political views, those of a generation born in Hanoi after the war, clash with those of the marginalized expatriate Vietnamese community and potentially with those of a generation of Americans raised to accept the premises of the Cold War. For Mai, choosing a host family is not akin to choosing between signs of the segregated fountain's iconography, but it resonates with the questions posed by the earlier period: What is the Asian's affiliation within the communities defined by Jim Crow and its legacy?

The still that introduces the film on its PBS Web site offers a visual conundrum: it features Mai's smiling face under a *non*, a Vietnamese peasant's hat, next to a billboard at the state border that reads "Mississippi Welcomes You" (see fig. 3). The sign invokes legendary southern hospitality at the same time that it solidifies Mai's alien status, providing a visual cue as to the documentary's fish-out-of-water premise and prefiguring the contingency of that welcome. The film's self-conscious (and continual) juxtaposition between Mai and her environment begins with the stark contrast between her character and that of her first host family of self-described rednecks. The family's prefab house, red velvet cake making, and continuously running television serve as the backdrop to the

<sup>16</sup> For comments on the origins of the film, see <http://www.pbs.org/itvs/globalvoices/maisamerica.html>. Discussion of the film's history can be found at [http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2002/maisamerica/behindlens\\_director.html](http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2002/maisamerica/behindlens_director.html).



**Figure 3** Publicity still, *Mai's America* (Marlo Poras, 2002)

film's depiction of Mai as the antithesis of Don, Susan, and their daughter, Kim; Mai's bubbly personality and wonderment at experiencing American culture offset the family's passivity, poverty, physical disability, and clinical depression. Here, the film perhaps too easily feeds northern fantasies of the southern white trash stereotype; nevertheless, the South becomes a stand-in for American parochialism. The film presents Mai's outsider status as a matter of youth versus age, vivacity versus melancholy, and ambition versus complacency rather than as a matter of race, which is rarely commented on.

Rather than submit to the potential contagiousness of depression that attends white rural poverty as depicted in the film, Mai requests a transfer. The establishing shot of the new African American host family deliberately shifts the tone of the film; the scene opens with Mai's public welcome before an exuberant black congregation. The youth of Mai's new hosts, Justin and Latoya, their gender-enlightened daily practices, and their willingness to acknowledge a teenager's needs ("How are you doing? Do you need to go to the mall?") present an intentionally stark contrast to the indifference of her previous hosts. In this, the film readily indulges in a romanticized portrait of African American affect and communalism. Nevertheless, it does not portray the shift in tone and feeling from white to black communities as a result of naturalized color alliance or as a seamless

erasure of Mai's cultural and racial difference. Her distance is conveyed, as before, as befuddlement; for example, she cannot appreciate "you know you're black" jokes because she does not understand the class implications that attend black-white polarity. Mai's inability to grasp the full meaning of those around her is a constant theme running across ethnic lines: she fails to appreciate the pun made by a white Mardi Gras reveler with a horned headdress who self-identifies as a "horny beast." She mistakes a Vietnamese American's view on the war when he attempts to inform her that "not all Vietnamese wanted communism." ("All?" she asks. "*Not* all," he corrects.) These repeated scenes of failed interpretation underscore her status as an outsider to American culture, its linguistic codes, its class and race associations, and its Cold War politics. The film asks us to evaluate American culture through the perspective of the transracial subject—one "betwixt and between" (Turner 1967, 110) historically sedimented southern communities.

It is the failure of Mai's integration that forms the film's indictment of national culture, yet it portrays this separation by highlighting not racial division but sexual politics. In a pointed scene, Mai contests her African American host mother's general view that "God did not, when you were born, make you gay." "God," Latoya emphasizes, "doesn't have anything to do with it." The scene is striking precisely because in religion it introduces a value system that transcends the southern racial divide and bridges the two communities in Meridian, Mississippi: homophobia. Poras intentionally places this scene alongside the moment when Mai's white girlfriends—the popular ones who, we are told, normally do not befriend foreign exchange students—express, with typical adolescent eloquence, their hatred of gay men and the "sickness" of homosexuality: "Gay men are so nasty. It's really gross." These scenes of conflict pointedly establish another aspect of Mai's distance from both communities. As the viewer has learned, her best friend is the white male transvestite she meets in a gay bar, Chris, also known as Christy. Moreover, although she had invited him to the prom, she subsequently reverses herself, aware that her liberal views on sexuality mark her difference from both black and white. In articulating her fear of ostracism, she implicitly recognizes the tenuous status that "foreign exchange student" confers within the hyperhierarchized atmosphere of American high school: she enters school with no peer group, bereft of even a falsely naturalized one among Asian Americans. Delinked from community, she is a social nobody. The film depicts in essence her search for an elusive sense of belonging even as she is marked as alien to the categories that traditionally define group membership in the South—race, religion, political belief. As if to compound that distance,

