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Intimacy, Desire, and the Construction of Self in Relationships between Asian American Women and White American Men

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INTRODUCTION

This study examines interracial relationships between Asian Americans and white Americans. The goal is to understand how the social construction of sexual desire is shaped by race and gender. […]

Several previous studies have found that Asian American women are almost twice as likely to outmarry as are Asian American men.¹ This gender gap is unique to Asian Americans’ intermarital pattern, since in other racial groups men outmarry more than women.² […]

FINDINGS

I found that the formation of relationships between Asian American women and white American men relies on a range of desires among Asian American women for four aspects of white hegemonic masculinity: narcissistic gaze; middle-class status; material security; and egalitarian knighthood. While similar desires and attractions for white hegemonic masculinity were expressed by other Asian American women whom I interviewed, the following four cases vividly illustrate the complex relationship between power and sexual desires as experienced by Asian American women. The story of “Grace,” an unmarried, second-generation Chinese American woman, illustrates how her choice of a white man stems from her aversion to ethnic patriarchy and desire for an egalitarian relationship, common feelings among the second-generation Asian American women whom I interviewed. The story of Irene, also an unmarried, second-generation Chinese American woman, addresses racialized alienation as it is linked to the narcissistic male gaze and to commodified images of Asian women, a theme that emerged in interviews with other women as well. The stories of two married, first-generation Filipina American women, here called Angelina and Linda, illustrate the importance of financial resources and socioeconomic status in structuring desire for white men. Angelina’s story represents the desire for middle-class status, while Linda’s story evinces a pronounced desire for material security. Angelina’s and Linda’s stories demonstrate
how their desire for upward mobility is related to their reaction to U.S. military dominance and globalization in the Philippines. They are striking examples of how Asian American women’s personal relationship choices are bound up with the social and economic conditions that shape their lives.

NARCISSISTIC GAZE AND DESIRE IN WHITE AMERICAN MASCULINITY

When white men fetishize “Asian” women as their love objects, their objectification of the race and culture of the “other” can cause a sense of emotional tension and racial alienation for Asian American women. Some of these women strongly resist this fetishization, while others try to compromise with it. Women who find themselves in such self-alienating experiences sometimes react with a form of denial, blaming themselves for overreacting rather than expressing their discomfort or resentment toward their white partners. Some of the women whom I interviewed felt that the notion of “Asian woman” was imposed upon them by white men, and some had experienced an explicitly sexualized gaze on their body as “Asian.” One woman described her experience in Brooklyn, New York, saying, “Being Asian there [in New York] is very hot right now. Guys really like it. There’s a porn industry for that, too. Like escort services and stuff like that. So, you get a lot of whistling and catcalls.”

The following story illustrates the reaction of a Chinese American woman to her white boyfriend’s preference for and fetishization of Asian women. Irene Huan, a 25-year-old Chinese American and a film major, was born and grew up in the United States. Her parents divorced when she was sixteen. Irene explained why her mother, isolated from the Chinese community and having blamed herself for being a bad wife, went back to Taiwan: “A lot of times, in the Asian family, when there is a divorce, they kind of blame the woman. You know, she isn’t a good enough wife. She should’ve kept the family together, that sort of thing. . . . I think she wanted to get away from that.” Irene used to go to Taiwan to see her mother once a year, but now she only talks with her by phone once a month. She described herself as “not very close to my family.”

Irene’s father, an engineer in the computer industry whom she described as “very unconventional and very liberal,” had lived with a white woman for several years at the time of Irene’s interview. Irene’s father once told her not to date or marry Asian American men, and he himself dates only white women: “I remember him telling me, ‘I never want you to ever marry an Asian guy.’ And, I was like, ‘Why?’ He goes, ‘Well, I know how they are, and I don’t want you to marry an Asian.’” Irene speculated that her father was “rebelling against Chinese culture,” since he had never gotten along with his traditional family in Taiwan.

