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THE THIRD SEX: ASIAN-AMERICAN MEN IN POPULAR CULTURE

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How did the vision of the model family change in the nineteenth-century United States? Why? What differences existed between the East Coast and the West Coast? Why?
2. Why were the Chinese immigrants portrayed as a "third sex"? Why were they seen as threatening?
3. What do the short stories discussed by Lee reveal about the intersections of gender, sexuality, race, class, and nation?
4. Does this article shed light on the relationships and intersections among these variables today? How are they similar or different today?

THE PACIFIC RAILROAD COMPLETE

In June 1869, *Harper's Weekly* published a lithograph with the title "Pacific Railroad Complete."¹ The illustration showed a Chinese man, mustachioed, with a thickly braided queue hanging beneath a skull cap, dressed in a baggy Chinese tunic and trousers, standing arm in arm with a white woman dressed in middle-class fashion with a fancy hat and bustled dress. The couple is posed in front of the "church of St. Confucious." [sic] With its caption celebrating the geographic consolidation of the nation, the picture of the wedding of East and West is an ironic visual representation of the complicated anxieties that nineteenth-century Americans had about the changing nature of nation and their families.

The lithograph suggests that the transcontinental railroad ironically "completes" the geographic consolidation of the nation, but in doing so opens up a new set of class, gender, and racial contradictions.

Robert G. Lee, "The Third Sex" from *Orientalists: Asian-Americans in Popular Culture*. Copyright © 1999 by Temple University Press. Reprinted with the permission of Temple University Press.

It offers a vision of the completed nation as a family, but one that is disturbingly biracial. The West can now be represented by the Chinese man, while the East is represented by the white woman. Their marriage not only is interracial but appears to cross class boundaries as well. The white woman, wearing middle-class attire, represents both the Victorian familial culture and the autonomous female public sphere emerging in the nation's cities; the mustachioed Chinaman represents the new racial and sexual possibilities and threats inherent in the incorporation of the "frontier" into the nation.

In the decades following the Civil War and the completion of the transcontinental railroad, the family became the principal background against which the ideology of citizenship was debated. At the same time that women renewed their demands for the vote and other rights of citizenship, the nation was faced with the question of citizenship rights for nonwhites. In 1869, Charles Sumner, whose Radical Republican faction in Massachusetts supported both the demand for woman suffrage and the enfranchisement of blacks, urged Congress to eliminate the single word "white" from the naturalization law of 1790. Although Congress amended the statute to allow the naturalization of persons of

African nativity or descent, it was unwilling to abandon the principle of racial qualification for citizenship. . . .

As the white Victorian bourgeois family took its place as the social norm, the relations of desire with the Oriental (male or female) offered an alternative (albeit a tabooed one) to the social order represented by the racially exclusive, presumptively heterosexual, nuclear family. Against an emergent heterosexual and dimorphic order, Oriental sexuality was constructed as ambiguous, inscrutable, and hermaphroditic; the Oriental (male or female) was constructed as a "third sex"—Marjorie Garber's term for a gender of imagined sexual possibility.²

The dynamics of sexuality, gender, class, and race that shaped the Victorian family were driven by changes in the capitalist order. Sexuality, like race, is a socially constructed category of power, formed by the social and political relations of a given culture at a given moment. Sexuality does the political work of defining and regulating desire as well as the body, determining whose bodies are sexual and with whom; under what conditions those activities are acceptable; what privileges, rewards, and punishments accompany sexual behavior; and how the erotic may be distinguished from the non-erotic. Articulated by systems of race and class, with the logics of national identity, and with the organization of gender, sexuality is organized to produce and reproduce the social relations of production.³

Nowhere was the capitalist transformation in mid- and late nineteenth-century America so powerfully felt as within the family. Structures and meanings of kinship changed as extended households shrank into nuclear families. Gender roles were redefined as women and men both left (or were forced from) hearth, farm, and workshop to go into the factory. By 1870, cities populated by a new working class, by free people of color, and by immigrants, created new possibilities for encounters across class, racial, and sexual boundaries unimaginable a decade or two earlier.

In the middle decades of the nineteenth century, the transformation of the precapitalist household into the nuclear family established polarized middle-class gender roles and sexual behavior in what social historians have called the Cult of Domesticity.⁴ The triumph of the bourgeois family transformed American culture from a male-dominated homosocial culture represented

by the frontier to a heterosexual culture represented by the Victorian family.⁵ . . .

The urban revolution of the 1830s and 1840s had brought about an explosion of new sexual possibilities. In the cities now burgeoning with immigrants, free people of color, professional men, and dandies, factory girls and working-class boys, no longer under the watchful eyes of parents and village, entered into new social relations in the factory, dormitory, and boarding-house, on the boulevard and boardwalk.⁶

In [Stephanie] Coontz's view, for the emergent middle class of the nineteenth century, the private nuclear family with the True Woman as its moral center was imagined to provide a haven from the alienation and anomie of the new competitive and chaotic public life.⁷ This construct granted women a monopoly of morality, sensibility, and nurture within the feminine mystique of True Womanhood, while in fact freeing men from such ethical burdens in the public sphere. Home was, however, only a temporary haven, a space in which men might restore their mental and emotional strength before returning to battle in the marketplace. The skills and techniques of crafts and farming handed down from father to son were supplanted by the inculcation of values needed to negotiate and survive in the marketplace. The discipline of the home, with mother at its center, was expected to reinforce and encourage the development of the competitive values needed to succeed within the new capitalist order.

