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introduction

The Strange Case of the College Impostor

By all appearances, Azia Kim was a Stanford freshman: living in the dorms, laboring over papers in the library, complaining about midterms on her social media account. It was nine months before the administration and her classmates caught on: Though she fit unremarkably among them, Azia had never been admitted.

For Jennifer Pan, retaking the single calculus class she had narrowly failed would have meant telling her parents that she did not have her high school diploma and had lost her early admission to college. She chose instead to pretend: to four years of undergrad and then the approved pharmacology school. Finally exposed, she hired hitmen to have her parents killed.

I've hesitated to tell people my book is about college impostors, unless I have the time to back up and explain that, yes, there is such a class of persons. In fact, there are several classes of such persons, and I am focusing on just one. The impostors that interest me may not have been admitted to their predetermined colleges, or maybe they flunked out; either way, they respond by staying the

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course, walking out onto thin air as if the ground had not dropped away beneath them. Above are the most famous cases in that set, but there are innumerable unsung ones. The phenomenon is literally uncountable because, like racial passing, college impostoring is by definition done in secret.¹ Those who do it have few (if any) confidants; those who are exposed rarely make the news. Yet, often enough that I half-expect it now, once I get the definition across, a listener will pipe up, “I know someone like that!” Some will even confess to it themselves, in confidence.² So far, they have all been Asian American, these masquerading friends of friends: sons and daughters of immigrants, passing for perfect. This book is the first to give the phenomenon a name and a classification system—but expect no epidemiological review of incidence, distribution, and determinants here. What I have for you today will not tell you about the strength of trends and makes no predictions. That not being my background, this is not that kind of study. What I *will* do is ask the puzzling questions and do my best Sherlock to answer them: Why would someone make such an illogical choice? How do they stage these lies so convincingly, for so long? And, hey, Asian Americans, what’s so hard about being model minority, anyway?

this is a prequel.

Passing for Perfect is a do-over, of sorts. In writing my first book, *Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature*, what mattered to me was to explain with utmost precision how it is that Asian immigrant families bent on raising only shiny, high-income professionals may render their children great harm—and to explain it in words that my own immigrant parents would not understand. Like secret code, academese let me smuggle out what needed to be said, without detection. This plan worked pretty well, for the most part: I have never had to talk about *Ingratitude* with relatives, while strangers with the necessary motivation to read it (term paper deadlines, say) have often found their own truths in its pages. That is to say, it’s the kind

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of urgent message one prisoner slips to another: *Live, friend! I've found a way out.* But that book being literary criticism, most who could use it would never suspect it was meant for them. Year after year, in courses like Asian American mental health or Vietnamese American experience, my students tell their stories by opening, unbidden, with remorse—remorse for never measuring up, for not redeeming sacrifices, for owing more than their lives can repay—because no one has shown them how rigged these covenants are. Yet, I've hesitated to recommend *Ingratitude* even to them: "I think you need my book," I'd have to say, "Decoder ring not included." The need I see being no less dire, this is take two, and this time, no deliberate barriers to entry.

This is a book for the desperate and for those who love them. It is for those of us who look at figures like Azia, or even Jennifer, and see something of ourselves. At the same time, it's an academic monograph, which means it takes part in an intricate conversation among scholars about its subject. I draw on concepts and arguments developed by researchers in the social sciences as well as humanities—whatever's relevant and useful, or relevant and flawed, because the idea is to build on what we know collectively and to improve it. Reaching people and creating knowledge are equally modes of fighting the good fight, and here I hope to do both at one and the same time, by telling a story worth hearing to the end. The subjects featured in this book might not have wanted their histories rehashed, it's true. But I hope they will ultimately prefer the respect of an attentive telling, and the humanity of a careful listening, over having been jeered and then forgotten.

