When I was growing up in New York City, my family’s mantra was “Marry your own kind. A nice Korean boy. Don’t even think about doing otherwise.” To me and my siblings, these admonitions were initially so obvious that they did not need to be questioned. Of course we must stick to our own kind. Of course we must preserve our cultural heritage. Koreans were, after all, a proud, homogeneous people with a unique culture and history, and we could not dare threaten that. National pride aside, I knew though that fear tinged my parents’ ethnic and racial preservationist stance, a fear of the dominant majority White Americans whom they believed did not respect nor understand Asian people. My parents, and many other Asian immigrant parents we knew, viewed this as stemming from casual arrogance directed at immigrants by Whites, especially at immigrants of color, whom the dominant culture saw as racially and culturally inferior.

In most places around the globe, intermarriages, especially those involving imagined racial-mixing and boundary-crossing, elicit anxiety. Even though interracial and other types of boundary-crossing unions (religious, ethnic, national, and so on) have long been a part of human history, the boundary-fixing constructs of race, ethnicity, nation, and religion continue to promote resistance to sexual or marital mixing. When sharp cultural, national, or racial inequalities exist among groups, interracial unions in particular face social condemnation and legal prohibition. In the United States, where racial conflict has historically occupied center focus, the sordid history of anti-miscegenation policies of the U.S. government targeted at mixing of “Whites” with people of color, such as with Blacks, Native-Americans, and Asians, is well known. It was not until 1967 that the U.S. Supreme Court struck down anti-miscegenation laws in the landmark
Loving vs. Virginia decision. Since the 1960s, intermarriage rates have begun to climb for all major racial groups. Although intermarriage rates for Blacks still lag behind those of other racial groups, the rates have risen significantly for other minority groups, including for Latinos and for Asian Americans.

Studies of intermarriage involving minority groups of color, however, especially those of African Americans and more recently of Latinos, challenge any benign or celebratory interpretations that a rise in, or acceptance of, intermarriages may signal a decline in racial prejudice, the breakdown of group barriers, or the majority group’s acceptance of the minority group. Many studies of racial minority intermarriages illustrate that despite the recent easing of opposition against intermarriages as a whole within the United States, marital boundary-crossings are still impacted by the issue of race; rather than simply being a sign of the breakdown of racial barriers or of assimilation, studies of intermarriage may exhibit how race still matters in the United States or “how racial borders still exist.” Furthermore, intermarital and romantic experiences of minority groups of color reveal that current colorblind discourses, which purport that people are marrying across racial borders and dismantling racial boundaries because people no longer see nor should see color, help disguise the centrality of race, color, and the system of racial hierarchy in the United States. Colorblind ideologies also make it palatable to gloss over the salience of race and color in interracial relationships, whether in how love and romantic desires are shaped or what role race may play in the dynamics of interracial relationships and marriages, identity negotiations, and family-making.

Despite the growing scholarship on intermarital unions, Asian American intermarriage has not been the subject of robust, in-depth qualitative scrutiny. Due to the popularized perception that Asian Americans are somehow more acceptable than darker-skinned minorities as marital partners for majority Whites, critical and nuanced analyses of the racial and gender dynamics of Asian American intermarriages have been limited. Like Latinos, persons of Asian descent occupy an ambiguous in-between space in the historically bifurcated Black-White racial divide in the United States. Although persons of Asian ancestry were negatively racialized, othered, excluded, and reviled throughout U.S. history, their current status is that of a “racial middle,” and similar to Latinos, Asian Americans’ position in the U.S. racial hierarchy appears more fluid and less fixed. Moreover, the stereotype of Asian Americans as a successful and cooperative model minority further complicates this ambiguous in-between position in the racial hierarchy, while encouraging Asian Americans’ social invisibility. The underresearching of Asian American intermarital unions reflects the reality of this liminal position within the U.S. racial structure.

This book seeks to remedy this gap in the scholarship. Despite the easy-to-digest image of Asian Americans as a rapidly assimilating, socially acceptable group in an increasingly colorblind and multicultural society—a society striving
toward a triumphant belief that racism may be losing its force—this book explores
the personal meanings and social significance of intermarriage for contemporary
Asian Americans. By qualitatively examining intermarriage and family-making
from the perspective of this study’s participants, this book will consider the inner
dynamics of Asian American intermarriages; in particular, it will look at how
issues of race, perceived social status of Asian Americans, and possible shifting
racial boundaries in contemporary U.S. society affect these marriages.

This book will consider that similar to other racial minority groups, race is
highly relevant to intermarriage and family-making of Asian Americans. Race
matters in several salient, sometimes subtle and ambiguous, ways for the par-
ticipants, including how romantic desires are formed, intermarital relationships
forged, and child-raising negotiated. A study of intermarriage therefore reveals
much about Asian Americans’ racial struggles, their experiences as a racial minor-
ity group, and their process of social incorporation into U.S. society. Praised as
“honorary Whites,” though simultaneously othered racially and culturally through
“forever foreigner” stereotypes,7 it is easier to gloss over the racial struggles of
Asian Americans because the problems they might be battling as the in-between
racial minority are more difficult to discern than for other groups of color.

This book focuses on the politics and meanings of intermarital relationships
among U.S.-born/-raised Asian Americans, primarily the second generation.8
Although there has been a recent growth of rich, qualitative studies about cross-
national, interracial marriages involving Asian-ethnics as a way of examining racial
and gender politics of intermarital unions, particularly “marriage migrations” of
Asian women to White men in the United States or Europe, investigating inter-
marriages among U.S.-born/-raised Asian Americans is important for two rea-
sons: 1) it throws into greater relief the significance of racial and gender politics of
boundary-crossing unions since there is a tendency to assume that intermarriages
of U.S.-born/-raised Asian Americans naturally occur due to assimilation or are
purely motivated by love and individual choice; 2) it isolates the experiences of
U.S.-born/-raised Asian Americans—a group more immersed in American cul-
ture and interracial dynamics than their foreign-born counterparts—enabling a
more accurate gauge of the relationship of intermarriage to assimilation as well as
a comparison to the assimilative experiences of European-ethnic groups.

Indeed, the rates of intermarriages, especially interracial marriages to Whites,
rise in the second generation and later for most Asian American groups, lead-
ing many to believe that racial prejudice and barriers may diminish for each
generation. However, if we do not begin with the assumption that this trend
is an indicator of desired or inevitable assimilation for Asian Americans,9 these
intermarriages, and their internal dynamics and meanings, provide fertile soil for
exploring the ongoing significance of racial politics in the lives of Asian Ameri-
cans, the meaning and paths of their assimilation process, and the renegotiation
and reworking of racial-ethnic identities and boundaries within the United States.
Comparing Interracial and Interethnic Marriages

In this book, the term “intermarriage” refers to two types of boundary-crossing marriages among Asian Americans: interracial marriages and interethnic (intra-Asian) marriages, and this study compares these two types of marriages. Historically, the majority of Asian American intermarriages has been composed of interracial marriage to Whites; by 1980, this rate was as high as 90% of total Asian American intermarriages. Since then, however, there has been a notable growth of interethnic marriages, while interracial marriages have begun to decline, especially among the non-immigrant, U.S.-born/-raised generations. As I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter 2, although interracial marriages are still higher in absolute numbers, the increase in Asian American interethnic marriages has begun to capture scholarly and media attention.

Comparing the intriguing phenomenon of interethnic marriages to interracial marriages, rather than studying interracial marriages alone, is important for a number of reasons. First, investigating the respective reasons behind, and the internal dynamics within, the two types of marriages gives a better insight into the wider range of shifting experiences and identities of Asian Americans, especially related to racialized experiences. What motivates individuals to choose one type of union over another? More specifically, what prompts some individuals to traverse racial boundaries for marriage and others only ethnic boundaries? How are people’s intimate desires and choices constructed in each case? Once married, what are the respective cultural and ethnic negotiations that occur between spouses, especially in the process of multiracial and multicultural family-making? What kinds of transformations do individuals’ racial/ethnic identification and consciousness undergo over time in each type of union, and what kinds of identity-work are being engaged in by individuals? What do these reveal about the shifting racial politics and boundaries of U.S. society and the ability of individuals to exert agency in negotiating them?