THE GEOGRAPHY OF SEX

As the imaginary "frontier" of American culture, a space where male fantasies of sexual, gender, racial, and class aggression and transgression might find expression, the West neatly reversed the reality of the Eastern city. . . . At the far edge of the pastoral farm homestead with its links to the communal village, the frontier was conceived of as savage, devoid both of comforting and constraining civilization and of the actually existing capitalist relations of the burgeoning cities. The symbolic emptiness of the West allowed young men to flee both the civilizing disciplines of their families and ruthless capitalism and to recreate themselves not as victims but as vanguard.

The cult of the Western masculine hero, first embodied in the figure of Davy Crockett, valorized untamed

savagery in the young single male, in service to an onward march of civilization. The frontier provided ground for an anti-familial narrative that reconfigured alienation and isolation as independence and self-sufficiency. It was on the frontier that loneliness could be hammered and honed into the "savage" skill of competitive individualism that was required for survival and success in the capitalist city.

Carroll Smith-Rosenberg notes that the mythic frontier in which Crockett could freely actualize himself and his historical mission imagined as largely without women, particularly without mothers.⁸ Literary critic Eve Sedgwick observes that it is precisely on the register of the homosocial that the boundaries between the heterosexual and the homosexual are contested. The homosocial can thus be understood as the liminal range of alternatives between heterosexual and homosexual oppositions. The Western imagery is often described as homosocial—that is to say, dominated by same-sex relations (like male bonding) that have no sexual component. Yet, as Sedgwick argues, although the homosocial is constituted by that which is not sexual and is distinguished from the homosexual, it does not exist independently of the erotic, but rather is deeply infused with desire.⁹ To describe the West as homosocial is not to deny its sexuality. The land itself was feminized in the metaphor of the virgin land, and the westward movement was imagined in terms of masculine penetration and conquest.¹⁰ In Western frontier imagery, whether the Davy Crockett narratives or the songs of the California gold rush, the land may have been a woman, but it was a place where boys could be boys.

Imagined as a space where desires that crossed class, racial, and sexual borders were unfettered, the West's freedom from the familial rendered it vulnerable to the homophobic accusation. That is, the Western homosociality engendered and restrained the transgressive impulse; it also sometimes transformed longing into aggression. By the 1870s, as the number of westering women increased, the male-dominated homosocial culture of the West began to be displaced by the Victorian Cult of Domesticity. Domesticity established an increasingly binary and naturalized code of gender and sexuality in an attempt to restore order to sexual behavior. The doctrine of True Womanhood overturned the Protestant republican view that women's sexuality was a natural source of evil. Victorian moralists regarded sexual passion in women as unnatural, deviant, and

a marker of degraded lower-class status. Chastity and moral order formed the ideal in which Victorian middle-class women were to fulfill the true nature of their sex. The unbridled sexual energy of men, celebrated in the myth of the Western hero, was to be sublimated to the psychic demands of the marketplace or brought into the service of class reproduction within the privatized family. Sexuality was harnessed to reproduction; the pleasure of the erotic, especially the autoerotic and homoerotic, was to be strictly suppressed.

The cult of domesticity, only partially successful as an ideology of sexual repression, succeeded in constructing the bourgeois family as a private sphere of chastity and piety. On the other hand, a public sphere of sexualized activity also flourished. Prostitution in various forms, from the informal exchange of sexual favors for gifts and meals to the exchange of cash, grew to be commonplace in mid-century American cities.¹¹ In his 1858 study of prostitution in New York, the social reformer William Sanger found that fully one quarter of his male respondents had visited prostitutes.¹²

In the transition from the male-dominated homosocial world of gold rush California to the settled domestic Victorian discipline of California of the 1870s, the Chinese represented a third sex—an alternative or imagined sexuality that was potentially subversive and disruptive to the emergent heterosexual orthodoxy. The Oriental in America could be imagined as an erotic threat to domestic tranquility for two related reasons. First, during the later decades of the nineteenth century, more than 10,000 Chinese women were brought, for the most part forcibly, to the United States as prostitutes. The Chinese prostitute embodied the available and mute but proletarianized sexuality that mirrored the exoticized female long displayed in the Western literary tradition of Orientalism. If not contained by race, this image of female sexuality, uninhibited albeit coerced, threatened to undermine the image of the passionless True Woman as the moral center of the chaste and obedient social order. Second, thousands of Chinese immigrant men, displaced from earlier employment in manufacturing, agriculture, or mining, entered the new middle-class family as household servants. This entry into the domestic sphere not only displaced female labor (more often than not, female, Irish immigrant workers) but, by opening up possibilities for relations of intimacy and desire across race and class, also threatened to disrupt the patriarchal hierarchy of the family.

THE SILENCED PRESENCE OF CHINESE WOMEN

During the middle and later decades of the nineteenth century, thousands of Chinese and later Japanese women were brought to the United States, often under brutally coercive conditions, to labor as prostitutes. In the 1870s and '80s, the figure of the Chinese or Japanese prostitute as a conduit of disease and social decay was sensationalized in newspaper accounts, magazine articles, and official inquiries into the social hygiene of the new cities of the West. Renewing fears of moral and racial pollution, "Chinese" prostitution became a significant political issue in California and a major weapon of those supporting the prohibition of Chinese (and later other Asian) immigration to the United States. The first act limiting Chinese immigration was the Page Act of 1870, which ostensibly prohibited "Chinese, Japanese, and Mongolian women" from being brought to or entering the United States to "engage in immoral or licentious activities." The Page Act, on the presumption of bad character and immoral purpose, required all Chinese women who wished to come to the United States to submit to lengthy and humiliating interrogations of their character prior to being issued a visa in China. The Page Act effectively closed off the immigration of Chinese wives of immigrants already in the United States. But it did little to stop the illegal trade in women, which was protected by corrupt officials on both sides of the Pacific.