I call this book a prequel, though, because staking its arguments on the lives of actual people does make it circumspect. Working with the published (i.e., voluntarily public) word, a literary critic can level a character, remake a world, so long as her analysis stands. In *Ingratitude*, I am relentless. *Passing for Perfect* delivers its truths but cushions its blows, so if you must see blood and bone to know your gods demolished, then maybe you will need to read the other book, too.

decoder ring

What if what seem to be outlandish and outlier behaviors are instead depressingly Asian American? This book considers life at the intersection of some demanding social, familial, and educational realities—among them, neoliberal abandonment of the middle class, “Tiger” and “helicopter” parenting, and increasingly racialized and intensified competition for admission at top-tier universities. As I write this Introduction, two proximate stories populate the media cycle: First, the Operation Varsity Blues scandal, in which moderately wealthy parents purchased fake credentials for their children’s real enrollment into competitive colleges. As chapter one explains, those are a different type of impostor: Though part of the same dystopic universe, their greed is not racially-specific and hardly mystifying—fit for *schadenfreude*, not *rapport*. Second, the anti-affirmative action case against Harvard filed by “Students for Fair Admissions,”³ which claims five of the first ten spots in my search results for “Asian Americans” in the news. In this cultural moment, scaling the Ivy Leagues is the *idée fixe* of success, and Asian Americans (by overrepresentation) are its very picture. This book means to trouble that perfect picture and to take its emotional measure.

My opening bid is this: Where I come from, the model minority is not a myth. This is not to say that *all* Asian Americans are prosperous or even upwardly mobile; it is not to say that we people pull ourselves out of poverty without government assistance and so can you. Those statements are demonstrably false for many Asian Americans; then again, they are demonstrably true for others. That which is partially true is not a myth (problematic or inconvenient, yes; uncalibrated or misleading, quite possibly; roundly deniable, no). But the empirical ratio is not what matters here. What matters is the immigrant auntie who buys that story, the father who works nights off the books but insists his children will be doctors, the boyfriend who walks through gilded doors pried open by generations of activism but hails America as

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meritocracy, the cousin who feels Harvard is her due. I define the model minority as an *identity*: a set of convictions and aspirations, regardless of present socioeconomic status or future attainability. It is an orthodox faith in what sociologists Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou, of *The Asian American Achievement Paradox (AAAP)*, have dubbed the “success frame”—“earning straight A’s, graduating as the high school valedictorian, earning a degree from an elite university, attaining an advanced degree, and working in one of four high-status professional fields: medicine, law, engineering, or science.”⁴ That list comprises not merely a set of goals but a framework for personhood, such that to be socially viable as Asian American—to hold up one’s head at family gatherings or church socials—is to live by its terms.

Among many a second-generation Asian American this frame is *common sense*, especially as Antonio Gramsci used the term: to convey that certain perceptions of reality may seem logical, inevitable, even though they are culturally specific and serve the interests of those in power. To be model minority is to “know” (even as one may hate it) that success means hitting each of the achievement checkpoints in sequence, because *everyone knows this*. What qualifies are not the achievements themselves, mind you, but the shared sense of them. Which means, as this book draws the set, to be model minority is not a matter of income bracket or GPA (nor is generation a guarantee*). The litmus test is not whether an Asian American meets “success frame” standards per se. Only the few do (my English major exempts me, right?), while some of us toil daily at such a far cry from its lofty requirements that surely we have been excused? But that, my friends, is too easy. It lets the vast majority of us off on technicalities.† Because this book

* A note on terminology: immigrants are “first generation” Americans, while their (American-born) kids are “second generation.” This because immigrants can become naturalized citizens and, therefore, Americans.

† “Model minority” and “Asian American” are not identical sets, and I don’t pretend to know statistically where one ends, the other begins. But this book’s focus is squarely on those invested in being, or enlisted despite themselves as,

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holds that the model minority is coded into one's programming—racialization become feeling and belief—its litmus test is whether an Asian American *feels pride or shame* by those standards. If you have enjoyed what Tiger parenting memes say about you (laughed ruefully, maybe, but knowingly): Congratulations, you have tested positive. With your click, like, and share, you affirm an identity set apart from other racial groups: a feeling that *our bar is higher*. Or, equally, if communal judgment can pith you, and you have needed to walk yourself back time and again to remember that your life has real worth: Your affliction can be managed, but it never leaves your system.

How could so much possibly hinge on a checklist? I suppose what has become codified as the success frame is a distillation:

model minorities; those to whom that paradigm is foreign are outside of its purview. Asian Americans exist who have never been subject to model-minority racialization; they are just not studied here. Still, I do hold that as a racialization *internalized*, model-minority identity has a reach that exceeds its intersectional grasp: poverty provides no immunity from its values, feelings, beliefs. Demographically, nothing inherently does. I offer for proof of concept the following interview with filmmaker Justin Chon: His family's experiences as Korean small business owners, whose warehouse was looted during the Los Angeles Uprising/Sa-I-Gu, form the basis of his film *Gook*. Faulting Hollywood for its neglect of such Asian American stories, Chon demands, "How come we're never seen as working class . . . ? We're always [shown as] the model minority and we're pitted against other minorities for someone else's agenda." That is, using the conventional definition of "model minority" as a checklist of stereotypical achievements, Chon confidently absolves his family of perpetuating the racial hierarchy. The way it sounds, the success frame could not have been further from their minds. But, define the model minority by conviction and aspiration instead, and Chon's family begins to sound typical of the set: "My dad's reason for being [in a Black neighborhood] was that the rent was cheaper. . . . But my sister and I lived in the suburbs because my Dad wanted us to go to a nice public school." (Jada Yuan, "From *Twilight* to *Gook*: How Justin Chon Found His Voice in His Own Painful Racial Past," *vulture.com*, August 25 2017, available at <https://www.vulture.com/2017/08/from-twilight-to-gook-how-justin-chon-found-his-voice.html>) And, in fact, it turns out Chon was raised in Irvine, among the children of professors and affluent white families, at top-ranked University High School. At the University of Southern California, he majored in business. All of which suggests an upbringing—whatever their household income—in active pursuit of the model-minority dream. ("Justin Chon," Wikipedia, last modified January 24, 2020, available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Justin_Chon)

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These expectations are an insider's experience of racial formation;* they are the structure of model-minority feeling.† By definition, then, to be model minority is to have this very fixed sense of success and failure in common, like it or not. And yet, it is worth pausing here to marvel at how truly saturated that common sense is. For their study, Lee and Zhou purposely chose two populations that “differ enormously in . . . their immigration histories, socioeconomic backgrounds, and settlement patterns”: “the Chinese, a long-standing immigrant group in the United States, and the Vietnamese, a relatively recent refugee group.” Yet, they find, rather to their dismay, “despite the tremendous intergroup differences among the first generation, . . . the educational outcomes of the children of Chinese immigrants and Vietnamese refugees converge within one generation—a *vexing* pattern that we refer to as ‘second-generation convergence.’” This is the paradox to which they refer. As they rightly marvel, moreover, “*most remarkable* is that regardless of class background” interviewees from the two groups “recounted the same success frame.”⁵ Remarkable, yes; unusual, no. The model minority converges from across groups so numerous, disparities so great, that paradox may be its only rule. Formerly hailing from a federal territory as “wards” of the United States, the Filipinx community's route to America is unlike any other Asian Americans'. Largely Catholic and shaped by centu-

* Sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant coined “racial formation” to name “the sociohistorical process by which racial identities are created, lived out, transformed, and destroyed.” (Michael Omi and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States* [New York: Routledge/Taylor and Francis, 2015], 109).

† Relevant but not vital to my project, “structure of feeling” I use lightly. In the original, Raymond Williams intended it to pinpoint the experience of living through a new wrinkle in history, a social or cultural development that we may sense but not yet have the conceptual vocabulary to articulate. The term has proven quite popular—though, as here, its versatility may come of a somewhat less strict application. I like it for the spatial quality it gives to lived experience: that our feelings come to map out, like sonar, the shape and size of what is happening to us, even if, like bats, we don't quite know what we are being made to fly around. This concept is useful, I think, even with social formations not exactly newborn unto the world.

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ries of prior Spanish imperialism, Filipinx have been “strikingly absent from contemporary literatures on immigration and on Asian-Americans.”⁶ Meanwhile, largely Hindu or Muslim, their histories marked by centuries of British rule, South Asians are further distinctive among Asian Americans for having no “direct historical connection to the United States”: “no history of colonial encounter [or military engagement] that explains their presence in the U.S. today.”⁷ And yet, this book will be able to cite both groups’ success-frame lives across wholly separate studies. Among the quotes below, some describe Filipinx students at a northern California high school; others, South Asian students in a Boston-area school district. Guess which is which.

- “My parents and my grandparents have always instilled in me that I can do whatever I want as long as I was happy. But now and then they always push, ‘well you can be a doctor,’ or ‘do you like medicine?’”⁸
- “Anything below an A is unacceptable.”⁹
- “Anything less than an ‘A’ was unacceptable.”¹⁰

Such consensus comes despite material differences in the very things usually deployed to explain why Person-or-Group X is so unlike Person-or-Group Y this strangeness is hard to overstate. What it tells us about this common sense, though, is not how very true it is but how very powerful.

