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Interrogating the ‘White-Leaning’ Thesis of White–Asian Multiracials

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Abstract: The study of multiracial people in the United States has typically focused on the experiences of Black–White racially-mixed individuals. In this article, we review and analyze the theoretical and evidence base for the White-leaning characterization of Asian–White multiracials. Historically, Asian Americans have been positioned as a “racial middle” group in relation to White and Black Americans. In line with this perceived racial position, Asian–White multiracials have been generally characterized as being more White than Black–White multiracials, as well as “leaning White” in terms of self-identification. While there is growing recognition of the variability of experiences among Black–White multiracials, the depiction of Asian multiracials as White-leaning—though based on limited empirical evidence—continues to be prominent, revealing the tendency to view Asian–White individuals through a “White racial frame.” The racial identifications and experiences of Asian–White multiracials are far more complex than such a view suggests. We argue for the need to advance studies on Asian mixed-race people to accurately capture their racial positioning within a system of White supremacy, including the diversity of their identifications, political views, and racialized experiences.

Keywords: mixed-race studies; Asian mixed-race studies; race/ethnicity; anti-Asian racism; multiracial experiences; assimilation; identity; White supremacy



Citation: Chong, Kelly H., and Miri Song. 2022. Interrogating the ‘White-Leaning’ Thesis of White–Asian Multiracials. *Social Sciences* 11: 118. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11030118>

Academic Editors: David L. Brunnsma, Jennifer Sims and Thomas McNulty

Received: 22 September 2021

Accepted: 1 March 2022

Published: 9 March 2022

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The COVID-19 pandemic has ravaged millions of lives around world. It has also unexpectedly served as a watershed event for Asian Americans, namely as a wake-up call for the Asian American community in terms of race relations. This is because, during the pandemic, the surge in racial violence and other forms of racial hatred against Asian Americans—largely spurred by the racist “China virus” “Kung-Flu” rhetoric of the Trump administration—has exposed the contemporary workings of the White supremacist system. During this painful period, many Asian Americans were forced to reckon with the existence of the virulent Anti-Asian racism of 21st century America, leaving no Asian-ethnic individual safe.

Many Asian Americans, wishing to remain silent no longer, rushed to document and communicate their racial experiences on any media outlets they could find, to show that anti-Asian hate is real, serious, and that it matters. As we perused these writings, we noticed something unexpected. The voices we heard were not just of mono-racial Asian Americans, but also of Asian mixed-race individuals—many half-White—passionately relating their experiences with racialization and racism (Adler et al. 2021; Bacon and Diaz-Camacho 2021; Wang 2021; also see Chang 2016; Fulbeck 2006; Murphy-Shigematsu 2012). When set against the widely-circulated “whitening” or assimilative predictions of the “model minority” Asian Americans, these perspectives feel jarring. While not all mixed-race Asians were vocal, these testimonies might be a sign that a racial reckoning has also come for mixed-race Asians; they also highlight the highly varied and complex nature of the racial identities and experiences of Asian-descent mixed-race individuals.

In light of the current realities of race relations, racism, and of White supremacy that the COVID-19 pandemic has helped lay bare in relation to Asian Americans, this

paper critically reviews and evaluates the existing scholarly literature on the identities and experiences of mixed-race Asian Americans, especially Asian–White multiracials. Our review shows that there are substantial reasons to be cautious about the “White-leaning” thesis relating to Asian–White multiracials. In fact, we argue that the tendency to interpret Asian–White multiracial people as assimilative is not only inadequately substantiated by evidence, but itself reflects a subtle tendency within academia to view Asian–White individuals through what [Feagin \(2020\)](#) refers to as the “white racial frame”, the White majority group’s hegemonic framing regarding racial hierarchies, racial relations, and stereotypes of different racial groups that has undergirded systemic racism in the U.S. and permeates the worldviews of Whites and non-Whites alike. A key contemporary framing of Asian Americans (and by extension, Asian–Whites) within the “white racial frame” is of the compliant, upwardly mobile “model minority”, suitable for absorption into the White racial majority through interracial marriage (as opposed to Blacks), affirming the majority group’s assimilative fantasies of a post-racial world, including the belief that people of color desire to become White.

We contend that the realities of Asian–White individuals’ racial identifications and experiences are far more varied than suggested by scholars who characterize them as White-leaning, spotlighting the need to advance studies on Asian mixed-race people to capture their racial positionings and the full spectrum of their experiences and racial proclivities. Extant research on multiracial people has tended to homogenize all Asian–White (and Asian-origin) people as one unitary population, when, in fact, there is considerable diversity in the phenotypical appearances, racial identities, and racialized experiences among them ([Song 2017](#); [Aspinall and Song 2013](#)).

1. Asian Americans, Racial Hierarchy, and the Assimilation Debate

In order to assess the positionality of Asian mixed-race people in the United States, we must first review how Asian ethnics have been positioned and treated within this nation. Within the enduring U.S. racial paradigm of the Black/White racial divide/hierarchy, Asian Americans have occupied an ambiguous “racial middle” position ([Kim 1999](#); [Bonilla-Silva 2004](#); [Jung 2015](#)). Legally, the racial position of Asian ethnics as racially “non-White” was not conclusively defined until the 1920s, but Asian ethnics and immigrants were subject to an appalling amount of racial prejudice, discrimination, and violence, since the entry of Chinese male “coolie” laborers in the mid-19th century, who were certainly not viewed as White. Throughout the 20th century, various Asian-ethnic groups—constructed as “yellow peril” economic, cultural, and sexual threats in multiple guises—continued to suffer racist treatment. In the 1960s, however, the United States shifted its position, reframing Asian ethnics as the “model minority.” This about-face was partly due to the United States’ need to revamp its global image as a champion of racial equality relative to the communist regimes, but also to pit racial minorities against one another domestically to undermine civil rights struggles ([Espiritu 2008](#); [Kim 1999](#)). Although the “yellow peril” stereotype has reared its ugly head in a cyclical fashion throughout U.S. history, the “model minority” image thus came to dominate the society-wide perceptions of Asian Americans after the 1960s, and continues to homogenize Asian Americans, a hugely diverse pan-ethnic group ([Okamoto 2014](#)).

