Exploring Perceptions of Asian Identity
Through Conversations with Asian American Mothers and their Mixed Asian-White Daughters

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Abstract

According to Maria Root, one of the leading researchers and authors on mixed race, ethnic identity is a fluid concept that can change temporally and contextually. This suggests that there is an element of mutability in the construction of one’s ethnic identity. Recently, with the emerging terms and labels of ‘multiracial,’ ‘mixed’ and ‘hapa’ created to accommodate the growing populations that fall into these categories, there has been a concurrent influx of literature and research attempting to discern how mixed race ethnic identities form. At the same time, there is also a wealth of research focusing on Asian American identity and assimilation through generations. With my research I hope to merge these areas of scholarship in order to examine how Asian-American history and social context affects the emerging mixed Asian-White population’s conception of Asian identity. My research consisted of nine paired interviews with Asian-American mothers and their mixed Asian-White daughters in the Bay Area in order to understand what factors account for differences in their relationships with their Asian identities. From this study, I have organized my observations into five common themes. First, I posit that generationally differing attitudes towards Asian Americans in the U.S., and the Bay Area specifically, have pressured the Asian American mothers to assimilate into American culture while the diversity movement has provided the daughters a sense of individuality and specialness that the mothers do not associate with their own Asian identities. Next, I observed that preparing and consuming Asian food was an important site for demonstrating connection to Asian ethnic heritage, especially for the daughters, likely due to its tangibility and its accessibility. Third, the mothers and daughters generally exhibited a pressure to prove that they possessed Asian cultural knowledge and, as a corollary, many also demonstrated guilt in feeling they had assimilated into ‘White’ American culture. Fourth, perceptions from others of the daughters’ ethnic identity based on appearance are particularly important for daughters. However, their ethnic ambiguity and the comments and questions about their ethnicity received from others are interpreted positively and negatively by different daughters. Lastly, the mothers’ and daughters’ opinions and generalizations about the Asian culture and other Asian Americans also color their views of how they align with Asian culture.

Preface

My father is White and my mother is second generation Chinese American. I identify as hapa but usually explain to people that that means I am mixed-race, Asian and White. I was introduced to the term hapa at a very young age and wasn’t confronted with any questions of my ethnic or racial identity until I took my first standardized test and, like so many other multiracial kids, faced the obstacle of checking just one box. I
remember going home and asking my parents which one I was supposed to check and my mother asking me what I thought I should put.

A lot of literature on mixed-race people tends to focus on this problem: the problem of having to define oneself as biracial in a society that currently understands race in a predominantly monoracial way. Yet personally, being mixed did not just mean questioning which group I identified with more when checking boxes, it involved constant disputes with my mother over how much Asian identity I could claim, it involved peacocking my knowledge of Dim Sum and Chinese New Year to friends I thought might see me as superior for having insider connections to a culture that was not White, and it meant realizing that at Chinese restaurants the waiters assumed the requested fork was for me because of how I look.

Growing up in the San Francisco Bay Area, there was no shortage of people who looked like me and had parents like mine. My high school even had a Hapa Club. Though we often discussed the implications of checking “other” and praising questionnaires that offered “mark one or more” options, I found myself thinking back to that moment when my mom asked me what I thought I should put. I wondered what other parents tell their children, how other Asian mothers teach or don’t teach their mixed-race daughters to be Asian and why? Do they do it consciously? How does this affect the daughter’s identification with her Asian identity? I wondered what the differences might exist in these mothers’ and daughters’ relationships with their Asian identities and what factors would account for these differences?
Introduction

As Timothy Fong underscores in his third edition of *The Contemporary Asian American Experience: Beyond the Model Minority*, one of the major tensions that Asian American families face today is “the changes that happen between generations and new identity formations” (Fong 248; 2008). Since the late 1800s, hundreds of thousands of immigrants have come to the US from Asian countries, escaping oppression in their home countries, seeking new economic prospects, and hoping to provide opportunities for their children. Asians are the fastest growing minority group in the U.S. according to the 2010 census, increasing 46% since 2000. And, in California people with Asian heritage comprise 13.6% of the population in comparison to the national 5%. In San Francisco, Asian Americans make up 35.8% of the population. As Asian immigrants raise new families in the U.S., understandably, the first generations of Asian Americans born in the U.S. have different connections to their ethnic identity than their immigrant parents did, as does each successive generation. Each generation is likewise shaped by their social contexts of both time and geography. Research has examined these cross-generational differences in ethnic identification through theories of assimilation, acculturation and attachment as Asian Americans negotiate dueling cultural influences.

As rates of interracial marriage for Asian Americans increase, it becomes evident that biracial Asian-Whites will be a significant subset of the next Asian American generations. According to Pew’s analysis of the 2010 census data, 36% of Asian females and 17% of Asian males married outside of their race. The majority of these intermarriages, especially for Asian females, were with white, college educated spouses.
Pew also found that interracial marriage trends were highest in the western states. Consequently, as Asian-White intermarriage rises, so does the mixed Asian-white population (Wang 2012, Kitano 1998, U.S Census 2000). With the growth of this population, terms such as “multiracial,” “mixed” and “hapa” concurrently gain popularity and familiarity (Gamble 2009). Simultaneously, there has been growing research and interest in how multiracial people form and negotiate their ethnic identities. According to the 2000 census, multiracials who checked both “Asian” and White” are one of the biggest mixed-race populations in the U.S. concentrated predominantly in California, Hawaii, and Washington. In San Francisco, where the majority of the participants for my study live, work, or attended school, .9% of the population identify as mixed Asian and White, which includes 2.41% of people under 18.

My research lies at the intersection between Asian American cross-generational studies and the budding research on mixed race identity; two areas that are inherently linked for the current and upcoming generations of Asian Americans. Through in depth interview, with my research I examined what factors impact Asian mothers’ and their Asian-White daughters’ differing perceptions of Asian identity and how they choose to perform and invoke these identities. While other researchers have looked at individuals from different generations to make conjectures about generational differences, I have instead chosen to interview two generations together in order to examine the micro processes of the mother-daughter relationship that may potentially shed light on their differing or similar conceptions of Asian identity, and provide a fuller picture of the social contexts that inform these mothers’ and daughters’ world views.
Literature

According to sociologist C. Wright Mills, sociology is the intersection between history and biography (1959). Over the course of this paper, I will outline the relevant history of research on Asian Americans in the US, which I believe bears on the growing interracial marriage trends, and will then summarize the current research on ethnic identity formation for both Asian Americans and Asian-White biracials, contextualizing these findings within the changing social climates of the US. I will then discuss my research directly, providing details about the study design and the social contexts of my participants, then outlining some key findings from my analysis regarding themes of ethnic pride and discomfort, demonstration of identity through Asian food, pressure to demonstrate cultural knowledge and allegiance, ethnic ambiguity, and perceptions of Asian culture and other Asian Americans.

Asian American Generational Assimilation

For Asian Americans, *generation*, or how many generations removed one is by birth from their ancestors who immigrated to the US, is viewed as a significant aspect of ethnic identity. In Japanese, different terms are used to denote each of the different generations of Japanese Americans: Nisei is second generation, the children of Japanese immigrants; Sansei are third generation; Yonsei are fourth. For Chinese Americans in the late 60s, ABCs or American-Born Chinese became a popular, and sometimes pejorative, term for children of Chinese immigrants. Because there has been some confusion regarding generation classifications for those born in Asia but raised in America, Min Zhou (1999) created the concept of the “1.5-generation,” which is defined as the generation
born abroad but brought to the US between the ages of 5 and 13. She counts those who entered the US below the age of 5 as part of the second generation along with those born in the US to immigrant parents. Laura Uba suggests in her 1994 book *Asian Americans: Personality Patterns, Identity, and Mental Health* that according to an assimilationist model, the first generations of Asian immigrants are expected to have a greater sense of ethnic identity, while subsequent generations become more assimilated into the dominant society, and have less and less ethnic identification. Recent scholarship, however, has somewhat challenged these assumptions with the idea of ‘replenished ethnicity’ for latter generation minorities (Jimenez 2009), with ethnic identity taking on a more symbolic role; an idea I will discuss later in this paper. However, for generations closer to the immigrant generation, scholars tend to focus on assimilation.

These ideas regarding assimilation were formalized in 1971 when Sue and Sue developed categories of assimilation for Asian Americans born in the U.S. They created four categories: traditionalists, those closely tied to their Asian heritage; assimilationist, those pressured to adopt American culture; bicultural, those who can comfortably navigate both American and Asian cultures; and marginal, those who feel rejected and apart from both American and Asian culture. These categories, however, have since been largely criticized as static and unable to account for the fluidity of identity and the possibility for inhabiting different categories at different points. Portes and Ruben updated these categories in 1996 using acculturation rather than assimilationist nomenclature.
Yet while researchers might categorize some Asian Americans as fully assimilated— and overwhelmingly Asian Americans are found to be the minority group most well integrated economically into American society— researchers have still observed a “foreign” status that Asian Americans are subjected to by other Americans (Min & Kim 1999). Mia Tuan (1999) observes that latter generation Asian Americans have a greater ability and flexibility to choose their identity but still must grapple with how other Americans view Asians. She deems these latter generation Asian Americans “Asian ethnics.” According to Tuan, Asian ethnics are often pressured to identify themselves to strangers and friends, expected to have connections to their Asian heritage (while third or fourth generation European Americans are not), assumed to be exotic or non-American foreigners, and constantly expected to prove their “Asian-ness” or “American-ness” to others (Tuan, 1999). In her interviews, Tuan observes that Asian ethnics “face societal expectations to be ethnic since others assume they should be closer to their ethnic roots than to their American ones,” yet they are seen as “inauthentic” Asians if they are unable to speak the language, prepare traditional foods, or perform other tasks people expect authentic Asians to be able to perform. In this way, many Asian Americans walk the delicate balance of “assimilated” and “foreign” identities.

**Why scholars believe some Asian women marry white men**

Some view interracial marriage as the ultimate symbol of assimilation and social acceptance of an ethnic minority group (Sung 1990). Milton Gordon observed in 1964 that according to assimilationist theory, the significant increase in Asian-White marriage would not be possible if larger society was not willing to accept it at least to some degree.
For this reason, some view the increase in Asian-White marriage as a function of a narrowing of the cultural divide between Asian American and mainstream American culture, and an increase in the similarity between the two.

Shingawa and Pang (1990), however, sought to explain not only the increase in Asian-White interracial marriage, but also specifically the spike in highly educated Asian women marrying highly educated white men. The upshot of this research was the controversial theory of *hypergamy*, which hypothesizes that women tend to marry men of higher economic and social status. In keeping with this theory, Asian women can “maximize their status” through marriage to the “most advantaged individuals with the highest racial position.” Fong puts in laymen’s terms: “well educated Asian American women in a professional job can generally choose from one of two marital choices: (1) an Asian American man who has the same or higher economic status, but same racial status; or (2) a white male with the same or higher economic status and higher racial status” (Fong 2008).

Many Asian American women understandably rejected the explanation of this trend as marrying for status. In 1995, Colleen Fong and Judy Yung conducted in-depth interviews with Asian-American men and women in the San Francisco Bay Area asking them how and why they choose a white spouse. The participants focused their decisions on free choice and the emerging freedom to marry whomever they wanted. Yet they also voiced a desire to avoid traditional Asian patriarchy. Women especially cited media’s portrayal of stereotypical images of Asian American men and the idea that Caucasian men were more “attractive” and “exciting.” In fact, “both women and men faulted the
opposite sex for the same weaknesses: being overly serious, having pragmatic occupations or narrow interests, being rather lackluster and not a part of the dominant or counter culture” (Fong and Yung 1995). These demonstrate that even Asian Americans are not immune to the dominant culture’s rigid and conservative perceptions of Asian peoples and culture.

As touched upon in Fong and Yung’s study, some see Asian American women’s choice to marry white men as a result of seeking greater equality within the marriage. Karen Pyke and Denise Johnson suggested that because Asian cultures are “innately oppressive of women,” Asian American women might choose to reject their ethnicity in exchange for white standards of gender, which, if not in practice, are “framed as a paradigm of equality” (Pyke and Johnson 2003).

These cross-generational studies of Asian Americans and their ethnic identities, along with research on the pressures and factors that have influenced the growth of interracial marriage, especially for Asian American women, provide the historical and social context for the mothers in my study.

Their daughters, on the other hand, belong to one of the first generations with a significant population that identifies as mixed race. The majority of emerging research and literature on mixed race people has focused on development of ethnic identity and varying ethnic identity options for latter generation multiracials. It is to this literature that I turn next.

The social nature of ethnic identity
What interests many researchers about the multiracial population are the factors that influence a mixed race person to develop a certain ethnic identity. Many authors who study identity formation focus on the impact of the perceptions and judgments of others. This harkens to Cooley’s theory of the “looking glass self” (1902), which posits that we gain information about ourselves through the social information provided by those around us. Omi and Winant (2004), prominent racial theorists, extend this idea to racial identity, suggesting that one is not born with their race innately, but rather forms a racial identity based on the characteristics they choose to perform and how they are perceived and treated by others. Moya and Markus additionally support, in their 2010 book *Doing Race*, this social nature of racial identity using their square, triangle, and dot analogy to represent race. They write “The person is not *inherently* a dot but becomes one in *relationship* to the surrounding others. The reason he or she is a “dot” is because the people surrounding that person see him or her as a “dot,” assume he or she is a “dot,” explain what it means to be a “dot,” and treat that person as if her or she is a “dot” — in other words they make him or her into a “dot.” “ They continue, “even when someone resists having “dotness” imposed on himself or herself his or her identity will be formed in relation to that process.”

Khanna (2004) echoes Moya and Markus’s emphasis on the social nature of racial identity construction with her theory of reflected appraisals for mixed race Asians. She additionally references Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982), who suggest people not only look to others for information about themselves but also confirmation of their conclusions, citing: “people feel that their identity claims require validation by others to give them
social reality” (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). From this literature, Khanna theorizes and proves quantitatively that social variables, such as cultural exposure and how participants believe others perceive their ethnic phenotype, have a significant impact on the formation of a mixed race Asian’s ethnic identity. In assessing cultural exposure, she looks specifically at language, friend groups, exposure to Asian family, food, holidays, and time spent in the native country as signifiers. Khanna’s work is one of many that situate ethnic identity formation in social interaction.

Akin to Khanna’s observation of the importance of cultural exposure, other researchers find the ethnic make up of one’s community to play a large role in the socialization process. In Amy Iwasaki Mass’s 1992 research comparing Japanese Americans and Japanese-White biracials she states: “one of the most prominent variables affecting respondents’ self-concepts was the geographic region in which they were raised” (1992). Other research suggests there is a correlation between one’s ethnic identity and their neighborhood and/or friends as well: “An Asian-White individual may feel more comfortable if there is a critical mass of Asians or Whites in his or her community and identify accordingly” (Hall and Turner 2001). Root writes, “If the family rarely socializes with the Asian relatives, the children have fewer opportunities for developing a breadth of interpretation of their ethnic experience. An affirmation of ethnicity may also come from participation in community activities. However, if the family lives where there are few Asians, then the opportunity to develop such an attachment does not exist” (2001). These examples highlight how exposure and access to a group can result in indentifying as a part of that group and aligning ethnic identity with that of the
group. This literature again emphasizes the highly social nature of ethnic identity
development and the importance others and communities can play in influencing one’s
particular ethnic identity.

**Ethnic identity and the Mother-Daughter relationship**

While the previously discussed sources outline the significance of others’
perceptions, social context, and group exposure in the construction of one’s personal
ethnic identity, these theories can also be translated more specifically to the mother-
daughter relationship and their effects possibly magnified due to the heightened
importance of social information and validation from a daughter’s mother and the
relatively greater amount of exposure. In fact, many researchers have indicated mothers
to be the major actors in racially socializing their children. Racial socialization is
commonly defined as the “mechanisms through which parents transmit information,
values, and perspectives about ethnicity and race to their children” (Hughes et al., 2006).

According to Trude Cooke’s 1997 study of biracial Asians, Asian-White respondents
identified significantly stronger with their mother’s group than their father’s,
predominantly among Asian-White mixes whose mothers were Asian. Other researchers
have found similar patterns of mothers being responsible for the transmittance of culture
or heritage especially among studies of bi-racial African American-White families (Miller &
Speight, 1999).

Parents’ attitudes towards ethnicity and race are also tied to children’s
understanding of their ethnicity. In her analysis, Mass found parental acceptance and
support of both ethnic identities was integral to a positive sense of ethnic self-esteem in interracial children (Mass 1992). She noted that conflict can result from parents believing one heritage to be superior or not acknowledging heritage at all, writing, “Parents are the key agent in making decisions and marshalling resources to aid children in the development of self-esteem.”

Researcher Stephanie Young (2009) finds the mother-daughter relationship especially significant in the construction of ethnic identity and expands on Khanna’s claims of reflected appraisal to support her argument:

“Acknowledging Khanna’s research, I suggest that one’s primary caregiver (e.g., mother) is an especially important factor in shaping how interracial individuals racially and culturally understand themselves. Through reflected appraisals (i.e., our interpretation of assessments made by others) experienced from our mothers, we come to know ourselves...Therefore, I concentrate upon my crucial mother-daughter relationship in exploring how hybrid identities are constructed, negotiated, performed, and maintained.”

In this way, the mother-daughter relationship may act as a crucible for identity formation and provide an abundance of social information impacting a daughter’s ethnic identity formation.

**Options for identities for mixed race Asians**

While Khanna and other researchers suggest that reflected appraisals and the perceptions of others play the most significant role in the construction of a mixed person’s ethnic identity, Frank Bean and Jennifer Lee, while acknowledging the power
social opinion, argue that mixed Asians actually have more choice than other mixes to embody multiple ethnic identities due to looser social definitions of Asian ethnic identities. They state, “We find that multiracial blacks are less likely to identify multiracially compared to their Asian and Latino counterparts, in large part, because of outsiders’ ascription, which powerfully influences one’s choice of identities.” They observe that while many ascribe black identity as “broad” and “all-encompassing,” Asian and Latino identities are seen as more “narrow” and “specific,” meaning that Asians and Latinos can be half-Latino or half-Asian and also half white and have those identities accepted by others while African Americans can often only be black. This willingness for others to accept Asian claims to multiple ethnic identities for Bean and Lee signals “the voluntary and optional nature of Asian ethnicity for the multiracial respondents.” This indicates that mixed Asians may have more opportunity to claim multiple identities and perform different identities at different times.

Examining the opportunity mixed Asians have for greater choice in ethnic identity, existing literature explores possible explanations for mixed people who identify as white and mixed people who identify with their minority heritage. For example, Song and Hashem’s study of multiracials in Great Britain in 2010 sought to understand the reasoning behind participants’ choices when selecting “best single race” on a questionnaire. They found the majority of their mixed East Asian-White (11 out of 16) participants selected white. After in-depth interviews, their reasoning for selecting white was actually more complex than they had expected:
“We found that respondents who chose white distanced themselves from the idea of being *racially* white. For most of these respondents, choosing white or white British as the group that contributes most strongly to their identity meant that they were first and foremost British in *cultural terms.*”

Because Whiteness is more closely associated with both British, and American, national identity, it follows logically that those more embedded in American or British culture rather than Asian culture might then choose white as the race that best describes them.

The Song and Hashem study goes on to describe that mixed Asian-White children growing up in an American or British context may also not feel authentically Asian enough to claim an Asian identity. They write,

> “Though most respondents reported that they were proud of their Asian heritage, they did not feel able to assert an ethnically authentic identification as Asian, because, typically, they possessed little or no language facility or the cultural trappings of “being” Asian.”

