

# From Undesirable to Marriageable: Hyper-Selectivity and the Racial Mobility of Asian Americans

By  
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Asian Americans are at the vanguard of rising intermarriage in the United States. Once deemed “undesirable” and “unassimilable,” Asian Americans have become the most “marriageable” racial minority group in the country. In this article, I posit that the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act altered the socioeconomic profiles of Asian immigrants to the United States, thereby making them more desirable partners in the marriage market. Further, I explain interracial “marriageability” as a social construction and document how the rising rate of intermarriage has resulted in a growing Asian multiracial population that experiences fewer social identity constraints than do other multiracial Americans. Some demographers claim that these trends reflect a “diversity explosion,” in which racial boundaries are upending, especially for Asian Americans. However, the gendered patterns of intermarriage and the persistence of racial and gender stereotypes, including the “model minority” trope in the case of Asian Americans, indicate that while Asians may have achieved racial mobility, racial boundaries persist and inhibit full incorporation.

*Keywords:* Asian Americans; intermarriage; multiracial identification; racial mobility; model minority

Interracial marriage is on the rise and accounts for one in twelve marriages in the United States. Among new marriages that took place between 2008 and 2010, the ratio narrows to one in seven (Frey 2014). That interracial marriage was illegal in sixteen states as late as 1967 makes

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NOTE: The author wishes to thank the Russell Sage Foundation for generously providing the funding on which the research for this article is based. For incisive comments and suggestions on an earlier draft, the author thanks the four anonymous reviewers and the editor of this special issue, Dan Rodríguez-García.

DOI: 10.1177/0002716215594626

these figures remarkable. In 1970, less than 1 percent of marriages were interracial, and only one-quarter of the U.S. population approved of marriage across racial lines. Today, 8.4 percent of marriages are interracial, and 87.0 percent approve. Among young Americans (ages 18–29), approval of intermarriage is near universal at 97.0 percent. The rise in intermarriage has led to multiracial populations, which gained official recognition in 2000 when the U.S. Census allowed Americans to mark more than one race on census forms. The rising trends in intermarriage, the mounting approval of intermarriage among Americans, and the growth in multiracial populations have led some researchers to conclude that the United States is in the midst of a “diversity explosion” (Frey 2014), in which racial categories may be upended altogether.

At the vanguard of these trends are Asian Americans. Once deemed “undesirable” and “unassimilable” by white Anglo-Saxon Americans, Asian Americans have become the most “marriageable” racial minority group in the country. To explain the “racial mobility” of Asian Americans, I posit that the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act changed the nature of Asian immigration to the United States, ushering in immigrants of higher socioeconomic status, and thereby changing perceptions about their “marriageability.”<sup>1</sup> Specifically, the relatively high levels of education of post-1965 Asian immigrants have affected their patterns of socioeconomic incorporation, which, in turn, have changed the way that Asian Americans are perceived by other Americans. This is especially the case for Asian American females, whose intermarriage rate is twice as high as that of their male counterparts.

The increase in intermarriage has resulted in a growing Asian multiracial population. In 2010, 15.3 percent of the Asian American population reported a multiracial identification, accounting for one in seven Asian Americans. Not only are Asians more likely to report a multiracial identification compared to other groups, but multiracial Asians experience more leeway in how they choose to identify and in how their choice of identities will be accepted by others.

The rising trends in intermarriage and multiracial identification among Asian Americans appear to suggest their unfettered “racial mobility.” However, the gendered patterns of intermarriage, the continued stereotyping of Asians as America’s “model minority,” and the gendered racialization of Asians reveal that white Americans do not perceive Asian Americans as status equals. While racial boundaries may be fading, they continue to remain salient for Asian Americans despite the high- and hyper-selectivity of U.S. Asian immigration.

