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CONCLUSION

Who Gets to Be Gay, Who Gets to Be Asian?

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Afro-French philosopher Frantz Fanon described how stereotypical images of blacks can lead to a "consciousness of the body that is solely a negating activity."[1] According to Fanon, negative stereotypes perpetuated by whites are internalized by blacks and lead to the devaluation of black bodies by blacks themselves. In the process, blacks come to favor white bodies and begin to associate all positive things with whiteness while associating all negative things with blackness. Although Fanon was specifically interested in examining the centrality of negative images in controlling colonized subjects, he is hardly alone in pointing out the insipid role that representations have historically played in creating and maintaining racialized hierarchies.[2] Less attention has been paid to Fanon's other observation that constructing blackness was an inherently racist practice that also helped to stabilize the category "white," which depended on the ability to negate blackness. That is, negating blackness not only leads to the alienation of blacks but to the stability of the category of "white," by defining who is white, and therefore better.

Thus, stereotypical images of marginalized groups are not simply a way of marking the boundaries of whiteness and nonwhiteness, but a way of constructing whites as being superior to nonwhites. Whiteness as a category exists only when it can be defined as different from nonwhites not only in some fundamental and essentialist way, but in a way that makes being white better than being non-white. Once established as superior, the stability of whiteness depends on ensuring that the borders of whiteness are carefully monitored.

Similarly, gay activists, as well as scholars, have also highlighted the importance of images in constructing and maintaining an imagined difference between those who are straight and those who are not. Negative

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images of gays and lesbians also simultaneously construct "straight" as better than "gay" in some fundamental way. The resistance to visible exclusion and confrontation of negative media images has long been an important component of the gay rights movement. A part of the strategy of gaining visibility among gay and lesbian activists has been efforts to have positive gay representations in various media products as well as promoting gay-owned media outlets. Thus, the move for citizenship rights among gay activists was intimately related to the movement for cultural rights that involved the right to "symbolic presence, dignified representation, propagation of identity and maintenance of life style." Yet, ensuring a fair racial representation of the gay community clearly has not been a strategy deployed by national gay and lesbian media advocates or gay media outlets.[3]

As this book demonstrates, contemporary media products, both mainstream and gay-targeted, continue to present Asian men, both gay and straight and in both America and Asia, as having failed to be men in some pivotal way. Not only do they present Asian men as being less masculine, less competent, and less desirable than white men, Asian men are often used specifically for the purpose of helping white men, both gay and straight, make masculine claims. In media products ranging from blockbuster movies to comic strips, Asian men are used as the feminine *other* that helps white men appear more masculine by comparison. The way that gay media has conflated gay Asian American men with gay men in Asia constructs all gay Asian men as being fundamentally foreign and, therefore, different from gay white men, thus, not necessarily a part of the "gay community" that gay and lesbian media advocates desperately attempt to protect. Collectively, these media representations have helped to solidify the tendency to equate gay with white in the larger social imagination, leaving many gay Asian American men, and other gay men and women of color, outside of the definition of the new gay citizen. In doing so, they create a dichotomy between those who are "gay" and those who are "Asian." As I have demonstrated through numerous examples, one is seen as gay *or* Asian, easily mistaken for either, but never both.

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It's (Not) Just Entertainment

It would be easy to look at the media products I have examined in this book and dismiss them as being "just entertainment." However, representations of different groups in various media outlets reflect the power dynamics inherent in a stratified society. And dominant groups use media as a way of promoting a worldview that favors them at the expense of others. In fact, a significant part of the power of racism lies in the way in which racist ideologies become the basis of constructing what social theorist Stuart Hall has called "impassable symbolic boundaries" between members of racialized categories.[4] It is not surprising, then, that a recurrent theme in racist discourse is the attempt to fix and naturalize the difference between those who belong and those who do not.[5]

But stereotypes exist for reasons beyond simply marking group boundaries. I have argued that media products consumed by gay men are not simply a way of creating and maintaining racial boundaries but also a way of creating racial hierarchies within the gay community. The invisibility of gay men of color, as well as the stereotypical way that they are presented in the rare instances where they do appear, promote the belief that gay white men are superior to gay Asian men because gay white men are *normal* and gay Asian men are not. Specifically, the images of gay Asian men, both in western nations and in Asia, are a part and parcel of helping to normalize gay white homosexuality at the expense of gay Asian American men and other gays and lesbians of color. These images not only define gay Asian men as being different from gay white men but also help to normalize gay white men by specifically using gay Asian men as the deviant *other* to which gay white men are compared. Thus, the category "gay" is stabilized for gay white men by negating gay Asian men and other gay men of color. In order to understand how these images help to normalize gay white men at the expense of gay Asian men, we must begin to understand them not simply as entertainment but as a part of the larger social movement for gay rights that has attempted to normalize homosexuality.

