AMERICA’S CHANGING COLOR LINES:
Immigration, Race/Ethnicity, and Multiracial Identification

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**Abstract** Over the past four decades, immigration has increased the racial and ethnic diversity in the United States. Once a mainly biracial society with a large white majority and relatively small black minority—and an impenetrable color line dividing these groups—the United States is now a society composed of multiple racial and ethnic groups. Along with increased immigration are rises in the rates of racial/ethnic intermarriage, which in turn have led to a sizeable and growing multiracial population. Currently, 1 in 40 persons identifies himself or herself as multiracial, and this figure could soar to 1 in 5 by the year 2050. Increased racial and ethnic diversity brought about by the new immigration, rising intermarriage, and patterns of multiracial identification may be moving the nation far beyond the traditional and relatively persistent black/white color line. In this chapter, we review the extant theories and recent findings concerning immigration, intermarriage, and multiracial identification, and consider the implications for America’s changing color lines. In particular, we assess whether racial boundaries are fading for all groups or whether America’s newcomers are simply crossing over the color line rather than helping to eradicate it.

**INTRODUCTION**

By the year 2002, the number of foreign-born people living in the United States exceeded 34.2 million, with the size of the U.S.-born second generation about 31.5 million, so that immigrants and their children accounted for almost 66 million people, or about 23% of the U.S. population (Fix et al. 2003, U.S. Bureau of Census 2002). Unlike the immigrants who arrived at the turn of the twentieth century, today’s immigrants are notable because they are mainly non-European. By the 1980s, only 12% of legal immigrants originated in Europe or Canada, whereas nearly 85% reported origins in Asia, Latin America, or the Caribbean (U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service 2002, Waldinger & Lee 2001). According
to National Research Council projections, by the year 2050, America’s Latino and Asian populations are expected to triple, constituting about 25% and 8% of the U.S. population, respectively (Smith & Edmonston 1997). Once a largely biracial society with a large white majority and relatively small black minority—and a relatively impenetrable color line dividing these groups—the United States is now a society composed of multiple racial and ethnic groups. America’s newcomers have undeniably altered the nation’s racial and ethnic landscape.

At the same time that immigration has increased racial and ethnic diversity in the United States, rises in rates of racial/ethnic intermarriage have also occurred. Over the past four decades—a time coinciding with the rise of the new immigration—intermarriage between whites and Asians and whites and Latinos have increased substantially, whether assessed on an individual or married-couple basis. For example, the percentages of Asian or Latino husbands or wives having spouses of another race or ethnicity exceeded 30% by the late 1990s, with the vast majority married to a white partner (Bean & Stevens 2003, p. 195). Similarly, the percentages of Asian or Latino marriages during the 1990s (defined as those with at least one spouse being a member of the race or ethnic group in question) that included a white spouse exceeded 50% in the third generation (Jacoby 2001, Waters 1999). Such rises in intermarriage have, in turn, led to a sizeable and growing multiracial population. Currently, 1 in 40 persons identifies himself or herself as multiracial, and this figure is twice as high for those under the age of 18 (Bean & Lee 2002, Grieco & Cassidy 2001). By the year 2050, as many as 1 in 5 Americans could claim a multiracial background (Farley 2001, Smith & Edmonston 1997).

It is not at all clear that today’s immigrants see themselves, or for that matter that others see the immigrants, as either black or white. In short, most late-twentieth-century immigrants may be people of color, but the degree to which they view themselves and are viewed by others as closer to black or white is highly ambiguous. Today’s immigration thus may be moving the nation far beyond the traditional and relatively persistent black/white color line that has long divided the country, a demarcation reflecting the practice of slavery, its legacy of discrimination, and a history of black social and economic disadvantage (Bobo 1997; Clark 1965; Drake & Cayton 1993; Farley & Allen 1987; Massey & Denton 1993; Myrdal 1944; Patterson 1998a,b; Smelser et al. 2001; Wilson 1980, 1987). This fault line, of course, was famously forecast in 1903 by the prominent African American social theorist W.E.B. Du Bois when he prophesied that the “problem of the twentieth-century is the problem of the color line” (1997, p. 45). However, even in 1903, during a time of substantial immigration, it seems unlikely that Du Bois could have anticipated that America’s racial and ethnic makeup would be so drastically changed by the late-twentieth-century immigration.

The arrival of unprecedented numbers of Asians and Latinos thus complicates the black/white portrait of America and calls into question where today’s immigrants fit along its bipolar divide. If a black/white color line no longer characterizes the nature of racial/ethnic relations in the United States, and a new line is emerging, where will the line be redrawn? Although the birth of a new divide is certainly one
possible scenario, another prospect is a shift toward unconditional boundary crossing and the fading of racial boundaries altogether. The rising rates of intermarriage combined with a growing multiracial population may indicate that boundaries are weakening overall, providing evidence of a declining significance of race for all groups.

Which of these scenarios more accurately depicts today’s demographic scene and the changing nature of America’s color lines is a question fraught with theoretical and social significance. Social scientists are beginning to wrestle with the question of whether today’s immigrants are helping to blur racial boundaries generally or whether America’s newcomers are simply crossing over the color line rather than helping to eradic ate it (Alba 1999, Bean & Stevens 2003, Gans 1999, Gitlin 1995, Hollinger 1995, Lee & Bean 2003, Rodríguez 2000, Sanjek 1994, Skrentny 2001, Waters 1999). In this review, we attempt to address the question about the placement and strength of America’s color lines by examining the extant theories and recent findings concerning immigrant incorporation, intermarriage, and multiracial identification in the United States, focusing specifically on intergroup differences among whites, blacks, Latinos, and Asians. After carefully reviewing the literature, we assess the implications of these findings for America’s changing color lines.