While there may be an element of choice, Song and Hashem still find the normative idea of what it means socially to fit into an ethnic category to be a driving force in ethnic identity construction.

In contrast to Song and Hashem’s study where the majority of mixed Asian-White adolescents identified as white over Asian on a survey, another study conducted by Debbie Storrs in the US conversely attempted to explain why the mixed race women she has interviewed have shown a growing trend in identifying with their minority race:
“Contrary to dominant racial assumptions about the superiority of whiteness, these women perceive their identities as potentially “spoiled” not by their non-whiteness but their whiteness--their lack of non-white racial purity and their appearance of being “too white” (Storrs, 1999).

Storrs describes that for these women, it is not uncommon for them to become upset when others assume or comment on their whiteness. Many of the women “claim” or “perform” multiple cultural and racial identities using style of dress, ethnic artifacts, or speech patterns. Storrs claims that these women’s definitions of whiteness play a role in their rejection of the identity. For these women, whiteness is “normative, empty and bland but also oppressive, prejudicial and discriminatory.” These examples suggest the importance of how the participants themselves perceive characteristics of white identities and minority identities when defining their own ethnic identity.

**Symbolic ethnicity**

Another option for mixed race Asians’ ethnic identity that is commonly discussed in recent literature is the idea of symbolic ethnicity. In 1990, M.C. Waters originally introduced the idea of symbolic ethnicity for white Americans. She claimed:

“White Americans of European ancestry can be described as having a great deal of choice in terms of their ethnic identities. The two major types of options White Americans can exercise are (1) the option of whether to claim any specific ancestry, or to just be “White” or American (Lieberson (1985) called these people “unhyphenated Whites”) and (2) the choice of which of their European ancestries to choose to include in their description of their own identities.”
Waters states, “for later-generation ethnics, ethnicity is not something that influences their lives unless they want it to.” In 1990, at the time she wrote the paper, Waters believed that only whites had the privilege of symbolic ethnicity since many Americans still had a lot of preconceptions about other races that prevented minorities from having these options. However, in 2001 Maria P.P. Root adapted this concept of symbolic ethnicity for Asian-White biracials in her essay regarding impacts on biracial identity. Root finds that mixed Asians also have the option of choosing what aspects of their Asian ethnic identity they want to claim and when. She finds this to be especially true for Asian-White biracials who grow up isolated from direct connection to many Asian Americans or without close ties to Asian family members. Root writes:

Accordingly, the isolated person may become more likely to develop a symbolic ethnicity, which M.C. Waters (1990) defined as the luxury of choosing to affiliate distantly with a group because it gives a person a sense of uniqueness. However this choice is not imposed by outsiders and has no costs. Thus, it is the ironic way of satisfying the American quest for both belonging and for individuality. (2001)

This demonstrates that while lack of cultural exposure to an Asian community does not result in an individual identifying or unifying with others in that ethnic group (Khanna 2004, Mass 1992, Hall & Turner 2001, Root 2001, Song & Hashem 2010), isolation from other Asians may result in the use of Asian ethnic identity as a symbol of individuality. Root notes that some of her participants saw their symbolic Asian ethnicity as a “positive uniqueness.” She cites that “phenotypic ambiguity,” the characteristic that makes it difficult for observers to determine a person’s race just from their appearance, aids the
ability of people such as Asian-White biracials to invoke a symbolic ethnicity. Lastly, Root suggests that for Asian-White women, the mix can seem exotic, provoking some women to invoke a symbolic ethnicity because it is societally perceived as attractive. The Asian-White mix was also seen as “advantageous” for women who did not feel they fit the stereotype of Asian American “petiteness” and, as mentioned earlier, chose to align their identity with “White” ideals of gender equality.

As the existing literature indicates, mixed race Asians may possess many possible options when constructing their ethnic identity with many potential and predominantly social influencing factors.

Embedding the mixed race generation in the history of Asian cultural heritage

One of the reasons many are particularly concerned with how mixed Asians construct their ethnic identity and how Asian parents socialize their mixed race children is due to a concern over cultural preservation. However, while some worry that intermarriage results in the loss or dilution of Asian heritage in the US, Mass observes from research such as Hall 1980, Kich 1982, Murphy-Shigematsu 1986, and Nakashima 1992, that “studies suggest that interracial Japanese Americans do not necessarily lose their sense of ethnic identity; in fact, they may be more aware of their Japanese heritage because they have to struggle to affirm and come to terms with their dual racial background” (Mass 1992).

Other research also demonstrates that Asians who marry White spouses tend to stress Asian or Asian American cultures, values, or traditions to their children, and as a result, more Asian-White children believe their Asian or Asian American heritage to be
important than those who believe that their White heritage is important (J.B. Mar, 1988; J.M. Oka, 1994; B Standen, 1996).

Authors Hall and Cooke Turner who were faced with similar apprehension of mixed marriage write, “Many people have stated to authors of this chapter that the mixing of races has “diluted” the Asian cultural knowledge of the biracial Asians.” They however reference Matsumoto et al’s 1973 study, which observes that in general, each generation tends to lose some of its native culture, regardless of intermarriage. Yet, Tomas Jimenez finds in his study of replenished ethnicity for latter generation Mexican Americans that continuous immigration from an ethnic group, a trait not present for White ethnics today, contributes to the “rigidity of ethnic boundaries and processes of assimilation and ethnic identity formation,” which sometimes reinforces an ethnic identity for latter generations. He finds in his research that latter generations whose ethnic groups continue to have a steady stream of immigrants may identify more with their ethnic heritage, despite being generationally distant from immigrant ancestors. Additionally, membership to that ethnicity may have more stringent access as knowledge of the language and other markers of cultural knowledge are more relevant for ethnic groups with consistent flows of immigrant populations.

The significance of studying ethnic identity

The implications of studying how Asian mothers and mixed Asian-White daughters perceive their Asian identities are significant because socially constructing a negative view of one’s ethnic identity can have potentially damaging impacts on one’s psychological health. Erik Erikson, in his eight stages of development, defines the period of adolescence
as one in which a person must confront the conflict of identity vs. confusion. According to Erikson, if adolescents do not achieve a stable identity to build upon into adulthood, this can result in psychological turmoil and a difficulty in identifying with others in future stages. Jean Kim expands on Erikson’s identity vs. confusion and links it specifically to Asian American’s construction of racial identity. In her research on processes of Asian American Identity Development (AAID), she observes identity conflict occurs:

“When an individual perceives certain aspects or attributes of him/herself which s/he rejects simultaneously. In the case of Asian Americans, it is the awareness of self as an Asian which one rejects in favor of the White models that are pervasive in our society.” (Kim, 1981)

Kim finds that for minorities and Asian Americans in particular at the time of her study, it was difficult to achieve success in this identity vs. confusion stage due to a divergence in American society between what is seen as positive, White attributes, and the non-White attributes ascribed to her participants. She posits that “Identity conflict as experienced by Asian Americans seems inevitable as long as White racism operates in this society, where being different is synonymous with being less” (Kim 1981). While the mothers of my study overwhelmingly grew up in a social context similar to what Kim describes, the daughters of my study have grown up in the Bay Area in the late 90s and 2000s, when diversity is celebrated and where patterns of symbolic ethnicity as described by Root, Waters, and Bean and Lee are made possible. Yet, while the daughters may not be subject to the same kind of prejudice and possible consequent low ethnic self-esteem inflicted on
the mothers, the daughters may experience identity conflict for a different set of reasons, predominantly their mixed heritage.

For a period of time, several researchers wrote papers on conflicts in identity and psychosocial development for mixed race people because of a dissonance of “belonging neither to the majority nor minority racial group” (As quoted in Grove 1990, Gibbs, 1987; McRoy and Freeman, 1986; Sebring, 1985; Sommers, 1964). They reported that mixed race individuals would not have a clear sense of identity or group belonging, which would have detrimental effects psychologically. Grove, however, in her 1990 study using the Marcia’s Identity Interview found that Asian-White subjects “did not possess significantly different identity statuses than Asians or Whites” leading to her conclusion that mixed race identity may not be as problematic as previously predicted. Sanchez and Shih’s 2005 study supports Grove and finds in a review of the literature on the positive and negative implications of being mixed race that only samples using clinical populations find detrimental effects while studies on non-clinical samples “find multiracial individuals to be just as well-adjusted as their monoracial peers on most psychological outcomes.”

While findings remain inconclusive, it will be important to consider if and how daughters express or do not express conflict regarding dual identities. Overall, one’s construction of ethnic identity has great implications for self-esteem and psychological development, demonstrating the significance of studies in ethnic identity formation.

Methodology

Research setting and participants
As much of previous research has emphasized the importance of location in the construction of racial and cultural identity, it is especially important that I justify my selection of the Bay Area for my research setting. I primarily chose to situate my study in the Bay Area because, as mentioned in my review of the literature on ethnic identity formation and Asian American identity, California and specifically the Bay Area have historically exhibited some of the highest Asian populations in the US. This has been largely due to the Bay Area’s proximity to Angel Island, a major immigration station for Asian Immigrants during the late 19th century to mid 20th century. Because of the high density of Asian Americans and the propensity for Asians to marry outside of their racial group, the Bay Area consequently also has one of the largest mixed Asian-White populations in the US, especially of people below 18. As stated previously, terms used to categorize this growing demographic group such as “hapa” and “mixed race” have gained prevalence and created opportunities for these populations to acquire some kind of continuity and conception of identity (Gamble 2001). I found it interesting and distinct from other research to study mixed Asian identities in a place where the population is large enough to have some kind of established community, or knowledge of and interaction with other mixed Asians. Another benefit of conducting the research in the Bay Area was that it provided me a convenience sample of participants. I am mixed Asian-White from San Francisco and had several contacts willing to assist me with finding participants for my research.

In addition to a relatively large population of mixed Asians, the Bay Area also possesses other unique characteristics that I believe are interesting to look at in
conjunction with my research. For example: the role that the political orientation of the Bay Area plays in the formation of ethnic and cultural identities. The Bay Area is predominantly progressive, often promoting acceptance and celebrating diversity. When creating my research design, I considered the likelihood that these daughters, growing up in the Bay Area like myself, have had conversations about race, ethnicity, and cultural identity before and probably more often than populations not from the Bay Area. I found it intriguing to interview a cohort that had likely thought about and articulated their ideas about ethnic identity before and therefore had a preexisting and developing idea of what their ethnic identity meant to them.

The choice to focus solely on the Bay Area has other implications for the scope of this study as well. It is not likely that this research has specific applications beyond the Bay Area, however it may be richly descriptive of the experience of Asian American women and Asian-White women in this specific location. In this way, the limited scope provides depth rather than breadth. Similarly the pairs studied also overwhelmingly represent the middle to upper middle socioeconomic demographic. Five of the daughters attended a private independent school in San Francisco for elementary school, high school, or for both. Two of the daughters in the study attended parochial school and the other three attended public school in the Menlo Park/Palo Alto area. However, what seems like a skew in the data is actually representative of the socioeconomic status of all Asian-White families in the aggregate because according to the Pew Research Center, Asian-White couples comprised of Asian women and White men are the second highest
earning couples in the US; second only to Asian-White couples comprised of Asian men
and White women.

Most of the mothers in my sample have a college degree, and two additionally
have M.Ds. The mothers’ ages ranged from 45 to 63, while the ages of the daughters
ranged from 19 to 24. Six of the daughters are current college students while three have
full or part time jobs. The ethnic make up of my participants consisted of six pairs with
Chinese mothers, 2 pairs with Japanese mothers, and one pair with a Pilipino mother. The
geographic make-up for where daughters were raised includes three from the Menlo
Park/Palo Alto area, one from El Cerrito, one from Petaluma, one from Oakland, and
three from San Francisco (however the daughters from El Cerrito and Oakland attended
high school in San Francisco, and the daughter from Petaluma attended high school in
Marin.) For a complete description of each participant, please see the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Relevant information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lana</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Immigrated to the U.S. from the Philippines at age 2, 1.5 generation. Grew up in the Bay Area in mostly African American neighborhood and school. Retired nurse. Mother to Lina.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Japanese-White, senior in college. Grew up in East Bay. Attended diverse independent elementary and middle school in Oakland and independent high school in San Francisco. Daughter to Donna.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megumi</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Immigrated from Japan at age 2, 1.5 generation. Grew up in Bay Area in predominantly White neighborhood and school. Attended UC Berkeley. Works as psychotherapist. Mother to Mari.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Independent elementary and middle school in Marin and an independent high school in San Francisco. Teaches in an independent school in Marin. Daughter of Megumi.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Colleen</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>Chinese, second generation. Grew up in San Francisco’s Chinatown. Administrator at a San Francisco independent school. Mother to Danielle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janine</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>Chinese, fifth generation. Grew up in LA in predominantly White school and community. Works as a pediatrician. Mother to Dana.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to roughly controlling for socioeconomic status as well as demographic characteristics like the ages of the mothers and daughters in my study (where they are all
in the same approximate age range), I also tried to control for the area in which the mothers were raised. Seven of the mothers were born and raised in the U.S., and two of the mothers moved to the U.S. when they were two-years-old. The majority of the mothers were also raised in the Bay Area. I was interested in controlling for mother’s provenance because I was more interested in differing perceptions of Asian identity between Asian American women and mixed Asian-White women and believed there would be too much variation in experiences between mothers raised abroad and mothers raised in the U.S.

Research design

I used semi-structured interviews with pairs of Asian mothers and their biracial Asian-White daughters to collect the data for this project. I designed my research questions to evoke memories of instances where respondents’ awareness of their racial or cultural identity was heightened so that I might try and assess how they chose to represent themselves, how they felt, and possibly what factors contributed to these choices and feelings. For each pair, I chose to interview both the mother and the daughter together, because, while other generational studies have interviewed different members of each generation, I have found only one auto-ethnographic study by Stephanie Young that looked directly at related generations and have yet to find a study that interviewed multiple related pairs. I hypothesized that conducting the interviews together would reveal how race and culture is understood and transmitted within the context of the mother-daughter relationship, albeit over the course of an extended conversation. I surmised that this would allow mothers and daughters to make
connections between themselves that they might not make if interviewed in isolation, and also expose some discrepancies in their points of view and perceptions.

At the beginning of each interview, I asked questions about the pair’s relationship, focusing on favorite memories, what they have learned from one another, and what they have disagreed about. These questions were asked mostly to establish comfort in the interview and learn about each pair’s relationship. I next asked about family traditions and cultural traditions, gauging the cultural knowledge of each respondent as well as their exposure to Asian family members (Khanna, Root, Mass). I then finished the interview asking questions about friends, communities, family, generations, and what mothers and daughters found similar and different about their racial experiences. To end the interviews, I specifically asked each pair what questions they would want to ask my participants. I found this helpful in eliciting what participants thought were the most important aspects of my study and in creating potentially new questions for subsequently conducted interviews.

I chose to conduct nine interviews because the research is intended to be exploratory and descriptive rather than generalizable to a wider population. With time and material constraints, I found it more valuable to do in-depth interviews with fewer pairs rather than interview more pairs for a shorter amount of time or conduct quantitative research.

**Data collection**

To obtain my sample of participants, I emailed friends, family friends, and family members and asked if they would be willing to participate in my research. Appendix A
provides a copy of the advertisement I emailed to each potential participant. Two of my participants were recommended to me, either by a friend or another participant. All of the other participants were people I had some personal connection to and some were even people I have had close relationships with. Four of the participant pairs were contacted through the mother. The other five were contacted through the daughter. Seven of the interviews were conducted at the participants’ homes, two of the interviews were conducted in my home. The interviews ranged in length from 30-90 minutes. I found that my personal connections to the participants increased the amount and ease with which they revealed their experiences and opinions. On multiple occasions I spoke with pairs for up to an hour after the interview had formally ended, about my research and other thoughts or ideas they had about my topic when they heard my questions. I found many had had a preexisting interest in the research question. Before completing the interview, each participant also received a $20 Amazon gift certificate to thank them for their participation.

**Data Analysis**

To analyze my data, I used a grounded theory technique (Strauss and Corbin 2008) and open coded initially, creating my coding structure from what I found in the interviews. I used the NVivo qualitative software platform to code my interviews and created analytic memos after I coded each interview to keep track of productive codes, problems with my coding structure, potential patterns, and significant quotes and moments.

**Potential limitations**
Upon reflection, I feel that my questions could have been screened further for biases in tone. For example, the question “Has there ever been a time when you have had to explain an aspect of your cultural identity to someone else?” could have been rephrased with a more positive “got to explain” or a more neutral “explained.” It is possible I found more tension between Asian and American identities because of the ways in which some of my questions were phrased.

Some other possible biases may have come from my relationships with some of the participants, as I have had previous discussions about race and identity with a few of them which might have subconsciously influenced the questions I asked them. They may also have felt more pressure to give me information or embellish stories because they wanted to help me, though I did not observe any obvious demonstration of this.

I will now discuss my findings from these interviews and the general themes that emerged from the data.

**Chapter 1. A Difference in Comfort and Pride in Asian identity**

Reiterating C. Wright Mills assertion, the intersection of history and biography is especially significant in describing the mothers’ and daughters’ differing levels of comfort with and pride in their Asian identity. The mothers in my study almost universally described childhood experiences of discomfort, prejudice, and embarrassment connected to being Asian, and many expressed making an effort to seem White or assimilated to counteract their ‘othered’ status. Many daughters, on the other hand, said they felt special because of their Asian identity, wished they looked more Asian, and drew on their Asian identity as a source of pride. This difference might be explained by the vastly
different social contexts in which the mothers and daughters grew up. Despite the greater economic integration of Asians and Asian Americans today in comparison to other minorities, Asians have faced a significant amount of prejudice and institutionalized racism in American history. While the age of the mothers in my study ranges from 45 to 63, seven of the nine mothers are between the ages of 60 and 63, meaning that they grew up in the United States during the 1950s and 60s, an era when perceptions of ‘foreign Asian evils’ plagued Asian Americans who immigrated from those countries. For example in 1942, following the Pearl Harbor bombings, the US government placed around 110,000 Japanese Americans in internment camps, removing them from their homes and jobs and casting national distrust upon the entire Japanese American population. In the 1950s, McCarthy era “red scare” anxieties lead to the increased suspicion of and prejudice towards Chinese Americans who were accused of sympathizing with Chinese communism. In 1956, the INS created the Chinese confession program, offering citizenship in exchange for admissions of illegal status. With 14,000 confessions, the INS was able to defend limitations to future Asian immigration and substantiate claims from politicians such as Everett Drumwright that all Chinese living in America were illegal (Museum of Chinese in America, 2012). Lastly, interracial marriage, though made legal in California with Perez v Sharp in 1948, was not legalized federally until Loving v. Virginia until 1967. Hence, interracial marriages, such as those of my participant mothers, were not only frowned upon when these mothers were growing up, but in many states were illegal. While the latter is not specific only to Asian Americans, it adds to the laundry list of events and policies that greatly impacted the social environments in which the mothers in
my study population were raised and depicts attitudes of that time towards Asian Americans and minorities. During the interviews, many mothers made clear references to the ways in which discrimination shaped their anxiety about being Asian in America.