Irene always had felt foreign and missed a sense of racial and cultural belonging. She said, “When I go back to Taiwan, I don’t really feel like I fit in there. But when I’m here, I don’t feel like I’m fitting in here. . . . I’m not one hundred percent. . . . I’m American but. . . . I was born here, but I’m still a minority.” Irene felt that she was always a foreigner and that she would never be the same as white people in this country. She remembered how the families of her past boyfriends would react to her:

They always treat you the same way. They treat you as someone Asian first before they treat you as American. I remember so many times going to my boyfriends’ houses for Thanksgiving. You know, my ex-boyfriend’s mother has a place setting for everyone; in my place, there were chopsticks. I felt uncomfortable with that. Of course, they always ask you questions like—you know, my name is Irene—’How do you get that name? It’s just unusual for a Chinese girl to have that name, you know. How long have you been in the States?’ Stuff like that. You have to react politely.”
Irene’s sense of not belonging and of being foreign led her to date both white men and Asian American men, despite her father’s advice. Irene said that she had tried to find the most comfortable place and person with whom to be: “There was a while when I wanted to marry someone Asian if I was going to get married. I think, growing up in America as an Asian person, every Asian kind of goes through that phase.” She also had found among young generations of Asians a strong racial animosity that she had never before encountered, to which she alluded in speaking of her ex-boyfriend:

He was the kind of person, he is like, ‘I just don’t like white people.’ He didn’t like to talk to white people. He’s kind of very closed-minded about that. So, he knew he wanted to date, he wanted to marry, an Asian woman. I think he’s kind of a traditional Asian guy.²⁰

Rather than viewing this racial hostility as historical or social, Irene saw it as simple closed-mindedness. She also interpreted Asian American men’s racial tension toward white men as a “traditional” defensiveness of Asian American masculinity. After a year of dating him, Irene was still hesitant to call him a boyfriend: “I never considered him really as my boyfriend. I knew that he wasn’t the one for me.”

Irene met her boyfriend, Brian Thompson, a 26-year-old law school student, at a club: “I remember the first thing he said was, like, he asked about my tattoo, and he thought it was Kanji. It’s just insects. But from far away, it looks like a Chinese character.”¹⁰ Brian had asked Irene if it was a Chinese character and had told her that he was considering getting a tattoo on his back that said, “Shiao-Guei,” little ghost. “In Chinese, we call white people ghosts because they are white,” laughed Irene. Shiao-Guei was the nickname that Brian’s Chinese ex-girlfriend had given him. Irene had reacted strongly and turned him down at first when he asked for her phone number. She initially thought, “Oh, no, he likes Asian girls. I didn’t like dating guys like that. No, not at all. Growing up Asian, you inevitably meet guys like, ‘Oh, I love Asian culture’... I hate that.” From a very young age, Irene had been aware that the white men around her exoticized and sexualized Asian and Asian American women just because they were Asian. Until she began dating Brian, she had avoided going out with those white men who simply fetishized her Asian-ness. Irene emphasized, “I had made this conscious decision not to date a guy that was interested in Asian women.”

Eventually, Irene called Brian, and they had been in a relationship for three months at the time of the interview. “He is very smart. I like intelligent people,” Irene said. On the other hand, Irene still was trying to make sense of the fact that Brian had dated only Asian girls and was primarily attracted to Asians. Irene speculated that he liked the physical appearance of Asian and Asian American women and not necessarily Asian cultures or languages: “That’s what his idea of beauty is. So, that’s acceptable. I mean it is. He finds a certain type of person attractive... There’s nothing you can do about it logically.”¹¹

However, Irene suspected that Brian liked all Asian girls:

That’s another one of the weird suspicions when you date a guy that likes Asian girls a lot because you think he is indiscriminate about it. And, he’s always making these comments. There would be some girls at a club. He would be like, ‘Oh, she is really cute,’ some Asian girl. She is totally not attractive. I would be like, ‘Okay, you know... she is cute because she is Asian.’²²

Brian had many female Asian friends and knew a lot about Chinese, Korean, and Japanese cultures, in part because those were the cultures of his former girlfriends. When Brian proudly expressed his knowledge of Asian cultures, Irene felt ambivalent about his attraction to her. She said, “Sometimes
I ask myself if it is because I’m Asian that he’s attracted to me because I know that initially, of course, that’s what it was. But sometimes, I kind of ask myself, like, if that is the only reason why. I know it is not. But in the back of your head...”