The ambiguous racial status of Asian Americans powerfully impacted social theorizing regarding the assimilation of Asian Americans, and this theorizing experienced something of a revival in the mid-1980s due to the post-1965 resurgence of immigration from Asia, as well as from the Caribbean, and Latin America ([Brubaker 2004](#); [Espiritu 2008](#); [Jung 2015](#)). Attempting to advance beyond the canonical “straight-line” assimilation theories that first emerged from the Chicago School and were elaborated by scholars such as Milton [Gordon \(1964\)](#), these new assimilation theories were different in that they were self-consciously critical of the blind spots of the older theories, and strove to revise the assimilation thesis in light of the particular racial experiences of the “new” non-European immigrant groups.¹

The influential “neo-classical” assimilation theories of [Alba and Nee \(2003\)](#), for example, complicate the “straight-line” assimilation theories by showing that the assimilation process—defined by them as “the decline of an ethnic distinction and its corollary cultural and social differences (11)” —can be affected by factors such as racial and socioeconomic status, and can have differential outcomes for different groups. Though the authors claim that “assimilation remains a potent force affecting immigrant groups in the United States (267),” they do not claim that assimilation is inevitable, or that distinctive ethnic features must completely disappear. In their view, the “mainstream”, as well as immigrant groups, can be transformed bi-directionally. In their analysis of Asian Americans, however, Alba and Nee largely foresee an assimilative future.

Based upon the dominant depiction of Asian Americans as a pliant model minority, Mia [Tuan \(1998\)](#) observed that Asian Americans are often seen as “honorary Whites”. The implication of this term is that Asian Americans are not yet racially “White”, but owing to their economic successes and adoption of some aspects of White middle-class culture, they are attributed a social status closer to Whites (certainly closer than Blacks), with the possibility that they may even join the ranks of the dominant White group in the future. High rates of Asian-ethnic intermarriage with Whites, in particular, are often referenced as evidence that Asian Americans may be “whitening”, since intermarriage with Whites has been viewed as the barometer of assimilation in canonical assimilation theories ([Gordon 1964](#)).

Tuan’s critical analysis of Asians’ alleged honorary White status pointed to how hollow such a status could be, given the common racialization of Asian Americans as perennial foreigners. However, ideas about honorary White status have increasingly been discussed in relation to racially mixed Asian–White people, as their (and other multiracial people’s) numbers have grown. For instance, some scholars argue that Asian ethnics are in the queue to become part of the White majority, with racial identification becoming “optional”, just as it had been for the early Irish and Italian immigrants in the early 20th century (e.g., see [Lee and Bean 2007, 2010](#); [Yancey 2003](#); [Rockquemore and Arend 2002](#); [Twine and Gallagher 2008](#)). With Asian–Whites (and Asian Americans), along with many Latinos, joining the ranks of the White majority, this group of scholars envisions a society that becomes characterized by a Black/non-Black divide, rather than a White/non-White racial division ([Gans 1999](#)). Other scholars have proffered a picture that is somewhat more complex; one of them is Eduardo [Bonilla-Silva \(2004\)](#), who predicts that the United States is headed towards a pigmentocratic “tri-racial hierarchy”, where light-skinned, middle-class Asian ethnics and Latinos would take up the “buffer” “honorary White” status, while Whites occupy the top of the racial hierarchy. In this scenario, Blacks and other darker-skinned minorities, including darker-skinned Asian Americans (such as Cambodians) and Latinos, would be relegated to the bottom.

2. Asian American Multiracials and Mixed-Race Studies

It is within these general debates about Asian Americans, “assimilation”, and their racial positioning within the U.S. racial hierarchy, that we must consider the experience of Asian multiracials. Mixed-race studies are by now well established in the United States. Following the pioneering work by Maria Root and her colleagues (see [Root 1992, 1996](#)), scholars have pointed to the importance of critically examining multiraciality as a racial formation ([Brunsma 2006](#); [Sims and Njaka 2019](#)). Thus, rather than providing evidence of a color-blind society, the characterizations of disparate types of multiracial people has become critical to debates about persisting forms of racial denigration and inequality. A paradigmatic contrast between Black–White and Asian–White people has become central to these debates. However, despite the fact that Asian Americans, since the 1970s, have had one of the highest rates of out-marriage of all racial minority groups ([Qian and Lichter 2007](#); [Pew Research Center 2017](#)), most of the studies on mixed-race people have focused on Black–White multiracials. We believe that a main reason for this is the general invisibility of Asian ethnics in the historical discourses/debates about race within the United States, largely due

to the assumption that Asian Americans experience the least racism of all minority groups (Chong 2021; Kim 2007); if this is the case, as the reasoning goes, then the experiences of Asian ethnic's mixed-race offspring—at least the Asian–White offspring—must not be problematic or worthy of attention.

Certainly, one source of ambiguous racial positioning of Asian mixed-race people is that the “one drop” hypodescent rule does not apply to them, as it has for mixed-race Blacks. Even if monoracial Asian-ethnics are only considered “honorary White”, that is, not quite wholly accepted into the White category, there is no *legal* barrier for their mixed White–Asian progeny to identify as, or be classified as, “White”, if they could, so Asian mixed-race people tend to be viewed as facing less racial discrimination than Black mixed-race people. In fact, most scholars have argued that there is less social distance between Whites and Asians than between Whites and Blacks, in relation to indicators such as residential patterns and intermarriage (Massey and Denton 1993; Yancey 2003; Alba and Nee 2003).

Most notably since the 1990s, studies of Asian-descent multiracials have begun to be carried out, many by Asian multiracial scholars themselves (e.g., Chang 2016; Khanna 2004; Ho 2015; King-O’Riain 2004, 2006; Nishime 2014; Root 1992, 1996; Standen 1996; Mengel 2001; Murphy-Shigematsu 2012; Tashiro 2011; Williams-Leon and Nakashima 2001). These studies have occurred in the context of burgeoning literature on multiracials that emerged in tandem with the social/political mobilization of people identifying and asserting themselves as multiracial, including Asian-descent multiracials.

In contrast to the emphasis on imminent “whitening”, the key themes emerging from these studies concern multiplicity, marginality and in-betweenness (racial exclusion by Whites, but also a lack of acceptance by monoracial Asians). One thing is clear: there is huge diversity in their (and all types of multiracial people’s) racial appearance, upbringing, and their experiences of racial prejudice and stereotyping—experiences that are also gendered across multiracial people (Davenport 2016). However, Asian–White people are characterized in a homogeneous, monolithic fashion in the “White-leaning” thesis. In the section that follows, we begin by critically assessing the “White-Leaning” thesis of Asian–White mixed-race and discuss evidence provided by recent literature that presents a more complicated picture of Asian–White multiracial experiences.

