

“WHAT ARE YOU?”: RACIAL AMBIGUITY AND THE SOCIAL  
CONSTRUCTION OF RACE IN THE U.S.

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This dissertation is a qualitative study of racially ambiguous people and their life experiences. Racially ambiguous people are individuals who are frequently misidentified racially by others because they do not resemble the phenotype associated with the racial group to which they belong or because they belong to racial/ethnic groups originating in different parts of the world that resemble each other. The racial/ethnic population of the United States is constantly changing because of variations in the birth rates among the racial/ethnic groups that comprise those populations and immigration from around the world. Although much research has been done that documents the existence of racial/ethnic mixing in the history of the United States and the world, this multiracial history is seldom acknowledged in the social, work, and other spheres of interaction among people in the U.S., instead a racialized system based on the perception of individuals as mono-racial thus easily identified through (skin tone, hair texture, facial features, etc.). This research was done using life experience interviews with 24 racially ambiguous individuals to determine how race/ethnicity has affected their lives and how they negotiate the minefield of race.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this grounded theory study is to explore some of the contradictions and paradoxes inherent in the system of racialization ingrained in the culture of the United States. While racial identity is commonly believed to be something easily determined by visual cues, such as skin color, for many people it is not. This study examines the life experiences of people who live in a society that is highly dependent upon race to set the tone of many social interactions but who cannot be easily classified racially on sight. I explore this system of racialization from the perspectives of people whose race is often misidentified and delve into what this phenomenon means to them in their life experiences. In this study, the term racially ambiguous people will be used to refer to these individuals, who are commonly people with a mixed race background or members of groups that resemble each other, like some Latinos and some Middle Easterners.

Racially ambiguous people pose a problem in the American system of racialization because that system relies on appearance as a clear indicator of race so that all members of the society know how to interact with each other when it comes to race (Broyard, 2007; Dalmadge, 2007; Goffman, 1963; Haizlip, 1994; Keating, 2002; Omi & Winant, 1986; Pate, 2006; Scales-Trent, 1995). Yet this social construction of race is becoming less reliable as the country becomes more diverse with major increases in the Hispanic or Latino population, immigration from throughout the world, and more intermarriage among all racial and ethnic groups. Nowadays, almost the total range of skin tones from the darkest to the lightest, as well as other components of phenotype, can be found in every racial group, and significant numbers of people

are racially ambiguous, that is their racial/ethnic identities are often not easily deciphered according to the way they look or sound or behave.

The study of racially ambiguous people is important because they are a sizable portion of U.S. population. Most of the interviewees in this study now live in Texas, a state that is well out in front of most of the rest of the country in having more than half of its population come from racial/ethnic minority groups (Longley, 2005), and members of minority groups comprise the majority of racially ambiguous people. For the country as a whole the percentage of the population comprised of minority groups rose from 30.9 % in 2000 to 38.3 % in 2010, with most of the overall increase in U.S. population being attributed to Hispanics or Latinos (Passel, Cohn & Lopez, 2011).

In the quest to understand race, what is sometimes forgotten is that there is a variety of life experience among members of the same racial groups. When individuals are sorted into racial categories in life and in research, a task is performed similar to what Weber suggested in the concept of creating ideal types. The types are simplified versions of groupings that exist in life, so that trends among different groups can be observed and analyzed; however, true to the form of social construction (Ore, 2006; Berger & Luckmann, 1966), these ideal types take on a life and a permanence of their own (however, for some research and tracking of social problems it is still useful to use mono-racial categories as an “ideal type”). What often results through social construction and racialization is a kind of selective racial amnesia because forgotten is the fact of racial mixing in the U.S. that has gone back to the days when pre-Columbian indigenous groups mixed with each other. In the area of race, this tends to give credence to the mythology of racial purity, and though it is considered blatantly racist to speak of racial purity, the prevailing social construction partially rests on the assumption that everyone has only one racial identity.

There is little or no recognition institutionally, socially or by the state that people have a history, not only in the U.S., but all over the world of intermingling – voluntarily or by force -- with other groups of people with whom they come in contact. The resulting social construction of race downplays the history of racial mixing in the country. Because this issue of racialization and social construction have been major social forces in U.S. society, it is especially incumbent upon sociologists, especially in these days of the rhetoric of colorblindness coming to dominate some discourse on race, to study how whether race still has significant impact on people living in the U.S.

### Research Questions

There are several research questions that this study set out to answer. They are:

- How significant is race/ethnicity in the U.S. in the post-Civil Rights Movement era?
- How does being racially/ethnically misidentified affect the racial identities and social interactions of those who experience this phenomenon?
- How do racially ambiguous people form their racial identities?
- How do these racial/ethnic identities change as racially ambiguous people go through life and encounter different social environments?
- How do racially ambiguous people use their racial identities in different settings, such as with their spouses, families, work, and social settings?

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The literature review of this dissertation shows that there is substantial history of racial mixing in the U. S. and that much of it has been used for economic and social advantage usually by the dominant group, which is comprised of European Americans. At the same time, the racial makeup of the U.S. population has been very dynamic. Not only has it been comprised of different groups with origins in different parts of the world, but the definition of who should be in each racial group changed over the decades.

#### Changing Definitions of Race

There are always people who defy simple racial classification because they do not possess the appearance of the racial groups with which they actually identify. When a person is frequently racially misidentified, it contradicts social construction and the system of racialization, and this contradiction sets off a number of reactions in other people with whom that person interacts. The reactions on the part of other people can range from slight embarrassment to amazement to anger (Dalmadge, 2007; Wallerstein, 1991; Bynum, 1998; Pate, 2006).

Racial classification still has a major impact on social interaction despite the fact that it is popular to say, as President Ronald Reagan did in the 1986, we have a colorblind society that has successfully addressed racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Racially ambiguous people can contradict that assessment of American race relations because they are reminded of the continuing salience of race in their everyday interactions which are marked by being constantly racially misidentified (Banerjee, 2002; Elia, 2002; Keating, 2002a; Keating, 2002b; Milczarek-Desai, 2002). Every racial/ethnic group in the U.S. has individuals and subgroups who do not resemble the range of

phenotypes associated with that race or ethnic group because of the patterns of racial intermingling<sup>1</sup> and other events and trends in the history of the U.S. The social and legal practice of the one-drop rule or hypo-descent is an example of this. People who had one distant ancestor who was black and lived as white found they could be classified as black, even though their phenotype and everyday life were those of white people.

There is abundant theory and evidence that classification according to race is an ongoing practice in the U.S. The phenomenon of encountering what is supposed to be most obvious and clear and being reminded that it may not be as clear as we are socialized to believe can be unnerving for some (Goffman, 1963). Yet people still act as if group identification, especially racial group identification in the U.S. is clear and immediate when it is just a matter of labels used carried over into relationships and experiences to the point sometimes of instigation violence (Wallerstein, 1991).

For such a social system to endure there has to be an easy way for people to determine who belongs in which racial group. Americans tend to believe that race can be determined by appearance, including skin color, hair texture, and shape of facial features. This may be true for many or even most Americans, but perhaps the racial classifications institutionalized by the U.S. government as of this writing -- white, black, Asian American, American Indian, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007) -- are each too narrow to capture accurately the racial identities of Americans in 2011. These classifications are in flux as political and social practices change. The racial classification of Pacific Islander used to be included as part of the Asian/Pacific Islander category on the U.S. census, but in 1997, a separate category of

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<sup>1</sup> Race is classified by the U.S. government as black or African American, Asian American, American Indian or Native American, Native Hawaiian and white. The government designates Hispanics as the only ethnic group. This study will use these designations in historic background and as appropriate, but as will be noted later, the interviewees in this study were not required to use any official designations. Their self-designations will be used.

Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander was established (Greico, 2001), and the definition of white used by the U.S. Census was changed in the 2000 census to include people considered as Middle Easterners, whose origins were not in Europe, but parts of Asia and northern Africa.

These classifications are also problematic because they are based on geographic origins of ancestors in a world where global and regional migration are common. When one also considers the ethnic category of Hispanic, or Latino, the largest minority racial/ethnic group in the U.S., accounting for 16.3 % of the total U.S. population (Passel, Cohn & Lopez, 2011), which is proud of its mixed ancestral heritage, and the large volume of transnational migration that occurs these days, the idea of looking at people and really knowing the truth of their racial classifications according to the U.S. system becomes even less certain (Amissah, 2008; Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Etzioni, 2006; Forman, Goar & Lewis, 2001; Goldstein, 1999; Greico, 2001; Hattam, 2005; Hirschman, 2004; Hochschild, 2005; “NCLR Q&A”, 2007; Portes & Zhou, 1994; Prewitt, 2005; Smith, 1996; Tatum, 1997; Wu, 2002).

America’s racial demographics have always been dynamic. In the past five years, the largest racial/ethnic minority group changed from African Americans or blacks who had held this position for decades, to Latinos whose increased share in the population is due to a high birth rate and immigration (U.S. Census, 2005). Hispanics accounted for most of the national population growth rate from 2000 to 2010 (Passel, Cohn & Lopez, 2011). For more than a decade, demographers have been predicting that by 2050, the U.S. will no longer have a numerical majority racial group. A nation in which whites are the majority will become majority-minority in government parlance, which simply means that no racial/ethnic group will account for more 50 % of the population (Hattam, 2005; Hirschman, 2005; Prewitt, 2005).

## Race under European Domination

The system of racialization in the U.S. that exists now arises from European global domination over the last centuries. Race has been part of the structure of what would become the U.S. since the first European explorers arrived in the western hemisphere, sometimes with black African crew members, and encountered indigenous peoples. For almost 500 years, Europeans dominated the globe as they colonized and exploited the rest of the world. By World War I, Europeans controlled 80 % of the world population (Segrest, 2003). As the dominant group, Europeans set up a hierarchy that favored themselves, and likewise favored people who appeared European (Broyard, 2007; Bynum, 1998; Graham, 1999; Haizlip, 1994; Elia, 2002; Keith & Herring, 1991; Russell, Wilson & Powell, 1992). Some of the underpinnings of this European stratification system were based on the ideology that Europeans were innately superior to other groups. As Wallerstein (1991) put it in his analysis of social conflict in black Africa, distinctions based on ethnicity, religion, race and other characteristics are useless because these distinctions all serve to group people in economic and political groups based on a pseudo-historical unity predating modern times in order to give these distinctions a veneer of ancient, even permanent existence.