DEFINING RACE/ETHNICITY

Before we continue, we should clarify the way we define and use the terms “race” and “ethnicity.” George M. Fredrickson (1988) has defined race as a “consciousness of status and identity based on ancestry and color.” If we delete the color criterion from this phraseology, we obtain a workable definition of ethnicity. Applying these definitions to racial/ethnic groups in the United States, we suggest that blacks are treated as a racial group. In the cases of the new Latino and Asian immigrant groups, however, the term “race” does not by itself provide a totally suitable label because it is not clear that “color” is (or is becoming) an attribute that is always ascribed to immigrants from Latin America and Asia, at least on a consistent basis. For example, some Latinos view themselves and are seen by others as white, some as mestizo, and a few as black. We thus deliberately use the somewhat imprecise term “race/ethnicity” in the following discussion to refer to groups that distinguish themselves on the basis of ancestry and/or color. Moreover, as we elaborate later in the paper, social scientists generally agree that race is a social and cultural rather than biological category, having documented in their research the changing nature of racial and ethnic boundaries. Thus, we view race and ethnicity as dynamic, not fixed, concepts.

For the purposes of analysis, we use the 2000 Census racial categories, which include: white; black; Asian; some other race; American Indian and Alaska Native; and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. Although neither “Latino” nor “Hispanic” were racial categories in the 2000 Census, the Office of Management
and Budget’s directive mandated two distinct questions regarding a person’s racial/ethnic background in order to identify the Latino population of the United States: one about race and a second about whether a person was of “Spanish/Hispanic/Latino” origin. In both 1990 and 2000, slightly more than 97% of those who checked “some other race” were Latinos (Anderson & Fienberg 1999, U.S. Bureau of the Census 2001). In addition, more than 40% of Hispanics chose the “some other race” category compared with only 1% of the non-Hispanic population, in part because many Latinos see themselves as deriving from more than one racial group—that is, as coming from mostly hybrid or mestizo backgrounds where racial mixing is not uncommon and racial boundaries not as sharply drawn (Glazer 2003, CE Rodríguez 2000, G Rodriguez 2003).

Thus, although the U.S. Census does not treat Hispanics as a racial group, we treat them as a separate category for two reasons. First, Latinos often see themselves as a separate category because many identify themselves as some “some other race” in the census; that is, many feel that the racial categories listed on the census forms do not fit them well. Second, they have been legally treated as a separate group, often as a racial/ethnic minority group who qualifies for and receives benefits from federal programs designed to assist disadvantaged minorities, such as affirmative action programs. Latinos have also been protected by Civil Rights legislation and the Voting Rights Act, both of which are aimed at helping racial/ethnic minorities. Hence, not only do Latinos see themselves as falling into a separate category (although not necessarily a separate racial category), they are also aggregated into a distinct category by the U.S. government. For these reasons, we treat Latinos as a separate group in our analyses.

CHANGING RACIAL/ETHNIC BOUNDARIES

In an oft-cited passage concerning group boundaries, Fredrik Barth (1969, p. 15) noted, “[T]he critical focus of investigation from this point of view becomes the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses. The boundaries to which we must give our attention are of course social boundaries, though they may have territorial counterparts. If a group maintains its identity when members interact with others, this entails criteria for determining members and ways of signaling membership and exclusion.” Barth recognized that ethnic boundaries, like racial boundaries, are not fixed but continue to change through expression and validation.

Today, social scientists generally agree that race is a social rather than biological category and have documented the processes by which ethnic and racial boundaries have changed throughout our nation’s history. For instance, previously “nonwhite” immigrant ethnic groups such as Irish, Italians, and eastern European Jews became “white,” often by deliberately distinguishing themselves from blacks (Alba 1999, Brodkin 1998, Foner 2000, Gerstle 1999, Ignatiev 1995, Jacobson 1998, Perlmann & Waldinger 1997, Roediger 1991). Historians such as Ignatiev (1995) and
Jacobson (1998) describe how white ethnics went to extreme measures to distance themselves from black Americans to achieve whiteness. Another critical factor that helped to change the status of Irish, Italians, and Jews from nonwhite to white was the end of large-scale European immigration in the 1920s. The cessation of massive immigration not only diminished fears about an overflow of allegedly racial inferiors, but also facilitated the economic incorporation of European immigrants, especially during the golden years following World War II (Foner 2000). In addition to the successful incorporation of white ethnics into the nation’s economic and social structure, black migration patterns within the United States influenced the nation’s color lines, redrawing the racial configuration along a stark binary black/white divide in which Irish, Italians, and Jews fell on the white side of the color line (Jacobson 1998).