## Immigration and the Changing Nature of Race

As a result of the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, contemporary immigration has changed the way Americans perceive and understand race. Once a largely black-white society, the United States now evinces a multiplicity of racial groups. Today, more than four in five immigrants hail from Latin America, Asia, Africa, or the Caribbean, which has diversified the U.S. racial landscape in an

unprecedented way (Alba and Nee 2003; J. Lee and Bean 2010). The groups that have grown the most rapidly in the past half century are Latinos and Asians. In 1970, Latinos and Asians made up only 5.0 percent and 0.7 percent of the nation's population, respectively; but by 2010, their populations soared to nearly 17.0 percent and 6.0 percent. Latinos have surpassed blacks as the largest minority group, and Asians are the fastest-growing group in the United States. Immigration is fueling the growth of Asian Americans; by 2012, the number of Asian immigrants surpassed the number of Latino immigrants in the United States (Pew Research Center 2012). Demographers project that these populations will continue to grow so that by 2050, Latinos will make up 29.0 percent of the U.S. population, and Asians close to one-tenth, at 9.0 percent (S. Lee and Edmonston 2005; Passel and Cohn 2008).

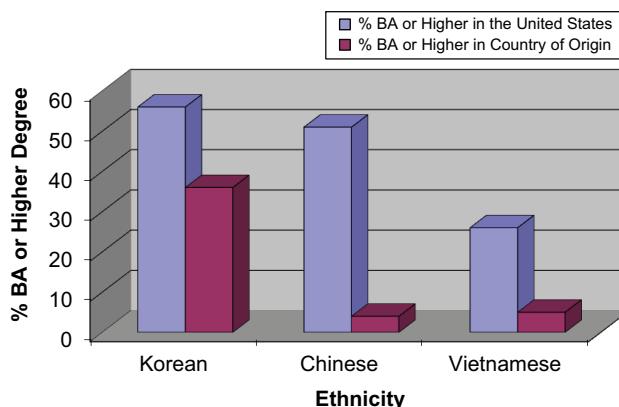
Accounting for nearly one-quarter of the U.S. population, today's immigrants and their second-generation children are challenging the way that Americans have historically defined race, by pushing racial categories beyond the traditional black-white binary. Less than a century ago, race was confined to two categories in the United States: "pure" whites and all others, as reflected in Virginia's Racial Integrity Law of 1925. The law defined a "white" person as one with "no trace whatsoever of blood other than Caucasian" and legally banned intermarriage between whites and other groups. The statute reflected the Supreme Court rulings of *Takao Ozawa v. United States* in 1922 and the *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* in 1923, in which people of Asian origin were not only classified as nonwhite but were also considered members of an "unassimilable race" and unfit for citizenship (J. Lee and Bean 2010; Sayler 1995). Underscoring their nonwhite status was the 1927 ruling *Lum v. Rice*, in which the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the exclusion of Martha Lum from a school for white children was not unconstitutional. Although Lum was U.S.-born, she was of Chinese ancestry and therefore of the "yellow" race, which denied her the right to attend a school for white children.

As "marginal members of the human race," full of "filth and disease," Asians were denied the rights of U.S. citizenship, denied the right to intermarry, residentially confined to ethnic enclaves, segregated from white schools, and, in the case of Japanese Americans, interned during World War II (Okihiro 1994; Takaki 1979; Zhou 1992). It was not until the passage of the McCarran-Walter Immigration and Naturalization Act in 1952 that Asians were extended the right to become naturalized U.S. citizens. Despite decades of institutional discrimination, exclusion, and racial prejudice, the status of Asian Americans has risen dramatically. The turning point for Asian Americans was the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which replaced national origins quotas with a system that privileged both family reunification and high-skilled applicants. The change in U.S. immigration law was a watershed moment in Asian immigration because it ushered in a new stream of immigrants whose socioeconomic profiles were more highly selected than their nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century predecessors.

### *The hyper-selectivity of contemporary Asian immigration*

Despite their ethnic and class diversity, contemporary Asian immigrants who immigrated after 1965 are, on average, highly educated (Pew Research Center 2012).