For example, the prejudice towards Japanese Americans demonstrated by the institution of the internment camps pressured some Japanese American families to feel they had to present model American behavior in order to be accepted by White community members. One daughter, Emma, who is half Japanese-American and half White, describes her mom, Donna’s, experience growing up as the only Asian family in an all White neighborhood in San Leandro:

I think something that I always heard from you about having to be perfect in your neighborhood was because your parents were in the internment camps they felt that -because it was a time when Japanese were not...not appreciated -they felt that they had to be perfect and show “look we’re prefect American citizens. Look how American we are, look how perfect we are.

Emma demonstrates in her description an implicit anxiety Donna’s family felt to not be seen as foreign and therefore distance themselves from cultural behavior that would not be categorized as American. Her emphasis on having to prove they were perfect American citizens reveals how Asians were not widely viewed or accepted as Americans at that time.

Akin to Donna’s family attempting to create the perfect veneer of the American family and distance themselves from their Asian identity, one mother instead tried to distance herself from her parents in order to temper the stigma of foreignness. Megumi, who moved with her family to the United States from Japan when she was two years old, expressed being embarrassed by her immigrant parents and the way they dressed and
spoke. She describes her experience of growing up Asian in the Bay Area as extremely uncomfortable and intimates that she was always trying to assimilate with White American culture and distance herself from her Asianness:

I felt really, really different...and also lower than, you know, kind of the White majority. And because I had parents who couldn’t speak any English and they kind of dressed weird and they could never stick up for us and, you know, just had this kind of broken English. It was kind of embarrassing.

Megumi’s recollection of her childhood alienation and isolation explains the motivation for some of the mothers in my study to reject their Asian heritage and distance themselves from their Asian identity. Megumi’s parents represented for her a symbol of her difference from her peers, which she felt marked her as inferior in their opinion of her. Additionally for Megumi, because her parents were immigrants who could not “stick up” for her and her sister, she never had the opportunity growing up to discuss ethnic pride or her struggle with assimilation and instead felt distant from both her parents and her White peers. In this way, it seems that Megumi not only felt embarrassed by her parents’ difference but additionally a certain amount of parental betrayal associated with their ethnicity and their inability to defend their children or explain this difference to them in a way that would abate their feelings of alienation.

Yet even mothers whose parents were not immigrants to the U.S. described incidences of racism and being identified as different. Ruth, a fourth generation Chinese American from the Bay Area, who is generationally more distant than many of the other mothers from her Asian immigrant ancestors, responded to a question about her racial experience by remembering a time she was riding in a car with older White girls from her high school and a neighboring car called out racial slurs to her.
We were driving in the car. We had you know the windows down and our arms out the window, you know, that type of thing, and we drove by a car with boys in it basically and they shouted something- it was a racial epithet actually and it was just really- it was embarrassing you know.

Ruth reveals that despite integration into White friend groups, the threat of hurtful racial epithets still distinguished Asians as different. In this moment of adolescent excitement, a youthful encounter of girls and boys, Ruth was made to feel embarrassed and dissimilar from her White peers in the car. The stories of the mothers I interviewed establish a legacy of historical racism that negatively influenced their perception of their Asian identity throughout their adolescence.

Cheryl, a third generation Chinese American who grew up and still lives in Burlingame, also experienced feeling alienated from her White classmate because of her ethnicity. When I went to high school, nobody asked me to the senior prom because it was an all White school right and I had to get- and I was senior class president-so- and did that because I wanted to fit in and, you know, you just... all that... But, that, you know that was high school there and you know I’m sure the parents there were like “my kids not going out with an Asian.”

Cheryl explains that instead of explicit racial discrimination, it was during social rituals such as prom that she observed the differential treatment she received from her White peers. She speculates that the parents of her classmates would not have approved of their child dating an Asian girl, which thus enforced this feeling that being Asian was less romantically desirable. However, because this discrimination is not explicit, this instance is also an example of internalized prejudice. For Cheryl, the threat of experiencing prejudice as a result of her ethnicity is so ubiquitous that it is activated in the analysis of all of her interactions, even when the prejudice is not overtly stated. Such instances of
explicit and perceived racial discrimination, alienation, and micro-aggressions significantly impacted these mothers’ relationships with their Asian identity, often resulting in quests for distance from their Asian identity and assimilation into White culture.

What is potentially significant to observe about the mothers’ experiences is that their stories anecdotally suggest they grew up largely isolated from Asian communities. As suggested in the literature (Mass 1992, Hall & Turner 2001, Root 2001, Khanna 2004), exposure to ethnic communities can be extremely influential in individuals identifying with that particular ethnic identity. While the majority of the mothers were raised in either California or the Bay Area (which are areas with relatively large Asian American populations in comparison to the rest of the country), they still grew up isolated from other Asian Americans. Overwhelmingly the mothers could remember exactly how many Asians were at their schools beside themselves and it was usually because they could count the total number on one hand. In addition to the era in which these mothers were raised and the feelings towards Asian Americans at that time, the mothers of my study were also overwhelmingly raised apart from large Asian American communities which may have contributed to greater discomfort and feelings of otherness. As Kim noted with her research on Asian American Identity Development, Asian Americans will experience conflict with their ethnic identity if they perceive “certain aspects or attributes of him/herself which s/he rejects simultaneously” (1981). In many of the communities the mothers of my study were raised in, they perceived from their peers that Asianness was a quality that should be rejected in themselves.
Looking to the younger generation, many of the daughters, in contrast to their mothers, seemed to gain a ‘special’ status from their Asian heritage. Megumi states of the difference between her and her daughter’s experiences:

I think our experience is pretty much- pretty different...like diametrically different. I think Mari grew up feeling very comfortable in her skin and feeling pretty much like [she] fit in in the community and, if anything, I think being mixed race... was a point of pride... it was like a cache or something, yeah, it made you feel good and different. And then for me, I didn’t feel like I fit in nor did my family fit in at all with the community that we lived in.

Megumi observes that unlike her experience with ethnic identity, being different was a ‘point of pride’ for her daughter and ethnicity was something she saw as a positive part about herself. She notes that Mari felt “comfortable” in her skin, and was in fact not just ok with being Asian, but happy to be Asian and mixed and this added to her cultural capital

Almost all of the daughters described the majority of their friends as White with many also specifying they had mostly ethnically White Jewish friends. Though this indicates that, like their mothers, these daughters also grew up more isolated from large Asian or Asian American populations, unlike their mothers, the daughters did not want or need to assimilate, instead viewing their Asian identity as a unique cultural heritage that made them different from their friends or classmates. Emma, a Japanese-White woman whose mother, Donna, is a third-generation Japanese-American, offers a story illustrating the difference between her and her mother’s feelings towards their Asian heritage:

E: She would always tell me about how in grade school her mom would make Japanese dishes or something right? For her lunch to pack?
D: She would make rice balls
E: Yeah rice balls and she would just say “mom can’t you please just make a ham sandwich or something?” like just wanted to do what all the other White kids
were doing, none of this weird ethnic food, and when I was in grade school and middle school and she would pack lunches, it was so cool and so in vogue when you would get something that wasn’t just a ham sandwich like people would say “OOO she has spam musubi” or “OOO she has furikake on her rice” or something, which was probably a function of where I went to school but that was very in vogue, you know, and I just loved it when she would pack me stuff like that.

This quote exemplifies a few significant points made by multiple daughters. Firstly many daughters observed the sense of it being “in vogue”, or “trendy” to have a connection to an ethnic culture that was not White. The ability to demonstrate a liking and knowledge for an ethnic food is a particular coup for many of these daughters and one of the most salient ways the daughters can concretely display their cultural identity; a point I will expand upon in a later chapter. For these daughters, demonstrations of ties to their cultural heritage are seen as cool. However, the use of terms such as “in vogue” and “trendy” also reveal that the daughters realize the temporality of this trend. With the Bay Area’s increasing celebration of and emphasis on diversity, it is precisely the differences that embarrassed the mothers that the daughters wish to claim as what makes them unique and special. However, unlike the mothers, the daughters generally get to choose which aspects of their Asian identity they wish to enact making their performed Asian identities similar to Maria P.P. Root’s interpretation of Mary Waters’ concept of symbolic ethnicity. Maria P.P. Root writes that mixed Asians have the “luxury of choosing to affiliate distantly with a group because it gives a person a sense of uniqueness.” (2001) In this way, the daughters similarly illustrate through their selective employment of their Asian heritage how their ethnic identities are performative and temporal; made and unmade, claimed and unclaimed, not just inherited. Yet, while Root suggests that symbolic ethnicities often involve a “distant” affiliation with an ethnic group, the
daughters in my study instead seem to want to be seen as an insider in their ethnic group when they access their ethnic identity.

While the daughters may choose to employ their ethnic identities to engage a sense of uniqueness, Emma and many of the other daughters observe that their schools often exploited their ethnic identities to illustrate institutional uniqueness as well. Most of daughters noted that their schools highlighted diversity in their mission statements, yet some speculated this emphasis was more symbolic of the times and what was expected from a prestigious educational establishment. Continuing the theme of “trendiness” in diversity, Danielle, a Chinese, Spanish and Mexican daughter who now teaches in a private school in Marin, reflects on her experiences in independent schools in San Francisco and her many outlets for celebrating her heritage.

I also think that…well maybe not but I think in my time and age its very um along with going to private schools, its like trendy? I don’t know if that’s really the word but like very encouraged and looked well upon to claim this multiraciality and start that club you know it was the same type of- I think I was riding the wave of private schools being like “o right diversity is important we should put that in our mission statement somewhere” and its like the new 21st century thing to do and we need to get on that wagon before our school is seen as like uncultured or they don’t know what they’re doing so I think also the time we’re growing up I mean I can’t speak for you but for me I think it was very much I was riding that wave

Danielle feels that a significant difference between her and her mother’s experience in school was the push for embracing diversity as a “21st century thing to do” when she was in school. Danielle describes that “claiming multiraciality” and “starting a club” were encouraged and common for her and her peers and her schools even institutionalized these values in their mission statements, fearing that failure to do so would make them
seem “uncultured.” Danielle feels that valuing diversity is not only encouraged, it gives these independent schools status and legitimacy.

An internet search in fact finds a paragraph on diversity on the mission statement page of every high school the daughters attended. Some of the daughters, however, describe the strong emphasis on diversity in the Bay Area independent schools almost cynically, as if diversity is something to be flaunted in the private school realm. Danielle laughs, “I’m still on the cover of the brochure at [an independent school in San Francisco] even though I don’t teach there any more,” indicating how her minority status is often taken advantage of liberally by independent schools to prove their diversity efforts. Many of the other daughters pointed to their school, and the organizations in their school, as a catalyst for awareness and discussion about diversity, race, and culture. In contrast to the isolation many of the mothers felt as they could count the other Asians around them on one hand, their daughters were provided ways to connect with other Asians, mixed people, and other minorities, and observe the positive aspects of these distinctions.

For instance, two of the daughters in my study participated in a Hapa Club in their high school, originally started by Danielle. One daughter attended a camp specifically for students of color that her high school nominated her for. Another daughter participated in a secret society at her college for people of color committed to social change. One daughter started a group for teachers of color in independent schools when she became a teacher. From this evidence, it appears as if having access to organizations that champion diversity, as the daughters in my study sample did, increased their identification with their Asian identity and their feelings of pride and social value in their ethnic heritage.
This may indicate the significance of organizational support, even if it is
sometimes viewed skeptically, in helping people of color embrace diversity because even
those with dual heritages, such as the daughters in my study, chose to invoke their
minority heritage in their engagement and participation in these groups. On the other
hand, one might interpret that the daughters’ participation in these groups stemmed
from a want to demonstrate their minority ethnicity through more concrete
manifestations such as organizational affiliation, which would additionally distinguish
them from the majority and support a unique or special status afforded my ethnic
membership.

**Ethnic Status-Trafficking in relative, relational and situational status**

Beyond feeling special, the daughters also expressed a certain heightened
awareness or understanding of race and ethnicity that accompanied their connection to
their ethnic identity. This understanding often evoked the sense of an elevated status in
certain circumstances, especially those involving discussions of race or diversity with
White peers. Mari, a 23-year-old Japanese-White woman whose mother is Megumi,
explains:

> When I was younger I kind of enjoyed being the only one who was not all White or
> who didn’t look like everybody else. I enjoyed standing out in that way and having
> a different perspective maybe or sometimes being able to be more righteous
> about things if there was like any hint of racism or anything.

Mari highlights how it is not necessarily her Asian identity but rather her non-White
identity that contributed to her feelings of heightened ethnic status among her peers. She
found that in situations discussing race when there was a “hint of racism” she was able to
employ this non-White identity to gain more authority over her White peers who she seemingly considers less adept with issues concerning minorities.

Emma, who is also Japanese and White, further describes a closed-mindedness she observes in her friends from college who are mostly White and have little exposure to ethnic or racial diversity.

It just frustrates me at [my college] that everybody’s White and I just...I dunno kinda want to be different. I kinda want to show them this isn’t all there is out there, there’s a lot of people who aren’t White, you should try it (laughs), get to know them.

In this quote, Emma criticizes her White peers for what she perceives as their lack of knowledge and experience with diversity. Her assertion that she wants to show her friends that White is not all that is out there demonstrates her opinion that she is an authority on diversity in a way that her all White friends could not be. When she states almost mockingly “you should try it” in reference to meeting non-White friends, she reveals how she relationally views herself on a higher plane regarding her understanding of race and ethnicity and her feeling that Whiteness is inherently correlated with lack of understanding or exposure to diversity.

Annie, a Chinese-White woman whose mother, Ruth, is fourth-generation Chinese American, voices similar opinions to Emma’s about the perceived ethnic ignorance of her White college classmates:

I mean [my college] is predominantly White also and so people just say kind of really like I dunno ignorant things you know? Someone was like “Do you eat dog? Have you ever had dog?” you know, like I dunno and there’s always that moment when you know you’re talking about Asians in a group of White people and the teacher looks at you and goes “Oh please speak for all the Asians in the world about what you feel about this.”
For Annie, it may not be merely that she assumes the role of authority on race or ethnicity but also that in some cases, this role is thrust upon her. One might wonder though, if the intent of the questions are really as presumptuous as they are perceived by Annie, as the teacher and students likely did not actually ask her to speak for all other Asian Americans. However, this story is a fairly common complaint among ethnic students in monoracial classrooms and may suggest that the classroom acts as a site of magnified difference interpreted as pressure to act as a representative ambassador for one’s race. Consequently, the archetypal nature of this story for ethnic minorities may amplify Annie’s righteousness against her White peers as well when she feels she is experiencing such a situation. Yet, though Annie resists the perceived plea to speak for all Asians, she also exposes that it is possibly because of these predominantly White social settings that she and the other daughters feel responsible for teaching their White peers about race. Annie, like Emma and Mari, invokes this same idea of Whiteness as if it inherently suggests a dearth of understanding about diversity, race, or ethnicity. She assumes, in her quote, that it will be understood by the interviewer that because her college is predominantly White, people will say ignorant things regarding race or ethnicity, again presuming Whiteness also signifies cultural unawareness. Like the respondents in Debbie Storrs’ 1999 study of mixed race women’s perception of their ethnic identity, the daughters I interviewed seem to associate Whiteness with incompetence about racial or cultural sensitivity. Similarly, when Lina, a Filipino-White daughter whose Filipino-American mother, Lana, immigrated to the US at the age of two, describes why the relationship between her mother and her father’s parents is strained, she similarly draws
on the definition of Whiteness created by Storr’s participants. She explains of the in-law relationship “Well, all of my family is very White on that side,” assuming that being “very White” universally denotes lack of tolerance or understanding of other cultures that would therefore explain their friction. In this way, many of the daughters associate a very specific culture with Whiteness that they predominantly view, when generalized, negatively. Potentially, in order to feel the specialness associated with their ethnic identity Whiteness necessarily has to be denigrated. Their opinions of Whiteness may also be persuaded by their mothers’ experiences of prejudice, which they may feel justifies and substantiates their claims about Whiteness. Perhaps, to speculate further, they feel an indirect responsibility to their mothers to defend their Asian identity and take pride in being an ethnic minority in a way their mothers could not.

What is also significant is that despite being half White themselves, the daughters easily use Whiteness as a negative quality to demonstrate the ignorance of White “others”. The manner in which they use the term also serves to distance themselves from this Whiteness and place them on a higher level of understanding. In this way, I find that the daughters draw on their Asian or minority identity to create a sense of ethnic status—a feeling of heightened awareness or understanding of social issues surrounding race, culture, and ethnicity. Mari’s quote even demonstrates an awareness of this process when she admits enjoying being more “righteous” when there is a “hint of racism.” The daughters not only enjoy a special status because of their unique ethnic heritage, they also are able to enact an enlightened identity or authority when it comes to social issues surrounding minorities. The manner in which the daughters are able to proudly access
their ethnic identities for social capital stands in stark contrast to their mothers’ adolescent struggles with discrimination and low ethnic self-esteem.

Following the investigation of how mothers and daughters feel about their ethnic identity, I will now examine a common way many mothers and daughters access their ethnic identity.

**Chapter 2. Role of Food in Ethnic Identity Formation**

As Root (2001), Khanna (2004), Markus and Moya (2010) and Omi and Winant (2004) highlight in their characterizations of ethnic identity formation, ethnic identity is a product of actions and interactions that affirm one’s connection to a certain identity. The mothers’ and daughters’ relationships with Asian food exemplify this concept, as their food rituals and traditions act as a medium through which they establish their ethnicity. Eating Studies scholar Kyla Tompkins also establishes in her book *Racial Indigestions* (2012) the function of eating in the creation of identity. She posits in her opening chapter “Eating is a social practice that confirms and delineates difference, demarcating social barriers and affirming group formations.” She continues that “acts of eating cultivate political subjects by fusing the social with the biological, by imaginatively shaping the matter we experience as body and as self.” In this way, Tompkins argues that what we eat, how we eat it, and where we eat it, and who we eat it with all make important statements about our identity, thus supporting the wide spread use of food by my participants as an emblem of their Asian ethnicity. Additionally, my participants’ overwhelming utilization of ethnic food as a significant symbol of Asian heritage suggests the consequence of *concrete* and clearly defined demonstrations of ethnic identity. For
the majority of daughters in my study, food represents a strong and incontestable link to
tradition and heritage. The knowledge, appreciation, and taste for something that may
seem “exotic” to their peers creates an identification with their unique ethnic legacy. The
ritualized preparation and consumption of ethnic food is also identified as a more
accessible tie to ethnic identity because it is tangible and easy to pass down, learn, and
absorb while still embedded in American culture in a way values or language are not.
Asian food is something that distinctly marks the Asian experience for almost all of the
daughters and is universally invoked when prompted about a family tradition that is
Asian.

Many of the daughters, when asked what cultural traditions they would want to
pass on to their children, indicated traditions surrounding food, citing food’s cultural
significance to them, it’s clear distinction as an Asian cultural tradition, and the simplicity
of passing such traditions onto younger generations. Mari offers:

Yeah I think the biggest thing is probably food, because I don’t know if I grew up
eating a lot of Japanese food but there definitely are a bunch of dishes that are
like really comfort food for me, like, we would eat them a lot. And now, like having
my own place, I cook those things or try to cook those things so I think that’s
something I definitely would want to pass on.

Mari specifically focuses on the way eating Japanese foods makes her feel and describes
these dishes as “comfort foods,” a term often associated with familiar family meals. Here
Mari demonstrates an interest in having her children similarly feel comfort and familiarity
with the Japanese dishes she grew up with. One might extrapolate that Mari hopes to
develop a similar connection to Asian culture for her children through food because this is
how she feels she has connected to her Japanese heritage. Another daughter, Lina, for whom Pilipino food is an especially important connection to her heritage, responded:

Yeah, I think it’s mostly in the food and I think that’s really one of the easiest ways and one of the most enjoyable ways to bring culture in anyone’s life.