However, many social scientists caution that the very fact that Irish, Italians, and Jews were not subject to the same type of systematic legal discrimination as African Americans illustrates that they were on a different plane from blacks to begin with, a standing that facilitated their eventual racial treatment as whites (Alba 1985, Foner 2000, Lieberson 1980). Moreover, the disappearance of national origin differences among European ethnics and the discontinuation of tendencies to view such differences not only in racial terms but in fact in rigid black/white terms contributed to the development of the idea that, for many European immigrants, race was an achieved rather than an ascribed status (Alba 1990, Gans 1979, Perlmann & Waldinger 1997, Waters 1990). But this in all likelihood was because such persons were viewed as nonwhite rather than black. In that time period’s rigidly compartmentalized black/white world governed by the “one-drop” rule (which emphasized pure whiteness versus everything else), not being white did not necessarily involve actually being black, but it was like being black. Thus, it is not surprising that these national origin groups were treated as black. Perhaps because in fact they were not black, their status was eventually allowed to change, thus hastening the evolution and acceptance of the idea that at least some racial categories—maybe all except black—could in fact be changed.

White ethnics such as Italians, Irish, and eastern European Jews are not the only groups to have changed their status from nonwhite to white. Asian ethnic groups such as the Chinese in Mississippi and Japanese Americans also changed their racial status from almost black to almost white. Loewen (1971), for example, documents how Chinese Americans in the Mississippi Delta made conscious efforts to change their lowly racial status by achieving economic mobility, emulating the cultural practices of whites, intentionally distancing themselves from blacks, and rejecting fellow ethnics who married blacks, as well as their Chinese-black multiracial children. Spickard (1989) notes a similar process of change among Japanese Americans who were once at the bottom of the ethnic ladder along with blacks at the beginning of the twentieth century, but whose status improved dramatically just three-quarters of a century later.

The change in racial classification among ethnic groups from nonwhite to white or almost white vividly illustrates that race is a cultural rather than a biological
category that has expanded over time to incorporate new immigrant groups. As Gerstle (1999, p. 289) explains, whiteness as a category “has survived by stretching its boundaries to include Americans—the Irish, eastern and southern Europeans—who had been deemed nonwhite. Contemporary evidence suggests that the boundaries are again being stretched as Latinos and Asians pursue whiteness much as the Irish, Italians, and Poles did before them.” There are two points to underscore here: first, changes in ethnic and racial boundaries are a fundamental part of the immigrant incorporation experience; and second, racial and ethnic boundaries have stretched in the past and will undoubtedly continue to change. Although boundary changes may be a given, uncertainties remain about where the racial and ethnic divides will fade, where they will persist, and where today’s newest immigrants will fall along these divides. It is impossible to predict exactly where the racial boundaries will be redrawn, but based on trends in immigrant incorporation, intermarriage, and multiracial identification, we can obtain a sense of the direction of these changes.

INCORPORATION OF AMERICA’S NEWCOMERS

The incorporation process of new immigrant groups into the United States has always been of interest among social scientists, consequently spawning several dominant theoretical perspectives about the assimilation process (Bean et al. 2003). The first is the classic “straight-line” model of assimilation (Gordon 1964), with its many variants (Alba 1990, Crispino 1980, Gans 1992, Waters 1990). This model predicts that newcomers will both affect and be affected by the fabric of American life so that, in the long run, the immigrant minorities and the majority become ever more indistinguishable from one another, at least after several generations. Born of the predominantly European-origin migration taking place at the beginning of the twentieth century, the straight-line model emerged out of the experience and strategy of incorporation adopted by European immigrants for establishing a foothold and gaining economic mobility in the United States.

Gordon (1964) canonized the view that there is one unidirectional pathway to successfully assimilating into the nation’s economic and social structure and that acculturation not only preceded but was necessary for structural incorporation. In the assimilation process, immigrants lose their ethnic distinctiveness, become ever more indistinguishable from the host society, and eventually adopt an American identity. The shortcomings of the model have partly to do with its imperfections in depicting the experiences of European migrants, but also with its inability to explain the experience of African Americans as well as today’s immigrants. For instance, white European groups continued to manifest aspects of ethnic distinctiveness despite their substantial structural incorporation—a phenomenon that could not be accounted for with the straight-line assimilation model. Researchers have demonstrated, however, that much of the ethnic revival of this
period was symbolic, giving rise to the concept of “symbolic ethnicity” for white ethnics (Alba 1990, Gans 1979, Waters 1990).

A second and more fundamental limitation of the classic straight-line assimilation model is its failure to account for the experience of African Americans. Although African American customs, practices, and ideals had come to mirror those of the larger population to a considerable degree—indicating their high level of acculturation—what was still missing was successful economic incorporation. The prevailing view in the late 1960s was that the removal of legal barriers would in fairly short order lead to substantial structural incorporation among African Americans (Glazer & Moynihan 1963). The elimination of such barriers to African Americans, however, resulted in only partial improvements in black economic situations, a consequence that could readily be discerned by the mid-1970s (Bean & Bell-Rose 1999; Glazer 1997; Smelser et al. 2001; Wilson 1980, 1987).

Third, the straight-line model fails to accurately characterize the incorporation pathways adopted by America’s newest immigrants, such as Asians, Latinos, and West Indians. Today, social scientists conceive of not only one, but many different paths of incorporation for America’s newcomers, a perspective first articulated in Portes & Zhou’s (1993) seminal article on segmented assimilation. They posited three possible pathways of immigrant incorporation: straight-line assimilation into the white middle-class (e.g., light-skinned Cubans in Miami); assimilation into the minority underclass (e.g., Haitians in Miami); or selective assimilation in which immigrants remain immersed in the ethnic community and preserve the immigrant community’s values and solidarity as a means to achieve upward mobility (e.g., Punjabi Sikh Indians in Northern California). Many of today’s new Asian and Latino immigrants adopt a path of “selective acculturation” (Portes & Rumbaut 2001, Zhou & Bankston 1998) or “accommodation without assimilation” (Gibson 1988).