FIGURE 1  
Educational Achievement by Ethnicity



They are more highly educated than their predecessors who arrived in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and also more highly educated than their ethnic counterparts who did not immigrate; the latter condition reflects their high immigrant selectivity (Feliciano 2005). For example, if we look at the three largest East Asian immigrant groups in the United States—Chinese, Vietnamese, and Koreans—we find that all are highly selected from their country of origin. As Figure 1 shows, more than half (56 percent) of Korean immigrants in the United States have a bachelor's degree or higher compared to only 36 percent of adults in Korea, meaning that U.S. Korean immigrants are more than one and a half times as likely to have graduated from college than their ethnic counterparts who do not immigrate.

The degree of selectivity among Vietnamese immigrants in the United States is even higher than that of Koreans. More than one-quarter (26 percent) of Vietnamese immigrants have at least a bachelor's degree, but the comparable figure among adults in Vietnam is only 5 percent, meaning that Vietnamese immigrants in the United States are more than five times as likely to have attained a college degree than their ethnic counterparts who did not immigrate. Chinese immigrants are the most highly selected: 51 percent have graduated from college compared to only 4 percent of adults in China, meaning that U.S. Chinese immigrants are more than twelve times more likely to have graduated from college than Chinese adults who do not immigrate.

Rather than measuring immigrant selectivity by comparing average years of education between immigrants and nonmigrants (Feliciano 2005), I follow J. Lee and Zhou's (2014, 2015) measure and compare the percentage with a bachelor's degree or higher between immigrants and nonmigrants. Because a college degree has become the minimum requirement for a professional occupation in advanced economies, this is a more suitable measure of immigrant selectivity in countries such as the United States.

In addition, some Asian immigrant groups—Chinese and Koreans—are not only highly selected compared to their nonimmigrant counterparts but are also more

highly educated than the general U.S. population. This dual positive immigrant selectivity is what J. Lee and Zhou (2014, 2015) refer to as *hyper-selectivity*. More than half of Korean (56 percent) and Chinese (51 percent) immigrants have graduated from college compared to just over one-quarter of the U.S. population (28 percent). Moreover, both groups are not only more highly educated than the general U.S. population but are also more highly educated than non-Hispanic whites and non-Hispanics blacks, 31 percent and 18 percent of whom have graduated from college, respectively (J. Lee and Zhou 2015). Vietnamese immigrants in the United States showed a slightly lower rate of college graduation compared to the general U.S. population (26 percent versus 28 percent), indicating that while they are highly selected compared to coethnic nonmigrants, they are not hyper-selected like their U.S. Chinese and Korean immigrant counterparts. The high- and hyper-selectivity of the post-1965 wave of Asian immigrants is the most significant difference between contemporary Asian immigrants and their predecessors who arrived in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Despite the vast class and ethnic heterogeneity of the Asian American population, the high- and hyper-selectivity of contemporary Asian immigrants in the United States has led to favorable socioeconomic outcomes for Asian Americans as a group. One of the most notable outcomes is their low level of residential segregation. Once confined to crowded ethnic enclaves, Asian Americans are now the least segregated racial minority group in the country. Only 11 percent live in a majority-Asian census tract compared to 43 percent of Hispanics and 41 percent of blacks (Pew Research Center 2012). Moreover, Asian American residential segregation is highly correlated with nativity and class; native-born Asians and those with high levels of education and income are less likely to live in majority-Asian census tracks (Charles 2001, 2003). Hence, with intergenerational succession and economic mobility, Asian Americans are more likely to leave ethnic enclaves and integrate into non-Asian neighborhoods.

That Asian Americans experience less residential segregation than Hispanics and blacks means that they have more opportunity to come into contact with members of other groups, especially non-Hispanic whites. Increased intergroup contact, in turn, affords more possibilities to form cross-group friendships, to date interracially, and to marry across racial boundaries. However, while greater opportunity for intergroup contact is a necessary condition for intermarriage, it is an insufficient one. For group members to cross racial boundaries and marry, they must perceive other group members as “suitable,” “desirable,” and “marriageable” partners. Here, I propose that the change in selectivity of Asian immigrants who arrived after 1965 has altered the perception of Asian Americans from “unassimilable” to “marriageable.” In short, Asian Americans have achieved what Saperstein (2015) describes as “racial mobility.”

