Utilizing Fluidity and Finding the Self: Developing a Multiracial Identity in Institutions of Higher Learning

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Abstract

This thesis explores the development of the multiracial identity in young adults ages 18 to 23, and how the university environment impacts this process. In it, I ask: What role does a predominantly White university environment play in the development of a multiracial identity and the overall sense of self? What patterns of experience exist amongst this population? And how does the presence of varying intersectional identities impact this journey? Data was gathered through interviews with 22 college students who self-identified as multiracial. The research brings to light the blurred relationship between race and ethnicity in the American context. It was also determined that there was a clear contrast in the ways in which subjects see themselves as a multiracial individual and the ways others perceive them, a disparity which creates an internal identity conflict around belonging in racial communities and a barrier to understanding the self. Overall, this study speaks about the racialized nature of higher learning, and points to a much larger, societal issue about how Americans are socialized not to engage with multiple racial identities at once. Ultimately, it was determined that the college environment provides tools that allow multiracial students the opportunity to situate themselves both in their campus community and in American society.
Chapter 1

Introduction

“I always knew I was a little different than everybody else… that something was a little bit off about me. Then in third grade we took a standardized test where we had to put our race in a box. I raised my hand and asked my teacher, ‘I’m not White and I’m not Black, I’m a little bit of each. So, which one do I put down?’ and she told me to just put that I’m White. It didn’t seem right to me, but I did it. That was my first defining moment, I looked at a paper that was so official and I realized that there wasn’t anything there to categorize me. It took a long time to figure myself out after that.” - Nina

College is designed to foster growth from both a personal and academic standpoint. For many, it is a process of learning and unlearning a variety of ideas to create a developed sense of self and perception of the world around us. Being that campuses are full of students trying to define themselves, institutions of higher learning have created an environment where discussions about identity are common and often even expected when meeting new people. In this way, self-determination and personal consciousness are heightened in these spaces as students are often developing the language skills to grapple with their individual experiences.

Of the many identities questioned in this period of growth and transition, understanding the racial self is a prominent theme. While race is a social construct, meaning it is a phenomenon that is neither part of nature nor does it exist outside of human perception, its impacts on the human experience are very tangible and long-lasting. In other words, race is not rooted in biological fact; it is created by those in power and accepted by the majority of individuals in a society. The color line, the racial divide created and reinforced by the dominating majority, plays a determining role in how one’s very being is defined both internally and by others. In the
twenty-first century, the color line has shifted as an increasing number of individuals identify as multiracial.

This study focuses on the multiracial experience in institutions of higher learning. In particular, I ask: What role does the university environment play in the development of a multiracial identity and the sense of self? What patterns of experience exist amongst this population? And how does the presence of varying intersectional identities impact this journey? Considering the societal pressure for young adults to get a college degree, it is important to understand the many impacts that this experience can have on various populations of individuals. As of late, very little information exists to represent how multiracial students as a category are affected by this environment.

While studies in this field are relatively limited, there are several major theoretical frameworks on multiracialism and identity. Foundationally, theorists argue between analyzing “multiracial” as its own racial category, understanding multiracials by breaking down their identities into separate racial labels, or developing understandings of particular multiracial groups depending on statistically common mixes. While I would argue that all three of these frameworks serve an equally important purpose and are ultimately helpful in understanding the racial self, this thesis will look to analyze multiracial as its own category, to find any existing patterns of experience that persist regardless of particular racial or ethnic mixes. I will further explain these theories and others of relevance in depth in the literature review.

This study shifted from its original research questions. Being bilingual and being able to share my culture through Spanglish has always been an important facet of my life. For this reason, I started my research hoping to discover how language might correspond to multiracial,
multiethnic, and multicultural heritages, and how language correlates with how identity is performed in institutions of higher learning. In other words, I wanted to know if monolingual people had a different experience with racial identity in college than multilingual people. Since language shapes perception, I hypothesized that the ways in which multiethnic people are able to communicate their culture(s) through language would directly impact how they are able to experience and present themselves in college, especially at predominantly White institutions. However, while gathering data I quickly learned this focus mattered very little to my interview subjects. Instead, I learned that communication and internalized narratives about language and race mattered more to subjects than fluency with the languages themselves. For this reason the study changed accordingly to reflect the preoccupations of my participants.

With this in mind, this thesis specifically focuses on multiracial college students who are 18-23 years old. To gather data, I interviewed twenty-two individuals between October 2019 and March 2020, who self-identify as multiracial. During these interviews, we discussed their thoughts and feelings about growing up with varying racial and ethnic identities, how college has impacted their sense of self, and the role that language played in the development of their individual multiracial identities. For the purpose of this study, the term “mixed-race” will be used and is intended to be purposefully ambiguous. Participants were able to self-identify whether or not they are multiracial, and as a group, brought their unique experiences to our conversations. I recruited a small number of initial participants, and then focused primarily on snowball sampling to find the rest of my interview subjects. All of my conversations were semi-structured and guided by a set of predetermined questions that were later adjusted as needed to fit each individual. Following the data collection, I documented and analyzed each
conversation through a process of loose coding to see if any patterns emerged regarding shared experiences or feelings on identity. (See Chapter 3 for more detail on methods.)

In my own experience, understanding my identity as a multiracial, multiethnic person has been a leading facet of my ability to understand myself and represent myself authentically to others. When growing up, strangers would often ask my mother how long she had been working for my family. Even though she was holding me and gave no indications that we weren’t related, her deep caramel brown skin next to my pale, freckled face was apparently enough to tell others that we didn’t belong together. Throughout our upbringing, my sister and I were confused about where we belonged. While I speak both Spanish and English and am lighter skinned, she is monolingual in English, looks visibly darker, and stereotypically “more hispanic.” In public, friends and family alike joked that my Jewish, Caucasian father was so lucky to land a beautiful Latin woman like my mother and often commented how lucky we were to have authentic Mexican food at home (which we rarely do). These same individuals also often made racist comments to my mother; they accused her of marrying my father for a passport (even though she was born in Los Angeles) and frequently made judgements regarding the ways in which she chose to share her culture with my sister and me. Needless to say, we were confused. In White spaces we were token Mexicans and in Mexican spaces we were told we’re “too White.”

Upon first entering the university environment, I had no idea how to speak about myself. In an environment where everyone seemed to be talking about identity, I felt as though I had nothing substantial to say. Furthermore, I was shocked to find that ignorance still exists in college. Many White, privileged peers often tokenized me in classes and social scenarios. A sorority “needed more Latinas” and pushed me to join, while professors asked me to speak in
class on behalf of all Latinx communities. Throughout my time in college at a predominantly White institution, I have frequently been made to feel as though my Hispanic heritage is the leading facet of my identity. Because of this, I often feel as though I am forced to perform my Chicana identity in unauthentic, stereotypical ways for White audiences so as to make them feel more “cultured,” that is, so they feel more accepting and educated about my experience. In front of White peers, I use my “academic voice,” and only communicate in English. Conversely, when surrounded by peers of color, I allow myself to use slang terms from childhood, and often use Spanish words or phrases interchangeably in communication. After taking a class on intersectional womanism to learn how to combat these experiences, I decided to build a major focusing on intercultural communication. While my experience is but a single story, it sparked questions about how my experience compares to that of others, and eventually led to this research.

This thesis is organized to mirror the process of identity development expressed by the individuals interviewed. It follows identity and experiences prior to college, additional intersecting identities that also impact racial identity, and finally the influences of development in the university environment that lead to various forms of personal change. A brief literature review of existing theory and data on multiracialism and an in-depth explanation of my research methods are provided to build a foundation of general understanding through which to understand the subjects represented in the study. Following this, the next three chapters are structured to discuss the foundations of identity prior to entering college, which intersecting identities play an important role in the understanding of the multiracial self, and the ways in which this identity is subject to change in college due to a variety of environmental factors.
Ultimately, I argue that the college experience and overall university environment provide a medium through which multiracial young adults are not only able to better understand themselves, but learn how to utilize their identities to be an asset in their daily lives. In doing so, an internal and external racial self emerges, where individuals are able to regulate the gap between their self-understanding and the perceptions of others.

Although the field of multiracialism is relatively new, already there are a variety of different scholarly frameworks available to think about multiracial identity building. That is what I turn to in the next chapter.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

Race, while entirely arbitrary, holds real and tangible implications in people’s lived experience. As a man-made social construct, race and the many qualities associated with it have been built to reflect the ideologies of the dominating majority in order to keep them, White people, in power. However, while capricious in its construction, the impacts of race and racism are abundantly palpable in American society. My research will focus on the mixed race experience of undergraduates at predominantly White institutions (oftentimes referred to as PWIs). Being that college is often a time period of intensive growth, socialization, and learning I ask how students’ multiracial identities are impacted by this space and the forms of sociality that higher learning demands. In doing this research, I hoped to discover how language might correspond to racial, ethnic, and cultural, heritage and identity, and how identity is performed in institutions of higher learning.

Prior to contacting potential subjects, I focused on developing a well-rounded understanding of the field as it stands today. When searching for secondary sources, I looked for three major categories: defining race at large and critical race theory, multiracial identity, and multilingualism. The existing literature on multiracial studies comes from several disciplines and includes both theoretical findings and qualitative and quantitative empirical data. The majority of data come from mixed-race studies, with significant contributions from sociology, psychology, education, African and African American studies, and sociolinguistic studies. All three of these categories, defining race, multiracial identity, and multilingualism, readily intersect in the lived
experience of mixed-race individuals, which is exemplified in the way data are recorded and analyzed by scholars. Amongst the many emerging categories within the literature on multiraciality, several overarching themes have proven most applicable for my particular set of research questions. In no particular order, they are: defining race and redefining the color line, finding and performing identity, the influence of intersecting categories and the “racial middle,” multilingualism in culture, and hypotheses on how the future may be shaped by changes in the perceptions of race and multiracialism.

**Defining Race and Redefining the Color Line**

Considering that the field of multiracial studies is relatively young, scholars are still debating how best to find a general foundation for this arena of study. Before delving into this field, one must first seek to define race. The concept of race was based in understandings of biology and physiology, which were subject to change overtime. Ideas about race began in the late sixteenth century when the English elite began referring to Irish people as the “less than human ‘savage’” (Baker 1). At this point in time, race was described as a scientific fact in order to provide credibility for and justify racially segregated societal hierarchies. These very same traits were later used to describe and discriminate against African and indigenous populations throughout the following three centuries (Baker 1). The traits ascribed to these groups portrayed them as biologically (and thus fixedly) uncivilized, and therefore justified why they should be seen as below the criteria for moral, ethical, and even legal treatment. The idea that these traits could be ascribed to any group, regardless of their physiological makeup, is proof that race is only made to satisfy bigoted behavior of those in power. In other words, “Race is not about what one is, but rather what one counts as in a particular time and place” (Korgen and Bailey 76).
Thus, race as a social construct, not a scientific fact, has created a sort of racialized common sense that people in American society use to inform their decisions on how to perceive themselves and others. This is to say that racial ideologies are arbitrary and were created to inform a system of power and control based on how cultural and psychological traits were ascribed to physiological and biological ones.

Within the context of America, colonialism and capitalism have created a system of control where wealthy White people have the most societal power. These systems were originally and forcibly built on the backs of African slaves, and by robbing Native Americans of their land. These dispossessions were justified by White elites through the aforementioned scientific racial hierarchy, where Whites, who created the science, were placed higher than all others. These forms of violence and dispossession were seen as justified, and thus laid the foundation for a society rooted in racism.

While race is a man-made social construct, its impacts are still very real and long-lasting. From the school to prison pipeline, to the alarming inequities in healthcare and environmental protections for bodies of color, there is clearly a difference in treatment correlated with one's racial group. We already see here how the intersection of Whiteness and the “other” races as defined by American society, a combination of the colonizer and the colonized, could form a complicated intersection in the lives of mixed-race individuals. This becomes increasingly problematic given the national perception that just one drop of non-White blood makes one not White. This has helped marginalize multiracial individuals historically by placing them outside of Whiteness.
Additionally, in defining race is it often important to distinguish between race and ethnicity. Both terms are difficult to precisely define, as each is defined in relation to marginalization subjected by the dominant group in society onto those identified as “other”. With this in mind, defining each term in some part allows for older, now unaccepted theories (mostly about racial loyalty and intermarriage) that have since been rendered to be racially insensitive to emerge, despite the comprehension of newer theory (Orkin et. al. 1). Ethnicity usually connotes location, and thus refers to a group bonded by similar origin. This can include shared ancestry, migration, culture and language (Bates 1). Race, while also referring to shared culture, ancestry and history, has been constructed to refer specifically to visible physiological categories, like skin color or hair type, and more recently extended to genetic markers used to create in and outgroup status. While racial categorizations are ever changing, the presently circulating U.S. Census Bureau recognizes five major racial groups: White American, Black or African American, American Indians and Alaska Native, Asian American, and Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander with an option to mark more than one racial group (U.S. Census Bureau 2018). These identifiers were chosen to “generally reflect a social definition of race recognized in this country and not an attempt to define race biologically, anthropologically, or genetically,” (U.S. Census Bureau 2018). This method of categorization also asserts that those who signify that they are Hispanic or Latino may be of any racial group. Both “race” and “ethnicity” are means of affirming an identity, and are often important layers of the developing identity. Moreover, both terms are defined on the basis of difference, and are entirely intertwined with systematic racism, xenophobia, and prejudice. Yet, by just taking a close look at how the census itself attempts to create distinctions between race and ethnicity, one can see how these categories
are flexible, historically contingent and continually change. Because of this lack of distinction, the terms “race” and “ethnicity” are often used interchangeably both in everyday conversation and in people’s experiences.

In terms of quantitative data, the number of recorded individuals who have reported themselves as mixed-race has been steadily increasing over the course of the past forty years, particularly since 2000 when the U.S. Census Bureau allowed for individuals to mark one or more racial categories (DaCosta 22). In fact, it is predicted that by 2050, as many as 1 in 5 Americans will be multiracial (Farley, 2001; Smith & Edmonston, 1997). While a significant portion of scholars credit this to the “interracial baby boom” following the Loving v. Commonwealth of Virginia case of 1967, when the Supreme Court abolished anti-miscegenation (a term referring to romantic interracial relationships) laws prohibiting interracial marriage, increases of interracial relationships for Latinx, Asian, and Native Americans were already in place long before the court case (Spencer, 70). With this in mind, as the numbers of reported mixed-race people increased, scholarly and popular attention to them increased as well.

Furthermore, these numbers can be questioned due to the one-drop rule (which will be further discussed later in the chapter) that defines any multiracial individual as non-White. Therefore, even beyond the lack of categories and miscegenation laws, there is a long history of refuting the categorical possibility of being multiracial.

When analyzing today’s scholarship, Spencer has identified two major lenses of critique that have emerged: one accepts mixed race as an identity category and another refutes it. The first lens understands race, and therefore multiracials, as a physical reality and a category that needs advocacy. The second refutes race by “[problematizing] race and its various reifications”
(Spencer 2). In other words, this lens asserts that to recognize race as a real category is to validate it. The latter is often criticized for being unsympathetic to the lives and experiences of mixed-race individuals in real time (Spencer 2). In addition to these lenses, I would argue that a third position exists: one where race is rejected as empirically, biologically, and physically “real,” yet still accepts that these arbitrary, flexible and shifting social categories have tangible effects that are important to acknowledge. For this reason, and since this study focuses on lived experience, I will be operating under the lens of the last position.

Multiracialism as a social category has its roots in social policy and activism. In a society where “racial identification is considered an important part of self-identity and norms about racial authenticity and loyalty are strong” (DaCosta 24), conforming to expectations as a mixed-race person can be difficult. Up until the 1930 census, there was a category explicitly for mulattoes, an outdated term for mixed race individuals of various percentages of Black and White. This designation was created based on the “one drop rule,” a segregation tactic claiming that any person with a single ancestor of sub-Saharan African ancestry is to be seen and treated as Black. This continued until the tracking of mass European immigration became the priority, as Irish and Italian immigrants became the primary focus of “racialized” bigotry (DaCosta 25). This speaks to why it has since been so difficult and challenging to accept “multiracial” as its own category. The one-drop rule makes it impossible to be mixed, one is just considered to be Black. Furthermore, this tactic is rooted in keeping slave populations; even if a White person fathered a child, said child would become another slave that he would own. It also served as a way of punishing Black people simply for being Black, as the notion of Whitening was impossible, and thus making Blackness feel undesirable. This aided in the creation of the color line in America,
the social and political characterization of individuals based on different physiological traits like skin color (DuBois, 1881).

In the 1960s, a swell of multiracial activism emerged. Multiracial activists, made up mostly of mixed-race adults and parents in interracial relationships, crafted their identities in opposition to the exclusionary membership of their ethnroracial groups. This fight, stemming from a need to feel represented in an individualist culture, ultimately led to both federal and state legislation that allows for the designation of multiple racial identities -- including the addition of the “choose one or more” option on the U.S. Census. This process served the greater purpose of moving multiracialism from a personal to a public issue and making it an acceptable identity category.

The very existence of multiracials problematizes the color line. To truly comprehend the multiacial identity and experience, we need to denaturalize race and the way we see it in our society. This is to say that multiracial politics “should be understood as part of an historical transformation in kinship, ideology, and social relations that [has] come about as the result of conflict, contradiction, and struggle” (DaCosta 174). As the number of self-identified multiracials grows, the color line becomes blurred, with no way of trapping subjects within the boxes of an individual racial group. To demand recognition for the unique challenges of multiracialism is to directly dispute the American system of social and political classification predicated on a Black-White racial binary. This reflexively rejects the logic of the one-drop rule, by showing that kinship is not defined solely by racial boundaries.

As the field of mixed-race studies has developed over time, so too has theory and terminology to define the subject. It should be noted that the vast majority of existing theory and
data has come from the United States, with the United Kingdom as a close second. While racial mixing dates back in Africa and Europe long before the creation of “New World America,” theorization regarding hybridity and the mixed-race experience is still relatively new in American society. In the rest of the subcontinent, however, being mixed has not posed the same social issue as in the U.S. since being mixed in Latin America played a significant role in Whitening the population and creating nation-states. In the search to find unifying terminology, scholars have discovered that very few terms are widely acceptable in our rapidly changing social and temporal contexts. A vast grasp of historical context is required to comprehend and effectively use the various terms for mixed race and different racially mixed peoples. The term “mixed race” in and of itself is debated in academia since it historically refers to Black-White mixed individuals (Christian xxvi). Because of this, the term is sometimes considered by scholars to be problematic, while others use it synonymously with “multiracial.”

Theory on multiracialism is equally mixed. Some argue that any person of more than one racial origin is “‘fixed’ to the ‘racial group’ of his/her heritage which has the least social status in the given society,” (Christian xxv). This is known as hypodescent, and is used as a descriptor of parentage and ancestry, not as a specified category. Furthermore, it is important to note here how this ideology then allows for people who are multiracial to not have full access to the privilege that comes with their heritage that has more social status, thus sustaining the particular system of power in America. Others have argued that the mixed-race identity is unique, separate from either of its racial parts. Folks who identify with this may employ the term melange to describe themselves (Christian xxv). This argument is regularly disputed on the basis that it minimizes the experiences of any marginalized group in an individual's lineage. Referring specifically to the
Black-White mixed experience, scholars have asserted that this notion of trying to exist as a separate racial group altogether stems from either feelings of White-guilt or Black self-hatred (Christian 5).

Scholars today generally agree that multiracial individuals are marginalized people, which varies in degrees based on a variety of other factors such as ethnic groups, colorism, socioeconomic status, sexuality, immigration status, language, etc. The debate begins as to why the positionality of a multiracial person is marginalized. Early theorists in the U.S. argued that hybridity in America leads to self-consciousness and alienation, thus making a “marginal man” (Christian 6). This theory suggests multiracial people are to be forever barred from full membership in any racial group, which would lead to eternal psychological stunting. Having crafted these theories in the early 1920s, most scholars of this mindset sought to reinforce anti-miscegenation attitudes; they are largely rejected today. Later theorists transitioned the conversation from multiracials being marginalized by cultural and psychological internal conflict to that of societal circumstance. This is to say that the society one lives in creates the stigmas and norms that lead to social hierarchy and the marginalization of all non-White people, including those with multiple racial identities.

