

The Great Demographic Illusion: Ethno-Racial Mixing in Families and the American Future

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Census Bureau population projections

- Population projections are fueling the belief in an imminent majority-minority society, when “more than half of all Americans are projected to belong to a minority group (anything other than non-Hispanic White alone)” (Colby and Ortman, 2015).
- The 2017 projections show this point being reached by 2045.

Race by Hispanic Origin

Projections for the United States: 2017-2060

Main series. Table 5

(2016 base population. Percent of total resident population as of July 1)

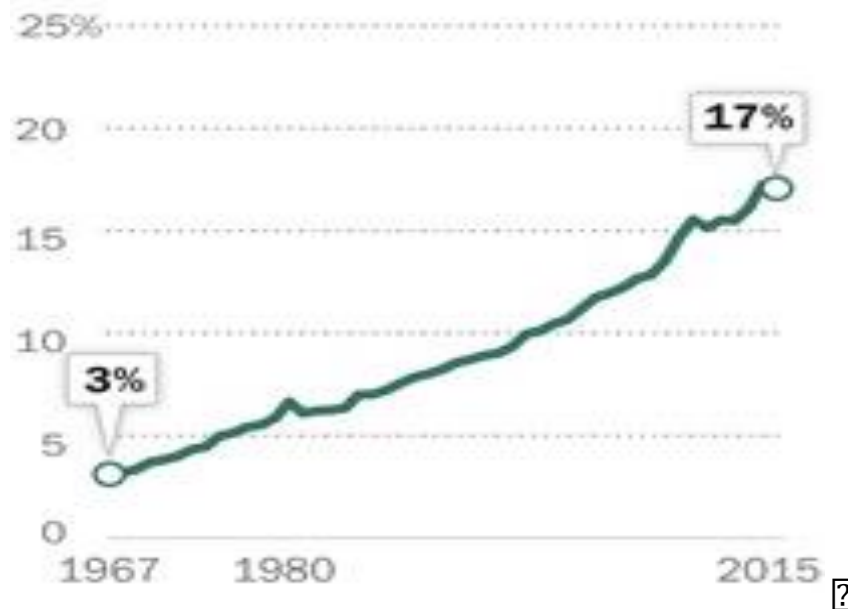
	2016	2020	2025	2030	2035	2040	2045	2050	2055	2060
Total (in percent)	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00
Not Hispanic or Latino	82.21	81.27	80.11	78.93	77.74	76.54	75.40	74.34	73.37	72.50
One race	80.12	78.98	77.56	76.11	74.61	73.10	71.62	70.20	68.87	67.60
White	61.27	59.70	57.75	55.77	53.76	51.74	49.75	47.83	46.02	44.31
Black or African American	12.45	12.53	12.64	12.75	12.86	12.98	13.12	13.26	13.41	13.56
American Indian and Alaska Native	0.74	0.73	0.73	0.72	0.72	0.71	0.70	0.69	0.68	0.67
Asian	5.49	5.83	6.25	6.67	7.08	7.47	7.85	8.21	8.55	8.85
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	0.18	0.18	0.19	0.19	0.19	0.20	0.20	0.20	0.21	0.21
Two or More Races	2.09	2.29	2.55	2.83	3.12	3.44	3.78	4.13	4.51	4.89
Hispanic or Latino	17.79	18.73	19.89	21.07	22.26	23.46	24.60	25.66	26.63	27.50

Impact of the “majority-minority” society as an idea

- Many analyses of the 2016 presidential election trace the outcome to the anxieties of many whites about loss of status due to demographic change (e.g., Mutz, 2018, in PNAS).
- Far-right groups are recruiting on the premise that white dominance in the U.S. is endangered.
- On the other side of the spectrum, a multicultural left welcomes “the end of white America” as “a cultural and demographic inevitability” (Hua Hsu, 2009, in The Atlantic).
- Social psychological research shows that many whites adopt more conservative political stances when presented with a majority-minority scenario (Craig et al., 2018). However, a blending scenario may not have this effect (Myers and Levy, 2018).

