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## Children and the Shifting Engagement with Racial/Ethnic Identity among Second-Generation Interracially Married Asian Americans

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## RELEVANCE OF RACE:

*Children and the Shifting Engagement  
with Racial/Ethnic Identity among Second-  
Generation Interracially Married Asian Americans*

kelly h. chong

SINCE THE 1960S, ASIAN AMERICANS HAVE enjoyed one of the highest rates of ethnic/racial intermarriage in the United States.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, overall racial/ethnic intermarriages have declined somewhat for Asian Americans, while interethnic marriage (pan-Asian) rates among them have increased.<sup>2</sup> A number of works have examined aggregate trends in Asian American intermarriage over time to make sense of the structural reasons behind these trends,<sup>3</sup> but studies that focus on the subjective dimensions of intermarriage are relatively lacking.<sup>4</sup> To understand fully why people intermarry, and what intermarriages actually signal about assimilation and changes in intergroup social distance, we need to gain a better understanding of the *meaning* of intermarriage for those who choose it, especially how it relates to their sense of group and individual identities and struggles over identity.

This article explores the meanings and dynamics of intermarriage for Asian Americans by examining the experiences of a group of *interracially* married middle-class, professional Asian Americans in Chicago and their non-Asian spouses. Given that the vast majority of Asian American interracial marriages are to white ethnics—about 92 percent in 2000—this study focuses mostly on those with white ethnic partners.<sup>5</sup> By examining how ethnicity and race come to matter for these “boundary crossers” over time, particularly how ethnic/racial identities and relationships to ethnic culture evolve as they marry and begin to raise children, this article offers

insights about the ongoing struggles of Asian Americans over assimilation and identity formation, the larger context of racial/ethnic politics, and the issue of color boundary transformation in America.

Despite the optimistic hopes that their marital choices will facilitate the blurring of racial lines in America, intermarriage, far from being an unproblematic indicator of assimilation, is a field in which complex subjective negotiations over ethnic/racial identity are waged over lifetimes.<sup>6</sup> In particular, the participants' selfhoods, intimate desires, and marital choices are shaped by a tension between the continuing reality of their location within a system of racial and ethnic stratification and the ascendant multiculturalist/color-blind discourses that have made intermarriage a highly complicated arena of ethnic/racial politics. This reality is thrown into full relief when they contemplate or begin the process of raising mixed-race children, which forces a serious reflection upon their own identities. For both men and women, their simultaneous ambivalence regarding ethnic attachment *and* assimilation becomes projected onto their mixed-race children, who come to symbolize this tension as well as hopes for overcoming such tension. By also comparing the views of Asian Americans with those of their non-Asian spouses, this article illuminates the distinctiveness of the Asian American experience.

### **ASIAN AMERICANS AND ASSIMILATION**

In a country historically characterized by an intransigent black-white racial divide, Asian Americans, like Latinos, occupy an ambiguous place as an "in-between" minority group. In an attempt to better capture the experiences of these post-1960s "new immigrant" minority groups, scholars have provided alternative theories of assimilation. In contrast to the Anglo-conformity model, these theories not only embrace the possibility of a society characterized by ethnic/cultural pluralism but also posit different types of assimilation.<sup>7</sup> This includes "segmented assimilation" theory, which envisions several different modes of immigrant incorporation,<sup>8</sup> including the classic "straight-line assimilation" path followed by many light-skinned immigrant groups into the middle class, but also "downward" assimilation into the underclass, as experienced by some recent immigrant groups of color, such as the Miami Haitians, and the

“selective assimilation” process in which immigrants voluntarily preserve and draw upon certain aspects of the immigrant community’s values and solidarity to achieve upward mobility.<sup>9</sup>

For understanding the incorporation process of many Asian American groups, the notion of “selective assimilation” seems to offer a particularly useful framework since Asian Americans, as an “in-between” group in the racial hierarchy, employ the strategy of retaining and utilizing parts of the ethnic culture as a social, economic, and identity resource in an effort to navigate perceived barriers to assimilation.<sup>10</sup> Although there is no doubt that many middle-class Asian Americans are achieving mainstream economic success and acculturating despite the ongoing assignment of them as racialized ethnics by society,<sup>11</sup> we need more knowledge about the different ways this selective assimilation process is occurring. How do they navigate conflicts between different types of external constraints—imposed by both the wider society and the ethnic community—and personal desires, to forge distinctive paths of social incorporation? Which elements of their ethnic identities/cultures are retained, discarded, reappropriated over lifetimes in the service of identity making? What meanings do they give to these choices and actions, and how do ethnic attachments and identities change and develop over the years?

### **INTERMARRIAGE, IDENTITY MAKING, AND RACE**

Building on works that have investigated the aggregate trends in Asian American intermarriage, a few recent studies have begun to examine the subjective dimensions of Asian American intermarriage. One notable book-length work by Nemoto examines such subjective aspects of Asian American intermarriage by focusing on dimensions of intimate desires, affect, and imaginations that lie at the core of individuals’ choices of partners and willingness to love, all of which are shaped by racial and gender inequalities. Recent works by Chow, Fong and Yung, and Kibria also examine such subjective desires and reasons behind spousal preferences, but mainly among *American-born* individuals of Asian descent.<sup>12</sup> While the findings of these studies reveal similarities as well as some differences in regard to the respondents’ views toward intermarriage, what these studies all have in common is their sustained attention to the context of unequal

local and global structures of race, gender, and nation that closely shape the intimate desires and spousal preferences of the respondents.

My study expands on such works and contributes to this body of research in several ways: first, unlike Nemoto, who mixes the experiences of foreign-born and American-born men and women, I focus exclusively on the experiences of the second generation because I want to delineate the distinctive intermarital experiences of the second generation; second, unlike Kibria, I focus primarily on those who are already married and highlight the identity changes generated by the raising of mixed-race children; and third, I compare the perspectives of the second generation to those of their non-Asian spouses to better highlight the distinctiveness of the Asian American experience and ascertain the racial and gender dynamics within marriages. Like the above studies, however, my study closely attends to the context of racial and gender inequalities that shape the dynamics of intermarriage, and seeks to contribute to the growing literature on intermarriages and multicultural family making in America.

While intermarriage and child-raising provoke opportunities for profound reassessments and reworkings of identity for the respondents, a particularly interesting finding of this study is the degree to which many interracially married Asian American parents struggle with the contradiction between their own distancing from ethnic culture and racial identity in their early years, and the powerfully renewed desire to instill ethnic identity/culture in their biracial children as they struggle to come to terms with their own ethnicities. As these intermarried parents struggle to work out this contradiction throughout their lives and through the process of multicultural family making, the ascendance of the multicultural paradigm in the past few decades has served to ease these tensions somewhat by legitimizing the value of reclaiming ethnicity. However, even within the context of this multiculturalist framework, the profound ambivalence Asian American parents felt about assimilation is demonstrated by the differing attitudes toward ethnicity held by the Asian respondents and their white ethnic partners.

In short, for Asian Americans, the reality of racial hierarchy continues to affect their private and intimate spheres; that is, race still matters. Indeed, the prevailing discourses of multiculturalism and diversity may actually

serve to mask subtler forms and effects of racial inequality on Asian Americans, including the power of Euro-American cultural norms/standards, pressures toward Anglo-conformity, and the privileging of whiteness, all of which shape not only the respondents' intimate, assimilative desires but also the conflicted feelings they later come to develop about intermarriage. In this environment, intermarried Asian Americans struggle to forge a sense of identity for themselves and their biracial children, whom they feel cannot ultimately transcend race entirely, and so must find ways of being American while protecting their racial/ethnic status.

