

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

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Abstract

This article analyzes the implications of the James Loewen's thesis that Chinese Americans in Mississippi elevated their caste status under Jim Crow from "colored" to "near white." Analyzing academic, popular cultural, and visual depictions of the Chinese and other Asian Americans in the segregated South, the article uncovers the jarring moments that attend the claim of status rise—here, of Asian "near-whiteness." More specifically, it argues that there is always an excess to the Asian community's "successful" disassociation from African Americans and its own "partly colored" past. The work develops a concept of racial interstitiality as a model for comparative Ethnic Studies and for reconsidering the black-white binary that frames American

RACIAL INTERSTITIALITY AND THE ANXIETIES OF THE “PARTLY COLORED”

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

White informant in Mississippi, 1966, emphasis mine.¹

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

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



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