Lina highlights the ease of using ethnic food as a means to “bring culture” into one’s life or affirm one’s heritage or ethnic identity. Lina also proposes that food is an ideal way for anyone to bring culture into their lives, suggesting a possibly universal acceptance of food as a purveyor of culture. She also describes it as “enjoyable,” which may differentiate learning the preparation of a certain meal, which Lina would find fun, from the acquisition of a more difficult or time intensive cultural practice such as learning a language.

Emma, while describing what Asian cultural traditions her family participates in, stopped and realized “it all just comes back to food doesn’t it?” Continuing on, she describes her enjoyment of making special food for Oshagatsu, a holiday which her mother, Donna, defines as the “traditional New Year’s food gathering:”

Emma: we would divide up among the family members the making of the special beans or the special dish or the stew...None of our family gatherings were Japanese per se, but I really liked this because I felt like it was a strong cultural tie and just some of the food is really weird that you eat and so I kind of liked that, like, “look how ethnic we are” (laughs) and I would tell all my White friends like “you wouldn’t believe what I ate today” (laughs)-but, no, I think it was because it was a strong, um a strongly Japanese thing that we didn’t really do elsewhere...

Emma once more alludes self-analytically to the “special status” she feels among her White friends because of her intimate knowledge of “weird” Japanese food, yet her interjection “-but, no,” leading to a more vulnerable description of her feelings during such celebrations, shows how powerful a cultural experience it is to cook traditional Asian foods. The practice not only, in her opinion, proves ostensibly to others her membership
to this ethnic group but also reaffirms her own sense of belonging. Her assertion of “look how ethnic we are” reflects a realization that by practicing these food traditions, she is embodying what she envisions as an ethnically Japanese experience both to others and to herself, which logically confirms for her an identification with her Japanese heritage. She describes her experience as a “strong cultural tie” and “strongly Japanese” indicating the robust emotional link to Asian ethnic identity created through cooking and eating Japanese food with the Japanese side of her family.

Though Asian food acts as an important symbol of ethnic identity during Asian holidays and in the passing down of specifically Asian traditions, my participants also discussed cooking and eating Asian foods to celebrate traditionally American holidays. When asked to describe general family traditions, almost every pair described Thanksgiving or Christmas, how they gather together with family, and what kind of foods they eat. Interestingly, in the description of these American holiday traditions, many brought up Asian foods that are also featured during their holiday festivities. Lina posits:

I feel like our Thanksgiving and our Christmas dinners are lot different than other families because they are so combined. We always have, like, Pilipino dishes along with the traditional Thanksgiving meal dishes.

In this quote, Lina illustrates how her Asian ethnicity is intertwined with her American identity as symbolized through the combinations of food at these holiday gatherings. She emphasizes how this may be unique in comparison to other American families that do not similarly have mixed and diverse cultural heritages, confirming that this kind of mixed meal is indeed a product of her mixed heritage. Danielle similarly talks about making sticky (glutinous) rice, a Chinese dish, for Thanksgiving, and Megumi and Mari say that at
their Thanksgiving meals, there is a combination of both American and Asian food. Ethnic food therefore possesses the unique function of both symbolizing a tangible and definitive connection to Asian heritage while simultaneously representing the possibility for both American and Asian cultural heritages to be acknowledged and celebrated at the same time. It is because of this function that I believe Asian food is especially significant for the daughters of my study who seek opportunities to express their Asian identity while inextricably embedded in American culture.

Ethnic and cultural traditions involving the cooking and preparation of food may also be particularly significant to the mother-daughter relationship and consequently the participants in my study because cooking is traditionally a feminized practice. Indeed many of the mothers and daughters in my study expressed fond memories of learning to cook with their mothers or grandmothers. Thus, food for my participants may be an especially strong link to their Asian identity because of its association with their mothers and their combined feminine and Asian identity. Lina recalls watching her grandma make traditional Pilipino food when she was younger:

I feel like when my grandmother was alive we had a lot more traditions. She used to baby sit me when I was younger so I grew up with I feel like the traditional Pilipino food and so she would wrap lumpia and she’d, like, wrap it a certain way - it was usually on the weekends in the morning and I would always, in my pajamas, go into the dining room table and sit there while she did it. And it was like so monotonous cuz she was like- everyone had to be perfect and I didn’t realize /how tough it was until I started making them

Lana: (Talking at the same time) /how hard it was until I did it and they were all different sizes

Lina and Lana, in their discussion of wrapping lumpia, disclose the tradition that has been passed down among these three generations of women learning to prepare traditional
Pilipino food. Lina’s nostalgic and detailed description of this act indicates the impact of these memories and reinforces the emotional connection of Pilipino food to her family, culture, and ethnic identity. Her emphasis on traditional Pilipino food highlights the important for Lina that she communicates how authentically and legitimately this food embodies real Pilipino heritage. Both Lina and Lana’s recognition of the skill Lina’s grandmother had in achieving uniformity in lumpia size additionally signifies the training and practice required to successfully execute these dishes, therefore making the knowledge of certain tricks and techniques in creating traditional ethnic foods that much more satisfying of a connection to one’s ethnic heritage and assigns ethnic status to mastery of this food preparation. The maternal inheritance of culinary cultural identity creates for some of these mother-daughter pairs an especially strong connection to Asian heritage.

For some of my participants, conflict can also arise when the significance of their cultural connection to food is unrecognized or slighted. For example, Mari described an uncomfortable instance between her and her roommates:

The way it works in my house is one person cooks dinner for everybody like one night a week and I usually cook Asian food. Not always just like often-and not even just Japanese food, like Vietnamese is like my favorite type of food. And one of my housemates always says “Mari loves Asian food, Mari you always cook Asian food” and just like makes this big deal out of it. And I haven’t really said anything about it because I don’t think she’s thinking about it, like... but it just like really shows how she normalizes, like, White American food, like, what is that even? And so I guess I haven’t had to explain myself but it is a place where I could be like, “this is my favorite kind of food and even if I didn’t grow up-” like, I grew up with this kind of food so its normal for me and like that’s just sort of a place where like I feel like she’s forgetting a big part of me...

In her retelling of this conversation, Mari demonstrates an interesting tension in her
analysis of why her roommate’s comments upset her. She at first argues that any
American person cooking Asian cuisine should not be considered abnormal because there
is no true “American” food when one considers America’s diversity and therefore one
should not normalize American as “White.” At the same time, Mari feels that her
roommate calling her out on cooking Asian food insinuates Mari is fetishizing something
exotic or foreign to herself. In this way, Mari feels her roommate fails to recognize Mari’s
heritage and the idea that Mari grew up with Asian food as a normal part of her culture
and home life, so such dishes are not necessarily Asian food in Mari’s eyes, but simply the
food she enjoys and is familiar with. While the preparation and consumption of Asian
food may act as a means of affirming Mari’s ethnic identity for her personally, this
practice does not indicate a lack of authenticity or an attempt to appropriate something
foreign. Hence commentary that implies artifice in her actions is perceived as a threat to
her sense of identity.

Lina and Lana also share how food practices can expose cultural differences. Lina
describes how her family always has a lot of food and as a part of the Pilipino culture
because in the Philippines “you never know who is going to stop by.” She remembers her
friends commenting “how many proteins are we going to have tonight?” when having
dinner at her house. Julie and Georgia, whose Asian ethnicity is Chinese American, also
observe that for many Asians, cooking a lot of food is a cultural norm stating, “yeah, [we]
cook for an army.” However, while Lina and Lana view having extra food as a normal
practice, Lana’s in-laws, Lina’s father’s parents, are less understanding.

Li: my mom always cooked whenever we went to Minnesota she’d cook for
everyone and we talked about earlier just having so much food and, um, that was
just part of our culture!... But my grandmother would always make comments (and they still do) when we come back from the grocery store-
La: “O there’s so much food!”
Li: with all these groceries just, because that’s how we live! We need food and the lake house is literally like-
La: so many miles away from a grocery store
Li: yeah so you have to get a lot when you go...she would always make you know these negative comments on the side about having too much food and how we always make too much food and it’s a waste and stuff like that

This anecdote reveals how important a tie food is to one’s ethnic identity by demonstrating how what others may assume is a commentary strictly on food can actually be perceived as a direct affront to one’s culture. These instances of conflict may also support my participants’ identification with their ethnic identity by highlighting the difference between their experience with food and culture, and other non-Asians’ experiences, confirming in their confrontation with others that they do belong to a distinctly Asian cultural tradition with Asian traditions and values surrounding food.

Thus, food serves as an important aspect of affirming Asian ethnic identity for these mothers and daughters because it is accessible and tangible, easy and enjoyable to pass on, can be employed within an American context or with simultaneous American traditions and, in instances of marked difference from non-Asian food practices, reifies a distinctly Asian cultural tradition. As follows, the preparation and consumption of Asian food represents for many of my participants an ideal realization of their cultural heritage and symbol of inherited cultural knowledge, additionally significant for these mothers and daughters due to common societal expectation of Asians to prove authenticity in ethnic identity through cultural knowledge.

Chapter 3. Pressure to Prove Cultural Knowledge and Fulfillment of Cultural Duty
For the mothers and daughters of my study, questions about cultural heritage in some instances evoked happy memories of connection and tradition. Yet, these questions also simultaneously created an apparent pressure on the mothers and daughters to prove a certain level of cultural knowledge. The mothers seemed to feel anxious to prove they had taught their daughters to be Asian or "admit" and "justify" if they had not. The daughters equally displayed a stress to demonstrate both for their mothers and for me, the researcher, that they possessed this cultural knowledge that would qualify them as legitimately Asian.

In accord with Mia Tuan’s 1999 research suggesting there is a greater expectation for latter generation Asian Americans to prove their Asianness than other ethnic groups in America, the mothers of my study, likely additionally prompted by my research questions, seemed pressured to prove that they had done their duty in imparting Asian culture to their children: interjecting when their daughters paused in answering what traditions they were going to pass on to their children and correcting their daughters when they made mistakes in explaining Asian traditions. The mothers expressed guilt if disclosing they celebrated few Asian traditions or when asked if their daughters could speak the language and seemed to think they should have tried harder in some aspects of cultural education. The daughters, too, seemed to feel there was an expectation to prove their Asian identity; sometimes listing cultural traditions they knew little about seemingly in an effort to display their cultural status. It is likely that, because many Bay Area Asian Americans feel societal pressure to inculcate their children with Asian cultural comprehension, the question “are there any cultural practices you felt were particularly
important to pass down?” might inspire assumed expectations, especially when the question is coming from a researcher examining Asian identity. Potentially the combination of this societal pressure and my specific mode of questioning caused some of the mothers to believe they should feel disappointed at not passing on certain traditions or practices.

Importantly, though, while these questions about culture and traditions often elicited stress, at the same time, for some of the mothers and daughters in my study, these questions also prompted stories of important moments shared between mother and daughter, when they felt especially connected to their Asian culture and to each other. Donna and Emma remember visiting Japan where Donna and her husband, Emma’s father, had lived for four and a half years before Emma was born. Donna reminiscences:

It was really fun to take Emma back to Japan to see her ancestry and to see her ethnic roots from my side of the family and just to watch her notice and observe everything about life in Japan was very satisfying for me as a parent.

Donna recalls a feeling of satisfaction seeing Emma connect with her Japanese heritage. Her use of “observe” and “notice” in conjunction with “my side of the family” imply that Donna felt that through Emma’s experience of Japan, Emma was also learning about Donna, almost as if the trip was revealing some part of Donna for the first time that they could now share. Her description of the satisfaction coming from her role “as a parent” further demonstrates how she feels this sharing of her culture is interpreted as a part of her role as a mother and an action that deepens the mother-daughter relationship.

Lina remembers vividly her mother taking her to a Pilipino heritage event for the first time.
I think I was in third or fourth grade when my cousin picked me up from school, and I was really worried because it was in the middle of the day, and she was like “you have a doctor’s appointment, your mother forgot about it” and I was like “no she didn’t, what are you talking about?” So she takes me from school and we get in the car and she said “no your mom- there’s an event going on at work and it’s, like, a Pilipino heritage event.” (to her mother) Remember this? Well, this was the first time I saw Pilipino dancing.

Lina remembers this experience especially fondly because of the collusion between her, her mother, and cousin to take her out of school to bring her to the event. Such effort both demonstrates how important it was for Lana that Lina be present at the Pilipino heritage event and also likely validated for Lina the significance of the event because her mother was willing to take her out of school for it. Though Lina was fairly young, she still remembers this moment: the first time she saw Pilipino dancing which, for Lina, was exceptionally poignant, as she had already started dancing competitively. The confluence of one of her passions with her culture and family made the event particularly powerful. This introduction and sharing of heritage between mother and daughter thus forged an incredibly strong memory for the pair.

Yet while the opportunity to pass on and share cultural heritage can offer experiences that build these emotional bonds, the mothers and daughters also expressed guilt and discomfort if they did not feel that they met some of the cultural benchmarks that they felt they ought to. As a researcher who is fairly familiar with some Japanese and Chinese cultural practices, I found that there were many instances where my participants would discuss traditions or use phrases such as “lai si,” red envelopes given on Chinese New Year, “pau pau and gung gung,” Cantonese for Grandma and Grandpa on the father’s side, or talk about seeing the site of the 1000 paper cranes, and not explain them
further, recognizing my understanding. Yet despite employing many cultural references, many would still sheepishly state that they did not have many Asian traditions or do anything particularly Asian as if some kind of admission to something they should have done or some job they failed to accomplish. After Mari states she would like her children to learn Japanese, despite the fact the she herself did not totally learn it, Megumi reflects on trying to teach Mari Japanese:

Um so yeah I don’t think I passed down a lot of cultural traditions um I think that with Mari I tried the hardest with the language um you know I mean I remember reading to her children’s books in Japanese and um you know and trying to sing her some Japanese songs um sending her to Japanese schools uh I think I tried really hard to talk to her in Japanese then it kind of got less and less I think yeah I think I dunno there’s a lot of kids a lot of children who are not that keen on learning the language.

Megumi’s record of her many attempts to teach Mari Japanese and her assertion that she “really tried hard,” conveys a genuine effort to teach the language and insinuates that passing down culture does not necessarily come naturally; there has to be a conscious, continuous effort. It also reveals that this was an effort Megumi felt responsible for and initially felt was very important when raising her daughter. Her conclusion that many children “are not that keen” to learn a language, seems to act as an attempt to absolve herself of the self-inflicted guilt she feels about not teaching her children Japanese, further illustrating the pressure Megumi feels to teach her daughter Asian traditions and culture.

While Megumi is second generation and fluent in Japanese, which might explain her endeavor to teach Mari the language, Janine, who is fifth generation and whose parents did not speak Chinese, also rationalizes her daughter, Dana’s, lack of exposure to
other minorities and why Dana does not speak Chinese. In response to a question about the differences between her and her daughter’s racial experiences, Janine states:

> Where I grew up and also where we were living in Massachusetts there weren’t enough of us to categorize so that was- I mean we couldn’t... Chinese school. I know a lot of people around here [Palo Alto] take their kids to Chinese school I mean I’m not even sure there was a Chinese school [where we are from], there must have been in Chinatown, Boston probably but around where we lived there just wasn’t anything like that I mean there was me and Ming; we were the only Chinese ladies in the whole town! (laughs) I think that that’s different but Dana even Dana’s experience from Massachusetts to here has been really different, (to Dana) no? Because there weren’t really any kinds of minorities back there.

Here, Janine has a conversation with herself, reasoning that because of where they lived there were not many *options* for joining Chinese communities even if they wanted to. She then argues with herself that maybe she could have gone farther to Boston or something, but counters again that it was only her and one other Asian woman representing as the “Chinese ladies” where they lived. Despite being generationally very distant from her immigrant ancestors and isolated from Asian communities, Janine still feels that there is an implicit expectation to fill an Asian identity that consists of participating in Asian communities and going to Chinese school. This could possibly reflect a function of Tomas Jimenez’s replenished ethnicity theory which suggests that because there is a constant influx of Asian immigrants to the U.S., validation of Asian identity through language is more present and relevant to Asian American identity in the Bay Area than say learning German to be a part of the German American community or learning Celtic to belong to the Irish American community is. It is significant to observe the immense internal conflict provoked by questions that almost seem to be interpreted by some of the mothers as “How hard did you try to teach your daughter to be Asian?”
Another fascinating manifestation of the pressure on the mothers to demonstrate a cultural education in their children was the interaction between mothers and daughters when describing specific cultural practices. A surprisingly frequent occurrence was for the daughter to attempt to display knowledge of an event and for the mother to correct her or for the daughter to mention a certain tradition and for the mother to describe it in more detail. For example, Danielle attempts to describe their Chinese New Year tradition:

D: yeah we have a huge banquet dinner or meal usually at a restaurant and it changes who gets to decide where it is and then um and you know everyone’s together around round tables, we have a seven course meal and we pass out the lai si and eat moon cakes
C: well, that’s in the fall
D: ok…. (both laugh) see how much I know
C: moon cake season is actually now

It appears that Danielle does not actually know what the moon cakes are for and when they should be eaten and yet she was attempting to use them as a demonstration of her cultural knowledge. What I think is interesting is that because it was only clearly a peripheral part of her cultural tradition, meaning she knows that they exist but she probably does not eat them often enough to remember at what part of the year they are eaten, her main reason for bringing it up was likely to add to her list of cultural facts she was inventorying. This again demonstrates cultural knowledge’s utilization as currency that Asian Americans use to barter their identity. Though both Danielle and Colleen were quick to laugh self-effacingly at Danielle’s gaffe, Colleen’s quick insertion of the correct information suggested Colleen’s investment in Danielle knowing the right details of the tradition. Lana similarly inserts her knowledge into Lina’s recollection of seeing Pilipino dancers for the first time:
Li: but I’d never actually been exposed to traditional Pilipino dancing um and I just remember that event and me eating the Pilipino food while watching these dancers do the tinik—?
La: tinikling
Li: and then this like really pretty dance with
La: candle light
Li: candles and they’re doing really crazy things and the tinikling is with these like sticks and they’re jumping

Lina and Danielle’s deferrals to their mothers about the specifics of the cultural traditions they are trying to describe invoke a sense that despite possessing parts of this cultural knowledge, they are still learning and not fully embedded in these cultural traditions. In many ways the mothers still act as the arbiters of culture for the daughters, coaching them through their descriptions of customs. Some mothers were even more involved in their daughters’ responses about traditions and ethnicity. Julie, in response to a question directed at her daughter regarding traditions she wanted to pass on to her children, jumped in and even listed some for her:

Interviewer: are there any specific cultural traditions that you want to bring your family when you have your own family?
G: probably lai si that’s always fun. Uh the New Year’s one maybe I dunno. Definitely not the no, no yes, I understand humility but you don’t have to go that far um
J: what about the red egg and…you wouldn’t know you were too small
G: I was too small to know the red egg and ginger—
J: /you were too small to know the red egg and ginger party but you had them. You had one a month after you were born you were given that party but you’ve never been to one
G: I’ve never been to one but I probably would do it… you would just have to give me directions (laughs) yeah the red egg and ginger party one year after the kid is born-
J: -one month
G: one month?
J: yeah I think its one month
G: yeah…see I don’t know
Because for many of the daughters their mother is their most significant source of cultural information, cultural education between mother and daughter is an ongoing process that, as demonstrated by Julie and Georgia, is expected to extend even into adulthood when Georgia is herself a mother. Their back-and-forth demonstrates how the cultural knowledge of the daughter is perceived as the mother’s responsibility and, possibly because these daughters are half, this extends into the cultural education and induction of the daughter’s children to their Asian heritage as well. This is also an example of race-making and illustrates the discursive collaboration through which the daughters and mothers come to share their understanding of their heritage. Here, Julie’s emphasis on certain traditions helps Georgia understand their significance as an enactment and preservation of the ethnic heritage Julie hopes to pass on.