## Intermarriage in the United States

While marriage across racial groups is on the rise, it is still relatively uncommon and remains at levels far below those expected based on chance alone, indicating

that race continues to matter in the marriage market (Banks 2012; Feliciano, Robnett, and Komaie 2009; Fryer 2007; Kalmijn 1998; Lewis 2013). Furthermore, race matters more for some groups than for others, as reflected in the uneven rates of intermarriage among U.S. groups. Close to one-third of Asian and Latino marriages in the United States are interracial marriages, and these figures are even higher for the U.S.-born. Moreover, most intermarriage occurs with a white partner. The comparatively higher rates of intermarriage among native-born Asians and Latinos indicate that as these groups acculturate, not only do they become more receptive to intermarriage, but white Americans also increasingly perceive these groups as suitable marriage partners (Moran 2001; Rosenfeld 2002).

To account for differences in the rates of intermarriage among groups, social scientists have largely focused on structural explanations, emphasizing differences in educational attainment, residential segregation, group size, and nativity (Blau, Blum, and Schwartz 1982; Hwang, Saenz, and Aguirre 1994; S. Lee and Boyd 2008). For instance, researchers have found that intermarriage is more common among highly educated groups, not only because education reduces prejudice, but also because college campuses and professional workplaces are common sites of intergroup contact (Qian and Lichter 2007, 2011). More highly educated racial minorities are also less likely to live in segregated neighborhoods, thereby increasing the probability of contact across group lines (Charles 2001, 2003; Massey and Denton 1993; Zhou and Logan 1991).

Group size also matters: the smaller the size of a group, the greater the likelihood of intermarriage since small group size creates a limited pool of marriageable partners from the same racial group (Blau, Blum, and Schwartz 1982; Hwang, Saenz, and Aguirre 1994; Jacobs and Labov 2002; Kalmijn 1998; S. Lee and Fernandez 1998; Sandefur and McKinnell 1986). Finally, researchers have pointed to the role of nativity; immigrants are less likely to intermarry than the native-born, in part, because immigrants are more likely to be married prior to migrating, and also because they are less acculturated than their native-born coethnic counterparts (J. Lee and Bean 2010; S. Lee and Boyd 2008).

While these structural factors explain some of the intergroup variation in intermarriage, they do not account for all. For example, Latinos have surpassed blacks as the largest minority group in the United States whose levels of educational attainment are lower than that of blacks. Based on these structural factors, blacks should intermarry at a higher rate than Latinos, but Latinos are almost twice as likely to intermarry as are blacks, despite their larger group size and lower levels of education. Moreover, about two-thirds of the Asian population is foreign-born, and given that immigrant status is negatively correlated with intermarriage, we would expect Asians to have relatively low rates of intermarriage. While native-born Asians out-marry at higher rates than their foreign-born counterparts, even foreign-born Asians out-marry at relatively high rates, especially foreign-born Asian females (Passel, Wang, and Taylor 2010).

Moreover, structural factors cannot explain the vexing gendered pattern of intermarriage among Asians, which operates in the opposite direction than it does for blacks. Black males are twice as likely to intermarry as black females, yet

the opposite is true of Asians; Asian females are more than twice as likely to intermarry as Asian males (Fryer 2007; Wang 2012). The patterns are particularly puzzling because black females and Asian males have higher levels of educational attainment than black males and Asian females, respectively, but the latter intermarry at higher rates than the former. That structural factors cannot explain the racial and gendered patterns of intermarriage indicates that other factors are in play.

## The Social Construction of “Marriageable” Partners

While structural factors may provide opportunities for members of different groups to come into contact, the strength of group boundaries affects the willingness of group members to interracially date and marry. Rachel Moran (2001) made this point by positing that intermarriage occurs within “culturally accepted parameters.” Because of the history of race relations in the United States, racial boundaries are more stringent for some groups than for others (Lamont and Molnár 2002). Consequently, some group members experience more social constraints in crossing color lines than do others, net of structural factors. J. Lee and Bean (2010) have extended Moran’s (2001) argument by illustrating that compared to blacks, Asians and Latinos in the United States experience fewer social constraints in intermarriage, in part, because boundaries have historically been more porous for U.S. immigrant groups than for native-born blacks. The former have historically represented America’s narrative of individualism, optimism, and mobility, while the latter continue to serve as a reminder of the country’s ugly and contentious history of slavery and *de jure* discrimination.