Just how powerful is, in fact, the very thing we need to wrap our heads around if we are to understand what drives college impostors like Azia and Jennifer. As I argue in chapter two, the academic world has no shortage of ways to make the point that humans are socially conditioned creatures: that our beliefs and actions default not to individual authenticity but to cultural norms. Still, most of the terms around this concept disappoint when it comes to making sense of choices as unreasonable as our protagonists’. Where if-then formulations and cost-benefit analyses are hopelessly inadequate, rationalist-minded explanations

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will not suffice. We need, here, tools that account also for the emotion of the thing: for the training and manufacture of persons on the level of fear and guilt, love and loyalty. But, what, is this structure of feelings so singular that there's no understanding it short a utility belt of literary and philosophical terms? I think quite the opposite, actually. There are those who *get* a college impostor's doomed choices on a gut level and need no outside assistance to show them how or why desperation is plausible. Though strangers, they *feel* like intimates, recognizing themselves and each other across these stories. If they need any help, it is in translating their peculiar dialect of feeling into the common tongue. But among the greater public, many find stories like Azia's and Jennifer's nonsensical and react with either bafflement or ridicule: the former is a mental impediment to empathy; the latter, an emotional repudiation of it. For the culturally monolingual, this passing for perfect is a spectacle too foreign; for the model minority, it whispers too close to home. Check in with your feelings, reader, if curious whereabouts you fall.

Concepts coined by Lauren Berlant crop up rather a lot in this book, because they are uncannily good for figuring out the geometry of a social configuration and for reading the emotional charge that animates it. A literary critic qua philosopher of capitalist life, it's as if Berlant had coined the cultural equivalent of pi and a series of correlate concepts as well; henceforth, it would be silly not to use these very handy constructs when dealing with things of a circular nature. Equally silly would be to reinvent the pi. And so, while *Passing for Perfect* taps useful theories wherever it finds them—plundering journals of law and quantitative psychology alike—it leans most consistently on Berlant's concepts of genre (along with intimate public) and of cruel optimism. In her oeuvre on American literature and sentimentality, she defines genre as “an *emotionally invested*, patterned set of expectations about how to act and how to interpret, which organises”¹¹ not only aesthetic productions like movies or poetry but temporal experience: how we each narrate and understand our everyday

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lives. The top billing emotion receives in that definition is key because, as Berlant argues to increasingly devastating effect across her own trilogy, even when we have come to know our social formation as harmful to us, a life worth wanting may still be trapped in its terms. While I do end up proposing some modifications in her concepts, they are nonetheless the secret sauce for explaining why the relationship between discourse and social being is, ultimately, not straightforward: why it is paradoxical and irrational and self-extraction is so dear.

passing . . . for model minority

Passing is not an easy commitment to make. Historically, in the racially stratified United States, to pass has meant to live or work surreptitiously as a member of a racial group not your own—and, in the vast majority of instances, thereby to stage whiteness. As a social phenomenon (as opposed to, say, a social experiment¹²), it is a choice made under duress—though, as the conditions of duress vary, so too do the manner and motivation. In the antebellum period, slaves who could are said to have “passed *through* whiteness” as a fleeting measure for reaching the free states, upon which they were apt to drop the charade and “*reject* rather than embrace the power and superiority whites claimed as their singular possession.”¹³ Indeed, only by acknowledging their former circumstances could fugitives hope to achieve the other part of their ends: Under a racial order in which “they could be bought, sold, and forever separated from their families” at a master’s whim, escape meant at least the possibility of finding their loved ones. “Surrounded by loss, enslaved people were motivated by a desire to reunite with their families, not to leave them behind.”¹⁴

During Reconstruction and through the Jim Crow era that followed, passing could be a tactical matter of getting white-collar jobs or attending elite colleges from which Black people were otherwise barred. In such instances, deceptions were staged within circumscribed settings or definite durations (“nine-to-five

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passing,” say). Those at home or even in the Black community were not meant to be deceived; rather, passing was a group effort, in the sense that it required all in the know to maintain “a conspiracy of silence” from white society.¹⁵ Even this part-time duplicity took enormous tolls in anxiety and risk. Law professor Cheryl Harris relates of her grandmother, who worked in a department store as a (presumed white) shopgirl, that “Day in and day out, she made herself invisible, then visible again, for a price too inconsequential to do more than barely sustain her family and at a cost too precious to conceive.”¹⁶