Several observers have noted that the modern gay rights movement has largely abandoned its emphasis on *difference from* the straight majority in favor of highlighting their *similarities to* the straight majority.[6] The move toward public acceptability of non-heterosexual identity has

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been marked by making "acceptable" what had been seen as "unacceptable."[7] To accomplish public acceptability of homosexuality, gay rights discourse shifted from the freedom to express oneself sexually to the freedom to join larger social institutions. Thus, a "good gay" came to be not just one who kept to him- or herself, but one who wanted to be married and proudly wear a uniform. Presenting gay America as being similar to straight America provided gay rights activists with the ability to make claims for the freedom of sexual expression as well as the ability to make citizenship claims based on their shared sexual identity, whereby sexuality came to be not only about sexual expression but "about enfranchisement, about inclusion, about belonging, about equity and justice."[8] Yet this claim to citizenship rights depended on the ability to present gays and lesbians as being just like straights, having normal values, goals, and desires, *just like* straights. Yet what is normal can only be defined by defining the boundaries of abnormal. Who belongs is not only a question of creating boundaries of belonging, but also boundaries of exclusion.

In this book, I've argued that one way gay white men have been able to weave the narrative of being *just like* straight white men has been to present gay Asian men as the feminized other that normalizes them. In order to claim normality, gay white men needed to present gay relationships as being *just like* straight relationships, complete with all of the same heteronormative expectations surrounding appropriate gender roles for husbands and wives. Yet, when white men are presented as husbands and Asian men are presented as wives, only the gay white man is normalized through his association with masculine norms, while the gay Asian man is further marginalized through his association with failure to achieve masculine norms.

Telling Stories, Exposing Myths

As Fanon noted about blacks, many gay Asian American men do internalize the negative stereotypes about what it means to be Asian that are presented in the mainstream and gay-targeted media. The internalization of these images leads many gay Asian American men to view white bodies as being superior to Asian bodies and white men as being more desirable than Asian men. This is not a trivial concern. To be racially

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marked as undesirable is to be marked as being racially inferior.[9] Rather than being a matter of aesthetics, beauty and desirability are a measure of worth. As this book demonstrates, being marked racially inferior and undesirable has profound implications for gay Asian American men. Not only does it lead to the negation of their own bodies, it negatively impacts the way they see other gay Asian men, hinders their ability to see other gay Asian American men as potential partners, and impedes the potential for gay Asian American men to create and maintain a sense of community. Instead, the desire for white bodies can often lead to a sense of competition among gay Asian American men who come to see each other as competitors for the attention of those white men who favor Asian men as sexual partners because those white men are seen as being in limited supply.

But Fanon only tells half of the story. Dominant discourses, whether they be narratives or images, are never taken simply at face value. While it may be true that members of dominant groups have the power to shape, define, and disseminate messages that help to create and maintain racial hierarchies, members of seemingly powerless groups are not entirely powerless in challenging the dominant discourse. Rather, members of marginalized groups construct counter-narratives that directly challenge the dominant discourse and "cast doubt on the validity of accepted premise or myths, especially ones held by the majority."[10] The counter-stories told by gay Asian American men expose the deeply ingrained racism in the gay community and homophobia in the Asian American community.

Using counter-narratives about what it means to be gay and Asian, gay Asian American men actively challenge the dominant discourse in order to define for themselves what it means to be gay and what it means to be Asian in a gay community that devalues their race and in Asian American communities that devalue their sexuality. As I have argued in this book, gay Asian American men actively challenge the dominant discourse both publicly and in their private lives using a number of different tactics. In doing so, they challenge the status quo that marks them as being racially inferior to gay white men and sexually inferior to straight Asian men. Yet challenging dominant discourse is never a simple matter. Because the stability of dominant identities is also intimately connected to its ability to construct the boundaries of belonging, members

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of marginalized groups often encounter a number of interpersonal and structural barriers to their ability to confront and challenge the dominant discourse.