Wallerstein wrote that the dominant group always provides rewards for its own; however, because the ascent of capitalism was part of the European dominance, economics is truly the determinant of any group's place on the current hierarchy. When darker skinned people have economic power, they can sometimes be treated and placed on the hierarchy as if they were whites, and when whites are in economically marginalized groups, they may end up being treated as if they were not even related as cousins to other Europeans. Discourse about race in the U.S. has been dominated by this intersection of dominant group interests and economic power.

## The One-Drop Rule or Hypo-Descent

When it was first used, the one-drop rule was an undeniable example of race and economics coming together to create a system of stratification based on race. The one-drop rule says that anyone who has “one drop” of black blood is black, or to put it in other words, anyone who has one black ancestor or partially black ancestor is black. This definition does not extend to any other racial groups, only blacks, because its original purpose was to enrich white men by allowing them to claim their offspring by black slave women as property.

Because of the one-drop rule, blacks have been placed in a kind of racial classification bind as exemplified in historical court decisions in some instances. That is what happened to the “white Negroes of Mississippi” whose case ended up in court when one of them was accused of breaking the law by trying to marry a white woman at a time when interracial marriage was prohibited by state law (Bynum, 1998). The “white Negroes” shared a single black slave female ancestor several generations back in their family tree, and all the rest of their ancestors were white. When Susie Guillory Phipps went to court to try to get her race changed on her birth certificate from black to white, she failed. She claimed she had been classified black because of a single black ancestor, but she lived her life as a white woman, and she looked like one. During the trial a retired Tulane University professor testified that most whites have “one-twentieth Negro ancestry,” but the other side maintained that the government must have some way of classifying people for federal record-keeping and tracking genetic diseases (Omi & Winant, 2009).

Even though it is estimated that 75-90 % of American black people have white blood, and that 25 % of them have American Indian blood, the one-drop rule requires that they classify themselves solely as black (Tatum, 1997). Other groups are not so rigidly defined. They have

more freedom to choose which of the multiple racial branches on their family trees they will use. This mono-racial self-identification has been encouraged by the U.S. government through its limitation of choices for racial self-identification on federal forms, other institutions and social practice. Meanwhile blacks, in court decisions that were handed down as late as the 1980s (Omi & Winant, 1986; López, 2005; Tatum, 1997; Hirschman, 2004; Prewitt, 2005; Warren & Twine, 1997) have been legally required to identify as black regardless of the perceived amount of black heritage they possessed.

### Color Stratification among Blacks

In the face of such strict insistence on racial classification, several systems of stratification and patterns of behavior because of racialization of almost every aspect of life in the U.S. became the norm for different racial subgroups in the U.S. One of these subgroups that typify Wallerstein's theories about economics and race is upper class blacks described by Graham, (1999) in his ethnographic case study *Our Kind of People*. The origins of the privileged and wealthy group that Graham chronicled lay in the racial intermingling of white mostly male slave-owners and their black female slaves. While the social construction of race in the U.S. favored increasing the wealth of slave-owners by declaring that anyone with black blood was black and therefore not eligible to be a legitimate heir of their white parent, there also developed a social hierarchy among slaves that gave privileges of many kinds, from better jobs to educational opportunities, to those who were related to slave-owners (Broyard, 2007; Bynum, 1998; Foeman & Nance, 1999; Graham, 1999; Hughes & Hertel, 1990; Keith & Herring, 1991; Omi & Winant, 1986; Piper, 1992; Prewitt, 2005; Root, 2003; Segrest, 2003; Spickard, 1989; Tatum, 1997; Winters & DeBose, 2003). Even as these black offspring of white men were

relegated to the status of being chattel, they began to think of themselves as a separate group from other blacks with less obvious European ancestry. More than 150 years after slavery was abolished, Graham (1999) wrote that the black upper middle class remained insular, confident of its superiority, and sure that it would be able to identify “our kind of people” through skin tone, straight hair and European features.

### Passing as White

Another option for descendants of white slave-owners and black slaves was to pass as white, providing perhaps one of the best known examples of racial ambiguity in the U.S. Williams (1995) wrote that as a child growing up in racially segregated Virginia, he was a white boy. His parents had told him his father was Italian and his mother’s nationality was not often remarked upon. A fourth grade portrait of Williams showed a pale child with dark straight hair, freckles, and light colored eyebrows who slightly resembled Jerry Mathers, the young actor who played Beaver Cleaver on television. In no way did he fit the phenotype of blacks or African Americans, yet only after Williams’ parents divorced, his mother left the family, and his father was forced to turn to black relatives for help with the children, did Williams learn that his father had been passing for white. As Williams and his brother grew up, the only white looking people in their black area of Muncie, Indiana, they faced rejection from both blacks and whites. Williams went to the prom with a black date, something that was shocking to strangers and passersby who thought they were seeing a white boy out on a date with a deep brown-skinned black girl.

Williams learned about his father’s racial background only when his father was forced to divulge the family secret by the difficulties of life, but Bliss Broyard (2007) found out her father

had been passing when he was on his deathbed. Anatole Broyard, Bliss's father, was very well known in the glitterati circle of New York City because he was a literary critic for *The New York Times* for 20 years and, as such, made or broke the careers of many writers. He lived in all-white wealthy Stamford, Connecticut where he belonged to the racially restricted country club and sent his two children to private schools. His wife was of Norwegian descent. Bliss Broyard thought she was a white girl until she was 24, and her father told her as he lay dying that his family was African American -- Creole from New Orleans (Broyard, 2007). Goffman (1973) would say that her father had calibrated his presentation of self to be accepted as an upper class, intellectual white man.

Anatole Broyard and other blacks whose skin color and other phenotypical characteristics allowed them, if they chose, to trade on their looks to become ersatz white people were powerful examples of the concept of hypo-descent or the one-drop rule at work. Some experts have said that the U.S. is the only nation, and American black people the only racial group to which a one-drop rule applies (Tatum, 1999; Omi & Winant, 1986). White-appearing blacks who passed often went to elaborate lengths to hide their "one drop" of black blood from their white neighbors, friends and co-workers. Sometimes they withheld the information from their white spouses and their own children (Haizlip, 1994; Williams, 1996; Broyard, 2007; Piper, 1992; Graham, 1999). Piper, an African American woman who says that she is often misidentified racially because she appears white, wrote that because of the phenomenon of passing, a significant %age of white people in the U.S. have black ancestry, but they don't know it. She wrote that the longer one's family has been in the U.S., the more likely it is that one has mixed racial ancestry (1992).

## Challenge to the One-Drop Rule

One of the most controversial challenges to the one-drop rule came in the form of the biracial or multiracial movement of the 1990s (Rockquemore & Brunnsma, 2002; Smith, 1996). Project RACE (Reclassify All Children Equally) and AMEA (the Association of Multiethnic Americans) were the two lead organizations, and they sought to have a multiracial or biracial category added to all government forms for individuals who had parents who were of different races. They were successful in having laws changed to require a multiracial option in at least five states (Smith, 1996). Although the goal of this movement was to have institutions provide more appropriate choices for the racial identification of any individuals who had multiracial heritage, the most prominent contentious issue became the challenge to the one-drop rule implicit in that goal. If the multiracial movement had completely achieved its ends, then many people with some black ancestry would no longer be forced by social conventions and government bureaucracies to check a box or say they were black; instead they would have the option of identifying their race as biracial or multiracial.

Although some people refer to themselves as biracial, the ability to use that racial identity is not always available to them in government and other bureaucracies, and socially, they may be ostracized for not choosing to conform to the one-drop rule and identifying themselves solely as black, especially if they appear to fit the range of African American phenotypes with dark skin or kinky hair. That the public discussion of this issue became acrimonious and heated, with several minority group civil rights organizations lined up against the proposed measure because it would lessen the numbers of people considered black, was a testament to just how deeply entrenched in social and institutional practice the one-drop rule had become in the U.S. (Rockquemore & Brunnsma, 2002). Exacerbating the emotional volatility of the issue was the idea that white

mothers were trying to boost their children higher on the racial stratification ladder by getting the government to let their children say they were biracial or multiracial instead of black. As some white mothers put it at the time, perhaps without realizing the irony and the hurt to some black people carried by their statements, they had not given birth to anyone who was black; instead they had given birth to biracial children (Smith, 1996).

The controversy also pointed up the difficulty of trying to start a new racial group from scratch without even what Wallerstein would call the mythic underpinnings of ancient shared culture and history. As a journalist, I interviewed some of the leaders of the biracial/multiracial movement, and they were very clear that the goal was to provide bureaucratic options (Smith, 1996) that would prevent children from having to pick one parent over the other, or black over white or vice versa. Because the movement was often couched in dichotomous black\white terms, it was unclear how meaningful the movement's goals would be to people of other races. Most of the racially ambiguous people in this study who are the children of parents of different races could not identify with biracial as anything more than a very limited, technically correct adjective for themselves. They could not accept it as an identity or a race, especially in preference to the identities from which they can already choose and which are rich sources of pride, familial responsibility, culture and history for them.

### Biracial Identity

In the wake of the biracial controversy over the one-drop rule, Rockquemore and Brunnsma (2002) did extensive research on the children of one self-identified white parent and one self-identified black parent in order to find out how these individuals identified themselves racially. They found that biracial people used four racial identities for themselves. There was the

border racial identity which allows the individual to inhabit spaces where he or she is black, white and a third category of identification that is specific to belonging to two races at the same time; the singular racial identity which means the individual chooses one racial identity (usually black); the protean racial identity which allows the individual to shift racial identities as he or she is involved in different social interactions; and the transcendent racial identity which allows the individual to say that race has no relevance to them personally.