But, of course, there were also those who disappeared into white identities entirely, a practice regarded by at least some among the Black community as betrayal and by white society as an especial threat. As a choice, it is as if the passer had taken every intimacy of friend or kin, along with communal comforts of food or song, memory or story, and placed them all on a scale, then traded them in to sweeten his odds alone. While this fully committed form of passing was thus “a deeply individualistic practice,” it nonetheless rested on the cooperation of others, whose silence was purchased with nothing: “The iconic image of the heartbroken yet sympathetic black mother who must not speak a word nor lay eyes upon her white-looking child in public lays bare the painful consequences of this practice.” As historian Allyson Hobbs writes in *A Chosen Exile*, “To pass as white meant to lose a sense of embeddedness in a community or a collectivity. Passing reveals that the essence of *identity* is not found in an individual’s qualities, but rather *in the ways that one recognizes oneself and is recognized as kindred*.”¹⁷ It is a lot to give up, and not necessarily redeemed by the rewards accrued in its place.

Meanwhile, at the top of a racial hierarchy, a lot rides on biology as a meaningful anchor of difference and phenotype as guarantor of those meanings. Insofar as passing proves difference to be indiscernible, it attacks the foundations of power and changes the terms of the debate about race: “[Passing’s] ‘performance’ so impeccably mimics ‘reality’ that it goes undetected as perfor-

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mance, framing its resistance to essentialism in the very rhetoric of essence and origin.”¹⁸ In other words, in successfully “hiding” genetic origins, passing “outs” racial identity itself as a matter of norms and cues, in staging and costume, habit and mannerism, speech and story: race not as what you are but how you do you. Passing champions the heresy that to be white in America is not (biological) fact but (cultural) act—as it is, likewise, to be Black, Asian, etc. It is in this performative sense that our college impostors may be said to be racially “passing.”

Passing is a loaded term, then, but one that this book, nonetheless, adopts for impostors like Azia and Jennifer, because to pass for model minority is a performance of race—even if your own. This reworking draws from concepts like “covering” (from Kenji Yoshino’s *Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights*—in chapter three) as well as performativity (from Judith Butler’s “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” for starters—chapter two) because its premise is that social identities are a matter of what we enact. That is, we necessarily manage our mix of identities every day, performing each by its respective script (straight male, middle class, mother, student, etc.) and dialing each up or down in varying contexts, with varying success, to score prestige and mask stigma. To call imposture a kind of passing, then, is to plot it on the extreme end of a range of common, socialized practices—as opposed to isolating it as a freak mutation or individual pathology.

In that sense, this book picks up where Tina Chen’s *Double Agency: Acts of Impersonation in Asian American Literature and Culture* leaves off. Chen’s work is very much about racial identity as a performance—and, more specifically, as an impersonation.¹⁹ Not only does she assert racial faking—it as normal but, most usefully, she drills down into the unfeasibility of opting out, when the role appointed to you is also the only role that will be believed of you. If “perform[ing] themselves into being *as persons recognized* by their communities and their country”²⁰ means that

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Asian Americans strive to look and act like Asian Americans are expected to look and act, the case *may* be that they earnestly see themselves as the model minority, but the case is certainly that being seen and heard by others is contingent upon being recognized. Be it in a courtroom or at a board game, to play is to play by roles, whether well or poorly; else, you can disrupt, but you can never win. Authenticity is not the name of this game. Chen's overarching concern is that we "ordinary" impersonators not be mistaken for deviant impostors, who are guilty of stealing someone else's identity and may presumably deserve to be uncovered and expelled. But, here, my argument makes a different turn, ditching the distinction between impostor and impersonator, morally and otherwise. Because if Asian Americans are recognized as persons *by their communities and their country* only by the success frame, then whose public identity is a failure allowed to use? Whose racial reputation and likeness if not their own? I use "passing for model minority" to describe what Azia and Jennifer do because it is an oxymoron, and signals the paradox of their having trespassed by taking their assigned places, their having offended by trying so hard to please. Lying about their public identities as college students, yet at least as earnestly playing their racial part as the next Asian American, those who resort to passing for model minority are impostors and impersonators, both.

