

PAWAN DHINGRA

success won't save us

how
asian
americans
can
fight
white
supremacy

**"Dhingra bravely
charts new territory
for intellectual and
cultural liberation."
—MIN JIN LEE**

Additional Praise for *Success Won't Save Us*

“How can we understand the modern Asian American? Pawan Dhingra explores the seemingly invisible paradigms of racial and cultural status hierarchies. By naming the knotty problems which limit the full humanity of Asian American lives, Dhingra poses a formidable and necessary challenge for our collective growth. *Success Won't Save Us* bravely charts new territory for intellectual and cultural liberation.” —MIN JIN LEE, author of *American Hagwon* and *Pachinko*, a finalist for the National Book Award

“Pawan Dhingra boldly calls for a paradigm shift to disrupt the conundrum of Asian Americans who decry overt racism while seduced by the toxic siren of ‘model minority success.’ His rational, clear, and accessible argument should be required reading to help move us away from complicity and toward a united, beloved community capable of dismantling white supremacy.” —HELEN ZIA, author of *Asian American Dreams: The Emergence of an American People*

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S U C C E S S
W O N ' T
S A V E U S



BUY

SUCCESS WON'T SAVE US

How Asian Americans

Can Fight

White Supremacy

PAWAN DHINGRA

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I dedicate this book to my family and
friends, both those living and those beyond.
It is a blessing to be in your long line.

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Contents

1	<i>Introduction</i>	The Conundrum
13	<i>Chapter 1</i>	The Costs and Benefits of White Supremacy
35	<i>Chapter 2</i>	The Limitations of Liberals
57	<i>Chapter 3</i>	(Mis)Presenting Asian America
73	<i>Chapter 4</i>	The Academy Needs to Learn
92	<i>Chapter 5</i>	Beyond Fighting Racism
115		ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
117		NOTES
129		BIBLIOGRAPHY
157		INDEX

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The Conundrum

On June 13, 2022, President Joe Biden signed a bill meant to bring about one of the most consequential moments in Asian American history. The bill created a panel to study the possibility of building the National Museum of Asian Pacific American History and Culture, to potentially be part of the Smithsonian.¹ With Biden flanked by Asian American legislators and guests, photographers captured this celebratory moment. While there are many steps still to take before a Smithsonian museum can be approved, much less erected, Biden's bill created the possibility for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders to have their own place on the National Mall and the recognition that only the Smithsonian can bestow.²

The timing of the bill's signing indicates the rising public presence of Asian Americans. The population of Asian Americans continues to grow. As of 2023, they made up 24.8 million residents, an almost 40 percent increase from 2010, when they made up 17.3 million residents (including those of multiracial backgrounds).³ They are around 7 percent of the population. They are the fastest-growing racial group in the United States.⁴

There is much to applaud in this current moment beyond their population growth. Their median annual household income is the highest of any racial group, at \$105,600 in 2023, well above the national average of \$75,500.⁵ Also, political barriers have been broken. An Asian American woman has served as vice president and was nominated for the presidency by a major political party.

Joining Harris on stage during the 2020 Democratic primary race was the entrepreneur Andrew Yang. He leaned into his Asian image, with punch lines such as being "good at math." Harris and Yang normalized two distinct narratives about Asian America. The former's biography symbolized the collective movement as fellow people of color with African

Americans, not just embodied by Harris's ancestry but also represented by her mother's engagement with interracial social justice movements. The latter symbolized the popular model minority stereotype, as fluent in math, entrepreneurial, self-reliant, and embracing of logic. In addition to prominent Asian American Democrats, the 2023–24 Republican presidential primaries offered two Asian Americans with serious campaigns, Nikki Haley and Vivek Ramaswamy. Both received significant support from a range of voters while also referring to their ethnicity as part of their journey to such a national stage.

Not only do Asian Americans appear to be beyond the effects of racism, but they have also (in)famously played key roles in rolling back civil rights gains and protections for immigrants. Chinese Americans were key applicants in the 2023 Supreme Court case, *Students for Fair Admissions Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard*, that dismantled affirmative action in higher education. Since 2025, Asian Americans have occupied major positions in President Trump's administration, which has been accused by various outlets of trafficking in racism, antisemitism, and white nationalism.⁶

But are Asian Americans—including those who are materially successful—truly above the problems of race? This book, and this Asian American scholar, says no. It is time to spread this message widely and rally our fellow Asian Americans and allies to both recognize the pervasiveness of race—even when Asian Americans do not feel constrained by it—and advance realistic yet meaningful ways to battle racism. *Success Won't Save Us* explains how even upwardly mobile Asian Americans experience white supremacy—in ways that enable that success, not only limit it—and how to fight back.