The perception of Chinese prostitution as a widespread threat to the nation's moral and physical well-being was greatly exaggerated. At the peak of Chinese prostitution in the late 1870s, Lucie Cheng reports, some 900 Chinese women in San Francisco worked as prostitutes.¹³ The number of Chinese (or other Asian) women who worked as prostitutes other than on the West Coast, however, was quite small. Although New York's Chinatown gained notoriety for prostitution, opium smoking, and gambling, the social reformers Helen Campbell and Thomas Knox reported that only three of the prostitutes in the quarter were Chinese, while the overwhelming number of prostitutes who worked there were white.¹⁴ Anne Butler found that only three of the several hundred prostitutes working in Denver in 1875 were classified as "Oriental."¹⁵

Nevertheless, the image of the Chinese prostitute as a source of pollution was considered a matter of

urgent concern. Chinese prostitutes were said to constitute a particular threat to the physical and moral development of young white boys. In San Francisco, the Public Health Committee investigating conditions in Chinatown in 1870 professed shock that boys as young as ten could afford and did regularly use the services of the lowest level of Chinese prostitutes.¹⁶ In a popular environment in which theories of national culture were freely combined with theories of germs and social hygiene, it was asserted by some public health authorities that Chinese prostitutes were the racially special carriers of more virulent and deadly strains of venereal disease. The general public tended to ignore the reality and focus on the sensational accounts that fueled the perception of a social crisis.

While highly visible as a symbol in the popular discourse of urban social crisis, the Chinese woman is an almost invisible and absolutely voiceless figure in nineteenth-century popular entertainment. Unlike the figure of "John Chinaman" about whom much is sung, the figure of "China Mary" as Chinese women were often called, is virtually absent in popular songs. One looks in vain for the Chinese prostitute as the subject of some of the several hundred lewd or bawdy songs documented from the period. Perhaps the songs in which she appeared have vanished; more likely they did not exist. . . .

The Chinese prostitute could not be made a subject of popular entertainment in the nineteenth century because such publicity would unveil the complex homosocial exchange between Chinese men and white men that made possible the profitable exchange of Chinese women's bodies as a commodity. In China, Chinese girls could be bought from their often destitute parents for as little as \$40 and resold to brothels in San Francisco for as much as \$2500. The huge profits involved in this illegal but low-risk trade created a web of exchange between Chinese merchants, brothel owners, and tong members on the one hand and white sea captains, immigration officials, policemen, and politicians on the other. The exchange was not limited to the merely economic, but extended to a shared sexual desire for the bodies of Chinese women. This exchange of commodity and desire created a homosocial bond that was both forbidden and unspeakable.

When the Chinese woman was portrayed at all, she was portrayed as victimized, passive, and silent. The Chinese woman in California, whether a prostitute

or the wife of a merchant, was invariably represented in short stories and magazines, such as *The Overland Monthly*, or in travelers' descriptions of Chinese life in California as a silent and isolated figure. The voicelessness of the Chinese woman in American popular culture served the purposes not only of her exploiters but also of her would-be rescuers. . . . For the social purity reformers, the image of the mute Chinese woman bound to sexual enslavement, which no doubt accurately described many but not all Chinese prostitutes in nineteenth-century America, served as synecdoche for all prostitutes, indeed for all women whose passionless True Womanhood was at the mercy of predatory male sexuality. The voicelessness of the Chinese woman seemed to confirm the claim to the passionless true nature of womanhood in general.

FICTIONS OF DOMESTICITY

Two short stories, "The Haunted Valley" by Ambrose Bierce and "Poor Ah Toy" by Mary Mote, which tell the story of desire between whites and Chinese, and its tragic consequences, exemplify the ways in which the discourse of desire was overdetermined by race, sex, and class in the transition from the homosocial frontier to the heterosexual family. Although "The Haunted Valley" is a classic Gothic tale and "Poor Ah Toy" is a domestic fiction, both stories address the boundaries of race, class, and gender that divided Chinese and whites in late nineteenth century California.

The stories were published twelve years apart.¹⁷ *The Overland Monthly*, which began publishing in San Francisco in 1868 with Bret Harte as its first editor, was considered the premier literary magazine of the West. . . . *The Overland Monthly* was aimed principally at a middle-class audience.

The Overland Monthly paid extraordinary attention to the presence of the Chinese in California; of the eighty-two pieces of short fiction that the magazine published throughout its history, sixty-nine involved Chinese characters. . . .¹⁸

"THE HAUNTED VALLEY"

"The Haunted Valley," the first piece of short fiction that Ambrose Bierce published (in March 1870), shows that

Bierce, like his editor Harte, was politically sympathetic to the Chinese. . . . "The Haunted Valley" foreshadows many of the themes of the uncertain and the unknowable that would become the hallmarks of Bierce's better-known fiction.¹⁹

"The Haunted Valley" is a gothic tale of murder and transracial desire that turns on a sexual masquerade.²⁰ (I use the term transracial, as opposed to interracial, here to indicate that the reader is given no indication that the desire is reciprocated.) . . . Revealed through a series of interviews, the story revolves around two murders, one that has occurred before it opens and one that occurs during the course of the story.