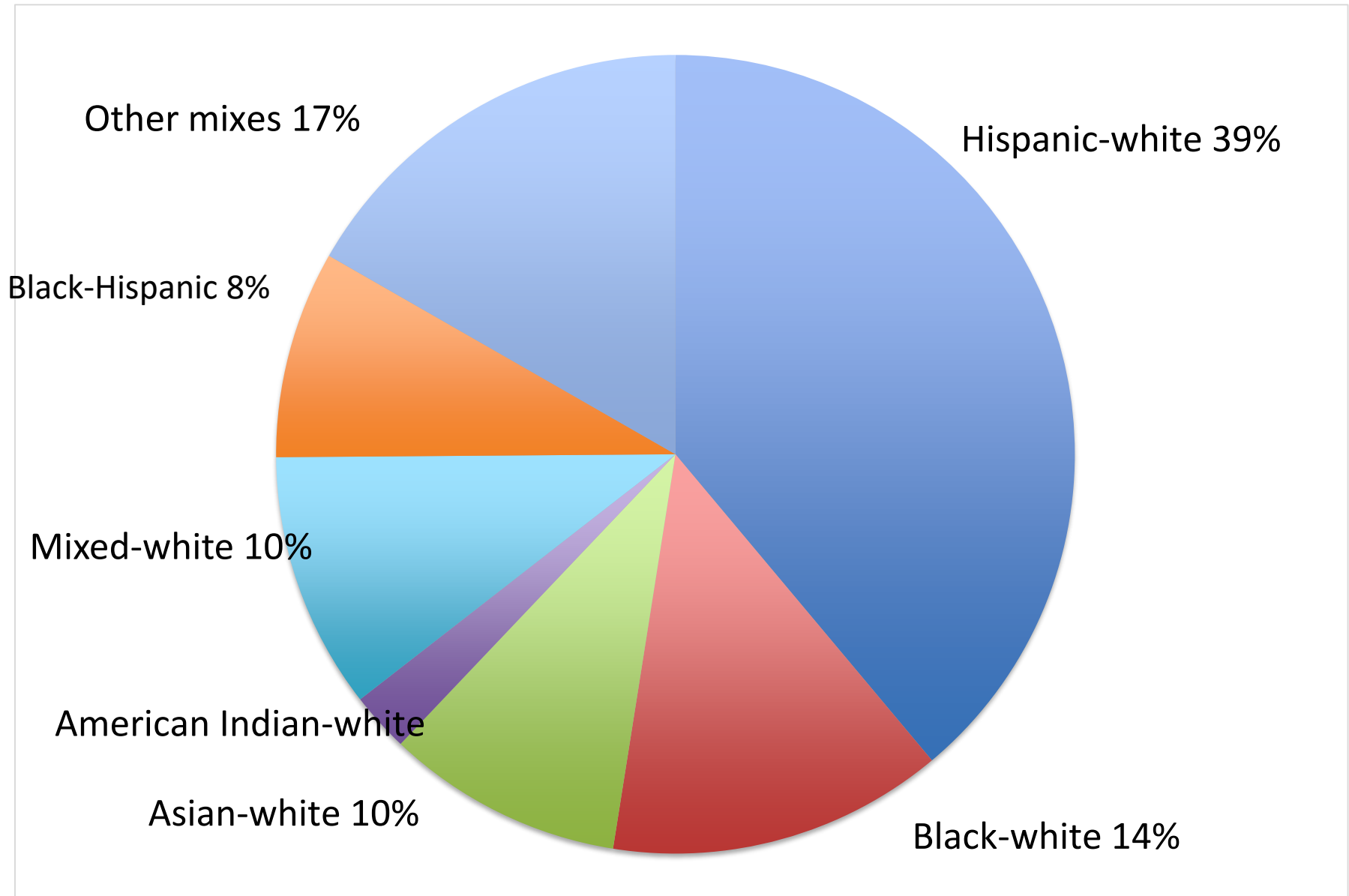
Rise of intermarriage (marriage across major lines of race and Hispanic origin)

*% of newlyweds who are
intermarried*



Source: Pew Research Center (2017).