Drawing attention to Asian American interethnic marriages leads to an exploration of panethnicity, more specifically, its post-1960s evolution and possible intensification. Asian American panethnicity originally described a process of ethnogenesis primarily driven by political interests among Asian Americans of differing national origins in the 1960s. It now refers to a pan-Asian group identity based on a common racial and cultural identity. This book will examine to what extent the increase in intra-Asian marriages, particularly among the U.S.-born/-raised population, is related to a possible growth of pan-Asian racial identification in recent decades and what this identity signifies for the participants. Probing this issue is important because it raises key questions about the assimilation thesis, including the presumed likelihood of interracial marriage for immigrants down the generations, and about the evolution of racial and ethnic boundaries in the United States. Finally, addressing interethnic marriages allows us an exploration of a relatively neglected topic in the study of the Asian American community:
intrA-Asian group dynamics and hierarchies. While panethnicity typically signals the construction of an Asian racial identity stemming from common experiences of racialization, this study of interethnic marriage not only affirms the diversity that exists along the lines of ethnicity, countries of origin, and economic status within the Asian American community but how this may precipitate a level of intra-Asian group hierarchy and interactional tensions, a hierarchy that at times manifests itself in terms of mutual stereotypes and power dynamics within marriages, including what Paul Spickard refers to as “hierarchies of intermarriage preferences” among Asian-ethnic groups.¹³

In sum, examining the two types of intermarriages gives rise to a complex picture of Asian American intermarriages. For both interracially and interethnically married couples, intermarriage, rather than being a barometer of assimilation, is an arena of ongoing ethnic identity and cultural struggles, although negotiated differently by the two groups. In both cases, this book shows the powerful effect of global and U.S. racial and gender politics on the participants. These racial and gender structures create a backdrop against which the participants’ identity struggles are revealed in their ethnic and cultural negotiations with each other, as well as in their struggles over the retention, modification, and transmission of ethnic cultures and identities within the context of multiracial or multiethnic family-making. The Asian Americans in the two intermarital groups often have differing perceptions of themselves as individuals or as couples within the U.S. racial hierarchy and therefore negotiate their respective cultures and racial/ethnic identities within their marriages in different ways, but they also reveal commonalities in their ongoing efforts to construct a meaningful sense of group identity.

Asian American Intermarriage and the Global, National, and Local Politics of Race

Historically, the study of U.S. immigrants and ethnic or racial issues have been territorially bounded within the United States as the host, or the receiving, country. Inspired in part by revitalization in studies of empires and post-colonialism,¹⁴ a surge of immigration and race/ethnic relations scholarship brings a global and transnational framework to examining the experiences of U.S. immigrants, particularly related to the immigrants’ experiences of race relations and incorporation into U.S. society.¹⁵ Moving beyond immigrant experiences as shaped primarily by their social/racial location within the United States, these studies describe how inter-state power relations affect the social and subject positions of immigrants in the United States; that is, how immigrant experiences are shaped “by the positions of their home country within the global racial order.”¹⁶

Situating Asian American immigrant experiences within this inter-state power context underscores the particular importance the global racial order has upon
U.S. racial politics and how instrumental this order is in determining the immigrants’ social location, experiences, and self-understandings. The formation of the present global racial order is rooted in the rise of European and, subsequently, American “empires” in the past few centuries that have established Western dominance. Although the importance of military and economic might in securing Western global dominance cannot be overstated, Western imperialist hegemony has also expanded through cultural and ideological means, for instance, through culture-ideology of capitalism and enlightenment liberalism.

A major instrument of Western cultural-ideological dominance is the propagation of White supremacist racial ideology. Although the West historically used cultural weapons such as religion to subjugate non-Western parts of the world, the claim of White racial superiority was central to legitimizing Western dominance, especially with the advent of “scientific racism.” Drawing upon the legitimacy of “scientific” evidence, scientific racism established a hierarchy of “races” in which the Negroes or mongoloids (Asians) were considered inferior to and fit for subjugation by the Whites. In relation to Asians, scholars have abundantly documented the ways in which imperialist, colonizing Euro-American nations constructed “Orientalist” discourses, representing Asians as an inferior, exotic, feminine other, in order to justify imperialist ventures in Asia.

Especially since the decline of the Cold War, the United States has emerged as a virtually uncontested world power that continues to assert itself globally through various interconnected channels—economic, military, political, and cultural—shaping not only economic relations around the world but also cultural understandings and imaginings. Despite the recent rise of multiculturalist discourses, the cultural framework of White-supremacist racial hierarchy continues to retain its force and legitimacy, reflecting the hegemonic strength of the contemporary American cultural reach. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva refers to this post-imperialist, post-colonial dominance as “informal imperialism” or “dominance without empire” that binds Western nations together under a common ideology of “new racism,” a form of contemporary racist discourse that asserts Western racial superiority in terms of cultural superiority and distinctiveness. Closely connected to political and military might and disseminated through controlling images and discourses, current Euro-American racial ideologies, building upon Western colonial ventures over the past several centuries, continue to powerfully influence the conceptualization of racial order and social/racial positioning of minority and immigrant groups in the United States.

One effort to explain the U.S.-dominated system of racial order appears in recent scholarship on global racism. Although rooted in the particularities of White racism that arose to justify Western colonialist capitalist expansion in the seventeenth century, global racism refers to the extension of racist principles, most centrally White racism, on a global scale. Bonilla-Silva states that the new international order has “led to the globalization of race and racial relations and the intensification and diversification of the numbers of racial Others in the Western world.” According
to Batur-VanderLippe and Feagin, “Thus what makes racism global are the bridges connecting the particularities imposed by White racism, to the universality of racist concepts and actions, maintained globally by prejudice, discrimination, violence, genocide and total destruction, since the expansion of capitalism.”

One manifestation of the current globalized racism is that the system of White-dominated racial hierarchy of Western origins has now been propagated and adopted by the majority of the world population who have learned to situate others, and themselves, within this global racial hierarchy. In a study examining this among contemporary Korean immigrants in the United States, Nadia Kim traces how the immigrants’ understanding of U.S. race relations and the meaning of race was already shaped by the hegemonic reach of U.S. racial ideology in Korea since WWII, especially through U.S. military presence in Korea, and how this affected the immigrants’ engagement with racial politics and racial self-positioning in the United States. Inderpal Grewal’s study focusing on middle-class Asian Indians similarly analyzes how ideas about “Americanness”—imaginaries about America and the American dream which includes both a particular understanding of global racial hierarchy and “a search for a future which the desire for consumption, for liberal citizenship, and for work came together to produce a specific subject of migration”—is constructed within and outside the United States through transnational networks of knowledge and communication: “America produced subjects outside its territorial boundaries through its ability to disseminate neoliberal technologies through multiple channels.”

Although such recent studies have situated the race-related experiences of immigrants within the context of global and inter-state power structures, few studies of intermarriage within the U.S. borders utilize critically informed global racial frameworks. A study of Asian American intermarriages, however, must use global politics of race as a lens to analyze the dynamics of these unions, since global racial ideologies shape the racial dynamics of group and individual interactions, including intimate and marital relations. That is, one must situate such studies of intimacy within a theoretical framework that attends to “positions within power hierarchies created through historical, political, economic, geographic, kinship-based and other socially stratifying factors” to help understand how such global and local power structures manifest in migrants’ lives, including in romantic choices and self-understandings.