This binary was reflected in the in-depth interviews with Asian-white, Latino-white, and black-white couples that J. Lee and Bean (2010) conducted. They found that for Asian-white and Latino-white couples, group differences between them were a “nonissue”; these couples did not think about their differences in racial terms, and, moreover, their differences did not affect their willingness to date and marry across group boundaries, unlike for the black-white couples. This was especially the case of Latino-white couples, in part, because Latinos can be of any race in the United States, and more than half identify as white on the U.S. Census, where Latino is not a racial category but an ethnic one. The same was also true for Asian-white couples, even though Asian ethnic groups have been distinct from whites on the U.S. Census since its inception in 1790.

Despite the separate categorization of Asians and whites throughout the history of the U.S. Census, the racial boundary between Asians and whites has narrowed. Moreover, while Asian-white and Latino-white couples defined their unions as intercultural, they clearly stipulated that marriage across the black color line is interracial. For example, a white woman married to a Japanese man explained that her parents did not raise concerns about her choice of marital partners because, in her view, “Well our whole culture is much more prejudiced against African Americans than Asians. Asians are perceived as hardworking,

ambitious, scholastically inclined, strong family, and the African American culture is the opposite. Plus Asians look more Caucasian than black people. I don't really distinguish much between Asians and Caucasians. It seems to me, anyway, that it's very blended" (J. Lee and Bean 2010). This white woman believed that the distinction between Asians and whites is so inconsequential that she sees the two categories as "very blended" because, in her view, Asians are phenotypically and culturally similar to whites, especially relative to blacks.

A second-generation Filipina woman married to a white man described that while her father warned that she was marrying someone from a different "culture," he did not voice any objections to their marriage. The woman then quickly added, "But my parents are blunt about interracial marriage. They look accepting, but no." Perplexed by her statement, we asked how her parents define "inter-racial marriage." She explained that in her parents' view, as well as her own, interracial marriage means marriage to a black partner (J. Lee and Bean 2010).

Her white husband concurred with her assessment and added, "I know my Mom and my Dad and their family, they definitely wouldn't want me to bring home certain races, but with her, they're fine." When asked what races, he replied with a laugh, "Well, like, you know, African American, a black girl. That's the one that sticks out in my mind. I mean, maybe if she looked like Whitney Houston or something, it would be okay [*laughs*]." In short, for his parents to approve of a black partner, she would have to be exceptional. That Asian-white couples perceived their unions as intercultural rather than interracial is salient because racial boundaries have historically been more rigid and durable than cultural boundaries; these couples defined the latter as differences in language, food, and customs, rather than differences across racial lines. While racial boundaries have been legally and institutionally sanctioned throughout U.S. history, cultural boundaries have not, and as a result, the latter have historically been more fluid.

The social construction of "marriageable" is not only racialized but also gendered. Asian women intermarry at twice the rate of Asian men. Furthermore, studies of online dating preferences reveal strong gender differences: while Asian women are highly preferred among male Internet daters across racial groups, Asian men are the least preferred of all men among women (Feliciano, Robnett, and Komaie 2009; Lewis 2013). Once again, structural explanations fall short in explaining why Asian women may be more strongly preferred in the dating and marriage market over Asian men, who have attained higher levels of education and higher earnings, which should make them more "marriageable."

Researchers propose that the gender imbalance observed in the composition of interracial Asian unions results from the gendered racialization of Asian Americans, which feminizes Asianness in such a way that Asian women are stereotyped as exotic, hyper-sexual, and gender-traditional and, therefore, "desirable." By contrast, the gendered racialization of Asian men stereotypes them as unmasculine and, consequently, "undesirable" (Feliciano, Robnett, and Komaie 2009; Rodríguez-García 2006, 2007; Song 2009). Kim (2008) has further argued that the gendered racialization of Asian intermarriage patterns stems from a history of unequal status relations between the United States and Asian countries.