One mother, Jane, who is Chinese American and lives in Petaluma, was even more insistent about some of the traditions she hoped her daughter, Ali, would continue on with her family.

Interviewer: are there any specifically Asian traditions you would pass onto your family?
A: probably just Chinese New Year because that’s like... really the only tradition I’ve ever-
J: you better do Chinese New Year! (laughs)

Jane’s firmness the Ali “better do Chinese New Year” portrays the weight she ascribes to her hope that Ali maintains the cultural traditions that were important to Jane. The significance of the continuance of these traditions, however, may extend beyond a mere social pressure to a greater desire on the mothers’ part for their daughters to appreciate
and want to continue Asian cultural traditions, as a symbol of pride in their heritage and connection to their cultural roots.

On the other hand, one mother, Cheryl, who is third generation Chinese American, voiced that she did not think it was particularly important to teach her daughter the details of Chinese traditions. In response to her daughter’s assertion that there are not too many Chinese or Polish traditions she wants to uphold with her family, Cheryl explains:

C: well the Chinese traditions- they probably didn’t learn a real lot. I mean I didn’t emphasize- when Chinese New Years came around, you know, you’re supposed to clean your house and not wash your hair and all that. I didn’t emphasize- M: I don’t remember that
C: see I didn’t teach them those myths because I don’t believe in that. So they got an entirely different version. I don’t know what kind of version you got but the version I taught ...

In contrast to many of the other mothers who, at least in the interviews, demonstrated an interest in teaching their daughters Asian customs and practices, Cheryl feels it is more important to pick and choose the aspects she finds important about these traditions and discard others, an idea that also resonated with many of the mothers, which I will discuss in a later chapter. Cheryl also believes that she was taught only the “broad strokes” of Chinese traditions because her parents feared discrimination and therefore did not teach many of them. Interestingly, though, the very tradition of cleaning the house before the New Year that Melissa had never heard of is one of the traditions her cousin, Georgia, another daughter interviewed, lists as one that is important in their family.

Well the New Years or the day before New Years cleaning rather than spring-cleaning. We do that because otherwise we believe that if you do it on New Years day, you wash away all your good luck so there’s that one.
It is interesting to note how differently members of the same family may experience and enact cultural traditions. While Cheryl and Julie, Georgia and Melissa’s mothers, are sisters and grew up together in essentially the same cultural context, the importance and emphasis on cultural traditions varies widely between them.

For some, these variations in the enactment of ethnicity create explicit tension in families. Mari and Megumi reveal a sibling rivalry that emerged between Megumi and her sister and Mari and her sister regarding who was the greater exemplar of being Japanese.

Mari: your-you- I mean I don’t know how much you participate in this but your competition with Miko, (to me) her sister, about who is more Japanese and like, I don’t know how much you buy into this, but my aunt is always like, you know, “oh you’re so assimilated duh duh duh ” and me and my sister don’t have that kind of animosity that you guys have but I definitely feel competitive with my sister about that and she started taking Japanese seriously again at the end of high school and now at Stanford for her first year she took it the whole year and like is really good and I definitely feel like now that’s something I need to get on- which is good. Its good that I’m like motivated by her but yeah just competition to be more Japanese.

Me: so we have that in common then this tension about who is more...well yeah I guess-

Mari reveals how her mother’s sister also traffics in relative ethnic status and attempts to lower Megumi’s ethnic status by questioning her standing as Japanese. The accusation of “you’re so assimilated” portrays how the absence of certain demonstrations of cultural heritage may be construed by others as a betrayal of Asian heritage. While Mari does not feel her relationship with her sister regarding their Japanese heritage is as antagonistic, she still feels there is competition, meaning there is a sense of being “better” at being Japanese by practicing more traditions such as language. Megumi elaborates on the competition between her and her sister.
I have one sister and she married a black guy and you know so she really feels like you know very identified with the more oppressed minority...yeah um and then there was, there was this strange thing in my family about who was more Japanese right like even comparing all the boyfriends. Did my boyfriend, like, who likes Japanese food the most (laughs) the boyfriends would all compete like “oh, I can eat raw fish. I really like raw fish” it was... uh... strange

Megumi notices that beyond comparisons in their performances of Japanese identities, her sister additionally draws on her marriage to a black man to bolster her status as a person of color, which contrasts to Megumi’s marriage to a White man. The constant use in both of these passages of being “more Japanese” implies again that there are levels of Japanese status that are achieved through cultural literacies and examples of Japanese or minority allegiance. The notion that this ethnic identity is not something you merely inherit but one you must cultivate and also can lose reinforces the importance for the mothers to teach cultural traditions to their daughters so they may lay legitimate claim to “being” Asian. These competitions between siblings using language acquisition or appreciation of raw fish as barometers of Asian ethnic identity are a much more explicit version of what I think is a competition many Asian Americans, especially those who are mixed or steeply embedded in American culture, feel they are in with society; the struggle to make evident an ethnic status they are expected to want and have. Though I believe cultural inheritance is important to many of my participants because they truly want to be connected to their heritage, there is also an external stress, evident in the previous examples but most explicitly in the sibling example, of a need to prove ethnic identity to others through examples of cultural knowledge and “loyalty.” However, while this pressure may lead to extremely negative encounters in some instances, like with Megumi and her sister, in Mari’s view, the pressure from competition with her sister has
encouraged Mari to try to learn Japanese which ultimately, Mari feels, would lead to her feeling more connected to her Japanese identity in a positive way and help her maintain a cultural practice Mari finds important for herself as she hopes to continue and pass on these traditions with her family.

In addition the importance of practices and facts that support cultural knowledge being passed down between mother and daughter to maintain cultural heritage, some of the participants in my study were also concerned about a feeling of being Asian passed on. Megumi, Mari’s mother, intimates about her children:

But you know there’s a certain, its hard to describe but there’s like a cultural sensibility there’s like a Japanese- like a feeling of comfort to be with other Japanese people and other Japanese American people and that is like very hard to describe but I’m just saying that my kids don’t have that. Like I mean like I think you guys feel a lot more comfortable-you gravitate towards people, you know, who aren’t necessarily Japanese. I mean that’s-they just don’t feel that way I guess and, um, and I think, you know, partly a lot of it is due to the mother’s personality. Like I became very acculturated myself like I personally I didn’t have a lot of Japanese friends growing up and then I went to UC Berkeley which is filled with Japanese- Asian people but I didn’t, like, become friends with them so much so you know I’m very assimilated and so it just is natural you know that, that they would respond in that way.

Megumi here tries to put her finger on a very specific understanding that a lot of the mothers and daughters were trying to capture when they would say “we aren’t that Asian” in that it is not just about cultural knowledge or how many traditions you practice but actually also a feeling of belonging and being Asian. This may be impacted by physical acts and traditions but is also a separate factor in ethnic identity. How Megumi describes it is a “comfort” and “gravitation” towards other Japanese people that she does not particularly feel that she or her children possess. She also speculates that her children do not often gravitate toward Japanese people because she often chose to surround herself
with white friends and peers growing up and in her adult life and therefore wonders if being attracted to the company and companionship of other Asian Americans and feeling a sense of belonging in those groups is also something that mothers teach their children. Emma voices a similar apprehension that her children may not have this feeling of being Asian if she were to have children with a non-Asian partner.

E: I would just- I would have the fear that the cultural understanding or the value on being Asian would be lost because there’s-when I think about my identity as being part Japanese I don’t know that there’s anything specific in the Japanese culture that I’m connected to but that identity is still very important to me.

While Emma and Megumi may have different conceptions of what the feeling of being Asian might be, Emma echoes Megumi’s sentiment that it is not merely cultural practices or knowledge that make up one’s ethnic identity but also how they interact with others of that identity, or in Emma’s case, how they value that part of their identity. What Emma and Megumi also share is a lack of clarity about how these feelings are passed on and taught to children since they are not concrete like language, holidays or food. Dana similarly feels that it would be important for her children to feel pride in their Asian identity:

Interviewer: and Dana how important is it to you that your children, one day if you choose to have children, would identify as Asian?
D: um pretty important….Depending who I marry like if they’re a quarter Asian and a quarter something and a bunch of stuff then I might like, I don’t expect them to be like “yeah” explain the whole thing but as long they know deep down and they’re, like, proud of it and obviously they’ll be in contact with their grandmother so I think its important for them to like fully represent that if they feel comfortable with that

What these three quotes are trying to articulate is that beyond food or language there is also this sense of being Asian, this feeling that one is Asian and identifies and belongs to
the Asian ethnicity that is hard to put into words but is clearly a known entity by some of these daughters and mothers. However, it is especially hard to identify what creates these feelings. The bulk of this research is aimed at trying to understand what processes contribute to my participants feeling they identify with their Asian ethnicity and this is clearly impacted by discreet events, social contests, and cultural exposure as I have and will continue to discuss. However, I feel it is still important to draw attention to this vague concept of the feeling of being Asian because of its continued occurrence in my data as a near indefinable individualized and abstract sense of what it means to be Asian that cannot be drawn from a catalog of events or acts. Because this feeling of being Asian is difficult to identify for the mothers and daughters to describe, let alone attempt to prove or deliberately pass on, it is understandable that this particular qualification of Asian identity maybe be an important point for them.

**Guilt in Assimilation**

Indeed the mothers and daughters actually do feel guilty when they do not feel like they are representing their ethnic identity enough. One mother, Janine, highlights how she felt outside of the Asian American community when she was at Stanford because issues that other Asian American students had did not resonate with her experiences:

We’re so many generations out that a lot of the questions about cultural identity didn’t apply to us. When you were talking about communities I was thinking about your mom, when I was at Stanford the Asian American Association at Stanford was just starting and I went to a few of those meetings but the issues that they had just weren’t the issues that I had. Most of them were dealing with assimilation and with the fact that there were so few Asians where as I had done that my whole life. The issue I had was how to maintain cultural identity.
Here Janine unveils that for her, her most significant issue as an Asian American is maintaining cultural identity. When she attempted to join the Asian American Students Association, she only found herself more distant from the community because she had already faced the issue of assimilation and growing up isolated from other Asian Americans. What is particularly significant is that Janine sees her own “assimilation” as an issue to work on and something she is not completely happy with. I found this to be common among my participants.

Megumi also ponders her sister’s accusations that Megumi is too assimilated:

With me and my sister it’s almost like a like a cop out, like, I’ve sold out like I’ve become too White. I guess so...

What is again striking about Megumi’s statement is its association of Whiteness with “selling out.” Similar to previous quotes, here Whiteness is again invoked as a negative trait carrying more accusatory weight than its mere ethnic description. The conflation of Whiteness with assimilation also indicates that Whiteness here is used synonymously with being American, which is problematic for these mothers and daughters who are attempting to navigate their Asian identities in an American context. Megumi, however, feels that her interest in her Japanese identity has grown as she has gotten older and challenges her sister’s indictment when questioned further.

Interviewer: do you agree with that statement?
M: do I feel like I’ve become too White? (laughs)
Interviewer: or, like, how do you respond to that statement?
M: um uh (sigh) how do I respond... I don’t know I don’t really I don’t feel like I’ve become too White I mean you know I am pretty assimilated but at the same time I’m very, very interested in you know my Japanese side and I guess I think maybe there was some truth to it when I was younger but I think as I get older and older I’m just finding like, oh my god, like even in my work I’m just really interested in working more with the Asians and you know the immigrants I’m just yeah I think
I’m getting more grounded in it. But before you know I did kind of like want to stay away (laughs) it was kind of like “I’m not that” you know?

As she goes on to defend herself from the accusation of assimilation, it becomes clear that she feels and is allowed to feel pride in connecting to her Japanese and Asian heritage. This connection with Asian and other people of color is therefore socially encouraged as a source of pride where lack of connection is admonished. Though Megumi was embarrassed by her Asian identity growing up, she alternatively finds that in her current social context, she has been able to become more interested in her Asian heritage and it is actually her assimilated identity that she interprets as being frowned-upon.

Megumi’s daughter, Mari, reveals similar feelings of pride in connection and guilt in assimilation.

I think because I didn’t connect with the Japanese American community like or even the Asian community I sort of like latched on more to being a person of color than um Japanese American because I didn’t feel I had those cultural connections or like language – I mean the language is English but you know the lingo, the in, um so starting to identify more with being a person of color, being introduced to that term in high school. And then in college I became a Race and Ethnic Studies major and so I became friends with people in that major which were a lot of people of color similar to the dance community and then the secret society so that was an important time for me for making connections with people who are not White because I thought that that was a place where I had failed a little bit um growing up.

In line with Megumi’s comments, Mari discloses efforts to connect with ethnic minority groups in order to compensate for all of the White friends she had made growing up, which she describes as “a place where [she] had failed” growing up. This feeling of failure in not making enough ethnic friends again demonstrates the guilt that my participants feel when they do not believe they have allied with their ethnic heritage enough. The
contrasting gratification elicited by embracing their ethnic heritage compliments the relative shame in perceived assimilation.

Donna, too, feels this pride when she remembers a time that she aligned herself with a minority cause during college, a period in her life when she says she had wanted to be White. She begins the story with “looking back now I’m really proud of myself” as she recalls lobbying to raise the wages of the African American cooks in her sorority, an effort that was voted down, prompting her and some of her friends to leave the sorority. She reflects:

Over time, I look back and I’m really glad that I um stuck to some values that meant something to me and I identified with people of color who were really trying to make ends meet and that I didn’t ultimately identify with the more genteel and wealthier aspects of society.

Donna is happy with her alignment with the minority community and not the “genteel wealthier” society, which is seemingly indicative of the White community from her college. Her decision to tell this specific story when considering a community that was important to her demonstrates the importance for these mothers and daughters in showing allegiance with their Asian or minority identity in order to achieve a sense of satisfaction with their identity.

While this was not explicitly stated, it is possible that the mothers in this study feel that the guilt and pressure to prove their Asian identity is especially salient in their lives because they admit to wanting to be White when they were younger and because they have married White partners and had mixed White children. The mothers may experience extra pressure from society to establish their Asian identity because they have chosen White partners and many have fair or White looking daughters. These factors may
heighten the awareness and sensitivity to the expectations of society regarding ethnic identity and cultural knowledge.

**Chapter 4. Ethnic Ambiguity and Visual Expectations**

While the mothers in my study may feel they need to prove their allegiance to the Asian identity because they married Caucasian men, the need to prove Asian identity may also be an especially relevant stress for the daughters in my study because they do not all feel they look Asian. As Moya and Markus (2010) suggest in their theory of ethnic identity formation and Khanna (2004) describes in her theory of reflected appraisals, one’s perceived identity in the eyes of others and their subsequent treatment is equally integral to identity formation as the identity an individual projects. Thus in assuming and treating a person like a “dot,” society will “make him or her into a “dot”(Moya & Markus, 2010).

How the daughter’s in my study describe and believe they are perceived by others is therefore extremely relevant to the understanding of the construction of the daughter’s ethnic identities. An especially common theme for these daughters is ethnic ambiguity.

Many of the daughters I interviewed felt they looked White or ethnic but not specifically Asian. They often described what they often considered humorous situations of encounters with friends and strangers about their race.

Emma: One time I was on BART in Oakland, a pretty diverse place and this guy was like “EXCUSE me, excuse me” and I was like “yeah?” “DO YOU SPEAK ENGLISH?” (laughs) and I was like “yeah I was born and raised here.” He was floored like could not believe that I spoke English, I can’t remember where he thought I was from

Here, Emma describes the often bold and intrusive questions strangers ask her and their disbelief at her stated nationality and identity. This scene depicts many of the
assumptions that others may make about these daughters and how these identities are often imposed on them. She continues:

um but yeah that’s been a big thing for me because when I look in the mirror I see a White person um an so I’m surprised when people can tell I’m Asian. When they think I look something non-White I’m very surprised, I get-I’m sure you get this too- people who are fascinated and ask “What are you?” My favorite answer is “I’m a person,” “I’m Emma.” but yeah people are very fascinated.

Many mixed race people get the now stale question “What are you?” Though Emma seems somewhat frustrated by this question, she is also intrigued by it as she sees herself as White when she looks in the mirror and imagines that other people see her as White as well. Part of her seems excited by the idea of being identified as ethnic and even possibly as Asian by a stranger. When she says “that’s been a big thing for me” referring to being asked about her ethnicity by strangers, she doesn’t necessarily classify it as a bad thing but rather sees its weight more in the way she shapes how she sees herself since she considers her appearance to be White. Emma later comments about the paper crane tattoo on her left wrist that she shares with her mother:

I think the way I put it was it was a very tangible mark of my Asian heritage especially because I didn’t feel that I looked Asian so I wanted something physical that represent that.

Here Emma reveals again that she does not feel there is specific physical trait that signifies to others her Asian ethnicity, which partially prompted her choice for an Asian themed tattoo. As the Debbie Storrs article suggests, mixed women often use appearance as a way of accessing their ethnic heritage through dress usually or in this case body art. For Emma, the act of choosing to mark her body specifically as Asian creates the “tangible” tie to her Asian culture that she felt she previously lacked because she does
not exhibit what she believes are typical phenotypic traits of Asians. This may be interpreted as a hope that it will more clearly indicate to others her Asian identity visually.

Like Emma, the majority of the daughters I interviewed received many guesses from strangers and friends at their ethnicity, the majority of the guesses not being Asian. Janine encourages her daughter, Dana, to talk about a game her friends in college play:

Dana: Oh (laughs) uh yeah there’s a popular drinking game in college: “Guess Dana’s Race”- cuz I’m just like racially ambiguous sometimes um so it’s a fun game to play

Janine comments later on Dana’s racial ambiguity: “and a lot of people come up to you and speak Spanish cuz they think she’s Latino.” Yet Dana seems to actually earnestly appreciate the fact that people do not know what race she is and describes how that has allowed her to navigate between different social ethnic groups.

Yeah I mean its kind of easier because we are racially ambiguous to like get involved with different groups because I know in high school there’s definitely a very segregated African American group and stuff but like I dunno maybe its just cuz no one could really tell what I was but I felt like a lot more comfortable approaching them and being friends with them I feel like than a lot of people might be

Dana notes that because her peers could not tell what race she was, she had fewer expectations imposed on her about what group she was able to or supposed to hang out with.

Mari has a similar experience of her racial ambiguity working in her favor:

I was able to enjoy a specialness or like elevated status and if I ever was like prejudged about something it was never about being Asian or Japanese because people don’t always know that that’s what I am from looking at me or talking to me so its more just about not appearing to be White so that’s kind of its more like
my appearance that has been something either mistaking me for something else you know that kind of thing

Reiterating the earlier point about ethnic status and the negative perception of

Whiteness, Mari feels that although she is not necessarily identified visually as Asian or Japanese, the fact that she looks ethnic is enough for her to gain this elevated racial status and in some ways can be potentially even more beneficial because people do not know what she is and therefore cannot make conclusive prejudices. In this way she can cater her ethnic identity to what benefits her in that moment.