Moreover, social scientists have documented that acculturation is no longer the surest path to successful economic incorporation, as the straight-line model suggests. By illustration, immigrants and their children who adopt a path of selective assimilation use the resources within the immigrant ethnic community and maintain a strong sense of ethnic identity as buffering mechanisms to shield them from the spiral of downward mobility in the face of economic disadvantage. In fact, in the case of West Indians in New York and Vietnamese in Louisiana, casting off one’s immigrant identity can lead to downward mobility—a concept that directly challenges the dominant sociological paradigm of straight-line assimilation (Waters 1999, Zhou & Bankston 1998). Hence, if cultural accommodation facilitated structural incorporation in the past, this has not seemed apparent or necessary for many of today’s newcomers, illustrating the frequent decoupling of the traditional linkages thought to exist between acculturation and economic mobility (Neckerman et al. 1999, Portes & Zhou 1993). In the path of selective assimilation, ethnicity acts as a resource to upward mobility and appears less constraining than previously presumed, becoming more useful, flexible, and nonconstraining than emphasized by the straight-line model.
INTERMARRIAGE IN THE UNITED STATES

At the beginning of the twentieth century, intermarriage between white ethnics was rare and nearly castelike, especially between “old” white ethnics and newer arrivals from eastern and southern Europe (Pagnini & Morgan 1990). Today, white ethnics intermarry at such high rates that only one-fifth of whites has a spouse with an identical ethnic background, reflecting the virtual disappearance of boundaries among white ethnic groups (Alba 1990; Lieberson & Waters 1988, 1993; Waters 1990). By contrast, marriage across racial groups, while on the rise, is still relatively uncommon between some groups, and all groups continue to intermarry at rates lower than would be predicted at random (Moran 2001). For example, more than 93% of white and black marriages are endogamous, whereas only about 70% of Asian and Hispanic and 33% of American Indian marriages are (Harrison & Bennett 1995, Waters 2000b).

In one sense, that interracial marriage is not as common as white interethnic marriage should come as little surprise given that it was illegal in 16 states as recently as 1967, when the Supreme Court ruling Loving v. Commonwealth of Virginia overturned the last remaining antimiscegenation laws. The ruling had an enormous impact on the rise in interracial marriage, which increased tenfold within a 30-year period from 150,000 in 1960 to 1.6 million in 1990 (Jacoby 2001, Waters 2000b), far beyond what would be predicted by population growth alone. Trends in exogamy are significant because social scientists conceive of racial/ethnic intermarriage as a measure of decreasing social distance, declining racial/ethnic prejudice, and changing racial/ethnic group boundaries (Davis 1941, Fu 2001, Gilbertson et al. 1996, Gordon 1964, Kalmijn 1993, Lee & Fernandez 1998, Lieberson & Waters 1988, Merton 1941, Rosenfeld 2002, Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan 1990). Given its theoretical significance, we review recent findings on intermarriage between whites and nonwhites and explore their implications for America’s color lines.

Today, about 13% of American marriages involve persons of different races, a considerable increase over the past three and a half decades (Bean & Stevens 2003, Lee & Bean 2003). Although the rise in interracial marriage might initially suggest that racial boundaries are eroding, recent findings indicate that not all racial/ethnic groups are equal partners in this growth. For instance, about 30% of married native-born Asians and Latinos have a spouse of a different racial background, mostly white. Among young (25- to 34-year-old) U.S.-born Asians and Latinos, the intermarriage figures are even higher; nearly two-thirds of married Asians and two-fifths of Latinos out-marry, again mostly with whites (Qian 1997). By contrast, only one-tenth of young blacks marry someone of a different racial background (Perlmann 2000).

Although the rate of intermarriage increased for all groups since 1970, on the whole the intermarriage rate for whites and blacks remains relatively low (Kalmijn 1993). In the late 1990s, among married whites and married blacks only 5.8% and 10.2% involved a member of another racial group, respectively (Bean...
& Stevens 2003). The intermarriage rates for Asians and Latinos are nearly three times as high as that of blacks and more than five times the rate of whites. Among married Asians and Latinos, 27.2% and 28.4% of marriages involve a member of another racial group, typically whites (Bean & Stevens 2003, Lee & Bean 2003). The comparatively higher rates of intermarriage among native-born Asians and Latinos indicate that as these groups incorporate into the United States, they not only become receptive to intermarriage but also are perceived by whites as suitable marriage partners (Moran 2001).

In sum, there appear to be three distinct trends in interracial marriage in the United States. First, intermarriage for all racial groups has increased dramatically over the past 35 years and will probably continue to rise. Second, intermarriage is not uncommon in the cases of newer immigrant groups such as Asians and Latinos (particularly among the young, native-born populations). Third, compared with Asians, Latinos, and American Indians, intermarriage is still relatively uncommon among blacks (Perlmann 2000).