Some of these identities were more feasible for some of the people in Rockquemore and Brunnsma's study than others because of the way they looked or the socioeconomic status of their family or the races of the people who surrounded them as they went through life. Their sample was purposefully made up of college students to yield interviewees who were equally well educated and at campuses that were more or less expensive and located in different parts of the country. Rockquemore and Brunnsma's work gives some insight into the lives of racially ambiguous people because it explores how much appearance, demeanor and even being raised in a neighborhood that is affluent and has few black people affects the kind of life the racially ambiguous person will live. Many of their study interviewees had never lived in places where they could be part of a black community that was of significant size, and so they were less connected to a black racial identity. Some of the racially ambiguous people in their study were not racialized and therefore less likely to see race as an ongoing issue in their lives.

### Racial Classifications have Porous Borders

In racially ambiguous people, one can see the paradoxes and contradictions of the social construction of race in the U.S. Williams (1996), a woman who is of Japanese, Irish and Welsh descent also did studies of racially mixed people, including one called "Reassessing the 'What

are you?:' Encounters of Biracial Individuals” in which she explored “what are you” encounters through interviews and a short survey. In her research, she found that biracial people who are ambiguous looking reported being constantly queried about their racial identities and became adept at presenting themselves differently in different interactions. She concluded that the mono-racial identities used in the U.S. were racialized and would be challenged more as racially mixed people and the facts about interracial marriages and relationships instead of stereotypes of poor, confused biracial people came to the fore in public discourse.

Ultimately the biracial or multiracial movement did lead to change in the U.S., but it wasn't the one for which the activists were clamoring. The U.S. government, starting with the U.S. census in 2010, decided on a strange practice. The “Other” racial category was eliminated, forcing everyone to be counted as a member of one of five racial groups (Hattam, 2005). In a backhanded kind of admission that many people are not mono-racial, the census also allows each person to identify how many races are included their ancestry. The result is that an individual, for example, can designate on the census form that she is black, but she can also say on the same form that she has four racial groups in her heritage. She will only be counted once as part of the race she designates.

### Race as a Sorting Mechanism

At perhaps the most visceral level, recognizing racial categories is a process of sorting out members of our own group from members of other groups. Racial classifications provide a kind of boundary, which has been reinforced by a history in the U.S. of racial and ethnic discrimination and stratification according to race. Social scholars, especially those who use symbolic interactionism, have done research on the way that Americans determine who is in an

in-group and who is in an out-group and act accordingly (Allport, 1979). Such categorization is part of defining the situation in everyday life (Goffman, 1973).

For example, Pate (2006) found that members of different racial and ethnic groups engage in acknowledgment rituals to recognize fellow in-group members. In his research, Pate found that the groups most likely to engage in these rituals were African American and Mexican American males, as well as African American females. The least likely (in his groupings based on race and gender) were white Americans, with white women more likely to participate than white men. Pate included not only race and gender, but sexuality in his analysis. He found a pattern of more acknowledgment rituals being performed by members of the subordinate groups in each case. Women in all racial categories were more likely to acknowledge other women; homosexual people were more likely to acknowledge each other than heterosexual people. His findings suggest that it is more important for those in the subordinate group to acknowledge each other than those in the dominant group, and the impetus behind the acknowledgment remains the necessity to distinguish possible friend from possible foe in a world where potential threats from the dominant group still make subordinate groups feel unsafe.

Dalmadge (2007) found another example of group threat assessment in her work on racial border patrolling. In the cases Dalmadge studied, people took it upon themselves to enforce the boundaries of racial categories when they encountered interracial couples. They may not have even known the partners in the couple, yet they somehow expressed disapproval and/or questioning of the perceived mixed race romance in some way or another because they had been socialized to police the borders of race. Unlike Pate, Dalmadge found that members of all groups whether dominant or subordinate engaged in racial border patrolling. The imperative to keep racial categories sacrosanct is so strong that members of some white families completely

ostracize relatives who marry black people, she wrote. There is even a racial hierarchy of unwelcome mates with whites disapproving most of matches with blacks, and blacks least accepting of unions with whites.

### Tri-Racial Isolate Groups

There are some groups who insist that a system of mono-racial racial classification is not accurate for them because they are a result of racial mixing. The Melungeons of the southeastern U.S. are a group that has been studied by anthropologists and historians as a missing chunk of southern Appalachian Mountain history and culture. The Melungeons have claimed that they are racially misclassified. Their claim is even more complicated because there are conflicting versions of their historical origins. Some theories hold that they have origins in the Mediterranean or Portugal or Turkey and are the descendants of pre-Anglo-Saxon colonists, American Indians and free African Americans who were able to retreat into isolated wooded areas to survive as mixed community groups that developed their own unified identity (Allen, 1995; Bethune, 2007; Melungeon Heritage Association, 2003-2004; Shute, 2000; Stuckert, 1993).

As the Anglo-Saxons became the dominant group in the region, as well as elsewhere in the U.S., the Melungeons became marginalized and severely discriminated against. In the literature, they are classified as a tri-racial isolate comprised of an African American (often attributed to the small portion of free people of color in the region), Native American and European American mixture (Allen, 1995; Bethune, 2007; Stuckert, 1993). More than 200 tri-racial isolate groups have been identified in the U.S. including, besides the Melungeons who are mainly in Virginia, West Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina, Kentucky, and Ohio; the Guineas

of West Virginia; the Nanticokes and Moors of Delaware; the We-Sorts of Maryland; the Jackson Whites of New York and New Jersey; the Cubans and Portuguese of North Carolina; the Turks and Brass Ankles of South Carolina; and the Creoles and Redbones of Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana (Melungeon Heritage Association, 2003-2004).

A problem for these tri-racial isolate groups is that they are by definition mixed race people who have engaged in both exogamy and endogamy, as well as mobility as they searched for better lives and tried to escape the discrimination they faced at home (Allen, 1995; Bethune, 2007; Stuckert, 1993; Melungeon Heritage Association, 2003-2004). Although they were isolated and ostracized in their home regions and developed their own cultures and identities, they are not recognized as ethnic groups by the U.S. government. This combination of factors means that they have been automatically racially and ethnically misclassified and will continue to be misclassified for the foreseeable future. The Melungeon Heritage Association maintains a website that says that Melungeons have European, Native American, or African features, and they consider themselves racially to be European American, Native American or African American. There is no typical Melungeon appearance (Melungeon Heritage Association, 2003-4).

#### The Case of the Mississippi Choctaw Rejected

Another multiracial group that suffered ostracism and discrimination because of racial classification was the Mississippi Choctaw Rejected. Osburne (2009) documented a chapter in the history of the Choctaw Indians where choice took place over time and was greatly influenced by social practice – Jim Crow segregation – and the need for survival. A group of people who had lived as part of the Choctaw nation in Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi were gradually

defined out of the tribe as treaties were broken and governmental and tribal policies delineated who could be considered a member of the tribe.

Although the Mississippi Choctaws, as these people were known, included people with Native American, African American and European American ancestry, the tribe declared that blacks had never been part of it, and African American members of the tribe became the Mississippi Choctaw Rejected. The Mississippi Choctaw Rejected appealed their status to the federal authorities many times, but even though they were counted in a census, assigned government registration numbers, and given records to show what percentage of Choctaw blood they had, they were not allowed to claim any benefits of being in the tribe, such as access to land. As a result thousands of people were labeled as frauds, (to be fair, some were) Osburne said, but many who had lived as Choctaws in everyday life were eliminated from the tribe with a few strokes of a pen.

#### Racial Misclassification and Native Americans

Much of the sociological research on racial/ethnic misclassification has been done on people who have intermingled American Indian and white ancestry (Nagel 1995; Campbell & Troyer, 2007; Warren & Twine, 1997). Campbell and Troyer (2007) in an article called “Racial Misclassification” analyzed data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health comparing young Native Americans who were misidentified as not being American Indians by observers and those who were correctly identified as Native Americans. The researchers correlated the likelihood of depression, suicidal tendencies and other mental health problems with frequently being misclassified. Among their conclusions was that there is a fallacy in assuming that the way people self-identify on surveys and government forms actually reflects the

way that people experience race in their lives and are treated by others based on the others' perceptions of race. They concluded that people who are misclassified by observers may not have the same experiences as other members of the group with which they identify, nor do they have the same experiences as people who belong to the group into which they are usually placed by people who misclassified them.

Racial misclassification has been of concern to some in the public health field. Several studies have found that because of misclassification, hospital admissions, deaths, and other documentation are significantly underreporting health problems of Native Americans. Studies in Washington, New York, Oregon and other states concluded that the problem was exacerbated because the people who classified the patients and the deceased were entering their own observations of racial classification rather than inquiring about the accurate classification (Blustein, 1994; Epstein, 1997; Sugarman, 1993; Stehr-Green, Bettles & Robertson, 2002). More recently Campbell and Troyer (2007) found in their study of Native Americans that observers frequently misclassify American Indian individuals as white.

Some people have found it advantageous or a matter of pride in minority cultural heritage to change their racial category on the U.S. Census and various government forms. Nagel (1995) documented a surge in the American Indian population of the U.S. as a result of people who were Indian and white changing their racial classification from white to Indian after an increase in Indian activism, resurgence in Native American pride<sup>2</sup>, and the establishment of government benefits to American Indians made the Native American identity choice more attractive. Her findings may be the harbinger of a fundamental change in racial relations. Perhaps there are

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<sup>2</sup> In this dissertation, the panethnic terms Native American, Native and American Indian are used interchangeably. The interviewees and the literature referred to in this study were not specific about tribal affiliation in most of the comments and information. This is somewhat problematic because there are hundreds of Native American nations, with varying legal requirements for membership, cultures and languages. Where there were specific Native American nations mentioned, I tried to include that specificity.

finally beginning to be enough social and economic benefits to claiming a racial/ethnic minority to choose it over a white identity.

### Mixed Race Individuals and Kinship Networks

Racial intermingling has been quite frequent among people who live in the U.S. (Dabel, 2005; Foreman & Nance, 1999; Ore, 2006; Omi & Winant, 2004; Piper, 1992; Rockquemore, 2002; Segrest, 2003; Williams, 1995; Wu, 2002). Spickard (1989) wrote a landmark study of intermarriage among blacks, American Jews, and Japanese Americans in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In his study, he analyzed current trends in intermarriage among these three groups, each group's perceptions of intermarriage with each of the other groups, as well as identity formation among the children of intermarriage. Spickard wrote that even though everyone has an ethnicity, the awareness of that ethnic background is often latent until a situation, such as interaction with members of other groups, calls for that ethnicity to be active.