Irene noticed how white men lump “Asian” cultures and people together as one, and how they are sometimes oblivious to her Chinese origin. Every time Brian pointed out certain Asian characters in a movie or talked excitedly about a Japanese film he had seen, Irene remembered a man she had dated several years before who always told her how fascinated he was by Japanese culture and girls. “Chinese culture and Japanese culture are different,” said Irene. “People basically think all the groups are similar, and they all think the same way.” Irene questioned whether Brian cared about what she thought when he said, “We should really go and see this Japanese film.” She sighed, “I was sort of like, ‘Okay, but not because it’s my culture, and I need to see it, because it’s not my culture.’”

Irene felt that she was “othered” and “exoticized” as an Asian woman in her relationship with Brian. Irene, having failed in an effort to erase her foreign-ness in a relationship with an Asian man, went on to struggle with her sense of “other-ness” and “foreign-ness” in her relationship with a white man. She complained about the difficulty of “being made to feel that you are different.”

This difference, she meant, stemmed from Brian’s constant re-imposition of “foreign-ness,” or “Asian-ness,” on her.

Women like Irene seem to serve as pleasurable objects, similar to the characters in Asian stories and films, for men like Brian, who exoticize and are fascinated by Asian media and culture. Irene, in her interaction with Brian, felt pressured to be exotic and different as an Asian woman. She said that she felt that men like Brian want a girlfriend who is different, that this is what attracts them. She characterized Brian as not wanting “just a white girl,” and yet she felt she wanted to be just a regular person in a relationship.

[...]
Angelina’s mother had worked at an American military base as a waitress “all day and night,” and Angelina had grown up mainly with her grandparents.

Angelina had started working as a waitress at the military base in the Philippines at the age of 16, to help her mother. Soon after, her mother had told her that she would be leaving Angelina and the family again. This time, she was moving to the United States because she had married an American serviceman, who then also had started abusing her after marriage. Angelina had moved to Mississippi, where her mother and her American stepfather lived, to study as a college student. At the age of 21, she had met Thomas, a serviceman at the military base there, in one of the classes that she was taking, and they had married two years later.

Angelina’s willingness to take on the traditional feminine role complemented Thomas, who believed in playing the traditional male role and in keeping Angelina as a mother and a wife. Thomas said, “...as a white guy, my culture would have me keep my wife at home. ... It’s recommended that the woman stays home and raises the kids.” Thomas viewed traditional gender roles as racialized status and said, somewhat defensively, “We are supposed to be the dominant male, protecting women and providing for the family. If we are equal partners, then what are we?”

In her individual interview, Angelina said that she had chosen to marry Thomas because she thought the marriage would provide financial and emotional security: “I think I did that for security reasons, to be honest. Because I felt like this person really cares for me. I really enjoyed being with him, and he wants to marry me. Should I turn down or should I look for further opportunity?” Angelina confessed that she saw marriage as a material and psychological opportunity: “He’s like an investment. I was like, you buy this mutual fund in the beginning, and it gets bigger and bigger, and at the end, you know, you got all of this and you get to enjoy it.”

For Angelina, marrying a white American had meant marrying into American society and transforming herself into an American. She said that she already had decided to “be an American” by the age of 10, when she first saw the high standard of living on the U.S. military base in the Philippines. After that, images from the media filled her with prosperous visions of “being an American,” as she explained in her individual interview:

If you marry American, you get to go to America. You enjoy your life. America is great. So, I get this American mentality all of the sudden. I’m nothing in this country. My goal is to go to America. And, I didn’t want to have Filipino boyfriend. I didn’t care for them... because if I married them, I didn’t get to go to America... My first boyfriend was American... I never dated Filipino, never. ... I like tall men. I like speaking English.