The differential rates of intermarriage among nonwhite racial groups suggest that racial/ethnic boundaries are more prominent for some groups than for others. The significantly higher rates of intermarriage among Asians and Latinos indicate that racial/ethnic boundaries are more fluid and flexible, and racial/ethnic prejudice less salient for these groups. By contrast, the lower rates of intermarriage among blacks suggest that racial boundaries are more prominent, and the black/white divide more salient than the Asian/white or Latino/white divides. Hence, although boundaries are fading, boundary crossing among racial groups is not unconditional, and race is not declining in significance at the same pace for all groups.

THE MULTIRACIAL POPULATION IN THE UNITED STATES

The rise in interracial marriage has resulted in the growth of the multiracial population in the United States. This population became especially visible when, for the first time in the nation’s history, the 2000 Census allowed Americans to select “one or more races” to indicate their racial identification. Brought about by a small but highly influential multiracial movement, this landmark change in the way the United States measures racial identification reflects the view that race is no longer conceived as a bounded category (DaCosta 2000; Farley 2001, 2002; Hirschman et al. 2000; Morning 2000; Waters 2000a; Williams 2001). In 2000, 6.8 million persons, or 2.4% of Americans, identified themselves as multiracial—about 1 in every 40 people. Although these figures may not appear large, a recent National Academy of Science study noted that the multiracial population could rise to 21% by the year 2050 when—because of rising patterns in intermarriage—as many as 35% of Asians and 45% of Hispanics might claim a multiracial background (Smith & Edmonston 1997). The growth of the multiracial population provides a new reflection on the nation’s changing racial boundaries.
Although it has been apparent for some time that the multiracial population will continue to grow, the phenomenon has been relatively understudied in social science research. For example, only a handful of studies have examined the question of how interracial couples identify their multiracial children (Eschbach 1995, McKenney & Bennett 1994, Saenz et al. 1995, Xie & Goyette 1997, Waters 2000), revealing that about 50% of American Indian/white and Asian/white intermarried couples report a white racial identity for their children. A somewhat larger but still not sizeable number of studies have examined the ways in which multiracial individuals self-identify, often based on small samples generating conflicting findings (Dalmage 2000; Harris & Sim 2002; Johnson et al. 1997; Korgen 1998; Root 1992, 1996; Salgado de Snyder et al. 1982; Spickard 1989; Stephan & Stephan 1989; Tizard & Phoenix 1993; Zack 1993). For example, Salgado de Snyder et al. (1982) find that 70% of multiracial children in California with one Mexican origin parent identify as Mexican, a rate much higher than Stephan & Stephan (1989) find for multiracial Hispanic college students in New Mexico, where only 44% adopt a Hispanic identity.

Previous research indicates that there are several important variables that affect the choice of racial identification among children of interracial unions, such as generational status, bilingualism, and proximity to a nonwhite community. For instance, in their studies of biracial children with one Asian parent, Saenz et al. (1995) and Xie & Goyette (1997) find that nativity and generational status matter. First-generation biracial Asian children are most likely to be identified as Asian compared with subsequent generations. However, the third-generation is more likely to be identified as Asian compared with their second-generation counterparts. Although this finding appears to contradict the classic assimilation model—which predicts fading ethnic identification with each successive generation—Xie & Goyette (1997) argue that choosing to identify one’s child as Asian does not necessarily signify a stronger sense of racial identification. Rather, they posit that the racial identification of multiracial Asian children is largely optional, likening it to the ethnic options available for whites. Providing further support for this claim, Harris & Sim (2002) find in their study of multiracial youth that when asked to choose a single race, Asian/white youth are equally likely to identify as Asian or white, demonstrating that the racial identification of Asian/white multiracials is largely a matter of choice.

A second consistent finding is that speaking a language other than English at home significantly increases the likelihood that biracial children will adopt a non-white identity, supporting the thesis that language maintenance is critical in ethnic identity formation (Saenz et al. 1995; see also Portes & Rumbaut 2001, Zhou & Bankston 1998). A third finding is that neighborhood context matters, and exposure to the minority parent’s culture increases the likelihood that biracial children will adopt a nonwhite identity (Harris & Sim 2002, Korgen 1998, Saenz et al. 1995, Stephan & Stephan 1989, Xie & Goyette 1997). For example, living among a large coethnic community or residing in a public use micro area (PUMA) that is greater than 20% Asian positively affects the degree to which interracially married Asians...
and whites identify their multiracial children as Asian (Saenz et al. 1995, Xie & Goyette 1997). Furthermore, Stephan & Stephan (1989) posit that the higher rates of multiracial identification of the Japanese in Hawaii (73%) compared with the Hispanics in New Mexico (44%) reflects the greater multicultural milieu in Hawaii, including a multiplicity of locally available labels for the multiracial/multiethnic population. Eschbach (1995) too discovers vast regional differences in the choice of an American Indian identity for American Indian/white multiracials—ranging from 33% to 73%.

Patterns of Multiracial Identification

Previous research on the racial identification of children of interracial unions was conducted before the 2000 Census, meaning that it was not able to take advantage of the new census data that allow Americans to mark more than one race to identify themselves or members of their households. As mentioned earlier, 2.4% of the U.S. population reported a multiracial background. Of those who reported a multiracial background, 93% reported exactly two races, 6% reported three races, and only 1% reported four or more races. And given the trends in interracial marriage noted above, the multiracial population is likely to increase substantially by the year 2050 (Smith & Edmonston 1997).

