Introduction

BILLY: *Oh, it's a long story. I'll tell you all about it later. But look at her. Isn't she sweet?*

MRS. BENSON: *She certainly is. But what are we going to do with her?*

BILLY: *She can live here in the house with us?*

MING TOY: *I stay here in this house?*

EAST IS WEST

In the 1930 film *East Is West*, international businessman Billy Benson brings a Chinese sing-song girl, Ming Toy, into his parental home. While abroad in China, Benson had urged his Chinese American friend Lo Sang Kee to buy Ming Toy from a notorious Chinese American gangster in order to protect her. Kee originally agrees to keep Ming Toy at his house in San Francisco's Chinatown. However, she starts to become a problem—the Chinatown missionaries believe that she is a prostitute because of the way she behaves. Ming Toy unabashedly flirts with men on the street as she sits on Kee's balcony. The film's crisis begins with the question of Ming Toy's presence in the Benson home and spirals downward from there. Will Ming Toy's living in the Benson home compromise the racial and moral integrity of the white American family? Most troubling is Billy Benson's budding romance with Ming Toy, which raises the question of whether white racial purity can be preserved: will the American family of the future be interracial? Having stirred up all these fears, the film seems to put them to rest at the end. In the bizarre final plot twist of *East Is West*, Ming Toy is not Chinese after all but white. It turns out that she was adopted as a young child by a Chinese family after her missionary parents died in China.

While through this plot device the film seems to eradicate fears of miscegenation, its unique racial drama actually presents a subversive commentary on white women's sexuality, particularly their autonomy. This suggestion of the sexual autonomy of the white female, of her capacity to indulge in "wild" sexual behavior typically associated only with the exotic Oriental female, was an equally, if not more, anxiety-provoking idea than that of a Chinese prostitute in the white American home. The film implies that since a white woman can so convincingly appear "Asian," then perhaps the gulf that seemingly separates them is not so great after all. The female behavior associated with Asian women may actually be shared by all women, regardless of race. *East Is West* reveals how rapidly the distance between East and West may contract to a dangerous proximity in two ways. First, the Asian Other easily passes through the United States' national borders and can threaten to actually change not just the racial composition of the nation but also white gender and sexual norms. She can penetrate the white domestic space and might indeed lure the white American male into a forbidden interracial tryst that would pollute the white race. And second, even after she is revealed to be white herself, "Ming Toy" still is a threatening female in the sense that she has displayed, seemingly effortlessly, the sexual behavior associated with Asian women.

The film, in a strong sense, represents the radical possibilities of East and West merging and in doing so exposes the possibility that the greatest threat to the nation and the home may be not necessarily the foreign Other but something that resides within the nation already as a constituent part of its assumed white racial identity.

Hence the inspiration for the title of my book comes from this 1930 Hollywood film, a film initially barred from commercial release in the United States by the Motion Picture Production Code because of its depiction of Chinese-white miscegenation. Yet, as I argue in a detailed analysis of the film in chapter 1, I believe that a more subtle, unconscious motive for its censorship might have been that it presented white and Chinese female

sexual identity as similar in essential ways. This instance of cinematic censorship was only part of a larger system of control and surveillance of not just Asian women but also white women, a mechanism put in place to contain the threat of modern female sexuality. Social and legal surveillance and control over Asian immigrant women and white women between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were primarily rationalized as protecting the white family, either from the sexual and racial infiltration of Chinese prostitutes or from the immorality of sexually promiscuous white women who refused to conform to the standards of respectable white femininity. *East Is West* presents fears not only of Asiatic female sexuality but also of the fragility of white racial and gender norms in the modern world. Together these anxieties represent an overriding ontological fear: that of modernity itself. As I show, in this period in the United States, fears of modernity's profound changes found voice precisely through articulations of mutual encounters, real and imagined, between Asia and America.

In the books and films I examine, "Asia" and "America" both took on an array of imaginative projections that tested the capaciousness of American modernity—white and Asian subjects defined their respective racialized formations of modern identity, femininity, masculinity, and sexuality through and against each other. These attempts by Asians and white Americans at understanding better their new locations in modern history reveal anxiety about the nation's changing domestic makeup and sociocultural life. Books written at the time, such as Lothrop Stoddard's *The Rising Tide of Color* and Madison Grant's *The Passing of the Great Race*, warned of the imminent decline of the US nation and its culture should the United States continue to allow the immigration of nonwhite and non-Anglo-Saxon people from Asia and eastern and southern Europe.[1] Stoddard and Grant and their supporters were especially afraid that these new immigrants would inevitably mix with Anglo-Americans, resulting in the racial mongrelization of America. As a result, notions of white racial purity depended heavily on the

maintenance of the cultural, racial, and social norms evinced in the space of the white family and home.

White women usually bore the greatest burden of maintaining the family's racial and sexual purity; the regulatory regimes enacted to control white female sexuality in the early twentieth century resulted directly from fears that white women could not, in fact, discipline themselves. They were deemed constitutionally susceptible to giving in to sexual behaviors that defied social norms and proprieties. But white men also bore some responsibility for upholding racial purity: they were charged with embodying the proper identifications of masculinity, strength, and virility and were to steel themselves against the temptations presented by the Ming Toys of the world. Whiteness thus was defined according to a set of proper and normative gendered and sexual identifications, behaviors, beliefs, and expressions that constantly defended against incursions of otherness, both racial and sexual, and "Asia" seemed to present a particularly alluring and dangerous otherness. Equally important, however, along with my inquiries into how white American men and women imagined their gendered and sexual lives through a comparison with Asians, I also look through the other end of this scope to examine the ways Asians, through their real and imagined relations with white Americans, reconsidered their own racial and cultural identities, particularly in the realms of gender and sexuality. My book thus asks how *both* Asian and white genders, sexualities, and domesticities come together in a deciphering of race, and how these formations continually intersect in ways that are sometimes oppositional and sometimes collaborative and integrative.