Recent studies on international cross-border marriages—unions that involve marriage migration across national boundaries, including military brides, picture brides, mail-order brides, or internet relationships—have used global race frameworks to analyze the politics of intimacy and romance. In cross-border international marriages, the embeddedness of romantic choices and desires within international and global power hierarchies can appear more stark, which recent investigations of marriage migrations have highlighted. Referred to by Nicole Constable as a “global hypergamy,” some of these relationships denote situations in which marriage migrants, often women from less economically developed
parts of the world, attempt to strategically enhance their personal and economic opportunities by “marrying up” racially and/or economically to a spouse in a wealthier, more powerful country, giving rise to complicated and unequal interpersonal dynamics. Constable’s study of cross-border marriages of Filipina and Chinese women to American men, for example, has demonstrated that the erotic and romantic desires between American men and Filipina and Chinese women have been configured by the gendered and racialized imaginings produced through the history of U.S. imperialism in the Asian-Pacific region. Although such marriage migrations, as noted, historically have involved women of color from less developed countries to mostly White men of Western nations, marriage destination countries have recently begun to include newly developed and wealthy non-White nations, such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. Sealing Cheng’s recent study of Filipina migrant entertainers in South Korea calls such erotic imaginings and yearnings as being constructed by the “political economy of desires,” and that “Through such an optic we may also come to understand how intimate longing and relationships with the Other can also be critical commentaries on gender and regional hierarchies within the larger political economy.”

When cross-racial marriages occur within the host society between racial minority individuals and those in the dominant racial group, or even between members of different ethnic or racial minority groups, it is more difficult to view these intimate encounters in global racial power contexts because it is easy to confine the analysis of such encounters within the context of domestic racial politics or deny the relevance of race in intimate relations altogether. Indeed, particularly in this moment of both multiculturalist and colorblind discourses, the tendency is to depoliticize and normalize these intimate interactions among people of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds as being motivated by individual choice. When viewed through a global and international lens, however, one can discern how the dynamics of such intimate encounters and unions are informed by the disparities of inter-state economic and racial inequalities that have driven global migration flows in particular directions in the first place, historically from the developing to developed countries, and how these disparities profoundly shape the racial and gendered self-understandings and positioning of individuals within the racial dynamics of the country of settlement. Intermarriage is a fertile arena of global interconnectivities that play out in individual lives and in localized cultural contexts.

Although anchoring the analysis within the context of global inequalities remains central, the experiences and maneuvering of participants in this book, however, are also about negotiating the powerful cultural imperatives of various local, cross-cutting cultural/ideological domains within the United States, particularly those of ethnic and panethnic communities. That is, while the individuals in the study are inserted unquestionably into the global-level power dynamics of inequality, their experiences, subjectivities, and desires are an outcome of their efforts to simultaneously negotiate global, national, and local structures of power,
with the local here signifying the ideologies of race/gender specific to various Asian-ethnic communities or the larger Asian American community. For example, a person’s choice of interracial or interethnic marriage is a result of her/his negotiation of the particular expectations or pressures from her/his family and ethnic communities regarding who is appropriate to marry, balanced against the opportunities and limitations regarding cross-racial unions provided to members of racial minority groups by the larger society. A person’s decision regarding what or how much of ethnic cultural elements to retain or transmit within an inter-racial or interethnic marital context is similarly an outcome of her or his negotiation of the pressures from, or resources provided by, the ethnic or the panethnic community for ethnic/racial assertion, weighed against the opportunities (or the lack thereof) provided by the larger society for social and cultural inclusion in that society.

In both cases, ethnic communities can serve as a source of resistance against larger structures of racial inequality—for example, through the panethnic construct of Asianness as identity and culture—at the same time that these communities can perpetuate their own system of social inequalities, such as patriarchal oppression against women. Furthermore, ethnic communities are not immune from trafficking in their own racist ideologies, particularly against fellow groups of color, that help to buttress the wider system of racial inequality. Indeed, the process of how ethnic, national, and global power structures simultaneously articulate in the participants’ lives recalls the concept of “scattered hegemonies,” a concept that captures the idea that while central aspects of West-centered hegemony may continue, hegemonic power may also be de-centered to the extent that it may multiply and disperse among various community and power structures. These multiple structures and sources of hegemony may include “global economic structures, patriarchal nationalisms, ‘authentic’ forms of tradition, local structures of domination, and legal-juridical oppression on multiple levels.”

Love, Desire, and Ambivalence

Investigating the ways romantic desires, self-identities, and dynamics of intimate relations are constituted within the context of intermarital relations and family-making reveals the complex psychological ramifications of racial and gender power structures on Asian Americans that flow through global, national, and local ethnic channels. Contemporary Euro-American cultures tend to view love as an individual, private affair, driven by personal emotions, especially of the romantic kind. A wide array of studies on gender and sexuality, not to mention cross-cultural studies of love, emotion, kinship, family, and marriage, have shown that love, desire, and emotions are profoundly social phenomena; they are produced and conditioned by society, “mediated by language and culture.” Not only is “love” defined differently across cultures (for example, is love sexual or non-sexual, action or feeling, commitment or passion?), but even as a feeling,
love is experienced in different ways across socio-cultural milieus. The objects of love or desire are also socially constructed, determined by whom a person is allowed to view as appropriate to love (along the axes of gender, race, age, class, and so on). Love and desire are generated within this complex web of cultural meanings and rules. Inversely, the topic of love and intimacy is a highly fruitful lens for social analysis, “providing as it does a glimpse [in]to the complex interconnections between cultural, economic, interpersonal, and emotional realms of experience.”

Insofar as love can be viewed as generated from and contained within overlapping power structures, this emotion has been subject to a range of critical analysis for its potential as a source of both oppression and agency. One body of critical analyses, originating from feminist scholars, critiques love as a possible source of oppression of women. For example, love, particularly of romantic but also the maternal kind, has been seen as an “ideology” that enslaves women in exploitative heterosexual relationships, particularly as a powerful weapon in the service of institution of “compulsory heterosexuality.” The institution of marriage is viewed in this context as a “beachhead of male dominance.” Chrys Ingraham writes:

To begin, romance is ideology in action. Ideology manifests in words and images that establish and regulate meanings and beliefs justifying dominant interests. Ideologies naturalize our socially created world, replacing realistic perceptions with idealized notions of that world.

In other words, romantic love as an ideology creates an illusion, and as an imaginary conceals the contradictions of inequalities created by institutions such as patriarchy and capitalism by enabling women to “reconcile” the reality of gender inequalities with the illusion or promise of plenitude, ecstasy, and well-being. However, from the perspective of feminists like Simone de Beauvoir, love, though it can place women in situations of “self-annihilating dependence,” can also be powerfully appealing to women as a kind of weapon of the weak. Or, as Stevi Jackson puts it, love, as linked as it is to women’s search for positive identity in a society that devalues and marginalizes them, also “holds out the promise of power, of being the loved one. . . . It is perhaps the only way in which women can hope to have power over men.”

This dual aspect of love’s power has been the ground upon which some recent scholars have conceptualized the social and intimate power of love in more agentic way, as a vehicle for self-realization, often achieved through an intimate identification with the desired other. Kumiko Nemoto states:

[d]esire and passion for other people is shaped socially and culturally, and often reflects a person’s desire for self-realization and a social identity, and by extension a person’s craving for certain social and cultural powers. The promise of self-realization can be seen fleetingly in one’s identification
with another person, who is seen both as a source of pleasure to identify with, and as a power to possess. Intimacy is a cultural and social device of self-making.39

In short, romantic desires are expressive of one significant aspect of a self- and identity-making process, a pursuit of who one is or wants to be.40

Modern forms of romantic love (passionate, sexual love), linked closely to the rise of European modernity and ideology of individualism, are especially connected to this type of individualistic pursuit of self-making; romantic love is even viewed as a pathway to personal freedom. To wit, modern love is linked to individualism insofar as it denotes free choice of partners, but it is also individualistic in that it seeks exclusive recognition from the other as a unique being, expressing “the desire to be known, to come into being through the look of the Other.”41

But as pointed out, this self-making process through love has a two-sided relationship with power; while love and intimacy can hold the promise of self-fashioning and future-making for a person through the identification with the other, it can also serve as a vehicle of subordination insofar as the other has the structural advantage of being in a superior position in terms of race, gender, or class.