## **METHOD AND DATA**

This article is based primarily on in-depth life history interviews of sixteen second-generation interracially married couples in the greater Chicago area that were conducted in 2009 and 2010. The sample consists of Asian-white partnerships: ten couples with white ethnic husband and Asian American wife combination, and six couples of Asian American husband and white ethnic wife combination. According to the 2000 U.S. census, 76.6 percent of Asian American men who intermarried, or married out of their ethnic group (13.4 percent of the total Asian American population), were interracially married, and 89.1 percent of Asian American women who intermarried (24.7 percent of total Asian American population) were interracially married, so the sampling of this study somewhat approximates the larger demographic pattern.<sup>15</sup> In addition to these couples, the article also draws from interviews with several Asian American individuals who are engaged to or in long-term relationships with non-Asian partners. The Asian American respondents were individuals of Chinese and Korean descent except for three, who were of Indian descent.

The informants were located through snowball sampling after my initial contacts with several Chicago-based Asian American professional, political, and community organizations. The leaders of these organizations were key in providing initial introductions to a number of individuals and couples. All informants in my sample, both Asian Americans and their spouses, belong to the middle and professional class; all received college educations, and the majority had professional degrees, such as in law,

medicine, or business. The informants resided either in residential areas in the city of Chicago or in several of the nearby suburban neighborhoods.

All of the interviewees in this study were American-born, second-generation Asian Americans, between the ages of thirty and forty-five; they were mostly second-generation offspring of post-1960 immigrant parents, and these couples have all recently married and started to have families. Most couples had children under the age of fifteen. As offspring of middle-class families themselves, most of my respondents grew up in the predominantly white suburbs of Chicago, and attended either state universities in Illinois or private liberal arts universities within or outside of Illinois. The non-Asian spouses had similar residential and educational profiles. I interviewed all spouses individually in order to obtain particular perspectives of both men and women, and in many cases together afterward; the interviews typically lasted from two to four hours and were all tape-recorded, transcribed, and coded. The majority of interviews were conducted face-to-face in the informants' homes and often in the presence of their children, although some were conducted in a place of business. For many informants, follow-up interviews were also conducted.

This study utilizes the grounded-theory method, which is designed to generate original insights, concepts, hypotheses, and theories from data during both the collection and analysis phases, especially through careful attention to the participant's own narratives and perspectives.<sup>14</sup> Individual interviews typically began with a set of semistructured questions about the respondents' background, including childhood history, family/social environment, educational background, and general experiences growing up.<sup>15</sup> They were asked about the dynamics of their current marital/family life, including questions related to their children's identity development and relationships with their spouses. The non-Asian spouses were also asked to provide similar kinds of autobiographical information and their own perspectives on family/marital dynamics. Although the respondents were approached with a set of prepared questions I wished to cover, I tried to leave the interviews open-ended whenever possible to allow the respondents to discuss topics that were most meaningful for them. When I interviewed the couples together after the individual interviews, I left the discussion generally open-ended; this enabled me to see what subjects

were of the most significance to the couples and to observe the dynamics of the relationship.

## **FACTORS BEHIND SPOUSAL PREFERENCE**

### **THE POWER OF ANGLO-CONFORMITY AND DESIRE FOR WHITE PRIVILEGE**

Focusing on the narratives of Asian American spouses, I examine in this section some of the major contextual and subjective factors that played a key role in the respondents' decision to marry interracially. The main contextual factor that must be foregrounded is the significance of growing up in predominantly white ethnic neighborhoods and the powerful impact this had on shaping respondents' subjectivities, fantasies, and intimate desires from a young age. I focus especially on the powerful but conflicted desires for whiteness and white racial privilege that emerged as central themes in the stories of all respondents.<sup>16</sup>

The attraction of Asians, and other minorities, to the hegemonic gender ideals in the United States has been discussed by a number of scholars. For the men, the hegemonic gender ideals are constituted by what has been referred to as "hegemonic masculinity," the prime reference point of which is "northern, heterosexual, Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and a recent record in sports," the only "unblushing male" in America.<sup>17</sup> This is of course an ideal that only a few white men can approximate. As for what constitutes hegemonic white femininity, Karen D. Pyke and Denise L. Johnson, in their study of Asian American women and their engagement with white hegemonic femininities, enumerate such qualities as "verbal expressiveness . . . assertiveness, self-possession, confidence, and independence" and espousal of egalitarian beliefs, as opposed to the passive, hyperfeminine, submissive and "compliant" femininity associated with Asian females.<sup>18</sup> For most of my respondents, my findings confirm the ongoing strength of hegemonic gender ideals that prevail in growing up in a racially homogenous environment, particularly in molding basic self-conceptions and romantic/sexual desires.

Monica, a forty-year-old Korean American stay-at-home mom of two kids, was one of only three students of Asian descent throughout her



secondary schooling in the Chicago suburb in which she grew up. Although she felt that she was well-liked and considered pretty, a powerful memory from that period is her sense of intense disjunction between how she felt “inside,” American, and her external appearance, Asian. Throughout her youth, she was engaged in an ongoing inner struggle with a painful sense of split self and a hidden sense of inferiority arising from her physiological difference. According to Monica, her first “epiphany” came in elementary school: “There was a day when I was in elementary school and I remember one day looking into a mirror and seeing my face being Asian and I cried, because I had up until that time thought that I was exactly like everyone else. But I saw that I was different on the outside. This I think says a lot about the community I grew up in, what I identified with, and what I even saw myself as.”

Growing up in a world surrounded by white ethnics who were viewed as bearers of the “real” American culture, most of my respondents struggled through their childhood and teenage years with an strong sense of racial/ethnic/cultural difference, including being “embarrassed” or “self-conscious” about their culture, which produced powerful desires to “whiten.” Although these feelings did not preclude a sense of pride in their ethnic heritage, such feelings did not forestall the development of powerful assimilative yearning, which seemed to be a common denominator among men and women of this study who eventually chose to marry interracially. Indeed, although every one of my respondents reported being a target of racist slurs and bullying when growing up—some endured these as a family unit—those who weathered these challenges most effectively were those who practiced as much distancing from the Asian “stereotypes” as possible. Relating that none of the second-generation Chinese kids she knew of “wanted to be Chinese,” Sarah, a forty-one-year-old mother of two, saw herself as having gotten by relatively unscathed as a Chinese American not only because she had an outgoing personality and did not have the “typical Asian look,” but also because she always made sure that she “was positioned where no one would ever tease me.”<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, such desires for “white identification” to avoid racism seemed to have been typically accompanied by attraction to Caucasian boys from a young age. Regarding dating, almost all of the female respondents reported

that while they were not allowed to date much until college, their attraction since a young age was overwhelming to European American boys, although some did date Asian boys along the way. One Chinese American respondent and mother of two, Carla, said that even though her parents made it clear from early on that they would disown her if she did not marry a Chinese boy, she “of course, always had crushes on nice, white, cute boys with blond hair or lighter hair or blue eyes.” Another Chinese American woman, Kira, attributed a part of this to the fact that “that was pretty much all I ran into.”

It is worthwhile noting the reasons that the female respondents gave for not finding Asian males appealing. The simple “numbers” explanation, such as that given by Kira, was belied by other reasons offered; for most of the women, not surprisingly, they viewed Asian men they knew or grew up with as falling short of the ideal American masculinity. The respondents uniformly referred to the widely held stereotypes of Asian men as being “geeky” and seemed to buy into it. However, another woman made an intriguing comment that in college, she did notice one Chinese boy who was “very handsome, athletic, tall,” but that he was the “type of boy who was not dating an Asian girl. He only dated very blond girls at school. . . . He was very non-Asian.” In her view, it is not that all Asian men are unable to attain the ideal hegemonic American masculinity, but that achieving the hegemonic ideal went in tandem with complete assimilation and Anglo-conformity, including using their superior physical capital to date white women exclusively and reject Asian women. For Korean American women in particular, the reason for their lack of attraction to Asian men focused on an additional theme: their intense dislike of Asian-style patriarchy, which they believed led to injuries inflicted on women.<sup>20</sup>

In contrast to the women who frequently alluded to the nerdy qualities of Asian males as reasons for these men’s undesirability, interracially married Asian American men in my study rarely mentioned explicitly the physical shortcomings of Asian females as reasons for not marrying or dating them. However, men who grew up finding non-Asian women, especially white ethnic women, more desirable did tend to elevate white females as paragons of ideal femininity in terms of physical appearance, and even personality and character. One interesting quality that rendered