Ethno-racial mixes (14%) among 2017 infants



Source: 2017 birth certificates

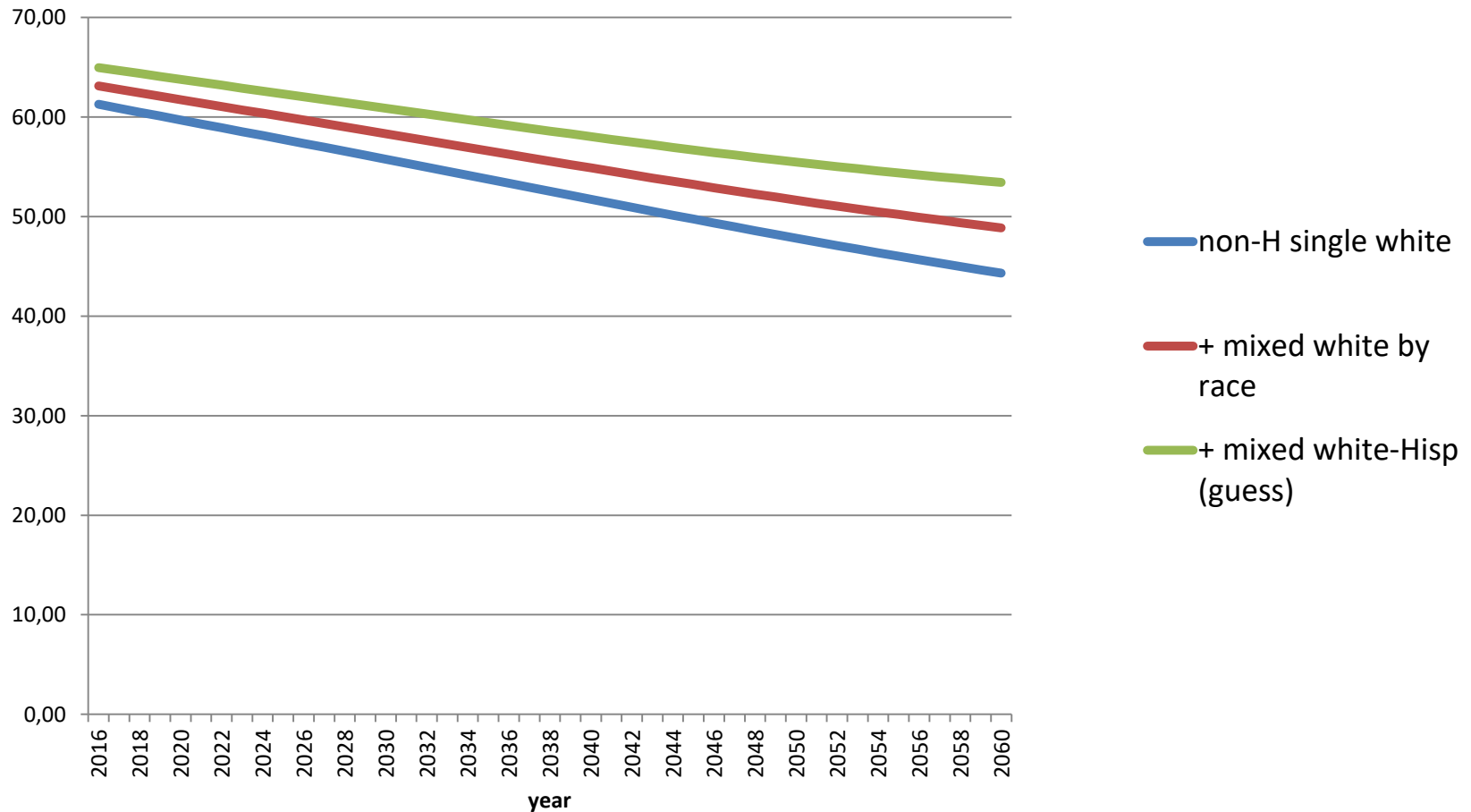
Mixity = big problems for the census

- In its major public presentations of data, the Census Bureau has encouraged binary, mutually exclusive thinking—white vs. not white.
- Individuals who appear as mixed in the census are classified as not white
 - Measurement issue: Census two-question format does not allow mixed Hispanic ancestry to be recognized.
- This creates problems for the projections, but also for statements about current population—“Babies of Color Are Now the Majority, Census Says” (June 1, 2016).