It is easy to conceive of Asian Americans as beyond the impacts of race. On January 1, 2026, Zohran Mamdani, a self-proclaimed democratic socialist, became the mayor of New York City. Such a diversity of views by Asian Americans means that we cannot be pigeonholed into a single corner of the political sphere. Whether a progressive like Mamdani, a liberal like Harris, a libertarian like Yang, a traditional conservative like Haley, or a MAGA Republican like Ramaswamy, there has been a prominent Asian American politician who represents your interests.

Both high art and popular culture have also seen Asian Americans achieve the highest recognitions possible. For instance, the architect Maya Lin, who burst onto the national scene as an undergraduate student for her winning submission for the magnificent Vietnam Veterans Memorial,

went on to direct multiple major projects, and to be awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2016.⁷ Also in 2016, Viet Than Nguyen was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his novel *The Sympathizers*, which offers a nuanced portrayal of the Vietnam War and its personal and political aftermath in both Vietnam and the United States. Yo-Yo Ma, the world-renowned cellist, has won twenty Grammy Awards and been awarded a Presidential Medal of Freedom; he is among the most widely known names in classical music today.

For those of us who consume mostly popular culture, we have been inundated with the presence of Asian Americans. It used to be that an Asian needed to win the Scripps National Spelling Bee to be invited onto late-night talk shows. Now, K-pop has become a worldwide phenomenon, thanks to bands like BTS, who topped the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart, received Grammy nominations, and, in 2022, spoke at the White House.⁸

Hollywood is clearly having an Asian American moment as well. Its most recent incarnation started with the 2018 film *Crazy Rich Asians*. It was the first major film since *The Namesake* of 2006 to have a majority cast of Asian ethnicity, and it became the highest-grossing romantic comedy of the 2010s. *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, released in 2022, made history by being the first film with an Asian American cast to win Oscars for best picture, best actress, best supporting actor, best supporting actress, best director, and more. Asian Americans even became superheroes. In 2021, *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* scored well for the Marvel franchise by being a top-ten-grossing film for the year, and Kumail Nanjiani starred in Marvel's *Eternals* (and on the smaller screen, Pakistani American character Kamala Khan is *Ms. Marvel*). For these films, being Asian American was not erased from a character's identity and story but was inherent to it. In other words, the critics and audiences recognized Asian Americans as *Asian Americans*, not as generic characters with Asian faces or as simple stereotypes. As written in the *New York Times* in 2021, Asian Americans were "in vogue."⁹

Nor are Asian Americans downplaying their heritage as they enter the limelight. Some of the most famous Hollywood stars talk openly about their Asian and Pacific Islander heritage, such as Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson and Mindy Kaling.¹⁰ Daniel Dae Kim, whose series *Butterfly* was filmed in South Korea, has spoken frequently about his upbringing and Asian American identity.¹¹ In April 2023, I got the chance to interview actor and author John Cho in front of a packed house of students, staff, and faculty at Amherst College, and credited him in part for our cur-

rent breakthrough moment, having taken on roles in cult comedy classics like the *Harold & Kumar* series. He was humbly deflective of praise. But he said that he (like his costar Kal Penn) made a point of playing Asian American characters thoughtfully. Cho would act as the person next door, not the Asian stock character. He would not pose as the best friend to a white character.¹² Being relatable on-screen was its own intervention.

From fashion to the military, Asian Americans have made their mark in the past few decades.¹³ They also are currently the CEOs of some of the most well-known companies in the world, including Microsoft, Nvidia, and Alphabet. Asian American women in particular have been major news anchors.¹⁴ The only two people of color who are principal owners of NFL franchises are Asian American: Shahid Khan (owner of the Jacksonville Jaguars), who migrated as a student from Pakistan, and Kim Pegula (co-owner of the Buffalo Bills), who was adopted at age five from South Korea.¹⁵ Joseph Tsai and Clara Wu Tsai (husband and wife) are the majority owners of the NBA franchise the Brooklyn Nets. They all follow in the footsteps of Hiroshi Yamauchi, who was the first Asian American to own a professional sports franchise (the MLB team the Seattle Mariners), in 1992.¹⁶