Later scholars have theorized that this phenomenon of internal conflict often requires an integration of identities in order to form a multiracial identity. This process is both helped and hindered by feelings of conflict and distance. Conflict is when people feel that their “two [or more] identities represent values and norms that fundamentally contradict one another, whereas distance refers to perceptions that the two identities are separated from one another,” (Cheng and Lee 53). The perceived levels of these components impact feelings of group membership and
supposed belonging. Those who perceive high levels of conflict and distance are more likely to feel alienated, whereas others who perceive lower levels experience higher identity integration.

Theorizing about multiracialism is particularly difficult in the United States, where the push for the creation of a separate “multiracial” identification and acceptance is seen as divisive. This is largely because of the lasting effects of the “one drop rule” that are still ingrained in American society, culture, and the lived experience of Black Americans. Furthermore, this distinction of multiracial as a category of othering raises concerns about White-washing one’s identity by erasing historical ties to oppression and further removing people from their racial in-groups.

Identity: Self-Discovery and Performance

It is now common knowledge that all people require social belonging to thrive. In other words, a feeling of positive relatedness, social feedback, validation, and shared experiences is a pinnacle part of the human experience. This social and emotional safety rests on the pillars of basic constructs like morality, language, and familial culture. These concepts, which are often taken for granted by monoracial folks without marginalized racial or ethnic identities in privileged positions, “take on a different meaning or [may] be in conflict with the multiracial person’s identity” (Oliver 29). This is because the internal conflict of balancing historically incompatible groups is not seen as a legitimate possibility within the systems of classification in American society. This idea, of cross-cultural inconsistencies and differing social expectations, often leads to social rejection and confusion in the lives of multiracial children. Because of this, socialization is more difficult, as many multiracials have been reported to build a necessary sense of double consciousness: “Du Bois suggests that double consciousness means ‘always looking at
oneself through the eyes of others,’ a process yielding ‘no true self consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world’” (Elam 154). This is to say that the multiracial identity, and racial identities as a whole, are built on the intersection of how we view ourselves and how we are viewed by others. Authors Harris and Sim unpack this claim further, explaining:

What an individual believes about his or her own race is an internal racial identity. Observers' beliefs about an individual are external racial identities. Moreover, there are expressed racial identities - words and actions that convey beliefs about an individual's race (615).

This doubled consciousness creates a framework where non-White and multiracial people are conditioned to code switch, meaning the use of different dialects or vernaculars depending on social context to project a specific facet of one’s identity. This creates an environment of constant self-awareness so that the multiracial person may be seen within the “correct” parameters of any specific social situation (this is also the case with monoracial people who do not occupy a racial position of privilege). However, in doing so, “rather than yield self-consciousness … it leads to a political cul-de-sac” (Elam 155). Thus, in developing a system of code switching for social acceptance, these multiple racial and ethnic identities, as well as other monoracial identities that are not dominant, are often not allowed to exist in tandem, thus reinforcing the problematic and archaic ideologies of race.

The multiracial experience is entrenched in the capacity for multiple truths. This is to say that while people of mixed race and mixed race families are a distinct group as “multiracial,” they are also “asserting specific mixed ethnoracial identifications such as ‘Japanese and Mexican’ or ‘Black and Irish” (DaCosta 174). This process is largely due to the work of activists. Today’s progress is often hindered by the lack of community amongst mixed race individuals.
Without membership affiliation and norms of specific racial or ethnic groups, the growing multiracial community is built on shared common relief at alleviating cultural homelessness, a term used to describe how multiracials are alienated from all of their assigned racial groups (Oliver 16). While the multiracial community is often discredited as furthering the American individualist mindset by trying to find means to make one seem or feel more unique, for many multiracials, finding and learning about this community is a tool for decolonizing the mind. What is seen as a radical movement for kinship provides a “space for our multiracial community to emerge and reify their lived experiences” (Oliver 17).

In addition to being accepted as an official category, everyday life is also changing for multiracial individuals. This is further complicated by the notion of who “gets” to be identified and identify as “multiracial.” This term, and the majority of multiracial studies at large, commonly refer to those of Black-White mixes. While that research is important, the experiences of dual-minority individuals, or even more simply those with no White parent, are also worth discussing and should not be erased. In this way, staying within a framework where being multiracial is solely about Black-White sustains this American binary and erases other multiracial populations. In cases like this, there is a significant amount of debate regarding who is “multiracial,” versus who is “multiethnic.” While some use the terms interchangeably, others argue that the lack of racial distinction signifies less social distance to Whiteness, both in terms of ethnicities associated with Whiteness and physiological characteristics that make someone look Whiter, and therefore less oppressed.

Furthermore, racial and ethnic ambiguity lies at the heart of who claims the multiracial identity. For multiracial individuals whose ethnic ambiguity is a point of contention in their
experiences, external interpretations of the self become more important. (Khanna 2). External confusion based on one’s supposedly ambiguous phenotype leads to what may be a confusing internal definition of the self. This varies in importance amongst different subgroups. For example, specifically among people who are half-White/half-minority, those who look White and those who are from predominantly White environments are more likely to identify as biracial than monoracial (Brunsma & Rockquemore, 2001). Furthermore, in a 2015 study it was discovered that “Black/White or Latino/White people may often be categorized monoracially as minority and not afforded the choice to identify as biracial” (Townsend, Wilkins, Fryberg and Markus 95). It is hypothesized that this may be with the ultimate purpose of reinforcing and preserving racial boundaries rooted in colorism and the one-drop rule.

Passing, meaning those who can be viewed and treated as White in different social contexts, is another major focus in the discussion on multiracial identity. Scholars debate what makes one an “ambiguous body,” whether it be phenotype or situational and cultural contexts. In this context a certain power, rooted in systems of internalized and externally reinforced systematic racism and oppression, lies in how one is seen both by those of the highest social power (wealthy Whites) and those of one's own subgroup(s). For example, in her work, author Nikki Khanna discovered that, “White people... see them as Black (not biracial, and certainly not White), while Black people are more likely to recognize their biracial/multiracial backgrounds. These conflicting perceptions have the potential to shape different “racial reflections” (e.g., as Black or biracial)” (12). These conflicting perceptions also include other markers like a social faux pas or an accent that might mark one as “other.”
Another impact of this experience is what is referred to at the chameleon experience. Both despite and because of feelings of alienation from their unique racial mixtures, several multiracial subjects have reported that a positive side of their ethnic ambiguity is the ability to “blend in” in many different racialized spaces. This is due to flexible group boundaries and social attitudes amongst multiracials, and an ability to accept “oneself without needing to exclude others and valuing both similarities and differences among people, the latter of which has been defined as universal– diverse orientation,” (Miville et al. 510). This was found in a 2005 study that reported the chameleon experience to be one of four prominent themes in racial identity development along with encounters with racism, racial identity label and/or reference group orientation, and identity development in context (Miville et al. 510).

The complicated implications of both double consciousness and the nature of being White passing stem from an opposition to Whiteness. It is important to note here that historically speaking, many first-generation mixed-race individuals were the products of rape of indigenous or enslaved people by White, European colonizers. This is to say that while many of today’s multiracial Americans may not identify with this history, the ever-lasting consequences of colonialism are still very much present in today’s society. One cannot mention this history without discussing the impacts of White supremacy on the multiracial community. Texeira attempts to summarize by saying, "Moreover, we cannot understand the (multiracial) movement unless it is placed in the context of White supremacy. White supremacy informs us that divisions, including racial labels and categories among people of color in the United States, have always benefited a White power structure that has often endorsed attempts to disunite nonWhites” (22). Within the Black Power movement, back in the 1960s, there was a serious
push to reject miscegenation for this reason. While this is no longer the case and some argue that this point is now “old news,” racial groups are often built on perceived group loyalty, often justifiably in opposition to Whiteness. While intermarriage is legal, numerically speaking it is still rare, particularly amongst Black-White couples. For example, some scholars today still “claim that Asian out marriage reflects Asian self-hatred and is an attempt to leave behind a stigmatized group” (DaCosta 174). This self-identification is seen in the differing contexts in which people do or do not choose to claim a multiracial identity. It is also important to note that while children are unable to choose their parents, they may have the agency to choose which, whether either or both, parent’s race they identify most with.

Finally, another factor that contemporary science has brought into the conversation is genetic testing. To be clear, race includes a multitude of factors and is much more complex than biology and DNA. Nonetheless, the quantitative evidence of one's supposed genetic racial makeup is often seen as a lucrative business, and is growing in popularity. Genetic testing is a slippery slope as it reinforces obsolete assertions about race, primarily that there are four isolated parental origin locations determining ancestry (Bolnic et. al. 1). This service overall reinforces the archaic ideology that race is innately genetic, and can be determined biologically. Furthermore, this increasingly blurs race with ethnicity, as ethnicity is cultural and therefore lacks a biological marker. Keeping in mind being that race in America is often a staple in one’s socialization and developing identity, learning about one’s ancestry can be seen as a means for better understanding oneself. Genetic testing is meant to increase multiculturalism and build bridges between individuals and new cultures that they are somehow biologically linked to. In
theory this may play a role in making multiracialism more socially accepted as people who previously identified as monoracial are able to recognize they have multiple backgrounds.

**Influence of Intersecting Categories**

Nearly all discussions on race rely on what subgroups are involved. This is to say that, “All identities are influenced by a variety of factors and biracial identity is no exception,” (Townsend et al. 95). As authors Harris and Sim assert, “In different settings, traits such as phenotype, ancestry, and culture are differently and differentially privileged as criteria for identifying one's race” (615). In other words, the various facets of one’s racial identity are perceived and treated differently depending on situational context. Any discussion on identity would be remiss without examining intersectionality. Kimberle Crenshaw’s work is central to any discussion on intersectionality, identity, and race studies. In her article, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” she teaches us that intersectionality is the way each layer of our identities is intertwined in such a way that all are present, in some form, at every moment – and all enmeshed in different structures of power and oppression. An understanding of intersectionality can also serve as a way to dismantle marginalization by creating new and authentic ways of existing in the world despite normative societal pressures (Crenshaw 1299). With this in mind, every aspect of our identity acts as an influence, especially when one or more of those identities is marginalized by society. Within the context of multiracial people, this means that even while experiencing White privilege, White passing or racially ambiguous persons are simultaneously experiencing oppression as a people of color and/or based on their gender, religion, sexuality, bodily ability, socioeconomic status, etc.
Class is one of the leading intersecting factors in the self-determination of a multiracial identity. Research has shown that upper class citizens of high-status “are more likely to identify as White, and less likely to identify as Black, than low-status people (e.g., those who have been unemployed or impoverished” (Penner & Saperstein, 2008). This becomes even more nuanced and complicated when outside factors such as social class, opportunities for social mobility, sexuality, gender identity, and education come into play.

In her book, *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa does the work of unpacking the complicated nature of the politics of location in the Chicana experience. Because she is made to live with her mixed identity split mita y mita (both geographically and emotionally), la mestiza, the creation of a new double-consciousness, emerges. This double consciousness differs from that of Du Bois, in that la mestiza refers to differing consciousness based on a politics of location in addition to social circumstance. Because of expectations mapped onto her personhood, her identities exist in opposition to Whiteness. The discussion of the influence of social location in Latina frameworks is often applied in multiracial theory. This is to say that one’s positionality, meaning the social and political contexts that help to build identity, impacts identity by means of political deployment and access to knowledge (Ortega 173). In other words, where we live and grow up play a significant role in the creation of the racial self.

**Multilingualism in Multiracial Culture**

Language is yet another essential factor in the performance of identity (Korgen and Bailey 76). In American society, the way one speaks allows us to claim identities for ourselves and have identities mapped onto us. As a primary tool for negotiating reality, language acts as a bridge
from the private to the public versions of the self. Additionally, “we tend to identify certain ways of speaking with membership in particular ethnic and racial categories” (Korgen and Bailey 76). While not all racial and ethnic groups are tied to specific ways of talking, communication style is often directly correlated with group membership. To exist as a “full member” of a racial group, one must perform said identity in a way that is deemed acceptable by other group members. This is particularly important for multiracial people, as their membership in multiple groups is often brought into question. In its intersection with classism, racism, and sexism, speech is a noticeable pathway to group membership (for example, “‘He looks Black, but he talks White,’” or “She’s a doctor but she doesn’t sound that educated when she talks’”) (Korgen and Bailey 77). When stereotypes regarding speech do not match the particular phenotypes they have been assigned to, people tend to question the identity of the speaker. This applies to various accents, dialects, and syntax and grammatical patterns.

Just as predetermined attitudes are mapped onto various vernaculars and dialects of speaking English in America, so too are they ascribed to different languages. The languages we speak embody both cultural and individual identities, and have intense impacts on how one relates to social groups and society at large (Zulueta 179). This is so much so that they can be used as coping mechanisms and devices for shaping perception. This theory is known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which asserts that our understanding is crafted based on the language available to grapple with our experiences (Zulueta 181). Language as a differentiator “fosters the political, economic and cultural dominance of the majority group, and the solidarity of the minority group” (Fischman). In reference to bilingualism, a balanced bilingual or multilingual is equally confident in both or all of the languages spoken, whereas a dominant bilingual or
multilingual is more comfortable in one (Zulueta 181). The ways in which languages are perceived both by speakers and onlookers provide insights into the dominant culture regarding how the language and ethnic group in question are viewed in American society.

The majority of the work in this field, at least from a United States standpoint, has focused on immigrant groups (Chen et al. 804). More specifically, the focus has been on Latin Americans and mainly, Mexican-Americans and Chicanos (descendants of Mexican immigrants). Studies of this subgroup have repeatedly shown that general attitudes towards bilingualism impact personal and professional opportunities for social and class mobility in the United States. These attitudes also have grave impacts on political consciousness (Hurtado and Gurin 1). When bilingualism in a minority language is accepted, it tells us that the preservation of said language is allowed by the dominating majority so long as a firm grasp of English is also obtained. This take on multiculturalism ensures that minority groups are able to “keep” their cultures while still conforming to the melting-pot ideology of American assimilation and conformity. Conversely, in keeping language despite hegemonic efforts to make losing it appealing, it is also a form of radical resistance.

This is often a divisive topic within individual ethnic communities. To maintain a loyalty to one’s ethnic language preserves tradition, provides another venue for emotional expression, and promotes in-group loyalty and out-group exclusion (Hurtado and Gurin 2). Conversely, particularly for Chicanos, Spanish and languages other than English can be perceived as unimportant and are often treated as a hindrance to assimilation and societal acceptance. We can see the influence of White perceptions of this matter in the strong push to maintain English as the one and only official language of the United States of America. This pressure is still so strong
that to this day it is one reason why third generation grandchildren of immigrants are more than likely to lose touch with the language of their ethnic group (Alba et. al.) For multiracials, this can be a tool of both self-identification and reclamation as it allows for individual distinctiveness.

**Shaping the Future**

While the field of multiracial studies has come exceptionally far, especially in the past twenty-five years, there are still vast gaps in the literature. We know that the complicated nature of race has skewed who does and does not identify as multiracial. With this in mind it is imperative that the United States Census Bureau specifically take extra measures to determine more accurate numbers of multiracial and multiethnic individuals in the U.S. This will allow legislatures and activists to better form their methodologies and practices around more accurate information.

It should be noted that while many mixed-race individuals exist beyond the Black-White binary, the majority of existing studies focus on this specific mix. As some contemporary scholars have noted, “many marginalized voices are lost in the discourse on mixed race” (Parker and Song 66). This is referring specifically to multiracials with dual minority mixes and no White ancestry. An understanding of the history and contemporary context of Blackness in America is critical to any discussion on race. With this in mind, as the field grows there is a need to fill in gaps regarding Latinx, Asian, Middle Eastern and Native American mixes, as well as those with only minority parents. While Latinx feminist theory and Asian American studies exist to describe the positionality of the “racial middle,” not enough data are available to grapple with how the combining of these experiences impacts the lives of multiracial Americans from these backgrounds (O’Brien). Questions remain about who is “allowed” to claim a multiracial identity,
and the differences between multiracial and multiethnic in a society where the fluid nature of each definition is rapidly being changed by those of the dominating majority in power, White people.

It should be noted here that the next generation of scholars will need to take into sufficient account intersecting variables such as gender, sex, geography, class, and age. I am also interested in seeing whether the role of a particular parent (mother or father) plays a role in the developing identity of multiracial folks based on gender, and how the politics of location impacts data specifically in the United States, where most intermarriages are occurring in major cities. Additionally, the majority of the literature focuses on three groups in this order: school aged children, familial units, and older adults. When data do discuss young adults (ages 18-24) their positionality is often left out, even though the transition into adulthood is widely influential on the developing identity. Furthermore, the influence of the college campus, even more particularly, predominantly White institutions, is almost entirely lacking. The temporal context of college students is often lost in current case studies; there is no tracking of how identity is developed over time from childhood to adulthood. The identity piece is especially important here, as college is notorious for being a chapter of growth and identity building.

Another missing identity component is how language intersects with multiracial identity. While significant literature exists regarding how individual languages for monoracial people intersects with American culture, and how being multilingual impacts identity at large, very little theory and data are available to grapple with how these two often intersecting categories exist in someone’s lived experience. Furthermore, there are many open answers regarding how code switching applies to multiracials of dual minority parents.
In terms of potential for shaping the future, scholars are often left simply with questions. More optimistic scholars call for the slow and steady abolition of race and racialized societies, whereas realist academics often place focus on how to find solutions by fighting the system within the limits of our current social contexts. Finally, research on this subject is rapidly changing and varies across several different disciplines. While these differing theoretical frameworks provide multidimensional perspectives, their lack of crossover can hinder our ability to understand multiracialism in a productive way (Shih and Sanchez 2008). To determine the way multiracial people perceive themselves and are perceived by others, we must work to ensure that interdisciplinary research has a foundation in empirical research. It is imperative that future research further examines the nuances of the multiracial identity from multiple theoretical lenses. Failing to do so will rob both society at large and multiracial individuals of the opportunity to understand the current status of diversity in the United States and its impacts on our society.

This thesis exists in dialogue with the existing literature both by considering existing theory and by adding new data to the conversation. This fills an existing gap by analyzing how a particular demographic is impacted by its multiracial identity, and how the college environment affects the way people interact with that identity. Furthermore, the specific component of the environment at predominantly White institutions allows for a more niche and nuanced analysis. Additionally, the sub focus on language creates space to explore how multilingualism may play a stronger or weaker role in the lived experiences of multiracial people as they are developing independence in their adult lives. This study adds perspective to the experiences of multiracialism as a specific category by focusing on trends of multiracial and multiethnic persons in general, rather than trends amongst people of similar ancestral backgrounds. Ultimately, the
research intends to find patterns in how identity is performed in institutions of higher learning, and the ways in which factors such as language, race, ethnicity, gender, class status, and cultural heritage and identity affect these outcomes.
Chapter 3

Methodology

The primary focus of this study is to find trends in the ways in which self-identified multiracial and multiethnic young adults understand their identities and how they are able to experience, present, and perform their heritage at predominantly White institutions of higher learning. To gather this data, I utilized qualitative methods, mainly semi-structured interviews, in order to understand individual experiences and how these individuals compare to others in their demographic. Given the lack of theoretical cohesion around this issue, it is clear that the perspectives of multiracial subjects themselves would need to be accounted for in order to understand how they view their experiences within their individual cultural contexts (Christian 8). Additionally, subjective accounts allow for the disproving of early theorists who asserted that hybridity leads to “psychological maladjusted” individuals (Christian 9).

My research was conducted through in-person and phone interviews. During the interviews, I discussed with the subjects their identity as multiracial individuals and the ways in which they believe language has shaped their experiences through multilingualism or lack thereof. The interview questions were divided into four sections: background information, how one’s upbringing impacted identity, their college experiences, and the use of language and multilingualism. Over the course of the project I interviewed 22 subjects with 5 different racial mixes. I recruited my subjects primarily through word of mouth and a snowball sampling method. I initially found willing participants through personal connections, and they were able to
help me slowly build a list of referrals. Each of my contacts knew at least, and oftentimes only, one other friend and/or family member who qualified for and was interested in the research.

Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, meaning I had an interview guide of questions prepared, but I modified each interview to cater to my participants and expand on important topics that came up. As several trends became clear early on, I adjusted my interview guide, adding up to eight extra questions depending on individual context. As I noticed patterns emerging in relation to certain experiences participants had, I began intentionally asking questions about the process of crafting the external identity, experiences with racism, being “open minded,” and what it means to be multiracial in the world versus on their college campus. Interviews were held either in person or via video chat in order to provide the full context of verbal and non-verbal reactions for analysis. Furthermore, all interviews were held in semi-private locations and were tape recorded for accuracy. Interviews varied in length from thirty minutes to an hour and thirty minutes; however the majority averaged at about forty-five to fifty minutes. The information my subjects provided was kept private in a multitude of ways, including conducting the interviews in a private location, locking signed Informed Consent sheets and all written notes in a drawer, and storing all interview recordings and the list containing pseudonyms on a protected platform. Unless otherwise specified in their Informed Consent Form, no participants are mentioned in the study by name. A random pseudonym generator was used to identify each subject, and the list connecting them was uploaded to a private website along with the participant’s interview recordings.

In my research, I interviewed adults between the ages of 18 and 23 who self-identified as multiracial. For the purpose of my study, the term multiracial was used and is intended to be
purposefully ambiguous in order to be self-defined by participants. While previous research suggests various definitions of terms such as race and ethnicity, in practice, these categories seemed to be interchangeable amongst my participants. Although I requested multiracial participants, many subjects used the terms “multiracial” and “multiethnic” interchangeably. This is because both categories often blur into each other in the lived experience and most non-White ethnicities are racialized in the cultural context of the United States. In defining these terms for my own analysis, I chose to follow Leah Oliver. She writes, “The definition of first-generation MR [multiracial] is defined as: Parents originating from two separate races” (13). Since this study operates in the societal context of the United States, I chose to use the United States Census Bureau’s definition of race. As previously stated, the U.S. Census thus far has chosen to identify five major racial groups: White American, Black or African American, American Indian and Alaska Native, Asian American, and Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, with an option to mark more than one racial group (U.S. Census Bureau 2018). Ethnicity refers more to nationality, origin, and shared culture. Oliver also defines a set of other important terms:

Multiraciality (MRy) is used as a noun to describe a way of being. If one is MR then there is a lived experience of MRy to their way of living in the world that is informed by a MR culture. Multi-ethnic (ME) is defined as having or identifying as belonging to more than one ethnic group. Mono-ethnic (MoE) is defined as having or identifying as belonging to one sole ethnic group. Mono-racial (MonoR) is defined as having or identifying as belonging to one racial group.

While my study was originally only meant to include people who were explicitly multiracial, I quickly learned from my interviews that many ethnic groups are forced to exist under a racialized status in American culture. This is to say that many ethnic groups in America function in society as races. For this reason, I chose to expand the study to be more inclusive of these experiences and counteract the erasure of racial categorization. While having a precise
language from a research perspective was helpful for creating my own cohesive analysis, I chose to expand the study to include those who, under these arbitrary guidelines, would be considered multiethnic. I value how my subjects self-identify as multiracial, and as such, this decision reflects a finding that in lived experience in the United States these categories are not neatly separated.

To qualify for the study, all subjects were required to be over the age of 18, English speakers, and able to give informed consent. Furthermore, all participants needed to personally identify as multiracial, and either be current undergraduates or recent graduates of a four-year university. While the study was open to multiracial folks of up to 24 years of age, the oldest participant was 22. I heavily debated whether to identify the racial and ethnic mixes of my participants in this chapter. The study is meant to analyze multiracialism as its own category. However, differences in lived experiences based on race is necessary context for understanding the individuals within the population. The following is a breakdown of all twenty-two participants who participated in the project. To protect my participants’ identities, I have included the ethnic categories represented in the study in alphabetical order in a separate chart.

Participant Demographic Breakdown

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liz</td>
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<td>Lily</td>
<td>21</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
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<tr>
<td>Name</td>
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<td>Jamie</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kayla</td>
<td>18</td>
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<td>Maya</td>
<td>21</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
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<td>Sam</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sophia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leah</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>22</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
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<td>Ahmad</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sonya</td>
<td>21</td>
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<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bryce</td>
<td>21</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clare</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Annie</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethnicities Represented</td>
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<td>-------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Afro-Latina</td>
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<td>American</td>
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<td>Bengali</td>
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<td>Black American</td>
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<td>Caribbean</td>
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<td>El Salvadorian</td>
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<td>English</td>
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<td>Filipino/a</td>
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<td>Italian</td>
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<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
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Additionally, subjects chosen for particular studies can be a telling sign of how research may be skewed based on the experiences of those represented in the data, and who the beneficiaries of a study are. Many studies of multiracial people solely include Black-White mixes, while others focus on how Black, Asian, Native American, and Latinx mix with White, as these are the leading reported mixes in the United States (Harris and Sim 614). These studies further emphasize the dominance of Whiteness in America. While these studies could, in theory, look into how different marginalized groups mix, they do not because the U.S. hegemonically defines its racial hierarchy with Whiteness at the top. In other words, multiracialism matters most when it involves Whiteness. Several other studies choose to ignore Latinx participants completely, regardless of their physiological makeup and treatment in this country, because they
are designated as a White ethnic group by the U.S. Census Bureau even though their experiences do not fit neatly into the U.S. White-Black binary racial system. Since the topic of who gets to belong to a racial or ethnic group is a pinnacle focus in this field, I chose to leave my recruitment language broad. All those who identified with the term mixed-race or multiracial (even if they were technically mixed ethnicity) were welcome to participate, regardless if their mix included White or not.

Although I used broad language to be inclusive of more participants, this in some ways led to a finding that altered the development of the study. Several interested participants approached me explaining that they self-identified as multiracial. However, during our interview they explained that they are actually multi-ethnic instead. The fickle nuances of what counts as race versus ethnicity in America made it so that folks were using the two terms interchangeably. Because of this I expanded my population sample to include all people who identify as “mixed” since most of the people who came forward come from ethnic backgrounds where their ethnicity has been racialized within the context of American society (e.g., Latinx mixed individuals or Middle Eastern mixed individuals). Since most of my participants were of differing racial mixes, it was nearly impossible to identify specific patterns of behavior based on similar cultural, ethnic, and racial mixes. With this in mind, I focused on the multiracial identity as its own individual identity. In doing so I was able to see how the existence of a multiracial and/or multiethnic status impacts how one interacts with several other compounding identities, including individual races and ethnicities, as well as gender, class, and education status.

Reading previous studies also provided me with tools for how to shape my interview guide. In one of the only studies with a specific focus on multiracial college student identities, authors
Navarette and Jenkins collected data on a group of mostly female undergraduates. Ultimately the researchers concluded that there were varying correlations to group belonging between those who were “visibly minorities” versus those who are not visibly a minority (Navarrete & Jenkins 802). In other words, those who physiologically presented as people of color reported a stronger feeling of group belonging than White or White passing subjects. However, a later study determined that “multi-ethnic individuals do not report less self-esteem than mono-ethnic individuals” (Oliver 88). This finding, along with the authors’ reported methods, served as a guide for how to present my questions without sounding presumptuous about my subjects’ racialized experiences. Thus, reading other interview guides provided inspiration for what questions were pertinent to my research and created a linguistic foundation for how to ask these questions. Furthermore these data, along with their specific study questionnaires allowed me to build my own interview guide (Appendix A) based on what kinds of questions provoked the most descriptive response.

Due to my own limitations in travel, interviews were mostly limited to folks living in the greater Boston and New England area. However, a few students who were studying abroad or commuting to campus were able to participate via Facetime. The entire population consisted of students currently attending my own institution, Brandeis University. Finally, about 72.7% of my subjects (16 out of 22) were female identifying. I speculate this may be attributed to a number of causes. According to the university’s website, Brandeis’ undergraduate female-male ratio is 60.6 percent to 39.4 percent (Brandeis University 2020). Additionally, as has been frequently reported in previous research, it could be that female identifying persons are more inclined to volunteer to discuss vulnerable topics like identity. This may have also been further impacted by the fact that
I, as the researcher, present and identify as female. While this was by no means a homogenous group, finding shared identities amongst my participants allowed for new analytic lenses to shed light on new and unforeseen themes. For example, analyzing participants from the same institution allowed me to find trends in the “college experience” that are specific to Brandeis’ campus culture. This specificity also adds a limit to the data, as they cannot be used to describe all multiracial college students. However, the study does shed light on the academic and social environments of a predominantly White private university educational experience.

In analyzing my data, I opted for selective transcribing. I searched through my recordings for any overarching phrases, feelings, and themes in what my participants shared with me. While there were very few experiences that were completely universal, many common experiences of the multiracial identity became clear very early on. The specificity of my population actually proved to be beneficial for analysis, because it was easier to find underlying themes and the outside factors that created these shared experiences, including the gap between the internal and external racial self, additional intersecting identities, feelings of inadequacy and loneliness, and more.

Furthermore, the ways in which findings are presented serve as a reminder of whom the intended audience of the research is. This material serves not only to educate monoracial folks about the multiracial experience, but also acts as a tool to give multiracial people language to understand ourselves. With this in mind, accessible language is an important tool for spreading knowledge. In her book, *But Don’t Call Me White: Mixed Race Women Exposing Nuances of Privilege and Oppression Politics*, author Silvia Cristina Bettez presents the reader with theories of hybridity, intersectionality, race, and gender, while speaking in an accessible way. The
insights expressed from a cross-cultural perspective create a narrative that should be used to set an example for both cross-cultural communication and mixed race studies. This also pertains to the lens with which we approach the subject of language. In describing their methodology, authors Mercedes Niño-Murcia and Jason Rothman discuss how “taking a social approach to the phenomenon of bilingualism, the studies collected here illuminate the... associations between language use and ethnolinguistic identity” (147). I have tried to follow these models when presenting my research by taking an interdisciplinary approach to analysis by utilizing multiple theories across a variety of academic fields and using accessible language throughout the thesis.

The categories of race and ethnicity are not neatly separated in people’s experiences and as such, there is a clear need to rethink how multiracial and multiethnic identities are intertwined and, moreover, how larger political, social, and cultural contexts allow for the racialization of ethnic identities. From this research, we can understand important information that applies both to the specific folks in this study as well as to the wider population of multiracial and multiethnic individuals. The temporal and physical context of these participants sheds light on both the importance of post-adolescent identity building, and one’s physical and social environments. Additionally, other compounding identities play significant roles in group belonging and the developing sense of self.
Chapter 4

Personal Definitions of Multiracialism and Foundations of Identity

When discussing the complex concept of identity, it is imperative that one uses multiple interdisciplinary and intersectional lenses of analysis in order to develop a well-rounded and fully informed foundational framework for understanding. This is especially true for this research, as the multiracial identity contains multi-faceted and oftentimes conflicting identities within an individual. These identities can be presented in various ways and can present very different findings depending on the theory and frameworks applied. In discussing my data, I have chosen to break down the analysis into three parts: the identity foundations that my subjects had when entering college, how additional identities intersect with their racial identity, and finally, the influences of change within the college environment that caused, triggered, and encouraged shifts in their self-identified racial identity. This chapter discusses their identity foundations, specifically, how their individual contexts impacted the ways in which my subjects entered college, how they thought about themselves at that time and how they interacted with others. Over the course of my research, it was notable that the vast majority of my participants discussed their identities by shifting between how they see themselves, how others perceive them, and the internalized conflict that emerges from contradictions between these sets of perception.

Internal Identification: “How I See Myself”

The ways in which we view ourselves significantly inform how people walk through life. The way we perceive reality and how we interact with others is altered by the lens through which we view ourselves. When recruiting participants, the only qualification listed was that one
needed to be a college student or recent college graduate who self-identifies as multiracial. This piece, self-identification, led to the first, and arguably most important finding of my research. The interrelated nature of the terms race and ethnicity as categories is convoluted in the lived experience, meaning that it is often difficult to analyze one category without the other. Furthermore, the attempt to distinguish between what each connote is problematic, as it is also unethical to allow the racial group in power, White people, to determine what groups are races and what groups would solely be considered ethnicities. The United States Census Bureau has a limited listing of racial categories, and places the question of one’s racial categorization before ethnicity. In doing so, it creates a distinction that insinuates race is the primary means of experience, while ethnicity is a secondary means of clarifying identification. In America, ethnic categories are often racialized and experienced in racialized manners. Thus, to not actively and formally acknowledge these experiences as racialized is to effectively erase them. This assumption is in no way accurate, nor does it encompass all the experiences of people living in America. Furthermore, the term "race" is socially used in such a way that people outside of the particular academic fields of race studies often conflate it with "ethnicity" based on how the particular group in question is treated within our social context. In lived experience and in our society, the boundaries of each category are very porous, therefore the treatment of a particular ethnic group can feel racialized depending on our political and social context at any given time.

When asked about whether his racial identity is different from his ethnic one, Ahmad stated

[I] would be White technically, Asian, and yes for Hispanic… We are Indo-Trinidadian but through imperialism from India… [I am also] Palestinian and Colombian… It kinda depends on the lens of the race. For instance if I’m looking at my Asian side versus my technically White side, which is almost patronizing, it’s just very different. Being Asian, I feel, in this country is very different because when people hear Asian they think you’re East Asian versus my experience. In this context, it doesn’t make sense to say I’m Asian.
Ahmad believes he is “technically White” because according to the United States standard, Hispanic people are an ethnic group only. Therefore, Ahmad is classified as racially White despite his ancestry, cultural experiences, even though his physiological qualities do not, in his opinion, align with Whiteness. This system of racial marking has created a grey area and a sense of ambiguity that seems to contradict itself based on homogenized perceptions of each “racial” category. Ahmad brings multiple ethnic categories into his racial category, thus problematizing normative distinctions and expressing that this system does not represent him. Ahmad later shared that his identity is even further complicated by his dual citizenship in the U.S. and the U.K. where racial definitions of all his ascribed categories are viewed differently by English society. For context it should be noted that this is because of the history of colonialism in the United Kingdom. The U.K. colonized Trinidad and brought South Asian indentured servants (from a different colony in the U.K.) to work alongside African slaves in the Caribbean. Thus, individuals in the U.K. have a very different way of relating to these groups than in the United States. These artificial means of categorization are not equal in all societies, meaning they vary based on societal context, influenced by different national colonial histories. These categories also alter the perceptions of the self in real life by limiting the ability to make meaning of one’s own racial identity in one’s own terms.

The phenomenon of ethnic experiences being erased by racial categories occurred across the varying cultural backgrounds of my study population, however it proved to be especially impactful for those who came from Middle Eastern and Latinx backgrounds and who would be considered racially White by government standards. The limited understanding of race by the federal standard reflects a hegemonic system of racial thinking that is influenced by a culturally
defined racial system in the United States organized around a Black-White binary. Individuals in power determine who is qualified to be categorized as “White.” However, despite being categorized as racially White, Middle Eastern and Latinx individuals are not afforded White privilege. A recognition of this difference then permeates the racial identity and creates confusion between the lived racial experience versus the forced identification of racial category.

Ahmad went on to explain the feeling of having to identify as White.

“If I’m looking at my categorically White side, which for me it’s kind of ridiculous checking off White because I’m just not White, or what is considered socially White. That is not me. If I were to identify myself as, say White or Black or whatever, I would say Brown, you know what I mean? I’m just a Brown guy because it kind of encompasses the extra that is important to me but isn't exactly stated when you literally White wash my race.”

This feeling of missing an effective category of representation was reflected amongst subjects of various cultures and nationalities. In this way, the category of White is not inclusive of all the experiences that are expected to come with it, meaning not all people who would be considered “White” by government standards are able to obtain privileges of Whiteness. The standard of Whiteness assumes that those who identify with it are physiologically fair skinned, mono-racial, individuals of European origin who, because of their background, have certain levels of privilege and access to cultural capital as well as economic and social mobility. Furthermore, Whiteness is an unmarked category, meaning it is assumed to be the norm and therefore all other races are defined against it. Because of this, the qualifications that the category of Whiteness possesses (as mentioned above) are obscured. It seems that the categorical breakdown from the perspective of the United States hierarchy is “White” and “race,” meaning that Whiteness is the norm and all other groups are considered to be "racial". This binary conflates "race" with being people of color, therefore Whiteness is the absence of "race" and its very antithesis. For individuals who
have lived a racialized experience, like Ahmad, the act of being forced to identify as White feels
harmful as it indicates he has lived an oppression-free existence. This experience of categorical
erasure is rooted in practices of homogenization and assimilation by European colonizers. Their
lasting impacts present an inflexible boundary to social understandings of group belonging.

Those who understood the governmental breakdown of “race” and “ethnicity,” often felt
troubled by their identification status. Feelings of resentment and anger over this blurry
distinction were expressed when begrudgingly identifying as White, which was often followed
by an explanation regarding how this categorization felt like a hollow identifier for a very
racialized experience. Nina shared that while she identifies as a Black woman of Moroccan and
Dominican descent, she resentfully checks the “White” box on formal surveys since Dominicans
are Latinx, and are therefore perceived as White in American society. The same is the case for
Middle Eastern categories. Almost all of these subjects reported that they learned to determine
their racial “box” during either standardized testing (state assessment exams, SATs, ACTs, etc.)
or upon applying to college when there was not a space on their forms to mark racial options that
felt representative of their experiences. The space to mark “Yes” for Hispanic simply added
more confusion regarding why Hispanic is included under the umbrella of Whiteness instead of
under the “ethnicity” category, and why it was then singled out as a facet of being racially White.

For those who used the terms “race” and “ethnicity” interchangeably, the question of
whether or not their racial and ethnic makeups differed almost always evoked confusion. For
many, the terms were the same, as almost 75% of participants used the words “race” and
“ethnicity” interchangeably. When asked if they had different answers for racial and ethnic
identifications, many subjects questioned their own response, asking me if it was “correct.” In
both situations, I declined to clarify any potentially limiting definitions of either term in order to understand how they experienced and defined these terms. From these responses we can deduce that participants saw their experiences, both racial and ethnic, as racialized to the point where “White” was in no way representative of their experiences. For many, their governmental classifications in no way signified their multiracial and multiethnic identities. The White standard is perpetuated in such a way that those who do not experience Whiteness via the privilege it entails or its economic and class implications cannot (and in my opinion should not) identify as White. When government classification schemes deny people the ability to assert their felt and lived identity, multiracials are robbed of the agency to be recognized and have their multiple ancestries acknowledged in order to conform to hegemonic, monoracial societal expectation.

These categories have deprived all people, but especially multiracial and multiethnic individuals, of the ability to be seen and recognized by the government of the United States and its society within the context of their own cultural backgrounds. For instance, Middle Eastern and Palestinian groups are lumped together in the “White” category. While these groups may experience some privileges of Whiteness, their intersecting cultures and ethnicities make it so that this label is almost entirely ill-fitting. In this case, this is due to racialization of the Middle Eastern experience in the United States, which is massively informed by Islamophobia, especially after 9-11. If racial identifications are meant to signify a common set of experiences amongst a group of individuals, the current system erases the experiences of these individuals and in doing so, provides those who rely on government data with incorrectly skewed information. Additionally, by counting them as White, the statistical numbers can show an
increase in the majority status of Whites, thus further empowering White supremacist influence on American society.