3. The “White-Leaning” Thesis about Asian–White Multiracials

In mixed-race studies scholarship (which is highly varied), a key consensus has been that the social distance between Black–White multiracials and Whites in the United States continues to be pronounced, making it difficult for the multiracials to identify with the White side of their heritage (Joseph-Salisbury 2020; Pew Research Center 2015; Sims 2016; Waring and Bordoloi 2019; Rockquemore and Brunnsma 2002). Various studies have shown that the vast majority of Black–White multiracials choose to adopt a Black racial identity and align themselves with the struggles of Black people and the Black community (e.g., Childs 2005; DaCosta 2007; Dalmage 2000; Pew Research Center 2015; Spencer 2006; Tashiro 2011; Strmc-Pawl 2016).²

Studies on White–Asian multiracials show more mixed results, but a prominent line of argument has been that Asian–White people, like many light-skinned Latino–Whites, are far more likely to be accepted as “White” as we move forward into the future. This perspective has been accompanied by the view that the boundaries of “Whiteness” will continue to expand in the United States, and Asian–White multiracials will be one of the first in line to be included into this expanding fold should it occur, just as European immigrants have been in the past.

We recognize that, for *some* Asian–White people, especially those who look White by prevailing norms, this will be the case. Plus, there is important evidence pointing to the material resources enjoyed by many Asian–Whites, overall, in relation to other types of multiracial and monoracial minority people (Le 2010). In general, the families in which one partner is White and the other a minority have higher incomes than families in which both partners belong to that minority group. Mixed White and Asian intermarried couples have high median incomes—higher than Asian–Asian or White only couples (Alba et al. 2017, p. 9). This tells us that mixed Asian–White people tend to be raised in households with relatively high incomes, and live in predominantly White neighborhoods. Furthermore, in the American Community Survey, the mean personal income of Asian–White people over age 25 was \$57,414—compared with \$50,741 for Whites, \$41,409 for Black–White, and \$38,945 for American Indian–White people (ACS 2015–2019).

While key socioeconomic indicators point to forms of privilege that translate into various forms of power and esteem in various spheres of life, including proximity to White neighborhoods or jobs that are dominated by Whites, the whitening thesis becomes much more problematic when it is extended to *the identities and lived experiences* of Asian–Whites—including how they are seen racially, their social treatment by others, and assumptions about Asian–White people’s feelings about their Asian and White ancestries. Some Asian–White individuals can look mostly White and have Anglo surnames (given the gendered patterns of Asian–White intermarriage); yet others report that they are seen as “Chinese” (Aspinall and Song 2013; Mengel 2001). Thus, a central part of our argument is that there is much more diversity in the racial identities and social treatment experienced by Asian–White people than is assumed in existing studies.

The earliest research on Asian–White mixed-race individuals were analyses of how the children of intermarried parents were racially identified by their parents. Saenz et al. (1995) found, based on the 1980 census data, that 53% of the Asian–White children were identified as White, 37% as Asian, and the rest identified as “Other” by their parents. Using the 1990s census data—the final census year when people were asked to choose a monoracial category—Xie and Goyette (1997) followed up Saenz et al.’s study, and they found that Asian–White individuals were equally likely to be identified by parents as White or Asian, concluding that racial identification of Asian–Whites was largely “optional” (Waters 1990), unlike for Blacks. A subsequent study by Harris and Sim (2002) using 1994–1995 national adolescent health survey data examined the racial identification of children themselves. When asked to choose a single race, they found that Asian–White youths were equally likely to identify with their White and Asian heritages, concluding that mixed-race people not only display considerable fluidity in their identification, but that Asian–Whites have more latitude than the other multiracial groups in selecting White or Asian as a single category.³

The evidence from these initial survey studies (many of which were based on *parents’* categorizations of their children) can be considered as rather mixed and inconclusive in terms of what the findings mean. Nevertheless, other scholars began to proffer bold claims and predictions that Asian ethnics, along with Latinos, would be accepted—that is “glide easily”—into an expanding White category because the society saw Asian–White or Latino–White mixed-race people as racially and culturally similar to Whites. Alluding to what he referred to as “Asian Assimilation versus Black Separatism”, Gallagher (2004) described this process of whitening as “racial redistricting”. What was curious about this article was that, other than providing findings from a few existing survey studies on the racial identification of Asian–White multiracials, the study relied entirely on interviews from 75 White college students (20 individual interviews and 8 focus groups) describing their perceptions of different racial groups, with no data from Asian–Whites or Latino–Whites speaking about their own identities. Regarding Asian ethnics, narratives of this sample of White interviewees focused on perceptions of Asian-descent people as being more culturally similar, less threatening, and more passive than Blacks, and therefore possibly as more acceptable romantic marriage partners to Whites than Blacks. Gallagher concluded that

rather than the increase in “multiracial” identification, “our collective notion of majority group might undergo a profound redefinition as some Asians and Hispanics join what has been viewed as ‘White’ European population (72)”. Gallagher aligns his findings with the Black/non-Black divide thesis advanced earlier by scholars such as [Gans \(1999\)](#), where “racial borders may be fluid but the end result will be a further cementing of blacks to the bottom of the racial and economic hierarchy (73)”.

This “White boundary expansion” argument is taken up by other works. In a widely-circulated article, [Lee and Bean \(2007\)](#) also argue strongly for the notion of a Black/non-Black divide in American race relations—departing from the paradigm of the White/non-White model—because, according to the authors, experiences of all non-White people cannot be “homogenized”, and Asian American experiences in particular fall closer to Whites than Blacks. Using the 2000 census data (the year that people were allowed to choose more than one racial category) and a very modest number of interviews (16 Asian–White individuals), the authors concluded that White–Asian multiracials were likely to identify themselves as White because others saw them as more White. The authors also pointed out that Asian–Whites who chose multiracial identity were likely to exercise “symbolic” and “voluntary” ethnicities, had more “leeway to choose different racial options”, and that most felt that their “race holds little consequence in their lives (576)”. According to the authors, “Whiteness as a category” may be “stretching yet again,” and based on multiracial identification, “Asians and Latinos may be the next in line to be white, with multiracial Asian-whites and Latino-Whites at the head of the queue (579).” They further added that based on patterns of multiracial reporting, “Asians and Latinos are more actively pursuing entry into the majority group, and that whites are more willing to accept their entry compared to blacks (580)”.