she adds gender to the mix by remaking her body to fit her chosen affiliation—her relationship with a transgendered person.

The film produces analogies of difference in two ways: first, as a straightforward account of shared oppression articulated as a lack of place and, second, as a more complex question of desire, belonging, and trans status. The parallelism between cultural and sexual marginality derives from Poras's editorial choices and is articulated by Chris/Christy himself/herself. Mai's status as someone away from home reflects Chris/Christy's own feelings of displacement. In response to Mai's dissatisfaction with her first host family, Christy confesses, "I don't feel that I'm right here. You know what I'm saying? I feel like I'm out of place. Does that make sense? You know, I know you probably know enough because I bet you feel that you're out of place. Being in Meridian or Stonewall, you just feel that you're out of place. You're not home. You see, that's the way I feel. I feel that I'm not supposed to be here. I feel I'm supposed to be somewhere where people accept me for what I am." In highlighting Christy's feeling of being "out of place" as a transgendered individual, the film implicitly calls up a conventional narrative: urban spaces as sexually liberated. The film thus relies heavily on what queer theorists identify as the spatial inflection of coming out stories—the migration from rural spaces to urban centers as part of the individual's quest for community. As Kath Weston writes, the imaginary urban (and nonsouthern?) elsewhere is "a symbolic space that configures gayness itself by elaborating an opposition between rural and urban life" (1995, 274). Here, Christy's commentary on being out in the South reflects this traditional narrative, which is partially constitutive of her transgendered identity; nevertheless, her testimony of rural sexual small-mindedness is placed in the service of a dissonant racial commentary. The film compounds a sense of their alliance in difference as Christy's voice-over continues over shots of Mai walking alone at night, a visual that grafts Christy's isolation onto Mai's. The fact that neither of them can be seen by the camera as Christy utters this confession enforces a sense of their mutual invisibility. The scene's darkness erases the very markers of visually inscribed difference and implicitly invokes another scene shot at night, a scene in a car when Mai's Vietnamese American friends express fear of the Ku Klux Klan. Both sequences draw an implicit link between intolerance and the threat of violence. Christy's mention of Stonewall, Mississippi, resonates with the Stonewall Inn in New York City, the symbol of gay resistance to police repression. Yet the inadvertently ambiguous invocation of Stonewall is intended to evoke Mai's displacement, where she feels out of place. Ironically, the documentary's location evokes their shared trans status: both Mai and Christy are meridian to Meridian itself, part of an imaginary circle passing

between the poles. This lens reorients the black-white dichotomy of segregation; they are not exactly beyond the scene of African American humiliation in Morrison's novel, a scene that takes place in nature, outside the same southern town. The film thus plays on gender to express the anomaly of Asian trans status in that both subjects are refused communal incorporation for lack of obvious alliance based on identities normative to place. Echoing Turner's concept of liminal personae who are "structurally, if not physically 'invisible'" (1967, 95), the drag queen (speaking literally from somewhere in the dark) experiences her difference as a lack of place.