Angelina’s sexual desire was subsumed by her desire to gain power via the racial, gender, and class privileges of white middle-class America. In her imagination, marrying an American was an opportunity not only to go to America but also to “be” an American who enjoyed a prosperous lifestyle and spoke English. A Filipino man, as a marital partner, was coded as inferior and lacking in resources. Angelina continued, “I guess, to me, the white American was the highest standard, and I chose somebody who’s higher standard. I’m sorry; it’s a shame, but that’s how I thought. That’s how I was formed.” Her desire to gain the same resources as white middle-class Americans was to be realized, for her, through heterosexual romantic love with a white man: “I like tall guys and I like the American standards, the way the white people live. I could show them what a good woman I can be for them. I like to serve that person.” The American standard was naturally assumed to be a white standard, possibly that of the middle class, and tall guys were regarded as the normative masculine figure, which Asian American men did not embody.

[...]
This desire to gain a higher, assimilated status through the relationship was not unique to Angelina, or even to first-generation Asian American women. The second-generation Korean American women whom I interviewed also spoke of similar desire. One 20-year-old Korean American student said her desire to assimilate and her lack of confidence as a racial minority had driven her to find an upper-class white boyfriend whom she described as “so white,” “popular,” and a “typical suburban kid.”

Stoler, citing Fanon, writes that in colonialism the man “uses sex as a vehicle to master a practical world.” Marrying the colonizer gives the colonized access to privileged schooling, well-paying jobs, and certain residential quarters. Fanon’s insight on colonial desire, that “to marry white culture” is “to grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine,” well explains Angelina’s imaginary transformation towards the “highest standard” of marrying the powerful other. Feminist psychoanalysis argues that women’s alienated desire takes the form of submission to and envy of men. Women often seek to fulfill their desire by identifying with the ideal lover’s power. Benjamin perceives women’s submission to and sacrifice for male heroes as the quest for paternal recognition and glory, which she argues is the necessary effect of society’s privileging of masculinity. Angelina desired to gain approval by “serving” a white man, and stated, “My purpose in coming to this world is to marry someone who is white.”

But, we also must look at Angelina’s desire for a white American man in the context of her history in the Philippines. Engaging as a good mother and wife in the middle-class white family represented Angelina’s resistance to and will to overturn what she and her mother had endured: poverty, abuse, abandonment, and excessive labor. Motherhood for Angelina, as for many of the first-generation Asian American women whom I interviewed, was the space of resistance against the gender and economic inequality that she and her mother had experienced in the Philippines. Her desires were deeply racialized in the sense that she regarded whiteness as a significant marker of ascension and privileges, a measure by which she had found herself lacking. White masculinity and Asian American femininity, in Angelina and Thomas’s relationship, conformed to the ideal of white middle-class ideology and family values. The majority of the first-generation Asian American women whom I interviewed similarly engaged with their white male partners in traditional, racialized gender roles.

DESIRE FOR WHITE MASCULINITY AS MATERIAL SECURITY

For Asian women who enter into marriage as “mail-order brides,” sexual desire takes the form of desire for a white man, who will embody the social, cultural, and economic privileges that enable one to attain one’s future potential and ideal-self. For these women, global inequality becomes another factor, along with traditional gender roles and racial stereotypes, that influences their choice of marriage. The story of one Filipina American woman’s deliberate choice of marriage as a mail-order bride illustrates the complex interworkings of these economic, social, and cultural factors on a global scale.

Linda Miller, a petite, 34-year-old Filipina American woman with straight black hair and round brown eyes, informed me in a quiet but serious tone that her husband was not interested in participating in this interview. She had been married to her husband, Jack, a 41-year-old computer engineer, for ten years at the time of our interview, and the couple had two children whom Linda described as “white.” Linda had first contacted Jack through what she called a “pen-pal relationship,” while she was working in Hong Kong as a domestic worker. In the living room of the couple’s apartment, Jack was working intensely on his laptop. He glanced at me without
stopping his fingers and said, "Hi," very curtly. We decided to go to the children's bedroom for the interview.