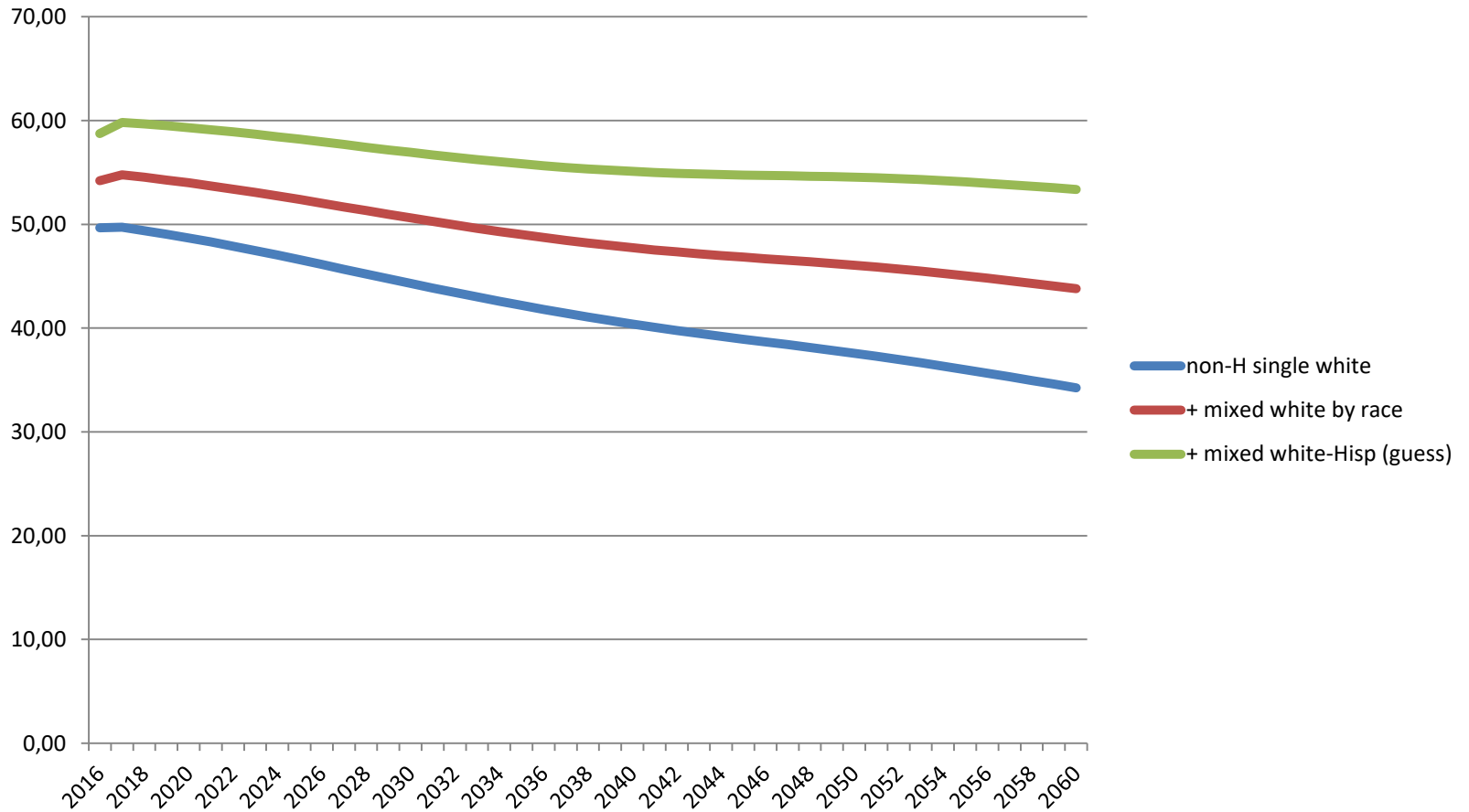
Mixed minority-white individuals are the pivot in the projections

- In contrast to the “one-drop” regime of past racism, most mixed individuals appear to be growing up in mixed family settings.
- However, because binary, zero-sum rigidity still guides thinking, they are mostly classified as minorities.
- Their growth over the time span of the projections is huge, especially among young Americans.

Alternative projections of the white population under more and less inclusive definitions



Alternative projections of whites among infants



What do we know about individuals from mixed backgrounds?