Moreover, the film produces an analogy between race and gender differences, not merely by paralleling forms of outsideness but through its portrayal of what I am calling Mai's transracial status and, I would argue, her own transgenderism. Early in the film, after flirting with Christy in a gay club, Mai shaves off her hair. Simply put, she looks like a boy through most of the film. Compounding her inability to find a place among communities, she is visually de-girled. What is revealed to be Mai's performative bent, her experimentation with her own appearance, naturalizes her alliance with a drag queen; transvestitism offers a ready visual metaphor for trying on alternative identities, an opportunity now opened through her distance from Asian patriarchy. Mai's voice-over before the mirror conveys her awareness of her gender betrayal: "All mothers in Vietnam want their daughters to be charming and gentle. And the typical wife in Vietnam, when her husband comes home, she should take off his jacket and prepare the meal—and never, never talk back. I don't think I'll ever be a typical Vietnamese woman" (see fig. 4). The film dramatizes the duality of her gender position: looking as she does, she cannot be mistaken for a traditional Vietnamese woman or, for that matter, a woman. Her cropped hair forms a startling contrast to her actual activity in the scene, lavishly applying cosmetics in the manner of a drag queen. The visual succeeds in establishing her penchant for dress up and play seemingly made possible by her migration, at the same time that the intensely feminizing action jars with the boyishness of the figure she cuts. The film uses Mai's gender liminality to visually align her with her transgendered friend who, perhaps reflecting a Westerner's purported inability to perceive gender distinction in Asians, had mistaken her for a boy even before her haircut ("I said to myself, 'Oh no, not another little Oriental boy! Not another one!'").

This approximate transgendering prefigures what will be the eventual erosion of Mai's girlishness—her innocence, vivacity, and wonder—that signals America's defeat of its former enemy. Despite the supposed freedom that distance from home confers, in the South she is continually schooled in gender conformity, most notably by the patriarch of her first



**Figure 4** From *Mai's America* (Marlo Poras, 2002)

host family, Grandpa, with whom she shares a sympathetic rapport. Her haircut elicits this exchange:

*Grandpa:* You look good, but a girl ain't supposed to cut her hair off.

*Mai:* (laughing) I'm not a girl anymore.

*Grandpa:* What your daddy say about that?

*Mai:* He doesn't know.

The dialogue dramatizes what is possible outside the range of paternal influence: the ability to renounce one's previous self and challenge a fundamental signifier of social status. But such a message is undercut by the images that follow, scenes that enforce perception of Mai's isolation in the Bible Belt. The film implies that it is not only her racial, cultural, political, urban, and presumably religious differences (her consultations with a street psychic are unironic) that inform her separation but her gender bending as well. This boundary blurring lends visual support to her alliance with Christy, highlighting the performative bent they share. Mai's ease in front of the camera was one reason she was selected as an ethnographic subject in the first place.<sup>17</sup> By the same token, the very

<sup>17</sup> Mai's theatrical bent is validated by the filmmaker, who notes that during two and a half years of filming, Mai "never once asked me [to] turn off the camera. That's why she was such a perfect subject" (Mitchell 2002). Moreover, when Mai was in New Orleans, she auditioned for MTV's *Real World* (Chaw 2002).

theatricality that surrounded Mai during filming was clearly a reason for Chris's interest in her. As he admitted after wrap-up, "Mai made me feel like a star" (Nicole n.d.). Nevertheless, the film's focus on Chris's sexuality as purely theatrical—he is seen in drag at a gay club or getting made up at home while singing gospel, never being intimate with gay men or transmen—neutralizes the possibility of the gay man's threat to a straight audience. Mai, newly queered, is the only object of his affection.

Yet the film refuses to push the boundaries of the sexual narrative it introduces. It admits erotic attraction ("I wish to be your girlfriend," Mai tells him) but cannot represent what is too complex to be understood within traditionally narrow routes of desire, those firmly fixed on either end of the homosexual-heterosexual continuum. Sexual tension between them is always rendered playfully, belying the implication that she has transformed herself into a boy for him, becoming the "little Oriental boy" that he initially thought she was. The very complication of routes of desire here—her transformation into a boy for a man dressed as a woman—like those in David Henry Hwang's play *M. Butterfly*, cannot be articulated within the simple opposition between gay and straight. Does she love him as her object choice or as a manifestation of a difference in herself? Is the mutual boundary blurring reflective of a desire for him or a desire for a shared likeness? Significantly, this ambiguity of gender and desire serves the film's interest in witnessing an Asian's experiences within a racially polarized landscape. In twinning racial and sexual discourses, the film redirects questions of communal integration away from an issues identity to one of locality, the irresolution of not being in the right place, a place characterized by racial and sexual fixity. The film's conjoining of Mai and Chris/Christy through not only ambiguous appearance but also ambiguous erotic attraction thus highlights their mutual segregation, challenging the very conception of segregation that we take to be self-evident. Their failure to integrate, to find belonging within stratified subcultures, culminates in social death.