Asian American women less desirable, mentioned most frequently by Chinese American men in the study, is that Asian women reminded them of their mothers or sisters, being “overbearing and possessive.” One man, Matt, explicitly contrasted his “easygoing” and “sunny” white American wife with Chinese American women he dated, presenting his wife as everything they were not. Even though Matt did not talk of Asian women in a negative way in any general terms, his comparison implicitly placed Asian women and white women in two contrasting and separate categories: Asian women as accomplished and smart but possessive and emasculating, and white women as more free-spirited, progressive, and somehow more “evolved” in their dealings with men.<sup>21</sup>

In general, my finding is that interracial married second-generation Asian American men generally fell into a category of those who engaged in a strategy of either “denial” or “compensation” in regard to dominant American masculinity ideal.<sup>22</sup> That is, they, though not all, tended to be “compensators,” highly assimilated individuals who saw themselves as people who either transcended the negative Asian male stereotype by trying hard to achieve the hegemonic masculinity, or “deniers” people who did not believe that negative stereotypes existed or that these stereotypes applied to themselves since they were really “white.” Such assimilative tendencies often went hand in hand with a desire for women of the dominant group in society, white females, whose approval provided these men with a sense that they are successfully approximating the American middle-class hegemonic masculinity and winning societal acceptance. Although Asian American women in this study were generally highly assimilated as well, I believe my observations support the findings elsewhere that the assimilation “bar” may be higher for Asian American men than it is for Asian American women who wish to cross the ethnic/racial line in terms of romance and sex.<sup>23</sup>

Not surprisingly, some interracial partnered Asian American men seemed to harbor submerged feelings of gratitude to their white ethnic partners. The men often confessed not only that winning approval of white ethnic females provided them with a boost in self-esteem and confidence, but also that they were grateful to them for being willing to date or marry across racial lines. Jason, a Korean American, denied that he saw his white

ethnic wife as a “trophy,” but admitted nonetheless, “You think more of the person you are dating because she’s open-minded enough to go out with someone like me.”<sup>24</sup>

While Asian American men felt gratitude, one of the main concerns of Asian American women in the study regarding interracial relationships was a concern and fear about the “Asian fetish,” a situation in which Asian women become objects of heightened desire for non-Asian men. Indeed, sardonic discussions of “Asian fetish” or “yellow fever” emerged in almost every conversation I had with the women. Nonetheless, a majority of Asian American women in the study, like the men, confessed to varying degrees of uncertainty regarding their attractiveness to non-Asian men growing up, for instance, wondering if they were not asked out on dates or did not receive marriage proposals because of their race.<sup>25</sup>

It is important to point out that a desire for whitening was almost always characterized by a high degree of ambivalence for most. The respondents were often torn, at a basic level, between a sense of pride and attachment they felt toward their culture/ethnicity and the desire to achieve acceptance and white racial privilege. This ethnic pride is often instilled by their parents as a strategy against racism—in fact, many parents were often simultaneously highly nationalistic *and* assimilationist, assimilationist in that the children were encouraged to acquire whatever cultural and educational capital was necessary to succeed, including speaking perfect English and acquiring the necessary customs of the mainstream society. Such mixed messages to kids resulted in various degrees of ambivalent, if not confused, feelings about their cultures and ethnicity as well as toward assimilation, which comes to a head in relation to their own mixed-race children.

### **REJECTION OF ETHNIC SELF-DISCOVERY**

While a number of current works on second-generation Asians discuss the phenomenon of ethnic “rediscovery” in college, the interracially married couples in my study belonged to a category of individuals who did not, by and large, pursue this trajectory. Like some of the college students discussed in a number of works, individuals in my study belonged to a group of individuals who were in general turned off by the insularity and “cliquishness” of Asian American groups in college and avoided these groups.

For most, this distancing from the Asian American community also involved avoidance of Asian dating partners. Most of my respondents not only refused to limit their socializing to Asian Americans by making efforts to attain social circles outside of the Asian American community by, for example, joining sororities or fraternities, but also found no reason to change their dating patterns in college. Most respondents, claiming that they did so because it was “all they were familiar with,” simply continued the pattern of dating white ethnics or other non-Asians, to the chagrin of many of their parents, although some did “experiment” with Asian American partners during college. In fact, a number of respondents made a point to mention that college was when they came to the realization of how *American* they really were.

For many, being exposed to the “insular” Asian American groups did nothing to disabuse them of the unflattering images they held of Asians growing up; in many cases, college only reinforced such images. This is demonstrated by the fact that for many respondents, they came to appreciate fellow Asian Americans more only *after* college, particularly in professional settings. Matt describes vividly how he was awakened to the positive qualities of fellow Asian Americans only after he had the occasion to interact with them in professional settings, which gave him the chance, for the first time, to meet a critical mass of successful, well-assimilated, and “attractive” Asian Americans. He remarked on attending an all-Asian professional meeting for the first time: “And you know there was a banquet on the last night and everybody is wearing tuxedos and there are some good-looking people. First, I was noticing . . . all these women and they were like, wow, amazing. . . . After spending my whole weekend encapsulated with just Asian people who looked just like me, spoke perfect English, were successful, I felt differently than I had ever felt before, and I had that feeling with me ever since then.” For Matt, these postcollege experiences led to ethnic rediscovery, involvement in the Asian American community, and reassessment of fellow Asian ethnics, although this involved appreciation only of a select group of well-assimilated Asian Americans like himself.

On the flip side, it is worthwhile noting that while the majority of the interracially married women in my study confessed to their long attraction to non-Asian men, a number of women did assert that they would have

preferred to have dated or married Asian men, attesting to the complexity of feelings and attitudes toward intermarriage among some of the respondents. This, however, proved difficult because these women did not fit the stereotype of a “typical” Asian woman, such as Vicky, a lawyer with an opinionated personality, who said that because she did not fit this “ideal Asian femininity,” many Asian men she was interested in did not reciprocate her interest: “They find you physically attractive but once you open your mouth, they think, this one is too much work.”

### **CHILDREN AND THE REKINDLED DESIRE FOR ETHNICITY**

One of the prominent themes of this study is the renewed interest in or rediscovery of ethnic identity and culture the informants acquired upon having children. Even those who seemed to have been following the clearest path of assimilation, starting with rejection of ethnic culture/identity during youth and then intermarriage, invariably confronted the question of ethnic identity after giving birth to children. While they themselves may have wished to continue distancing themselves from their ethnicity, or to downplay its relevance in their lives, having biracial children whom the respondents realized would eventually have to come to terms with their own ethnic heritage and racial issues brought to the fore the necessity of reassessing the relevance and meaning of ethnic identity/culture in their lives. For all of the interracially married parents in my study, this took the form of a rekindled desire to engage with their own ethnic identity and learn about their ethnic culture so that they can transmit it to their children in some form.

Joy, the Korean American woman who, upon encountering Asians in college, realized she was more comfortable with whites than Asians, expressed this surprising sentiment very clearly: “Yeah, I wasn’t one of those people who discovered their ethnicity in college. . . . Well, what’s interesting now is that now that Brittney’s here, I want to know more about it and I want to push it on her.” She also added that this realization transformed her own sense of self: “I really don’t know where it came from. I don’t know if it’s because when you have a child, you feel like you have to pass something onto them, some sort of legacy or something. . . . Most of the identification for me now is my ethnic background, and it wasn’t that way before.”

Monica, the Korean American mentioned earlier who in the past struggled painfully with her Korean heritage and appearance, feels that now that she has biracial children, she finds reengaging with Korean culture a simple necessity. Although she feels “shallow” culturally, she also feels lucky that she met a guy who is open-minded enough toward Korean culture so that she can begin to negotiate it. She said, “I think I’m so American that in our marriage, there aren’t too many things that come up. You know, I don’t go to Korean church, I can’t speak Korean. But it’s funny because at my kids’ school, they do a lot of ethnic share days where you can volunteer to bring an ethnic dish or things like that. So I now actually find myself reaching deeper down to find my culture and heritage in the hopes of bringing it out to my children.” Monica added, “But it can’t be forced.” However, Monica displayed a lot more ambivalence about this issue of cultural negotiation than did Joy. When asked whether she would care about ethnic cultural maintenance had her kids been Euro-ethnic, she confessed that she would not, and that the reason she felt the need to reconnect to her ethnic culture was because her kids have an undeniable Asian appearance.