Yet for some of the daughters, being racially ambiguous is less of a coup. Annie expresses some frustration over the way people respond to the way she looks:

I don’t think I look Chinese. I mean I kind of have like a flat nose but otherwise I mean I’ve got like the really pale skin you know big eyes you know I don’t really think I- but if I tell someone “o yeah I’m half Chinese” and they’ll say “o I see it” but I don’t think anyone would think that just by looking at me for a second... I got asked if I was Latina I was like “no, are we looking at the same skin color?” I mean I wasn’t like offended but I was just kind of like “no, that’s really weird” but yeah people will usually stop me and they’ll say like “what are you? Like you’re so-“ they try to put it like nicely so they’ll say like “o you’re exotic looking” I don’t look exotic. You’re just trying to tell me that I look weird and you wanna know what I am.

The excitement felt by the other daughters at being racially ambiguous is not especially shared by Annie who feels more that the questions identify her as “weird” rather than interesting or unique as she accuses others of “trying to put it nicely” when saying she looks exotic. Annie also dissects exactly the reasons she does not believe she looks Chinese referring to her skin, nose, and eyes, implying that Annie has contemplated her appearance and its relationship to ethnicity quite a bit. The recognition of these specific features also underscores the idea that there are particular characteristics that concretely
point to ethnic or racial membership. Ruth, Annie’s mother, seemed to echo Annie’s feelings that she does not look Asian. When asked if she was surprised by anything about having a mixed race child Ruth states:

With Annie I actually don’t think she looks Asian at all um you know very little so I was... not surprised but you know there’s a typical look for that half-Asian half-White you know child and um she didn’t really have that but other than that I you know that’s the only thing I can think of

Though no other mothers commented outright on whether or not they thought their daughters looked Asian, I think it is interesting to consider, in contemplating how mothers impact their daughters’ relationship with Asian culture, how important the mother’s perception of how Asian her daughter looks might also affect the daughters’ perception of how Asian she appears. It is also worth noting Ruth’s idea of the “typical” look of a half-Asian half-White child and the implications from that statement of the societal effort to visually-norm mixed race. Michele Elam in her 2011 book The Souls of Mixed Folk suggests that the trend in making mixed-race dolls such as the Real Kidz dolls by Molloy, though intended to broaden children’s exposure to diverse concepts of beauty and provide mixed kids a doll who looks “like them,” actually results in an attempted mainstreaming of the look of mixed children. Hence, as the mixed population grows, visual types are created, privileging those believed to exhibit the newly formed “typical look” of certain mixes and marginalizing those who do not fit this look to the “ambiguous” category. Hence, because Annie does not fit the typical or expected look of an Asian woman, a White woman or a mixed Asian and White woman, she is especially sensitive to the confusion regarding her looks.
And, though Dana may enjoy some of the benefits of being ethnically ambiguous, she also acknowledges the threat it sometimes has to her Asian identity:

I mean yeah and also when sometimes people don’t believe me that I’m Chinese, I say, “You should see my mother- she’s a little Asian woman. I promise!”

Dana tells this anecdotes laughingly, yet it points to the greater theme of feeling that she has to prove a legitimate Asian identity, and if Dana does not possess what is traditionally thought of as Asian physical characteristics, she has to offer a blood relationship to someone who does look traditionally Asian. The mere idea of having to defend an asserted ethnicity, even in jest, with physical evidence demonstrates the pervasiveness of racial gate keeping in which these mothers and daughters are situated.

Danielle, who feels she looks more Asian, has actually experienced this sense of having to prove her ethnic identity with respect to her father’s Latino heritage. She remembers how people often say to her:

D: like “you don’t even look like him he’s like tall and brown!” Sorry but that’s my dad! So stuff like that where its not culture but kind of the multiracial part of it like justifying your identity to someone and that might not happen if we all looked the same in our family. I remember as a kid being like “why is this kid so stupid, like, why would I lie about something like that?” you know
Interviewer: have you had to explain to a lot of people like what your background is when people are confused
D: not really cuz a lot of people don’t think I’m mixed when they see me they just assume or think I’m one thing um and only when I say I’m multiracial do people say “OOOOO so what are-” or like “o yeah I kind of see it” that’s the weirdest thing when they’re like
C: your earlobe (talking about what they could see)
D: like o yeah I kind of see the Mexican in you
C: the Mexican in your eyes
D: what the heck does that mean?

Danielle encounters incredulity at her stated ethnic heritage and identity and observes that people often will not believe her identity because of how she looks. It is not until
they believe that they can see it “in her eyes” or in some other detail that they will allow her to claim the identity. This again reveals another important role onlookers and communities play in shaping the ethnic identities especially of the daughters.

Another daughter, Ali, experiences similarly disbelieving responses to her Asian ethnicity because of the way she looks.

Yeah a lot of people thought I was Hawaiian in I dunno some people look at me and are like o yeah she’s Asian but then other people look at me and are like “what? I don’t see it.” How do you not see it? But like I dunno. I am the Asian of my friends and that’s kinda the joke but no one ever really knows that I am. For like the first three weeks I dated my boyfriend he didn’t even know I was Asian.

In comparison to some of the other daughters for whom being identified as Asian or ethnic seems to hold some social capital, for Ali, her friends’ inability to tell her race by looking at her does not seem to have any social consequence. However, similar to the other daughters, she notes that many seem to have opinions on whether they can tell or not that she is Asian and express them to her, signifying again the role of others in legitimizing race and the right that observers feel to qualify racial membership. While the daughters talk about how they see themselves, their most significant insights seem to be their contrast with how others see them. Whether others see Asian, ethnically ambiguous, White, or exotic impacts the way these daughters ultimately see themselves. Phenotypical confusion was the most shared and common experience among the daughters with Georgia also sharing:
They always think I’m Hispanic even in Mexico and they think mom’s Pilipino and they think my sister’s just pure Caucasian she even got black once which is just hilarious but then I explain that I’m actually half Chinese and they’re completely stunned and that’s always amusing its like my own entertainment

And Melissa too stating:

M: I mean when people look at me they think “you’re not-no, you’re not Asian, you’re either White or Pilipino, you’re Mexican” depending on how tan I am, you know, I don’t just look Chinese and I don’t just look White, I look a whole other culture I’m not even in- its one of those things where I’ve gotten used to and its interesting to see but I think its just added more depth and uh more identity to myself

It appears that for mixed Asians, the constant interpretation of their ethnicity based on their appearance is almost a universal experience. While Georgia finds the constant confusion and amazement at her ethnicity amusing, Marissa believes that her physical recognition as a culture she does not actually belong to has ultimately enriched her identity. Like Dana, Georgia believes this ambiguity and ability to fit visually into many cultures has allowed her “more identity,” suggesting she can employ each ethnic identity she is mistaken for in the ultimate creation of her ethnic identity. Melissa’s statement that she doesn’t look “just” Chinese or “just” White signals her appreciation of the opportunity to transform her looks to enact multiple identities.

Interestingly, these experiences of visual confusion are not necessarily limited to the daughters in my study. One of the mothers, Jane, who is full Chinese, seems to share with her daughter Ali this experience of the external questioning of her ethnicity based on her looks:

I mean people will walk up to me and I think it’s rude but of course people don’t think so they’ll say “are you Pilippina? Are you Hispanic?” No, people will start speaking Spanish to me! And I think I look the farthest thing from Hispanic but,
they either think I’m Korean, Pilipino, Japanese, Hawaiian, nobody ever thinks I’m Chinese.

While the majority of my participants facing questions from strangers about their ethnicity were the daughters, Jane actually has a very similar story in that people are amused and interested in solving the “mystery” of what her looks convey. Often, their guesses place upon her an identity she does not see at all. Jane then draws this experience out one generation further with a story about her mother.

J: yeah. And one time when my mom, do you remember how fair skinned my mom was? 
Interviewer: I can imagine (note: Jane is my mother’s cousin) 
J: she had really fair skin, beautiful skin, and she worked for Pacific Telephone for years and um I remember when I was about 13 or 14 she had a man in her office and she was you know doing paper work for him or something, he thought she was part Irish (Ali laughs) and my mom doesn’t look a bit of Irish but because of the color-the fairness of her skin 
A: yeah I was gonna say the color of her skin though 
J: and that one, because we were use to hearing everything but when we heard that one when she told us, we were literally rolling on the floor laughing. That was a good one

Jane and Ali, like many of the other daughters, also recognize the details such as skin tone that convey ethnicity in trying to reason how people determine visually others’ ethnicities. What seems to be a general pattern is people trying to make sense of these women’s ethnicities and almost urgently needing clarity to the point of asking in often rude and invasive ways. Though Jane and Ali demonstrate how this can be comical, even to the point of giving status to the actor who can laugh at the questioner’s misguided guesses, one must also wonder what effect these constant inquisitions have on the ethnic identities of these women and mostly these daughters.
Another mother, Julie, could also sympathize with her daughter about the barrage of questions and guess at her ethnicity.

J: my whole life people have- the last thing they guess is Chinese, they’ll guess Hawaiian, Mexican, Tibetan, depending on what I’m wearing and how long my hair is, if it’s in a braid then I’ve got to be Native American
G: oh yeah I’ve gotten that before, Pocahontas
J: yeah and so we are rarely- you know when I traveled in Japan “you have to be from Singapore you can’t be American and you certainly aren’t Chinese” even when I was in China they didn’t think I was Chinese. So you know I think in terms of specifics they know I’m something but they don’t know what

Again reflecting on the relationship between the mother and daughter and the impact they have on each other’s relationship to their Asian identity, I would be interested in exploring in future research whether confusion in the perception of the mothers identity affects how the mothers respond to confusion about their daughters perceived phenotypic identity. I wonder if there are mothers who hope that their daughters would look more Asian to avoid these encounters of misidentification or doubts that the daughter is in fact related to the mother. If the mother sees her daughter as an extension of herself, how does the skepticism of the daughter’s ethnic identity affect the mother?

Some mothers, on the other hand, were excited by the anticipated look of mixed Asian-White babies when they were expecting and the potential combination of features.

Colleen: I was kinda hoping for blue eyes because Matt’s [her husband] mothers has blue eyes
Danielle: so it might skip a generation
C: I thought “oh that would be” but I was very excited when Danielle was born she had curls and you know me growing up I got perms I had to buy them I had to get perms like every, once a year so when she was born and started getting curls in her black hair I was very excited
D: it was interesting I had ringlets
C: (excitedly) yes!
D: like the first year of my life. I dunno what happened, it turned into frizz
C: but to me she looked totally Asian...so
Just as Ruth talked about a typical “half-Asian half-White” look she expected for her daughter to have, Colleen reveals hopes for her child to have traditionally Caucasian features such as blue eyes and demonstrates excitement at her daughter possessing ringlets. In some ways this mix of Caucasian features with Asian features achieves an enhanced beauty for Colleen potentially because the Caucasian features were idealized when she was growing up which provoked her to perm her own hair.

Janine is also familiar with the sentiment that mixed Asian-White babies are more attractive. Her cousins and siblings also married White partners and she remembers one of them intimating this idea to her that mixed Asian children were especially appealing.

I think it was one of my cousins who said, “Our babies are just cuter than pure Chinese babies”

Again, it seems that this mix of Caucasian and Asian features is prized for the mothers of their generation, potentially from the internalized glorification of traditional White beauty. The use of ‘pure’ is also interesting, as it was likely a term not thought out fully in all of its implications, but in this context does make a commentary on ethnicity and how one might see those with one ethnic identity as “pure.”

Some of the daughters have also experienced beyond their mothers an observation of celebrated mixed Asian-White beauty.

Emma: but there’s also, there’s a lot of mystique around being mixed race especially with Asians um I have a friend at CC who’s hapa, she’s half Japanese and half Caucasian and we always talk about how they’re the most beautiful and so I don’t know...in certain circumstances you try to pull that out ...

As mixed Asians become more fetishized in the media, the idea of being mixed brings not only a sometimes elevated ethnic status but also an accompanying beauty status for
some mixed Asians. As Maria Root referenced in her dissection of ethnic membership, it
is possible that because this mixed Asian/Identity can be considered physically desirable,
this encourages the daughters to want to align themselves with the mixed identity more,
a point Emma definitely alludes to when she says “in certain circumstances you try to pull
that out” as a reference to trying to engage her mixed heritage because of its desired
status. From this quote, we might consider how opinions and conceptions of a certain
identity also impact the mothers’ and daughters’ interest in aligning themselves with and
embodying that identity. I will investigate this particularly in terms of how the mothers
and daughters perceive Asian ethnic culture.

Chapter 5. Perceptions of Asian Culture, Other Asians, and the Asian Self

As discussed previously, my participants, both daughters and mothers, face the
difficult task of navigating their Asian identity within the context of American culture.
They, however, seem to have distinct conceptions of what constitutes Asian, American
and White cultures and often disclose how they choose to identify or not identify with
those defined philosophies. In this chapter I will examine how the mothers and daughters
perceive and understand Asian culture and how that impacts how they align themselves
with their Asian and/or their American identity. Emma summarizes the relationship
between her American and her Asian identity as she describes explaining her culture to
her boyfriend who is from Croatia:

E: it’s been interesting for me to think that largely I’m just working on the
Caucasian and then eventually we’ll get to the Asian (laughs) like that’s a
little...let’s start easy
D: (laughs) let’s start at the 100 course
E: exactly that’s a 500 course. Um so and I’m sure that I’ve interspersed some...I
mean I’ve told him about sort of like the family thing and what it’s like for me to
be mixed race but by and large a lot of the cultural issues that we talk about are American culture vs. eastern European culture.

D: that’s interesting
E: because I think of the kind of macro issues or kind of the macro cultural norms that drive me are sort of largely American um and then it’s sort of the micro stuff that’s Asian... I don’t know if that’s right

Here Emma introduces many of the issues that I will be addressing in this chapter. One of the main points she touches upon is the idea that because all of the participants currently live in America, their most salient identity is their American identity. It is the culture they are most immersed in and therefore the culture that predominantly dictates their lives, values, and beliefs. The Asian culture on the other hand is a more nuanced part of Emma’s life and comes into play, as she says, with the “micro stuff.” The metaphor of the 100 level course and 500 level course expresses how broadly, on an introductory level, Emma considers herself American but when examined more closely and in depth, in an upper division seminar like a 500 course, reveals a strong Asian influence. I chose to open this chapter with this quote to offer a lens through which to understand the mothers’ and daughters’ statements about Asian identity and underscore the idea that all of their understandings and opinions of Asian culture are necessarily couched within American culture.

What is also important is how Emma begins this quote with “working on the Caucasian” side and switches to American, despite the fact that both of her parents are American. This use of White synonymously with American through out these interviews is important in examining how the mothers and daughter partition their identities. Again, I would like to call attention to the way many of the mothers and daughters consider Asian
and American (or “White”) cultures dichotomously at odds with one another, which ultimately effects how they choose to identify within those identities.

To illuminate the process by which the mothers and daughter define Asian and American culture and discuss these cultures with respect to themselves, I will first look at how my participants characterize Asian culture, both from their personal experiences and from their impressions of other Asian Americans.

**Describing Asians: What is the Asian culture and why do I have to work harder than everyone else?**

Many of my participants had a distinct picture of how Asian culture manifested itself in other Asian Americans and how the Asian culture and values influenced their personal life. The most common themes my participants used to describe Asian culture, observed both from their experiences with other Asian Americans and from their own experiences, were parental strictness and an emphasis on work and success. Many of the mothers observed that their upbringings were particularly strict and conservative as a product of their parents’ adherence to Asian cultural norms. Donna describes how being Japanese influenced her childhood:

> I was raised in a very traditional kind of Japanese upbringing. To have fun and to make mistakes was just not part of the equation (Emma laughs). That was not a choice...You had to do everything perfectly and heaven forbid you should go off and have fun you just need to stay and do the work until it was perfect, and then maybe you could have fun... but maybe there would be more work to do.

Donna describes her upbringing as very “traditionally Japanese” and defines that as strict, success oriented, and forbidding mistakes. Possibly because Donna did not choose to raise Emma this way and is now distant from these cultural values, she sees these cultural
values as almost satirically severe saying “heaven forbid you should go off and have fun”
as an example something that would have seemed normal to her growing up but she now
considers ridiculous. The repetition of “work” and “perfection” exemplify how she sees
and understands these Japanese and Asian cultural ideals of her childhood but now views
herself apart from them. Megumi remembers a similar rigidity from her childhood when
considering why she reacted negatively to her daughter, Mari, wearing makeup in middle
school:

I wasn’t allowed to wear makeup. Yeah I don’t know if I tried that much but I grew
up with very strict parents so like I wasn’t allowed to go to the movies and things
like that.

Like Megumi, Jane feels it is sometimes hard to shake the strictness and rules of her
upbringing when approaching raising her daughter even if she does not necessarily wish
to be as strict as her parents.

  We were just strict and we were expected to act a certain way at home and in
public and you know not, I dunno the right words to describe it, it’s just black and
White completely different now and you know it was just ingrained in me so we
expected certain things of her which, over all you’re a fabulous daughter, I mean
she’s got, you know, the basic ground laid for her but we still have
disagreements...its ingrained in me

Jane observes that the expectations of Ali’s generation and Ali’s peers are very “black and
White completely different” than the expectations placed on her as a young adult and
tries to reason with herself that she should probably not impose the same stringent rules
that were imposed on her on Ali. Yet she emphasizes that certain values are just
“ingrained” in her, as if they are inextricably programmed as a part of her psyche.

Essentially, this is what culture is, these parts of our value systems that we did not choose
but are a significant part of the way we think, behave, and frame the world. Jane reasons
that it is because of this culture that she is sometimes more strict with Ali. Emma uses similar language to describe the influence of Japanese culture in her mother’s life:

Japanese culture is very, very strong and we were talking this morning about how, um how much ingrained behavior and understanding of the world there is and how much there are very, very strict guidelines for how you’re supposed to behave, how you’re supposed to think all of these things, and she learned early on that that didn’t work for her and so spending a lot of time sort of negotiating how to be herself in this culture...

Emma, like Jane, also uses the word “ingrained” to describe the role of Japanese culture in ones life as if it is so deeply rooted and embedded into the values of those raised in the culture that it is difficult to shake or change certain beliefs that are so entrenched in one’s understanding of the world. Emma also notes, however, that many of these cultural norms did not work for her mother, Donna, which may shed light on the critical tone Donna assumes when describing Japanese culture.

Though the mothers sometimes noticed that certain expectations and strictness in raising their children emerged as part of their upbringing, the mothers also often felt that some of their choices to be more lenient with their children were a direct result of their strict upbringing:

Cheryl: he [my father] was pretty insistent on it [grades] so it’s been hard for me- I didn’t like that kind of pressure so I was not going to pass that kind of pressure onto my kids.

Because Cheryl remembers the pressure on academic success put on her by her father, she deliberately chooses not to raise her kids with that same academic pressure.

Additionally many mothers felt that their interaction with their daughters, who were more steeped in American culture, had taught them to let go of their stress on being
success oriented and risk averse. In response to the question “what is something you have learned from your daughter” these three mothers had strikingly similar responses:

Donna: I think in the Japanese culture you maybe wouldn’t do anything you didn’t think you could succeed at. (E: mmhmm) and so it’s a very kind of prescribed box that you live in whereas um Emma and the young women of your generation if you wanna do it you don’t even think about if you could possibly succeed at it, you just go out there and do it and I love that adventurous spirit and that’s definitely something that I’ve learned from Emma... I would say I’ve learned that from observing her and that it’s ok to make mistakes and its ok to um challenge myself.