The film's race-gender analogy is driven home in the fate of its characters; Christy's defeat prefigures Mai's. Near the end of the film, Chris is shown for the first time in men's clothing, confessing his change of heart and his "murder" of Christy: "I went to church. I want to be more of a boy now. I want a family. I want the wife and the children and all the stuff like that. . . . I went from this 'Christy' person to Chris. And I'm more happy with it now. I got rid of her. I buried her behind my house." The presumably enlightened viewer is asked to see this as a capitulation to social norms as Mai does, as a tragic if predictable consequence of living in the Bible Belt. In Christy's forced disappearance, the

film achieves its indictment of southern-as-American culture, in which tolerance is driven underground and given a proper burial.

The impossibility of trans spaces is brought home in the film's invocation of Christy in its final scene. Poras hearkens back to the film's opening images of destitute Hanoi shoe-shine boys at its end, in which Mai is now visibly depressed and working on feet in a Vietnamese-run nail salon in Detroit. While the move restores her to a naturalized sense of community among those "like" her (other Vietnamese expatriates), her migration to the North nonetheless marks her as like African Americans whose exodus out of the South was filled with hopes largely unmet. Northward migration is thus resonant with the symbolic failure of American promise for people of color. Her hair grown out, kneeling before a chatty and well-intentioned but ignorant customer (conveniently adorned in red, white, and blue), Mai woodenly remarks in the film's final dialogue, "You remind me of my friend, Christy." She does not achieve the desired academic degree but instead carries away the detritus of American culture symbolized by a suitcase overflowing with junk. The suitcase's bunny slippers and plastic M&M's dolls are the analogue of other junk—racial and sexual attitudes—that cannot be wholly compacted but must nonetheless be taken home.

#### **Beyond the intersection: The uses of analogy**

Even as it promises a new look at the nation, *Mai's America* relies on standard tropes of the South, particularly regarding the association between Christian conservatism and sexual and gender oppression. Christy's "death" is represented as the logical outcome of being transgendered in the Bible Belt. Far from being made to signify postmodern futurity and gender flexibility, as Judith Halberstam (2005) notes transgendered figures are, Chris/Christy is a martyr. As Williams's recognition that her transgendered student "S." has "no place else to go" (1991, 124) might indicate, Chris finds an ambiguous stability in the death of his other half. Thus, transspace is not necessarily liberating but a site subject to the pressures of normativity enforced by gender expectations and, as Mai's migration reveals, the historical legacy of black-white division. In the end, Mai and Christy find belonging together, if only in the abstract.

Yet the treatment of this somewhat conventional representation of southern queerness provokes an analogy between race and gender in perhaps unconventional ways. Expressive of the neither/nor placement of Asians within the racial economy of the South, a term such as "transracial" might convey a greater sense of fluidity between what are perceived to

be, even after *Brown v. Board of Education*, two fixed communities, black and white. My point, then, is not to argue for a naturalized alliance between the differently gendered and differently raced. Nor am I claiming that being transracial is the same as being transgendered. Rather, exploring the relationship between a Vietnamese woman and a cross-dressing white man—and its facets that defy representation—signals the need to understand alliances that are not singularly based on ethnic community, nationality, political coalition, or even erotic intimacy. In thinking about friendship as a form of alternative kinship, I am reminded of Lauren Berlant's sense that "attachments are developing that might redirect the different routes taken by history and biography" (1998, 286). "To rethink intimacy," she writes, "is to appraise how we have been and how we live and how we might imagine lives that make more sense than the ones so many are living" (286). The film thus depicts alliance and kinship through routes alternative to those naturalized by identity politics and history, opening up the space for social reorganization. The analogy between transracial and transgender, then, becomes the occasion to think about race beyond the terms set by the civil rights movement. For an Asian in Mississippi, for example, "integration" might signal meaningful bonds and connections not based on identitarian concepts of community. The very nature of integration as it is traditionally cast—the push toward a single, putatively color-blind community based on shared equal rights—becomes reconceived. Its horizon is no longer an illusory form of likeness based on access to rights but alternative collectivities not aspiring to incorporation into or representation in the public sphere.