Spickard was one of the first to attempt to study a variety of families beyond just blacks and whites who are intermarried. In his work he pointed out the importance of government definitions of racial categories in U.S. history. While the sexual assaults and liaisons between slave-owners and their slaves had been common before the Civil War, Spickard said it is not possible to track the frequency of interracial sexual relationships in the years after the war; however census takers tried in most of those years to keep track of "mulattoes," people who were a racial mixture of black and white. Although there were many problems with the census takers' methods, Spickard (1989) concluded that their records indicated that interracial sexual mingling continued through the 1920s and that the black population of the nation was getting lighter in complexion as blacks chose light-skinned mates for themselves. Spickard mentioned that part of

the racial pride movement in the 1960s was to encourage anyone who had some black ancestry to identify as black rather than biracial or multiracial (1989).

Root (1992) was another researcher who wrote extensively about racial mixing in the history of the U.S. In her book, *Racially Mixed People in America* she wrote that researchers had found that all the major racial groups in the U.S. include racially mixed people. She wrote that an estimated 30 to 70 % of African Americans “by multigenerational history are multiracial”; virtually all Latinos and Filipinos are multiracial; and most American Indians are multiracial. A significant percentage of American white people are multiracial as well. These statistics support the idea that there is no such thing as racial purity among the majority of Americans.

In the U.S. census in 2000, the government offered respondents the opportunity to check more than one box for racial identity, however because the goal of the census is to count each individual only one time, respondents were still relegated to only a single racial category apiece. Thus, as Root once pointed out, the U.S. government has a major role in perpetuating the perception that racial categories are more discrete than social science and history have shown them to be. In this environment of governmental, social, institutional, cultural and other practices shaping the ideology of race, the concept race and the categories it generates must be dynamic as each force has differing amounts of impact on what the dominant ideology of race will be. Hence an individual may belong to different races in his or her lifetime, depending upon the social forces that are at work.

Racially mixed people often find themselves in the uncomfortable and tricky position of developing a racial identity for themselves in a society which has not dealt with their existence. They develop a variety of racial identities that correspond to the methods they have chosen to negotiate racialization. Root (2003) argues that there were five identities for mixed race people.

The first was to accept the identity that social custom gave them, as uncounted black people did under the practice of hypo-descent or the one drop rule. The second was to choose a single racial identity in solidarity with a minority group. Third is to choose a mixed racial identity, an option that has only become widely possible recently as the visibility of multiracial people has increased and the entertainment and other media have been willing to show multiracial people and families. The fourth option is to “choose a new race identity” (p. 15) such as “Other” or mixed without specifying the components of the racial mixture to avoid fractionations, such as being considered one-fourth Indian or one half white. Finally the fifth option for mixed race people is to adopt a white racial identity. Root noticed this choice in her research had come up only in the past 10 to 15 years. She and other researchers found people of white and African, white and Mexican, white and Asian, and white and American Indian heritage making the choice to identify as white.

Some people of Asian and white descent have been able to choose the white category, especially if they look white or racially ambiguous to improve their chances of success and assimilation in the U.S. (Wu, 2002). There is a high rate of exogamy among Asian Americans and most of the mates have been white. Because of this trend, Wu argues that Asian Americans are disappearing themselves from the U.S. racial landscape. Root (1992 & 2003) said that isolation from the minority group was part of the impetus for many people to classify themselves as white. These mixed race individuals did not have disdain for the minority racial identity, but rather they had had so little contact or attachment to it that it held no meaningful affiliation for them, Root said.

In the 2000 census, only 2.4 % or 6.8 million people in the U.S. had chosen more than one racial category to identify themselves (Winters & DeBose, 2003) even though the history of

the U.S. would contradict that only such a small percentage of Americans are mono-racial people. That such a small percentage of Americans chose to state that they have more than one racial identity is a testament to the strength of mono-racial social construction. In that same census, only 2 % of respondents said they were in interracial marriages (Ore 2006).

However in the years before the 2000 census, Goldstein (1999) hypothesized that many Americans live in extended multiracial family groups, and he used mathematical and statistical methods to calculate the portion of the U.S. population that lives in multiracial extended families. He concluded that a substantial percentage of the national population belongs to multiracial extended families. Goldstein's models showed that about one-fifth of Americans belonged to multiracial kinship groups and most Asians and American Indians belonged to them. Goldstein also concluded that although the most homogeneous groups in the U.S. were blacks and whites, one in seven whites and more than one in three blacks had close relatives of a different race. He argued that intermarriage could be seen as an engine of social change and would become more frequent as time passes. More recently Harris and Ono's work on interracial marriage tends to reinforce Goldstein's hypothesis that it is more common than national estimates indicate (2005).

### Racial Fusion and the Hispanics<sup>3</sup>

While Goldstein cautioned that his conclusions were understated because he did not include Hispanics in his study, Latinos have presented a unique set of problems for the U.S. government in its attempts to count people by race. From the folklore of the combining of the blood of *La Malinche* or Malintzin, an Aztec princess, and Hernán Cortez, a Spanish

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<sup>3</sup> The terms Hispanic and Latino are used interchangeably in this study.

*conquistador*, to produce the first Mexican, to other stories and historical events, Latinos of all nationalities have seen themselves as carrying Spanish, Native American and African heritage together in their lives, in their cultures, and in their history (Perez, 2001). In the 2000 census, there was an “Other” box on the census form that individuals could choose if they did not feel that the four races designated by the U.S. government at that time included them. A significant portion of Hispanics chose this box (Etzioni, 2006; Hattam, 2005; Hochschild, 2005; Prewitt, 2005), and so in the 2010 census, there was no “Other” option in the racial categories question on the U.S. Census. Government officials said the elimination of this racial option would force everyone to choose a race and eliminate the government having to impute racial categories for those who choose “Other” (Hattam, 2005; López, 2005; Prewitt, 2005; U.S. Census, 2007). The government has not considered Hispanics to be a racial group, but instead designated them an ethnic group whose members could be of any race. Many Hispanics, however, consider themselves to be members of a race that in and of itself is a product of racial mixing (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; López, 2005; National Council of *La Raza*, 2007; Perez, 2000; Rodriguez, 2006; Smith, 1996).

As the U.S. becomes more racially diverse due to immigration and more racial intermingling, social scientists have studied race in new ways. A recent Harvard University doctoral dissertation has focused on issues of racial/ethnic misclassification. For her dissertation, Roth (2006) interviewed Puerto Ricans and Dominican immigrants about the ways in which they identified themselves racially, and how those identities changed as they tried to succeed in the U.S. She used photographs of her interviewees to illustrate their phenotypical characteristics. One of the most salient aspects of Roth’s research was the difference between racial categories that the immigrants had used at home and in the U.S. There were many racial terms used in the

Dominican Republic so that anyone familiar with these terms could almost visualize differences in skin tones and amounts of racial ancestry of different kinds. Being lumped into large broad categories such as those used in the U.S. was part of a difficult transition for many of the people Roth interviewed.

Because Latinos are the largest racial/ethnic minority group in the nation, their own concept of race and the governmental and institutional definitions of race are on a collision course that at some point may force a change in the way all Americans are counted racially. In the meantime, Latino immigrants like immigrants from many other countries throughout the world, face the process of adapting to American racialization and accepting the racial categories that will be assigned to them in the U.S. (Amisshah, 2008; Forman, Goar & Lewis, 2001; Portes & Zhou, 1994; Rodriguez, 2006; Staiger, 2004; Suleiman, 2009; Waters, 1999; Wu, 2002; Yancey, 2003).

#### The U.S. Census and the Social Construction of Race

In the census, the U.S. government tries to count every person in the country by race. Currently, the federal government uses five racial categories, including: white or Caucasian; black or African American; Native American or American Indian; Asian American; and Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (Greico, 2001; Prewitt, 2005; U.S. Census Bureau, 2007; U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). Each of these racial categories is defined by geographic origins prescribed by the U.S. government. Whites have origins in Europe, North Africa and the Middle East<sup>4</sup>; blacks have origins in sub-Saharan Africa; American Indians have origins in North and South America; Asian Americans have origins in Asia; and Native Hawaiians and Pacific

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<sup>4</sup> In the late 1990s, there was some public discussion of adding an Arab/Middle Eastern racial category to the federally recognized racial groups (Smith, 1996). That proposal failed. Subsequently, North Africa and the Middle East were added to the list of geographical origins for white people.

Islanders have origins in the Pacific Ocean regions. The specificity of these categories may suffice for population counting, but these categories have also had a huge impact on the social construction of race because they are tied to the identities, social, legal and educational institutions, and political power of people in the U.S.

Although the government uses geographic origins for its categories, and the geographic regions are vast portions of the world including hundreds of ethnic groups in each region, and although each racial group includes most of the spectrum of skin tones, most Americans are still socialized to expect phenotypical characteristics such as skin color, hair texture and facial features to correspond to each of the racial categories.

## CHAPTER 3

### THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Although this is not a quantitative project that attempts to test a specific theory or hypothesis, theories can be helpful in understanding the social construction of race in the U.S. Some of these ideas are the racial formation theories put forth by Omi and Winant (2008, 2009, 1986), assimilation theory enunciated by Gordon (1961), and the Latin Americanization thesis put forth by Bonilla-Silva (2002). The following is a discussion of these theories beginning with racial formation theory expounded on by Omi and Winant.

#### Racial Formation Theory

Omi and Winant's ideas are especially helpful because they provide a definition of race that is not based on country of origin or ancestry as are the census definitions or on phenotype as are the categories commonly used socially. They attack these definitions of race as not being reflective enough of the wide ranging and deep impact that the notion of race has had and will continue to have on the lives of all Americans. At the same time, Omi and Winant also attack the tendency to think of race as being illusory and somehow easy to dismiss as being unreal or problematic (Omi & Winant, 2008). Their definition of race is "a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies (p. 405)."