Beyond these high-profile corporate leaders, Asian Americans generally have achieved economic success and residential assimilation and speak English well, all of which contribute to the notion of them being a “model minority” group.¹⁷ In 2021, they made up 11 percent of employer owners (and had more employees than other minority groups), while making up only 7 percent of the population.¹⁸ They also have a median net worth almost double that of white people (and over eight times that of Blacks and Latines), as of 2022.¹⁹ Well over half of Asian American adults have completed a college education or more (56 percent), much higher than the national average (36 percent). For US-born Asian Americans, 68 percent converse only in English at home, signifying their degree of linguistic assimilation. Speaking of their homes, more than half of Asian Americans lived in the suburbs as of 2010, a sign of their general integration outside of poorer urban centers (e.g., Chinatowns).²⁰ In other words, it is not just celebrities who appear to be assimilating and doing well.

Many Asian Americans believe that they are in effect beyond race, because they have professional jobs and live in well-off suburbs with highly ranked schools. While people are mindful of racist extremists and know that racism persists, especially during extreme periods such as the pan-

demic of 2020–21 and anti-immigrant push since 2025, they are not worried about a perpetually racist country in which they will face significant limitations. Verbal harassment continues, but concerns about hate crimes have decreased since 2021.²¹ Many such Asians may worry about whether they are fully seen as American, but they do not worry about structural racism and instead believe they can practice their heritage and live transnational lives.²² In brief, Asian Americans may hardly feel akin to other minorities within a “people of color” umbrella.

As noted earlier, more than just not worrying about racism, some Asian Americans have gained notoriety for joining with white supremacists or for their efforts to dismantle protections for minorities. A common question is, Why are there so many Asian Americans in prominent positions within the second (as well as the first) Trump administration, one known for promoting white nationalism and attacking diversity, equity, and inclusion?²³ For instance, FBI Director Kash Patel appeared numerous times on the podcast of Stew Peters, an accused antisemite, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) issued a statement condemning his nomination to the FBI. Steven Cheung, who has served as the White House communications director for the second Trump administration, is known for profanity-laden social media posts and for targeting Democrats whom Trump dislikes. Harmeet Dhillon has been the assistant attorney general for the Civil Rights Division at the US Department of Justice; the *Atlantic* wrote in April 2026: “Consistent with Trump’s stated belief that ‘white people were very badly treated,’ the new Civil Rights Division seems primarily concerned with correcting the perceived wrongs of past civil-rights enforcement.”²⁴ As a case in point, Dhillon refused to investigate the fatal shooting by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers of Minnesota protester Renee Good on January 7, 2026, and instead emphasized prosecuting anti-ICE protesters at a Minnesota church; attorneys in the Department of Justice resigned in sharp disagreement with her decision.

Everyday Asian Americans also advance the interests of whites at the expense of fellow minorities. As noted previously, Chinese Americans were key players in bringing to the Supreme Court the lawsuit in which it struck down affirmative action in higher education. As written in the *Nation*, “Asian American anti-affirmative action activists have not been simply ‘used’ by white activists and duped into this white supremacist policy. They are active, militant co-conspirators with white conservatives.”²⁵

Even as Asian Americans believe Donald Trump engaged in anti-Asian rhetoric during his first term as president, more voted for him in 2024 than in 2020. Asian Americans, then, are enjoying a postracial America—so much so that they are working to dismantle the gains that minorities have had.

ANTI-ASIAN REALITIES

And yet the rise of Asian Americans takes place alongside their simultaneous harassments, deportations, violence, and other forms of exclusion. Just a few weeks before Biden's public signing ceremony, there were three separate shootings of Asian Americans in Dallas, Texas. The last one took place in a Korean American hair salon. The man arrested for the chain of shootings had fearful "delusions" of Asian Americans.²⁶ In the same set of months, a Chinese American delivery driver was murdered on his scooter in the streets of New York City. He worked for a Chinese restaurant. These people were all effectively attacked while on the job but hardly made the national news.