"The Haunted Valley" begins with the narrator-journalist's interview with "Whiskey" Jo Dunfer, an old-timer who is Known for his hatred of the Chinese and his love of strong drink. He is reputed to have murdered his Chinese cook and hireling, Ah Wee, some years earlier. Dunfer is willing to tell his story to the young Eastern reporter as a way of explaining to the newcomer the "nub of the [Chinese] problem." The reason Dunfer gives for killing Ah Wee is that Ah Wee "put on airs" and refused to chop down the trees on the site of a new cabin in the manner in which Dunfer had instructed. This shallow rationale for homicide, absurd on the face of it, was one that had been accepted with full faith and credit by the local jury, which had acquitted Dunfer of any wrongdoing. The interview comes to an abrupt end as Dunfer recoils in terror when he sees "an eye black as coal" looking at him through a knot-hole in the barroom wall.

On his way back to the city, the young reporter comes across Ah Wee's neatly kept and flower-decorated grave, and discovers that the story is perhaps more complicated than Dunfer has let on. The gravestone reads:

Ah Wee—Chinaman
Aig unnone. Wikt last Wisky Jo. This monument is
ewrekted bi the saim to keep is memmery grean. An
liquisize a wornin to Slestials notter take on ayres like
Wites. Dammum! She was a good eg.²¹

When the young reporter returns to the Haunted Valley, it is Jo Dunfer who has died. On his weed covered grave a crudely carved sign simply says, "Jo Dunfer, Done For."²²

In a subsequent interview Dunfer's other hired hand, "a little cuss named Gopher" (as Whiskey Jo called him), tells another story. In his version, Ah Wee was a woman. Gopher had fallen in love with Ah Wee and had rescued her from prostitution but had subsequently lost her to Dunfer in a card game. Gopher had followed Dunfer and Ah Wee to the valley so that he could be near her. After some time, Dunfer had himself fallen in love with Ah Wee. As Gopher recounts the story Dunfer killed Ah Wee by accident when he came across Gopher and Ah Wee in what he had thought was a sexual embrace. Immediately after striking the fatal blow with his ax, Dunfer had discovered, to his horror, that the embrace had actually been an innocent attempt by Gopher to brush a wasp away from the face of the sleeping Ah Wee.

Although he had not contradicted Dunfer's preposterous story to the jury, Gopher admits to having poisoned Dunfer to avenge Ah Wee's death. After this now complicated tale is told, however, the reporter elicits the admission that Gopher has himself gone mad.

This is no simple ghost tale. In the middle of the story, the reader is led to Ah Wee's flower-decorated gravestone with its inexplicable inscription, "with its meagre but sufficient identification of the deceased; the impudent candor of confession; the brutal anathema, the ludicrous change of sex and sentiment." The inscription is an invitation to revisit the story offered by Whiskey Jo in his cups. When Dunfer says at the beginning of the interview, "You young Easterners are a mile and a half too good for this country, and you don't catch on to our play," and asserts that his story will explain the "nub of the [Chinese] problem," the derisive comment should be a warning to us that to accept, on faith, Dunfer's glib rationale for murder is to naively recapitulate the racism of the jury.

The triangle of desire between Dunfer, Gopher, and Ah Wee turns on the racialized and sexualized relations of capital. In direct competition for Ah Wee, the object of desire, are Dunfer and Gopher. The primitive pun on their respective surnames parallels the stage of primitive accumulation of capital that their relationship represents. For Whiskey Jo Dunfer, the petty capitalist, the economic structure of primitive accumulation and its homosocial culture that allow him to control both Gopher and Ah Wee are ideal. For Dunfer, the "nub of the problem" comes with the introduction of

bourgeois familial society, represented here by religion and politics. It is the church (here Bierce is forecasting his lifelong feud with what he called "organized hypocrisy"²³) that introduces taboo into the homosocial idyll. Nostalgically, Dunfer recounts that he had hired Ah Wee in the days before the onset of politics and religion, when he "had no nice discriminating sense of my duty as a free W'ite citizen; so I got this pagan as kind of a cook and turned off a Mexican woman." Dunfer claims that it is when "I got religion over at the Hill and they talked of running me for the legislature, it was given for me to see the light"—that is, the error of his racial transgression. Despite the pressure to dismiss his Ah Wee, he resists. "If I made him sling his kit and mosey, somebody else'd take him and mightn't treat him well," Dunfer asserts, revealing some concern for the well-being of his Chinese hireling.²⁴

Dunfer's view of the "nub of the problem" has some historical merit. In the 1850s and 1860s, California was still a largely male terrain. Until the arrival of large numbers of white women from the East Coast in the mid-1870s, the gender ratio in California was twelve men to one woman. Between 1860 and 1882, thousands of Chinese workers who had been dismissed as railroad builders and driven from the mines and farms took up independent employment in service industries as launderers, tailors, and restaurateurs, or worked for wages as domestics and cooks.