This double-sided perspective on love is directly pertinent to this study because the specific and shifting emotional configuration of love and desire on the part of the study’s participants—connected to identification with the desired other—reflects a complex psychological topography of self-realization and identity formation for Asian Americans, especially along racial and ethnic lines. Similar to individuals belonging to other U.S. racial minority groups, central to understanding the self-making process of Asian Americans, of which the formation of romantic desire and love is an important part, is the relationship of Asian Americans’ status as a racialized minority to the hegemonic ideals and discourses of whiteness and White middle-class culture. Whether interracially or interethnically married, the construction of romantic preferences is an outcome of complicated negotiations with whiteness and the participants’ racialized subjectivities.

Sociological investigations of intimate relationships, including in-depth, qualitative exploration of racialized desires and their effects, are, however, sparse. As some sociologists have pointed out, this is not only because of the inherent difficulty of studying the psychic complexity of desires and subject-formations but also because of sociologists’ general reluctance to confront the topic of racialized desires, including the sensitive issue of internalized racism among racialized minorities.42 The reasons for this avoidance include tendencies in contemporary scholarship to “fetishize resistance,” to deny the complicity of the subjugated in their own oppression because of the shame associated with it, and the concern that exposing internalized racism would embarrass racial minorities.43

Interrogating the question of racialized desires, including the issue of internalized racism, is, however, important because of their deep, inherent complexity. This book shows, for example, that the participants’ romantic preferences rarely represent
a one-dimensional case of internalized racism or mental colonization, revealing the profound intricacies of racialized desires. In this book, I describe the participants’ identities and subjectivity-formations as fields of struggle, a state that is characterized by contradictions, ambivalences, and resistances in relation to both hegemonic whiteness and to imperatives of local ethnic identities and cultures. Situated at the nexus of two clashing forces—one, of U.S. society’s social-cultural exclusion of the participants despite their U.S.-born status, and two, of pressures for conformity to the dominant White middle-class culture—the participants’ lifelong identity struggles form the backdrop for the development of romantic desires and longings, whether in terms of desires for whiteness, repudiation of it, or both. Indeed, what is most pronounced about the negotiation with whiteness for Asian Americans in this study is not so much its occurrence but its deep ambivalence.

Indeed, post-colonial writers of color such as Franz Fanon and Albert Memmi have already written poignantly about the complex psychology of the colonial subject. They have powerfully brought to light not only the reality of the internal colonization process that grips the colonial subject, particularly of self-denigration, but also the profoundly ambivalent love-hate relationship that the colonial subject develops with the colonizer, especially in the form of the simultaneous wish to mimic the identity and culture of the colonizer and to repudiate it. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon talks about this in terms of an interracial relationship; in dissecting the psychology of a Black man wishing to pursue intimacy with a White woman, Fanon refers to an intertwined desire “to be White” and to counterpoise the colonizing powers. Within the discipline of sociology, W.E.B. Du Bois has proffered classic analyses of a similar psychological phenomenon from the perspective of American Blacks, a psychic phenomenon which he refers to as the “double consciousness.” This is a process whereby the devalued Black subject struggles with the societal ideal of the White personhood from which a person is excluded but to which he/she is expected to measure up: becoming “two warring ideals in one dark body,” the American Black, like the colonized subject, internalizes racism and develops a fraught, ambivalent relationship with whiteness.

The understanding of psychic complexities in the formation of the racialized subject is aided also by pivotal insights from post-structuralist psychoanalytic and feminist theories that draw attention to the process of psychic division or splitting of the subject as a key moment in the identificatory process with the other. The main insight here is that identificatory processes of human beings with a more powerful desired object—for example, an infant with the mother or adults with the desired love object—are inherently ambivalent because a perfect identification with the other, an imaginary ideal from which one seeks to form a self-image but to which one can never measure up, involves a partial self-loss/self-split. A split self, “between that which one is, and that which is the other,” can as well lead to a feeling of love-hate toward the emulated object and toward oneself, further bolstering the dynamic of emotional ambivalence. The relevance of these
insights to sociological concepts like double consciousness in racialized minorities is obvious, where the desired identificatory object that can be a source of self-split and ambivalence is the racially and socially superior other.

Aside from spotlighting the issue of ambivalent identity formation, another key insight of these perspectives is that identity, or a sense of self, is therefore never whole but always in tension within itself. A fantasy of a whole, sealed subject or identity is only possible as an imaginary and is always in danger of being fragmented. Furthermore, scholars such as Judith Butler, although writing in relation to gender and sexuality, echo the insight that such imaginary “sutured” identity can only be achieved through a process of exclusion, an expulsion of the reviled other:

The “abject” designates that which has been expelled from the body, discharged as excrement, literally rendered “Other.” This appears as an expulsion of alien elements, but the alien is effectively established through this expulsion. The construction of the “not-me” as the abject establishes the boundaries of the body which are also the first contours of the subject.50

This analysis is applicable to how racialized identities form. From the perspective of the White dominant group or individuals, the abject “other” can be others or a part of oneself that are signified as non-White; from the perspective of the subjugated group, the reviled other can be an aspect of oneself that one wishes to deny and expel in order to identify with the dominant group. For individuals in both groups, however, an important insight is also that in this process, the disparaged “other” can never be completed refused as the other always remains within oneself, and the “attempt to expel the other to the other side of the universe is always compounded by the relationship of love and desire.”51

In sum, these theoretical insights provide a great deal of purchase in understanding how the contradictory psychic processes generated by racial inequalities play out for Asian Americans, including the tension between internalized racism and ethnic/racial assertion, between love/desire and denial/refusal of the other, all within the context of the participants’ efforts to negotiate and reconcile their racialized selves with the dominant other of whiteness. The racialized desire for whiteness and White privilege that is equated with Americanness, propelled by the still-powerful pressures for assimilation into the dominant White middle-class U.S. culture, appears at first glance to be more pronounced for those who choose the path of interracial marriage to Whites, but it is nonetheless a foundational dynamic that even the interethnically married individuals must negotiate. Each group, however, negotiates these racialized desires in differing ways throughout their growing-up and family-making processes. I argue in this book that for Asian Americans in this study, being a racially in-between group whose status alternates between inhabiting the alien, excluded other and the praised model minority renders the ambivalence with regard to whiteness particularly complex, subtle,
and difficult to navigate. For many, the relationship with whiteness and the dominant culture is never straightforward; it is characterized by simultaneous and intertwined desires to accommodate, embrace, resist, and refuse and represents “love and hate that condition the mutual enmeshment of the ‘dominant’ and the ‘disempowered.’”\(^5\)\(^2\) However, insofar as identity is an ongoing, open-ended process, the arena of intimate relations, whether in the context of marital or family relations, may open up space for reconfiguring social conditions and dynamics, as well as ethnic and racial subjectivities, identities, and cultures.