The inequality in nation-states affects not only the gendered intermarriage patterns but also contributes to the persistence of the stereotype of Asian Americans as the model minority that has quietly, independently, and assiduously achieved mobility the right way (Wu 2013). The racialized and gendered stereotypes of Asian Americans reveal that despite their racial mobility, high levels of education, and high median household incomes, Asian Americans are not status equals to whites in America's racial hierarchy.

Hence, even decisions as personal as whom one finds attractive and whom one chooses to date and marry—which many believe is strictly an individual choice based on personal preferences—is a result of structural and cultural opportunities and constraints at both the global and local levels. These processes lead Asian women to be perceived as more desirable than Asian men, illustrating how race and gender intersect to socially construct attractiveness, desirability, and marriageability. Finally, that the gendered patterns of intermarriage occur in opposing directions for blacks (with black males intermarrying at twice the rate of black females) reveals that gender and race do not operate in the same direction equally for all groups, once again underscoring the social construction of “marriageability.”

## Asian American Multiraciality

The rising rates of Asian intermarriage have resulted in a growing Asian multiracial population, which—like other multiracial populations—is no longer confined to marking only one race on the U.S. Census. In 2000, the U.S. Census gave Americans the unprecedented option to mark “one or more” races to identify themselves and members of their households. This landmark change in the way the U.S. Census measures race gave official recognition to America's multiracial population by acknowledging racial mixture among Americans (DaCosta 2007; Farley 2002; Hollinger 2008; Morning 2011; Prewitt 2013).

In 2000, about 6.8 million Americans reported more than one race on the census; and in 2010, the figure increased to 9.0 million, accounting for 2.9 percent of the U.S. population (Jones and Bullock 2012). The figure is much higher for Asian Americans, 15.3 percent of whom identified with more than one race in 2010, translating into about one in seven Asians. The rate of multiracial identification among Asians is twice as high as that of blacks, 7.4 percent of whom identified with more than one race in 2010 (Jones and Bullock 2012), and the gap persists even after controlling for differences in age, education, nativity, gender, and region of the United States (Gullickson and Morning 2011; Tafoya, Johnson, and Hill 2005).

The history of U.S. race relations has legally circumscribed multiracial identification for all Americans by forcing a monoracial identification on U.S. censuses prior to 2000. While this has constrained the identity choices of all multiracial Americans, only one group has been legally constrained and subject to the “one-drop” rule of hypodescent—black Americans. The one-drop rule was legally

implemented to ensure that any child born of unions between white males and black females would not be entitled to the wealth holdings of the white fathers or family members (Nobles 2000). The rule nullified racial mixture between blacks and whites, by identifying anyone with as little as 1/32 black ancestry as racially black (Davis 1991/2001; Haney-Lopez 1996).

Historically, black Americans had not been able to claim that they were part black without giving up their white ancestry, no matter how large a part the latter (Hollinger 2003). And while the rule is no longer legally codified, its legacy continues to affect the racial identification of multiracial blacks (DaCosta 2007; Gullickson and Morning 2011; Roth 2005), by constraining the way in which multiracial black Americans identify themselves and, critically, how other Americans identify multiracial blacks. Americans have become critically attuned to identifying and constraining black ancestry in a way that they are not similarly attuned to identifying and constraining Asian ancestry, for example. Multiracial Asians can claim to be one-eighth, one-quarter, or one-half Asian, and more importantly, those identities are more likely to be accepted by others (J. Lee and Bean 2010). Moreover, claiming to be part Asian does not necessitate forfeiting a person's white racial mixture, as was historically the case for blacks.