In the United States, the ability to live authentically and fully within a cultural group is often a privilege that is almost exclusive to monoracial and monoethnic individuals. This observation is derived from an overwhelming number of my participants who reported feeling as though they don’t fully belong in any of their racial or ethnic communities. For this reason, the categorization of multiracials as a group in and of itself is important in order to extend the privilege of social belonging. However, it became clear during my interviews that the label for this category was itself divisive. While I myself used the term multiracial, this ended up being only the second most popular term used. The majority of participants used a combination of other terms for self-identification. The most popular term amongst my respondents was “mixed.” This term in the United States and academic discussions and theories about specific racial politics in the United States often refers to Black and White multiracial persons; however, only one of the people who used this term had that identity. Academics in these particular fields might object to the free use of the term “mixed” because it is yet another blanket statement that erases nuanced experiences. Furthermore, in the United States the term “mixed” is tightly linked to the nation’s history of slavery, where the term “mixed” meant Black and White. Although it differs greatly based on academic discipline and conversation, the broader use of the term “mixed” can show a gap that exists between how language circulates in academic versus social spaces. For others, the term “mixed” is an acceptable way of framing their identity, as people bring in knowledge from their backgrounds as a means of categorizing themselves. For example, Latinx individuals may use the term “mixed” because in the Latin American context it does not connote
a Black-White binary, therefore it can be applicable to them. The next two most popular choices were “biracial” and opting to not use a term but simply explain one’s racial-ethnic breakdown. Finally, “half” or “halfie” was almost unanimously used by Japanese identifying subjects.

The ways in which we identify ourselves publicly can share a lot about how we view ourselves and the way we connect to both our given and chosen identities. It also demonstrates the versatility in how people tactically and politically navigate racially marked spaces. When asked to break down their racial background, the racial identity that participants listed first often said a lot about their personal connection to that group and its culture. While participants rarely explicitly expressed feeling closer to one identity over another, the primary identity shared was almost always the one discussed most throughout the interview. Chloe, a Latinx and White participant shared that for her, there is no need to discuss her White side, since she does not feel connected to it, despite being White passing. “I just say I’m Mexican,” she explained, “I mean look at me, people already know I’m White.” Because she feels she presents as White yet connects more to her Mexican culture, she chooses solely to identify her Hispanic heritage, in part to compensate for her White passing appearance. Throughout her interview she spoke solely about being Latina. This may be because Whiteness often erases other identities, thus forcing participants to over-emphasize their marginalized racial identities in order to somehow counteract that erasure. This trend existed across many other participants. Of the twenty-two individuals interviewed, twenty-one were mixed with White. Of these 21, only three listed White first. Furthermore, of these 21 individuals, twelve spoke primarily about their non-White identity. What’s more, almost none of the participants mentioned or knew about the ethnic breakdown of their White heritage. Additionally the pattern of primarily identifying with one’s
marginalized race more than their White heritage could also be related to a second layer of oppositional identity that arises in the space of a predominantly White college or university, which I will refer back to in later chapters.

The racial identification of multiracial students is often fluid, in that individuals often elect to identify differently based on social context. While the level of emotional attachment to their chosen term varied per participant, every participant was very well aware of what language they used most to describe their racial background. Almost every participant had a clear and well-rehearsed answer to how they describe themselves racially. As Leah shared, “I’ve had to explain my [racial] self my whole life, I eventually figured out what to say.” Furthermore, several participants stated that the term they use is fluid depending on context since different terms evoke different questions and responses in the presence of various individuals. Moreover, the terms chosen affect their social mobility across different social contexts. Many individuals reported altering their racial identification based on who they are speaking with. For example, in spaces where it is beneficial to be White (such as academic and professional settings), many individuals opted to explain their racial mix, especially if it included White. Some, like Leah and Chris, simply choose to say they are White since they are White passing. However when surrounded by communities of their non-White identities, many individuals solely share that specific identity. Moreover, partially White or White passing individuals, like Chloe or Alice, neglect to claim their White identity in these contexts.

These same circumstances also proved to be true regarding whether or not individuals identified as a person of color (POC), as many participants shared that they sometimes do and other times don’t depending on who is around and whether they were called POC, or were asked
to organically define themselves. This was often informed by an upbringing filled with previous experiences of being interrogated about their racial makeup and oftentimes being subsequently made to feel excluded in communities where they wanted to feel accepted, particularly in cultural spaces where race is of particular importance. By young adulthood, most participants reported feeling somewhat numb to these interrogations and have developed a sort of scripted, routine response to questions about their race. From this, we can glean that preferred labels for self-identification are often in part determined by a drive for acceptance from others. It is also determined by a learned recognition of how to navigate and position themselves across different social contexts, which I will further reflect on in later chapters. Considering that the majority of my participants reported having been made aware of monoracial hegemony on some level during their upbringing (bullying, standardized tests, college applications, etc.), one’s personal language for identification is often already at least partially determined by the time one enters college. This may be true for monoracial and monoethnic people within the college age demographic as well, however the constant interrogation from others about racial identity forces multiracial students to be acutely more aware and prepared for how to respond in ways that feel most comfortable to them, or are more beneficial and acceptable given their specific context.

Another important trend in self-identification arises from commercial genetic testing. Seven participants reported that they or a close family member (either a parent or grandparent) took a genetic test that influenced their identities and the ways in which participants related to them. For those who took the test themselves, results either confirmed an understanding of a complex racial breakdown or helped them discover an unknown parent or ancestry. Those whose family members’ took the test reported a newfound sense of responsibility to the heritages they
were already aware of after learning about their test results. For example, after taking an ancestry test, Emily’s mother discovered she was multiethnic and fully Asian, previously believing she was half Korean and half White. Subsequently, Emily then learned she was half Asian, instead of a quarter. In response to this change she shared, “When I was just a quarter Korean it didn’t really mean too much to me because I just thought, ‘Oh it’s just a quarter and three quarters of myself is just like everyone else in my school [mostly White]. So when I learned I was half I felt like I had more of a duty to myself to learn more about my cultural background...” To be clear, no individuals discovered a new identity they had never known and suddenly embraced it, like commercial genetic testing companies would lead us to believe. Instead, individuals who were able to see their racial breakdowns used this information to help them recalibrate their identity based on categories they already had some connection with, which in turn helped them embrace that identity and get closer to something they were already connected to. Ultimately, the ways in which subjects identified themselves after receiving test results allowed them to reconcile internalized differences between their multifaceted racial and ethnic identities.

Almost all of my participants described feelings of not being “enough” of any of their racial or ethnic groups. This was equally reflected through explicit statements like “I’m not Black enough to give someone the N-word pass” and in implied commentary about their appearance not matching the stereotypical physiological makeup of one of their racial groups such as statements like “I could never go to a Latinx Student Organization event, I mean look at me!” This finding reflects an important trend in how society characterizes group membership and belonging. There is no way to quantify how much is “enough” to belong to any racial category, nor can one determine what qualities and identities entitle one to membership in any
racial group. The ways in which every facet of life is ideologically racialized in American society make it so that all compounding identities indicate one's race. Nonetheless, each participant, regardless of racial and ethnic combination, reported presently feeling or having previously worked to overcome feelings of inadequacy within their identified groups. Strategies to breach this felt gap range from altering one’s external appearance to convey an invisible or less seen identity, to preparing phrases to politely shut down interrogations, making an active choice to reclaim one or more cultures, or even refusing to provide answers to interrogative questions or judgmental commentary from others as an act of self-care.

Regarding his sense of belonging, David explained that he had to go out and learn about his Korean heritage in order to connect to it publicly. Through a combination of YouTube videos, books, and social media influencers, he was able to understand cultural references and then use them himself. For example, after becoming a fan of a Korean cartoon, he decided to decorate his college dorm room with the show’s merchandise. This served as a constant reminder of his culture, allowed him to connect with Korean peers, and was a conversation starter to share his culture with new friends. Embracing this experience is difficult, particularly because society in the United States lacks the terminology to explain the existence of multiple, equally important racial identities. Maya explained to me that in Japan, the socially used term for multiracial Japanese people translates to “half,” which to her has contributed to a feeling of being “less than fully Japanese.” However, in learning to reclaim her multiracial identity she has decided to reject this understanding of herself. She said, “I don’t use that phrase anymore. I’m just not ‘half’ of either, I am fully both… Instead of ‘half’ it’s more like double!” This qualification of being enough or not comes from a variety of factors stemming from the racial and ethnic ideological
framework of society in the United States. With this in mind, the majority of traits explicitly
shared by participants when discussing what made them feel enough or not enough of an identity
included physiological makeup (most commonly hair texture, skin color, and body type),
parental connections to culture, knowledge of nationality and language, diversity in childhood
social environment, familial socioeconomic status, experiences with racism, and perceptions by
others. Perhaps this also correlates with the enthusiasm for genetic testing, as it provides
multiracial persons with empirical data quantifying how much one relates to origins and
ancestry. In doing so, these tests provide almost a kind of physical proof, despite of and/or in
conjunction with all of those other factors, of group membership and their connections with and
experiences of being socialized within any given culture.

Regarding how and when the process of overcoming feelings of not belonging or being
“enough” occurs, there was a significant trend regarding age and class year within the university.
Most subjects who reported they no longer experience or are working past this feeling of
inadequacy were upperclassmen, while those who were still heavily impacted by this
phenomenon were mostly younger underclassmen. This trend demonstrates how the college
environment plays a significant role in understanding the self, which will be further discussed in
chapter six.

External Identification: “How ‘Everyone Else’ Sees Me”

While the internal view of the self is important, it is just one layer of an identity complex.
Self-identities are also shaped by outside perceptions whose forces often build a source of
tension and can even feel violent to those who are marked as "others" by how their race and
ethnicity are perceived. How others view us is an important factor in how most people,
regardless of racial of ethnic makeup, build their sense of self. The “others” mentioned are made up of a variety of influencers: family members, teachers, friends, the government, and even strangers. When describing themselves to me, participants would often discredit their own answers by countering them with assumptions they constantly receive from others. Before finishing a response, subjects would often look back at me and lament that their own view of themselves was unimportant, since this identity often did not match how others perceive them. For example, after a discussion of how she is viewed as White by others, I asked Leah, “Do you think you look Black?” to which she frustratedly replied, “It doesn’t matter what I think! People see me and have already decided for themselves.”

When asked about when and how they came to understand that they were multiracial the entire study population shared at least one formative instance about racial identity that stemmed from external perceptions of their race. From this data, it can be gleaned that multiracial individuals in the study population frequently struggled to identify how they viewed themselves without the presence of an outside opinion. However, when assumptions greatly differ from one another, or differ from one’s internal identity, it can be especially confusing for an individual to determine their own personal narrative. As Alice explained, “I am Latina, it’s who I am. But no one sees that, so sometimes I just let people think I’m White. What’s the point?” Because of this already difficult internal struggle, each external opinion carries significant weight; it is confirming or denying an internal truth that exists in all people, and (while usually not mal-intended) mapping onto the bodies of multiracials an opinion that is frequently rooted in prejudice and stereotypes regarding physiological characteristics.
Those who reported to frequently experience assumptions from others regarding their race or lack of visible connection to their race stated that such assumptions usually begin upon an initial meeting. Almost unanimously, subjects reported being frequently interrogated about their racial background in most of their primary interactions with new acquaintances. Several mentioned the phrase “What are you?” as the initial point of entry, with follow up questions such as “But what are you really?” “Where are you parents/grandparents from?” or “I know you’ve got to have something ethnic in you, right?” The frequency and intensity of these interrogations were often recounted with frustration and annoyance. “People always ask [about my race], like it’s their business to know my business. I know they just want to fit me in a box to see if they should treat me like a Black girl or not,” Lily said. This process of social ‘othering’ marks multiracial people as outsiders of power and privilege in the American society.

In these interactions, many reported that strangers often feel comfortable sharing with them what they had previously assumed their race or ethnicity was, which added to preexisting feelings of inadequacy. Conversely, in these cases non-White monoracial individuals who are already marked by society make an assumption of similarity in order to make a connection outside the bounds of that hierarchy of power and privilege. However, these assumptions can also be harmful. Several trends occurred regarding what racial groups are most commonly assumed. The most commonly reported, in order, were Hispanic, Middle Eastern, Portuguese, South Asian, and Filipino. Oftentimes, these assumptions were accompanied by members of these ethnic groups speaking to the subject in another language. David explained that while meeting new friends in college, this became abundantly clear. “I mean, it wasn’t a thing before [in high school]. All my friends knew me so they didn’t need to ask. Now it’s the first thing
people wanna talk about when they meet me. Like ‘Hey, what are you?’ or ‘Are you Asian? You
look kind of Asian, are you?’” First impressions are especially important here, when people who
do not know the individual context of multiracials often accidentally make assumptions about
their racial and/or ethnic makeup. Those who spoke to this experience often assumed well-intent
from the persons discussed. However, this does speak to the incessant need of people in the
United States to place someone racially almost immediately upon knowing them. The societal
desire to place individuals in a singular race speaks to the way people in the United States link
race to a wide variety of other compounded assumptions about identity. Social categorization
based on physiological makeup alone is shallow and therefore often incorrect. Furthermore,
people from the United States are typically socialized to categorize others as monoracial unless
made aware otherwise, which is informed by colonial systems of racialized privilege and power.
In this way these assumptions and interrogations also serve as a medium for reproducing
inequality and justifying one group’s hierarchical dominance over another.

Being ethnically ambiguous, or having a physiologically unclear ethnicity or race, makes
the societally imperative process of categorization difficult, thus explaining the incessant
interrogations to fulfill this need. Just over half of my participants (twelve out of twenty-two)
reported feeling as though they were ethnically ambiguous. This sentiment is informed by a
variety of factors including skin color (the most reported quality), hair texture, body type, dialect
used when speaking English, and multilingual abilities or lack thereof. When discussing how her
multiracial identity is invisible, Leah explained “I mean I obviously look White, but there are
some things… it’s mostly my hair. I always wear it like this (straight) but when it’s not I have
like a full afro. Also my body type… my Mom always tells me I’m ‘White in the front and Black in the back.’"

Opinions differed on whether being ethnically ambiguous was a positive or negative trait. Most often, individuals reported having complicated and ever changing feelings about the subject. Some expressed resentment or disdain for being ethnically ambiguous, sharing that their external self did not accurately represent their internal self, which served as a barrier to in-group connection and belonging. Pain from being wrongly categorized by outsiders was frequently expressed through means of not being “enough.” In other words, their external characteristics defied the traits stereotypically attributed to one, both, or all of their racial and/or ethnic groups, thus making them not appear as similar to members of any of their individual groups as monoracials. Sonya explained this experience, “It’s a lot. In Japan and with Japanese people, I look White. But in America [with White people], everyone thinks I look Japanese.”

Conversely, others asserted that being ethnically ambiguous was an overtly positive trait, as it allowed for greater social acceptance amongst a wider array of audiences. For example, Sophia shared that being ethnically ambiguous allowed her the freedom to speak, dress, and identify however she wants on a daily basis. Furthermore, it allows her to connect to a wide variety of audiences and make friends with a larger variety of people. “It’s just mostly cool,” she said, “I can just connect with so many kinds of people, and I feel like because of that I can use those connections to really talk to people and help others.” In her case, and in the case of many others, they have discovered how to use their ambiguity to their advantage. This allows for greater acceptance from a variety of audiences and can lead to greater mobility in White spaces, which applies to both personal and professional connections. Clare expressed that in her experience,
having a vague non-White appearance has been beneficial to her ability to obtain acting jobs, “I know it’s bad, but in my industry looking this way is a good thing.” She went on to explain how she was able to change what she wore to fit the race the casting director was looking for. “I know that I wear certain things in certain ways, people will see me in certain ways. If I look South Asian it’s because my eyeliner is darker, there’s some sort of skirt involved… if I wear bright lipstick or hoops I give off a Latinx vibe, or if I wear pearls I look more White.” Her appearance benefitted her ability to belong because she is able to conform to casting politics, where most roles are presumed to be White unless it is specifically stated otherwise. While both participants expressed how benefiting off their ethnic ambiguity is ethically complicated, they ultimately determined that it is in many ways a means of conquering systems of oppression from within and utilizing one’s personal experiences in order to manipulate these systems to their advantage. Most participants that identified as ethnically ambiguous shared a combination of these two sentiments.

In unpacking “ethnic ambiguity” and the idea of what physical qualities make one “enough” of any racial group, one must address colorism, the different treatment of people within a racial group based on color of skin tone in comparison to others within their identified group. While only six participants specifically used the term “colorism” when discussing their experiences, almost all of my participants, regardless of whether they identified as ethnically ambiguous, evoked comparison to others when discussing their skin tone. This comparison most frequently applied to parents and siblings, however it also extended to other family members and friends. Most often these comparisons were made to demonstrate how one looks “less” like their racial or ethnic group than their loved one, which again furthers feelings of racial inadequacy and
builds barriers to belonging. Furthermore, participants who had lighter skin tones in comparison to their loved ones reported feeling that they experience less overt racism in comparison to their loved ones or other monoracial people within their groups. As Maya explained, “I am a minority, but I’m pale so I have this sort of mixed privilege where people don’t usually treat me differently unless they know [my races].” The awareness of this privilege sometimes evoked feelings of guilt for being less targeted and, less often, a strong sense of responsibility to address these inequities. The emotion of guilt was most commonly reported from subjects who identified White as part of their racial mix. In this way, even though these subjects are not totally White, they were experiencing White guilt, an internalized shame some White people feel from generations of systematic racism and harm to bodies of color. Moreover, this feeling seemed to be most deeply felt by subjects who felt that they looked White, also known as White passing.

This White guilt manifested itself in a variety of different ways. Clare shared that capitalizing on her ethnic ambiguity sometimes made her feel bad, “I mean I definitely feel some White guilt, because I get to live really differently than a lot of others [who are Filipina]. But I just remind myself that me being in that role will add more representation to the field, and if that’s how the system is then I want it to work for me.” This being said, some participants who identified as White passing did not express feelings of White guilt, although they were still aware of their passing privilege. Chris explained that it was ultimately a good thing that he looks White, as it allows for greater networking opportunities and connections to powerful people. He later shared that being White passing allows him to fit in with proper folk at school, meaning monoracial White people. However, he then expressed feeling a lesser connection to his Mexican heritage while in “proper” spaces. Passing for White complicates feelings of belongings because
the privileges associated with Whiteness allow these individuals to avoid certain forms of prejudice and violence that often mark the racial experience. Furthermore, in cases like these, individuals are not ashamed or guilty of looking different than their family members or their racial stereotypes because it allows for greater access to the privilege and power of being White.

It should also be noted that while White passing participants felt most connected to their marginalized communities, in most circumstances where individuals reported that they saw themselves as ethnically ambiguous or White passing, they did not identify as people of color. Moreover, the majority of all my participants in general did not identify with this term due to colorism or lack of physiological belonging. From these data, we see that colorism plays a significant role in the treatment, and thus the self-understanding, of the multiracial body.

Systems of inequity and racism are enforced in such a way that skin tone and other physical characteristics associated with race are perceived as crucial means of membership. Because of this, acceptance within each racial group is often based on how those who have all of these qualities are able to live in the society of the United States. These sentiments are primarily enforced through treatment from others in racial groups different from one’s own, but are often reinforced by members within marginalized racial groups who have internalized the racism that has been inflicted upon them. This is to say that even in-group membership can reflect internalized ideas about the desire for elements of Whiteness, or to exclude those who look too White in comparison to a broader in-group physiological aesthetic. Furthermore, this exclusion by in-group members also helps bond and forge community within said in-group by developing a sense of pride in the groups' difference. Nina explained her struggle to combat racism from different sides of her family, “My family would talk shit about my Moroccan side in terms of
their appearance but they never said it was because they’re Black. They would just say ‘Oh, Nina
looks Moroccan and Moroccans are ugly so we need to fix that.’ There’s this certain shame
around me being Black, like we aren’t supposed to even say it.” In this way, resentment and
exclusion can occur towards multiracial individuals who are able to obtain more privilege in their
communities; they lack many of the physiological in-group markers that would position them to
be subjected to racism in the United States.