Cheryl: What I’ve learned from Melissa is she’s a very strong independent person which is really- I can see the dynamics of the different generation going from my mother’s where the man definitely male dominated over- and my husband doesn’t dominate me the same way but I came from a very dominant father so there’s a certain amount of fear that I have about what to go out and try and do and I hesitate to maybe explore and do things but she doesn’t, so then it helps me get rid of my fear, my willingness to try things and take risks more than I think if I didn’t have her. It’s sure nice to have a buddy to talk to.

Jane: Oh ok one is I learned from my daughter not to take life so seriously because I raised her like my parents raised me and its very strict you know so just kind of being a little bit more care free and you know if she I dunno I can’t think of an example right now but like when she was little jumping off you know furniture “don’t do that you’re gonna hurt yourself” (A: I’d still do it) well if she did it now if I could rewind I’d just say “don’t hurt yourself.”

What these three mothers have in common is this growing acceptance of the opportunity to make mistakes. Donna and Cheryl especially voice a fear of taking risks and trying something they might not succeed in which they see as a result of their inherited cultural values. They therefore admire in their daughters the courage to be more independent and adventurous and feel that their daughters encourage them to take similar chances.

What emerges from these quotes is a strongly defined perception of Asian culture as confining and stressful. These mothers overwhelmingly attribute many of their fears and
anxieties to the Asian culture and look to their daughter’s apparently carefree childhoods longingly.

Despite the mothers’ admiration for their daughters’ free spirits, overwhelmingly most of the daughters still feel an increased pressure in comparison to their predominantly White peers to achieve academically.

Emma: I, whether this was explicitly stated I don’t really know, but I felt intense pressure not to be lazy so I felt a lot of guilt if I was watching TV or, I don’t know particularly where this comes from because I don’t know if she ever said this to me like “don’t be lazy” um, but this was sort of this feeling that I got which created a lot of guilt around how I wanted to live my life however I thought was appropriate at that time. Looking back probably, I probably was being lazy (laughs) but I needed to go through.

Here Emma discusses how she felt a pressure from her mother to be productive and work oriented and specifically not be “lazy.” While Emma’s implicit feelings of the demonization of laziness are important, even more intriguing is the way she interprets why she was so resistant to her mother’s pressure with a few years of hindsight:

I mean if I had grown up, it’s amazing how much this all comes back to racial and ethnic identity I didn’t even really think about that much until now, but I think if I had grown up in an Asian or fully Asian house hold and or around everybody whose parents were saying the same things or were doing the same things I don’t think I would have had sort of this sort of cognitive dissonance between what I want to do or what I saw people doing and then what I felt was being very strongly suggested (laughs) um so and then maybe in my mind I don’t think I thought about it this deeply at the time, in my mind I was just trying to do me and do my thing and then something else was telling me that that was wrong.

In this quote the significance of the navigation of Asian identity in an American context becomes especially relevant. Emma reasons that her resistance to her mother’s pressure was in fact a comparison to her other friends who were predominantly White Americans that did not have the same type of parental pressure. She considers that if her peers had
had similar expectations she may not have had the “cognitive dissonance” between what
she thought were reasonable expectations (those she observed from her peers) and her
mother’s expectations. It is also important though that after high school, in her relatively
older age, she can accept that she probably was being lazy and no longer categorizes the
expectations as excessive or egregious.

Annie similarly recalls a parental emphasis on a rigorous work ethic, especially in
school, and remembers the shame associated with laziness and lack of effort. She
recounts a conversation with her mother about her grades in math:

“Mom I gotta tell you something. I’m getting a C- in math” and she was like “I’m
not mad that you’re getting a C- I’m mad because, like, you’re smarter than that
and you should not be getting- its not the fact that you got a C- it’s the fact that
you’re just being lazy.”

Annie notes that her mother’s disapproval was not strictly with her performance or
grades, it instead was with the effort involved in her academics and the feeling that she
was not working her hardest. Yet, just as Emma, Annie does not disagree with this
pressure that her mother put on her and shares a similar value on working hard in
academics. She in fact wrote as one of the most important values of her family during the
interview:

I put “hard work” because I mean we all get lazy sometimes but when it comes to
education and stuff like that we all... we all work really hard and we’re not gonna
accept less than what we are capable of doing.

The adverse attitude towards laziness appears to be a prominent aspect of the cultural
values surrounding hard work that the daughters have inherited. While the mothers may
have appreciated their daughters’ opportunities to make mistakes, an emphasis on
academic success was still an important value. Dana also sees her mother’s expectations as at times extreme but at the same understands the value of such expectations:

I was saying before, she is very organized and overly prepared but sometimes she expects other people to be as overly prepared so I think her standard for being organized and stuff definitely is a lot higher... and I mean granted that should be- I should be that organized but we have disagreed about things like that

Despite the fact that her mother’s expectations have sometimes led to conflicts, Dana still concedes that her mother’s emphasis on organization and preparation can be beneficial.

While some of the rationalizations of the daughters may be influenced by their mothers’ presence in the room, and therefore may be more appeasing and less critical than they might be in a more candid situation, I think their reflection demonstrates that some of the daughters have experienced greater academic and behavioral expectations than their peers. Yet, their discussions do not vilify these expectations and actually reason that they were ultimately probably beneficial. Though the daughters did not seem to experience expectations as extreme as their mothers and their mothers were in the room, it is still interesting to note the daughters reflective understanding and appreciation of the perceived strict nature of Asian culture in a way that the mothers did not necessarily express.

Cheryl’s daughter, Melissa, on the other hand, was very appreciative that her mother did not incorporate the pressure Cheryl experienced in her upbringing when raising her children and openly favored what she perceives as White cultural values.

Well in my opinion it’s of the culture, of the Asian culture at least, Whites are a lot more relaxed. Um Asians you have to be perfect, you have to perform well in school and huge emphasis on school, and making mistakes, its allowed but it’s not, they’re not very lenient on making mistakes- it’s a problem if you make mistakes, you shouldn’t disobey, you shouldn’t, you know, go your own path, and even I’ve
noticed, I don’t know if this is one of your questions but I have more White friends than even Asian friends because they tend, the Asian friends, tend to stick to their particular group um not explore, not go out, not you know not do the ideals I do and I’m kind of happy I have those White ideals because it’s allowed me to branch out and see the world more. Its allowed me to have experiences that people my age can’t boast about yet. Its allowed me to have an in depth insight within myself and others that you just can’t gauge when you have that traditional goggle on you know clouding you saying “if it’s not perfect then it’s wrong” you know making mistakes feel like they are detrimental and harmful to your life when, in the end you’re not gonna remember the mistakes in your life you’re just gonna remember your experiences and how much fun you had. In the end, making yourself happy is the biggest thing and if you make a few mistakes on the way you make a few mistakes, you can’t control everything in life. It’s just, it’s too hard to do that you’ll stretch yourself out too much, you’ll die way too early than you should...Many Asians I’ve talked to either they may say their name and maybe a few interests they have, most of its what grades they’ve done well in and where they’re going to college you know the name brands, where as for me and others and mostly Whites which I do appreciate is they’re more open about things.

Melissa echoes a lot of the characterizations of Asian culture cataloged by other participants such as the reproach of making mistakes or taking risks and the fear of not achieving perfection. Yet, an interesting distinction from previous accounts is Melissa’s candid preference for what she considers “White” values. Melissa interprets the antithesis of these Asian values to be White values. In interpreting Melissa’s quote, one might consider how her mother, Cheryl’s, commitment to not passing on the pressure of her upbringing has resulted in her daughter’s categorization of Asian culture as oppressive, and “White” culture as free and open to experiences. It is in Melissa’s definition of Asian culture that she decides to position herself apart from it. However, I would also argue that this quote also demonstrates Melissa’s underlying alignment with her Asian identity. In describing her peers and her family, she makes some surprisingly broad negative categorizations of what she perceives as Asian. Yet, Melissa is a politically conscious individual who serves as the president of an anti-genocide student activism
group at her college. She likely has considered issues of stigmatization and racial
generalizations thoughtfully. Nonetheless, she feels able to make sweeping negative
critique of Asian culture and somewhat harsh generalizations about Asian Americans. This
demonstrates for me that despite not feeling that she is particularly Asian in her values,
she still feels that she has the moral credentials to critique Asian culture because she
ultimately does in some respect belong to that culture. In the politically correct realm of
the Bay Area, it is unlikely to hear open criticism of an ethnic culture from a politically
conscious person unless it comes from someone who identifies, in some way, with that
culture. I believe this reveals that even this example of resistance to Asian culture shows
an implicit alignment with Asian culture.

Still, in her categorization Asian culture, Melissa decides Asian cultural values are
not ones she espouses and therefore aligns her identity ostensibly with values she
believes are part of “White” culture. Just as Emma discussed dividing her boyfriend’s
education on her culture into two separate camps, the all-encompassing Caucasian (or
American) intro level and the more nuanced Asian advanced level, these identities are
viewed as at odds with each other and identification with one overwhelmingly for my
participants means rejection of the other. Georgia, too, observes her White and Asian
peers as diametric opposites when reflecting on whom she usually chooses for friends.

Um I tend more towards Hispanics or Caucasians, Chinese or Asians kind of but
just because of where we are I tend not to because they’re all just kind of
snobbish and at Mills mostly Caucasians, a couple Asians

There seems to almost be an implicit “or” between Caucasian and Asian, as if the two
cultures and personalities they produce are so different it is hard to imagine being
attracted to both. Melissa and Georgia also indicate in their descriptions of their Asian American peers and sense of clique-iness and haughtiness that they find unappealing, expressed through their use of “snobbish” and “name brand” schools. Perhaps to aid in their explanation of their predominantly white friend group they have also exaggerated and generalized their categorizations of White and Asian peers, making them appear more opposing, therefore explaining why one would likely choose either/or. Other participants also express this notion of having to choose between the two identities.

Melissa’s mother, Cheryl, states:

C: I’d have to say I’m less, people have noted that I’m less Asian more Caucasian in my philosophy
M: twinkie
C: I’m not a tiger mom- I was not a tiger mom
M: thank god

Cheryl, like her daughter Melissa, aligns herself with what she perceives as Caucasian culture, which is inversely related to her alignment with Asian culture. To this admission, Melissa teasingly accuses her of being a “twinkie,” a slang term used for someone who is Asian on the outside but White on the inside, further demonstrating how these identities are viewed as distinct and opposing. Cheryl then asserts that she was not a “tiger mom,” a term made popular by Amy Chua’s book about Asian parenting, which includes stories of Chua forcing her daughters to play the violin and not allowing them to go to sleepovers or participate in school shows, and was highly shocking to many western parents. This book and term currently serve as one of the most predominant stereotypes of Asian mothers today. Employing this term shows Cheryl’s interest in distancing herself from this common Asian parenting stereotype.
Julie and Georgia also react negatively to the tiger mom archetype. After declaring that the tiger mom type did not reflect their family because the daughters “didn’t play the violin,” Julie and Georgia discuss their other family members in relation to the book:

G: she [Julie’s other sister] is kind of a tiger mom
J: yeah but she
G: she would never admit it
J: she-well it kind of depends how you-she is and isn’t. The part of tiger mom she didn’t like was the one that limited- that had to control everything in the child’s life that’s the part that she didn’t like although she is controlling on the sunny side or whatever you call that
G: helping is the sunny side of controlling
J: she does like to control certain things and she does like to be fully engaged in her children’s lives. Um but you know she didn’t resonate. Then I have my cousin-loved it and she wanted to emulate and actually does emulate the tiger mom.

Julie and Georgia illustrate how the tiger mom stereotype is employed by comparing the different mothers in their family to the type and assessing how closely they each align with it. There appears to be a spectrum of what they consider an acceptable amount of “controlling” and what is too extreme. Because of this association between overbearing parenting and Asian culture, it is probable that Asian mothers are more likely to be compared to the “tiger mom” type, and criticized for these behaviors, than micro-managing White mothers, even by Asian Americans. It is possibly, actually more likely, that certain Asian Americans will employ and critique what they view as examples of the stereotype to prove that they are aware of it, but reject it through their criticism. Julie and Georgia continue to describe one of Julie’s sister’s children, and the effect of this perceived tiger mom parenting on their personalities:

J: But she’s-and she has wonderful children, but they have this drive
G: its kind of a scary drive
J: kind of a scary drive right that’s competitive and
G: in the sense that they will sabotage other people
J: to do it
G: I meant that happens at Cal
J: hmm?
G: that happens at Cal Berkeley. They sabotage each other’s chemistry experiments. Seriously.
J: seriously? Really?
G: think about their student body population is all Asian

Like Melissa’s previous comment, Georgia perceives an almost ruthless competition for academic success in Asian culture, which prompts her desire to distance herself from this identity. For her, the stress on success creates negative qualities in her Asian American peers and even her Asian American family members. It is almost as if the Asianness that Georgia identifies is seen by her as completely separate from the Asian persona that she describes in this passage.

**Why marry White**

The impetus for the mothers to marry non-Chinese men also may come from this negative association of Asian culture with rigidity and dominance. After Melissa points out how the majority of her mother’s sisters also married White men, Cheryl explains part of what motivated her lack of attraction to Asian men.

M: it ended up that all your sisters- all my aunts and I mean my mom ended up marrying another culture, none married a Chinese man
C: yeah
M: that’s interesting, I’d never thought about that before
C: I thought, back in my time, I think I had the fear that they’d be as strict and domineering as my father and then I look at the Chinese male now and they’ve evolved and they loosen up from some of that having to dominate and tell the woman exactly what to do- we just- my father had very independent thinking...

While Cheryl does not necessarily believe that Chinese men today are still domineering husbands, she does believe that part of her apprehension of having an Asian husband stems from her personal experiences with her father and the perception that Chinese
men need to dominate their wives. This agrees with earlier literature that suggested a link between perceptions of Asians as traditional and a consequent desire to enter relationships with Caucasian partners, who were perceived as valuing more equal and free marriages (Pyke & Johnson 2003). Lana appears to have the same feelings about her trepidation with dating Pilipino men as she explains why her mother was not disappointed she married a Caucasian man.

La: she [my mother] knew of a lot of Pilipino men that she knew I would never be-
Li: happy with
La: happy with because... just because a lot of them feel that that you know that they should, I guess, what is it that like- they’re the boss

Lana is also turned off by the idea of a dominant husband who feels like he is “the boss” and reasons that both she and her mother knew that she would not likely end up with a Pilipino man because of this. Jane, who has some siblings who married White partners and some siblings who married Asian partners, tries to work through why each might have chosen the way they did.

J: (regarding her marrying a White man) and my parents were like “oh another White guy. Okay” cuz I know they would, they never have said, but I know they would have liked to see us, have liked to see us marry Chinese guys you know but um no Josie and June are the only ones that married Asian
Interviewer: Why do you think, do you have any thoughts about why that is?
J: you know June is more traditional because she, she’s the oldest. So I can’t see her with a White guy any way.
A: I was gonna say I can’t see...
J: and Josies’s traditional you know. Even though Mitchell is Japanese he acts like he’s Chinese,
A: I was gonna say I forget though Mitch is Japanese.
J: and then Jan, my brother, and I were the three easy going of the family and just not worried about, I mean I tried to date Chinese guys but I just never got into Chinese guys.
Jane reasons that her siblings who married Asian were more traditional which, as observed, has a rather conservative connotation for relationships in the eyes of my participants. On the other hand, Jane sees her and the two siblings as being more easy going as an explanation for why they married White partners, once again demonstrating the profound perception among the mothers of my study that marrying a White partner would provide a more progressive and free relationship.

Overwhelmingly, one can see throughout these stories and descriptions of Asian culture that, just as earlier perceptions of Whiteness as culturally ignorant or intolerant lead to an increased alignment with an ethnic minority identity, scrutiny of Asian strictness likewise prompts an affiliation with White or American ideals. For the mothers, this strong association between Asian culture and conservatism and a desire to escape traditional Asian gender roles may have even played a significant part in their choice of a husband.

**Conflict Arising Varied Racial Experiences**

Yet while some of the mothers explain their interest in dating or marrying a White man as a product of being attracted to a less dominating relationship and therefore see this combination of cultures as a positive, some of the mother-daughter pairs also noted conflict that arose from the marriage of two differing cultures in the childrearing process.

Emma: I would sort of point out I think because I watched my parents- from my perspective, a lot of their- I talked to dad about this and I don’t think he agrees or doesn’t think it’s the main thing but that I did see a lot of cultural tension or issues between the two of you as part of the reason why it didn’t work out in the end and so I’m very conscious of these cultural differences in relationships.
Emma posits that it was actually the cultural differences between her mother and her father that contributed largely to their divorce, proposing one to consider how a couple from two potentially dissimilar cultures aligns or does not align their cultural viewpoint when raising their children. Though the mothers insinuate that part of their attraction to White partners was a result of an interest in White cultural values surrounding marriage, one might further explore how these couples compromise on other cultural values in their marriage. Donna, Emma’s mom, at the end of the interview, was also interested in what cultural differences come up as a source of conflict in other interracial relationships.

I’d be interested to know for other moms what aspect in their partnership with their husband is the most... is there the biggest gap between cultures, you know? I have a feeling its communication and sort of underlying assumptions because that was always what was difficult for me in my marriage. That could also be a function of who the individuals are but I think between cultures it would be interesting to know, where does it miss? You know um and is that similar across the pairings between Japanese and Caucasian or Chinese and Caucasian or let’s say Pilipino and African American, I don’t know, I would be interested to know.

Donna wonders if underlying cultural assumptions, products of the “ingrained” culture discussed earlier, cause gaps in communication and understanding for mixed couples.

While she predominantly wonders about Asian-White couples and what cultural conflicts might specifically arise in those relationships, she also wonders generally whether mixed relationships can lead to these tensions.

In addition to discord that can occur between married couples in intercultural relationships, Mari is also reminded of a conflict that has arisen between her and her father as a result of varied cultural perspectives and experiences within her family.

That made me think of a big spat I had with my dad in high school that I had sort of always been aware of when I was younger um feeling like he was trying to co-
opt [to her mother] your Japanese-ness or our Japanese-ness and use it to make himself more different or something. Like just like comments he would make I guess or stories he would tell of like- he was in a business meeting or something and some client accused him of being like-not understanding something and he told us this story of like “no, like, my wife is Asian my kids are, you know, biracial like, I understand” and kind of and I remember really prickling and being like “no you don’t understand” even though like you know in a similar way I am disconnected from Japanese culture almost in the same-different, you know-but like so feeling that protectiveness of it kind of over, and really seeing him as being White for the first time

Mari illustrates an example of how the fact that her, her siblings and her mother are ethnic minorities and her father is of the ethnic majority can cause interesting conflict within their family. Almost as a corollary to the mothers who were interested in relationships with White men out of attraction to perceived White cultural values, Mari believes her father uses his marriage to a Japanese woman as a symbol of his progressive cultural values, which he believes qualify him to understand experiences other White men cannot. Mari, however, feels this is “co-optation,” or a kind of invalid appropriation of her ethnic identity for her father’s means. When she says she “saw him as being White for the first time,” drawing on the earlier implications of Whiteness, we can understand that Mari sees her for the first time as not understanding race the way she and the rest of her family does. If I were to continue this research, I would be very interested to explore further the idea of cultural divides in interracial/intercultural relationships and mixed families and how the White fathers who are not interviewed in this study interact with the mothers’ and daughters’ Asian identity as well.