In fact, Monica recalled an incident that was highly disturbing to her. When it was pointed out to her six-year-old son explicitly for the first time that he was half-Korean, she remembered that he almost became angry and horrified, and retorted, “No I’m not!” and ran out of the room. She felt extremely sad since this recalled the time when she was shocked by her own image when looking into a mirror, and she wondered if her son was feeling what she had felt then, though she thought his reaction was curious in light of the fact that he was only half Korean. Such incidents, which made her feel as if her own son was rejecting her, precipitated her to participate more in the school’s diversity events because she realized it was important for their kids to realize that their differences were valuable. On the other hand, Monica struggles between her desire not to put too much emphasis on race/color, and her need to attend to the reality of difference, since she to a large extent desires a color-blind world but also realizes her kids will have to face the issue of race eventually.

Kira, on the other hand, seems to have had no doubts about wanting to pass down her Chinese culture to her biracial kids, even though she

herself is highly assimilated. For one thing, she received strong messages of the importance of ethnic pride from her parents. Admitting that when growing up she “just wanted to be white,” she gained an appreciation for having knowledge about her culture and for cultural/ethnic difference when her parents took the family to live in Taiwan for a couple of years when she was in high school. She said, “Maybe they [her kids] will have more of an appreciation for the crazy things that my parents do, and my grandparents too. I think it’s always good for them to have exposure to different languages and to know where their family came from, so if they do get teased, they’ll be able to appreciate some of the things that are unique about them.” It turns out however that her kids *did* get teased in school; one event she recalls was an “eye-pulling incident” where the kids in school made Chinese eyes (pulling their eyes horizontally to make them narrow) at her son, which prompted her to call the teacher to complain. Incidents like these confirmed to her the absolute necessity of teaching them about their cultural heritage.

Kira made sure to speak to her kids in Chinese from the day they were born, despite the fact that her husband does not speak any Chinese, even though she admits that it is becoming increasingly difficult now that her kids are in elementary school and are out of the home environment more often. Like Monica, Kira feels fortunate in that she has a husband who is on board with transmitting Chinese culture, but she is a bit bothered because she feels she is the one who has to “take the lead.” And as the kids grow up, she is afraid that the Chinese they learned will not get reinforced since her parents do not live nearby. Like many others, Kira sees grandparents as key conduits of ethnic culture. But Kira feels strongly that even though her kids will probably identify as mixed, it is very important for them to “know that they’re Chinese.” As I elaborate below, her husband, as enthusiastic as he is about passing down Chinese culture to the kids if his wife wants to, does not himself feel that this is as important.

In almost all the cases, the parents faced a dilemma because even though they wanted to teach their kids about their ethnic culture, it was difficult for them to do so since their knowledge of their culture was thin, starting with the language. Although Kira was rather unusual in that she was relatively proficient in Chinese, others were not so fortunate. Sarah,



the other assimilated Chinese American who feels strongly about helping her kids retain ethnic culture, experienced this dilemma keenly since she understands Chinese but speaks little of it: “It becomes hard because I really want my kids to learn Chinese. And so I had them watching some Chinese videos and reading some Chinese books early on, but then they had Polish nannies so they weren’t hearing Chinese since I don’t speak it. . . . Besides even if they learn it, who’s going to talk to them so it gets reinforced? Unless they have Chinese babysitters or something, they are just not surrounded enough by it.”

Like Monica, Sarah displays more conflict about this issue than Kira not only because she feels less fluent in ethnic culture and less connected to it—for instance, she remembers hating Chinese school as a youngster—but also because she feels torn about what should be prioritized in their education. Although ideally she would like her kids to learn Chinese and send them to Chinese language school, the reality is that time is limited, and her “overscheduled” kids are involved in many other activities she deems just as important for learning life skills, like playing soccer, which teaches them team skills and which her husband coaches. Clearly, in Sarah’s case, this sense of uncertainty is due to a combination of her own inability to transmit Chinese culture adequately and her desire for her kids to acquire the educational tools and social skills needed to be part of the mainstream.

It is useful at this juncture to reflect on the issue of fear of cultural erasure or loss on the part of the Asian American respondents. In her study of Chinese and Korean Americans, Nazli Kibria makes a similar observation; she discusses the fears that her informants had for “ethnic loss” in intermarriage that lay not only in mixing of blood but also in the “production of culture gaps or dissonances in cultural orientations and practices” within their family and marital relations.<sup>26</sup> Aside from the possibilities of conflicts and distance intermarriage would engender between the families of the spouses, Kibria’s informants were concerned especially about the potential for conflict over passing down culture to children if they married spouses who did not value ethnic culture. But while Kibria’s interviewees were for the most part not intermarried, Sarah and others, all intermarried and despite their own sense of inadequacy with regard to Chinese culture, were just as clearly concerned about the “erasure” of

their children's cultural heritage, and the major reason for this seems to center around their concern that their kids retain a sense of strong ethnic identity and knowledge of ethnic culture as a strategy against potential racism and exclusion.

Indeed, echoing Monica's story, Sarah relates how she found herself disturbed to discover that her young daughter identified racially with her father and not with Sarah. What bothered Sarah even more was an incident involving a school project that set off a major red flag for her. In a school project for which her daughter was to do research and make a presentation on China, Sarah was aghast to find out that all her daughter chose to present about China was a series of negative cultural aspects of China. She explained,

Her presentation would center around things like how kids ate bugs in ancient China and how they had slavery. It was all about negative things. So I got mad at her and said, listen, you know you are half Asian. There is so much more to say than that. Why are you picking these? Look at all these things, like the inventions that originated in China. So I told her to talk to her teacher about what she thinks of what she had so far, and the teacher said they were fine. I was really irritated by that. I was like, my gosh, you're going to stand up and you're talking about bugs and fleas. You could be talking about this invention or that; there are so many things. . . . I mean there weren't a lot of ethnic kids in her gifted program, but there was a Jewish girl there, and she did her presentation about ancient Judaism and stuff. I'm sure she wasn't talking about bugs. And what made me even more irritated was that she ended up getting a good grade. I was mad at my daughter but I was also kind of mad at that teacher.

Sarah clearly interpreted her daughter's actions, despite her daughter's young age, as reflecting that her daughter had already absorbed the subtle, negative stereotypes about China and reflecting self-denigration in relation to her Chinese heritage. Another Chinese American mom, Carol, related an incident about one of her young daughters that she found similarly disturbing and unexpected: this daughter, who is more Asian looking than her sister, announced suddenly one day that she did not like Chinese people, or anyone with black hair and dark skin, and chose a book for a school project explaining that it had light-skinned people on the cover.

In relation to the Chinese language, however, one theme that emerged repeatedly for the Asian parents was that despite their realization that Chinese language needed to be taught to prevent cultural/ethnic “loss,” Chinese would also be a useful language to learn in light of China’s current economic ascendance to the world stage. It is a language they perceived as having a great deal of strategic value. Most Chinese spouses received support for teaching Chinese language or at least did not face resistance from their non-Asian spouses for this reason.<sup>27</sup> Another interesting tension that I observed throughout the narratives is that despite the recognition that biraciality is a lot easier for kids today to handle because the world has become more “color-blind” and diverse than it was in the past, almost all of the respondents pointed out voluntarily that the luxuries of a color-blind environment can be expected only in diverse areas or in major metropolitan cities where they all chose to live.<sup>28</sup> Despite the parents’ genuine optimism regarding the growing tolerance of American society, this tension speaks powerfully to the awareness on the part of the Asian American participants of the ongoing challenges arising from racist attitudes toward people of color in America, and the need to arm themselves and their kids with strategies to battle against or protect themselves from such challenges.