One of the more recent articulations of this line of argument on Asian–White mixed-race people is by Richard Alba and his collaborators. Building on neo-assimilation ideas discussed earlier, [Alba et al. \(2017\)](#), for example, have proposed that they have compelling evidence of the “expansion” of the U.S. “mainstream” through the integration particularly of mixed-race offspring of mixed unions, similar to the expansion of the “mainstream” (religious, ethnic, etc.) that occurred post-WWII. Focusing on White–Asian, White–Hispanic, and White–Native American mixes, the authors contended that these individuals, based on evidence of their social identities/affiliations (fluid, contingent White-leaning identities), residential locations (residential locations and families “that resemble those of White-only families”), and high marriage rates with Whites, resembled Whites more than they did minorities, “tilting” White. They did so “in the sense that they appear to incline more to the White side of their ancestry than to the minority side ([Alba et al. 2017](#))”. These Asian–Whites, along with Latino–Whites, indicate that they “generally feel confident about mixing in the mainstream society and about the option to identify along ethnic lines or as whites without having their decision questioned by others (unlike Blacks) (110)”, and generally “do not perceive barriers to their participation in mainstream settings” and “tend to have White friends” (and see [Alba 2020](#)).

For Asian–Whites, this is despite the fact that they are often targets of racial discrimination. In a recent book length qualitative study comparing Asian–White and Asian–Black multiracials, [Strmc-Pawl \(2016\)](#) confirms this finding; she outlines some of the ways Asian–White multiracials are still subject to race-based discrimination, particularly based on physiology, and the model minority/forever foreigner stereotypes. However, she asserts that these cases are exceptional. She contends that the “vast majority” of Asian–White mixed-race people did not extensively report ethnic/racial discrimination and that Asian–White mixed-race people are in fact subject to a process of “deracialization” ([Gans 2012](#), p. 217) (but see [Chang 2016](#); [Mengel 2001](#); [Standen 1996](#); [Aspinall and Song 2013](#)).

This “White boundary expansion” argument, with the prediction that Asian–White mixed-race people will likely be absorbed into the White category, is also articulated in some research on anti-Blackness, by scholars who point to the further denigration and entrenchment of Blacks at the bottom of the racial hierarchy. One main example of this is [Yancey \(2003\)](#), who, advancing his Black “alienation thesis”, similarly predicts the future of the U.S. racial hierarchy to be one of a Black/non-Black division, whereby Asians and Asian–Whites, though taking longer than Latinos, will become part of the “White” side of the binary, even losing the “notion of physical distinctiveness (130)” in time. An earlier article by [Warren and Twine \(1997\)](#) takes a similar position; the authors predict that Asians or Asian mixed-race people, along with Latinos, will be accepted into the White category because they can “blend” more easily with Whites (just as all Europeans had been), leaving Blacks at the bottom, “precisely because Blacks represent the ‘other’ against which Whiteness is constructed, the backdoor to Whiteness is open to non-Blacks (208)”.

4. Problems with the White-Leaning Thesis

Although it may, at first glance, appear plausible, there are many reasons why this “White-leaning” thesis of Asian-descent mixed-race people is problematic and requires rethinking. Particularly viewed in the context of the Trump presidency and the COVID 19 pandemic, especially, the ways pandemic-related anti-Asian racism has deeply affected the Asian American community, the “White-leaning” argument of Asian-descent multiracials appears inaccurate and even troubling.

4.1. *Whitewashing of Anti-Asian Racism and Violence*

One of the most glaring omissions in these studies is that all of them underestimate, minimize, and ignore the reality of historic and contemporary racism—and anti-Asian violence—against Asian Americans and their White–Asian offspring ([Ancheta 1998](#); [Chang 2016](#); [Mengel 2001](#); [Zhou 2004](#)). Aside from passing mentions of mixed-race Asians sometimes being targets of racist behavior (e.g., [Alba et al. 2017](#); [Strmc-Pawl 2016](#)), none of these articles properly recognize this dimension of mixed-race people’s experience that may strongly influence their self-perceptions and attitudes towards race.

As pointed out earlier, Asian mixed-race experience must be viewed in relation to the racial positioning and treatment of Asian ethnics more widely within the U.S. One of the major reasons why Asian Americans have been targets of racism throughout U.S. history, and still are, is because they have been subjugated in a different way from Blacks. While many Asian ethnics may be materially advantaged (as discussed above), they are subordinated not only in terms of color, but also in terms of their cultural/social exclusion which is related to the long history of the legal exclusion of Asian-descent people in the United States. Asian ethnics were the only racial group legally excluded from naturalized U.S. citizenship until the mid-20th century, but the ongoing construction of Asian ethnics as the “forever foreigner” still serves to “other” them, preventing their full social/cultural inclusion. As a number of writers have astutely pointed out ([Kim 1999, 2007](#)) the unique racial–social positioning of Asian Americans has to be carefully considered, particularly vis-à-vis other U.S. racialized groups. While most Asian American groups may be valorized in terms of race and class above Blacks, they are not accepted as “Americans” in the way that Blacks are. Due to what [Ancheta \(1998\)](#) calls “nativistic racism” that has relied on stereotypes such as the “yellow peril”—a stereotype that includes images of Asian ethnics as “foreign” economic, military, and virus threats—Asian Americans have been discriminated against throughout U.S. history as *unassimilable* and forever foreign, and based on these stereotypes, they have been subject to loathsome discriminatory treatment including many instances of racial violence encompassing lynchings and massacres. However, when studies describe and compare the Asian American experience to Blacks only along the axis of race/color—and this is something that most of the authors promoting the Asian “whitening” thesis implicitly do—they are leaving out a critical piece of Asian American racial experience and misrepresenting them ([Kim 1999](#)).