The men I met were not ignorant of the various structural factors that led to their marginalization or that worked to hinder their ability to challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions that constructed them as being inferior to gay white men. They were also fully aware of how to work within that social structure in order to confront racism geared toward them by gay white men. First, they understood that marginalization of gay Asian American men in the gay community had more to do with the difference in power between gay Asian American men and gay white men to define desirability. They also understood that perceived desirability played an important part in how they were able to negotiate a social and political space for themselves within the gay community. Similarly, they also understood that their options for confronting racism in the gay community were limited. The understanding that the existing racial hierarchy, as well as racial stereotypes in the gay community, made it difficult to directly confront racism, so many gay Asian American men found various ways ranging from subtle sarcasm to organizing their own events. Although I've discussed several such "everyday" methods of resistance in this book, none were more successful for challenging the racial hierarchy in the gay community than gay Asian drag.

Crowns, Heels, and a Social Cause

In their study of drag queens at the 801 Cabaret in Key West, sociologists Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor summarize the current ongoing debate among scholars of gender over drag by noting that:

> On one side are scholars who treat drag in the context of the gay community primarily as transgressive action that destabilizes gender and sexual categories by making visible the social basis of femininity and masculinity, heterosexuality and homosexuality, and presenting hybrid and minority genders and sexualities. On the other side are those who consider drag performances more as enacting and reinforcing dominant assumptions about the dichotomous nature of gender presentation and sexual desire

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> because drag queens appropriate gender displays associated with traditional femininity and institutionalized heterosexuality.[11]

While siding with the former, Rupp and Taylor also note that drag can be a way of deploying an identity for the purpose of a strategic collective action whereby a relatively powerless group can challenge the status quo. While I agree with the authors, I maintain that the two different sides of the current debate regarding drag are not so clear-cut. Drag does not simply destabilize gender and sexual categories or reinforce the dichotomous nature of gender presentations, with the former providing for a collective action and the latter supporting the status quo. My work demonstrates that enacting and reinforcing the dominant assumptions about gender presentation by appropriating gender displays associated with traditional femininity can also be a form of collective social action. In order to win drag competitions, gay Asian American drag queens rely on an emphasized femininity. In doing so, they demonstrate that "traditional femininity" itself can be deployed as an act of social resistance to institutionalized heteronormativity which holds that masculinity is superior to femininity and the racial hierarchy that maintains white supremacy. Arguing that reinforcing traditional gender presentations always leads to maintaining gender hierarchies fails to remove the social context where masculinity comes to be seen as superior to femininity and assumes that feminine presentations are always inferior to masculine ones. Gay Asian drag challenges that assumption and demonstrates that gender hierarchies are not inherent in the dichotomy of gender but are embedded within the social context where that dichotomy operates. By demonstrating that femininity is *better* than masculinity in certain arenas, and doing so within a community context where masculinity has come to be viewed as better than femininity, gay Asian drag demonstrates that gender hierarchies are not linked to gender dichotomies; also, it does not preclude the possibility that femininity can be utilized to pursue a social action, even within those spaces where masculinity is seen as the norm.

But can a drag performance really be considered a political action? Again, I turn to Rupp and Taylor, who argue that three criteria distinguish a cultural performance as a political action rather than simply entertainment. First, a cultural performance is political if it occurs in a site of contestation where cultural symbols, identities, and cultural practices

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subvert rather than maintain dominant relations of power. Performing an emphasized femininity provides gay Asian American drag queens with the arsenal to win drag competitions. Winning provides them with influence within the gay community, subverting the racial hierarchy. In addition, a cultural performance is political if it is intentional. That is, the performance itself is the medium of expression for political ideas. As this book demonstrates, gay Asian drag is a collective action orchestrated by gay Asian American drag queens in order to challenge the status quo within the gay community that marks white men as superior, more desirable, and more attractive than members of another race. Gay Asian American men do not stumble into drag because they failed to "cut it as a man," but rather because it is an arena in gay life that they can actively manipulate for their own purposes. Finally, cultural performances are political if they are staged by a set of actors for whom the act leads to an "enactment, reinforcement, or renegotiation of *collective identity*."[12] As we've seen in this book, gay Asian American drag queens make a conscious choice to enact a certain type of drag. While fully aware that there are other forms of drag available to them, gay Asian American drag queens deliberately construct the feminine persona in order to utilize existing beliefs within the gay community to their benefit.