All told, then, I choose "passing" precisely for how heavy it is, with what is at stake. Because, while the conditions and contexts of duress vary, even the moral valences shift, the cost of passing is always high. So, to see it chosen is to know that the alternative, not to pass, has to have felt in each case even more intolerable. But, to see it truly, is also to know that the distance between those choices is actually so slight: Realities cleave, sure, from that moment forward, but aren't the hardest choices precisely those in which it's not clear which path is worse, and the selves we imagine either way rack with fear or pain? Performance artist Kristina Wong has probably never been a college impostor, but she could

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have passed for one.* In an essay about the emotional backstory to her work on mental health, she describes the rewards and punishments of model minority performance, according to which “success usually came in specific quantifiable terms like having a well-paying job, a medical degree from a reputable school, or marrying a Chinese bilingual doctor husband”:

I won't lie. Getting good grades, winning trophies, and stacking a long list of accomplishments on my college application made me feel good because it meant I had avoided my parents' idea of a failure. But most of the time, the road to the seemingly unattainable, chasing a dream that wasn't really mine, felt so totally miserable and pointless.

Despite what she calls the “agony of living” this way, though, the alternative seemed to hold no better: “To me, choosing a different path meant flunking out of school and disowning my parents.”²¹ Per what she had been told and told to feel, not performing her racial part might cost her her family or render her features unrecognizable in a community obsessed with face. Was this framing hyperbolic, histrionic? Hopefully, yes. Emotionally, no. Thing is, there is only one way to find out.

assimilate this.

One more thing to note about this particular kind of passing: Whiteness is not its aspiration. Which suggests the practice may be native to some more than others of the states in the union, even some more than others of the counties on the coasts. The

* Wong is a comedian and actor whose work is informed by ethnic studies and feminist criticism. In 2006, she wrote and began to tour a solo theater show called “Wong Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest,” inspired by CDC reports of high rates of depression and suicide among Asian American women. She graduated from UCLA “but” with an English major and Asian American studies minor.

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success frame flourishes most where Asian ethnic communities are thickest: enough to seed the schools with a plurality or more of their students; enough to sustain networks of churches, tutoring services, and cultural activities. Lee and Zhou anchored their study in one such region: metropolitan Los Angeles, with special attention to the “ethnoburbs” of the San Gabriel Valley and Orange County.²² Likewise, in “Family Secrets: Transnational Struggles among Children of Filipino Immigrants,” sociologist Diane Wolf’s sites were two high schools in Vallejo, California, where, in the 1990s, Filipinx students accounted for 25–30 percent of the population—and the highest average GPAs of any racial-ethnic group. Surprised by the alienation and crises she discovered to belie students’ “cheerful, socially involved” appearance, Wolf gives us what reads as an early transcript of the success frame.²³ Also in the 1990s, anthropologist Shalini Shankar set her research in Silicon Valley, where high school already meant student-bodies up to 54 percent Asian American, about a third of them South Asian. She dubbed her project “Desi Land” in reference to not only the numerical predominance of South Asians but the local hegemony of Desi* identity, overachievement and all.²⁴ Even on the East Coast and twenty years later, Pawan Dhingra’s *Hyper Education: Why Good Schools, Good Grades, and Good Behavior Are Not Enough* (2020) is based in districts over 30 percent Asian American and projected to reach 40–50 percent in “a couple of years.” His sociological elaboration on how model-minority parenting “fits into the neoliberal education system” is worth reading in its own right[†] but serves here, along with Wolf’s and Shankar’s work, to fortify the foundation provided by

* A self-referential term for South Asian people, usually from India, Pakistan, or Bangladesh.

† Had *Hyper Education* been published earlier, no doubt it would have been well threaded through these pages. Our arguments are complementary (i.e., largely compatible)—save that *Passing for Perfect* insists on biopsying affective aspects of achievement-parenting that *Hyper Education* accepts as benign, such as “caring” that takes the form of “discuss[ing] the need to do well for the sake of the [already upper-middle-class] family” (Dhingra, *Hyper Education*, 43).

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AAAP.²⁵ Evident across concentrations like these is a new normal: local countercultures about Asian American excellence competing for hearts and minds with mainstream U.S. racial thinking. This development has put a wrinkle in the long-standing “assumption in classic assimilation and segmented assimilation models” that immigrants use “native-born whites as their reference group when measuring their success.”²⁶ Where “academic success has become racially recoded as ‘an Asian thing,’” and also the paramount thing, whiteness can be a liability: a measuring stick neither long nor exacting enough.*

As an identity, then, the model minority is not so easily written off as wannabe-white. Which is not at all the same as saying it is politically “resistant.” In Dhingra’s words, “immigrant parents . . . care first and foremost about outcompeting others”:²⁷ If they question some of the rules as being to their disadvantage, it’s because they play to win. Model-minority aspirations or realities buy into privilege plenty; it is just not white privilege.²⁸ The vicarious glee of second-generation viewers, then, for the opening scene of *Crazy Rich Asians*²⁹—in which an owning-class Singaporean family avenges itself against racist treatment by