**Constructing Hybridities: Negotiating Identities and Cultures**

Identities and cultures are subject to ongoing processes of construction, recreation, and even re-invention. Such constructionist views of ethnicity, race, and identity formation in general characterize situational or emergent perspectives on cultures and identities as adaptive responses to structural conditions or external forces (rather than arising from perceived inherited attributes), such as political or economic circumstances or social assignment of group identity.\(^5\)\(^3\) Along with perspectives that consider race as a product of an ongoing constructed process,\(^5\)\(^4\) this view is useful because it helps to clarify not only the fluidity and contingency of identity and cultural construction, which is how group identities and cultures emerge and change across time and place, but because it opens up space for considering individual and group agency. In this view, individuals are not passively formed by external forces, such as by the externally imposed racial or ethnic categories on a group, but exercise the ability to actively engage, and maneuver within, these discursive structures, shaping their own identities and cultures within the given constraints and opportunities: “Construction involves both the passive experience of being ‘made’ by external forces, including not only material circumstances but the claims that other persons or groups make about the group in question, and the active process by which the group ‘makes’ itself.”\(^5\)\(^5\)

The term “Asian American” is an interesting example. It emerged during the 1960s’ civil rights struggle among young students of Asian descent as a self-formulated panethnic label as they forged a political movement for racial justice. In one sense, this term is a result and acceptance of racial lumping of diverse ethnic groups by the larger society. On the other hand, it can be viewed as a self-recuperative move by the students because the label rejected and replaced older stigmatizing terms like “Oriental” or “Asiatic” and allowed the students to define themselves on their own terms as a new panethnic, albeit racialized, collectivity united in common awareness and experiences of racism.\(^5\)\(^6\) The term has now evolved into a cultural identity that is defined and redefined. In this book, the politics and construction of the panethnic Asian American identity and culture occupy a central place in the personal lives of the participants. To be specific, the book explores the ways in which the intermarried participants
navigate hegemonic discourses at various levels—particularly at the interstices of the global, national, local-ethnic politics of race, ethnicity, and gender—which opens up space to challenge ideological structures in creating new identity forms and cultures, including attempts to reconfigure the term “Asian American.” As a result, interracial and interethnic families exhibit emergent and novel forms of cultures and identities that engage both the dominant meanings, representations, and practices of the larger society as well as those of ethnic groups.

In analyzing the experiences and identity-making of the couples and families, this book utilizes the concept of “hybridity” to understand these emergent cultures. With origins in the field of biology, hybridity refers to the product of biological or plant species-intermixing, such as cross-fertilization in plants. Initially laden with negative connotations pertaining to contamination, perversion, and miscegenation that were rooted in the racist scientific discourses of the nineteenth century, it has recently become fruitful metaphor to describe or analyze intercultural mixing and transfers. In the last few decades, the term has been appropriated as a popular theoretical concept within both post-colonial and globalization studies to refer to forms of “diverse linguistic, discursive, and cultural intermixtures” that arise as a result of cultural-social contact, whether through transnational circulation of cultures or through face-to-face group contact precipitated by direct colonial contact or voluntary, free migration.

In this new incarnation of the term, the notion of cultural hybridity, especially within post-colonial writings, has a political and ideological purpose; it calls attention to the cultural contact between groups with unequal power and the ways in which hybridity or hybridized cultures that emerge out of interaction between colonial and indigenous cultures can represent an alternative, resistant space against the dominant cultural powers. It is a space in which both the dominant group (for example, the colonizer) and the subjugated group (example.g., the colonized or the minoritized groups) are both transformed and transform each other in an ongoing way through the process of contact, challenging not only the modernist, essentialist fiction of a singular culture or identity but also binary logic (e.g., domination versus oppression), highlighting the possible agency of the subaltern. As Homi Bhabha puts it, “the ‘hybrid’ moment of political change . . . the transformational value of change lies in the re-articulation, or translation, of elements that are neither the One . . . nor the Other . . . but something else besides which contests the terms of territories of both.”

In recent discussions on globalization and late modernity, the hybridity concept has been used with similar connotations but presented as a cultural logic of globalization: that is, as representing the heterogenizing process against the homogenizing tendencies of the modern, West-dominated, globalizing world. Stuart Hall writes: “Like the post-colonial, contemporary globalization is both novel and contradictory. Its economic, financial and cultural circuits are Western-driven and U.S.-dominated. . . . Ideologically, it is governed by a global neo-liberalism. . . . Its dominant tendency is homogenization.” However, contemporary globalization’s
movement toward this universalistic, U.S.-dominated culture and conception of the world, one that “always speaks English,” is not the only trend; it invites at the same time countervailing, often unintended, forces that bring about resistance by generating differentiating effects within and between societies. One example is the intensification of localisms, particularisms, and pluralisms, or what Hall calls the “return of the local”:63 “what people do in the face of a particular form of modernity which confronts them in the form of globalization. . . . It is an effort of the margins coming into representation—in art, in painting, in film, in music, in literature . . . in politics, and in social life generally,” and is a “most profound cultural revolution of the late twentieth century.”64

Whether analyzed within the framework of post-colonialism or that of globalization, the central point is that these erupting forms of localisms, particularisms, or subaltern formations—whether ethnic, cultural, racial, religious, or national—comprise, and have given rise to, cultures of hybridity, or mutually transformed commingling of forms involving invention of traditions that often employ symbolic cultural elements:

Everywhere, cultural identities are emerging which are not fixed, but poised, in transition, between different positions; which draw on different cultural traditions at the same time; and which are the product of those complicated cross-overs and cultural mixes which are increasingly common in a globalized world. It may be tempting to think of identity in the age of globalization as destined to end up in one place or another: either returning to its “roots” or disappearing through assimilation and homogenization. But this may be a false dilemma.65

Pertinent to this study is that cultural hybridization, both as a group and an individual phenomenon,66 is generated by cultural encounters of one major type of global movement, in this case a mass movement of peoples that creates diasporic communities and cultures, or what Arjun Appadurai refers to as the “ethnoscape.”67 In diasporic communities, cultural intermixing and reconfigurations are “increasingly evident in the multicultural diasporas and other mixed and minority communities of the post-colonial world”; these include those communities made up of formerly colonized subjects who migrate from the “margins” to the “center (the formerly colonizing nations)” becoming “margins in the center”68 like many Asian American and other immigrant communities within the United States or Western Europe. Utilizing the concept of cultural “translation,” Hall writes:

This [translation] describes those identity formations which cut across and intersect natural frontiers and which are composed of people who have been dispersed forever from their homelands. Such people retain strong
links with their places of origin and their traditions, but they are without the illusion of a return to the past. They are obliged to come to terms with the new cultures they inhabit, without simply assimilating to them and losing their identities completely. They bear upon them the traces of the particular cultures, traditions, languages and histories by which they were shaped. The difference is that they are not and will never be unified in the old sense, because they are irrevocably the product of several interlocking histories and cultures, belong at one and the same time to several “homes” (and to no one particular “home”). People belonging to such cultures of hybridity have had to renounce the dream or ambition of rediscovering any kind of “lost” cultural purity, or ethnic absolutism. They are irrevocably translated.

How does this inform this book’s analysis of Asian American intermarriage and identity/cultural politics? First, applying the concept of hybridity broadens the vision and analysis of the American immigrant experience, especially as they relate to intermarriage, beyond the U.S. borders, situating it within the framework of a modern U.S. imperialist and capitalist project. As mentioned, Asian American immigration is part of the post-colonial diaspora, the spatial aspect of the post-1965 late-capitalist economic transformation that has spurred the movement of migrants, both legal and illegal, from the third world to the “core” Western states; Asian migration, driven by a changing and expanding post-1965 system of global capitalism, is part of this post-colonial diaspora within the imperialist center of the United States.70

Within this imperialist center, the United States has tried to absorb continuous waves of immigrants into a homogenized brew, a process that has been referred to as assimilation, especially of the classic Anglo-conformity kind. This assimilative project and dynamics of intercultural/interracial contact that occur within the United States are but the domestic face of the contemporary West-centered globalization process that has resulted in myriad post-colonial cultural and human encounters, the global spread of U.S. cultures, and the formation of diasporic communities around the world. However, just as inequities among nations are shaped by imperialism, the unequal positioning of national, ethnic, and racial groups with respect to the United States configures their experiences of incorporation within the U.S. citizenry, generating resistances and assertions of local identities. Within this framework, one can begin to comprehend the complexities inherent in contemporary Asian American identity struggles and racial politics, including within the private realm of love, romance, marriage, and family-making.