Although most individuals who report a multiracial identification list exactly two races, the selection of these races is not evenly distributed across all racial groups. As Table 1 illustrates, the groups with a high percentage of multiracial persons as a percentage of the total group include Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, American Indian and Alaska Native, other, and Asian. Just to reiterate, although neither “Latino” nor “Hispanic” were racial categories in the 2000 Census,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Racial identification (millions)</th>
<th>Multiracial identification (millions)</th>
<th>Percent multiracial</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>216.5</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>36.2</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian and Alaska Native</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


aRacial/ethnic group totals do not sum to the total U.S. population because multiracial persons are counted here in more than one group.

bMultiracial persons are counted for each race category mentioned.
in both 1990 and 2000, slightly more than 97% of those who checked “some other race” were Latinos (Anderson & Fienberg 1999, U.S. Bureau of the Census 2001).

As Table 1 illustrates, the groups with the lowest proportion of persons claiming a multiracial background in 2000 are whites and blacks. However, because whites account for 77% of the total U.S. population, most individuals who report a multiracial identity also claim a white background. More specifically, although 5.1 million whites report a multiracial background, this accounts for only 2.3% of the total white population. Like whites, the proportion of blacks who claim a multiracial background is also quite small, accounting for only 4.2% of the total black population. These figures stand in sharp contrast to those among American Indian and Alaska Natives and among Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islanders; both of these groups show the highest percentage of multiracial reporting as a proportion of their populations at 36.4% and 44.8%, respectively. Asians and Latinos fall in between with significantly higher rates of multiracial reporting than blacks and whites at 12.4% and 16.4%, respectively, but lower rates compared with American Indian and Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islanders.

If we examine the rates of black/white, Asian/white, and Latino/white multiracial combinations as a percentage of the total black, Asian, and Latino populations, we find these figures equal 1.9%, 7.0%, and 4.9%, respectively (see Table 2). Among Asians, the Asian/white multiracial combination is about three and a half times more likely to occur, and among Latinos, the Latino/white combination is more than two and a half times more likely to occur, as the black/white combination among blacks.

Mirroring trends in intermarriage, there appear to be three distinct patterns in multiracial identification. First, the multiracial population seems likely to continue to grow in the foreseeable future because of increasing intermarriage. Second, multiracial identification is not uncommon among the members of new immigrant groups such as Asians and Latinos (particularly for those under the age of 18).

### TABLE 2  Percentage of various racial/ethnic groups reporting a multiracial identity in combination with selected additional racial identities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Native American</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whitesa</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blacksb</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asiansc</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Americansd</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Othersd</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latinos</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*aDefined as non-Hispanics of the given category reported alone or in combination.

*bCan be either Hispanic or non-Hispanics reporting the “other” racial category alone or in combination with the white, black, Asian, or Native American categories.

*cConsists of Latino respondents reporting multiracial identities involving the column race and one or more other races.
Third, at only 4.2%, multiracial identification remains relatively uncommon among blacks compared with Asians and Latinos. Why blacks are far less likely to report a multiracial background is particularly noteworthy considering that the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that at least three-quarters of the black population in the United States is ancestrally multiracial (Davis 1991, Spencer 1997). In other words, while at least 75% of black Americans have some alternative ancestry (mostly white) and thus could claim multiracial identities on that basis, just over 4% choose to do so, although recent studies reveal that younger black/white multiracials feel less constrained to adopt a black monoracial identity. For example, Korgen’s (1998) study of 40 black/white adults reveals that only one-third of her sample under the age of 30 exclusively identifies as black. Moreover, Harris & Sim’s (2002) study of multiracial youth shows that 17.1% of black/white adolescents choose white as the single race that best describes them.

Although younger blacks are less likely to report a black monoracial identity than older black cohorts, blacks overall are still far less likely to report multiracial backgrounds compared with Asians and Latinos. The tendency of black Americans to be less likely to report multiracial identifications undoubtedly is due to the legacy of slavery, including lasting discrimination and the formerly de jure and now de facto invocation of the “one-drop rule” of hypodescent (Davis 1991, Haney Lopez 1996, Nobles 2000). For no other racial or ethnic group in the United States and in no other country does the one-drop rule so tightly circumscribe a group’s identity choices (Harris et al. 1993). Unlike the one-drop rule of hypodescent that has historically constrained racial identity options for multiracial blacks, the absence of such a traditional practice of labeling among multiracial Asians, Latinos, and American Indians leaves room for exercising discretion in the selection of racial/ethnic identities (Bean & Stevens 2003, Eschbach 1995, Harris & Sim 2002, Lee & Bean 2003, Stephan & Stephan 1989, Xie & Goyette 1997). The higher rates of multiracial reporting among Latinos and Asians, both as a proportion of the total Latino and Asian populations, and vis-à-vis blacks, indicate that racial boundaries are less constraining for these groups compared with blacks. Although boundary crossing may be more common for all groups, it appears that the legacy of institutional racism in the country, as exemplified in such practices as the informal rule of hypodescent, more forcefully constrains the identity options for blacks compared with other nonwhite groups.