While the study of the anti-Chinese movement in California generally has emphasized its economic rationales, Ralph Mann's study of the anti-Chinese movement in Nevada City and Grass Valley demonstrates that it was the arrival of white women and the establishment of families that precipitated the movement in those two gold-mining communities. The establishment of family life reconstructed bachelor life in the mining towns around a new more hierarchical social and moral order. Many of the services that Chinese immigrant men had provided, such as laundering and cooking, were now performed by families, or by white women who provided services to bachelor populations to supplement their family incomes. Other, heretofore welcomed services provided by the Chinese, such as gambling, prostitution, and opium smoking, were declared morally unacceptable and provided justification for the control, segregation, and finally removal of the Chinese residents of these communities.²⁵

Dunfer's rhetorical and somewhat cynical questions "What was I to do? What'd any good Christian do, especially one new to the business?"—make it clear that racial transgression in the realm of employment is framed as a moral transgression.²⁶ The regime of the bourgeois nuclear family, reproductive and heterosexual, extends its reach by defining the boundaries between acceptable nonsexual homosociality and deviant same-sex relations. In this case, the accusation against Dunfer and Ah Wee is overtly a charge of economic racial transgression, the employment of a Chinese. In light of Dunfer's affection for Ah Wee, however, the effect of the accusation is homophobic panic. Ah Wee's masquerade as a man is no longer necessary and sufficient to protect the relationship. Ah Wee must "take on ayres like Wites" if the relationship is to survive.

This intervention of the bourgeois family into the homosocial frontier explains Bierce's insistent description of the valley not in pastoral terms but as a "twisted and blasted heath, a unnaturally foreboding place." It also explains his suggestive choice of the word "hermaphrodite" to describe Dunfer's dwelling.²⁷ The overtly racial and covertly sexual dilemma also explains Dunfer's effort to build a new cabin far back in the woods as an attempt to reconstruct a pastoral utopia in the face of heterosexual and racial discipline.

Gopher, the hired man, is described as misshapen and deformed, while Dunfer, the petty capitalist, is described as looking like he had not worked for some time, and as a prodigious consumer of tobacco and drink. Gopher's body is deformed both by his economic exploitation and by his frustrated desire for Ah Wee. The erotic rivalry between Dunfer and Gopher is intense but, given their class relations, one-sided. It ends only in the death of Dunfer and can be measured by the terse bitterness of the crude grave marker that Gopher has made for his erstwhile master. Bierce uses the figure of Gopher to represent working-class frustration, both at capitalist affection for and exploitation of the Chinese and with its own desire for the Chinese. Gopher has won and lost Ah Wee. He does not object to Dunfer's glib rationalization of Ah Wee's homicide in the public record, for to do so would also reveal his own secret desire for Ah Wee. Instead, he waits to poison Dunfer.

As a racially subordinate object of desire, Ah Wee has neither voice nor agency while alive. Even Ah Wee's

physical description is limited to Dunfer's exclamation that "Ah Wee had face like a day in June, and big black eyes—I guess maybe they were the damnd'est eyes in this neck o' woods." Only Ah Wee's eyes are physical markers of difference. . . .

Ah Wee's masquerade as a man works to protect the interracial couple as long as it is assumed that the homosocial relations that sustain it are not erotic. However, the introduction of the bourgeois family with its heterosexual orthodoxy brings with it the threat of the homophobic accusation, and the sexual masquerade becomes as threatening as the exposure of racial transgression. Thus the threat of the Chinese servant as an ambivalent sexual object reasserts itself.

Although Ah Wee's sexual identity is what Dunfer and Gopher must both keep secret so as not to reveal their (racially and/or sexually) transgressive desires, it is race and not sex that determines Ah Wee's fate. Ah Wee's death is a warning to other Chinese not to "put on ayres as White" after all. It is race that asserts itself in determining the value and outcome of this relationship. . . . The story finally turns on the establishment by bourgeois society of an immutable difference between Ah Wee's Chineseness and Dunfer's and Gopher's Whiteness. Ah Wee's permanent status as the subordinate object of desire is determined by race. Ah Wee is "won," after all, in a poker game. On the face of it, Ah Wee's race, not her sex, is the principal social marker of difference and transgression. It is Ah Wee's Chineseness to which the people upon the Hill object. It is this racial object in the first instance which makes necessary Ah Wee's sexual masquerade. As it turns out, the question of Ah Wee's sex is made moot by the jury's unquestioning acceptance of Jo Dunfer's silly plea; the public value of Ah Wee's life is measured only by Ah Wee's race. . . .

It is Ah Wee's eyes, the very same eroticized body parts that Dunfer exclaims are the "damnd'est eyes around," the physical markers of race that have "incapacitated his servant for good service," which, in death, become Ah Wee's instruments of terror. After Dunfer's scream of fear, the young reporter "saw that the knot-hole in the wall had indeed become a human eye—a full, black eye, that glared into my own with an entire lack of expression more awful than the most devilish glitter."²⁸ In this moment, sexualized and racialized difference is reified in the persistence of the sign of the Oriental body—the inscrutable eye.

"POOR AH TOY"

By contrast to the unknowable gothic of "A Haunted Valley," Mary More's "Poor Ah Toy" seems at first glance to offer a didactic and straightforward cautionary tale about the potentially disastrous consequences of miscommunication between white mistresses and Chinese servants. Historian Glenna Matthews notes that the "servant problem" dominated the pages of women's magazines between the 1870s and the First World War. Matthews writes that in the mid-nineteenth century, the "help" of neighboring farm girls who were, more often than not, considered part of the family was displaced by immigrant (often Irish) "servants" whose cultural, linguistic, religious, and class differences were pronounced. "No one was going to call 'Bridget,' as she was frequently so personified, a republican independent dependent. She was Catholic, poorly educated, and highly vulnerable."²⁹ For thousands of middle-class white families, finding a substitute for Bridget meant turning to a male Chinese servant. . . .