Much of what I explore in this book are the ways Asian Americans remake and reconfigure their ethno-racial identity and culture in the form of emergent hybridized cultures as this occurs within intermarried families. Parallel
to ethno-cultural and ethno-identity constructions around the contemporary world, Asian American remaking of ethno-racial identities/cultures within U.S. Asian-ethnic communities and families betoken struggles carried out in relation to the dominant cultural logic of White superiority and the equation of whiteness with Americanness. In broad terms, the Asian American intermarried couples and families in this book, whether interracially or interethnically married, represent particularist assertion of identities in this post-colonial, globalizing world. At the level of personal identities, the participants are engaged in lifelong ethno-racial renegotiations in relation to global racial and gender politics; once married, these struggles take place via cultural and identity negotiations with their partners.

For interracially married couples, the hybrid cultural formations reflect the synthesizing of the Asian American partner’s ethnic culture with that of the dominant White mainstream culture, while for interethnic couples, the hybridization process involves blending, selecting, and discarding elements of distinct Asian-ethnic cultures in dialogue with the mainstream culture. In the case of interracially married couples, the resulting cultural forms symbolize the struggle of the minority Asian-ethnic partner to achieve some sort of hybridized ethnic-cultural retention as a response to racism and potential cultural absorption by the dominant majority culture, with the level of success, as we will see, depending on such factors as the Asian-ethnic partner’s cultural fluency and the cooperation of the non-Asian spouse. For interethnic couples, the culture-building efforts involve negotiations between minority cultures with greater sense of power parity and of solidarity, but contestations occur between spouses over how to craft and retain this panethnic culture and how to assert it against the dominant culture. Despite the ongoing dominance of White normativity for both groups, this book illustrates the ways in which the two intermarried groups are groping toward new forms of hybridized identities and cultural constructions that rearticulate ethnic, panethnic, and mainstream cultural elements, transforming all of them in the process.\footnote{71}

It is important to caution, however, that hybridity, despite its transformative possibilities, should not be treated as a celebratory concept simply to showcase the resistant possibilities of the subordinated. While it is important to recognize the empowering potential of hybridity, the dominant culture exerts power within hybrid spaces in reinscribed forms, even while such spaces are experienced as having independent cultural power.\footnote{72} One example of this is the seductive, powerful pull White privilege and culture has for the middle-class Asian American model minorities even while they attempt to craft and assert their ethnic identity/cultures; White middle-class culture remains the referential norm for the participants in this book even when the locus of hybrid cultures involve lateral intercultural negotiations with other minoritized groups.\footnote{73}
Furthermore, it is uncertain whether these hybridities, even if creative and empowering, pave the way for alternative cultures and ways of being that can feel dignified, equal, and distinctive in relation to the majority culture, or whether Asian-ethnics will remain subordinated to the White Euro-American culture that exercises dominance by harnessing and celebrating differences in the name of multiculturalism and diversity. Additionally, insofar as hybridization is an ongoing, unsettling process of negotiating differences with others that guarantees no closure, it is important to recognize that hybridization generates deep dislocations, anxieties, and uncertainties, as is apparent in my participants’ narratives. Indeed, any mode of social transformation “has deep and disabling ‘costs’ deriving from it multiple forms of dislocation and habituation,” and such multiple forms of dislocation may include the “dissonances that have to be crossed despite proximate relations; the disjunction of power or positions that have to be contested; the values, ethical and aesthetics, that have to be ‘translated’ but will not seamlessly transcend the process of transfer.” The hybrid spaces inhabited by the participants in this study, therefore, are often experienced as one of uncertainty, lack of closure, and instability, yet also as a site of empowering possibilities.

The Study

This book is based on in-depth, life history interviews of 100 U.S.-born/-raised individuals, comprising 78 self-identified, cisgender, heterosexual Asian American intermarried persons, in addition to 22 non-married and intra-married individuals. Of the 78 intermarried individuals, 72 were interviewed as couples—36 couples total—with six additional participants who were interviewed without their spouses. The fieldwork was carried out between 2009 and 2016. In this book, “U.S.-raised” refers to those who came to the United States at age 12 or younger, otherwise known as the 1.5 generation. In sociological parlance, it has become common practice to use the term “second generation” as encompassing both the U.S.-born and the 1.5 generation, but this book uses the term “U.S.-born/or -raised” both because it is more precise and because my sample includes a few third and fourth generation individuals (four third generation and one fourth generation). The rest of the interviewees were U.S.-born/-raised second generation, and the vast majority, about 90% of this sample, were U.S.-born.

This book focuses on the U.S.-born/-raised because separating their experiences from the foreign-born is critical. First and foremost, because the second generation and later are exposed in comparable ways to the U.S. mainstream culture—the assimilation process and interracial dynamics are more similar to other U.S.-born groups than to their foreign-born counterparts—it is possible to ascertain with greater accuracy the meaning and patterns of intermarriage and its
relationships to assimilation for this group and compare them to the experiences of other non-Asian groups. It is known, for instance, that interracial marriage of the U.S.-born/-raised is related in different ways to assimilation from the foreign-born. That is, while interracial marriage for the U.S.-born/-raised is generally related to higher levels of acculturation, it is less so for the foreign-born, especially for foreign-born Asian-ethnic women, who display high rates of interracial marriage regardless of their levels of acculturation. For this and other reasons to be discussed more fully later in the book, decoupling the analysis of the U.S.- and foreign-born is therefore crucial in order to clarify the specificities of the U.S.-born/-raised group in relation to intermarriage and to enable a more accurate evaluation of the relationship between intermarriage and assimilation.

Of the 36 couples, 19 couples were interracial and 17 couples were interethnic (72 individuals). Three additional interracially married persons and three additional interethnically married persons were interviewed without spouses (78 individuals total). The rest—22 individuals—consisted of six intra-married couples with one interviewed without the spouse (13 intra-married individuals) and nine single individuals (6 women and 3 men) who were interviewed to gain a comparative perspective on the intermarried participants. Although demographically the number of interracially married exceeds the number of interethnically married among the U.S.-born/-raised Asian Americans, this study aimed for the number of interviewees from both marital groups to be as close as possible to obtain a robust comparative result. Interracially married couples are primarily Asian-White pairings. Since this book focuses on the comparison of interracial and interethnic marriages and is not a study of Asian interracial marriages along the lines of race, I controlled for race in interracial pairings, focusing mostly on those with White spouses; this enables the interracial-interethnic comparison more meaningful, in-depth, and manageable. Aside from the fact that Asian-ethnic/White unions still constitute the vast majority of Asian American interracial marriages, including Asian-ethnic/non-White pairings would have introduced race-related variables that would not have been wise nor feasible given the sample scope of this in-depth qualitative study. I look forward to other studies focusing on non-White/Asian unions, an important topic. Of the 19 interracially married couples, there are 12 Asian wife/White husband couples and five Asian husband/White wife couples, one Asian wife/Black-mixed-race husband couple, and one Asian-White husband/White Hispanic couple where the husband identifies primarily as Asian American. Two Asian-ethnic wives and one White wife were interviewed without spouses.