In addition, because a significant proportion of Latinos and Asians in the United States are either immigrants or the children of immigrants, their understanding of race, racial boundaries, and the black/white color divide is shaped by a different set of circumstances than those of African Americans. Most importantly, what sets Latinos and Asians apart is that their experiences are not rooted in the same historical legacy of slavery with its systematic and persistent patterns of legal and institutional discrimination and inequality from which the tenacious black/white divide was born and cemented. Unlike African Americans who were forcefully brought to this country as slaves, today’s Latino and Asian newcomers are voluntary migrants, and consequently their experiences are distinct from those of African Americans.
Americans. The unique history and experience of black Americans in this country make the black/white racial gap qualitatively and quantitatively different from the Latino/white or Asian/white racial divides. For these reasons, racial/ethnic boundaries appear more fluid for the newest immigrants than for native-born blacks, consequently providing multiracial Asians and Latinos more racial options than their black counterparts.

In fact, some research even indicates that the racial boundaries among Latinos, Asians, and American Indians more generally are beginning to assume the fluidity and mutability of ethnicity. For instance, in their longitudinal study of high school students, Eschbach & Gomez (1998) note that only 68% of the more than 6500 students interviewed within a two-year period (1980 and 1982) consistently identified as Hispanic. They suggest that the change in racial/ethnic identification points to a process of transformation from ascribed to optional ethnicity. Similarly, Eschbach et al. (1998) note that the American Indian population grew from 827,000 in 1970 to 1.96 million in 1990—an increase far in excess of natural population growth. They posit that the change in racial identification from white to American Indian signifies the flexibility of racial boundaries for this group. Furthermore, as social scientists have documented, the racial identification for Asians has changed over time from “almost black” to “almost white,” pointing to the mutability of boundaries for at least some Asian ethnic groups (Loewen 1971, Spickard 1989; see also Spickard & Fong 1995). Thus, recent findings suggest that at least for some Asians, Latinos, and American Indians, race is adopting the optional and symbolic character of white ethnicity.

Geography of Multiracial Identities and Racial/Ethnic Diversity

Another way of measuring America’s changing boundaries is to unearth where these boundaries are shifting most rapidly. Patterns of multiracial identification reveal that areas with high immigrant populations evince larger multiracial populations. Immigration researchers have long noted that the foreign-born population is clustered in several cities and states (Bean et al. 1997, Waldinger & Lee 2001), and like the immigrant population, the multiracial population is similarly clustered. In fact, 64%, or nearly two-thirds, of those who report a multiracial identification reside in just ten states—California, New York, Texas, Florida, Hawaii, Illinois, New Jersey, Washington, Michigan, and Ohio—all of which have relatively high immigrant populations (Bean & Stevens 2003). In essence, states with higher levels of racial/ethnic diversity (as reflected in the percentage of the population that is not non-Hispanic white or non-Hispanic black) boast much larger multiracial populations than states that are less racially diverse. On the opposite end of the diversity spectrum are states like West Virginia and Maine that have low racial minority populations, and thereby exhibit very low levels of multiracial reporting. States like Mississippi, Alabama, South Carolina, and Louisiana, however, have relatively large black populations yet evince low levels of multiracial reporting nevertheless. In these southern states, the strong traditional dividing line between
blacks and whites appears to constrain multiracial identification, leading persons to identify monoracially as either white or black rather than adopting a multiracial identity (Bean & Stevens 2003, Davis 1991, Farley 2001, Harris & Sim 2002).

These patterns suggest that multiracial reporting is more likely in areas with greater levels of racial/ethnic diversity, which in turn have largely been brought about by the post-1965 wave of immigrants, particularly Latinos and Asians. This possibility is consistent with much prior work in sociology. By racial/ethnic diversity we mean both the presence of multiple racial/ethnic groups and the relative absence of statistical predominance on the part of any single group. Thus, the more a single racial/ethnic group makes up all the population of some social, political, economic, or geographic group or area, the less the diversity; conversely, the greater the number of groups and the more equally they are distributed within an area, the greater the diversity. Basically, as used here for racial/ethnic groups, diversity is equivalent to the idea of heterogeneity as often more broadly invoked in sociology (e.g., Blau 1977, Blau & Schwartz 1984, Laumann 1973). If all else is equal, we expect greater diversity to lead to increased multiracial reporting because increased diversity (or heterogeneity, more broadly) tends to promote more frequent intergroup associations and greater tolerance, results often noted and found in the sociological literature (Allport 1954, Blalock 1967, Blau 1977, Massey et al. 1999). In fact, it is precisely the lack of racial/ethnic tolerance in the deep South that has tended to constrain the reporting of multiracial mixing, as noted above. In general, we expect increased tolerance and flexibility to generate increased multiracial reporting. Immigration increases the likelihood of multiracial identification because the diversity it fosters leads to the loosening of racial/ethnic boundaries, and consequently allows more flexibility in the identity options for multiracial persons.

The geography of multiracial reporting clearly indicates that the rate varies widely across the country, with the highest levels in states that exhibit the greatest racial/ethnic diversity brought about by the arrival of new immigrants to these areas. Hence, although national patterns in interracial marriage and multiracial identification indicate a loosening of racial boundaries, particularly for Latinos and Asians, these shifts appear to be taking place more rapidly in certain parts of the country. Areas of the country that have lower levels of immigration, and consequently less racial/ethnic diversity, exhibit a more tenacious hold on the black/white divide.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR AMERICA’S CHANGING COLOR LINES**

What do current trends and patterns in immigration, intermarriage, and multiracial identification indicate about America’s changing color lines? Increases in intermarriage and the growth of the multiracial population reflect a blending of races and the fading of color lines. Because interracial marriage and multiracial
identification indicate a reduction in social distance and racial prejudice, these patterns appear to offer an optimistic portrait of weakening racial boundaries. For instance, interracial marriage was illegal in sixteen states as recently as 1967, but today about 13% of American marriages involve persons of different races. Even more starkly, at the end of the nineteenth century, the rates of intermarriage among Asians and Latinos in this country were close to zero, but today more than a quarter of all native-born Asians and Latinos marry someone of a different racial background, usually white (Alba 1999, Foner 2000). These figures are even higher among younger Asians and Latinos and are likely to increase in future generations.