With this in mind, another external factor that proved to be important in the developing
sense of self was experiences with racism. Twelve of my participants shared that they have
experienced racism first-hand, meaning that they personally have been a victim of race-based
prejudice rather than solely witnessing it being inflicted on a loved one. Those who did
experience racism expressed an overall stronger sense of belonging to their non-White group.
Nina continued to share that because she looks Black, she has been treated badly by people who
seemed scared of her because of how she looks. Because of this she feels that even though
Morocco isn’t always socially considered to be part of the African community, she is part of the
Black community in this way. Shared experiences in general strengthen individual relationships
as well as connections within a social group or community. Trauma bonds, bonding that occurs
as the result of ongoing shared forms of abuse and experiences of inequality and prejudice, can
create an even stronger community attachment. Sharing the same repeated systematic abuse, both
from individuals as well as within the society at large, creates a sense of shared understanding of
pain, as well as a sense of a shared lived experience and a history. Society in the United States is
so centrally structured around racism that to experience trauma from racism first-hand is seen as
a qualification of membership within one’s non-White racial group.
A common trend in first-hand racist experiences amongst my subjects occurs when they are out in public with their families. As N.B. shared, “When I was younger, people would always just assume that my mom was my nanny, since I looked White next to her. We totally laugh about it now, but I know it used to hurt her a lot.” Of the twelve participants who felt they experienced first-hand racism, seven listed stories in which they were singled out for looking different than one or both of their parents in a public setting. Four listed stories similar to N.B., where parents are mistaken as nannies or babysitters to their multiracial child due to their visible physiological differences. These stories existed across color lines, both with parents from marginalized groups and parents who are White, depending on which looks more visibly different than the subject. This stems from the societally racialized assumption that in normative familial units parents are from the same racial group and therefore create monoracial children that look visibly similar to them. Additionally, it speaks to further racialized and normative assumptions that a non-White person caring for a White or White passing child must be a service worker or nanny, which are portrayed as low-level, unskilled jobs. In some cases, subjects said that the assumptions were overtly prejudicial, where onlookers assumed that a person of color caring for a White (passing) child must be a hired caretaker. In all of these instances, comments or nonverbal reactions from strangers socialized my participants to understand that their familial unit was not “normal” and that they are therefore perceived as less connected to their parent(s) than peers who looked visibly similar to their caretakers.

The other half of my participants reported to not have personally experienced racism. However, of these participants, 75% described stories they did not identify as instances of racism
in which they were targeted or treated differently based on their racial or ethnic background. For example, David described his high school friends making fun of his Asian heritage:

It’s all just jokes. We’re all friends, so they would never mean anything bad by it. I just laugh along and sometimes crack a few jokes of my own. Like if we go to a sushi restaurant or something I’ll say something like ‘Trust me, I’m Asian I know what to order.’ I’m not Japanese of course but people still laugh.

This seemed to be a trend across this population, where racist experiences one had were downplayed both by the individual and others around them. Subjects not only second guessed whether their experience was racist, they also dismissed it and often later added to these jokes themselves. Not coincidentally, those who reported these experiences all had one White parent, and almost unanimously reported being perceived as White passing. Because of this, the racism experienced didn't feel like it was true or directed towards them, because they see themselves as visibly White and therefore not able to be a target of racist interactions. The vast majority of racist moments and stories shared in this circumstance would be defined as microaggressions, subtle and oftentimes unintentional discrimination or prejudice against members of marginalized groups. Overwhelmingly participants laughed during these stories, sometimes with visible discomfort and other times without. When prompted about how they respond to such instances, many explained that they either join in the banter or laugh it off. In these instances, subjects are perceiving these microaggressions as jokes.

In some ways humor can be a coping or defense mechanism; it neutralizes situations by covering them with laughter and deciding that the joke is not really about them, so no harm has been done. Alternatively, humor can also be a form of projecting one’s insecurities by drawing attention to them in a nonchalant setting. Considering that the majority of participants who reported these cases are partially White or White passing, it could be that using humor in these
cases is rooted in denial that they are capable of being victims of racism. Members of marginalized groups who are not White passing do not benefit from the privilege of experiencing racism through humor because they do not have the agency to decide that the joke wasn’t meant for them. However, in a circumstance like David’s, perhaps both truths can exist, maybe even simultaneously. He is both benefiting from privilege while simultaneously experiencing racism. David went on to share that “Because I’m not really Asian, stuff like that doesn’t bother me so much.” This contradiction in some cases seems correlated with the partial connections people have with their identities. It is important to note that in these cases, racism is subjectively experienced based on how participants mobilize and identify with their multiple racial identities. This is perhaps connected to feelings of not being enough or not feeling as though one is fully part of one or more of their racial groups. In other words, if one is not “really [read: fully accepted as] Asian” how can one experience racism towards Asians? Some may include microaggressions as racist experiences while others may not. In the eyes of some of these participants, they truly do believe that they did not experience racism. I do not disagree here, instead I only offer that people's recognition of racist experiences is dependent on how they privilege certain parts of their identities and that not feeling like a “full” member of a racial group allows some to disavow these instances. This is particularly pertinent for subjects who closely identify with Whiteness and its privileges. Therefore experiencing a moment as racist or not for these individuals is dependent on the ways they personally identify and prioritize their racial or ethnic identities and how they feel they are viewed during the majority of their social interactions.
The ways in which multiracial students develop their sense of self is weighted heavily on the assumptions of others. So much so that while discussing identity, participants exhibited the most visible discomfort with questions regarding how they saw themselves without referring to the perceptions of others. For example, regarding the question of whether one identified as ethnically ambiguous, the majority of my subjects began their responses with how other people perceived their physiological qualities, rather than their own emotions or perceptions of their external makeup. While this could be because the self is a combination of how we are viewed and how we view ourselves, it should be noted that in conversation this dichotomy was skewed more towards the views of others rather than the individual view of the self. When probed on the matter, people often deflected. In response to a question asking about whether or not he feels he looks Mexican, Chris became visibly agitated and said, “It doesn’t matter how I see myself, people see what they want to see and decide on their own.” In this way, the external pressures and perceptions from others outweigh and thus silence any other possibilities he might have seen or felt about himself.

This perception of being pin-holed into a racial box of sorts, based on what others assume to be true, is a common trend. 36% percent of participants used the phrase “I am forced” when describing the way they behave in society based on their external racial presentation, which often differs greatly from their internal racial self. This was often articulated explicitly. For example, Ahmad described himself as “socially White at school,” meaning that he dresses and behaves in ways that are viewed as White to fit in with White peers. This creates an interesting cyclical process and a long-lasting internal tension. When multiracial people have frequently been victims of overt assumptions and stereotyping, they will assume that others will see them this
way as well. This creates a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy where, in order to avoid uncomfortable interrogations and to make others comfortable, multiracial people will perform in ways that match up with how others perceive them. This phenomenon demonstrates that, at least at this stage of development in young adulthood, the internal view of the multiracial self is limited in comparison to perceptions from others. Outside opinions tend to outweigh the ways in which one may see oneself because Whiteness and the hegemonic system of race in the United States forcibly imposes opinions regardless of how one internally views oneself.

**Internalized Identity Conflict**

The dichotomy between one’s internal understanding of the racial self and one’s external understanding based on assertions from others creates an internalized identity conflict. Unanimously, all subjects in some way discussed struggling to navigate the gap between identities they feel or have learned to feel are oppositional, in addition to balancing their multiple cultural, ethnic, and racial identities. Subjects expressed this conflict through a series of stories, where commonalities in language used to describe their experiences emerged. Many participants compared themselves to what is “normal,” meaning being monoracial, and said that not being normal meant that they were “torn” between multiple identities. This reflects how normalcy in the United States is defined via the rejection of racial mixing, which is directly correlated to this country’s legacy of anti-miscegenation laws and the assertion that mixing, especially mixing with darker skinned people, contaminates White “purity.” More commonly, people explained this duality as “How I feel versus how I look,” which was especially common in subjects who defined themselves as White passing. Furthermore, many participants discussed how they feel as though they need to fully explain their full experience to everyone whenever questions regarding
heritage arise. Ahmad shared, “I always just kind of explain it to people. I am culturally one thing, ethnically another, and genetically even more [categories].” Most subjects seemed to have similar surface level explanations of their identities that appeared to have been memorized through years of repetition. This experience reflects the “double-consciousness” that was defined by DuBois (1903), where people of color, or in this case multiracial people, have more than one social identity that is shaped by the constant denial of one’s ability to self-define and affirm one’s identity, thus making it difficult to craft a sense of self. The multiracial identity is built in relation to these two important and oftentimes contradictory factors, how one feels versus how others see them. As Kayla explained it, “It’s difficult and beautiful, multiple truths exist within me.”

Coping with double consciousness requires different methods to make sense of the internal and external racial identities as discussed by theorists Harris and Sim (2002). Internally, it was clear that the work required to understand the self, at least during the young-adult period of one’s life, required a developing idea of where one belongs or how to belong. In other words, individuals craft a personal understanding of what role they have as a multiracial person in their home communities, in the campus community, and in society at large. What emerged from my data was an overwhelming feeling of uniqueness. Almost all of my participants (approximately 82%) felt that being multiracial made them unique. This may be connected to the obsession in the United States with individualism, where people’s personal sense of self and success makes them stand out and determines their worth. With that in mind, the population seemed to respond to this perceived uniqueness in very different ways, either positive or negative. These perceptions seemed fluid, and often changed overtime. Those who presently felt positive about
their individuality discussed how being multiracial made them special. For example, Chloe expressed her pride by saying “I’ve always known I was different, this is what makes me special. It’s what makes me, me.” She continued on to explain how the uniqueness of her multiracial identity is one of, if not the most important part of her identity, meaning it is where a significant amount of her self-worth was derived. While all people are different, Chloe saw herself as particularly more different, which made her feel unique. Those who aligned with this experience or perspective discussed their multiracial story with pride; 27% of these individuals repeated the word “pride” or “proud” while describing themselves.

Conversely, those who saw their individualism through a negative lens often described themselves as being “different” from their peers; 44% of these individuals repeated the word “different” as a negative attribute when describing themselves. Furthermore, subjects in this category described the individuality of being multiracial as a lonely experience, and often reported feeling as though no one understood them or that they would never be able to fit in anywhere. When describing her experience, Lily explained that being multiracial “makes you want to cry blood” because you are not welcome or wanted by racial communities that are connected to you. While this mindset often initially presented as ambivalent, upon further examination subjects within the category actually cared very deeply about the subject of racial identity, and were often in the midst of an important transition of growth into understanding themselves and their personal feelings about their role in the world.

Additionally, it should be noted that the one exception to the feeling of being misunderstood was in the case of multiracial individuals interacting with each other. In fact, many individuals discussed how they felt most understood by other multiracial individuals. “We
recognize each other,” was a common phrase expressed by many. Over the course of my research, I realized that this sentiment had a great impact on the tone of the interviews. In earlier interviews, subjects frequently asked me either before or after our conversation if I too was multiracial. When I addressed that question before the interview, subjects were quicker to open up to me, and often completed answers saying, “I mean you understand” or “you get what I’m saying.” For this reason I began to slyly assert my personal investment in the research during the explanation of the Informed Consent form, which ultimately reinforced my credibility as a researcher with my subjects.

It was clear that the ways in which one perceived one’s individuality changed over time, and most participants described processing a multitude of emotions over the course of their lived experiences. Upperclassmen (meaning juniors and seniors) were more likely to discuss their current identities through a positive lens (approximately 67%), while underclassmen were more likely to express a currently negative view when discussing their identity (approximately 57%). Subjects began their individual journeys of self-understanding at different times based on life circumstances, and were therefore at different stages of this process at the time of our interview. With this in mind, almost all individuals stated that developing an understanding of themselves has been a complicated process. Because they have worked to comprehend the fluid nature of their own ever-changing identities, 45% of participants specifically expressed how being multiracial has made them a more open minded human being. As Kayla shared, “Being multiracial just makes me want to understand people and be a better global citizen.” This openness applies to how they perceive and are curious about other cultures. For example, Lily said that being multicultural inspires her passion to learn new languages outside of her own
cultures. Even more, these individuals frequently reported feeling a strong sense of empathy for others as a result of their multiracial experience. Sophia shared that because her ancestry is tied to so many different forms of oppression she has a stronger capacity to understand and empathize with others experiencing different forms of oppression.

Making sense of the external racial self takes on many forms, all of which are very specific to the physical and social context of each individual. That being said, two overall themes emerged in how subjects in this population reported they cope with their external identities: first how one physically crafts an identity, and second, how one openly speaks about it. In terms of physical elements, subjects were asked if they had any particular style choices that they felt were related to their racial, cultural, or ethnic backgrounds. In other words, did they choose to present themselves to others in ways that convey one or more of their racial identities? Of the entire study population, 72% reported that at least one part of their chosen external appearance (e.g., hairstyle, clothing, makeup, etc.) was intentionally aligned with one or more of their racial or ethnic groups. Furthermore, while 44% of the population identified as being White passing, 94% percent of whom had one White parent, only three individuals reported that they crafted their identity around their White ethnicity. From these data we can surmise that stylistic choices play a significant role in expressing multiracial identity, as using stereotypical fashion choices that align with one’s ethnic or racial group allows an individual a sense of agency and control in how they represent and externalize their internal racial identity. Examples included choices like hoops earrings, eyeliner and makeup for different skin types and facial structures, haircuts, specific brands and styles of clothing or shoes, even colors worn that individuals felt associated them with a particular racial or ethnic group. Especially for individuals who are seeking to merge the
gap within their double consciousness, physical representations create space for all individuals, but particularly young adults, to experiment and determine what styles authentically represent themselves to the world.

In speaking about identity, it is important to recognize that the ways in which multiracial individuals speak about themselves publicly is often very different than how they think of themselves. While in Western societies we are socialized to represent our internal individuality via our appearance, multiracial participants preferred to not necessarily display or externalize their internal self in this manner. This varies per individual and is dependent on social context and life stage. This became clear over the course of the interviews, as participants frequently had two different answers to questions: one that they would say to others and another about how they truly felt. Most participants had one racial or ethnic group that they publicly spoke about more often. This was dependent on a variety of factors including parental marital status and which parent they primarily live with, languages spoken, skin color, hair type, personal connection, and many more. In cases where an individual had one White parent and another of a marginalized racial or ethnic group, the marginalized identity often received more airtime, reflecting an internal opposition to Whiteness. The exception to this rule was when the White parent was also Jewish, which will be unpacked further in the following chapter. Additionally, in cases where an individual felt excluded or rejected by one or more of their racial or ethnic communities, they often expressed a “them versus me” mentality that distanced them from one or more of their racial communities. In other words, when one felt distant from their own communities, they often spoke about their racial and/or ethnic in-groups as though they were not a member. This manifested itself in either discussing the “toxicity” that they felt existed in one or more of their
communities, or in feeling sympathetic towards their racial or ethnic groups, meaning they felt bad since they experienced differing hardships as monoracial minorities.

Overall, the representation of the external racial self seems to be a fluid balance of wanting to make others comfortable to avoid confrontation, and disrupting assumptions from others in order to authentically represent one’s internal racial self. Oftentimes, this is done by mobilizing elements of privilege to navigate social structures of power. At play in these identity decisions are lived experiences of racism, internal in-group politics, and internalized racism and colorism. These experiences also relate back to taking advantage of whatever privilege one might have, which ultimately is also shaped by how individuals relate to power and privilege afforded by their racial identities. In all circumstances, this duality was subject to change over time, and almost always had already changed significantly by the time the subject entered college. In all cases, the way in which subjects viewed or interacted with their racial self changed in some way during the course of their college career.
Chapter 5

Informants of the Multiracial Self: An Analysis on the Role of Multiple Identities

American society is structured so that every aspect of our lives is racialized. This is to say that race is so intertwined with every facet of society that other identities are perceived as qualifications of racial membership and vice versa. With this in mind, one cannot analyze a racial or multiracial identity in a vacuum; social context and other identities must also be included in order to develop an intersectional understanding of racial identity. Each of my subjects held a handful of intersecting identities that added to, and sometimes complicated, their racial selves. We know this to be true from theorist Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), who asserts that all identities are intertwined and coexist in such a way that they are inseparable at any moment. Furthermore, she argues, one must learn to navigate the power relations at play amidst these intersecting identities. These identities exist in monoracial individuals as well, however the intersection of these identities with the multiracial self sometimes adds another layer to an already complex and at times confused sense of personal understanding. Through my study, it became clear that identities tied to geographic location, language, socioeconomic status, religion, and gender heavily impacted how people related to their racial self. Moreover, individuals often viewed these categories differently depending on racial, ethnic, and cultural contexts. As Audre Lorde once wrote, “There is no such thing as a single issue struggle because we do not live single issue lives” (1982). Overall, these identities are not directly related to the racial self, however the racial lens through which one views these categories shapes how they are understood and experienced by the individual.
Language

In the original design of this project I hypothesized that language, specifically multilingualism, would have a critical effect on the developing sense of self in a university environment. I had thought that perhaps the lack of opportunity to think and communicate in multiple languages would prove to be impactful for multilingual students, or that monolingual students would express struggles connecting to their racial groups based on language barriers. While language proved to have some significance, it proved to be less important to my participants than I expected. Of the entire interview population, including those who are monolingual, only 27% reported that they found language to be an important component of sharing racial and/or ethnic identities. This may be because the majority of the population was monolingual and thus did not use their ethnic languages to share their cultures. Of the entire population, approximately 36% were multilingual.

The majority of the multilingual participants believed that language connects people to their heritage and is an important facet of sharing culture. As Nina explained, “I mean it’s part of being Dominican, the jokes, the food, it's all in Spanish. The language is such an important part of the culture, I feel like I would be way less connected if I couldn't speak it.” Furthermore, for those who felt less connected to their heritages, knowing a language served as an important lifelong connection to their culture and ancestry. Ahmad did not grow up with his Hispanic parent, and is now rarely in touch with that side of his family. In this way, as he explained, speaking Spanish is what keeps him connected to his heritage, and at times this connection feels like his only one to his Latinx culture. Being able to communicate with grandparents was the only other significant pattern to emerge from the interview sections on multilingualism. 41% of
the study population discussed connections with grandparents as a critical part of their understanding of their racial self, as grandparents are a connection to ancestry and often share their culture with their grandchildren. This varies by individual familial context, as well as history, immigration status, and mental and physical health. When discussing how he works to communicate with his grandmother, Chris said, “It’s beautiful really, I don’t speak great Spanish and she doesn’t speak great English, but we both can understand each other. So I speak in English and listen to her in Spanish, somehow it just works.” The majority of participants, like Chris, determined that positive relationships with their grandparents allowed them to feel closer to that side of their racial heritage.

Where multilingualism proved to be less relevant, dialect played a much more significant role than expected. Because of lack of resources for translation, one qualification for the study was that all participants were required to speak English. However, with so many recognized dialects of English spoken in the United States, the types of English spoken varied greatly from person to person. In interviews with my participants, they often discussed using different dialects affiliated with their racial groups, depending on context. Nearly 55% of the subject population either specifically reported or described frequent code-switching. As Chris explained, different dialects are for different occasions. At school he is “proper and White” whereas at home or with very close school friends he will speak with his usual syntax, sometimes even using some Spanglish slang. This proved to be a strong pattern across the population. Code switching, for many of these individuals, was about switching in and out of the White standard. Without realizing it, Chris was recognizing power relations at play here, and in this way operated under a subconscious understanding that he experiences the university environment as an oppressive
space. Since the university is predominantly White, Chris and others like him have found ways for themselves and their communities to exist within this space through the use of dialect and code switching. By mobilizing their social-cultural capital to navigate the university environment, they learn how to be accepted by a variety of audiences. During these discussions, I often stopped participants to ask “which voice” they were currently using while speaking to me, so I could obtain a reference point. Those who knew me (and were therefore comfortable already) or those with whom I had shared my own multiethnic identity often were using their comfortable dialect, closer to what would be shared with close friends or at home. Others who did not know my identity or were younger than me often reported to be using their “professional” or “proper” or “White” voice with me since this was a semi-formal interview setting.

Considering that code switching is not limited to multiracial people, it can be presumed that most people would code switch into some sort of “professional code” in an interview setting. However what was different about this specific code switching was that the dialects of English used changed depending on the story or family members that were being spoken about in addition to the transition in and out of professional code.