Recent academic studies, as well as non-academic accounts of mixed-race people themselves, attest to the fact that White–Asian people as well are far from being free of racialization and racism due to continued “othering”. Sharon Chang (2016)’s book about multiracial Asian children, for example, documents in detail the various ways in which Asian–White children and youths are subject to racism growing up (and see Aspinall and Song 2013). In her study, she argues that every single multiracial person she spoke to had been racially targeted at some point in his or her life, and mostly in ways that spotlight their “foreignness” and “un-Americanness,” including being called “meek”, “slanty-eyed”, “dirty”, etc. (52). Chang writes: “Historically mixed-race Asians have been white- framed and institutionally discriminated against as: sometimes Asian, definitely people of color (wherever they fit), and most certainly, not white (53)”. She adds: “Multiracial Asians confirm that being racially ambiguous does not immunize against painful direct or indirect experiences of racial discrimination . . . mixed race-Asian children and peoples butt up against anti-Asian prejudice and stereotyping . . . ” that cause “individual pain and hence have personal impact (52)”. Although Chang notes, as others have, that physical appearance (more White or Asian looking) may influence these experiences, she also makes an important point that, even for White-looking Asians, “Close proximity to whiteness does not necessarily mean close proximity to everything positive and automatic transfer of white privilege (118)”. A similar point is made by Song (2009) in her questioning of the White privilege automatically enjoyed by ethnic minorities who intermarry with Whites.

Furthermore, it is important to remember that mixed-race Asians are connected to histories of Western colonialism and militarism where stigmatization against Asian mixed-race people began; for example, as is well known, many Amerasian offspring of American GIs in various military theaters in Asia were mistreated as inferior, impure, immoral, and non-belonging (to any single race). Throughout U.S. history, anti-miscegenation laws between Whites and people of color, including Asian ethnics, were instituted in order to police the boundaries of Whiteness; mixed-race offspring, therefore, were always reminders of that racial boundary violation and thus targets of vilification and violence. In light of this evidence, it is difficult to make a facile claim that Asian mixed-race would so easily and unproblematically “blend” into the White racial group.

4.2. Data, Methodologies, and Interpretation

Another problem with the Asian American and Asian–White mixed-race racial assimilation thesis relates to the data and methodologies used in these studies to make conclusions about and forecast the “whitening” of Asian mixed-race individuals. First, as Nadia Kim (2007) observes in her article critiquing Asian American assimilation literature, many of these predictive studies within the “whitening literature” “do not empirically interview or systematically observe Asian Americans (or Latinos) in the United States to capture if and how ‘race’ might matter (562)”.

Second, many studies, especially ones that employ qualitative data, often draw conclusions upon thin or inadequate empirical evidence. Miri Song (2017) has argued that extrapolating on the basis of racial categories chosen in large surveys (such as the census) provides a glimpse of racial identifications and experiences, but her qualitative research with multiracial people found that survey responses can obscure as much as they reveal, and certainly do not capture the varied and ambivalent feelings and attachments that many multiracial people report; in other words, people’s racial selves are not reducible to categories, even when multiple races are reported (Aspinall and Song 2013).

The Lee and Bean study (2007) mentioned earlier, for example, relies on only 16 Asian–White interviews. Others utilize anecdotal or selective secondary evidence. One example is Warren and Twine (1997)’s article mentioned earlier; this study bases its conclusions on a couple of anecdotal narratives of White interviewees viewing Asians as being “less different” from Blacks, and by prominently showcasing the case of the “Mississippi Chinese” at length.⁴ Relying on White people’s perceptions of Asian ethnics as evidence of Asian

ethnics' purported greater acceptability to Whites is a serious limitation that plagues other studies as well. As Rebecca King-O'Riain (2004) notes, White people's perceptions of Asians as "less threatening", "harder working", or "quieter" than Blacks—illustrated in studies such as Gallagher's (2004)—are a reflection of the societal acceptance of the problematic "model minority" stereotype of Asian ethnics in general: "... to view multiracial Asians as more similar to whites based on the perceptions of whites themselves reinscribes white racial entitlement regarding whom they [whites] see themselves as 'close' to and whom they will allow to be honorary whites (184)".⁵

One consequence of such empirical inadequacies and selectivity in the 'White-leaning' literature is the omission of the not insignificant proportion of Asian mixed-race people who *do* feel an affinity with other Asian (or other non-White) people, or people who do not marry Whites (Chong 2021, 2013; Aspinall and Song 2013; Liebler and Song forthcoming), an issue related to the neglect of race and racism in the lives of Asian mixed-race people. Not surprisingly, what is frequently also missing in these types of studies is *context*, that is, the reasons why Asian-Whites may "tilt" White if they do say they identify as White, an issue which will be explored further in the next section.

4.3. The Diversity and Complexity of Multiracial Identification

One of the ways that previous studies, both with their inattention to issues of anti-Asian racism and inadequate research methodologies, have distorted/misrepresented the experiences of Asian multiracials is that they have failed to provide a full picture of the diversity and deep complexity of Asian mixed-race identities. Since the 1990s, however, we have not been without research that has begun to point us to the rich and complicated nature of Asian mixed-race identification and experiences.

One of the earlier works in this vein are the two collective volumes on multiracials by Maria Root (1992, 1996); with chapters on multiracials of all stripes, these collections aim to spotlight some of the key issues facing mixed-race peoples, starting with the complex nature of mixed-race identification. Root's volumes were one of the first to contain chapters dedicated to the experiences of Asian mixed-race people. Unlike the predictive racial assimilation studies discussed earlier that portray Asian mixed-race people as mono-racially "tilting" White or Asian, these recent qualitative studies highlight two key insights: first, that Asian mixed-race racial identification is a "fluid and malleable construction" that can change with situations, even over people's lifetimes (Standen 1996; Tashiro 2011; second, that mixed-race people can contest and defy racial boundaries, and even the meaning of race, by defining their own identities, including as multiracials—even if those asserted identities are not always validated by others (King and DaCosta 1996; King-O'Riain 2004).

A book-length qualitative study of earlier-generation mixed-race individuals by Cathy Tashiro (2011), *Standing on Both Feet*, illustrates these themes clearly. Through in-depth interviews with her participants, Tashiro finds not only that mixed-race racial identifications are varied, fluid, context-bound, and even contradictory, but that racial identities can be viewed as existing along five dimensions which the individuals negotiate: cultural identity, ascribed identity, identification to others, racial self-identification, and situational racialization. Moreover, these disparate but related dimensions may not all cohere in predicted ways.