The rise in interracial marriage has led to a visible and growing multiracial population that could easily account for one-fifth of the nation’s population by the year 2050. Nowhere are these changes more apparent than in the West, where 40% of the multiracially identified population resides, and most prominently in California—the state that leads the country with the highest level of multiracial reporting and the only state with a multiracial population exceeding one million. Multiracial individuals account for 4.7% of California’s population, or 1 in every 21 Californians, compared with 1 in every 40 for the country as a whole. And for Californians under the age of 18, 1 out of every 14, or 7.3%, reports a multiracial identification. Again at first glance, these statistics appear to indicate that boundary crossing is becoming more common and that racial divides are fading for all groups.

However, upon closer scrutiny, we find two general patterns: First, intermarriage and multiracial identification is fairly high for Asians and Latinos (especially among the younger cohort), and second, it is far less common for blacks.

Before one can assess the implications of these patterns for America’s color lines, it is crucial to determine how one interprets the findings on intermarriage and multiracial identification for Latinos and Asians. For instance, if one adopts a perspective that Latinos and Asians are racialized minorities (that is, as persons whose race or ethnicity constitutes a basis for substantial discrimination), and thus persons falling closer to blacks than whites along some scale of social disadvantage, then the high levels of interracial marriage and multiracial identification occurring in these groups suggest that boundaries are not only fading for these groups, but also for all nonwhites, including blacks. Such a conclusion would support the sanguine view that the old black/white divide is breaking down and that racial prejudice and boundaries are fading for all groups. However, this interpretation may attribute signs of incorporation to all nonwhites that are in fact more the province of Latinos and Asians than blacks, thus risking overly optimistic conclusions about the breadth of boundary dissolution.

If, on the other hand, Latinos and Asians more represent new immigrant groups, whose members’ disadvantage derives from not yet having had time to join the economic and social mainstream, but many of whom soon will, then their high levels of intermarriage and multiracial reporting signal that their experience may be different from that of blacks altogether. Such a conclusion would support a more pessimistic view that the experiences and situations of Latinos and Asians do not necessarily imply that similar improvements can be expected among blacks.
Thus, what may at first glance appear to suggest a dissolution of color lines for all racial/ethnic groups may simply be a loosening of boundaries for new immigrant groups who are simply undergoing the transitional phases of immigrant incorporation. This distinction is critical, and helps us to differentiate whether color lines are shifting for all racial/ethnic minorities, or whether they are changing mainly to accommodate new nonblack immigrant groups.

Based on the review of the research literature, it is evident that the different rates of Asian, Latino, and black intermarriage and multiracial reporting suggest that although racial boundaries may be fading, they are not eroding at the same pace for all groups. Given the divergent patterns, the color line is apparently less rigid for newer immigrant groups such as Latinos and Asians. And while the color line may be shifting for blacks, this shift is occurring far more slowly, consequently placing Asians and Latinos closer to whites than blacks are to whites, and demonstrating the tenacity of the black/white divide. In essence, although boundary crossing may be rising, and the color line fading, a shift has yet to occur toward a pattern of unconditional boundary crossing or a declining significance of race for all groups.

Where do Asians and Latinos fit in this divide? The arrival of America’s newcomers points to the need to reconsider the relevance of the black/white divide in a nation that is no longer simply black and white. At this time, America’s shift in color lines points to the emergence of a new split that replaces the old black/white divide and one that separates blacks from nonblacks, or what sociologists refer to as a black/nonblack divide (Bean & Stevens 2003, Gans 1999, Lee & Bean 2003, Waters 1999). In a black/nonblack divide, Latinos and Asians fall into the nonblack category. The emergence of a black/nonblack divide is even evident in areas with high concentrations of immigrants, high levels of racial/ethnic diversity, and high levels of multiracial reporting, although not to as strong a degree.

The birth of a black/nonblack divide could be a disastrous outcome for many African Americans. Once again, they would find that newer nonwhite immigrant groups are able to jump ahead of them in a hierarchy in which many blacks, or at least those with less than a college degree, find themselves continuing to incur extreme disadvantage for structural reasons. Based on patterns of immigration, intermarriage, and racial/multiracial identification, however, Latinos and Asians may enjoy the option to view themselves as almost white or even white, and consequently, participate in a new color line that is still somewhat exclusionary of blacks. Hence, America’s changing color lines could involve a new racial/ethnic divide that may consign many blacks to disadvantaged positions qualitatively similar to those perpetuated by the traditional black/white divide. If much of America’s racial history to date has revolved around who was white and who was not, it is important to strive to ensure that the next phase in this story does not revolve around the issue of who is black and who is not. Although rising rates of intermarriage and patterns of multiracial identification indicate that boundaries are breaking down, the fact that boundary dissolution is neither uniform nor unconditional indicates little basis for complacency about the degree to which opportunities are improving for all racial/ethnic groups in America.
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