### **AMBIVALENCE TOWARD BIRACIALITY**

Widespread concern about cultural/ethnic erasure that seems to be ever-present in the minds of Asian American respondents was also expressed poignantly in an unexpected manner by a few of the respondents—in terms of ambivalent feelings toward biraciality of children. Not surprisingly, the majority of my interracial married informants did not express negative sentiments regarding racial mixing per se; if anything, they tended to remark on racial mixing, especially between Asian and white races, in an optimistic, even celebratory manner, as demonstrated, for example, by their appreciation of the beauty of biracial children. Revealing their idealization of the white beauty standard, most of the Asian American respondents spoke of how biracial children were more good looking than Asian children, since they have bigger eyes and other Caucasian features.

Nevertheless, a few of the parents simultaneously expressed ambivalence and conflicted feelings about biraciality, disclosing their trepidations about the potential “dilution” of distinctive Asian racial and cultural distinctiveness. Vicky, the interracially married attorney who is intensively involved in Asian American political activism but does not yet have children, expressed her mixed feelings about biraciality in the following way:

I have two feelings about biracial kids. First of all, they [biracial kids] are the best. . . . The body will naturally select the best genes of the parents. . . . So typically, biracial children are attractive or this or that. My only concern is that I really am proud of my heritage and what one thing I would be sad about is that my children won't look anything like me. They grow up and there are a lot of beautiful biracial children and they don't look Asian, maybe they do a little bit. . . . So while I don't think having biracial kids are a bad thing. . . . I feel like I won't be able to pass on a legacy because I have children who won't physically look Asian, and other Asians won't identify with them as being Asian. Sometimes I feel guilty that I won't have Chinese kids. I want to look at my children and feel like they are little Chinese babies. I know it sounds crazy but that's one of the reasons why I wanted to marry a Chinese guy. So I love my husband, you love who you love, but I do feel a little sense of guilt about it.

Captured in these narratives about cultural/ethnic erasure is the subtext of fear and concern about the “absorption” of minority, ethnic culture into the dominant Anglo one. There are, in other words, highly conflicted feelings about “assimilation” which recognize that assimilation in the American context is still not a process of ethnic/racial incorporation occurring on an equal basis, but one that still implies Anglo-conformity for the most part. While this process may not be as problematic for past and recent white ethnic groups whose culture, values, and physiology are historically and still relatively devalued, this process is felt more as an erasure of cultural/ethnic distinctiveness.

### **DISCOURSES OF NON-ASIAN SPOUSES: “OPTIONAL ETHNICITY” AND COLOR-BLIND DISCOURSE**

While the discourses of Asian spouses illuminated a tense struggle between what they perceived as the continuing significance of race in their and

their kids' lives and a belief in and desire for a race-less/color-blind world, the white spouses in general hewed to a much more explicitly color-blind perspective. This is expressed in three major ways: by their desire to see their children as "race-less"; by their view of children's Asian heritage, and any recognizable Asian racial features, as a source of harmless "difference" and "specialness"; and by their tendency to regard ethnic identity as optional for their children.

Color-blind discourse dominated the discourses of most of the white ethnic spouses in my study. Although most of them certainly recognized that their children had "mixed" features and were biracial, one theme that dominated these individuals' narratives was the extent to which they did not want to see the kids' "Asianness" as having any special significance or consequence for them, or that race mattered that much in general. For Calvin, the husband of Carla, this meant not seeing his kids as having particular racial identification at all, or as being "raced:" "Well, my kids, I guess, I don't view them as Caucasian nor Asian, I just view them as Susan and Tom. So to say you are one or the other, doesn't make sense. To sort of force people into a box and pick, I always thought that was stupid." The striking aspect about Calvin's view is that while he recognizes the dilemma involved in racial categorization of biracial people and of people in general, he does not fully recognize the impact the external imposition of such categories has for minority groups and therefore the real potential salience of "race" for his children in their daily lives. He sees racial identification simply as something people are forced to "pick" and that "boxes them in," but which is essentially voluntary and optional, at least in the case of his children. Not surprisingly, Calvin was most shocked when one of his children, when asked during the interview, definitively identified himself exclusively as "Chinese."

While Calvin objected to "racing" people in general, for others the color-blind perspective focuses on the belief that the *Asian* racial characteristics of their children in particular does not matter. In fact, Luke, the husband of Kira, admitted that although he does now identify his kids as biracial, he had always viewed biraciality as applying only to those who were half white/half black: "There was a time years ago when a woman asked us, how do you guys feel about being in a biracial relationship? I

didn't really understand what she was asking . . . biracial to me always meant black and white, not Asian and white. I never thought I was in a biracial relationship. . . . So having kids with a Chinese, it's just that they'll grow up to be good looking kids. It's not something I think about." Although these white spouses do recognize the racial "distinctiveness" of their kids, they do not seem to believe that the Asian racial features make their kids "different" enough in any phenotypical or practical sense to warrant major concern.

This view also involved repeated assertions that they did not see their kids, nor even their wives, as "different" from them, and that it is not fruitful to dwell on the issue of race since it matters so little. When asked whether he had any comments about the challenges of raising biracial kids, Luke did not think there was anything particularly worrisome; when I brought up the "pulling-eye" incident suffered by his son in school mentioned by his wife Kira, he asserted that he did not think this was an insulting incident in the least since he thought "Asian eyes were cool." Sam, Sarah's husband, similarly diverged from his wife's perspective; directly contradicting his wife's deep concerns about their children's identity and race issues and the school incidents that were fully disclosed to me earlier, he revealed little awareness of any difficulties that came from being biracial: "Yeah, I would say that they probably have as normal a childhood as you can have—I don't think anyone at school or anything has ever said anything to them. Although they look more Asian . . . I don't think people think of them as being Asian or different or anything." He also commented on the difference that having an American last name made for his kids. When asked if he thought his kids identified with any side in particular, he said that he did not think they were much aware of their biraciality, further pointing out how his kids had mostly white ethnic friends, and said that he envisioned them marrying whites.

For most white ethnic husbands, downplaying "differences" of their wives and children involved stressing similarity of values with Asian "culture" that their wives and their families represented, including emphasis on education and high expectations regarding scholarly and other types of endeavors for kids. Sam stated that his parents were happy with his wife despite the fact that she was not white because, although his family

was not altogether uncaring about religion or race, they did care that his mate was “smart, nice looking, and educated.” In fact, his parents were unhappier with his brother’s new wife, who was white, because she did not have a college education. For many of the white ethnic husbands in my study, the elevated socioeconomic status of their wives’ families seemed to affirm their preconceptions of Asians as “smart,” “educated,” “good at math,” “more intelligent than an average Caucasian,” which they thought worked to the advantage of their children’s upward mobility. Luke also implied that the fact his son is smart and tested into accelerated classes can be attributed partly to his being part Chinese. What is suggested by these narratives is that with Asians in particular, class can come to trump race for their white ethnic spouses and families, though this may not apply as much to other races, such as blacks.