Linda had started working as a maid for an American serviceman's family when she was 12 years old. Her father had worked at an American military base as a maintenance man, and her family had run a small store. She always had given half of her income to her family. As with most people in the Philippines, work had been a part of her life since she was a child. Linda said, "We just work because work is there." At twenty-one, Linda had discovered few choices available to her. She faced either going to Hong Kong to work as a domestic worker or going to Japan to work as a waitress or a singer. She had chosen to go to Hong Kong. "All I did was just to clean the house and cook," said Linda. At that time, she had been earning the equivalent of 250 U.S. dollars a month. The family for whom she had worked owned a small house, but they did not give her a private room and fired her when she expressed her displeasure: "I said, 'I need space even though I am a domestic.' But in Hong Kong, you don't have that choice unless your employer is really rich."  

At that time, her Filipino friends had been circulating lists of American men who were looking for Filipina brides. Linda had chosen her current husband because he was the youngest of all the Americans on the list, which included men in their sixties and seventies. She had gone back to the Philippines, and her husband had come over to meet her and marry her. Although Linda had not experienced any romantic feelings toward him, she nonetheless accepted his offer of marriage, which had taken place four days after his arrival in the Philippines. "He was a quiet, simple person. That's it. I can't think of any other words . . . but I thought he was okay, a macho man, a big guy," Linda replied without any smile. Asked about any concerns she might have had about marriage, Linda expressed a combination of disassociation and irritation. Her attitude toward her husband was distant and mechanical. "It's just, this is my man. I am going to be with him. . . . I didn't feel anything about him," Linda said, "Not excitement. Not fear."

[...]

For legal reasons, it had taken Linda about two years before she could start her new life in America. During the two years of waiting for legal permission to immigrate, her husband, Jack, supported her financially by giving her a credit card as well as supplying enough cash so that she did not have to work. "When he came to the Philippines, he told me I didn't have to go back to Hong Kong," said Linda. Once Linda and Jack were together in the United States, Jack continued to send $150 a month to her family in the Philippines. She sighed, "That's not enough for them. It's not enough to support them. . . . It's still a poor economy." Linda appreciated her husband's financial support of her and her family, but her words could not conceal the emotional distance underneath, especially when she talked about Jack showing no interest in her family and culture:

He doesn't ask how my brothers and sisters are doing. I'm getting used to it. It doesn't matter any more. I don't care. . . . I talk to his family. But, he doesn't talk to my family. I just accept it. I can't do anything. You are not expecting him to talk more or be happy about what he hears from you. I wish he were. I wish he could commit more to my family and my background. Yeah . . . it bothers me. But, I can't make him do that.  

Her husband apparently expected her to serve him in the traditional sense as a docile, good wife in exchange for financial security. Describing her marriage and housework, Linda repeated many times in the interview, "I expected more," and, "You just have to live with it, just do it." Linda said she cooked every day but had never heard him say anything about her cooking: "He doesn't show any,
you cannot hear any, you just cook and put them on the table. He puts them in the sink. It's like your kid. You don't want to wait for a kid to say, 'Thank you.' " Linda barely finished her sentence and seemed about to cry. She did not move or speak for a while.

[...]

Having resisted her material deprivation in the Philippines and Hong Kong, Linda finally acquired upward mobility by crossing the border to the United States. However, she had little power to transform her husband's perceptions or the dynamics of the marital relationship. Linda's hope, and strategy of resistance, was to live one day with her parents, who had been waiting in the Philippines for ten years for legal permission to immigrate to the United States: "Here in the U.S., when they get old, you just throw your parents into the nursing home. But me, my kids, we don't do that. You take care of your parents when they get old." Being an assimilated middle-class American appealed much less to Linda than it did to Angelina. The main desire driving Linda's decision was the desire for material security.

DESIRE FOR WHITE MASCULINITY AS EQUITARIAN KNIGHTHOOD

Common among many of the Asian American women whom I interviewed was an aversion toward Asian and American men, due to their small physical size and attitude of ethnic patriarchy. For these Asian American women, the white man's body, in contrast to the Asian body, symbolized not only physical strength but also Western civility and the ideal of gender equality—"white knighthood." The following story illustrates one Chinese American woman's desire for an egalitarian white knight, with whom she could resist ethnic patriarchy and realize ideal independent womanhood.