First, how some mixed-race people self-identify can be affected by their cultural connection/knowledge of one side of their heritage than how the society might ascribe them racially; regardless of how a person looks or how others see her/him, a person is more likely to identify as Asian, or White, if they have substantial connection to that heritage: "Cultural conditioning can be at odds with ascribed racial identity. Seemingly contradictory identifications can coexist (Tashiro 2011, p. 12)." For example, limited cultural exposure to Asian people and family could be significant; multiracial Asians who grow up in predominantly White parts of the country often have limited contact with Asian grandparents and relatives, who often live outside of the US.

For others, however, ascribed racial identity (including racial assignment as Asian, White, or as racially ambiguous, based upon how they are seen by others)—and experiences of racialization and racism—defines their identification more than anything else, because that influence is felt most powerfully, overriding any other form of identity, including cultural identification.

Finally, as in the case of other kinds of multiracial people, “situational racialization”, or a form of code-switching, is not uncommon, and depends on who they are with and who is doing the asking. A mixed-race Asian American, for instance, may feel, identify as, and signal as Asian American most of the time, but may identify as mixed-race/multiracial when with all Asian ethnics. A Black-identified mixed-race person may *feel* more “White” when alone than when with others (see also [Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002](#); [Stephan 1991](#)). Thus, these findings point to the deeply complicated and contradictory nature of self-identity among any mixed-race person that defies society’s efforts to box them within defined categories of race ([Hall and Turner 2001](#)).

Furthermore, we underscore the problematic tendency in the literature on Asian mixed-race people to exaggerate the ethnic options and flexibility enjoyed by Asian–White multiracials, leading to the impression that they are free to opt in and out of White or Asian identity as they choose ([Song and Hashem 2010](#)). One reason this perspective is inaccurate is the significance of “foreign” physical appearance for many Asian mixed-race people. There is much evidence that Asian–White multiracials are viewed by society as non-White or racially ambiguous ([Mengel 2001](#); [Chang 2016](#); [Khanna 2004](#); [Pew Research Center 2015](#)). Contrary to what the White-leaning literature suggests, Asian–White multiracials are not able to have their chosen mono-racial identity validated by others, whether they choose White (but are not accepted as White by Whites) or Asian (but are not accepted by Asian ethnics as “authentic” Asians) ([Hall and Turner 2001](#); [Stephan 1991](#)).

4.4. Asian–White People Do Not Want to Be White

All of these factors account for why even some survey-based studies have cautioned against easy interpretations that Asian-mixed race people “tilt White”: [Saenz et al. \(1995\)](#) observe, “Counter to the most rigid view of assimilationists, children with a majority and minority parent do not automatically gravitate toward the majority parents’ group . . . (177).” In a survey of 110 Asian–White multiracial Americans, [Khanna \(2004\)](#) found that an almost even number of respondents identified most strongly as White (59.9%) and as Asian (49.1%); yet, when asked how they would identify themselves on the 1990 census form (where only one race could be chosen), these respondents were more likely to declare themselves Asian (34%) than White (16%). Identifying phenotype and cultural knowledge as the two most important factors influencing Asian identification, Khanna concluded that Asian–White people thus have “some predilection toward labelling as Asian (120).” In fact, the [Pew Research Center \(2015\)](#) found that as many Asian–Whites said they were seen as non-White as those who said they were seen as White. Clearly, there are variable findings about the racial appearance of Asian–Whites, and phenotype is a critical factor in their social treatment.

A multitude of qualitative studies ([Chang 2016](#); [Chong 2021, 2013](#); [Khanna 2004](#); [Root 1992, 1996](#); [Song 2017](#); [Williams-Leon and Nakashima 2001](#)), as well as writings by Asian–White multiracials themselves ([Fulbeck 2006](#); [King-O’Riain 2006](#); [King and DaCosta 1996](#); [Mengel 2001](#); [Murphy-Shigematsu 2012](#); [Vivinetto 2022](#); [Zauner 2021](#)), not only affirm these findings but also reveal one key misguided assumption underlying the White-leaning literature—that Asian Americans and thereby Asian mixed-race people *want* to be White. The twin beliefs underlying the assimilation literature—that minority groups will eventually be accepted by the majority White group if they can elevate themselves socio-economically, culturally, and racially (through physical “whitening” or by being accepted as “Whites”) and that Asian ethnics/Asian mixed-race people *desire* to become White—form the basis of whitening literature.

Many nuanced qualitative works show that this desire for whitening cannot be presumed. Although there are some Asian–Whites for whom Asian ancestries are not considered to be highly significant in their lives, many Asian–White multiracials care deeply about their Asian backgrounds and want to engage with and know their Asian culture/heritage, if they can (Aspinall and Song 2013; Chong 2021; Mengel 2001; Liebler and Song forthcoming). These kinds of aspirations are accounted for in a compelling way by Roth and Ivemark’s recent study (2018) on identity formation via genetic ancestry testing; in this study, Roth and Ivemark find that while many Whites may, in the present day, choose to embrace newly discovered racial/ethnic “difference” as a kind of “color capital” (Hughes 2012) or “costless exoticism” that does not threaten their status as Whites, most people of color in the study—including Asian ethnics and Asian mixed-race people—aspired to retain their ethnic/racial identities (even if historically stigmatized) because racial minority group identities not only carry a “master status” in the U.S. (socially ascribed), but are meaningful in a deeply personal way for the respondents, reflecting a high private regard for their racial/ethnic identity.

Indeed, the idea that White–Asian (or any mixed-race) people yearn to be White is embedded in the U.S. colonialist historical imagination, a key dimension of the white racial frame. Williams-Leon and Nakashima (2001), in discussing the historical cultural/media stereotype of the “tragic mulatto” in the United States, refers to Judith Berzon’s term “white narcissism”—the “assumption that the mixed blood yearns to be white is doomed to unhappiness and despair because of this impossible dream (38)”. This complex struggle around ethnic identity is also clearly illustrated in recent studies of intermarriages and family formation (Chong 2021, 2013; DaCosta 2007; O’Brien 2008; Song 2016; Vasquez 2014). These studies find that, contrary to common assumptions, “racial middle” Asian–White and Asian–Latino families do not desire to “whiten” their families or mixed-race children. Chong (2013, 2021) finds, for example, that Asian-ethnic parents in interracial unions displayed high levels of racial awareness once mixed-race children entered the picture and sought to revitalize and maintain ethnic connection within their families, producing children who grow up with a high degree of racial/ethnic awareness. In a similar vein, Vasquez (2014) challenges the idea that Latinos who partner with White Americans are necessarily “whitening”: criticizing the assimilation literature, she argues that there are various forms of “biculturalisms” adopted by people in such unions, including the possibility that White spouses can “migrate” into Latino culture (see also Jimenez 2010; Nagel 1994; O’Brien 2008). Others confirm strong Asian ethnic and racial identifications, as well as cultural practices even in third and fourth generation Asian multiracial households (DaCosta 2007; Rooks 2001, p. 75).