What is remarkable about Omi and Winant's definition when it comes to this particular study is the flexibility it allows. It is inclusive of physicality without being dogmatic. It says race is a signifier and a symbol of conflicts and interests. Race as a symbol and a signifier of various social conflicts and interests is at the crux of this particular study because it explores what

happens to people when their bodies give contradictory messages about the race to which they belong. It is difficult for others to read these messages and to respond appropriately, which gives rise to the question “what are you?” If interests and conflicts were not involved, it would not matter to what race or ethnic group anyone belonged. Omi and Winant talk about these interests and conflicts as they relate to politics, history and other large group phenomena.

Omi and Winant (2008) say that race on a micro-social level manifests itself in interactions based on “common sense (p. 409).” One of the first things individuals notice about each other aside from gender is race. The television program *Saturday Night Live* used to make fun of the proclivity to categorize people with a series of skits featuring a character named Pat who defied gender classification by being totally androgynous. Everyone around Pat would try various ways to get a clue to Pat’s gender without asking the character -- because that would be too embarrassing to have to ask someone -- “What are you? Male or female?” Instead coworkers, social acquaintances and others would be visibly uncomfortable around Pat because of gender ambiguity, and their actions would produce lots of laughs for fans of the show.

In real life, there is also unease about encountering racial ambiguity said Omi and Winant when people meet racially mixed individuals or members of racial/ethnic groups with which they are unfamiliar. Not being able to classify these racial unknown quantities brings on a crisis of racial meaning for them, which is often accompanied by remarks that reveal astonishment and discomfort. Also, as interviewees in this study will attest, there is no hesitation to ask “what are you?” because the social construction of race in the U.S. dictates that people act out their racial identities and other people become disoriented when they do not. This expectation and disorientation are prompted by the fact that race is used as a signifier of so many qualities in individuals. Expectations about different groups of people are based on race and become the

common sense of what we can expect of different groups. This common sense is often the basis for stereotypes about racial groups. In his landmark work on prejudice, Allport (1961) defined stereotypes as beliefs associated with social groups which justify social conduct in relation to that group. Allport wrote that stereotypes could be either positive or negative. A more recent popular definition is that stereotypes are unreliable generalizations about groups (Schaefer, 2011). Examples are: all Asian kids are smart academically; all black people can dance; and all American Indians have long black hair.

In this way, race becomes something that is used to explain social differences among people of different races. Academic ability, temperament, athletic ability, physical beauty, sexuality, talents and much more are supposed to be discernible according to the racial groups to which individuals belong. For Americans to ignore race or become colorblind is impossible since so much of U.S. society is based on racialization. Everyone in the U.S. learns some version of the rules, which become treated as common sense in a racialized society.

This racialized U.S. society has been a “racial dictatorship” with European Americans being in the dominant position. In order to consolidate their hegemony the dominant group must promulgate a system of ideas and practices that perpetuate its hegemony through coercion and consent. In the history of the U.S., the media, education, violence, folk tales and rumor, have been used to enhance and enforce this system of beliefs and ideas, which becomes expectations about people based on how they are identified by others racially. Omi and Winant (2008) speak in terms of racial projects which when analyzed reveal the complexity and subtlety of these racial projects today. Even though there is still hegemony, it can be harder to recognize and dismantle than the hegemony of the past because racism is so much more hidden and complex today than it was in the past.

## Assimilation Theory

Gordon's (1961) assimilation theories were based on observation of European ethnics who as they immigrated to the U.S. gradually gave up their languages, their customs, and their cultures and often even their religion in favor of Anglo-conformity to become members of the dominant group in the U.S., white Americans. Anglo-conformity is the rule in the U.S. for almost everyone, but assimilation has different stages. Behavioral assimilation involves Anglo-conformity, but in structural assimilation absorption of the minority group by the dominant group is so complete even intermarriage is routine.

Perhaps racially ambiguous people are the human test of whether Gordon was correct in his analysis of assimilation. Most racially ambiguous people are the offspring of interracial marriages or sexual exploitation in previous generations, and some of them have married partners whom they consider to be members of a different racial group than themselves. However the historical patterns that they represent are not uniform. Asian Americans are often discussed (Wu, 2002) as the minority racial group that has experienced the most assimilation – both behavioral and structural – through socioeconomic success, education and intermarriage with whites, the dominant group. No other racial minority groups have as high a rate of racial/ethnic exogamy as Asian Americans, but a large amount of the racial mixing that occurred historically was not as easily tracked as interracial marriage. That there are racially ambiguous people gives rise to questions about whether racial/ethnic minorities are assimilating as white people. A society that still uses a one-drop rule to determine who is black cannot be one in which black people, no matter how racially ambiguous, can assimilate as white. There are many other significant social barriers to white assimilation of racial/ethnic minority groups into the dominant

group. One of them may be the reluctance of minority groups be assimilated and identified as white.

Similarly, many racially ambiguous people are not assimilating. Assimilation theory says that holding onto one's language and culture, and refusing to be identified as one and the same as the group into which minority groups assimilate slows the process of assimilation. Even though some of the racially ambiguous people in this study have white spouses, most of them don't claim a white identity. Many of the interviewees in this study come from Texas, which is a particularly diverse region in itself. In modern Texas, there is not as much the pressure to assimilate as white as in many other parts of the country or as much as in the past because almost any racial minority or immigrant group in the U.S. has a large enough sized community in the area to support its own cultural identity activities. In some groups, such as Hispanics and blacks, the communities are large enough and cohesive enough that the members don't have to take on a white American identity to succeed or survive. Now that a high birth rate and immigration are pushing the portions of the U.S. population attributable to Latinos, blacks and Asians to higher and higher levels, it is becoming more of a popular practice in business and politics to cater to these minority groups. Catering to these groups will make assimilation less likely because these groups can maintain their own identities without being assimilated into the dominant white group. This may be more satisfactory to some minority group members because they never aspired to be assimilated; they only wanted their unique heritages to be respected and to have more opportunities in life.

### The Latin Americanization Thesis

Most of the analysis of the historical legacy of racial hegemony has been based on the

racial dynamics of black people and white people in the U.S., but the Latin Americanization thesis put forth by Bonilla-Silva (2002), one of the most provocative new theories, proposes that U.S. racial relations are moving in a more complicated direction. This theory is an especially interesting lens through which to examine the results of a study like this one, because it includes more than two racial groups, and it points to the direction of race relations in a U.S. that is rapidly moving toward having more than 50 % of the population<sup>5</sup> comprised of members of minority groups. The Latin Americanization thesis is based on the idea that U.S. race relations will become similar to race relations in Latin America where the concept of race is ignored in favor of a nationalistic idea of identity. It will become far more important to claim “we are all Americans” in decades to come than to speak of race (Bonilla-Silva, 2002).

This Latin American model acknowledges that the U.S. is not just populated by people who are only black or white, but a population that is truly multiracial. The issue of race is not just a matter of biracial relations between black and white but a much more complicated and multiracial dynamic. Racially ambiguous people comprise a hefty portion of the individuals who are and will be affected by the change in direction of U.S. racial relations. As immigration brings more people to the U.S. who have similar skin tones, and as the birth rate among Latinos and other groups remains high and the birth rate of European Americans continues to lag, the issues associated with race and with racially ambiguous people will come to the fore.

Already a black American was elected president without getting a majority %age of the white vote. Barack Obama was elected in 2008 with only 43 % of the white votes. He garnered 67 % of the Latino votes; 95 % of the black votes; and 62 % of the Asian American votes

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<sup>5</sup> This prediction is based on racial categories used in the 2000 U.S. Census. Some scholars predicted that the definition of who is white would change in future decades to include more people as white and protect their majority percentage of the U.S. population. The same thing has happened in the past and allowed Italians, the Irish, eastern Europeans and others to be counted as white people (Yancey, 2003, etc.).

(Gonzalez, 2011) cast in the election. His election as the first black person or, perhaps more importantly first nonwhite person, to become president of the U.S. has been the catalyst for much discussion of the meaning and significance of race in the United States. In the process, many people who are racially ambiguous may demand a more nuanced racial discourse that takes into account their priorities including immigration policies, affirmative action and other issues. They may also become part of U.S. society in which their very existence is used as evidence that the subject of race has been successfully dealt with by Americans and in which it will become increasingly unpopular to bring up the idea of race in any kind of discourse. In such an atmosphere, it will be more important for individuals to proclaim we are all Americans and to ignore economic, social and cultural inequities that are really based on race (Bonilla-Silva, 2002). Such a shift would not happen suddenly but it would require all kinds of reframing of various aspects of race, including changing racial categories, as was done when the U.S. Census Bureau decided to add Middle Eastern people from Africa and Asia to the racial category of white people, who had previous been defined as European in origins. Middle Easterners representing dozens of countries, ethnicities and races, are racially ambiguous people. It is in many adjustments, redefinitions, and decisions like this one, public discourse on race in the U.S. will change as the racial complexion of the nation changes and racially ambiguous people will be an integral part of that change.

A particularly striking feature of the Latin Americanization thesis is the prediction that a new racial hierarchy will develop (Bonilla-Silva, 2002). In Latin America, there has always been widespread recognition of racial mixing. *Mestizaje* and *blanqueamiento* are long acknowledged parts of race relations in Latin America. The word *mestizaje* simply means mixture and numbers of terms and names reflect the varying skin tones produced by having a mixed ancestry

comprised of European (usually Spanish or Portuguese), indigenous or Indian, and African strains (Roth, 2006; Rodriguez, 2006; Bonilla-Silva, 2002). *Blanqueamiento* means whitening and it refers to the Latin American practice of allowing lighter skinned people to enjoy some of the privileges and status of white people even though they have African or indigenous heritage. Among some Latin Americans *blanqueamiento* means that the skin color of potential mates is greatly determined by whether they are light skinned enough to produce light skinned offspring. The practice is similar to that used by members of the light-skinned elites among African Americans to protect their high status through producing light-skinned children. In much of Latin America, black ancestry goes unacknowledged, and so one can be white or in the elite as long as one does not acknowledge one's black heritage. In his recent PBS television series "Black in Latin America," Henry Louis Gates said in Mexico this is often referred to as "having a black grandmother in the closet," meaning that many people have African ancestry but they do not speak of it.