Grace Wong, a 24-year-old computer engineer, welcomed me into the brand-new condominium she had recently purchased. Grace had been born in Taiwan but had come to the U.S. soon afterward. When her family first moved to the U.S., they had suffered a hard time economically. Her father had helped his family's business for a while, then had been "a day trader" and "lived by stocks." Grace's mother had worked at a jewelry store full-time since they arrived in the United States. Grace, after a moment's pause, started to talk about her mother in a bitter tone. "I think the reason why my sisters and I, we date outside of our race, is because my mother herself is pretty unhappy with her marriage." Grace's mother had worked all her life and taken care of the children. Grace described her father as "very quiet and withdrawn." She went on to say, "He thinks that our personal lives are my mom's responsibility." He "controls the money my mother makes," does not allow her mother to spend money, and "bullies her around." Grace resented the fact that her father neglected her mother and controlled all the family members: "He never gave her anything as a present, not for her birthday and not for Christmas, nothing . . . I hate my dad." Grace's father went out with his friends, often until past midnight. If these were the standard Chinese cultural privileges of men, her mother's "privilege" was being alone all the time.

[...]

For Grace, her father's negative characteristics and her mother's anger were easily transferred onto the gender characteristics of the Asian American men around her. Grace remembered what her mother used to say to her: "Once in a while, she would say, like, American guys are, they are just a lot more polite, and they are so much nicer. They treat women so much more fairly." The unfulfilled desire of Grace's mother was thus transferred onto Grace, and she unconsciously retained her mother's anger and directed it towards Asian men in general.

This intergenerational transference became a gender strategy through which to resist Asian male
dominance. Grace armed herself with a higher racial and gender power: white masculinity. Race was the significant weapon by which she could attack the male dominance that haunted her. Kelsky, in her ethnographic studies of Japanese women, has demonstrated that it is not only Western Orientalist discourse that creates fetishized stereotypes of Asian women, but also Japanese women themselves. Kelsky has observed that these women appropriate such racialized images “for an act of revenge against the patriarchal Japanese nation-state,” even though this appropriation might arguably perpetuate “self-colonization” and feed the value of white supremacy.

Grace perceived Asian American men as being incapable of dealing with her independence and assertiveness. As she put it, “I feel Asian guys are intimidated by me. So, they would never approach me.” Grace understood Asian American men to date only quiet and submissive Asian American women. She thus effeminized both Asian American men and Asian American women, while presenting herself as clearly different from the feminine stereotype. She was not alone in this view; another Chinese American woman whom I interviewed said she had never dated Asian or Asian American men because “Asian guys like quiet girls” and would not like a woman like her, who is “so vocal, talkative, and kind of opinionated.”

Grace’s rejection of Asian American men represented a combination of her aversion to repeating her parents’ unequal relationship and her desire to identify with the image of independent womanhood, an image that she felt Asian American men could not accept. Grace saw her mother as a powerless feminine figure and avoided identifying with her powerlessness by rejecting Asian American women in general as “quiet” and “submissive.” Grace’s contemptuous view of Asian American women as submissive and dainty, shared by other Asian American women whom I interviewed, thus reinforced mainstream stereotypes. Similarly, Asian American women’s aversion to Asian American men, even though it appears to have originated in a resistance to Chinese patriarchy, was complicit with Western stereotypes of Asian American men.

DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

Social institutions and cultural discourses have perpetuated and legitimized white male authority and privileges, even in the fields of desire and imagination. As Moore comments, “It is not that the material world, as a form of cultural discourse, reflects the natural division of the world into women and men, but rather that cultural discourses, including the organization of the material world, actually produce gender difference in and through their workings.”