Furthermore, while most Americans have a very narrow and specific vision of what an Asian should look like (such as straight black hair, dark brown eyes, and an olive skin tone), they have a much broader vision of what black Americans look like (J. Lee and Bean 2007, 2010). As a result of centuries of racial mixing, blackness spans the phenotypical spectrum with respect to skin color, facial features, and hair texture. Subsequently, Americans have come to readily recognize traces of black ancestry on sight and, in turn, assign a black racial identity to all Blacks, including multiracial blacks. "Blackness" is phenotypically inclusive in a way that "Asianness" is not.

By contrast, most Americans are not as attuned to recognizing traces of Asian ancestry with the same facility and, even more consequentially, not as determined to constrain these identities even when they are. Consequently, Asian multiracials have more freedom to choose among a variety of racial options, including multiracial, white, and American identities and, critically, to have those identities accepted by others (J. Lee and Bean 2007). The difference stems, in part, from the legacy of the one-drop rule, which was uniquely applied to black Americans, but it also stems from the relative recency of the Asian American population (two-thirds of whom are foreign-born). As largely first- and second-generation Americans, Asian Americans' understanding of race relations and racial identification is born from the post-civil rights era and after the liberalization of immigration law. Furthermore, their understanding of racial boundaries emerges from a narrative of the new immigration, unlike the thorny and contentious racial history and narrative of black-white relations in the United States.

In addition, given the history behind the one-drop rule, and the meaning and consequences behind the practice of "passing" as white, adopting a white identity for black multiracials may not only signify a rejection of the black community but also the desire to be accepted by a group that had legally excluded and oppressed them (Davis 1991/2001; Hobbs 2014; Kennedy 2003; Patterson 1997). The

meaning of adopting a white, American, or multiracial identity differs for Asians. Because the majority of Asian Americans today are immigrants or the children of immigrants, Asian multiracials who claim a white, American, or multiracial identity do not feel as though they are rejecting their Asian racial identities but, rather, that they are taking a step in the incorporation process and becoming American, with the conception that American equals white. Even today, despite the increased racial and ethnic diversity of the United States, many people continue to use white and American interchangeably, thereby conflating race, identity, national origin, and citizenship (Cheryan and Monit 2005; Devos and Banaji 2005). Just as critical to note is that African Americans are native-born with a native-born legacy that dates back generations, and therefore adopting a white racial identity means something different than becoming American. Black Americans are already American.

Finally, the gendered patterns of intermarriage have consequences for patterns of multiracial identification among Asian Americans. Because Asian females are twice as likely to intermarry as Asian males, and because most intermarriage occurs with white partners, the children born of Asian interracial unions are more likely to have Anglo rather than Asian surnames. The patrilineal practice that children adopt the father's last name means that multiracial Asians are more likely to have surnames such as Smith, Johnson, or Williams rather than Kim, Wang, or Sato. As ethnic and racial identifiers, surnames affect how multiracial Asians identify themselves and also how others identify them. Having a surname like Smith or Johnson provides more leeway for multiracial Asians to identify as they choose—as multiracial, white, or American—without having their identity choice contested by others. Were intermarriage more likely between Asian males and white females, the children of Asian-white multiracial unions would be more likely to have Asian surnames. As a result, multiracial Asians would find themselves more constrained in their ethnic and racial identity choices because their ethnic surname would become an immediate ethnic and racial identifier. Although surnames are imprecise and erroneous ethnic identifiers, Americans continue to rely on them as signals of an individual's ethnic and racial identity (Waters 1990).

## Discussion and Conclusion

The “racial mobility” of Asian Americans is the result of several critical legal changes in the United States. First, the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act removed national quotas and changed its system of preferences to family reunification and professional skills, thereby changing the socioeconomic profile of U.S. Asian immigrants. On average, contemporary Asian immigrants are highly educated, highly selected from their countries of origin, and, in the cases of some East Asian immigrant groups like the Chinese and Koreans, hyper-selected. These groups exhibit a dual positive selectivity: they are more highly educated than their nonimmigrant ethnic counterparts and more highly educated than the general U.S. population. The high- and hyper-selectivity of Asian immigrants has affected the socioeconomic and residential integration of Asian Americans, who

exhibit the highest levels of education, the highest median household incomes, and lowest levels of residential segregation of all U.S. groups (Pew Research Center 2012).