Language shapes the way we are able to understand the world. In the lives of my subjects, language is also a medium to navigate structures of power and inequality in addition to reflecting how they perceive reality. That being said, when one attends school, takes entrance exams, writes resumes, and eventually enters the work force speaking primarily in English, one would naturally associate English as the preferred social language. It should be further noted that mandating the use of “standard English” in academic and professional spaces is a device informed by White supremacist ideals to help discipline people into particular subjects for the
space they are going into. This is to say that through entrance exams and academic standards, one learns that a certain language is expected to successfully move through a space, and that this specific code will further help one learn and utilize the dominant modalities in American society. American college students are responding and learning how to navigate these other spaces. However, when one thinks in another language other than English, it is understandable that some people might feel unseen or misunderstood, as they are unable to authentically represent their full selves. “Of course I just speak English here,” Ruth shared. “Even when I’m on campus and my mom calls, I usually respond in English. Unless it’s something I don’t want people hearing of course. I just don’t feel like dealing with the looks or questions from everyone when I speak my language here.” This speaks to how multilingualism is perceived and undervalued in American society. Speaking in another language made Ruth and others like outsiders in a majorly monolingual context. Because of this they reported mostly speaking their non-English at home or in a private setting with friends. Ruth went on to explain that this feeling of shame only began when she immigrated to America, as Cuban culture does not stigmatize multilingualism in this way. Since the language spoken at home usually establishes a foundation for learning in adolescence, this creates a distinct separation between a “home self” and a “professional” (school/work) self (Pierce et al. 2015). For multiracial children who are mixed with White, this separation of the self creates a binary that forces one to be White in public and not-White in private, thus unintentionally reinforcing internalized racism by creating an understanding that the racial self is meant to be kept at home in order to maintain the White standard.

Familial Class Status
Race and class are systematically intertwined in the United States. Similarly, racism and classism also seem to go hand-in-hand. American society includes the foundational ideology that if you work hard and take every opportunity that is presented to you, eventually you will be able to succeed and accomplish upward social and class mobility. However, this idea is also systematically rigged, in that marginalized groups do not and often cannot receive the same amount and kinds of opportunities that affluent White people do. In this way we cannot solve class inequality without dismantling institutionalized racism and vice versa. The intersection of class and race is complex. Rooted in slavery and exemplified in today’s school-to-prison pipeline, the United States since its founding has been structured to continuously oppress Black and brown bodies by limiting access to resources that would allow for upward socioeconomic mobility. The extent to which racism has been cemented into our society was exemplified in my interviews. Discussions with participants regarding socioeconomic status, as they arose organically, almost always touched on subjects of race. “The struggle” as Chris called it, is a part of being Latino. This “struggle,” as he put it, is the systematic racial and socioeconomic oppression that prevented his family from escaping poverty throughout his childhood. Because he, and all of the Latinos he knew, grew up close to or below the poverty line, he and many others like him have come to associate socioeconomic hardships with the overall Latino experience.

While all of the study participants disclosed their familial class status, 50% of them spoke about socioeconomic status in depth in reference to their racial identities. Those who identified on the lower middle to lower class spectrum often used words like “ghetto,” “ratchet,” or “hood” to describe themselves or their family and friends from home. Chris used these words when
describing himself and the kind of dialect he uses when he feels most comfortable. These terminologies are profoundly racialized, as they are almost exclusively used to describe people of color or things associated with people of color. Furthermore, when one traces the origin and definition of each of these words, all of them connote an impoverished neighborhood predominantly inhabited or item that is usually used by people of color. In this way these words, when used in certain contexts, are dangerous and almost always imply a racial insult. This is also related to the dialect subjects used while discussing their situations, as individuals would often code switch when discussing their financial situation throughout their lives. “Shit was always just rough for us,” Chris explained, switching out of what he called his “proper” voice. “The only difference between us and the elite is cash flow. I grew up on fuckin’ food stamps, so I work my ass off now so we never have to live like that again.”

This struggle is further embodied by systematic barriers to governmental services like health care or food stamps. In explaining her family’s struggle to get quality healthcare, Alice explained, “When I was filling out an application, a question asked about my connections to health care and why I wanted to work in this field. For me, it’s because my mother, her family, and myself have struggled to receive health care a lot.” From denied insurance to being ignored by doctors, the harmful consequences of Raegan’s welfare queen, where women of color and particularly Black women were portrayed as intentionally capitalizing on the potential to gain government resources, clearly still lie in every crevice of our society as women of color and their children are starved of basic necessities due to racist assumptions. Conversely, those who reported to be on the upper-middle to high class spectrum were often visibly uncomfortable discussing their familial class status, more so than those who reported being lower-middle to
lower class. Even more interestingly, these individuals either saw “being ghetto” as adding social status, or as something to look down upon, with seemingly no in between. These individuals rarely referred to their familial class status when discussing their multiracial identities. This only further demonstrates how affluence is intrinsically associated with Whiteness, thus allowing socioeconomically privileged individuals the prerogative to not think about or interact with their societal advantage.

In these cases, a strange comparative trend occurred. Those who had grown up in lower socioeconomic households and now identified themselves with words like “ghetto” or “hood” perceived the words to be negative, and spoke frequently about trying to combat these stereotypes. Conversely, those from affluent class backgrounds more often used those words as positive attributes, and smiled when using them to describe themselves. This difference here shows that perceptions about race are so intertwined with understandings of socioeconomic status that in order to try to be closer to a particular racial identity, one must visibly appropriate poverty. It also shows that privilege allows affluent individuals the advantage of being able to perceive, treat, and appropriate systematic hardship and symbols of this hardship as “cool,” while those who actually experience these struggles are left to handle the gravity of these conflicts. For example, Chris and Chloe have the same racial and ethnic makeup. They have never met and live on opposite coasts in completely different lifestyles. When describing his home life, Chris shared that looking, sounding, and feeling “ghetto and ratchet” were qualities that he wanted to escape and overcome in adulthood in order to be able to be successful. Meanwhile, Chloe used the same term when explaining her fashion choices, saying, “Yeah, I would definitely say my style is ghetto. I love my hoops and red lipstick, it lets people know I’m Latina.” By connecting Latina
style to being “ghetto” and using these terms, glorifying poverty in this case, while insensitive and condescending, is in many ways a coping mechanism and an attempt to relate to one’s perceived in-group. By trying to “act ghetto,” Chloe is trying to fit in with the stylistic, stereotypical norms of the community she is trying to reclaim. In Chris’ case, not having had the choice to claim or reject these stereotypes caused him to resent his familial class status, and thus his Hispanic heritage. In both scenarios, living in poverty is seen as correlating with being a Hispanic individual, becoming a qualification of being a member of the community. This is to say that poverty is taken as a cultural, racial, and ethnic element that can be used to craft one’s identity to mark belonging in a group even if one did not live through that experience. This appropriation shows the complex ways race and class are intertwined to the point that poverty has become a cultural element that can speak to racial and ethnic identities despite not having that lived experience.

This pattern of linking race to class is also correlated with connections to immigration. Individuals whose parents are first generation Americans, or who are immigrants themselves, shared a lot of similar ideas regarding class status. Regardless of current familial socioeconomic class status, those with personal connections to immigration often associated poverty and “coming from less,” as Sophia put it, to being part of the immigrant experience and therefore part of their connections to their ethnicity.

Furthermore, several individuals who have or had family members still living in their countries of origin described how these ties strengthen connections to their families and their cultures. Nina explained that “visiting the D.R. [Dominican Republic] and talking to my family there always brings me back to my roots and just grounds me in a way. I guess being with your
people reminds you who you are.” In these cases, recent experiences of immigration serve as a connection to their initial home and heritage, and provide an ability to trace that lineage in a tangible way. As an immigrant from Cuba, Ruth explained how being able to remember immigrating to America has served as an important way to maintain her racial identity and understanding of herself since she still has ties to her home country. Those who moved to the United States for college reported similar sentiments. All participants who moved in order to attend university discussed how the American obsession with identity sparked (or forced) their curiosity to understand their multiracial identity. Annie laughed as she lamented, “I didn’t really think about it before [moving to America] because no one used to talk about it before [in Taiwan].” Growing up in a different society meant being socialized to different understandings of race and multiracialism. In these contexts, entering into American society during what is an intense period of self-reflection and growth among their peers adds another difficult layer to understanding one's multiracial identity. In this way, students like Annie and Ruth (at very different moments in their lives) had to learn and understand American racial codes and figure out how to navigate them, position themselves within them, and understand themselves as others position them based on the racial system of the United States, even if they do not necessarily identify with these codes.

**Cultural Gender Roles**

The ways in which one is able to understand their gender identity is rooted in multiple contexts, and has shifted greatly, especially during the last decade. This shift towards gender has particularly affected Millennial and Gen Z generations in America. As a demographic, these generations generally accept a more fluid ideal of gender and gender role expectations than older
generations. All of my participants identified as cisgender across a variety of sexualities, however most individuals in a liberal university environment (a commonality amongst all of my subjects) understand basic principles of gender as a spectrum and believe there is gender inequity in America.

With this in mind, the background from which one ascends plays a critical role in understanding one’s own gender and one’s gender role(s) in society. Understandings of gender differ cross-culturally, which proved to be difficult for some subjects in the study population. In many cases, the expectations a subject perceived from their family and had for themself were heavily informed by cultural context. This is to say that my participants' cultural norms influenced their different gendered roles and responsibilities in their familial unit, as well as their personal and professional aspirations. For example, Christobal (also known as Chris) found it important to behave and be perceived as a “macho man,” which is a Hispanic tradition of showing aggressive and prideful masculinity. Ahmad furthered this sentiment, explaining that while he did not strongly identify with his Hispanic heritage, he found that he felt pressured to uphold male “Latino social expectations.” These expectations included needing to provide monetarily for his family and performing masculinity by asserting dominance stereotypically in outward and aggressive ways: “macho big-man shit,” as Chris put it. These gender roles further manifested themselves in a variety of scenarios ranging from familial dynamics, to social cues, friendships, and romantic relationships. For Ahmad, Chris, and others like them, gender expectations can potentially outweigh one’s own racial and ethnic identifications. While Ahmad does not identify closely with his Hispanic heritage, he still feels compelled to perform and ascribe to the Latino gender expectations he was socialized to view as qualifications of manhood.
Perhaps the most prominent demonstrations of culturally linked gender roles within this demographic occurred in romantic relationships. Inter-gendered interactions vary heavily cross-culturally. For example, in many societies, prolonged eye-contact from a woman to a male is viewed as romantic interest, whereas in Western cultures there is an explicit value placed on one’s ability to maintain eye contact as a social signal of being generally engaged and confident. The cultural understanding of one’s gender role is often demonstrated most in romantic relationships, particularly for individuals who are currently navigating what they like and dislike in romantic partners and partnerships. In other words, the ways in which someone who sees themself as having to ascribe to a Latino male gender role, like Ahmad and Chris did, will be exacerbated in any kind of romantic relationship. About 45% of participants organically brought up stories of current or previous romantic relationships when discussing understandings of their multiracial self. For many, these stories reflected moments where racially charged behavior from either ongoing or potential partners helped socialize the subject to understand how they are perceived through a sexualized lens. It should also be noted that only women expressed stories conveying their racial and gender identities through relationships. For example, Clare discussed how many potential partners, specifically men, idolize her ethnic ambiguity and use it as a means of verbal objectification. In doing so, the complexity of her multiracial identity was erased by limiting her identity to a stereotypical exotic ideal. Annie also mentioned similar experiences. Both women also reported being in relationships where their partners made racialized remarks about their physical appearance and skin tone in public in both positive and negative ways.

For others, having one’s multiracial identity be fully accepted by a partner serves as a moment of healing. Ruth shared that her husband and his parents understand and accept her
racial identity. Because of this she felt the most “herself” with them because she was not expected or forced to code switch in any way. Additionally, Chloe’s partner actively makes her feel validated in both of her racial groups, an experience that was previously new to her. She said, “He just gets it, and gets me. There’s no questions or judgements about what I am or should be, I just get to let go.”

To further complicate this pattern, another layer of norms exist based on one’s sexual preference. Heterosexual, homosexual, nonbinary, and all other gendered relationships are affected by their own set of norms. To identify as a queer person of color, Sam explained, is to simultaneously defy the norms you have grown up with while also putting in an active effort to uphold them. Clare offered a different perspective, saying that being bisexual offered little to her racial identity. While gender identity is influenced by several factors, including exposure to stereotypes, identification with people in their lives, the internal sense of self, and culture, like all other identities, it is still subject to change with time. Throughout the college experience, many subjects reported learning more about gender, sex, and sexuality, and how those factors inform the ways we are treated and are able to treat others. In these cases, such identities and how one interacts with them shifted during the course of the university experience. In doing so, the interconnected nature of gender and culture allows for the opportunity to shift cultured understandings as well. This is to say that in unlearning sexist and gendered norms, these individuals are also developing an understanding of their particular sets of cultural norms, and thus how their gendered and cultural norms might be intertwined.

Religion
Religion proved to be another very significant facet of participants’ identity, as 50% of the subject population spoke about the importance of religion on their sense of self. Regardless of present practices or affiliations, having grown up with a religious background at home served as a powerful influence on the ways in which these individuals viewed the world. Those who identified as religious (either presently or before) were almost always coming from interfaith households where only one parent affiliated with the religion discussed by the subject in our interview. It should also be noted that this reflects how different racial groups tend to have different religious associations. In fact, 82% of religious individuals in this population came from interfaith homes. Previous studies show that links and continued connection to one’s chosen religion is positively correlated to one’s ethnic group (Oppong 2013). However, in the context of multiracial individuals, more than one ethnic group is represented in the household, thus participants more closely identify with the religion of the actively practicing parent. In the context of households where parents are from different faiths, my study shows that children in those households seemed to affiliate their religion with the race of the parent who practiced it at home and more closely identified with that religion than with the one not practiced at home by the other parent. For example, Nina, who identified more closely with her maternal Dominican heritage than her paternal Moroccan one, reported that she felt more closely connected to Islam because her father practiced this faith in the home, whereas her mother’s Catholic faith was rarely discussed in their household. This affiliation was also closely related to the religion of the individual’s grandparents, and if being religious was an important part of their grandparents’ culture and/or history and therefore was a foundational facet of the individual’s relationship to this authority figure.
For several individuals, being religious was an important conduit for finding community. Like-minded individuals being connected by values and traditions as opposed to physical similarities was healing for several members of the study population. As N.B. shared,

Growing up, I was always very involved in my Jewish community. I did Sunday school, youth group, the whole thing. I love the Jewish values of community and helping repair the world. It felt like my Jewish friends really accepted me for who I am, even though I clearly am not totally like them [White].

In this circumstance, being involved in a religious community allowed him to be fully accepted as a member of an in-group. Moreover, N.B. perceived Judaism to be associated with his White racial group, thus furthering his connection to this identity. Since meeting the qualifications of group membership came through practice and participation, belonging was fully achieved regardless of physical differences from others in this group. Other subjects had the complete opposite experience. They discovered that stereotypes are often mapped onto religious bodies. Understandings about skin color, facial hair, clothing, and more are assumed based on “visible” religious affiliation. Only participants from non-Christian religious communities reported these patterns. For example, Ahmad reported that most people assume he is Muslim because of his skin tone and facial hair. “If [they] think I’m Middle Eastern, they automatically assume [I am] Muslim,” he shared. This demonstrates how race, ethnicity and religion are intertwined in such a way that physical qualities affiliated with race or ethnicity are often assumed to be, and then connected to, proof of group membership in a religious community and vice versa.

Additionally, many religions are affiliated with ethnicities or specific nationalities, thus adding to racial hegemony in religious communities. For example, considering that Judaism is an ethno-religion, there are often assumptions about physical similarities among Jews from the same ethnic ancestry such as skin tone, hair color and texture, and facial structure. In cases
where subjects reported looking like they fit into their religious category, religious affiliation also became an important facet of understanding the body, and how it is connected to the assumptions communicated by others, like in the case of Ahmad. In other situations, multiracial individuals reported feeling excluded in religious social spaces on account of looking physically different than their peers and community members. “People always tell me ‘You don’t look Jewish’” Emily shared. She explained how the acknowledgement of her physical difference made her feel less connected to the community, even though she is still an active member of her religion. For others, particularly those from the Jewish faith, individuals reported that the reverse experience can be equally painful. Leah explained that in Jewish spaces she experiences what feels like an erasure of her Black heritage. Since the majority of peers around her were White, they assumed she was as well. In these circumstances, the multiracial identity is further impacted by the ways religions are racialized or associated with physical characteristics of an ethnicity. In both circumstances, religion at times served as means of understanding difference and searching for answers to unknown questions regarding both the internal and external racial selves.

It should be noted that almost all subjects reported being less actively religious while at college than they were during their childhood, meaning they partake in fewer physical practices (prayer, events, clubs, etc.) in their daily lives while living on campus. This seems to be in line with existing data on religiosity and college students in this age demographic (Hunsberger 1978). Not much data exist on the direct correlation between religion and identity formation. However, limited data available from previous studies suggests that religious affiliation positively correlates with a strong sense of individual purpose (Opong, 2013). The continued strength of belief or lack thereof is related more to other variables like age. From this data, we understand
how religion is a complex identity in and of itself, and can have dramatically different impacts on an individual. To one person, religion can serve as another medium for comprehending culture and the multiracial self, while for others, racial hegemony in religious communities serves as an added layer of confusion in understanding the self and can reinforce the formation of double consciousness. For some it brings the solace of community in a society obsessed with physiological qualities, and for others the mass conformity and limiting traditions serve as a barrier to connection and belonging. In all cases, the religious background people grow up with is a crucial facet of their ability to process, cope, and make sense of the world around them, thus greatly impacting the understanding of race and the racial self.

**The Impact of Representation (or Lack Thereof)**

It should be noted that representation of multiracial individuals and/or one’s specific racial and ethnic groups in the media also heavily impacted how individuals treated the above categories. Some subjects felt that fair representation of one or more of their racial groups existed, and that they had been frequently exposed to such representations throughout their childhood. These individuals often had role models to help shape their perceptions of themselves and what was seen as normal and desirable. For others, the topic of representation or lack thereof was painful. It signified a lacking in society that only furthered feelings of confusion when trying to comprehend the self. As Emily explained, missing Asian American role models for the younger part of her life added to misunderstandings about what it meant to be herself. Without young or “cool” examples, it was hard to understand what it meant to be any of her ethnicities. She later found that seeking out media from her countries of origin served as a healing moment and newfound lifelong hobby for her. These films, photos, books, and video tutorials, while often
very new to her, showed her how to “be herself” in many new ways. These examples allowed Emily an insight into the culture she had never been personally exposed to. Since her siblings were in similar circumstances, sharing these learning moments also created a bonding experience for them. In doing so, it gave them both ownership over their identities, and began a process of reclamation that continued and increased during their college careers. In this case, and in that of many others, the role models create a beauty standard to follow and look up to, as well as provide insights into cultural nuances that can increase feelings of in-group inclusion and belonging. Furthermore, individuals often sought role models on social media because there was a shortage of “real” role models in their lives to teach them what is considered “cool” in their specific combination of cultural contexts.

Others used the lack of representation they were exposed to in order to serve as career inspiration. Clare had never known individuals of her specific mix, especially none that were famous. As someone who identifies as a woman of color, she felt it important that other women were able to see and look up to “someone like them,” as she explained. However, even with this in mind no individuals reported having felt they had seen or sought out representation of all of their cultural groups, and almost no one reported seeing or seeking out multiracial role models. The exceptions to this were students who grew up abroad and were enrolled in international schools throughout their lives. While these subjects unanimously reported experiencing a stronger belonging gap with monoracial peers and in their society at large, they also all reported feeling less lonely individually, because they were constantly surrounded by multiracial peers of various mixes depending on location. Because they were outside of the United States educational
context, which is predominantly monoracial, they didn’t feel the same pressure that is enforced in American society.

**Conclusion**

From the identities above, we see how race in the United States is presented, enforced, and perceived based on a foundation of racial categorization. This is so much the case that the racial lens through which one views oneself in many ways sets the foundation for how one sees their other intersecting identities. I argue that at least in the case of multiracial young adults, the weight of the racial lens is a key determinant in how all other identities are formed and experienced. Certain qualities of femininity and masculinity, wealth and poverty, and even religion are so associated with racial categories that subjects positioned their identities in these categories as a facet of their racial selves. In other words, the systems of oppression that exist in America today are so fundamentally racialized and racist that individuals view their position in these additional identities as qualifications of being a member of their racial groups.