Intimacy is a major technology of modernity for achieving self-realization and forming identity. The Asian American women whom I interviewed understood intimacy as a “potential avenue for controlling the future as well as a form of psychological security,” and strategically deployed their desires toward white men. The feminine strategy of the two Filipina American women whose stories I examine in this paper has strong links to the economic deprivation in their country of origin as well as to the Philippines’ neo-colonial/colonial relationship to the United States. Angelina’s childhood dream of being an American and attaining middle-class prosperity was realized in her marriage to an American serviceman. Linda’s husband, through a U.S. bride importation service, appeared as a savior figure who took her from Asia, where she was a domestic worker, to the United States. Linda’s relationship with her husband reflected the neo-colonial structure of the relationship of the United States to third-world Asian countries, in which “women with dependent immigration status are often more economically, psychologically and linguistically dependent on their spouse.”
It is critical to note that Angelina’s and Linda’s gender strategy was a strategy of survival, and of escape from economic deprivation and ethnic patriarchy in their home country. Furthermore, their desire for white men corresponded to their desire for status as an ideal white American citizen, who possesses access to the global and local privileges in a place where whites constitute “a ‘nation’ with whiteness,”43 and where non-European immigrants “encounter the challenges of being treated as second-class citizens” and “can at best become ‘honorary whites.’”44[,] In my interviews, the majority of the first-generation married Asian American women engaged in traditional gender roles, while the second-generation non-married Asian American women tended to express their aversion to submissive images of Asian women and their desire to have relationships based on gender equality.

[...] In all four cases, Asian American women’s sexual desire for white men is grounded in their aspiration for upward mobility and discovery of true-self. The feminine positions in which Asian American women engage are highly regulated by the local and global discourses of romantic love, and by neo-colonial hierarchies of race. I emphasize again here, however, that what has led these women to engage in feminine subjugation is not their subservient nature in a stereotypical sense, but rather the culturally embedded imaginary discourses that promise their upward mobility and realization of self.

The four desires for white masculinity that I discuss through the stories of Angelina, Linda, Irene, and Grace reflect common perceptions of and subordination to whiteness among the Asian American women whom I interviewed. Irene’s story illustrates the racial and gendered tension deriving from white men’s fetishization of Asian women. Many Asian American women silently negotiate with racialized images of themselves in their daily lives and intimate relationships. In my interviews, those who explicitly addressed or were aware of the damaging consequences of commodified and objectifying images of Asian and Asian American women usually had high familiarity with American culture due to their native-born or high socioeconomic status. Yet, as in Irene’s case, they seemed to be torn between their resistance to these images and their reluctance to acknowledge them in their own relationships. Grace’s case shows us how Asian American women’s preference of white men, while deriving from an aversion to ethnic patriarchy and submissive images of Asian women, ironically may reinforce negative images of Asians and Asian Americans.46 Projecting visions of equality onto white men is common among both first- and second-generation Asian American women. Six of the ten Asian American women with whom I conducted interviews saw part of a couple stated such a belief directly or indirectly. For many of them, a desire for white male egalitarian knighthood corresponded to the belief that egalitarian relationships were not possible with Asian American men.

The desire for white masculinity as a gateway to middle-class American status and for white masculinity as material security, as represented by Angelina’s and Linda’s stories, are deeply mediated by economic and immigration status. Choices of white men for their socioeconomic and cultural privileges derive from women’s strategic resistance to powerless positions, but such choices also inevitably increase Asian American women’s vulnerability to white power over them.

The combination of cultural stereotypes of Asian and Asian American women and the actual desires that Asian American women have for white hegemonic masculinity has created a “mutual attraction”47 between Asian American women and white men. This attraction, grounded as it is in profound inequalities and controlling images, also “promotes Asian American women’s availability
to white men and makes them particularly vulnerable to mistreatment." Much discussion in academic and popular culture in the United States has addressed the nature of white men's attraction to Asian and Asian American women. In contrast, the four kinds of desire I discuss here are ways to understand the attraction of Asian American women to white men. This discussion begins to reveal the complexity and paradox of the racial and gender inequalities that emerge within intimate relationships.

[...]

Regarding the question of whether Asian American women's feminine strategy can be one of self-liberation or is mere complicity with the dominant ideology, I do not reduce my findings to a dichotomized discourse of either liberation or self-colonization. Rather, the importance of this work lies in showing how, contrary to popular utopian celebration of mixed-race marriage as a sign of multiracialization, interracial intimacy is still regulated by racial, gender, class, and national hierarchies.

NOTES


4. Irene Huan, individual interview by author, Austin, Texas, December 8, 2000.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
17. Thomas Brown, individual interview by author, Austin, Texas, October 22, 2000.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
27. Fanon, Black Skin; Stoler, Race.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.