As the award-winning author Min Jin Lee wrote on the social media platform Twitter (now X) on March 17, 2021, in regard to the simultaneity of the Oscar achievements and the attacks, "In less than 48 hours, we had a historic Asian Oscar moment with multiple firsts in 93 years—then a mass shooting targeting 3 Asian-owned businesses. This is how terrorism works—you're not allowed to feel safe, accepted, or valued."²⁷ This brutality came in the wake of the massive number of publicized attacks on Asian Americans during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. In early 2020, when cases of COVID were starting to spread in major metropolitan areas, anti-Asian racism spread alongside it. By March, anti-Chinese sentiments were being widely reported.²⁸ There were over 650 reported incidents of anti-Asian attacks within a week in March 2020, according to the nonprofit Stop AAPI Hate.²⁹ It would go on to report over 11,400 cases of anti-Asian hate from March 2020 to March 2022.³⁰ Hate crimes against Asian Americans grew over 300 percent between 2020 and 2021; they impacted Asian Americans across the economic spectrum. Compared with 2019, hate crimes against Asian Americans rose over 75 percent in 2020. Public rhetoric of the "China virus" from the White House at that time added fuel to an already smoldering fire. Nor was this limited to the United States; anti-Asian racism took place worldwide.³¹

Despite public awareness of this racism, much of the harassment against Asians has been defended as nonracial. The eighty-four-year-old Vicha Ratanapakdee was shoved to the ground and died in San Francisco. The public defender of the accused perpetrator argued that race did not motivate the murder, since nothing racial or racist was clearly articulated at the attack. Yet even if the attacker was not motivated by explicit anti-Asian racism, it does not mean race was not relevant. Unlike men of other races, Asian American men are considered effeminate, unlikely to fight back. This is especially pronounced for the elderly. To suggest that race does not pertain to attacks on Asian Americans unless the perpetrator actively references it would be also to suggest that strangers do not see Asian Americans as of Asian descent. Yet studies have shown that Asian Americans are thought to be foreign-born unless there is some marker that clearly designates them as American (e.g., being overweight).³²

President Biden remarked at the Smithsonian signing ceremony, “This year marks one year since the murder of six Asian American women in Atlanta—a symbol of the anti-Asian hate in America today.”³³ He went on, “This year commemorates the 80th anniversary of the incarceration of 120,000 American citizens who were Japanese Americans during World War Two.”

The Trump administration since 2025 has actively targeted Asian Americans as enemies of the country. Middle Eastern and South Asian students have been kidnapped off the streets and sent to detention centers by ICE agents for having any connection to pro-Palestinian views, despite not committing any crime. Chinese immigrant students have been denied visas to study at universities because of supposed allegiance to their homeland’s Communist Party. Even wealthy, well-integrated Asian Americans have come to realize that they are susceptible to both interpersonal prejudice and legal barriers to belonging.³⁴

Unfortunately, the Trump administration has not been alone in this framing of Asian Americans as suspect. The presumption of Chinese as spies is reminiscent of the unfair treatment in the late 1990s of Wen Ho Lee, the Taiwanese American nuclear scientist at the University of California’s Los Alamos nuclear laboratory who was falsely accused of being a Chinese spy and ended up shackled in prison and in solitary confinement. Lee was the main suspect in the supposed sharing of military equipment details with China, despite a lack of sufficient evidence that he shared such secrets. The *New York Times* perpetuated this myth, thereby contributing to his unfair imprisonment, and ultimately admitted that it failed “to give

Dr. Lee the full benefit of the doubt,” and contributed to a settlement payment to Lee.³⁵

The challenges facing Asian Americans go beyond such acts of overt racism. While Hollywood portrays Asian Americans as “rich” and “crazy” in an entertaining way, Asians are increasingly poor and experience mental health problems. Most ethnic groups have poverty rates equal to or above the national average in 2019, despite their high average household incomes.³⁶ And household incomes misrepresent Asian Americans’ financial well-being. Their households often have more people working than the national average, and Asians tend to reside in expensive areas of the country which have higher average incomes by extension. Taking that into consideration, their incomes are basically the same as those of whites, despite having advanced educational degrees.³⁷ Asian Americans have the greatest income inequality within their race compared with any other racial group, with Chinese Americans the most unequal among Asians, again belying the image of them as well-off that is held in the popular imagination.³⁸ For instance, they have lower homeownership rates (59 percent) than for the country as a whole (64 percent).

Asians’ claims on the nation also are precarious. They are the fastest-growing undocumented population, making up an estimated 17 percent of the nation’s undocumented population in 2022.³⁹ Deportations of Asian Americans, including those lawfully in the United States, have intensified under the second Trump administration.⁴⁰ Access to immigration and permanent residency has severely declined, given the significantly rising costs associated with applying for visas—not to mention the ending of legal immigration from many countries around the globe, primarily in Africa and Asia. Visas available for international students to attend college have also dropped and been delayed since 2025. Relatedly, an executive order by President Trump in January 2025 in effect stopped the legal admission of refugees, even those who had been vetted and cleared for arrival. Even the Cato Institute, a conservative think tank, has ridiculed this policy.⁴¹ Adding insult to injury, the administration fast-tracked the admission of white South Africans requesting refugee status, laying bare the commitment to white nationalism at the heart of the immigration policy.