Additionally, those who connected these qualities with one of their racial groups often struggled to cope with their additional identities that felt as though they were in further opposition to their racial selves. For example, Chris, a White and Hispanic individual, associated being Hispanic with being “broke” and “macho” while White was associated with being “proper” and “soft.” Because American understandings of class, gender, sexuality, and religions are all racialized, multiracial Americans have a hard time navigating these identities when more than one racial category is operative. With this in mind, I assert that in this population, other identities, like the racial one, can be fluid. This is to say that the perception and treatment of these categories is set to change depending on situational context, audience, and time period in life.
Chapter 6

The Influence of the University Environment on the Developing Identity

The personal history students bring to college is critical; it provides a foundation through which students perceive and interact with their new environment. The young adult years, defined in this study as ages 18-24, are a period of intensive growth. During this time, many individuals are developing independence from parents or other caregivers, which in turn allows for time and space to develop an identity different from what they might have previously been taught to uphold. The university environment is therefore a sort of incubator of this growth. Students are surrounded by peers in similar stages of development, all of whom are at least in some capacity working too to craft their own senses of self to prepare for adulthood and life after completing school.

It is important to note here that, as an institution, the university is an inherently White space. In her article “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” author Sarah Ahmed explains that “When we describe institutions as ‘being’ White (institutional Whiteness) we are pointing to how institutional spaces are shaped by the proximity of some bodies and not others: White bodies gather, and cohere to form the edges of such spaces” (2007). This is to say that spaces and institutions reflect the bodies that occupy them; when a space is mostly acquired by White people, Whiteness shapes the culture and norms of said space. Thus, a university that is occupied predominantly by White people and White social norms is therefore a White institution. As previously mentioned, Whiteness often goes unmarked, meaning it is invisible to those who possess it. This means that in White spaces and institutions, Whiteness is often unseen by the
majority of those within them. In this way the university environment institutionalizes
Whiteness; White norms are both expected and reinforced, even though this is never directly
stated. In refusing to recognize or formally acknowledge the diverse backgrounds and
experiences within their student population, universities often underserve marginalized racial
groups, particularly students of color (Keene and Lawrence-Lightfoot 2014). Without tools to
navigate this space, non-White students often feel disconnected and excluded. In other words,
this environment makes it so that, “non-White bodies feel uncomfortable, exposed, visible,
different, when they take up this space” (Ahmed 2007).

With this in mind, the university experience, comprised primarily of academics and
student affairs, plays a significant role in student growth and identity development. Classes
taken, student clubs, university affiliated scholarship programs, and exposure to new ideas and
people all act as motivators for change that help build a newfound understanding of the
multiracial identity. Throughout my study, participants reported a number of tangible factors that
contributed to changes in their multiracial identities. This chapter will discuss the leading factors
reported to contribute to the substantial development of a multiracial identity in college, and
changes in self-acceptance that occur as students learn language to grapple with their experiences
and reclaim their multiracial identity on their own terms.

Influences of Change: Important Factors in the “College Experience”

From a student perspective, higher education is divided into two overarching components:
student affairs and academics. Student affairs encompasses the social environment and personal
care. This includes room and board, student activities, social groups, healthcare, spiritual life,
etc. Academics focuses on classes required by the institution, majors and minors, research, and
elective courses. These two components combined makeup the so-called “college experience.” While the primary focus of a university is its academics, the social and emotional education received throughout college is also invaluable for the developing young adult. Each provides different critical insights that aid in building an individual identity. In terms of the multiracial identity, it is nearly impossible to determine which of these spheres of influence holds the most value. Each one creates very different opportunities for exposure to new ideas and identity development. Regardless, both components of university life act as motivators of change by creating space for conversation and thought about the self that ultimately aids in identity shifts and a greater understanding of the multiracial self.

**Student Affairs**

In terms of student affairs, several subjects referred to having various support systems which were important mediums for discussing race, ethnicity, and identity conflicts. While many students reported not having discussions about their multiracial heritage with family or friends from home, these same individuals often reported partaking in conversations regarding race and racial identity in college. The university environment occupies a special position to open these conversations, as many young adults are experiencing independence for the first time and thus are working to understand themselves as individuals outside of their home environment. Because of the trope of self-discovery in college, this space is one of heightened racial consciousness, where conversations about race and identity are often encouraged by faculty and staff in a multitude of contexts (orientation, fellowships, clubs, classes, etc.). For example, Alice described her college years as a period of unlearning and relearning. She explained that having grown up with White grandparents who were racially prejudiced against her Puerto Rican parent made her
initially resent her marginalized identity, which she is now actively trying to reclaim in college. It can be understood that her choosing to explore her racial identity in college is perhaps due to the uncomfortable nature of sharing one’s journey of navigating seemingly opposing racial identities with the individuals held responsible for reproducing it or people who are more closely involved with an individual’s familial context. The physical separation of the university environment from one’s childhood home proved to play a large role in people’s ability to partake in vulnerable discussions on identity that may have been trivialized or misunderstood in home contexts. Simply put, college friends and other peers are immensely important. Within the realm of social support, subjects reported a number of places and people on campus they look to for guidance. However, the four primary group social settings discussed were cultural clubs, Greek organizations, scholarship programs, and individual friendships.

The topic of cultural clubs, on-campus organizations whose mission is to develop communities rooted in shared culture, was intentionally discussed in each interview. Of the 22 individuals in the sample population, only two individuals reported to be active members of a culture club (and both were in the same club). Those who did report positive experiences specifically mentioned it providing an important opportunity to speak in their first language with people who understood complicated cultural nuances and humor. Maya shared her experience in the Japanese student association: “It’s nice to have a place that just feels like home, I don’t have to really explain myself as much.” Sonya also shared this sentiment and added, “I noticed the longer I’m away from Japan my Japanese is rusty, and more American sounding. I like being able to speak [Japanese] here [at school] with people who understand.” She continued to explain how being able to have a club of both Japanese and Japanese American students allowed her to
see the differences between Japanese and Japanese-American culture. This enabled her to better understand the norms and social trends that are different in her community here compared to those at home. Communicating with fellow native speakers and developing an understanding of how Japanese and Japanese-American culture differ in the United States created a welcoming and safe space for her to explore her racial identity. Furthermore, she shared that several other multiracial individuals are in this club and they frequently discuss their experiences together.

The other 91% of the study population either spoke negatively about their experiences in their respective cultural organizations, or completely refused to participate in them based on unpleasant experiences with members of said groups. Multilingual participants in this category reported feeling disappointed by the loss of a space to communicate in one of their two languages. While Nina spoke Spanish and English interchangeably in her home in New York City, she lost her ability to do so in college. While she enjoyed being able to use her Spanish in the school’s Latinx student group, she was ostracized and chose not to return after having been accused of not being a “real Latina” on account of discrimination against Dominicans for being Black. Even though she spoke the language, those who also Spanish did not accept her as a full group member because of her particular ethnic background and physiological characteristics. This speaks to the particular politics of belonging and exclusion within the Latinx community in the United States, where there is both a linguistic and racial divide. Because of this dual divide, those who have limited definitions of what it means to be Latinx are able to exclude in-group members for lacking either or both the language and physiological qualities that are perceived to be “normal” in this community. This is exacerbated in predominantly White university
environments, where low representation of Latinx students on campus creates a greater need to forge a close Latinx community (Lopez and Hasso 1998).

For others, language barriers, colorism, and outright exclusion were obstacles to group membership. Subjects who somehow looked or sounded as though they did not know “enough” about their culture were made to feel ashamed, and were treated differently than monoracial members of the group. Lily shared her experience in her university’s Black Student Associations:

They could see I wasn’t totally Black. So people always asked me all these questions about how I grew up, where I was from, and all that kind of stuff just to see how Black I was. I realized it didn’t even matter what I said, so I just ended up making peace with it and decided that I would never be Black enough, so I just figured it out on my own.

Like Lily, several other subjects reported similar experiences. This feeling of rejection by members of one’s racial group leads to myriad negative emotions including a sense of betrayal, resentment, anger, sadness, shame, and guilt. For example, both Alice and Ruth felt unwelcome in their Latinx Student Organization due to colorism and non-normative connections to their Hispanic heritage. While Alice feels she was excluded for being too White-passing and not knowing Spanish, Ruth felt that she was excluded for being too dark-skinned and not knowing the right dialect of Spanish. In both cases, the subjects felt unwanted and not welcome in the community they hoped would provide them with belonging.

A few individuals reported longing for a multiracial club on campus; one individual even shared there was talk of starting a half-Asian club, although it never came to fruition. Culture clubs are meant to provide a chance for students to build companionship around shared experiences and address the needs and concerns of their respective communities. Acceptance or lack thereof by monoracial individuals in this circumstance confirms or undercuts feelings of belonging in a racial group, and has the potential to further complicate the relationship with a
developing multiracial identity. On a campus where literally hundreds of clubs exist, it is a little surprising that there isn’t a space for multiracial students. Perhaps this could be because students are working to initially be accepted by one or all of their different cultural clubs, and when this attempt at connection fails, individuals choose to isolate themselves so as not to draw attention to the very reasons they were barred from belonging in the first place. Furthermore, the lack of space or acceptance for multiracials in culture clubs is a reflection of the United States racial system. Students are unintentionally and implicitly reproducing this system by determining who belongs to their community and what the membership requirements are.

Greek letter organizations are often a prominent social environment on college campuses in the United States. Sororities and fraternities offer guaranteed friendship through planned social experiences. They also focus on developing leadership, philanthropy and community service, and building strong bonds amongst a group of like-minded students. In addition to these positive qualities, Greek life is also historically rooted in racism. Greek organizations are infamous for their legacies of elitism and racial homogeneity, and enforced conformism. Considering the often racialized nature of criteria for membership, this legacy is explicitly and inherently racist, and thus most impacts low-income students and students of color. While many Greek organizations have been created specifically by and for members of marginalized groups, recent history has shown that implicit racism is still prominent in many sororities and fraternities. While most Greek organizations are open to people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, the very fact that there was a need to create separate Greek organizations for people of color is telling of the dire need for equitable and inclusionary policies within these organizations. The complicated process of navigating the desire for close friendships and community with the racism and homogeneity of
this particular kind of social group is difficult to unpack, and varies according to organization, institution, and individual. Eight subjects (approximately 36% of the study population) were members or had previously been members of a Greek organization on campus, they all freely discussed the racialized nature of their group. Of the ten Greek organizations currently at the campus (five sororities and five fraternities), five were represented in the study. Experiences in these groups varied greatly, however even those with positive experiences felt compelled to bring up the lack of both racial and socioeconomic diversity in their respective groups. While no fraternity members reported experiencing any explicit racism individually (even when asked directly), several subjects reported having seen or heard racial jokes in fraternity settings that felt unsettling to them.

Although Ahmad reported meeting the majority of his closest friends through Greek life, he acknowledged the lack of racial diversity in his fraternity.

Yeah, there's a lot of White people. They’re mostly good people, and everyone in my life that I love [on campus] is involved in Greek life, but it’s sometimes hard dealing with class differences, like socioeconomic class, and having to deal with ignorance sometimes. I guess I would say I’ve become socially White here because of [my fraternity].

According to Ahmad, being “socially White” meant that almost all of his friends are White, and as a result he has learned how to communicate and behave “in White ways.” For him, this included slang and dialect used (or in some cases not used), clothing worn, and more. This experience of learning and navigating Whiteness in college is not unique to Ahmad, which I will discuss further later in this chapter. Others with similar experiences felt compelled to act to change this homogeneity, taking on leadership roles in their groups to do so. For example, David noticed a lack of diversity in his fraternity during his first year, so he decided to join the group’s Executive Board as a recruitment chair in order to help bring in more Asian members. He
continues to feel compelled to create change and improve racial diversity in his group. “It’s gotten a lot better since I first joined,” he said of the group’s demographics. “My thing is that if I am there telling guys to join, maybe they’ll see me [an Asian person] and feel like it’ll be fun for them too.” In this way, he shared, being biracial served as a leverage point for his efforts. Others learned to utilize their multiracial identity to connect a wide array of audiences. For Chris, choosing to join a fraternity was an opportunity to network with wealthy students to obtain the academic and career resources held by these better connected individuals. He expressed that he always knew he wanted to come to college and make something of himself; that’s why he joined the fraternity infamous for having wealthy members who, as he put it, are “spoiled trust fund babies” who had potentially helpful and powerful connections through their parents. In this way, he explained, leveraging his Latino identity was a means of entry into a space that needed more diverse membership, while the qualities he attributed to his White identity acted as points of connection with his fraternity brothers.

Members of sororities reported vastly different experiences. All sorority members within the study population reported feeling excluded from and uncomfortable in sorority settings due to racial and socioeconomic discrimination. The excessive pressure to look, dress, and behave similarly to fellow sorority members was communicated in such a way that participants often felt forced to perform as White in Greek spaces. This created particular challenges regarding hair and clothing in addition to already stark financial barriers. Furthermore, members of sororities discussed a kind of racialized environment centered mostly around microaggressions regarding physical attributes like body type, hair texture and color, nails, and clothing choices.
Compared to members of fraternities, participants who were members of a sorority were noticeably more nervous about sharing their experiences in Greek organizations. In each conversation, participants stopped to ask if I was involved in Greek life, or was close to a female who was. After looking around to see if anyone from her group was there, Alice leaned in and whispered her experience to me:

I need to be quiet, just ‘cuz people might be around… So I joined a sorority on campus because I wanted to make friends, but that is the exact opposite of what happened. I don’t connect with anyone and don’t feel anything towards them. I just am different from them. It’s not just racially and ethnically, it’s also socioeconomically. I feel like all of these girls are able to relate to each other in ways I’ll never be able to because I wasn’t raised the way that they were. It just requires a certain kind of explaining myself, more so than what I have to do normally.

The desire for friendship and group belonging is natural, particularly for multiracial individuals who were already longing for community on campus. However, it is a complex thought process; healing a racist legacy and unintentionally reinforcing it. Although many individuals reported having positive Greek life experiences, the underlying theme of racism often created a divisive internal conflict for group members who did not or could not feel fully seen and understood in their Greek communities.

Six participants in the study were members of various university affiliated scholarship programs, where individuals who are receiving a specific kind of outside funding go through training and group bonding experiences before and during college. In contrast with Greek organizations, participants who were part of these groups had overwhelmingly positive experiences. Access to communities of individuals from similar socioeconomic backgrounds served as a refreshing point of connection at a private school full of wealthy students. “I feel the most connected to them,” Alice said of her scholarship program community. “We are from the
same background and place, and they’ve known me since before [I started college], so they just really get me and who I am.” These scholarship groups also offered connections to other multiracial individuals, and often held group bonding discussions where other participants could see and understand other peer’s experiences of being multiracial. Furthermore, the three scholarship groups represented offered continuous peer and professional support for students, ranging from therapy, to tutoring, career counseling, and more. Scholarship groups do far more than simply provide financial aid. It should be noted here that the existence of these scholarship groups is due to the reality that non-White and low income students often have difficulty successfully navigating the predominantly White university environment. These scholarship groups provide necessary tools to navigate this space; they create friendships rooted in support and care, and work to fill the educational equity gap by providing access to resources to ensure continued success for students. In these ways, these groups created both a community and at times a safe space on campus for individuals to express their experiences and receive comfort from others who could understand those experiences on a personal level.

While individual relationships are a strong component of self-understanding, it is difficult to measure how they impact patterns of identity development in a large population. Keeping this in mind, building friendships with other multiracial individuals did prove to be especially influential in my sample. Upon first moving onto campus, Sophia reported being overwhelmed by confusion. It was difficult for her to find her “place” in a White institution she described as a “racialized campus of boxes,” that is, a campus socially divided into racial groups. When she realized she was unwelcome in any culture clubs, she felt excluded and eventually became resentful of the university social scene. Meeting just two fellow multiracials during her
sophomore year provided an unexpected alleviation of this burdensome frustration. “We just sort of found each other and bonded from this shared experience,” she said. “We are just friends now [outside of this connection] but that is what brought us together at first.” For others, multiracial friendships also offer solidarity through unity in moments that would otherwise be much more painful. In reference to exclusionary club environments, Clare experienced a personally unprecedented sense of camaraderie at being surrounded by multiracial friends when presented with an exclusionary comment about monoracial racial hegemony:

He (a club member) made a comment about a member of the group not being ‘really Asian’ because he was mixed, we all just looked at each other. None of us felt like saying anything, but we all knew we had each other in that one second, which was just a nice feeling.

Overall, this support creates a kind of think-tank for multiracial individuals to hear and see their experiences reflected in the lives of others and then compare them as such. It should also be noted that no individual who spoke about multiracial friendships on campus mentioned having friends of their same racial mix. Moreover, the shared multiracial experience, both on campus and in life, served as a sufficient foundation for connection. Although no participants specifically referenced being a part of any kind of multiracial community, these one-on-one relationships serve as a strong comfort and solace from the racism or racial exclusion within the greater campus community. Perhaps these shared senses of hardship and comfort are part of why multiracial individuals reported being so keen at “recognizing each other.”

**Academics**

Academically, the kinds of classes participants take also provide an important aspect to their identity development. In terms of study areas, about a third of participants were involved in STEM fields; all others were studying humanities or social sciences. While not directly
correlated with racial identity, the experiences gained from being part of a particular academic department are relevant. Those involved in STEM fields often discussed the racialized nature of their departments, where the majority of students are White. The harsh, competitive environments of these departments frequently create disparities for students of color. “It’s a bad spot to be in,” Nina explained, “you look out into a sea of over 100 people and you can immediately spot all three Black folks, and they’re usually sitting right next to each other. Everyone is already so competitive, then they group together to study, and people only want to help people like them.” She went on to explain that, even though she is partially White, she is also a victim of this exclusion because she presents as visibly Black. While students in these fields mostly reported discussions on race were lacking in their classes, people like Nina learned to cope with prejudicial experiences by becoming leaders in organizations to support students of color in the sciences.

Conversely, participants who took classes in humanities and social science courses frequently reported conversations about race being brought up in class. Readings, lectures, and group discussions on subjects like Black feminist thought, intersectionality, and critical race theory provided them a language to help understand and explain their experiences. Leah explained how in most sociology classes, where the topic inequality is a main focus, race seems to always be folded into classroom discussions. However, these discussions were not without controversy. Many subjects reported feeling tokenized or pressured to speak during conversations regarding race. While multiracialism was almost never a point of discussion, individuals visibly connected to a group in question were often called out by peers or professors to add their experience to the conversation. This created an internal conflict for many
individuals, including Liz. She shared that in these spaces she felt unequipped to speak about any specific ethnic group, and only felt able to speak on behalf of the “generalized POC experience.” She shared her constant struggle of deciding whether or not to be a voice in classroom conversations on race. Ultimately, she determined it felt the most comfortable for her and the most helpful to the discussion to speak about her personal experiences only in conversations regarding the general experience of people of color in America.