"Poor Ah Toy" tells the sad story of the relation between a young white middle-class matron, Fanny Siddons, and her Chinese servant, Ah Toy. Fanny Siddons arrives in California shortly after the end of the Civil War to take over the household duties of her deceased sister-in-law, who has left Robert Siddons a widower with two young children. Finding the Irish female housekeeper unsuitable and trying a series of imperfect Chinese servants, Fanny is sent Ah Toy, the young cook and houseboy of a close family friend.

Ah Toy proves to be an excellent domestic servant in every respect, a quick learner and a patient worker under Fanny's tutelage. For some time, domestic order and tranquillity are restored, and Ah Toy becomes a member of the household. When he falls ill after news of the death of his mother, Fanny cares for him as a child, much the way that she had for an old Negro slave in her father's home in Virginia. Ah Toy is entrusted with the care of the family and, in Robert Siddons' absence, is invited to join the family at the hearth.

This idyll of reconstructed family begins to unravel with the arrival of Captain Ward, a suitor to Fanny. Ah Toy becomes immediately jealous of Captain Ward. After Ward and Fanny are engaged, Ah Toy angrily confronts Captain Ward and is dismissed by Fanny or his insolence. In the kitchen after his dismissal,

overcome by frustrated passion, Ah Toy attempts to kiss Fanny's hand and to profess his love for her.

Fanny recoils in horror, saying that her brother would kill Ah Toy if he found out what Ah Toy had done. Shaken, Fanny tells Ah Toy that he must leave at once. She hires another Chinese servant, one Gong Wah, who proves to be an incompetent. Nevertheless, Fanny is distracted and can no longer sustain an interest in the household's management.

A dramatic change for the better in the condition of the household makes Fanny suspicious of Ah Toy's renewed presence. She believes she hears him singing and she thinks she feels someone touching her cheeks at night. She sends her brother on a fruitless search for Ah Toy that seems to reveal only the extent to which Fanny has been driven to distraction by her emotional entanglement with Ah Toy.

The next morning, however, Gong Wah finds Ah Toy's body in the barn. Ah Toy has hanged himself and left a note stating that he cannot bear to be apart from Miss Fanny and that he desires to be buried on the farm so as to be with her forever. This extraordinary request is granted. Fanny goes on to marry Captain Ward, but returns often to visit the grave of Ah Toy.

"Poor Ah Toy" is at one level a domestic fiction that reiterates the taboo on interclass and interracial intimacy. Like Charles Nordhoff, Mary Mote serves up a warning to female employers of Chinese household servants.³⁰ They should not succumb to their own image of the Chinese as childlike. They should be careful not to let their own "natural" kindness be mistaken for affection. Finally they should be careful not to allow servants to assume positions within the private realm of the family as surrogate family members.

"Poor Ah Toy" reverses the power relations of social history: the least socially powerful, the spinster homemaker and the Chinese servant, are the principal agents of the story. The most socially powerful, Robert Siddons, Fanny's older widowed brother, and Captain Louis Ward, a former Union officer, are given little agency in this story. In the rivalry between Ward and Ah Toy for the affections of Fanny, there is nothing equal in the social contest between the white gentleman and the Chinese houseboy. Ward has to do nothing to gain the adoration of Fanny, while there is seemingly nothing that Ah Toy can do to gain her affection. Nevertheless, at the psychological level, Ah Toy's

transgressive display of affection, his departure, and his death all have a deep effect on Fanny, the unattainable object of his desire.

Fanny and Ah Toy are economic orphans of the post-Civil War economy. Fanny is like many a young, woman from a genteel former slaveholding family, for whom factory work is unsuitable and marriage to the appropriate gentleman difficult. One of Fanny's few options, apart from teaching, for making her own living and enabling her to retain her class status is to establish herself as the surrogate mother of her widowed brother's family. Ah Toy, like thousands of other Chinese immigrant men displaced from mining, railroad building, or farm work in the 1860s and 1870s, enters the white middle-class household as cook, houseboy, and laundryman. In entering into domestic labor either as household servants or independent service providers, such as laundryman or tailors, Chinese men avoided competition with white men but competed directly with women, particularly immigrant Irish women. . . .

While it saved True Womanhood from the physical demands of the secular cult of cleanliness, the entry of men into the domestic sphere threatened to unsettle the gendered division of labor, putting men in domestic roles such as cleaning and cooking and assigning supervisory and management roles to women. The creation of the domestic male required a place for an alternative masculinity. This alternative masculinity, opposed to True Womanhood by gender and class and to the Western Hero by race and class, could be contained by racial taboo and facilitated by the assumption that the Chinese male immigrant, bereft of family in the United States, would eventually return to China. Thus a critical turn is taken when Ah Toy is orphaned by the death of his mother in China. Her death takes away the reason for his future return to China; he declares his permanent residence in the United States: "Me no go to my Chiny-place, me allee time stay here." Ah Toy's orphan status makes him available to assume a permanent position within the domestic sphere of the Siddons household, transforming him from sojourner to permanent alien. It also makes him available as both a surrogate child to Fanny and an alternative head of household.

This surrogacy is made manifest when Ah Toy falls ill and "Fanny wait[s] on him with the womanly tenderness her mother had shown to a favorite slave." This

is a clear warning that Fanny's behavior is anachronistic, better suited to the extended pre-capitalist household under the rules of slavery. The same act in the "modern" bourgeois family has been given a different meaning and has different consequences.