The complexity of multiracial identification has prompted the increasing acceptance of multiracial identity by mixed-race people since the 1970s (Dalmage 2000; DaCosta 2007), a movement that has gained greater momentum since the 1990s (Dalmage 2000; Joseph-Salisbury 2020; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002; Root 1996; Sims and Njaka 2019). Indeed, data from the 2000 and 2010 censuses show that it is increasingly normative for Asian–White people to report biracially as both Asian and White (and in fact, this also holds for Black–White mixed people) (Liebler and Song forthcoming), pointing to the distinctive but heterogeneous experiences of Asian–Whites (see Davenport 2016).

One of the major motivations behind the rise of multiracial identity is not only mixed-raced people’s acceptance of their unique and complex identities, but also the wish to counter the belief that they are deviant, invisible, stigmatized, or non-belonging (to mono-racial group categories) (Nakashima 1996). Studies focusing on Asian mixed-race people have illuminated that Asian mixed-race people, too, are indeed finding ways to connect and identify on the “basis of being multiracial (110)”, or on “mixedness per se (Mengel 2001)”. In her study, Laurie Mengel (2001) proposes that the complex life experiences and histories of mixed-race people, those that do not adhere to the racial constructions defined by dominant groups, may perhaps be more accurately described as inhabiting a “third space”, where links between multiracials are constructed in the fashion of a pan-ethnic

link between people, a connection different from linkages between mixed-race people and monoracials. Studies suggest that, in contrast with Black–White mixed-race people, Asian–White mixed-race people often experience feelings of *double* rejection: first, from the monoracial Asian group of which one may be a part, who often reject them as not being “authentic” and racially “pure”; and second, from the majority White group.

The oldest and best-known group for Asian-descent multiracials is the Hapa Issues Forum (HIF), initially formed by multiracial Japanese Americans but now representing all Asian multiracials (see [King and DaCosta 1996](#); [King-O’Riain 2004](#)). HIF was formed because Asian mixed-race people did not feel comfortable in multiracial organizations dominated by Black–White multiracial individuals and issues, and sought to represent the particular multiracial experiences of Asian mixed-race people. Even though many of these organizations, such as HIF, seek the inclusion and recognition of Hapas within mono-racial Asian-ethnic communities that have traditionally rejected them, carving out of Hapa identity can also be read as a form of resistance against Whiteness, Whitening, and White normativity. As [King-O’Riain \(2004\)](#) writes: “If all or even most Asian/whites could slide easily and pleasantly into whiteness, there would be no need for and therefore no existing Asian-focused multiracial groups such as Hapa Issues Forum (186)”. Moreover, what is highly interesting is that multiracials of Asian ethnicities, “a demographic for which analysis suggest race is most likely to be “symbolic, optional, and costless”—were among the most organized in the 1990s and highly active in advocating for their public recognition: “Rather than blending into whiteness, they are asserting a racialized identity ([DaCosta 2007](#), p. 11)”.

This is not to deny that Asian–White multiracials escape feeling “marginal” in contemporary society, nor is it to minimize their sense of liminality. Multiraciality can continue to mean inhabiting a space of ambiguity, embracing multiple identities that may change situationally or over lifetimes ([Strmc-Pawl 2016](#), p. 46). However, because of this, Asian-descent multiracial people are demanding a recognition for the uniqueness and heterogeneity of their experiences and identifications, pushing against traditional racial boundaries in the United States.

5. Conclusions

We have reviewed and analyzed the theoretical and empirical evidence base for the White-leaning characterization of Asian–White multiracials, which is problematic for various reasons. Asian–White people in the U.S. have tended to be characterized as more White than Asian, but this argument is actually based on a relatively thin body of empirical research. Too much is extrapolated on the basis of survey indicators (such as the choice of census categories without an excavation of what those choices may mean) or socioeconomic indicators of material privilege. We have argued that, *despite* the relative material advantage of some Asians and Asian–Whites, and despite the persistent evidence of anti-Black racism and disadvantage, the social distance between Whites and Asians, including for many multiracial Asian–White people, is still significant to this day, compared to White ethnics of past and present who are no longer racialized as other ([Schachter 2016](#)).

So many factors shape how and why people identify and make life choices (physical appearance, cultural exposure, the quality of relationships with relatives, etc.) in the ways they do ([Saenz et al. 1995](#); [Aspinall and Song 2013](#)). In fact, growing qualitative research on Asian–White (and other racially-mixed) people indicates that while some Asian–Whites do “lean White”, others lean toward their Asian ancestries, or embrace a multiracial identity, especially if they do not feel fully accepted as either White or Asian. Given the considerable demographic changes afoot, which includes a growing normalization of racial “mixing” across many ethnic groups, it is imperative that we capture this growing diversity of multiracial experiences, including the diversity among Asian–White multiracial people, whose experiences and attachments to their Asian and White ancestries, respectively, can vary considerably.

We argue that the tendency to interpret Asian–White multiracial people as assimilative is not only inadequately substantiated by evidence, but is also reflective of a tendency to view Asian–White individuals through a “white racial frame”, “a broad and persisting set of racial stereotypes, prejudices, ideologies, images, interpretations and narratives, emotions, and reactions to language accents, as well as racialized inclinations to discriminate (Feagin 2020, p. 11)” that has been used to justify systemic racism and normalize Whiteness and White people as superior. Such framing of racial relations is hegemonic in the sense that it is held not only by the dominant racial group, but often by other social groups—racial or otherwise—who are far from immune to its ideological power. With regard to Asian-origin people, one way that a White racial frame operates is by promoting the minimization of anti-Asian racism, xenophobia, and violence across all social groups, literally white-washing the Asian American experience. Such white-washing leads to the neglect of how experiences of racism can shape the identities and subjectivities of mixed-race Asians.