In explaining her experiences in similar circumstances, Leah explained how being an ethnically ambiguous Black woman makes tokenization in classroom settings especially difficult. Considering her internalized discomfort in spaces for people of color, she explained, having to share her identity and speak on behalf of others felt nerve racking and put her at risk of being verbally attacked by Social Justice Warriors. Social Justice Warriors (or SJWs as described by participants) are predominantly White individuals who loudly express and publicly promote their politically left and progressive views. In the context of this specific campus culture, this title was meant as an insult; individuals who spoke about SJWs regarded them with disdain. Almost a third of participants in the study specifically mentioned “SJW” culture on campus and how it impacts their classroom environments. Chris shared the reasons behind his frustration towards these particular individuals:

There is just this oversaturation of information, they put their narrative and opinions into my head... And I can appreciate that… but at the end of the day as someone who is actually culturally, a part of the group that is being spoken for by these elite... I don’t know, I just think that the only people who can really comment on issues of underserved people have to be underserved. To try to say that they get it, just invalidates you when you’ve already invalidated yourself. It’s kind of a game of cat and mouse, where people who don’t understand but would like to are trying to do good, but it's just kinda awful.
In these ways, the seemingly well-meaning SJW, in a hollow attempt to promote anti-racism, end up reproducing the same system of exclusion that they seek to dismantle. This attitude is, in fact, counterproductive and harmful to their causes. Several other students mentioned similar frustrations about being spoken over by these more privileged individuals who, while well intended, often speak over individuals like them instead of actually helping or even hearing them. The problem here with the SJW population is that they try to take a public stand for issues they care about through tactics that ultimately reduce the social phenomena in question to simplistic labels. In doing so, they are reproducing a system of exclusion where their voices and experiences are once again silenced and only validated via the voices of the SJW population. This is particularly problematic for multiracials, whose existence disrupts any attempt to neatly categorize individuals or behaviors into homogenous groups. For that very reason, multiracials threaten the self-proclaimed authority of SJWs, and thus are often victimized by SJWs’ public social attacks. While in this way the SJW is a caricature, since real people tend to not be quite so odious, this pattern speaks to serious toxicity that exists in campus classrooms and activist culture.

Developing meaningful personal and professional relationships is important for all people, regardless of temporal context or individual circumstance. However, in the university environment, one’s chosen support systems play an even more important role. In the absence of parental figures, college friends become the primary socializers in an individual’s life. Academically, important conversations about race and identity with peers and faculty are thought-provoking and allow individuals the opportunity to question the realities previously seen as unconditionally true. Ultimately, the people one surrounds oneself with will offer ideologies
and information that will either confirm individuals’ understanding of themselves or make them question it, perhaps for some, for the first time. For the developing multiracial identity, these motivators of change offer a unique opportunity to break down the facets of a complex identity and put it back together in ways that often feel more authentic and representative of multiple truths.

**Shifts in Identity**

Young adulthood is generally known as a period for growth and self-discovery. Just over 40% of individuals in this study reported developing greater confidence or interpersonal skills in college. Exposure to new people, places, and knowledge provides a powerful set of circumstances to build a sense of self; personal change is inevitable in this environment. For all students, the intersection of prior experiences with their chosen university environment creates a personal journey that is dependent on a wide variety of continuous circumstances throughout this period. During this time, students experience considerable personal progress that can significantly change how they identify themselves. What is special about the multiracial identity, however, is that instead of developing a new identity, what changed most often were the ways in which subjects viewed a pre-existing identity and the ways in which they interact with that identity in their daily lives. More specifically, the internal and external racial selves are both able to evolve on their own accords. Motivators of change create shifts in the multiracial identity in ways that are unique to the university environment.

This study highlights a few of the many ways the internal racial self, the way someone personally identifies racially, can differ from the external racial self, the way one presents and outwardly discusses their racial identity to others. The development of the internal racial self
seems to point towards an eventual understanding and self-acceptance. While many participants shared stories about the painful experiences and hardships of personal reflection, ultimately this struggle leads to an understanding and an active choice about how to comprehend the racial self. The fluid nature of the multiracial identity allows for this journey of self-navigation to be constant and ever changing; many students reported changing significantly from one semester to the next based on classes, clubs, jobs, life events, mentors, and friendships. Sophia, a third year, explained her in-depth process of understanding how to exist racially:

“When you first arrive here [college] as a non-White person, you notice everyone starting to sort themselves, which I had never really experienced before. So while all of the POC were making a community they were like ‘hey you look Latina, want to be friends?’ and of course I said yes, even though I’m not [Latina] but then they were already talking to me so there wasn’t a barrier to our interactions. I realized how things were different for me over time, and noticing microaggressions and stuff like that. I’ve learned here to not have a problem talking to White people, but this is different from friends who would rather not hang out with people who don’t look like them. Eventually I learned that I could be friends with anyone, because I can kind of figure out how to fit in anywhere. Now I don’t really feel [lonely] like I did before.

For many, this process of self-acceptance and understanding begins with reclaiming and redefining their internal racial self in their own terms. Several participants, like Sophia, expressed that the university environment aided in this process by presenting opportunities through which to unlearn previous learned feelings and behaviors. Through a unique combination of classes, therapy, public events, programs, clubs, and individual relationships, the college experience provides multiracial students with the ability to unpack their identities while adding in new information so that an individual can grow in a way that aligns with their own personal ideologies as they develop.

Reclaiming can look vastly different depending on the individual. Nevertheless, it involves some form of claiming agency over one's racial identities and how one chooses to
represent them. During one’s upbringing, connections to one’s heritages and cultures are through the familial unit. In college, students are able to build their own connection with their heritage outside their familial context, and can decide how and how much they want to participate in their racial, ethnic, and cultural communities. Throughout the interview process, subjects demonstrated a variety of methods through which they were seeking (or had sought) to redefine their racial selves. Some chose to focus on one racial identity, others chose to find ways for their various racial selves to coexist (like Sophia) through a fluid balance between their different racial selves. This balancing act demonstrates a new kind of double consciousness, when the various racial identities are no longer felt in opposition to one another, and instead create different lenses for thinking and behaving in different contexts. However, it should be noted that almost all subjects who expressed utilizing this balancing act tactic were mixed with one White parent. This ability is a privilege that allows them to navigate oppression differently than multiracials who are mixed with two or more marginalized groups. I would further argue that college changes double consciousness by making it even more fluid, as individuals develop and understanding that their identities are neither oppositional nor incompatible. This is because while multiracial kids are normally able to frequently switch in and out of their different racial selves when moving from home to school each day, in college, students live in what would normally be their White space. For these students, finding a new way to distribute the various identities is a challenge. For example, Nina shared that “At first, whenever I would come home from college my whole family would make fun of me and call me ‘White’ and say that ‘school made me White’ so I learned pretty quickly to code switch whenever I come back home.” About a third of the population, like Nina, reported feeling as though they were “White at school.” Being “White
at school” also connects to experiences like Ahmad’s aforementioned “social Whiteness”, where multiracial students feel forced to learn, navigate, and perform Whiteness in order to belong or succeed in a predominantly White institution. This is the standard of Whiteness in institutions of higher learning; students are expected to behave in ways that are perceived as acceptable to the dominant majority of Whites who set the expectations in academia.

Finally, the college environment provides ample opportunity, and often requires students, to speak about themselves in front of others. From presentations to group projects, college students are constantly being asked to speak about themselves in depth. This relates back to the aforementioned American obsession with identity in conjunction with the trope of self-discovery in college. In this educational environment, students develop a newfound capacity to understand themselves and their positionality, both within their academic institution and in the broader society of the United States. Through these frequent conversations, multiracial students eventually (if they haven’t already) develop a language to grapple with their experience and accurately explain them to others. While this language is helpful, it can also feel imposed when there is an expectation to discuss race in an environment where multiracial individuals are concerned about being targeted by SJW ignorance. This also connects to how many upperclassmen were prepared with a quick memorized speech about their racial identity. Through these conversations, students are able to figure out their role in the classroom space. Through trial and error, students said they determine how they can productively contribute to conversations regarding race in ways that feel truthful.

Both the internal and external racial understandings need to progress in order to develop a well-rounded sense of self. In doing so, multiracial students are not only developing an
understanding of how they see themselves, they are also creating new coping mechanisms that determine how to communicate and behave in order to present themselves in a way that feels authentic to their compounded identities. In the college environment specifically, the development of the external racial self teaches individuals how to utilize their multiracial identity to their benefit. In the university environment, individuals receive widespread, rapid exposure to a variety of new kinds of people and subjects. While seeing how others interact with their racial identities can help teach individuals how to interact with their own, it also reinforces the lesson that multiracial individuals are able to fit in anywhere through code switching. Since the style of life in college requires multiracial students to slip in and out of their various identities in order to manage expectations from peers, faculty, and family at home, individuals in this context develop a heightened and refined ability to code switch in a number of social settings. About a third of individuals in the study reported saying they “can fit in anywhere.” This concept, as previously discussed in Chapter 2, is called the chameleon experience, where both despite and because of feelings of alienation stemming from their unique racial mixtures, multiracial subjects have the ability to code switch successfully in many different kinds of racialized spaces. Through learning how to accurately express themselves to others, multiracial students are eventually able to determine a sense of belonging on campus, in their home lives, and in society at large.

All subjects in this study were at widely different places in their identity development and each presented a set of personal coping techniques that were unique to their needs. As students at a predominantly White institution, this sense of self is developed within the context of a White space. With this in mind, I would argue that to develop multiple understandings of a racial self, at any stage, is an example of radical protest against systemic racism and White hegemony in
and of itself. This is because non-White individuals are able to utilize their privilege and leverage their positionality as multiracials to their benefit in spite of expectations of monoracial categorization and hegemony in America. The university environment provides a medium through which one can expand through active exploration and try to find a way in which to exist. Learning how to understand yourself and interact with society is challenging for all young adults, however doing so while managing multiple sets of expectations, cultural norms, and one’s own personal standards for each context is a feat all its own. This combination of self-acceptance and active coping, in any of its many forms, creates a synergetic relationship between the internal and external racial selves, where they are cohabiting productively within an individual identity instead of existing in active opposition to one another.
Chapter 7

Conclusion

The university environment is in many ways centered around a theme of self-discovery. Discussions about individuality and racial identity are encouraged in every facet of university life from orientation, to residential life, and of course, the classroom. During a time of transition and growth, finding a balance between the multiple layers of the self can often be a complicated process. When my project began, I set out to find trends in the multiracial experience at predominantly White institutions of higher learning and the role of multilingualism on the developing identity. I also had several sub-focuses, including the impacts of campus culture, common challenges amongst multiracial students, and the ways in which intersecting identities shape each unique experience. Overall, I was interested in finding specific ways in which college aided in the process of identity development.

I had originally hypothesized that there would be trends in the ways in which individuals manage their identity development in college. For example, I expected to find similar stories of childhood confusion regarding belonging. I also predicted there would be strong patterns regarding ways of managing this confusion in college, such as getting involved in clubs or taking classes in subjects regarding race. Much to my surprise, my research changed significantly from its early stages and the findings were mostly unrelated to my original hypotheses. First and foremost, the original focus on language proved to be significantly less relevant than expected. Multilingual students were mostly used to speaking only English in elementary, middle, and high school settings, and thus were relatively prepared for this particular transition to college. In this
way, the role of language was far less impactful on the developing identity during time in college. Additionally, the qualities of the university experience that did prove to be positively correlated with identity development were far different than expected as well.

Some of the most important findings emerged almost immediately during the recruitment stage. For the purpose of this study, the term “mixed-race” was used in an intentionally ambiguous fashion in order to be as inclusive as possible. This choice led to my understanding of the interrelated nature of “race” and “ethnicity” and how the two are often used interchangeably. From this it was determined that formal definitions of each term were often unknown, and insisting on the differentiation between the two often felt like an invalidation and “White washing” of experience based on the ways that non-White ethnicities are racialized in the societal context of the United States. With this in mind, I would argue that, at least in this way, the distinction between race and ethnicity is no longer worth making. Since race itself is not something that is fixed or biologically real, the lack of experiential patterns amongst individuals is understandable because racial understandings are so context specific.

It was also determined that there was a clear contrast in the ways in which subjects see themselves as multiracial individuals and the ways others perceive them, a phenomenon that was most often rooted in colorism, the distinction between members of an ethnic or racial group based on differences of visible shades in skin tone. Ultimately, this disparity creates an internal identity conflict around belonging in racial communities, which serves as a barrier to self-understanding in the United States, where these individuals feel as though they don’t belong and aren’t “full” members of their racial groups. Ultimately, students learn (whether consciously or otherwise) that their various racial identities are socially constructed so that it feels as though
they exist in opposition to one another, which drives the eventual creation of a double
consciousness (DuBois 1903), where life is seen through different racialized lenses depending on
context. This shared experience of fluid identity in conjunction with the shared hardship that
comes from being ethnically ambiguous to others creates a camaraderie amongst multiracial
individuals in the college environment, even though a specific “multiracial community” does not
exist. The absence of an organized multiracial community is not unique to this particular
institution. It does, however, speak to a much larger, societal issue about how Americans are
socialized not to engage with multiple racial identities at once, thus making it difficult for a
multiracial community to exist, or even for multiracialism to exist as its own category.

This study speaks about the racialized nature of higher learning, both through academics
and campus culture at large. In college, there are a variety of influences that aid in the shifting of
identity. For many multiracial students, this shift is built through a combination of trial and error
to determine what communities are supportive and accepting of one or all of their truths and
identities. An important finding of this study is that most students in the sample population found
culture clubs to be a negative experience, primarily because they were not accepted as a member
of a community or communities where they felt they should be able to belong. Members from
cultural clubs often excluded multiracial students for not being “enough” of whatever
qualifications would make one a member of that culture. Thus, the culture of culture clubs end
up reifying the broader social and racial hegemony by denying the possibility of a multiracial
identity and requiring full belonging; participants need to erase one or more of their other
identities in order to belong. I suggest that campus intercultural centers make an effort to build
an active multiracial club or community on campus where students will have an intentional space to cultivate and nurture their developing racial identities.

Furthermore, it was determined that even for students who specifically study race or subjects where race is a primary focus in the curriculum, many students struggled to find language to explain the particular experience of being multiracial. This proved to be particularly important in classroom settings, where, due to perceptions of peers based on their ethnic ambiguity, multiracial subjects were unsure about their role in academic discussions regarding one of their racial identities. While multiracial or mixed race studies programs and departments are seldom offered in undergraduate institutions, this study produces a call for at least an intentional incorporation of multiracial learning in departments that study race, ethnicity, and culture in any capacity. Doing so will offer a more intersectional approach to studying race that allows for the representation of even more experiences.

In regards to the toxicity that exists in a racialized campus culture, the study speaks to the harmful impacts of the “social justice warrior” in this setting. Poorly executed attempts by privileged White peers to raise awareness and enact positive change often lead to a further erasure of marginalized voices and thus harms the people their activism aims to help by robbing individuals of the opportunity to speak for themselves. In doing so they reinforce the racially White dominant hierarchy, even as they attempt to dismantle it. This culture is reified through public call-outs regarding positionality and who gets the privilege of belonging, particularly in classroom settings. As a consequence, many multiracial students feel unable to express themselves in the classroom for fear of these interactions. While I am unsure how to address this
phenomenon in classrooms, the data unequivocally call for an active change to address this concern.

Ultimately, this study reaffirmed the lasting impacts of childhood experiences in that an individual's personal context prior to college played one of, if not the most significant role in the impact of a university experience. This is to say that even though subjects in this study population were all members of the same university and therefore had similar baseline opportunities for personal growth, the learned narratives internalized before college can completely change the way the university environment is seen and experienced. Furthermore, the combination of the trite obsession with identity in America, and the well-known trope of college years as a time filled with exploration and self-discovery, create a heightened consciousness around racial identity. Students are learning how to speak about themselves and present themselves as adults to the world in a way that will be both authentic to themselves and acceptable and understood by others. Without giving answers, the college environment adds a certain kind of consciousness around the multiracial identity, which creates a space to reconcile and better understand their identities despite the lack of frameworks that exist for multiracial self-identification in the United States. Because this is a learning process that takes time, many subjects (mostly underclassmen) often found themselves considering new ideas about their racial identities during the interview process.

Furthermore, the college environment provides tools that allow multiracial students the opportunity to situate themselves both in their campus community and in American society. All participants were asked what it meant to be multiracial at their institution and in the world today. Regardless of their definitions and feelings associated with the multiracial experience, almost
every participant agreed that those two sets of experiences were at least somewhat different. Again, this is in part because of the particular emphasis on identity in college. It also may be because of the inherent and considerable White standard which persists in academia. While there is an inherent White standard in all of American society, the ways in which it is performed and reinforced in academia through elitist language and expectations create a particular experience that is similar to, but certainly not the same as the general reinforcement of Whiteness in society at large. This causes many non-White students to feel alienated in the university environment. By existing in a space that provides language to grapple with these experiences, multiracial college students are able to find how to utilize their positionality to their advantage in a variety of contexts before and after graduation. Existing theoretical frameworks discuss important influences on multiracial identity development, however almost no theory exists to explain the ways multiracial identity development is affected by the university environment.

The study has in many ways made me more critical than ever of higher education, and I am left with a multitude of questions on how to respond to these concerns. I am wondering about the nature of campus culture at large, if the experiences discussed by individuals at this specific institution are in any ways representative of similar liberal arts universities, and how this may compare to the college experience on a national scale. Furthermore, there is a significant amount of work to be done in understanding how intersecting identities impact the multiracial experience and how the development of one impacts the other. For future work, there is a need to develop understandings of the multiracial college experience and trends that exist for students of the same racial and ethnic combinations. More specifically, I am curious to see how similar data might look different when looking specifically at populations of multiracial individuals who have
multiple marginalized racial identities versus those who have one parent from a marginalized group and another who is White.

Multiracial individuals have a vast and immeasurable capacity for human understanding. In living with multiple truths, their capacity for empathy and understanding is substantial. The university environment provides a unique opportunity to develop an understanding of this capacity and in many ways provides tools to develop language and coping mechanisms to best confront these experiences. Personally, in gathering and analyzing these data, I was able to better understand my own experiences by differentiating what of my life matched up with patterns in the data and what was unique to my own individual circumstances. In doing so I was able to better understand myself in relation to others and discovered a new sense of comfort in experiences I had previously found to be confusing and isolating. I was able to better see the depth of the impacts of a college experience from multiple sides, and the many faults in both the institution of higher education and American society as a whole.


Appendix A: Interview Guide

Interviews were semi-structured and open-ended, with the goal of being partially guided by the interviewees themselves. This guide was used as a starting point, suggesting topics that may not otherwise arise during the flow of the conversation.

Background:
1. How old are you?
2. Where do/ did you go to school?
3. What is/ was/ were your major(s) and minor(s)?
4. Where are you from?
   a. Were you born there?
   b. If no, where were you born?
5. What is your racial makeup?
6. Does this differ from your ethnic makeup?
   a. If yes, how so?
7. What would you say is your family’s class background?
8. Did either of your parents attend college?
   a. What about siblings or other family members?

Identity:
9. How (if at all) do you feel your racial background shaped your upbringing?
10. Do you feel this impacted your college experience?
    a. If so, how?
11. Have you found/ did you find a community or communities on campus where you felt you belonged in college?
    a. If so, what were they?
12. Are you/ were you a part of any student organizations?
    a. If so, which ones?
13. Has college impacted your identity?
    a. If so how?
14. Has it impacted your racial identity or how you interact with your racial identity?
    a. If so, how?
15. Do you feel your relationship with your racial identity has changed during your college experience?
    a. If yes, how so?
16. Do you feel you interact differently with peers, faculty, or other people in college than you do at home?
    a. If yes, how?
17. Do you feel there are differences in how you behave in the classroom compared to residential settings?
    a. What about social settings?
    b. Are these experiences related to your racial identity?
    c. If yes, how?
18. Do you feel there are differences in how you feel and interact with others in these
Settings?
   a. Are these experiences related to your racial identity?
   b. If yes, how?

Language:
18. Do you speak more than one language?
19. **If yes**, what languages do you speak?
20. How did you learn these languages?
21. Did you grow up with more than one language being spoken in the home?
22. When and where do you speak each language?
23. Would you consider either/ any of these languages your “first language?”
24. Do you use more than one language when interacting with people on campus?
   a. Have others assumed that you speak another language?
   b. How has this impacted you?
   c. Do you feel your connection to your racial group is different based on this experience?
   d. If yes, how so?
25. **If no**, do you feel that has impacted your experience as a mixed-race individual?
26. Have others assumed that you speak another language?
   a. How has this impacted you?
27. Do you feel that your connection to your racial group(s) is/ are different because you do not speak another language?
   a. How does this make you feel?
28. **[For both]** Do you think the languages you speak are important for sharing your racial (or ethnic) identities?

Other:
29. Do you have a preferred term for “mixed-race”?
30. What else do you think I should know/ what else would you like to tell me about your experiences?
31. Do you know of any other people who may be qualified for and interested in this research?
   a. If yes, who and may I have their contact information?