The construction of Ah Toy as a surrogate child accomplishes several things. It symbolically shifts him from an object of exchange, a commodity, into an imagined family member. The reader recalls that Ah Toy had been "given" to Fanny by a friend of the Siddons. His arrival had been accompanied by a note:

Now that you have undertaken the charge I am not willing that all the sacrifices shall be yours; and therefore tender to you my own private and particular factotum, Ah Toy, hoping that he will lighten your burdens as he has mine. He is cleanly, honest, faithful, but lest you disbelieve in my paragon I must own that he is unduly sensitive and has been somewhat spoiled.³¹

Ah Toy's childlike, "feminine" qualities can be safely contained, indeed inventoried and deployed in the service of the household. Initially, Ah Toy is described as "tall, youthful, comely, jauntily dressed. With a bow, this Mongolian exquisite presented a delicately tinted, faintly perfumed billet."³² Ah Toy's fastidiousness and sensitivity distinguish him from earlier household servants. "Evidently Ah Toy was of another ilk, and as complement to his exceptional tidiness, his bedroom was hung with cheerful paper, a dozen flaming lithographs were bestowed to adorn the walls, and a bright colored matting laid upon the floor."³³

Since Ah Toy's labor has restored "comfort and order" to the "storm-tossed" Siddons household, attention to his sensitivity is a small price to pay. When Robert Siddons attempts to admonish Ah Toy, Fanny is quick to remind her brother that Ah Toy is "the very center of our domestic economy."³⁴ Here Ah Toy's role in restoring the domestic economy is seen as part of a pastoral restoration; his dual role as servant and surrogate child recapitulates the role of bonded servant or apprentice in the pre-capitalist extended household. In actuality, his role as waged servant brings the entering wedge of capitalism into the bourgeois household itself.

As a surrogate child, Ah Toy can enter into the intimate sphere of the family. After a short time, Robert

Siddons leaves the family in Ah Toy's trusted and skilled hands while he travels on business. Ah Toy is able to claim a space within the family sphere.

Ah Toy, solitary in the kitchen one rainy evening, donned his best silk blouse and, tapping at the door, timidly begged leave to join the little circle. As the dog and cat were outstretched in lazy content on the rug, it seemed hard to deny the one lone servant admission to the hearth; so he was welcomed to a humble seat corner, where he shared the mirth and good cheer in a deferential way: popping corn, cracking nuts, and making ingenious little toys for the children.³⁵

In crossing to the hearth, Ah Toy is crossing the internal boundaries of race and class. Despite his trusted position as temporary guardian of the household, his permission to enter the domestic sphere of the hearth relies on his status as a surrogate child. He is not, and he is conscious of the fact he is not, the surrogate master. "Henceforth, in Mr. Siddons's absence, he often joined the group, never presuming to do so when the master presided."³⁶

Finally, Ah Toy's status as a surrogate child makes possible, and at the same time, unresolvable, the erotic tension between himself and Fanny. Establishing a surrogate mother/child relation between Fanny and Ah Toy establishes an alternative vehicle for intimacy that conforms to Victorian codes of gender and desire and thus was extremely familiar to the Victorian woman.

In the ideology of domesticity, the constrained relationship between disciplined husband and passionless wife was paralleled in importance only by the intimacy between mother and her male child. G. M. Goshagian has demonstrated the central role that an obsession with imagined incest between mother and son played in the domestic ideology of the Victorians.³⁷ The male child/mother relationship established a vehicle of intimacy and simultaneously raised an incest taboo to suppress or contain passion.

It is the confrontation between this third, alternative gender, figured as the male child, and the Western hero that is at the heart of the relations of desire among Ah Toy, Louis Ward, and Fanny Siddons. "Poor Ah Toy" directly compares this version of Orientalized sexuality with Western masculinity. Fanny describes Louis Ward, a former Union officer whom she admires

despite his former status as an enemy, as "a real Yankee, but a gentleman, intelligent, accomplished, agreeable." On his arrival at the Siddons's door, Ward is described as dark and handsome, in sharp contrast to the more elaborate and feminized description of Ah Toy on his arrival. In keeping with Victorian conventions of gender and sexuality, which assigned emotional sensitivity, if not sexual passion, to the female, Ah Toy is rendered as vastly more sensitive and emotionally complex than either Robert Siddons the brother, or Louis Ward the suitor, who are depicted as civil and restrained. In emotional terms Ah Toy is much more closely aligned to Fanny.

Ward's arrival is marked by a bold assertion of his masculinity: "Fanny's smile of welcome was more eloquent than speech for Captain Ward took both her hands and boldly kissed her lips."³⁸ It is when Ah Toy presumes to assert his own sense of racial equality and to act in the same way that the incest taboo asserts itself. Refusing a large tip for the favor of walking twelve miles to deliver the very telegram that will bring Ward to the Siddons home, Ah Toy asserts a claim to class status. "I no T-a-r-t-a-r. I allee same gentleman."³⁹ Later, frustrated by the evident permanent presence of Ward, Ah Toy attempts to use his indispensability to the domestic economy to oust his perceived rival for Fanny's affections from the position as honored guest. When Ah Toy angrily confronts Ward, Fanny rebukes and dismisses him; moments later in the kitchen, a space that Ah Toy shares with Fanny, he makes the following advance.