Another notable aspect of the white partners’ narratives regarding their children is their generally *laissez-faire* attitude toward the transmission of the spouse’s ethnic culture, which contrasted sharply with their Asian spouse’s far more concerned attitude. Although most of the white ethnic spouses expressed approval, even enthusiasm, of their kids learning aspects of their spouse’s ethnic culture since it made them “different” and “special” in a way that was advantageous in the current global and multicultural environment, almost all admitted that they were fine with it only as long as their spouses took the lead. When asked how important it was for the kids to know about their Chinese culture and heritage, Luke put it this way: “Okay, so I think if there is anything I can do to open up their minds, that’s good, difference is really good. So it’s the Chinese part they get because Kira is Chinese and I also find it really interesting. So I don’t really have any issues with it. If Kira didn’t push it though, I wouldn’t be the one to push it.” What seems to be implied in these comments is that the kids learning Chinese culture is almost an accidental benefit that comes from having a Chinese American spouse, but what is important is that the kids receive some kind of “global” education, including different languages and ethnic culture, and if it is Chinese, the better. Luke even confessed that if it were twenty years ago, he would probably not have been happy about his wife pushing Chinese language on the kids since he would have seen no use for it except as ethnic transmission.<sup>29</sup>

The valuing of “difference,” and the view that ethnicity and ethnic culture is a benefit that made the children “special,” “different,” and “unique,” is echoed by all of the white ethnic wives in the study. Many of the Euro-ethnic wives in my study were distinctive in that most of them appeared to be more cognizant about the issue of ethnic identity with regard to their children than were the Euro-American husbands in the study and, for the most part, were enthusiastic about helping their children engage it in some form. Many such wives, for example, were keen on having their kids learn the language of their husbands, and took an active interest in maintaining some of the major ethnic rituals of their husbands’ families, and instilling awareness about their children’s ethnic identity. Susan explained that in her family they now try to emphasize the “Chinese side of things.” She relayed a disturbing incident that made her realize the need for this: “One day at Walmart, when my daughter was about four, a big banner went up with different children’s faces and she said ‘Look mommy, that girl looks like me!’ and I said, ‘She does. She’s Chinese just like you,’ and she said ‘I’m not Chinese!’ So she visibly identified with an Asian child but that was it. That’s when I realized oh my gosh, we’re doing something wrong!” After that, Susan and her husband made a concerted effort to transmit to her kids knowledge about their Chinese identity and culture, and “really encouraged them to know that they’re different and special and be proud of who they are.”<sup>30</sup>

Even in these discourses, what is interesting is the extent to which the racial/ethnic distinctiveness of their children is framed in terms of benign “difference” that adds “specialness” and “interest” to their identity. When asked why she emphasizes the Chinese side more, Susan commented, “Well, because there *is* something to emphasize. There is a cultural difference, there is different food, there’s different clothing, and there are different stories whereas I feel like with my own background, there is not a cultural difference. . . . It’s really important to me that they [her kids] know their cultural background, to know the historical background. And you know, it’s fun—it’s fun to have something different.”

An interesting dimension was the extent to which a number of white ethnic spouses tended to contrast the “cool,” “special,” and “fun” difference of their children and their partners’ culture/ethnicity by construct-



ing their own backgrounds and their own families as “lacking” in culture and ethnic identity. Ellen specifically referred to her own family as being “cultureless,” “white-bred,” and “boring,” and stated that she had found the prospect of marrying her Chinese American husband exciting because he was “different,” a source of diversity in her life. Calvin also echoed this sentiment with his admission that his attraction to Chinese culture was due to the fact that he was “looking for something as different as possible” from what he grew up with, and never saw marrying outside of his race “a big deal,” in contrast to the considerable angst expressed by his wife about intermarriage. In Luke’s words, “I like the difference . . . I enjoy Chinese culture. I love my wife, I love her family. I think the customs are kind of cool. . . . Being married to a Chinese woman is cool.”

The white ethnic spouses are generally highly optimistic about their children’s future, in contrast to the greater guardedness shown by their Asian ethnic spouses. This is interesting in light of the fact that many white ethnic spouses are not unaware of the challenges their young children were already facing in school as mixed-race children. Susan brought up an incident where her eight-year-old son was teased about being Chinese by his classmates, which made him “really upset.” But she reasoned that the attack was not against him “personally,” but against his “background.” It was about his culture, not race. Regarding her children’s identity and personal development, she remarked, “I think it will be smooth. I think that the environment that they’re growing up in, they’re not called out on their background . . . or teased for looking or sounding a certain way. I think their peers respect the fact that they’re learning Chinese and that they were going to China.”

## **CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION**

As the putative “model minority,” Asian Americans have occupied, and still continue to occupy, an ambiguous space in the racial hierarchy of the United States and beyond. Although they are, in invidious contrast with blacks and other groups of color, upheld as model citizens whose core values and way of life parallel many of the core American middle-class values, they have, at the same time, been denied complete social acceptance

by an ongoing process of “othering” and marginalization, due primarily to their race, physiology, and characteristics that continue to render them “foreign” and not fully American.

Despite the fact that high rates of interracial marriage among Asian Americans, especially to white ethnics, have been interpreted as a possible “litmus test” of assimilation for Asian Americans, this study has reaffirmed that interracial marriages should not necessarily lead us to the simple assumption that Asian Americans, or their mixed-race offspring, are unproblematically transcending racial barriers, nor that they are uncritically being accepted as part of the Euro-American mainstream. To the contrary, this study of interracial marital boundary crossing throws into high relief the intransigent reality of society’s continued racialization of Asian Americans and thus the need to engage the problem of race for themselves and their children.

The nagging fear of cultural loss or erasure that emerged as a pronounced theme in the narratives of my respondents highlights their renewed awareness of the continuing power and dominance of the Anglo-American culture, and in general the issue of the unequal power dynamic that underlies intermarriage in many senses. Although the respondents individually work out and negotiate the issue of ethnic culture within their marriages in their own ways, the need to reconnect with their own ethnicity and to remain vigilant against cultural erasure on the part of their children attests to the crystallization of this awareness.

In line with this intensification of racial consciousness on the part of the respondents, their view about race relations and the prospects for assimilation with regard to their children is best described as one of profound ambivalence. Although most respondents, like their non-Asian spouses, display a preference for viewing the world through a color-blind lens and remain guardedly optimistic about the future of racial relations, they also cannot help but become keenly aware of the limitation of this view, given their own personal experiences and the experiences of their young children. Furthermore, the respondents were torn about the extent to which being mixed-race or multiracial would be beneficial for their children in the current environment; some believed that their kids, for the most part, had the best of both worlds, and wished to pass on the

“best” of both Asian and the mainstream culture. On the other hand, they were simultaneously worried that their kids would be subject to identity confusion and a sense of marginalization as mixed-race individuals, and suspicious about the possibility of escaping stigmatized status through efforts to connect to whiteness.

Indeed, some recent studies of multiracial individuals suggest that issues of identity are highly complicated for them,<sup>31</sup> challenging the presumption that intermarriage simply signifies blurring of color lines and social acceptance for mixed-race children.<sup>32</sup> As one study shows,<sup>33</sup> multiracial individuals of Asian ethnicities—a demographic for which analysis suggests race is mostly likely to be symbolic, optional, and costless—were among the most organized and active in recent decades in creating organizations for multiracial people and advocating for their public recognition; rather than blending into whiteness, many of them are embracing a racial minority self-conception and asserting a racialized identity. For the Asian American parents interviewed in this study, one clear theme stood out: race did matter, and physical appearance was the primary factor that influenced how their children would fare. The general belief was that the experiences of the children, and how they will identify later on in life, would depend to a large extent on how “Asian” or “white” they looked, and the preliminary evidence of this study indicates that children with more Euro-American features experience less identity conflict and insecurity.<sup>34</sup>

The other intriguing finding of this study is the divergence in discourses and perspectives between the Asian American and their Euro-ethnic spouses. Although both sides operate within a broadly multicultural discursive framework, the tension between a multicultural perspective and a race-centered one is palpably more acute for the Asian American spouse. Asian American parents indicated some degree of faith in the ideals of the current multicultural project that attempt to honor diversity on an equal basis, and hoped for the possibilities of ethnicity as being an “option” for their children,<sup>35</sup> while being cognizant of the race-centered reality that conflicted with this ideal. The non-Asian spouses, in contrast, hewed in general much more explicitly to multiculturalism’s emphasis on cultural differences—rather than race—as markers of difference for Asian Americans, downplaying the importance of race and its current and potential

consequences for their children and even their spouses. This de-emphasis on race was also often accompanied by a color-blind, optimistic perspective that was expressed in their desire to see their Asian-mixed children as “race-less,”<sup>36</sup> and a dominant vision of the future was one in which their offspring would become racially and culturally integrated due to further mixing with white ethnics or through the achievement of a race-less society.