The structural twinning between doors and fountains highlights the restrictive necessity of establishing legal status within bipolar frameworks. In her work on drag kings on the cabaret circuit in New York, Halberstam counterintuitively establishes that "it is the very elasticity of the gender binary in particular that allows the biological categories of male and female to hold sway" (1997, 109). My emphasis on Asian Americans here likewise does not discount the primacy of the black-white dialectic but in fact affirms its ability to hold sway long after the dissolution of de jure segregation, a point that *Mai's America* visualizes. In effect, Asian America is a site of multiple ambiguities against which, I would argue, the complexity of black-white relations—often conflated with race relations—stands out in heightened relief. Nevertheless, in highlighting the ways in which subjects are created and disciplined within parallel (and, of course, intersecting) continuums that define distinctions between the normative and the deviant, I want to enrich that framework for comparative race studies through a detour through gender theory.

By foregrounding Asian oscillation between the unstable poles of “like blacks” or “like whites” I do not want to establish a third space between them but to uncover deep structures associated with beliefs attached to status fixity, a process that underlies the goals of transgender theory. Stryker outlines these goals in broad strokes: “The field of transgender studies,” she notes, “is concerned with anything that disrupts, denaturalizes, rearticulates, and makes visible the normative linkages we generally assume to exist between the biological specificity of the sexually differentiated human body, the social roles and statuses that a particular form of body is expected to occupy, the subjectively experienced relationship between a gendered sense of self and social expectations of gender-role performance, and the cultural mechanisms that work to sustain or thwart specific configurations of gendered personhood” (2006, 3). If one were to substitute “race” for “gender” in Stryker’s definition, one could say that transracialism shifts away from concepts of racialized biology and the visual epistemology of race toward an analysis of social status and its dependence on a historically entrenched racial binarism. The substitution highlights the shared relation to social justice that underlies both critical race studies and gender studies.

In drawing an analogy between transracialism and transgenderism, I hearken back to the women’s movement not to graft oppression onto oppression but to focus on the potential within comparison. Comparison, a hallmark of social movements, has certainly been displaced within academia by a focus on intersectionality, on explorations of the interconnected and mutually constitutive categories of race, gender, class, and sexuality. I am certainly aware, too, that the palimpsest of continuums that I highlight here finds intersection most obviously, for example, in Asian transpeople living in the South who, in distinction to my claims regarding Mai here, identify as transgendered. Nevertheless, I would claim that analogy opens up the space for a critical methodology that renews and expands the exploration of intersecting axes of difference. Affirming the significance of analogy, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick links the discourses of fat phobia and homophobia in asserting that “it’s possible to come out of the closet as a fat woman” (1990, 72). Defending her claim against the charge that it may disrespectfully evacuate historical gay specificity, she notes, “I hypothesize that exactly the opposite is true. I think that a whole cluster of the most crucial sites for the contestation of meaning in twentieth-century Western culture are consequentially and quite indelibly marked with the historical specificity of homosocial/homosexual definition” (72). I would second that expansion even at the risk of political dilution. I want to suggest that the male-female dichotomy can initiate a

reconsideration of black-white relations. As the film shows, this might not occur through traditional routes—via the figure of the interracial intersexual or the analogy between race passing and sexual closeting for instance—but through a broad conceptual twinning of the transracial Asian and the transgendered drag queen.

Meridian is thus not merely a small town in Mississippi; in the context of *Mai's America* and of Asians in the South, it specifies a way of seeing. Echoing Homi Bhabha's notion of the interstitial, wherein culture "produces occasional spaces in which those annihilating norms, those killing ideals of gender and race, are mimed, reworked, resignified" (1994, 124), I would affirm the significance of the comparative gesture and its ability to rework and resignify race and gender continuums that define belonging and exclusion. The film's lesson, then, above and beyond its sentimental documentation of the failure of American promise and the disruption of associations between the first and the third worlds, lies in its potential to reconceptualize the historically saturated terms that we use to talk about race, terms like integration and segregation that cannot help but conjure up the South in all of its supposed perversity. In doing so, the film lays claim to the space of the in-between and to the potential in drawing analogies of difference.

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