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So the questions become: Are Asians Americans living in a moment of national celebration or domestic terrorism? Are we a group to be assimilated or eradicated? Are we promoting white supremacy or victims of it? How can both be true at the same time? This book takes up this last question. It does not assert that the truth lies on one side or the other, nor that we are in a “best of times,” “worst of times” scenario where professionals can enjoy global citizenship while the working class and undocumented experience prejudice and violence. Nor is it just a matter of the middle class navigating racism to attain mobility by utilizing one’s culture and resources or being able to assimilate up to the point when racism kicks in and creates a glass ceiling or racist attack.

I contend that the question of whether Asian Americans are either integrating or facing violence is a mistaken one. The two realities do not exist in an either/or manner. Instead, they are two sides of the same coin, and that coin is in the pocket of white supremacy. The Asian American conundrum is to be accepted by and expunged from the nation, seemingly simultaneously. The extreme economic, residential, and even marital integration of many Asian Americans does not mean that race has lost relevance either in general or for them in particular. Nor does racism just matter when they counter resentments for their gains. Instead, race has facilitated those gains. The common assumption that assimilation means the declining significance of race is wrong. More than just asserting that a group can integrate while racial exclusion is taking place, I explain why and how this is true and how to combat it.

Success Won't Save Us makes sense of this conundrum by explaining the embedded nature of white supremacy in the Asian American experience—as enabling both upward mobility and violent exclusion—and how to address it. At the heart of the book is the question: Can people of color be economically well-off, feel relatively assimilated, and even argue against the role of race in society, yet still be living not just as minorities but also under a system of racial oppression? I answer yes. Race is active in Asians’ lives even when they feel that they are beyond it—their mobility can be possible *because* of white supremacy, not just despite it. People must understand that racism not only leads to a backlash against Asian Americans’ achievements but also facilitates those achievements in the first place, so that they are fully awake to the power of race. The model

minority stereotype is often cited as how Asian Americans benefit from race, since it praises Asians for their culture and work ethic at the expense of African Americans. But more than how Asian Americans' success is referred to, the success itself depends on white supremacy. It should not be surprising, then, that a growing number help perpetuate this system.

White supremacy does not mean that racism against people of color is always at play and keeps them from succeeding. Nor does it mean that meritocracy does not exist at all. White supremacy is not the same as, and can have little to do with, active white supremacists who spread antisemitic and racist rhetoric. It is a system of practices and policies that prioritize the interests and perspectives of whites, often those in authority, as the proper standard for deciding fair outcomes, family formations, economic priorities, and the goals of the nation. At times Asian Americans will encounter barriers and even violence under this system. At other times they will be applauded and raised up but will still operate within a racial caste hierarchy.

Asian America is a wide category, with too many nationalities, ethnic groups, religions, and other distinctions to fully take into account. I concentrate on those groups that make up the largest contingent—namely, Chinese, Indian, Filipinx, Korean, Vietnamese, and Japanese. Within them, I attend to various gender identities, to the rich and the poor. Given that the majority of Asian Americans are college-educated and middle class, I concentrate on them while still giving voice to others. But more than because of demographics, the upwardly mobile Asian American deserves concentrated attention because of their importance to major political discourse. They are often seen—and see themselves—as proof of the irrelevance of race and racism. The rising number of self-described conservative Asian Americans, who deny that racism matters in America, makes recognizing the power of race even more necessary.⁴² Understanding their experiences within white supremacy without taking away from their accomplishments will advance our understanding of race in this country. Persuading my fellow Asian Americans and allies to join in the political project to dismantle race and racism will go a long way to advancing racial justice.

Worth noting is that while this book focuses primarily (not exclusively) on voluntary, documented immigrants, an increasing number of Asians arrive as asylum seekers or as undocumented. Their experiences should not be conflated with the popular imagination of immigrants who

arrive sponsored by family members or have a work or education visa. Readers who want a chronological history of Asian America can find that elsewhere.⁴³

Success Won't Save Us makes sense of race, mobility, and belonging within America, through the lens of Asian Americans. While it investigates anti-Asian racism, more broadly it analyzes how white supremacy operates, including at moments we think it is absent, and how to address it. More generally, this book helps make sense of how race works and how minorities perpetuate a system that oppresses them. Minority groups experience race differently, so the limitations impacting one group may not apply to another. Asian Americans do not currently experience mass incarceration, for example, and African Americans today do not have to worry about being barred from owning property because of their country of origin. Asian Americans also benefit from settler colonialism, which is another founding condition of the nation. Even as Asian Americans are often excluded from the nation, they are still adjudicated under civil law.⁴⁴ I focus on white supremacy as a way to explain the power of race. We need to move beyond singular visions of race and beyond an oppressor-versus-oppressed binary where groups are on either one side or the other. Even whites experience marginalization on the basis of gender, class, sexuality, and other social categories.