By winning drag pageants where beauty and desirability are the criteria for success, gay Asian American drag queens challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions about the beauty and desirability of whiteness. It demonstrates that racialized desires are, in fact, socially constructed and embedded within a social context. In the same way that drag itself challenges audience members to consider what it means to desire someone of a particular sex, gay Asian drag challenges audience members to reconsider what it means to desire someone of a particular race.

Finding Home in Gaysian America

Confronting dominant discourse does more than just challenge the status quo or raise questions about existing social arrangements. Often, for members of marginalized groups, confronting the dominant discourse also leads to constructing an identity, which in itself can be a political act.

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Most studies on "identity politics" have argued that groups can mobilize around a shared identity. According to scholars working in this tradition, members of disenfranchised groups attempt to transform the dominant culture in order to gain recognition.[13] Rather than mobilizing around an "issue," mobilization occurs around a shared collective identity. The assumption, of course, is that a shared social identity exists from which to launch a social movement. In much of this literature, an identity is a given. The tendency to view identity as a given may have a lot to do with the tendency of many social theorists to view identity as something that one acquires or develops over time. Yet my work demonstrates that this may not always be the case. Rather than an identity that exists "out there," that needs to be found, for many gay Asian American men, a gay identity is not something that they "discover" or "acknowledge," but something that they must negotiate. For gay Asian American men, this negotiation revolves around a narrative of oppression. While some scholars have argued that the narrative of oppression may be limiting for gay Asian American men,[14] I maintain that a shared grievance can also be a basis for the creation of a shared social identity. Whether a group comes to celebrate or suppress their differences, within the context of mobilizing against a shared grievance toward a dominant group depends on a number of different factors. In her study of the gay and lesbian movement, sociologist Mary Bernstein found that gay organizations in New York met hostile opposition to their goals, leading gay activists to the deployment of more critical identities. In contrast, the gay men in Oregon during the same period had access to the polity and faced less opposition, leading to a less critical use of identity as the basis for the movement.[15]

Clearly, as this book demonstrates, some gay Asian American men have attempted to suppress their racial identities by noting the ways that they were similar to gay white men. But even by their own admission, this tactic rarely proved to be successful. Claims to being just like white men were often met with hostility from gay white men as well as from other gay Asian American men. As we saw in the example where a gay Asian American man attempted to claim a sexual identity as a top during sexual interactions, claims that they did not fit the stereotypical image of the gay Asian man were met with similar resistance as well, again from gay white men and other gay Asian American men. Meeting

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hostile resistance to their goals of claiming similarity, gay Asian American men highlighted how they were different from gay white men and from straight Asian Americans. Claiming difference allowed them to construct a new gay Asian American identity, different from both a gay white identity and an Asian American identity, yet at the same time embedded in both. For the men I met, it was their difference from, rather than their similarity to, both gay white men and straight Asian Americans that came to hold the central role in the way they deployed their social identity.

Rather than attempt to be integrated into the larger gay community or the Asian American community, the men I met were more interested in carving a social space that allowed them to address both their gay and Asian American identities simultaneously. Gay Asian American activists in Seattle made conscious choices about the types of events they were going to sponsor as well as about where they were going to hold these events. The founders of both gay Asian American sponsored events discussed in this book, the Mister and Miss Gay Asian Pacific American pageant and Pride Asia, deliberately chose to hold their events in Seattle's International District, the historic Asian American neighborhood. Holding the events in the International District rather than in the gayborhood accomplishes two broad goals. The simple goal was to force the Asian American community to acknowledge their existence and to force members of the gay community to venture outside of the gayborhood to other areas of the city where nonwhite gay people can be found. But perhaps the larger goal was to claim the Asian American physical space as belonging equally to gay Asian Americans as to straight Asian Americans, laying claim to their ethnic and racial identities while simultaneously claiming a gay identity that is not embedded in the gayborhood dominated by gay white men. Doing so, the organizers of the Mister and Miss Gay Asian Pacific American pageant and Pride Asia forced members of the Asian American community and the gay community to reexamine taken-for-granted assumptions about who is Asian American, who is gay, and who gets to claim a physical and social space as their own. Doing so provided an opportunity for gay Asian American men not to find a home in Asian America or gay America, or at the margins or borders of either, but to deeply embed themselves in both.

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