Rereading Racial, Gendered, and Sexual Formations through Asian Exclusion

The racial exclusion of Asians should be seen as a symptom of the crisis in America's management of race, gender, and sexuality that was unfolding within the nation itself in the early

twentieth century. In this crisis, the sexual, gendered, and reproductive regulation of Asian men and women as offsetting "Others" helped construct and normalize white sexuality and domesticities. In fact, the American notions of Asians as sexually deviant (usually the extremes of asexual or hypersexual) that still exist today came out of the historical conditions of Asian immigration and settlement in the United States during the early twentieth century.

More recent historical works about the exclusion period reveal the heterogeneity and unevenness in the sexualization of Asians, particularly as it serves to repress white narratives of anxiety over sex, gender, and race. The sexualities of both Asian women and Asian men were often represented as either completely innocuous or extremely threatening, rarely as anything in between. Representations of Asian women in the late nineteenth through the early twentieth centuries introduced the figure of the submissive and docile Japanese geisha, in Madame Chrysanthemum and Madame Butterfly. Euro-Americans latched onto these exotic Asian female stereotypes, seeing them as indications of Oriental feminine beauty and docility.[2] Since these figures, for the most part, existed "out there" in Asia, and not in the United States, they did not threaten to compete or mix with Americans in the United States. Asian immigrant women, however, were typically viewed in a different light from this nonthreatening Oriental femininity.[3] For example, Chinese immigrant women were routinely seen as prostitutes and as disease carriers who infected respectable white families through liaisons with white men, and this view affected Americans' perceptions not only of Asian immigrant women but also of white men and their families, who were seen as vulnerable to this particular Asiatic "invasion."[4]

Exclusion laws essentially codified what constituted sexually normative behavior, presumably exhibited by whites but not by Asian men or women.[5] These gendered and sexual regulations of difference between Asians and whites were therefore based on ideas of what constituted heteronormative and middle-class

sexualities and gendered identities, as well as based on race. And containing sexual behavior had its racial implications. Exclusion also shaped antimiscegenation laws that barred Asians and whites from marrying and procreating. Hence the intimate connection can be seen between the regulation and disciplining of sexual behavior and racial consequence. In this scenario, racial identity signaled sexuality. Yet just as racial identities were multivalent, so were the sexual characteristics associated with them. For instance, exclusionary and restrictive laws depended on the social construction of Asian men as sexually deviant and, in particular, a danger to white women and the reproduction of white families.[6] Filipino male immigrants in the early twentieth century were seen as hypersexual menaces. Moreover, Chinese immigrant men living in "bachelor societies" in the United States had long been seen as particularly suspicious because of the men's cohabitation with other men and the seeming absence of women and children in their midst.[7] Ignorant of how these Asian immigrant male communities were the products of exclusion and antimiscegenation laws, most white Americans viewed Asian males as sexually abnormal, emasculated, and even feminized. In short, Asian men were characterized as either wildly predatory or questionably asexual, both threatening and nonthreatening, respectively.[8]

My readings of Asian and American texts of the early twentieth century complicate homogeneous representations of Asian men and women during this period to argue that other, more significant and complex characterizations and articulations of Asian sexuality and gender existed. I reinterpret this period's exclusion of Asians as a point of departure from which to read the internal weaknesses of white racial and gendered identities and how those weaknesses shaped, and were shaped by, new formations of gender, sex, and race that came about as Asians in America were starting to become what we now call Asian Americans.

During these years, white women of different classes were defined by their sexual and gendered differences from Asian

women or, in other cases, actively defined their sexual and gendered identities through strategic differences from and similarities to Asian women. The early twentieth century's "girl problem" identified young unmarried white women and their sexual independence as a threat to the erosion of white domesticity. For example, my reading of the film *East Is West* reveals how the representation of deviant Asiatic (Chinese) female sexuality gives voice to the "girl problem" that was actually at the center of debates about white women and sexuality in the early twentieth century. The popularity of the New Woman and the early feminist and reproductive-rights movements sustained the notion that women, regardless of class, were becoming a problem in the maintenance of normative white domesticity.[9] In the 1920s and into the 1930s, white middle-class women's marriage and reproduction rates were dropping, lending support to the fears of race suicide promulgated by Madison Grant and Lothrop Stoddard.[10] I read *East Is West* as taking part in this debate over white female sexuality, not as simply a set orientalist piece of lurid exotica.

Similarly, white and Asian men tested out their sexual, gendered, and racial identities through each other, constructing specific national identities that overlapped with the new global definitions of manhood. Studies on American masculinity during the early twentieth century reveal representations of middle-class white men that were very similar, in their contradictions, to those of Asian men. The representations of white and Asian men within American national culture describe various cultural instances of emasculation, through either racism or changes related to gender and sexuality in the nation and often the compensatory need to reestablish and redefine a hegemonic masculinity defined as white, American, and middle class.[11] In the case of white men, the sense of emasculation resulted from a number of factors: women's growing power in the public sphere, immigration, and the rise of the working-class man. All these factors compelled a renewed claim to a virile masculinity reaffirming the power and privilege that middle-class men had enjoyed in the United States throughout the nineteenth century.[12]