Concrete steps can be taken to not only fight against inequality but also persuade fellow Asian Americans and allies to join, which is a central aim of the book. Our educational approach must be revised to neither just dwell on Asian Americans' marginalization nor applaud their perseverance. It must identify white supremacy and explain how race has impacted the so-called model minority. But it must also resonate with upwardly mobile Asians' belief in their accomplishments and in American meritocracy. How else will they join in this fight? Educational efforts to mitigate racism must be able to talk about the Asian American experience in a critical manner while also connecting with a broader audience.

In addition, we need to see combating racism as an opportunity to rethink how we approach education, politics, the economy, and other spaces in ways that many people—not just Asians or people of color—will benefit from. Ironically, our approach to fighting anti-Asian racism should not focus on combating racism per se. Instead, we must work toward the kind of communities, schools, town centers, workplaces, et cetera that we want to see, and in the process disincentivize the gains of racism. More capa-

cious understandings of citizenship will not solve these problems of exclusion and precarity, for that still rests on the premise that some groups deserve rights and others deserve violence. To challenge white supremacy, we must go beyond approaches grounded in a simplistic liberalism. Put differently, let's not fight anti-Asian racism. Let's use it as a reason to remake the society we care about.

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Notes

INTRODUCTION

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- 9 B. Yu and Wee, "Vision of Asian-American Cinema."
- 10 Modos, "AAPI Heritage & Culture."
- 11 Baldonado, "Daniel Dae Kim Plays a Spy."
- 12 Tejada, "How Hollywood Treats Asian Actors."
- 13 Tsui, "49 AAPI Designers"; US Army, "Asian Americans & Pacific Islanders."
- 14 Sengupta, "Connie Chung Phenomenon."
- 15 Powell and Morris, "Who Are the NFL Owners?"
- 16 Chi, "Asian Owners Show Their Presence."
- 17 Budiman and Ruiz, "Asian Origin Groups."
- 18 Association for Enterprise Opportunity, "Asian American, Native Hawaiian."
- 19 Jenkins and Talisman, "Asian Wealth in America."
- 20 Frey, "Melting Pot Cities and Suburbs."

21 AAPI Data, *Making Sense of Anti-AAANHPI Hate*.
 22 Levitt, *Transnational Villagers*; Ong, *Flexible Citizenship*.
 23 Montlake, “Why Indian Americans Are Shifting Right.”
 24 Jurecic, “Harmeet Dhillon Is Not Wasting Any Time.”
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 32 Cheryan and Monin, “Where Are You Really From?”; Handron et al.,
 “Unexpected Gains.”
 33 White House, “Potential Creation of a National Museum.”
 34 Polgreen, “One of America’s Most Successful Experiments.”
 35 Purdy, “Making of a Suspect”; Liptak, “News Media Pay in Scientist Suit.”
 36 Budiman and Ruiz, “Asian Origin Groups.”
 37 Asante-Muhammad and Sim, “Racial Wealth Snapshot”; Guo, “Asian
 American ‘Advantage.’”
 38 Budiman, “Income Inequality.”
 39 Millet, “Demographic Profile of Undocumented Immigrants.”
 40 Vue, “Immigration Policies Are Hardening.”
 41 Bier, “Indefinite Suspension of All Refugees.”
 42 Qin, “Why Chinese Americans Have Shifted Rightward.”
 43 Chan, *Asian Americans*; Shelley Sang-Hee Lee, *New History of Asian
 America*; Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*.
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I. THE COSTS AND BENEFITS OF WHITE SUPREMACY

1 US Bureau of Labor Statistics, “U.S. Labor Force Characteristics.”
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 5 Karuka, *Empire’s Tracks*.
 6 Leroy, “Black Philosophies of History.”
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 Segregation.”
 8 Bellin, *Mass Incarceration Nation*.
 9 Wilkerson, *Caste*.
 10 Ortiz, *African American and Latinx History*.
 11 Chavez, *Latino Threat*.