A key difference between Latin American *blanqueamiento* and the way race is determined in the U.S. is that the Latin American system allows one to claim being white or of a higher racial status than darker skinned people even if one has a black relative or ancestor. In the U.S. system of hypo-descent, one black ancestor even several generations back disqualifies one from claiming to be white. In the U.S. racial classification not only demands that individuals claim one racial identity and one only, but also places more weight on racial/ethnic minority group membership than on being white when it comes to determining racial classification. A person who is black and white cannot claim to be white, he or she must always say he or she is black. Russell, Wilson and Hall (1992) discuss this contradiction in their book, *The Color Complex*, which is about the colorism among black people. They cited the example of late

NAACP leader Walter White, who appeared white, but who always identified as black because of the one-drop rule and his commitment to the civil rights struggle of black people. When White traveled to Europe, the Europeans would be confused about his race because he looked white. This traditional practice of the one-drop rule will be tested and strained by changes in the racial composition of the population of the U.S. As the number of interracial marriages and relationships seems to increase (Passel, Wang & Taylor, 2010) and the rates of immigration from Asia and other parts of the world increases, racial mixing and racial ambiguity will become a fixture on the landscape of the U.S.

What Bonilla-Silva (2002) predicts is that over time a three-level racial hierarchy will evolve. This tri-racial system in the U.S. will be comprised of whites, honorary whites and collective blacks. The white level will encompass whites, some white-looking multiracials, assimilated (urban) Native Americans and Latinos and a few Asian-origin people. Light-skinned Latinos, Japanese, Chinese, Korean Americans, Asian Indians, Middle Eastern Americans and most multiracials will comprise honorary whites. Collective blacks will be Filipinos, Vietnamese, Hmong, Laotians, dark-skinned Latinos, blacks, new West Indian and African immigrants, and reservation-bound Native Americans. Bonilla-Silva (2002) gives a caveat that the new hierarchy may be different for some groups and individuals than what he envisions, but the important thing is that there will be stratification along racial lines that allows the middle group of honorary whites to act as a buffer between whites and collective blacks thus defusing any revolutionary activity and providing some privilege for honorary whites that collective blacks will not be able to enjoy. Such a hierarchy will foster the development of colorism or a pigmentocracy and obscure the lingering effects of racial discrimination even though that

discrimination will still exist. Bonilla-Silva compares this new hierarchy to the results yielded by color-blind racism.

Whether this tri-racial system will come about is somewhat dependent upon how members of the racial/ethnic groups see their own identities. Bonilla-Silva (2002) points out that not all Latin Americans have a rigid notion of their racial identities. In some families, for instance, individuals have different racial identities. Indeed, Rodriguez (2006) says among Latinos the same person can have different racial identities during the course of a day depending on what kind of interactions are occurring.

#### Theoretical Perspectives: Discussion

From Omi and Winant's description of racial formation to Bonilla-Silva's prediction of a tri-racial stratification system, these interviewees are in a position to experience some of the occurrences that the theorists describe. While this sample is far too small and far too purposeful to prove or disprove any hypothesis or theory, theories can be helpful, especially when mixed with grounded theory techniques in gaining profound insight into race relations. These interviewees with their generous sharing of the narratives of their lives are a reminder of the fact that these theories apply to people who have feelings, friends, mates and experiences. Race is not just an intellectual phenomenon in the U.S. It is contested; it is painful sometimes; it is a source of pride; it is a basis for exclusion and inclusion; and it is much, much more.

If these theories are correct in explaining various aspects race relations in the U.S., some of the patterns they describe should appear among the life experiences of the interviewees.

Among Omi and Winant's theories is the scenario of being racially misidentified. Omi and Winant (2008, 2009) discuss the relationship between expectations of behavior and

appearance and racial identity. Somehow racial appearance is supposed to indicate what can be expected of individuals of different racial groups. It is this idea of racial expectations that the interviewees in this study frequently encounter. They do not look black, or Native American, or Filipino, etc. The expectations about their appearance or behavior by race are pervasive. They face them every time someone, whether stranger or acquaintance, asks them the question “What are you?” and then follows it up with a surprised reaction to the answer. This study provides a closer examination of the effects of racial expectations and curiosity as a constant presence in the interviewees’ lives and will be discussed more in the chapters dealing with the grounded theory aspects of this study. Racial expectations are a major factor in race relations in the U.S., but Omi and Winant (2008) also discuss at great length the racial dictatorship of the U.S.

They describe the racial dictatorship of the U.S. as basically a social order in which whites, and people who can present themselves as white, are at the top enjoying many privileges (Omi & Winant, 2008). Over time this racial dictatorship doled out some privileges to light skinned people because they were deemed more attractive and smarter than darker skinned members of minority groups or because they were able to pass as members of the dominant group. Although, as shown in the literature review of this paper, racial mixing had been a feature of every epoch of the history of the U.S., it has not been treated as a positive development for most of U.S. history. In slavery, the mixed children of white masters and their enslaved women were not classified as white but black so that they would become their fathers’ property and increase his wealth. After slavery the one-drop rule and hypo-descent continued this tradition of prohibiting the offspring of black/white unions whether involuntary or voluntary to identify as anything other than black. Omi and Winant go so far as to say the U.S. is the only country in the world that has instituted this kind of racial classification system.

The one-drop rule defines race for black people, but how it applies to members of other racial groups is different and in some cases unclear. Their ability to be accepted as whites has often depended on their appearance and the changing politics and governmental policies and social customs of the time and place where they live. This project will examine these sometimes contradictory factors as they play out in the interviewees' development of racial identity and the various events in their life history. Underpinning all aspects of the racial identity issue in the U.S. is the ubiquitous rule that everyone has only one racial classification. Only in the 2000 census did the U.S. government allow people to say that they have more than one race in their ancestry. This was after years of petitions from a multiracial movement in the U.S. (Rockquemore, 2002; Smith, 1996) that the government add a multiracial category to its forms and the census that failed. It is not clear how the multiracial classification would have clarified race because most of the people who wanted this classification wanted to use it only for people who have parents of different races (Smith, 1996). Many more people have multiracial ancestries than those whose parents are of two different races. By interviewing people about their life experiences as they have been shaped by race, their racial appearance, and how they manage to develop racial identity against a backdrop of contradictory and confusing racial practices and beliefs that buttress a racial dictatorship. In many cases, they are the living, breathing proof that what passes as what Omi and Winant (2008) call the common sense of race is really not common sense at all.

Closely connected to Omi and Winant's analysis of the racial system in the U.S. is the Bonilla-Silva thesis that the U.S. is moving toward a system that employs three-tiered stratification along racial lines. This system moves away from the black/white racial paradigm that has dominated U.S. discourse on race toward a paradigm for a country that is becoming

darker in its racial composition. The interviewees in this study have a very definite standpoint on this thesis. Most of them would be on Bonilla-Silva's honorary white level of racial stratification. Bonilla-Silva describes this stratification as being porous for some members, in similar ways to the racial system in Latin America. Some of the interviewees in this study demonstrate this porosity by the flexibility they have to choose which racial identity they will claim at different points in their lives or for different purposes. Bonilla-Silva said that in the Latin American racial system, the middle racial group acts as a buffer between the top group and the bottom groups.

Assimilation and Latin Americanization are both pertinent lenses for this study because as the U.S. population grows more diverse there have to be techniques for gauging what is happening among the more complex population. Several questions posed by the theories have to be answered. Are we just developing another system that perpetuates racial stratification by redefining racial categories, and then arranging them in a hierarchy as Latin Americanization would suggest? Or are we slowly continuing the process of assimilation of racial/ethnic minority groups into a dominant white racial group? The federal government has already in the 2010 census started to count some who are not from Europe as white by changing the definition of white people to include people from northern Africa and the Middle East as white people. The government also made it more tempting for Hispanics or Latinos to identify themselves as white on the census by eliminating the racial "Other" category, and consigning them to the status of an ethnic group whose members could be of any race. The problem, as Gordon (1961) put it, is that while behavioral assimilation or adopting the language, the social behavior and other outward manifestations of the dominant group is the general practice of U.S. society, the dominant group in the U.S. has failed to offer structural assimilation to anyone who isn't defined as white. It still remains to be seen if the newly designated white people with origins in Africa and Muslim

countries like Morocco or Egypt or Libya (which are all embroiled in revolutions and trying to develop democratic societies) follow the path of predominantly Christian European ethnics into structural assimilation.

Sociological theorists, like Gordon, have long thought that assimilation was a two-way process that can be speeded up or slowed down by the receptivity or resistance of the groups involved. While what Gordon posited is certainly true for all ethnic/racial groups, the question of assimilation has to be reexamined in the light of the rapidly changing balance of the racial/ethnic population of the U.S. Major social influences and trends also have their impact on whether structural assimilation is occurring or whether the U.S. is gradually instituting a Latin American model of racial stratification. These influences include the racial identity pride movements and other social movements that have stirred some to acknowledge that they are members of minority groups instead of white people. There is also more volatility in personal relationships which heavily influence identity, as shown by the divorce rate soaring to 50 % in recent decades after Gordon developed his theories of assimilation. These trends and events tend to reinforce individual self-actualization and militate against members of one group to making him or herself subservient or in any way inferior to members of another. The high divorce rate enhances a general milieu in which stability and long term rejection of one social identity for that of a spouse or anyone else cannot be expected or required. Both Latin Americanization and structural assimilation require some kind of redefinition of self to fit into a different schema of race relations than has existed historically in the U.S.