Mari’s mother, Megumi, also wonders about the cultural presence of the fathers, and particularly what cultural influence fathers may have for my participant pairs.
Yeah um well I mean it's such a hard question but um I guess you know in these mother daughter pairs I just you know I have- it's like this ghost of a presence which is the father and um I'm just really curious how it is that children-sometimes they kind of adopt more of the cultural personality of one parent or the other parent so I guess that's something I'm really kind of curious about so what is the influence of this third person so in all these interviews that you're doing I'm just curious to know you know how does the child feel about the influence that the father brought and the influence the mother brought and how it all you know kind of plays out.

While I focused primarily on the mother daughter relationship and how my participant pairs perceived Asian culture for this research, as my participants note, the father’s cultural experiences are also incredibly important to how the mothers and daughters conceive and create their ethnic and cultural identities which in future research would be interesting to investigate.

**Picking and choosing:**

Shedding some light on how the mothers hope to incorporate diverse cultures into their daughters’ upbringing, many of the mothers explained that they strived to select the best aspects of both their culture and their husband’s culture to teach to their children.

Julie: I like our daughters to feel pride in both of their racial backgrounds. I happen to know Chinese American better than I do this mixed breed (G laughs)- James [her husband] says I’m the high strung pure breed and he’s the good natured mutt so it’s a little harder to teach the mutt part because he’s not very interested in knowing his historic-his genetic heritage so it takes me going to his sisters and asking “are you English? Are you Polish? Are you Hungarian? Are you Dutch? And most recently we found out that he’s got Belgian blood in him which means he’s actually related to the Dutch and the Flemish. Um so that’s a harder side of us to teach but mostly we wanted to convey by model to be proud; to be proud of your heritage that you have the um richness of both heritage I think is what we really tried to bring
Julie establishes that her ultimate goal for her daughters is for them to be proud of both of their ethnic identities and celebrate the “richness” of both of their ethnicities. She, however observes, that it is slightly more difficult to access her husband’s ethnic heritage because he has many different European ancestries which he is very distant from and is also less interested in connecting to his ethnic traditions. It is interesting to note here that Julie also feels responsible for teaching her husband’s heritage in addition to her own and makes an effort to explore her husband’s ethnic background for her children despite the fact that he is not interested. This ostensibly further supports the claim that the mothers are the primary agents in imparting culture to her children, elucidating the gravity of the themes of racial socialization for the mothers of this study. Thus these choices of how they incorporate both cultures in their daughters’ upbringing are not likely made lightly.

Jane also highlights ways she and her husband try to also celebrate her husband’s ethnic heritage in addition to her Chinese customs.

J: Kevin is German so we have Oktoberfest every October, October and November depending on when we’re-
A: you guys just drink a bunch of beer (laughs)
J: (laughs) no but we have the traditional decorations that are up and everything so she gets a taste of both and plus he found out that he also has ancestry, you’re like an eighth English. He had ancestors from England. (A makes a face as if she does not find this significant) Supposedly there’s a little Chilean but that’s never been proven. The German/English, yes.

Like Julie, Jane hopes to provide opportunities for her daughter to appreciate her father’s ethnic heritage in addition to her own. Ali, however, observes that the incorporation of her father’s heritage is mostly symbolic in celebration of events rather than an influence in culture or values as previously discussed with Asian ethnic identity. Jane also acknowledges, like Julie, that her husband has many different heritages that he knows
little about which she finds fascinating but also makes it hard to provide traditions from these cultures. Lana additionally expands upon this idea of integrating aspects of both heritages into the ethnic upbringing or her daughter by explaining how she selectively chose only the aspects of each culture that she liked.

I sort of wanted to take the positive parts of my culture and share it you know with my children and the same with you know his. I think that’s why he never explored all that other stuff with grandpa and grandma [the previously discussed cultural tension] because that was part of, that was one part that he did not wish to be part of their lives and so I didn’t, that part was just not discussed or whatever and so I wanted to bring the positive things, like for example, grandma [Lana’s mother-in-law] was a great dessert maker. You know she sewed well. So that part- I tried to cultivate that

Lana likewise demonstrates the mother’s role in teaching both her own culture and her husband’s culture. She seems to be both the actor choosing which characteristics of her husband’s heritage to impart and also the one “cultivating” them. Again, Lana’s report seems to indicate that the aspects of her husband’s heritage seem to be on the activities side rather than values or belief system. Also in contrast to the manner in which Asian culture is passed down in these families, the mothers seem to be researching and selecting traditions from their husbands heritage in an additive way, meaning because they likely know little about these cultural heritages and less about the husband’s family than their own, they have to actively seek out each new tradition to add. On the other hand, because the mothers come from an Asian cultural tradition, they instead are paring down their culture to only the aspects they like when they engage in selectively imparting Asian culture.

Donna: I would say that recently as I kind of realize now that I get to pick and choose which parts of the culture that I can identify with and that I don’t have to
be Japanese through and through and have to do all of these things it’s become less important to me and actually finding my true self, who I am is of more importance to me than carrying on a tradition that seems to have less and less importance to people.

Donna reiterates the notion of discerningly and deliberately choosing certain aspects of her culture that are central to her and letting go of the aspects she does not appreciate. Her assertion that she does not have to be “Japanese through and through” and it is more important to be her “true self” gives the impression that she feels there is a falsehood to maintaining cultural traditions that she does not agree with merely in order to maintain what she believes would give her socially granted legitimacy as Japanese. It is interesting, however, to consider that she believes that being her “true self” inherently reduces her Japanese-ness, further indicating how Asian culture is not merely seen as something biologically inherited but also a behavior and value system that one must subscribe to in order to have full membership.

While the mothers may participate in the activity to picking and choosing the aspects of both their culture and their husband’s culture to teach to their daughters, their daughters are often forced to pick and choose with respect to their ethnic identity in a much more reductive way of checking boxes.

**Checking boxes**

For mixed race children, boxes on official forms that require the participant to check only one race or the race that most closely reflects your race act as the site for many crises of identity. Racial box checking in many cases requires the mixed race participant to either feel they are betraying an identity, reducing their identity,
exploiting an identity for gain, or making a statement about which identity, parent, or family they identify with more; all experiences that can make the box checker uncomfortable. Some of the daughters discuss how they rationalize their choice to deal with the cognitive dissonance and discomfort with the forced selection of a single racial identity.

Annie: if anyone ever asked me “pick one thing to describe yourself” like on the SAT, this is a huge thing for me, so when you look at my name, Annie Decker, that’s a White name so I was thinking to myself- how am I going to explain what I am because if I put White then I’m just White with my last name so I was like ok, well then I’m gonna check Asian so maybe if they see that they’ll be like “o ok so she obviously is mixed” you know so its, I dunno I hate those little questionnaires where it says check one. It should say check all that apply because it’s the 21st century

Annie has clearly experienced a lot of trouble with this issue and has reasoned out an explanation that she feels comfortable with and thinks represent both sides of her ethnic identity. Instead of merely stating that she checks the Asian box, she explains her thought process behind it. She imagines that whoever would be interpreting the form would look at her name and understand that she was White which could then compensate for her marking only Asian on the form. This demonstrates her discomfort with being identified as only one race and the mental gymnastics she has to accomplish in order to feel comfortable or justify her decision. It also reveals a discomfort that many of the daughters feel which is the idea of not being Asian “enough” to claim the Asian box without a logical rational. Like the mixed Asian-White participants in Song and Hashem’s 2010 study who marked White instead of Asian because they did not feel they had the cultural trappings to authentically claim Asian ethnic identity, many of the daughters felt they had to justify a choice to mark Asian, as if people might accuse this of falsely
claiming an identity. Annie is Asian, so theoretically, she could just choose to mark that box. Yet instead, she requires a rational that she can mark it because the organization will already know she is White.

Other daughters, possibly also in avoidance of viewing box checking as an assertion of their personal identity, consider how they utilize their options in box checking to represent themselves as whatever ethnicity they think will be most beneficial in that situation.

A: oh yeah it sounds really bad but I always mark the Asian part because you know they, I dunno, like if you mark that you’re White everybody...I dunno...I remember when I did college apps even my counselor was like “you’re half Asian right? Mark Asian” you have a better chance of like- because you know they need to fill their diversity levels or whatever, you need to- colleges need that. Not that I really went to college yet but for stuff like that and for jobs like I dunno I don’t care I’ll take advantage because a lot of places in Petaluma like besides like G & G market which is Asian owned like there’s a lot of Asian employees there but otherwise like everywhere else I’ll mark that I’m Asian because you have a better chance of like getting it because they need like their diversity or whatever, their percentages have to be equal or something I don’t know what it is but something like that

J: we always have her mark Asian
A: yeah no that’s what I was just telling her because you have a better chance
J: well you know when she was younger she would say she would look at the boxes and say, “what am I?”
A: cuz it said mark one
J: and Kenny and I both at the same time “ASIAN” (laughs)
A: so that’s what I’ve always marked

Despite being Asian, Ali still feels like she needs to defend her choice of marking Asian on forms because she feels there is a certain falseness to that choice. She says “it sounds really bad” that she marks Asian, as if everyone assumes if she chooses her non-White identity it is because she is trying to take advantage of affirmative action. She even admits that that is a huge part of the motivation, noting both her college counselor and parents’
encouragement to check Asian so that she may have a better chance due to jobs and schools needing to fill diversity quotas. Yet, like Annie, the choice to mark Asian cannot come from a personally stronger identification with that ethnicity because that choice is too uncomfortable to make. It is easier to have a justification of the benefits and advantages that can come from that decision rather than choose which ethnic identity she feels she more strongly identifies with. Danielle demonstrates this same uneasiness with marking boxes purely to express identity and voices similar efforts to barter an ethnic identity for advantages and opportunities. In her case, however, she feels that her Asian side is the hindrance to admission and her father’s Spanish and Mexican heritages are more beneficial in an application.

D: well I remember um this wasn’t a very in depth conversation but applying to colleges because a lot of colleges just have you check one box and talking with my parents about hmmmm like affirmative action and like what was I identifying with what would be to my advantage and how race is kind of sometimes used as like something that um you know to your benefit what other people could say is playing the race card you know I remember talking about that with you and dad remember, “o yes I’m Latina for Berkeley.” Yeah and it was just an interesting like open, honest, there was some humor involved in a conversation about what was less important, how does society view race and
C: why can you only check one box?
D: yeah why can you only check one and it’s kind of like a joke almost but it’s a very serious thing, I want to go to a good school so you know um I remember that and being like this is silly...
Interviewer: what did you end up checking when you were applying?
D: I’m pretty sure I checked Hispanic or Latina but at least for the UCs you couldn’t check more than one I don’t think -maybe not, maybe I’m thinking of a different application. One of the schools I applied to you could only check one
Interviewer: and did you feel, why do you think you made that decision?
D: because its more of a minority in the UC system
Interviewer: and if you were to be given that check box and it wasn’t specifically uh for to get into a UC do you think you would make the same decision
D: No I would probably check Chinese American because I think its interesting also while you can claim your own identity right you can say whatever you identify as and its an empowering thing for you to decide only and not society, everyone
views me as Asian American so it would be silly or unrealistic or me to only claim being Latina like it wouldn’t be to my benefit nor would it, um like it wouldn’t prove anything so.

Danielle also openly acknowledges the strategic checking of boxes when it comes to applications. The daughters, in these processes, divorce themselves from the idea that checking the box actually has anything to do with their personal identification and instead view it merely as another aspect of the application that can be manipulated to make them the most desirable applicant. Both Jane and Danielle use humor to discuss this dilemma, Jane cynically and satirically describing the insistent “ASIAN” they answered to Ali’s questions, and Danielle joking “I’m Latina for Berkeley.” These instances of humor demonstrate their understood cynicism of the box-checking process, alleviating a lot of the pressure around the process of selecting one ethnic identity for the daughters.

Danielle’s speculation that other people might think she is “playing the race card” if she marks Latina reiterates that the daughters feel their assertions of identity will can doubted or viewed as inauthentic, placing additional pressure on these situations and illustrating the many complex processes involved in making their choice. Even when Danielle considers checking a box not for application purposes, a situation when no particular ethnicity would be more advantageous, she still does not choose an ethnicity she feels she identifies with more but rather an identity she feels society has thrust upon her. With all of the processes, complications, and factors contributing to the ethnic identity of the daughters, choosing a box that best describes their ethnic identity is too reductive for the daughters to consider attempting earnestly. While Elam in Souls of Mixed Folk considers box checking a “fetishized” or overly-accentuated issue for mixed
race advocates and posits there are likely more effective outlets for self expression of ethnic identity, I think it is important to consider that apart from the opportunity to express one’s full identity, providing “mark one or more options” also prevents many of the daughters from these confusing and often ethnic guilt-inducing encounters.

Conclusions

What I find these data attempt to identify and illuminate are the many social factors that contribute to the construction of Asian ethnic identity for these mothers and daughters and the various strategies they employ to access or not access that identity. While many of the mothers grew up feeling self-conscious and uncomfortable being Asian, largely due to internalized stigma and discrimination, the daughters in contrast, felt society valued the diversity they offered and embraced their ethnic identity. This celebration of ethnic identity for the daughters, often promoted through school clubs and activities, also sometimes manifested itself as a feeling of heightened status regarding issues of race and ethnicity. The process of embracing ethnic identity also requires for the daughters a ritualized “doing” of race, which for many involved cooking and eating ethnically Asian food. These cultural food practices provide a tangible connection to their heritage and were generally the traditions the daughters felt most passionately about continuing with their families, suggesting their perceived importance to the daughters’ cultural inheritance. Food practices were also likely important to the mothers and daughters because of the perceived societal pressure to be able to demonstrate cultural knowledge or prove that one has passed on culture to her child. The mothers and daughters both exhibited some anxiety and guilt in their discussions of cultural traditions
that they had not passed on or not learned correctly. While for the mothers there may be extra pressure to prove allegiance to their Asian identity because they married white husbands, for the daughters, some of the pressure also emerged because they do not all necessarily look like what they believe the “typical” mixed Asian might look like. While some of the daughters were less enthusiastic about the constant questioning of their race, some also enjoyed the “ethnic ambiguity” and their ability to embody different identities in different contexts. A part of their decision in deciding what aspects of their ethnic identity to embody is also influenced by their perception of their different heritages. While many of the daughters and mothers had a somewhat vilified generalization of “Whiteness” as ignorant of matters concerning cultural and ethnic diversity, many of my participants also had critiques about Asian culture, usually suggesting that it was excessively strict and success oriented. This prompted many of my participants to prefer some aspects of American culture, often conflated with White culture. Ultimately, the mothers of my study hoped to pick and choose the best aspects of both their culture and their husband’s culture to impart to their children in a blended cultural household. Despite these egalitarian ideals of inclusive mixed heritage, the daughters are still often confronted with choosing which race they identify more with on forms, bringing many of these previously described tensions to a head. The navigation of Asian identity within an American cultural context surfaces as an important theme in understanding how these mothers and daughters perceive and negotiate their ethnic identities. It also appears that overwhelming opinion of the value of diversity plays an integral role in ethnic self-esteem and the consequent alignment with that ethnic
identity. The research also suggests the importance of positioning the examination of mixed race identity construction in the larger context of their parents’ relationship to ethnic identity and the changing attitudes towards their particular ethnic heritage within their social environment.

**Limitations and Further Research**

Though I have previously outlined some methodological limitations of my research, one significant potential limitation I would like to acknowledge is my personal bias. I am close to many of the participants and also fit the requirements to be a daughter in this study myself. Naturally this might have lead to some bias in my analysis, potentially provoking me to observe things I personally have experienced and believe to be true or be ignorant of processes that do not ring anecdotally true for me. Though I have been methodical in my process and made every effort to catalog and weight all data equally, as a person deeply steeped in this issue, I assume it is likely impossible for me to be truly unbiased. All of my analyses are therefore also the lens through which I interpret my participants’ statements and stories. It is possible that not all of my interpretations accurately encompass the sentiments intended by my participants, yet my hope was to do their accounts and feelings justice, find common experiences, and clarify processes that may not often be discussed.

A significant revelation for me in reflecting on this research is that the mothers often experience as much racial gate-keeping and questioning of the meaning of their Asian identity as their daughters do. While the daughters may feel conscious of their ethnic belonging because of their relative cultural knowledge or their appearance, the
mothers have also faced significant questioning from others and from within themselves about how Asian they are and what that means. If I were to continue this research, I would also be interested in interviewing mother-daughter pairs where both of the parents are Asian and compare these experiences, trying to identify which of these processes observed in my research might be a result of growing up Asian in American culture, and which processes specifically emerge from the variable of the mother marrying a White man and the daughter being of mixed heritage parenting. I would also be interested in conducting comparative interviews with both mother and father present in order to gauge a greater understanding of the role of the father in the cultural cultivation process. I believe however that the importance of my study is the sharing of stories from a population that is small but growing significantly. As a daughter who often wondered if anyone thought or felt the same way I did and what conversations other mixed daughters had with their mothers about being Asian, I found exposure to this information and the candid responses of my participants incredibly helpful to my personal understanding of my ethnic identity and would hope that access to these stories would similarly be meaningful for other Asian mothers and their mixed daughters. Hopefully some of the themes covered in this research could even help start conversations between another mother and daughter about their feelings on ethnic identity.
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Appendix 1. Advertisement

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in a research study on the co-creation of racial identity between US born Asian mothers and mixed Asian and White daughters. The purpose of this study is to gain exploratory knowledge of processes through which mixed Asian-White daughters are racially socialized and what factors and experiences impact the formation of their racial identity. You will be asked to participate in a 1-2 hour pair interview with your mother or daughter. The interviews will be recorded, transcribed and used as the data for my senior thesis project. You will receive a $20 Amazon gift card as payment for your participation.

CONTACT INFORMATION:

Questions: If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this research, its procedures, risks and benefits, contact the Protocol Director, Jamie Yuen-Shore, jbyusho@stanford.edu, 415-613-5921.
Appendix 2. Protocol

Hello. Thank you so much for letting me interview you for my thesis. I have around 15 questions and usually these interviews last about in about an hour. As you both know, I am interested in how parents and children negotiate racial identity, specifically with Asian American mothers and mixed Asian-White daughters. Everything you say is what I want to hear; there are no right or wrong answers.

Demographic questions: Name, age, ethnic background, where you go to college/what is your occupation

Take a minute to write down one or two favorite memories you have with each other

Take a minute to write about one or two things you learned from each other

Take a minute to write about one of two things you have disagreed about

Next, take a minute to write about one or two traditions that have been important to your family?

Question for daughter specific: What are some traditions that you think you will continue with your family?

Mother specific: what are some traditions you have tried to emphasized?

Cultural traditions?

Take a minute to think about a 3-4 communities you participate in. What are they and why are they significant to you?

Can you think of a time when you’ve had to explain an aspect of your cultural identity to someone else?

Question specific to mother: What were some of your expectations or anxieties about having a mixed race child?

How did your parents feel about you marrying a white man?

What is the race or ethnicity of the majority of your friends? (growing up?)

How do you think your racial experience different from your mother’s or daughter’s experience?

How do you think it was similar?
What question would you want to ask to a pair of my participants? 
(at some point ask what generation the mother is, at some point ask about language, at some point ask about if sibling marriages)

Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in my study. If you would like, I can send you a copy of the transcript of this interview. I will use pseudonyms for your names when I publish my final analysis and the only people who will see the raw data will be my advisers and me. If you’d like I can also provide you a copy of the thesis once it is finished. If you wouldn’t mind providing me with your emails, I would like to be able to contact you if I have any follow up questions. I will also be sending you the Amazon gift certificates via email. Thank you again!