Despite all the angst on the part of the Asian American parents, the irony is that for most of them, what actually gets passed down to the children will probably be a highly diluted form of ethnic culture, similar to what Kibria has referred to as “distilled” ethnicity.<sup>37</sup> The important point here, however, is not so much how much the second-generation ethnicity becomes removed from the “authentic” ethnicity of the immigrants’ generation, but the fact that its importance remains highly salient in our society for minority groups like Asian Americans, and that they are engaged in an ongoing process of reassessing and reevaluating what ethnic identity and culture means to them over their lifetimes, negotiating multiple cultural commitments and are reenvisioning/recrafting what “Asian,” “ethnic,” “mainstream” means within the context of their marriages.<sup>38</sup>

What form or shape this ethnic negotiation takes for these families, only time and future studies will tell, but one thing is certain: the long-term effect of intermarriage will depend on the racial/ethnic identification of the parents and their children, and this will depend, in turn, on the specific context in which the individuals are situated, including the larger context of the society’s “racial project,” the locations in which the individuals were raised, the attitude and behavior of the parents, and class position.<sup>39</sup> To better ascertain if and how racial boundaries are being blurred or new ones are being constructed as individuals negotiate their racial self-identification and cultural commitments, further research needs to be done on intermarriage and identity development with regard to individuals who are situated differently, especially in terms of class position and the race of partners.

## Notes

1. According to the 1980 census, the total percentage of Asians who married exogamously was over 20 percent, while the rate was just over 2.2 percent for blacks and 12.7 percent for Hispanics.

2. Jerry A. Jacobs and Theresa G. Labov, "Gender Differentials in Inter-marriage among Sixteen Race and Ethnic Groups," *Sociological Forum* 17 (2002): 621–46; Sharon Lee and Marilyn Fernandez, M. "Trends in Asian American Racial/Ethnic Inter-marriage: A Comparison of 1980 and 1990 Census Data," *Sociological Perspectives* 41 (1998): 323–42; Sharon Lee and Keiko Yamanaka, "Patterns of Asian American Inter-marriage and Marital Assimilation," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 21 (1990): 287–305; Zhenchao Qian, "Breaking the Racial Barriers: Variations Interracial Marriage between 1980 and 1990," *Demography* 34 (1997): 263–76; Zhenchao Qian, "Breaking the Last Taboo: Interracial Marriage in America," *Contexts* 4 (2005): 33–37; Zhenchao Qian and Daniel T. Lichter, "Social Boundaries and Marital Assimilation: Interpreting Trends in Racial and Ethnic Inter-marriage," *American Sociological Review* 72 (2007): 68–94; Richard Alba and Victor Nee, *Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).
3. Such as demographic changes, changes in immigration patterns, educational achievement levels, as well as larger ideological contexts. Also see note 2.
4. Some prominent exceptions to this include works on inter-marriage by Sue Chow, "The Significance of Race in the Private Sphere: Asian Americans and Spousal Preferences," *Sociological Inquiry* 70 (2000): 1–29; Colleen Fong and Judy Yung, "In Search of the Right Spouse: Interracial Marriage among Chinese and Japanese Americans," in *Contemporary Asian America: A Multidisciplinary Reader*, ed. Min Zhou and James V. Gatewood (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 589–605; Nazli Kibria, "The Construction of 'Asian American': Reflections on Inter-marriage and Ethnic Identity among Second-Generation Chinese and Korean Americans," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 20 (1997): 523–44; Kumiko Nemoto, *Racing Romance: Love, Power, and Desire among Asian American/White Couples* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2009); Gin Yong Pang, "Attitudes toward Interracial and Interethnic Relationships and Inter-marriage among Korean Americans: The Intersections of Race, Gender, and Class Inequality," in *New Visions in Asian American Studies: Diversity, Community, Power*, ed. Franklin Ng, Judy Yung, Stephen S. Fugita, and Elaine H. Kim (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1994).
5. See Qian, "Breaking the Last Taboo," 34. According to the 1980 census, over two-thirds of those who were inter-married were married to white ethnics, though these numbers have declined somewhat since then. Larry Hajime Shinagawa and Gin Yong Pang, "Asian American Panethnicity and Inter-marriage," *Amerasia Journal* 22 (1996): 127–52; Lee and Fernandez, "Trends in Asian American Racial/Ethnic Inter-marriage." Historically, Asian American women have married interracially at higher rates than have Asian American men, but this gender gap is considerably narrowed when simply looking at the rates among the American-born. Qian and Lichter, "Social Boundaries and Marital Assimilation."

6. Race and ethnicity are not identical categories. According to Kibria, “*Race* is a system of power, one that draws on physical differences to construct and give meaning to racial boundaries and the hierarchy of which those boundaries are a part....In contrast, *ethnic* boundaries is based on ‘perceived common ancestry, the perception of a shared history of some sort, and shared symbols of peoplehood.’” Nazli Kibria, *Becoming Asian American: Second-Generation Chinese and Korean American Identities* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002). But for individuals who are marked by both race and ethnicity such as Asian Americans, especially as “racialized ethnics,” their struggles necessarily involve a simultaneous negotiation of both markers, which are often conflated by the outside society.
7. Although this “melting pot” theory did leave some room for the possibility that the larger society would be transformed by the assimilating minority groups as well, it essentially viewed the assimilation process as one of “Anglo-conformity” to “middle-class cultural patterns of, largely, white Protestant, Anglo-Saxon origins,” and has been viewed as insufficient for explaining the experiences of various minority groups since 1965, and for its implicit assumptions of the ethnocentric superiority of the Anglo-American culture. For example, see Milton Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964); Herbert Gans, “Introduction,” in Neil Sandberg, *Ethnic Identity and Assimilation: The Polish Community* (New York: Praeger, 1973). Furthermore, this model has been criticized not only for its failure to account for the experiences of African Americans—who display high levels of acculturation but not as high a degree of economic incorporation—but also for its neglect to consider the possibility that different groups can be incorporated into American society on some other basis than incorporation into the Anglo mainstream culture. For a good general critique, see Alba and Nee, *Remaking the American Mainstream*.
8. These would depend on both the individual/family characteristics of the immigrants and the social context into which the immigrants enter, including government policies, values/prejudices of the receiving society, and the strength of the coethnic community. Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou, “The New Second Generation: Segmented Assimilation and Its Variants,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 530 (1993): 74–96.
9. Margaret Gibson, *Accommodation without Assimilation: Sikh Immigrants in an American High School* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988); Min Zhou and Carl Bankston, *Growing up American: How Vietnamese Children Adapt to Life in the United States* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1998); Pawan Dhingra, *Managing Multicultural Lives: Asian American Professionals and the Challenge of Multiple Identities* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007); Ruben Rumbaut, “Paradoxes (and Orthodoxies) of Assimilation,” *Sociological Perspectives* 40 (1997): 483–511.
10. Indeed, some scholars have viewed this as a kind of “additive” process in which immigrant groups selectively acquire linguistic and other cultural practices of

the majority culture without rejecting their own ethnic identity and culture, contrasted with the “subtractive” nature of one-way acculturation. According to Gibson, *Accommodation without Assimilation*, 25, “Acculturation may be an additive process or one in which old and new traits are blended.” Hurh and Kim, in their earlier book on Korean immigrants in the United States, introduce the term “adhesive adaptation” to describe a similar but slightly different adaptation process for Korean Americans: “adhesive adaptation” describes a process in which “certain aspects of American culture are added onto the Korean culture, without replacing or modifying any significant part of it.” See Won Moo Hurh and Kwang Chung Kim, *Korean Immigrants in America: A Structural Analysis of Ethnic Confinement and Adhesive Adaptation* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University, 1984), 82.