* Some caveats: Anecdotally, it does seem that towns “east of California,” where an Asian family may still number among the few or only, still foster classic assimilationism and classic scenes of self-hate. Having grown up that way, Wesley Yang opened his infamous “Paper Tigers” essay by admitting that he is estranged, even astonished, by the sight of his own face—Asian features he loathes to call his own. Yang has no desire to pass for model minority; he would be white, though, if he could. Yet, judging by that same essay’s description of Stuyvesant, one of New York City’s most competitive public high schools, even a student body 72 percent Asian does not assure the inverse experience: Even vastly outnumbered, white students there ruled the social hierarchy. (Wesley Yang, “Paper Tigers,” *New York Magazine*, May 6, 2011, available at <http://nymag.com/news/features/asian-americans-2011-5/>) This is to say, there is no hard-and-fast rule. An isolated immigrant family might manage to manufacture communal mandate out of thin air: gossip and some Chinese-language newspapers (see Elaine Mar’s *Paper Daughter* [1999]). Meanwhile, South Asians in Silicon Valley high schools play the nerds and the cool kids, too (see Shankar’s *Desi Land* [2008]). Across that range, Asians may rank themselves above white or below—while being equally familiar with the hail of the success frame.

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British hotel workers, by instantly buying the exclusive hotel—is not about becoming white but about besting it. Indeed, the very essentials of the success frame are wrought by a sharp sense of racial disparity: compulsory higher education? clustering in technical fields? Social scientists have found these patterns to be best explained not by ancient culture or individual talent but by a pragmatic approach to institutional racism: “racial discrimination is relatively easier to combat in technical occupations due to the availability of objective criteria for hiring and advancement.” The model minority derives its best-or-bust identity directly from its racialization: “We know we are a minority in this society, and we have to do better than other Americans. . . . That’s the only way we’ll get ahead.”³⁰

Produced in such moments is something more interesting than a misplaced possessive investment in whiteness. That is a common way of characterizing upward mobility among Asian Americans—that they become “almost white” or aim to “out-white the whites”—but it is a belittling one, building in a narrative of chasing after what is not theirs and never will be. The concept of possessive investment itself, however, can be transposed to model-minority identity. When people talk about “whiteness as property” or the (cash) “value of being white,”³¹ these refer to the ways that the identity confers systemic advantages, making life easier, less expensive, more profitable: A membership plan that allows one to live in neighborhoods with healthier air, water, and property values; to drive unmolested along roads well-maintained to take one to retailers with the better selection and pricing of goods; to receive smiling benefit of the doubt from security guards, teachers, and employers that one is worth their protection and their time—what kind of annual fee would this be worth to you? And if you could pass it down to your children? Those advantages are not accidents of history but the upshot of laws laid down from the federal level to the municipal, which continue to pay dividends in social inclusion/exclusivity to this day. The inference of *vested* interests is useful, though, because the having

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of such privileges is not a passive or innocent thing. One becomes possessive of objects that, precious, grant their holders such powers. Harris, whose law review essay opened with her grandmother passing as a white shopgirl, explains that “if an object you now control is bound up in your future plans or in your anticipation of your future self, and it is partly these plans for your own continuity that make you a person, then your personhood depends on the realization of these expectations.” Being “regarded as white,” she continues, is a “reputational interest” and, as such, “intrinsically bound up with identity and personhood.”³²

This is why it makes sense to say the Asian American version—a racial identity that, successfully performed, enjoys all the membership privileges listed above, with *bonus* reputational assumptions of being smart and hard working—is a possessive investment in being model minority. It is also why this book’s interest in impostures of model-minority perfection is twofold: Mainly, we’ll be grappling with how that identity can be devastating and (yet) unthinkable to let go of. When passing for perfect means retaining a sense of yourself and your future as well as keeping your loved ones about you, you do what it takes to pass. But we’ll also be spending a little time on model-minority identity as not-unfounded pride: when it means having bested the field despite racism or cultural disadvantage, whether in one generation or two; when overachievement becomes norm and powers a new cultural dominance; and then when it curdles into more cynical opportunities of imposture, and passing for perfect is a matter of working an identity to advantage.