The arrival of contemporary Asian immigrants coincided with broader legal changes in the United States. In the 1960s, the civil rights movement, spearheaded by African Americans, led to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that outlawed segregation in public places and prohibited discrimination in employment based on race, gender, and national origin. Their fight for equality also resulted in the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that secured for African Americans equal access to and opportunities for the basic privileges and rights of U.S. citizenship. These unprecedented changes were followed by the U.S. Supreme Court's decision to strike down the country's remaining antimiscegenation laws in the 1967 ruling *Loving v. Virginia*. These sweeping legal changes gave hope to Americans that race would decline in significance and would no longer obstruct equal opportunity for black and other nonwhite Americans (Skrentny 2013).

Race has declined in significance, but this decline has been more rapid for America's newest immigrant groups than for African Americans, as reflected in intergroup differences in intermarriage rates. Asians and Latinos have much higher intermarriage rates than do blacks, especially among the native-born. While structural factors explain some of the intergroup differences, they cannot account for all. Group members are also socially constructed as desirable and suitable as marriage partners. That Asian Americans are, on average, hyper- and highly selected, highly educated, and more residentially integrated than other racial groups affects not only the opportunities for intergroup contact, especially with white Americans, but how other Americans perceive them. In this article, I propose that the change in selectivity of Asian immigration as a result of the change in U.S. immigration law has made Asian Americans appear more "marriageable" than other racial minority groups.

Higher rates of intermarriage have led to a growing multiracial population, which became highly visible when the 2000 U.S. Census allowed Americans to mark "one or more races" to identify themselves and members of their households. About 2.4 percent of the U.S. population identified as multiracial in 2000; and in 2010, the percentage rose to 2.9 percent—a 32 percent increase. The rate of multiracial identification among Asians in 2010 was much higher: 15.3 percent or one in seven Asian Americans. By 2050, one-fifth of the U.S. population could report a multiracial identification; and by 2100, one-third. The trends appear to indicate that the United States is in the midst of a diversity explosion, in which racial categories may be upending altogether. Intergroup and gender differences, however, indicate otherwise.

Asians are twice as likely to claim a multiracial identification as blacks, and intergroup differences remain even after controlling for differences in age, education, nativity, gender, and region of the United States (Tafoya, Johnson, and Hill 2005). In part, the differences stem from the legal entrenchment of the one-drop rule of hypodescent, which continues to constrain the multiracial identification of black Americans in a unique way (DaCosta 2007; Gullickson and Morning

2011; Hollinger 2003; J. Lee and Bean 2007, 2010; Roth 2005). Given the history of black-white relations in the United States, Americans have become acutely aware of identifying black ancestry in a way that they are not similarly accustomed to identifying and constraining Asian ancestry. As a result, multiracial Asians have more leeway to choose among various racial identities and to have those identity choices accepted by others. Moreover, the meaning of adopting a white or American identity differs for multiracial blacks than for Asians, who are largely immigrants or the children of immigrants in the United States.

While Asian Americans have experienced racial mobility and exhibit higher levels of education and median household incomes than white Americans, it would be a mistake to conclude that they have reached equal status with whites. They continue to be racialized as America's "model minority" that has achieved success "the right way"—a divisive trope that pits them against other minority groups, especially blacks and Latinos (J. Lee and Zhou 2015; Wu 2013). Furthermore, they experience a unique form of gendered racialization that feminizes Asianness in a way that stereotypes Asian women as exotic and gender-traditional and Asian men as weak and unmasculine (Feliciano, Robnett, and Komaie 2009; Kim 2008; Rodríguez-García 2006, 2007). The persistence of racialized and gendered stereotypes of Asian Americans reveals that despite their socioeconomic incorporation into U.S. society, increasing rates of intermarriage, and growing multiracial population, racial mobility does not mean full incorporation.

## Note

1. On "racial mobility," see Saperstein (2015).

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