The interethnically married couples and participants are composed of individuals spanning a range of Asian-ethnic backgrounds, including Korean, Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Filipino/a, Indian, Cambodian, and Laotian. All individuals were mono-ethnic except for two persons of mixed-Asian ethnicities and two Asian mixed-race individuals. Of the latter two, one was predominantly
Asian-ethnic in racial make-up and the other was Asian-White mixed-race; they both identified primarily as Asian-ethnic. As qualitative studies on Asian Americans that compare the full spectrum of different Asian-ethnic/national origins are scarce, this study made a concerted effort to recruit those outside of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean heritages. Although Northeast Asians are still represented in greater numbers in this work, ethnic diversity, rather than proportional sampling reflecting each group’s share of the demographics, was the primary goal given the limitations of the snowball sampling technique. Expanding the participant sample beyond Asians-ethnics of East Asian origin—typical of previous studies of interethnic marriages—also allowed an exploration of how interethnic dynamics across a larger number of groups might influence the negotiation of pan-Asian identity and culture. This study recognizes, however, that there are important differences in experiences across different Asian-ethnic groups and that the experiences of all Asian-ethnic groups, as a whole, cannot be homogenized. On the other hand, due to the limited sampling size in relation to each ethnic group, the aim of this study is not to assess interethnic variations in its results; this book has a more modest goal of being a study of middle-class Asian Americans whose shared experiences as the members of the professional middle class form the basis of analyses presented here.

The majority of interviewees were recruited from several large U.S. metropolitan areas with the largest Asian American populations in the United States, namely, Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, Chicago, and Washington, D.C. Twelve participants are from small or mid-sized towns in a southern and a midwestern state. The participants were acquired mainly through snowball sampling in two ways: first, through initial contacts with key individuals associated with Asian American professional, political, and community organizations, particularly in Chicago and New York, which led to snowballing of participants in those and other cities, and second, through personal contacts that snowballed out to all of the cities mentioned above. Although the sampling strategy was not initially designed to target these particular cities, the majority of the interviewees ended up being recruited from cities with the largest Asian American populations in the United States.

Although most of my participants resided in urban areas, many were urban transplants; they did not necessarily all grow up in urban areas, but in smaller towns or suburbs, often with White-dominated homogeneous populations. A few grew up in even more racially diverse areas than where they now reside. Thus, the self-understandings and perceptions of my participants are informed by their life experiences in different types of environments at various stages of their lives, not only by their current location. For this reason, this study cannot and does not make comparative generalizations of differences among cities or regions represented in this book regarding identity development or the evolution of romantic and marital preferences, although it does consider the possible effects of certain types of demographic conditions (e.g., ethnic group size or neighborhood racial
composition) on the evolution of racial and ethnic identity and marital/romantic preferences of the participants.

All the participants in my sample belong to the middle and professional class; all are college educated and some hold doctorates, and others Master of Arts degrees. The majority have professional degrees in fields like law, medicine, engineering, business, and education. In order to keep the interracial/interethnic comparison meaningful and manageable, this study controlled for class and focused on middle-class participants only. Middle-class individuals, whether interethnically or interracially married, share similar kinds of integrative experiences that are associated with their socioeconomic status, including middle-class values, parental human and social capital, similar school and neighborhood contexts, and higher-education experiences, the latter being particularly central to Asian Americans’ ethnic and racial identity formation—especially panethnic identity. Given these considerations, adding the variable of class would have introduced complexities related to socioeconomic status that would have confounded the focus of this study: the comparison between interethnically and interracially married. Moreover, given that middle-class Asian Americans, particularly as the model minority, are seen to be well positioned to assimilate into middle-class White America, focusing on the middle class with my limited sample size best situated this study to make any generalizable claims about whether such optimistic proposition might bear out. Because this is a study of middle- and professional-class couples, its findings therefore are not generalizable to the experiences of working-class couples, of which only a limited number of studies exist. More studies that examine the intersection of race and class in Asian-ethnic intermarriages are needed. The ages for all married individuals ranged from 31 to 57. Most couples had children under the age of 15; six couples were without children. Pseudonyms are used for all participants to safeguard confidentiality; in a number of cases, some identifying features have been altered to ensure anonymity (see Appendix A for list of participants). All spouses were interviewed individually and some together after individual interviews.

A Note About Intersectionality

The key tenet of intersectionality theory is that the particular experiences, identities, and perspectives of individuals are structured by their location at the intersection of multiple social categories—including race, ethnicity, gender, class, nationality, sexual orientation, religion, and ability. In terms of understanding oppression, intersectionality theory addresses how a person’s subordination arises from such interlocking systems of oppressions and “how race, gender, and class oppression are part of a single, historically created system.” Another related insight of this theory is that depending on a person’s intersectional location, she
or he can experience varying degrees of privilege or oppression, capable of being both the oppressor and oppressed. For example, White women have historically been in positions of subordination to White men but are situated in a position of privilege relative to Black men or other men of color. Wealthy, highly educated Asian-ethnic men may possess certain elements of class privilege over poor, under-educated White men and women, but they experience subordination in terms of race to both while being in a position of gender privilege to Asian-ethnic women.

Because this research controls for class and sexuality as it focuses on middle-class heterosexual individuals, the two major intersecting social categories in this book are race and gender. That is to say, insofar as Asian-ethnic women and men in this study are differentially situated in relation to race and gender, one must pay attention to their divergent intersectional experiences regarding romance, marriage, and assimilation. For instance, while both Asian-ethnic women and men are subordinate in terms of race to White women and men, Asian-ethnic women and men are not racially subordinated in the same way owing to imagined attributes the dominant culture attaches to Asian-ethnic masculinity (less desirable) and femininity (more desirable) that affects each gender’s self-understandings and opportunities in romance and marriage. Along with this, the traditional privileges enjoyed by Asian-ethnic men over Asian-ethnic women within Asian-ethnic communities often provide incentives for outmarriage by Asian-ethnic women in pursuit of perceived greener romantic or marital pastures outside of the Asian-ethnic communities. A focused discussion of this important issue of intersectionality of race and gender, that is, the differences in experiences of men and women, is found in Chapter 7.

**Overview of the Book**

In Chapter 2, this book reviews the history and current scholarship on Asian American intermarriage. This chapter overviews the ways in which marital and romantic boundaries for Asian-ethnics in the United States have been configured by state-sanctioned regulations of gender and sexuality of Asian-ethnics beginning in the mid-1800s, particularly by way of immigration policies, legal restrictions on marriages, and cultural imagery. Chapter 2 also examines key issues central to a study of Asian American intermarriage, especially how intermarriage is related to the matter of race and the process of assimilation.

Chapters 3 and 4 are devoted to a discussion of interracial marriage. Chapter 3 traces the development of racially transgressive romantic desires and marital choices of the interrally married Asian American participants; it focuses on the impact of the participants’ coming-of-age experiences as racialized minorities on their self-understandings, identities, and romantic preferences.
This chapter also illuminates the ambivalences of identifying with the dominant other of whiteness and middle-class culture that give rise to racial consciousness and desires for greater ethnic reconnection in adulthood. Chapter 4 examines the politics of identity development and the dynamics of multiracial family-making in the context of interracial marriage, focusing particularly on the unexpected rekindling of interest in ethnic identification and culture on the part of Asian-ethnic spouses when children enter the picture. This chapter illustrates the ways in which the two key motivations for this stem from the fear of ethnic cultural erasure and the need for defense against racism. By drawing on interviews with White partners, the chapter also talks about the varying ways in which the White and Asian-ethnic partners simultaneously appropriate colorblind and race-conscious discursive frameworks in discussing themselves, their relationships, and children in the context of culturally hybrid family formation.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the experiences of interethnically married Asian Americans. Chapter 5 examines some of the reasons behind the development of interethnic romantic and marital preferences of the participants, a process shaped by a dialectic between parental/family expectations for same-race partnering and the development of pan-Asian identity centered on college experiences. After analyzing the romantic appeal of fellow Asian-ethnics, this chapter also considers the unexpected emotional complexities of being situated in racial-minority interethnic unions in a White-majority culture. Chapter 6 investigates the dynamics of interethnic family-making and cultural negotiations between partners, as participants attempt to construct hybridized Asian American culture and identities within their families. This chapter illustrates the ways in which the participants struggle to formulate “Asianness,” an emergent concept and set of practices that are being constructed in the face of many participants’ relative ethnic cultural incompetence and, in some cases, dearth of ethnic cultural resources. This chapter also describes the specific process of identity and cultural negotiations engaged in by the partners from divergent Asian-ethnic origins as they attempt to blend, co-construct, and pass down the hybridized Asian American culture within their families. It also looks at unexpected challenges related to power dynamics between the couples.