- Knowledge based on census data, specialized surveys, especially conducted by Pew, and some small-scale interview studies.
- A fundamental issue: selectivity in the reporting of mixed background; some studies get around this by ancestry tracing (e.g., Pew).
- Knowledge logically divided up: children vs. adults; topical areas such as social affiliations (incl. marriage partner), social identities (self and others), experiences.

Mixed infants

- Alba and colleagues (Alba et al. 2018) have looked closely at the situations of mixed infants (in the ACS), where the identification of mixture is based on both parents (75 percent).
- Overall, mixed infants are an in-between group, but one that “leans” towards whites
 - Family incomes of most categories of mixed infants are closer to those of white infants than to infants with the same minority heritage.
 - Locations in residential space are also more similar to those of white infants.
- Black-white infants are exceptions.

Mixed adults: Social affiliations

- Social distance from whites is less than that from minority origin—e.g., feel accepted by whites, have a lot in common with them (Pew). The reverse is true for black-white individuals.
- In friendship circles and neighborhoods, mix more with whites than with minority origin. Partly true for black-white persons (Pew).
- Marriage is commonly to white individuals. True of mixed race adults, including black-white ones (Miyawaki 2015). Also true of Anglo-Mexican individuals (Telles and Ortiz 2008).

Mixed adults: Boundary-related experiences

- From the Pew study, “Multiracial in America”:
 - Individuals of mixed race commonly report being “subject to slurs or jokes” “because of their racial background” (though it is not obvious by whom).
 - Partly black individuals are much more likely to experience “poor service,” though this is not uncommon for individuals who are white and Asian.
 - Partly black individuals much more likely to be “unfairly stopped by police.”
- In-depth interviews suggest that mixed Asian-white and Hispanic-Anglo individuals do not feel excluded by whites; not true for black-white persons (Telles & Ortiz 2008; Lee & Bean 2010; Strmic-Pawl 2016).

Mixed individuals: Identities

- Those who are mixed Asian and white prefer a mixed identity, as do those who are black and white; those who are mixed American Indian and white prefer “white” (Pew 2015).
- For those who are Hispanic and Anglo, the evidence indicates that their Hispanic identity is at best muted and that many identify as “white” (Telles & Ortiz 2008; Pew 2017). A recent Pew study estimates that 11 percent of Americans with Hispanic ancestry don’t identify as Hispanic; virtually all are mixed Hispanic. Many other mixed Hispanics describe themselves most often as “American” rather than Hispanic.
- Nevertheless, there is a lot of fluidity and contingency in these identities—hence, the “churning” in census reports observed by Liebler et al. (2017), which except for black-white individuals “leans” white.

How to make sense of this? A proposal

- Need to rely on sociological concepts and theories to understand better the changing social realities that give rise to demographic patterns—in this case, ethno-racial reports.
- Neo-assimilation theory (Alba and Nee 2003; Alba and Duyvendak, 2019): assimilation is equated with entry into a white-dominated mainstream, within which the impact of ethno-racial origins is relatively small.
- Historical experience—post-WW II mass assimilation—shows that assimilation need not extinguish ethnic identities but they come more muted. Hyphenation of ethno-religious identities as an example.

What about the majority-minority society?

- A chimera in the following sense:
 - Most Americans undoubtedly view it as a society constituted by groups discrete and distinct like those of today but with very different sizes.
 - Such a scenario is very unlikely.
- Instead, the pivot of the future is the population coming from mixed majority-minority backgrounds.
- They can be seen as whites, as minorities, as something altogether different.
- Since they can be seen as whites, the projection of whites as a minority is problematic, at a minimum.
- Since they can be seen as minorities, they change our view of minority groups. They add to the evidence of growing heterogeneity within contemporary ethno-racial groups, minority as well as majority (Alba et al. 2014). To this heterogeneity, we should add the inevitable changing generational composition of Asians and Latinos, the groups that have grown most rapidly from immigration.

Some final words

- If the US becomes a majority-minority society, where whites are a minority of the population, it will not look like we currently imagine it.
- More important, our demographic future is, in a fundamental sense, indeterminate. It will not be determined solely by demographic forces—fertility, mortality, migration. The key lies in the social locations of Americans from mixed family backgrounds. They will be determined by sociological forces, such as the willingness of Americans of different ethno-racial origins to cross boundaries.