11. Angelo Ancheta, *Race, Rights, and the Asian American Experience* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1998); Mia Tuan, *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites: The Asian Ethnic Experience Today* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1998); Kibria, *Becoming Asian American*; Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996).
12. See note 4.
13. See Dina G. Okamoto, “Marrying Out: A Boundary Approach to Understanding the Marital Integration of Asian Americans,” *Social Science Research* 36 (2007): 1391–1414, 1394.
14. Barney G. Glazer and Anselm L. Strauss, *Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Chicago: Aldine, 1967).
15. I asked detailed questions about dating history and events leading up to their marriages, including factors that informed their spousal choices. I asked respondents to reflect on their experiences as racialized ethnics, including any experiences of racism and discrimination while growing up and as adults, including in the workplace. Specific questions were asked about the respondents’ parental influences on their lives and choices, and the evolution of their ethnic identity. The next set of questions focused on the respondents’ family/marital life, starting with relationships with spouses and children; in particular, the respondents were asked to discuss issues regarding their children’s ethnic identity development, and these questions typically prompted discourses on the respondents’ child-raising philosophies, their personal feelings about ethnicity and ethnic culture, and their assessment of their children’s experiences as biracial children. I also asked questions regarding power dynamics within their marriages, especially in relation to the negotiations of ethnic identity and culture within the family.
16. Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
17. Anthony Chen, “Lives at the Center of the Periphery, Lives at the Periphery of the Center: Chinese American Masculinities and Bargaining with Hegemony,” *Gender and Society* 13, no. 3 (1999): 584–607.

18. Karen D. Pyke and Denise L. Johnson, "Asian American Women and Racialized Femininities: 'Doing' Gender across Cultural Worlds," *Gender and Society* 17, no. 1 (2003): 35–53.
19. This included being involved, taking leadership positions in school, wearing makeup, and joining a sorority in college, though she did do some "stereotypical" things like play a little violin. She drove this point home by contrasting herself with her sister, who had it more difficult because she was more "quiet" and more "overtly Chinese" in terms of playing the violin seriously through high school and hanging out more with Chinese people. Sarah also made a point to comment that all of the Chinese American girls she knew growing up ended up marrying white ethnic men.
20. Many spoke from personal experience: Joy, who came from a broken family after her mother divorced her abusive husband, recalled that "maybe the reason why I'm not really seeking out other Asian men is that . . . I associated them with my dad. . . . I just figured every Asian guy is going to be like my father." Janet, another Korean American woman, remarked, "I think it was because I saw early on the way my dad treated my mom, and the way the guys, the men, are in this culture. . . . I was like, 'Okay, I don't want to be Korean. I'm going to dissociate myself and stay as far away from them as I can.'"
21. Compare with Chow, "Significance of Race in the Private Sphere."
22. Anthony Chen, in his article "Lives at the Center of the Periphery," identifies four gender strategies engaged by Chinese American men to deal with ideals of hegemonic masculinity in America. This includes "compensation, deflection, denial, and repudiation." Chen does not specifically discuss romantic issues in the article, however.
23. See Okamoto, "Marrying Out."
24. He also made an interesting comment that since white women symbolized the American beauty ideal, it was natural for all men, including Asians, to desire white women, whereas white males' desire for Asian women can be viewed in many cases as a fetishistic fixation.
25. Pauline, an Asian Indian woman, always thought that the reason she was not asked out on dates when young or taken seriously as a marital partner was because she was not white, though Asian Indians became ethnically "cool" to date in college. A Chinese American woman explicitly talked about her long-held suspicion that some of her past Caucasian boyfriends were not enthusiastic about marrying her because for them it came down to wanting to have "blond-haired and blue-eyed" children. Curiously distinguishing between "race" and "genetics," she tried to explain this away with a view that their preference had to do with "genetics" and not race, that is, not necessarily thinking that the Chinese were "racially inferior," but that they didn't have the right "genes" in terms of appearance.
26. Kibria, *Becoming Asian American*, 182.



27. Korean American parents seem to have to rely more on themselves and family members to teach children Korean, unless they are heavily involved in ethnic churches, which is unusual for the interracially married. For Chinese Americans, with more and more regular schools teaching Chinese, it is easier for parents to pass down the language.
28. Many respondents cited specific instances of overt or subtle racism they experienced as interracial couples in nonurban areas, reiterating their calculated choice of diverse, urban neighborhoods for the sake of their children.
29. At least one respondent, however, said that her non-Asian husband was far more enthusiastic about transmitting ethnic culture, and that was a Korean American woman Janet who is married to a half white/half black biracial man. Janet's case was extremely interesting because her trajectory involved a radical rejection of her family and her family's ways in her early adulthood for her family's restrictive ways toward women, which included marrying a man who is half black, leading to initial disowning of her by her parents. But because her biracial husband was intimately knowledgeable about the issues and challenges faced by biracial kids as he had been one himself, he took the lead in her family regarding ethnic culture, including "coaching" and coaxing Janet herself with regard to these issues, and in making sure that the kids would know about their Korean heritage, in addition to their white, black, and native Indian heritage, and take pride in them.
30. Another Euro-ethnic spouse, Ellen, also revealed some cognizance of the importance of race in saying that because her kids happened to *look* more Asian than white, it was important that they know that part of their heritage.
31. David L. Brunnsma, "Interracial Families and the Racial Identification of Mixed-Race Children: Evidence from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study," *Social Forces* 84 (2005): 1131–57; David L. Brunnsma, ed., *Mixed Messages: Multiracial Identities for the "Color-Blind" Era* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2006); David L. Brunnsma and Kerry Ann Rockquemore, "The New Color Complex: Appearances and Biracial Identity," *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research* 1 (2001): 225–46; Kimberly McClain DaCosta, *Making Multiracials: State, Family, and Markets in the Redrawing of the Color Line* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007); David R. Harris and Jeremiah Joseph Sim, "Who Is Multiracial? Assessing the Complexity of Lived Race," *American Sociological Review* 67 (2002): 614–27; Joel Perlmann, "Reflecting the Changing Face of America: Multiracials, Racial Classification, and American Inter marriage," in *Interracialism: Black-White Inter marriage in American History, Literature, and Law*, ed. Werner Sollors (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 506–33; Maria P. P. Root, ed., *Mixed People in America* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1992); Rogelio Saenz, Sean-Shong Hwang, and Robert Anderson, "Persistence and Change in Asian Identity among Children of Inter married Couples," *Sociological Perspectives* 38 (1995): 175–94; Teresa Williams-Leon and Cynthia L. Nakashima, eds., *Sum of Our Parts: Mixed-Heritage Asian Americans* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001); Yu

- Xie and Kimberly Goyette, "The Racial Identification of Biracial Children with One Asian Parent: Evidence from the 1990 Census," *Social Forces* 76 (1997): 547–70; George A. Yancey, *Who Is White? Latinos, Asians, and the New Black/Non-Black Divide* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2003).
32. Jennifer Lee and Frank D. Bean, "Intermarriage and Multicultural Identification: The Asian American Experience and Implications for Changing Color Lines," in *Asian American Youth: Culture, Identity, and Ethnicity*, ed. Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou (New York: Routledge, 2004).
  33. DaCosta, *Making Multiracials*.
  34. The degree to which looks or "race" matters is evidenced not only by the tendency of the children to identify as white early on, but also by the extent to which the Asian American parent, sometimes along with his or her spouse, obsessed over the physical features of their children. A number of participants confessed, for example, that before their children were born, the partners would speculate endlessly about how the children would look, what combination of "Asian" features and Caucasian features they would have. One Korean American respondent, poignantly indicating the power of white privilege, even confessed that when her first child was born, she felt bad for her husband because the child looked more Asian—more like her—than white.
  35. Avery F. Gordon and Christopher Newfield, eds., *Mapping Multiculturalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994).
  36. Joe R. Feagin, *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *White Supremacy and Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2001); Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).
  37. Kibria, *Becoming Asian American*.
  38. Alejandro Portes and R. Rumbaut, *Legacies: The Stories of the Immigrant Second Generation* (Berkeley: University of California Press and Russell Sage Foundation, 2001).
  39. For middle-class, upwardly mobile Asian Americans of this study, the preliminary evidence indicates that the refocus on ethnicity upon having children does not necessarily signify their categorical rejection of or hostility to the mainstream, nor a desire to develop a reactive ethnicity for themselves and their children, but an effort to craft ways to be distinct and maintain a critical consciousness of racism while being integrated with mainstream society. In fact, while recognizing the need to be proud and aware of their ethnic heritage, none of the respondents, cognizant of their status as members of the "model minority" ethnic group, desired to jeopardize their hard-won advancements into the mainstream society, and identified with the mainstream to a large extent.