Another example of how a White racial frame functions is the (usually unstated) presumption that Asian–White people *want* to be White, and not recognizing the desire of many people to foster a sense of belonging in the wider Asian American community, or the wish to keep Asian ancestries and practices alive in relation to their children. We contend that such White racial framing has been subtly but identifiably operative within the academy, shaping the interpretive frames of some scholars who have tended to perceive Asian ethnics and Asian mixed-race populations through the lens of assimilation. Assimilationist perspectives have typically been based on a proclivity to homogenize Asian-origin people—including Asian–Whites—as the “model minority”, giving currency to the view of Asian-origin and mixed-race people as being culturally closer to/more acceptable to Whites than other groups of color, often resulting in a reductive characterization of them as an expanding quasi-White group (see Feagin 2020).⁶

In concluding this paper, it is necessary that we raise an important yet unsettling issue: the likelihood that most non-White people, including Asian–White individuals, have internalized forms of racism. Most theorists of racism point to the White architects of racial orders, and, as we have emphasized in this paper, how non-White people are subject to the workings of these racial hierarchies. For instance, Bonilla-Silva (2001) observes that “racial ideology is systemic or global; that is, all members of a racial order are affected by it. In racialized social systems it is impossible for individuals to be non-racial (76)”. As Cathy Tashiro (2011), among others, has noted, a central part of the privileging of Whiteness within a White supremacist society has been Whiteness’s invisibility, with the unspoken assumption that to be White is to be not just superior, but also the norm (see Frankenberg 1993).

Since we are all imprinted by White supremacist ideology, even as we consciously work to reject it, it is very possible that the valorization of whiteness can unconsciously creep into our psyches and actions. Karen Pyke (2010) observed that: “The failure to study internalized racism is partly due to a concern that the racially subordinated will be held responsible for reinscribing White supremacist thinking, casting it as *their* shortcoming rather than a problem of White racism (559).” That is, researchers do not want to be accused of “victim blaming” or of embarrassing the minority group. In addition, an academic tendency to fetishize “resistance” by the oppressed groups has also contributed to the neglect of investigating the issue of internalized racism (Chong 2008).

Yet, we must be mindful of the ways in which an invisible White “racial grammar” “normalizes the standards of White supremacy” (Bonilla-Silva 2012), and how this can potentially shape the racial subjectivities of mixed-race people. Of course, as we have shown above, there is resistance, and a valuing of minority heritages and people, but the potential for various forms of internal complicity and accommodation, which bolster and maintain the workings of White supremacy, is powerful. It is therefore not surprising that some Asian–White mixed-race people may, and do, hold “identity aspirations” toward Whiteness, even choosing to pass for White, as Whiteness bestows both significant social and psychological value in our society (See Roth and Ivermark 2018). As Omi and Winant (1994) reminds us,

our society's "racial project" is not only a discursive practice but "an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines (56)"; being considered White does not just confer cultural rewards, but substantial material benefits as well. In addition, in light of the recent trends toward glamorizing the Asian–White mixed race (and other White mixed-race people) as an instance of "hybrid vigor (Chang 2016)",⁷ even the desire to embrace a White–Asian multiracial identity, for some, cannot be viewed as being free of aspirations for White privilege insofar as Whiteness is what confers value to the multiracial body.

Indeed, we believe that a fruitful direction for future research on Asian multiracials is to pursue fine-tuned studies of some of the internal, psychic processes through which Asian multiracials come to construct their racial identities and subjectivities—including struggles with "internalized colonization"—an endeavor that can complement extant research that largely focuses on external factors influencing Asian multiracial identity formation. There also needs to be a further expansion of research on non-Asian–White multiracials (for example, Asian–Black or Asian–Latinx) which can broaden our understanding of the heterogeneity of the Asian multiracial experience and of the ways the dominant racial/racist ideologies of the White supremacist system create racial subjects (see Gambol 2016; Miyawaki 2015).

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, K.H.C. and M.S.; methodology, K.H.C. and M.S.; formal analysis K.H.C. and M.S.; investigation K.H.C. and M.S.; writing—original draft preparation, K.H.C. and M.S.; writing—review and editing K.H.C. and M.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Theories such as "segmented assimilation theory", devised by Portes and Zhou (1993), also offer influential reformulation of the canonical assimilation perspective by spelling out the potentially contrasting assimilative trajectories of different immigrant groups as these are influenced by the group's race, socioeconomic background, and a range of host country's reception factors.
- ² One exception is a large-scale survey of incoming freshman in U.S. colleges, Davenport (2016) compares Black–White, Asian–White and Latino–White students. In this study, almost 71% of Black–White students chose a multiracial identification, a much higher proportion than Asian–Whites (almost 55%) and Latino–Whites (37%). Surprisingly, however, Black–White students were the least likely to identify solely with their minority race (and only slightly less likely to identify as solely White in comparison with Asian–Whites (p. 67).
- ³ This is presented as similar to findings on multiethnic Latinos (Waters and Jimenez 2005) who are also viewed as having more options in choosing racial/ethnic categories (except those without much African ancestry), including multiracial identities.
- ⁴ This evidence is drawn from a book *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White* (Loewen 1971) which discusses how the 19th century Chinese Americans in Mississippi made efforts to become accepted by White by distancing from Blacks.
- ⁵ King-O'Riain's perspective here provides an instance of how the white racial frame operates, that is, the way White privilege confers power upon the White majority to decide who is or who is not acceptable in society.
- ⁶ See Feagin (2020) for an astute discussion of the "White-centered perspectives of contemporary social scientists." Here Feagin observes that "white-centered framing" permeates sociological analysis of U.S. society, whereby even scholars and social scientists (both classical and contemporary) are often steeped in euro-centric racial framing that reflects "the habit of not thinking realistically and deeply about a country's undergirding racial structure (5)".
- ⁷ Chang (2016) explains "hybrid vigor" as a form of post-race stereotyping of mixed-race people that is based on questionable application of modern genetics. "Hybrid vigor" is not only the idea that mixed-race people are more attractive (thus celebration of Asian–White mixed-race celebrities such as Keanu Reeves or Olivia Munn) but includes a "romanticized conviction that racial outbreeding creates genetic excellence and 'superior' offspring with improved, increased functioning (168)." The concept of hybrid vigor represents a complete inversion of earlier stigmatizing of Asian mixed-race people in Asia and in the U.S.

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