Chapter 7 directly tackles the issue of intersectionality; it examines the differences between Asian-ethnic women and men in regard to how they are positioned relative to the romantic and marital market. This chapter focuses on the shifting contemporary images of Asian Americans, especially in popular media, and how this affects the self-perceptions, experiences, and romantic desirability of Asian American women and men in divergent ways, particularly in their differing statuses as sexual model minorities. Chapter 8, the Conclusion, ties the main arguments together and pursues a preliminary comparison of Asian Americans and Latinos in regard to intermarriage.
Notes

2. In a number of states, Asian or Asian Pacific Islander groups targeted under anti-miscegenation laws included groups termed “mongoloids,” “yellow,” “Asiatic Indian,” or “Malay.”
3. Racial intermarriage patterns show the greatest cleavage between blacks and non-blacks, supporting Yancey’s (2003) “Black alienation thesis,” though over time black/White intermarriages have continued to increase (Kalmijn 1993; Qian 1997).
8. In this book, “U.S.-raised” refers to those who came to the U.S. at age 12 or younger, the “1.5” generation. Thus “U.S.-raised” is equivalent to the term “second generation” that scholars often use to include the “1.5” generation (see Kim 2004, fn1).
11. There are very few studies explicitly comparing Asian American interracial and interethnic marriages at the national level, qualitative or quantitative. See Qian et al. 2001, 558.
14. For example, see Ashcroft et al. 2006; Gandhi 1998; Goldberg and Quayson 2002; Hardt and Negri 2000; Harvey 2003; Williams and Christman 1994.
26. Mahler and Pessar 2001, 445–46. This definition is part of what Mahler and Pessar refer to as “gendered geographies of power.”
31. Exploring the dynamics of intimacy and love traverses the deeply psychological terrain of subjectivity and subject-making. Subjectivity, which I define here as the entire condition of being a subject/person—including self-awareness, thoughts, feelings, desires, and fantasies that are positioned in relation to particular practices and
discourses—is a key link between structure and agency and the psychic field in which individuals become subjectivated as raced/gendered beings.


33. Padilla et al. 2007, xi.


35. Ingraham 2008, 123.


40. Lisa Rofel thus observes that the “social field of desire” as a whole can be the “most explosive and powerful realm” for constructing the self (2007, 2).

41. Butler 1987, 137.


43. See Anzaldúa 2007; Chou and Feagin 2015; Collins 1990; Osajima 1993. Pyke (2007) observes that when the topic of internalized racism is avoided, it is White racism that benefits the most, as such avoidance discourages the development of strategies to combat identification with whiteness and White privilege (109).


45. Fanon quotes from a novel he is analyzing: “The majority of them, including those of lighter skin who often to the extreme of denying both their countries and their mothers, tend to marry in Europe not so much out of love as for the satisfaction of being the master of a European woman” (1967, 14).


48. Hall states (1996a) “The mirror stage is not the beginning of something, but the interruption—the loss, the lack, the division—which initiates the process that ‘founds’ the sexually differentiated subject . . . the very image which places the child divides its identity into two” (9).


50. Butler 1990, 133.


54. Omi and Winant 1994. “Race” is a constructed social category in which a group of people are considered similar based on physical appearance or characteristics. In contrast to race, “ethnicity” refers to a belief in group distinction and peoplehood based culture, national origin, food, language, religion, customs, etc. It is worth noting that ethnicity and nationality are technically not identical—as people can share the same nationality but belong to different ethnic group and people can share the same ethnicity but be of different nationalities—but the two can overlap. As national and ethnic origins are viewed as overlapping for all participants in this study, I use the two terms interchangeably throughout the book.


57. For example, Bhabha 1994; Canclini 1995; Gilroy 1993; Hall 1992.


59. Similar terms include creolization, transculturation, or syncretism.

60. Bhabha, quoted in Hsu 2008, 312.
Indeed, the issue of the tensions between cultural homogenization and heterogenization has been central to the recent debates on globalization. See Nederveen Pieterse 2004; Tomlinson 1999.


Hall 1991, 33. Hall also refers to this as the “subaltern” proliferation of “difference” (2000, 215). According to Axtmann (1995): “cultural globalization, similar to economic globalization, is more likely to result in generating and upholding heterogeneity as a feature as much inherent in its logic as homogenization” (37).

Hall 1991, 34. Such re-assertions are connected, of course, not only to the globalization process but to the dynamics of the post-colonial world, which incited the emergence of various forms of particularisms, such as ethnicities, nationalisms, and other kinds of identities/cultural assertions around the globe. Examples include the emergence of defensive-type localized group assertions and identity politics around the world and within the United States—from religious movements (like fundamentalisms) to assertions of ethno-national identities—to other even more localized, marginalized identities encompassing “new subjects, new genders, new ethnicities, new regions, new communities, hitherto excluded from the major forms of cultural representation (Hall 1991, 34).”

Hall et al. 1992, 310.

“Hybridity, a processual quality, and a resistance to (one-sided) definitions characterize not only national, cultural or ethnic group identities but also the identity of individuals” (Raab and Butler 2008, 6).

Appadurai 2004, 102–3. Ethnoscape is a “landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and individuals” that constitute an essential feature of the world characterized by the “realities of having to move or the fantasies of wanting to move” on a large scale.” Appadurai identifies ethnoscape as one of the five of interrelated but disjunctive cultural flows of the new global cultural economy.


Hall et al. 1992, 310. See also Bhabha 1994.

Lowe 1996.

In this sense, it is not useful to conceptualize hybridity in binary terms as a resistant or an oppressive space, but to interrogate how “hegemony-hybridity” operates in each case: “Hence hybridity raises the question of the terms of mixture, the conditions of mixing and mélange (Nederveen Pieterse 1995, 57, quoted in Tomlinson 1999, 147).


Another way of looking at this is that while globalization is “structured in dominance,” globalization cannot “control or saturate everything within its orbit: Indeed, it produces as one of its unintended effects subaltern formations and emergent tendencies which it cannot control but must try to ‘hegemonize’ or ‘harness’ to its wider purposes. It is a system for conforming differences, rather than a convenient synonym for obliteration of difference” (Hall 2000, 215).

Bhabha 1997 quoted in Hall 2000, 226.

See Kim 2004, fn1.


There was one Asian-ethnic husband who was mixed-ethnic but identified primarily as Chinese American.
According to the 2000 U.S. Census, 76.6% of Asian American men who intermarried (13.4% of the total Asian American population) were interracially married, and 89.1% of Asian American women who intermarried (24.7% of total Asian American population) were interracially married, so the gender mix of this study’s sampling (more outmarried Asian-ethnic women than men) is somewhat representative of the larger demographic pattern (See Okamoto 2007).

This research honors the racial/ethnic self-identification of individual participants.

There are only a small number of studies on working-class Asian Americans and their intermarriage patterns, and the results are contradictory, with some showing that working-class Asian Americans have a weaker sense of ethnic identity and tend to marry across racial boundaries, and others suggesting the opposite. See Lee’s (2004) and Louie’s (2004) studies on working-class Korean Americans and Chinese Americans respectively.

There were four single individuals in their mid-20s.

Collins 1990, 225.