This study can only enunciate the theories of Omi and Winant, Bonilla-Silva and Gordon by identifying any patterns that tend to provide evidence that those theories are unfolding. With that caveat in mind, racial formation theory is exemplified by several patterns in the life

experiences of the interviewees, including deeply ingrained racial expectations and the promulgation of a common sense set of rules about race that tends to support the racial dictatorship. Both the Bonilla-Silva and Gordon theses are cloudier when used as a lens for viewing patterns in race relations as evidenced in the lives of interviewees. Some racial minorities do enjoy some privileges by virtue of being honorary whites while some see privileges to declaring their racial/ethnic minority heritage; and others have chosen to take up the struggles and challenges that Bonilla-Silva would say are roughly comparable to those faced by collective blacks, such as choosing to live on an impoverished and crime-ridden American Indian reservation. Since this study is very small and exploratory, it cannot provide a definitive test of how many people actually fall in the Bonilla-Silva category of honorary whites; however if one looks at the results of the recent census, it is arguable that at least half of the people in the U.S. would be honorary whites. A qualitative study like this one gives valuable insight into what people really experience and what is really important to them if being racially ambiguous is synonymous with being an honorary white.

Racial formation theorists would say that politics, economics and other social forces have helped the shape the environment in which racially ambiguous people grew up and live today into one where they claim a racial identity that fully recognizes her minority heritage and, indeed celebrates it. They do not have to be secretive about being members of minority racial groups even though some realize that no one would question them about race or if others did question them about race, the presumption would be that they are European Americans. They also realize that there are a plethora of stereotypes, both negative and positive, linked to race and ethnicity, and they have internalized some of these notions because the stereotypes are so pervasive in U.S. society.

Bonilla-Silva would probably assign most of them to the honorary white layer of his stratification scheme. It would be easy for many racially ambiguous people to fit into a racial stratification pattern that is porous, allowing people who can fit different look and class expectations to move back and forth between levels of stratification. But do racially ambiguous people really fit the honorary white description? Many of them certainly do not seem to be aspiring to whiteness because it is innately superior, as racist ideology claims it is.

The fact that there are honorary whites is nothing new; the question is whether or not the “actual whites” knew there were honorary whites among them or whether the honorary whites made it known that they had minority ancestry and fought for the betterment of members of minority groups. Although in slavery, for example, light-skinned blacks received some privileges, and in more recent times, some Latinos became stars in Hollywood by downplaying their Latino identity (Anthony Quinn, Rita Hayworth), there have always been light-skinned members of minority groups who chafed at the privileges they received and fought for the rights of their darker brothers and sisters. Honorary whites are supposed to be a buffer between racial groups. I don’t think people who stay connected to their minority community, are actively taking part in social welfare activities, and who maintain and announce their minority identity, are acting as buffers between groups or obscuring the true nature of social problems.

In such an unstable and shifting racial landscape, new research has to be done to develop new paradigms. The old theories are not useless, but certainly new theories on what is happening in the U.S. to people who find themselves constantly in confusing and complicated situations because of race need to be developed. Because most of the interviewees have lived in a region of the country that is diverse and dynamic, they have rich insights into race relations in the kind of America where there is no racial/ethnic numerical majority. They see the racial landscape from a

position straddling both being members of traditional racial/ethnic minority groups and living in a place where perhaps it is decreasing in importance that one be white in order to access privilege. They see the abundance of racist attitudes that still exist in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. Ironically, they say in the wake of the election of Barack Obama as the first self-identified black president of the U.S. they saw their relatives, friends and others with whom they interact, display racist resentment of Obama. Apparently, race relations have not improved as much as some pundits would claim.

## CHAPTER 4

### METHODS

#### Recruitment

Twenty-four people were interviewed for this study. Most of them were living in the northern Texas region, but I did six interviews by telephone mainly because of time and budgetary restrictions.

I recruited interviewees, mainly using a snowball approach to reach them. Fourteen of the interviewees had volunteered to be in the study. In conversations in classes or as colleagues or socially they had told me about their racial ambiguity at different times. Some of them were former students of mine who had written about their experiences. On several occasions, when I said I would be doing dissertation research on racial ambiguity, they said they wanted me to talk to them. In one case I was not aware that the person was racially ambiguous, and we were chatting. When she asked me the topic of my dissertation, and I told her, she said you have to interview me. Some of the volunteers are in my son's group of friends, which is very racially diverse. One interviewee volunteered through one of my professors, who had not previously been aware that she was racially ambiguous.

Some of these volunteers were able to recruit people they knew through work or in social relationships. The interviewees in South Dakota and Wyoming were recruited by another interviewee who knew me as a colleague. The interviewee in New York was a friend of a family member.

Because most of my recruiting relied on interpersonal methods, most of the potential interviewees that I approached had a trust level with the people who were referring them to me or they knew me. At the end of most interviews I asked if the interviewee knew someone else I

could talk to. I did however try to use less personal methods. Early in the recruiting, I printed out some fliers that I could give to individuals or post on bulletin boards. I saw a woman who worked in a store that I frequented as a customer, and I attempted to recruit her using the flier. I felt uncomfortable talking to a complete stranger about the topic of the research, (it was akin to asking her “what are you?”), and she seemed to be a bit uncomfortable. Although she agreed to meet me at an area coffee house, she did not keep the appointment. I did not try to recruit her again, nor did I try to recruit anyone in such an impersonal way again.

I had more success when I went to a conference on racial diversity and was able to approach people who were already talking about race. I recruited one interviewee at this conference. I did try to use a flier on the bulletin board at a diversity office on campus, but I did not get any responses from that advertisement.

None of the people I asked to be interviewed refused to be interviewed directly. However there were some people who had moved out of the area after they had expressed interest in the project, and others whose schedules never meshed with mine. I suspect that the latter group was not really interested in the project and trying to let me down gently. I estimate that there were about six people who did not agree to be interviewed after their telephone numbers were given to me by interviewees, and we could not set up an interview.

Recruiting interviewees for this study involved more sensitivity and tact than I anticipated. Racially ambiguous people are everywhere, but to recruit them for a study that is centered on racial issues is not easy since one may be asking them the same questions that they have faced, sometimes in humiliation, all their lives. I realized then even more that this is a subject that the ideology of racialization tells us is obvious and open to discussion, but often it really is not. It is a matter of privacy and discretion. The researcher has to be sensitive to the

environment in which he or she is attempting to recruit interviewees, and also he or she has to learn how to help the interviewees get through the interviews. One cannot ask a question and then move on robotically because an interviewee has entrusted the researcher by recounting an incident that has left them in tears, or with which they are still struggling emotionally. The emotional dynamics of some of these interviews was very delicate.

### Data-Gathering Instruments

There were two questionnaires used in this study as well as a consent form. The consent form presented the parameters of the study, explained the emotional risks and benefits and gave contact information for the researcher, and the University of North Texas Institutional Review Board, which approved the design of the research project. The Consent Form also asks for permission to take their interviewees' photos and use them with this document and any other publications that could arise from this study. That Consent Form is Appendix A of this dissertation.

There was also a brief demographic questionnaire asking interviewees about their ages, places of birth, current residences, occupation and racial/ethnic categories. Interviewees were allowed to identify themselves racially in any way that they desired. They were not limited to a mono-racial classification for themselves, nor were they restricted to using the designations on the census or any governmental forms. Then the long questionnaire, which formed the basis for questions in the interview script, was used.

Field notes and memos were produced periodically to begin to analyze the information gleaned from the interviews. The interviews were taped on a voice recording and detailed notes supplemented in the documentation of the interviews. I transcribed all of the interviews myself.

## Interview Locations

Most of the interviews were performed face-to-face beginning June 3, 2009 in the north Texas region and at the University of North Texas in various offices and in the student union. The interviews lasted from about a half hour to two hours. I conducted some interviews in coffee houses and restaurants. One interview was done at my apartment; another at my son's home. I did one interview at the interviewee's house. That proved to be somewhat problematic because the interviewee's husband was there. She was very critical of him not being sensitive to her situation as a racially ambiguous person, and he wanted to defend himself. They engaged in an exchange that was both distracting and a little bit amusing, but ultimately very revelatory about how even a longtime spouse might have difficulty grasping that she felt deeply her racial ambiguity. I included the things she said in the transcript, but I did not include his comments.

Six interviews were done by telephone. These interviews were with an interviewee who lived in Tennessee, and that interviewee helped me recruit interviewees who lived in South Dakota and Wyoming. A family member helped me recruit an interviewee from New York City. There was one other interview done by telephone with a former student who lived in suburban northern Texas, but we could not manage to agree on a meeting place and time, so we made an appointment to do the interview by telephone.

## The Interviewees

The interviewees in this study represent a diverse group. Their occupations included being a student, a security worker for the federal government, a banker, a human resources manager for a major corporation, a cheerleading director, a culinary specialist for the U.S. Navy, a chef, a production designer, a project director, a senior analyst for a major airline, a variable

data printer, a hairstylist, and a retired person.

Seventy-one percent of the interviewees were women and 29 % were males. This overrepresentation of women was most likely caused by the fact that snowball recruiting was used in this study. There was no attempt to have the sample match the proportions of particular groups in the general population. Seventy-nine % of the interviewees were U.S. born while 21% of them were born in other countries, including the Philippines, Japan, India and Mexico. Fifty percent of them were ages 20-35; 33% ages 36-50; and 17 % were ages 51-63.

While the interviewees identified themselves racially in various ways, 62.5 % of them chose a single racial category for themselves (including Hispanic, Mexican or Mexican American which the interviewees said they used as a preferred racial identification). None of them chose white as that racial identity. About 29.2 % of them chose multiple racial identities, such as white and Native American, while 8.3 % of them had a different definition of their racial identities than is socially common. Both these interviewees said they were of mixed racial descent including one who used the term “biracial” and another who chose “mixed.” Table 1 gives a demographic description of the interviewees in this research.