The yellow features of the spectator grew ashen with suppressed feeling, his black eyes glittered with a strange light, as he caught her hand and pressed the jeweled fingers to his lips, in imitation of a salute he had seen when the captain fancied himself and Fanny unobserved.⁴⁰

Fanny recoils in horror and shameful knowledge. Ah Toy's kiss has pierced the veil that has marked their relationship. The single gesture of desire violates the surrogate child/mother relationship and breaks the incest taboo, exposing the seams of race, class, and sexuality that suture their relationship.

That Ah Toy has broken the incest taboo between mother and surrogate child is made clear from Fanny's

immediate verbal response to his kiss. Her first words are, "you are a bad man."⁴¹ This is the first and only time Ah Toy is referred to as an adult. Fanny's further response is to internalize the incest violation, blaming herself as mother for the failure to successfully tutor the child: "She darted from the room, white, cold, heart-sick, to throw herself on her bed in an agony of shame and apprehension, sobbing to herself I am to blame, I am to blame."⁴²

This transgression is cathartic and transformative. Although Ah Toy has been driven from the household, his presence continues to be felt. Although Ah Toy's successor proves incompetent, the once fastidious Fanny is distracted from her duties as superintendent of the household. "Fanny bore herself to Gong Wah with an icy hauteur that astonished Robert. She kept entirely aloof from the kitchen, and refused to correct his short comings."⁴³

It is Ah Toy's racially and sexually transgressive kiss, and not her engagement to Ward, that transforms Fanny from a girl into a woman. This transformation is beset with pain, since it flows not from an orderly transition from girlish innocence to True Womanhood but from exposed desire, both Ah Toy's and her own. After Ah Toy's exile, Fanny is described as being full of "womanly shame and remorseful anxiety." Desire, guilt, and remorse have transformed Fanny. She has become

a changeling, for the frank, sunny girl had been displaced by an irritable, absent-minded, and dejected woman—a metamorphosis that dumbfounded the men to whom she was dear, she grew wan, careworn, and strangely nervous. The truth was that she was harassed by vague forebodings and by constant self-reproach.⁴⁴

The search for Ah Toy on the Siddons ranch reveals the depth of her mixed feeling for him. "The pitiable condition of the wretched creature and his presence in the valley filled her with apprehension that drove her half wild." When her "eager quest" for Ah Toy turns up no sign of him, she admits that "I have thought about that wretched boy till I am almost insane."

Ah Toy's suicide is his final gesture of resistance. He hangs himself in a manner that underscores his status as a racially defined subordinate, the racial status that

makes his desire for his white mistress impossible. Ah Toy kills himself by the very sign of his difference: "He had managed to suspend himself with the long and thick cue which had been the object of his pride."⁴⁵

Ah Toy leaves a note stating that, unlike many Chinamen who die in America, he does not want his remains to be sent back to an ancestral home in China but wants instead to be buried on the Siddons ranch. Gong Wah translates and paraphrases the note to Fanny: "He no wantee bones go back Chiney, he wantee puttee in glound here, so he allee time see Miss Fanny."⁴⁶

Gravestones mark the presence of people on the landscape. In both "The Haunted Valley" and "Poor Ah Toy," the headstones of Chinese immigrants signify their status as permanent resident aliens in America. Both headstones are inscribed with epitaphs that, reflecting the ambivalence of their authors toward their subjects, are layered in meaning. Both mark the racial parameters that simultaneously created and constrained new possibilities for relations of desire, conflating the sexual with race, class, and gender formations. The crude warning on Ah Wee's gravestone to "Celestials" not to be "putting on airs" underscores Ah Wee's subordinate and vulnerable status as a racial Other. The warning against "putting on airs" of presumptive racial equality is ironic, in the face of the "airs" of sexual identity that Ah Wee is supposed to have put on in collaboration with Dunfer and Gopher. Just below the warning, the "revealing" comment "She was a good egg," attests to that ambiguity of transracial (and more ambiguously, homosexual) desire that shaped the relationship between Ah Wee, Dunfer, and Gopher in the transition between the homosocial world of the gold rush and the heterosexual world of Victorian California. On the second headstone, the simple inscription "Poor Ah Toy" both recognizes Ah Toy's subordinate class status dictated by his race and, at the same time, is an oblique expression of sympathy for his desires. In his suicide note, Ah Toy stakes two claims, both unattainable for the Chinaman in life: The first is on the heart of Fanny Siddons, the second is for a place in America. The first is achieved simply by interment, the second by the memorial. "Fanny Siddons never returned to the spot; but Mrs. Louis Ward came more than once to see an humble grave whose headstone bore the brief inscription, 'Poor Ah Toy.'⁴⁷

DISPLACING WOMEN, DESTABILIZING GENDER

The presence of the Chinese male disrupts the fragile balances between sexes within the household, both in the realm of sexuality and in the realm of labor. On the one hand, the Oriental domestic could be made the site of homoerotic and/or multiracial alternatives to the emergent heterosexual and monoracial orthodoxy of Victorian America. At the same time, the employment of the male Chinese servant to do "woman's work" destabilized the gendered nature of labor. . . .

Boycotts of industrial and agricultural employers of Chinese led Chinese to seek employment in the home or to open small businesses in industries most identified with "woman's work." In both "The Haunted Valley" and "Poor Ah Toy," the Chinese immigrant enters and displaces a non-Chinese woman (in the first case, Mexican, and in the second, Irish). . . .

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