### The Interview Script

The basic script of the interview was not changed as the interviewing progressed. Because of the in-depth nature of the interviews, many prompts were used to ask the interviewee to clarify or elaborate on a response to a question. These prompts also were used to get a more complete answer from the interviewees where needed, but the framework of the interviews was the same as in the original script. The following is the script used during the interviews:

Table 1

*Interviewee Demographic Data*

| #  | Name*     | Age | Gender | Occupation                           | Hometown                  | Current Residence          | Race/ethnicity                            |
|----|-----------|-----|--------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|---|
| 1  | Indira    | 31  | F      | Personnel/security                   | Tyler, TX                 | Irving, TX                 | Asian/Indian                              |
| 2  | Brenda    | 23  | F      | Student                              | Dallas, TX                | Carrollton, TX             | Black                                     |
| 3  | Delores   | 25  | F      | Reservation clerk                    | Fort Worth, TX            | Fort Worth, TX             | Filipino/white                            |
| 4  | Robert    | 30  | M      | Production designer/Student          | Toledo, IA                | Denton, TX                 | Pacific Islander/Asian                    |
| 5  | Charles   | 21  | M      | U.S. Navy: Culinary Specialist       | Kapolei, HA               | Fort Worth, TX             | Filipino/Black/ Cherokee/<br>Puerto Rican |
| 6  | Rosa      | 26  | F      | Banker/Student                       | Guadalajara,<br>Mexico    | Carrollton, TX             | Mexican                                   |
| 7  | Barbara   | 23  | F      | Graduate student                     | Lynchburg, VA             | Denton                     | Black/African American                    |
| 8  | Sandra    | 24  | F      | Cheerleading director                | Denton, TX                | Denton/(small town), TX    | Black/White                               |
| 9  | Guadalupe | 23  | F      | Student                              | Fort Worth, TX            | Fort Worth, TX             | Hispanic                                  |
| 10 | Beth      | 46  | F      | Human Resources Manager              | Atlanta, GA               | Flower Mound, TX           | African American                          |
| 11 | Deborah   | 40  | F      | Program/Project Director             | Fort Worth, TX            | Lewisville, TX             | Mexican                                   |
| 12 | David     | 48  | M      | Anthropologist/ Sociology<br>Student | Cincinnati, OH            | Denton, TX                 | American Indian                           |
| 13 | Theresa   | 28  | F      | Sociology student                    | Kansas                    | Denton, TX                 | Biracial (Black/White)                    |
| 14 | Susan     | 50  | F      |                                      | Kansas City, MO           | Knoxville, TN & S.D.       | Native/White/Black                        |
| 15 | Mary      | 63  | F      | Retired                              | Wind River Reservation WY | Wind River Reservation, WY | Eastern Shoshone                          |
| 16 | Tom       | 40  | M      | Chef                                 | Waxahachie, TX            | Dallas, TX                 | Native American                           |
| 17 | Rolando   | 41  | M      | Variable data printing               | Manila, Philippines       | Irving, TX                 | Filipino                                  |
| 18 | Ronald    | 57  | M      | Research professor                   | Multiple                  | McKinney, TX               | Cherokee                                  |
| 19 | Maria     | 21  | F      | Student assistant                    | Fort Worth, TX            | Fort Worth, TX             | Hispanic/American Indian                  |
| 20 | Miki      | 43  | F      | Airline senior analyst               | Sukuloka, Japan           | Keller, TX                 | Asian                                     |
| 21 | Cecilia   | 20  | F      | Hairstylist/college student          | Denton, TX                | Denton, TX                 | Mexican American                          |
| 22 | Anne      | 40  | F      | Night clerk auditor                  | Multiple                  | South Dakota               | White/Native American                     |
| 23 | Jim       | 52  | M      | College professor                    | Des Moines, IA            | Brookings, S.D.            | Caucasian/Native American                 |
| 24 | Hope      | 55  | F      | Marriage and family therapist        | Newark, NJ                | Brooklyn, NY               | Mixed                                     |

\*These names are pseudonyms. They are not the real names of these individuals.

- Tell me about where you grew up.
- What racial identity do you use at home or with your family?
- Tell me about your racial identity.
- Tell me about where you live now?
- What racial identity do you use now?
- What racial identity do you use at school or work?
- What racial identity do you use socially?
- Tell me your thoughts and feelings about the identities you use in different situations.
- How does the subject of your identity usually come up?
- Tell me how people react when they hear your racial or ethnic identity.
- How do people treat you after they realize they misidentified you?
- How significant has race and ethnicity been in your life?
- If you could choose any racial/ethnic category for yourself, what would you choose?
- Do you want to tell me anything else about this before we end the interview?
- Thank you very much.

In some cases, the interviews brought up painful or angry memories. Also in many cases, there were deviations to the script in order to get the interviewees through the interviews and to promote a sense of comfort with subjects that are often difficult to discuss. A couple of the interviewees broke down crying and some expressed their distaste for people who had been in close relationships with them. These are examples of times when strictly following the script would have been insensitive and ineffective.

I transcribed these interviews verbatim and then began analyzing these transcripts using open or descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2011). The chapters after my reflexivity statement describe the results of this research.

## Reflexivity

When I was growing up in one of the most racially polarized cities in the country, Cincinnati, Ohio, I was aware that race controlled every part of my life. It dictated which schools I could go to, where I would live, what food my mother could buy at the grocery store, and what jobs she could and could not get. Because we lived in every poor black neighborhood in town, I learned that the people I saw every day became invisible when I watched television at night. The movie theaters in my neighborhood displayed posters depicting black actors playing detectives, cowboys, and vampires, but when I ventured to the white world, very few people of any race knew about this cultural history. As a girl, I could look up to Annie Oakley and Wonder Woman as heroic figures for me as a female, but as I grew older I gained a more nuanced understanding of the world. Gender was widely considered a straightforward concept in those days, but race remained pervasive, fascinating, and confusing all at the same time.

Race was supposed to be something you could see, determined by the color of your skin, and although Negroes, as we were called then, were subjected to extreme forms of discrimination because whites thought we were inferior, my extended family believed that you should be proud of being a Negro. You were supposed to be proud of the variety within the race as something beautiful and resilient in its own right. My own large extended family relished the racial diversity we embodied among our members. I had grand-uncles with blue, green and gray eyes and an abundance of hair textures. Among my relatives was represented every skin tone from darkest strong coffee color to light olive. The wife of one of my relatives says that when her husband's family gets together, "they look like the League of Nations."

So it was apparent to me at an early age that race did not mean uniformity in appearance of people who were members of the same race. Race seemed to be capricious to me, and I was

never sure that any of the rules made sense, but yet those same rules had a profound impact on my life. When I was growing up, the biggest amusement park in the area invited white visitors to frolic in the pool and ride the roller coaster, but in my neighborhood we knew the invitation wasn't for us. My uncle, who was a field secretary for the NAACP and a columnist for a black newspaper, tested the racial segregation of the park by showing up there with another black man and perpetuating a ruse. While his friend tried in vain to buy a ticket, my uncle, who was a brown-skinned man with crinkly hair, put on a fake accent and a headpiece and succeeded in buying a ticket and being welcomed into the park as a guest from a foreign country. He wrote a column about how white Americans treated foreigners better than their own fellow black Americans. He said that people who looked very much like American Negroes but perceived to be from another country, were treated like white people, but black Americans were discriminated against. This story was told to me as a cautionary tale about the social construction of race. It helped make me profoundly skeptical about segregation and racism and made me more determined to follow my uncle's path of challenging and decrying stratification and the arbitrariness of race.

Many decades later I was working at a newspaper in Texas, when I became embroiled in a protracted controversy over how the paper would cover the burgeoning minority communities in our area. The controversy would flare up over stories and assignments, even words used in stories, as it did one night when I was called out of a school board meeting I was covering to go to the city's Juneteenth celebration where thousands of black people were gathered to check on a disturbance involving police and young black men. When I got there, I noticed that some of the crowd was excited but not all of it because families were picnicking into the night. I talked to the young men involved in the disturbance, and they said the police had formed a crowd control line

between them and the stage where a performance was going on and started treating them roughly, and finally a police officer called one of the young men a “nigger,” a scuffle ensued and three people were arrested. That night the editor on duty decided that an Asian American’s description of the incident as a “melée” between cops and blacks was accurate, and he refused to print my eyewitness interview saying the police had called the blacks “niggers” as too explosive. He did not seem to be concerned that we routinely printed eyewitness accounts or that the young men would not have their say about what actually happened. The next day all of the black staffers and I went over the head of our boss to protest a story that unfairly depicted blacks and the overlooking of a senior black reporter’s work. The next day one of the television teams that had been on the scene ran its tape that verified that the black men, while rowdy were not menacing, and that one of the white officers called them “nigger.” Incidents like that exacerbated tensions along racial lines both between different groups of minority journalists and white management and between groups of minority journalists against each other. The whole complicated situation became so infuriating that all three of the most senior minority journalists, two Hispanic men and me, left the newspaper within a year of each other.

One of these colleagues and I started an online newsletter on Latino current events called *Politico*. In one of our articles, my friend warned Hispanic men to get ready for a wave of racial profiling because law enforcement authorities were searching for Middle Eastern terrorists and whenever this occurred, there were numerous reports of Hispanics getting questioned especially at airports. The profiling was a presumption that Hispanics were not supposed to be air travelers according to racial stereotypes, so if people with a certain phenotype were in airports they must be the suspect Middle Easterners. I had never thought about racial profiling as something that

involved mistaking members of one group for members of another. I had always assumed although racial profiling was a racist practice; its parameters were always clearly defined.

But once again race turned out not to be something that seemed as easily perceived according to skin color or physical appearance. There were a lot of people of a variety of backgrounds who could not be placed in a single racial category according to visual cues. I realized that an important way to fight racism was continually to question race and racialization. Even when I was fully engaged in my journalistic career, I had always planned to have more than one career over the course of my working life. I wanted to be a university professor sometime after my journalism career and sociology is the field which allows me to use both previously developed skills and new ones to continue to play a small part in exposing fallacies of race in different environments. That race is socially constructed made sense to me because it allowed room for interrogating racialization and racism and beginning to understand that race was a dynamic social phenomenon. Trying to understand how race was socially constructed gave me some tools to begin to show how a racialized system was basically unfair and impermanent. If race was in a constant process of social construction, then more groups could find ways take part in simultaneously destroying it as a repressive force and molding it to conform to their own interests and perceptions of their own identities.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RACE ENDURES IN A “COLORBLIND SOCIETY”

Most of the interviewees in this study were born after the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s or were too young at the time to remember much about segregation, yet they still have a keen understanding of the continuing significance of race in a U.S. which many claim is now colorblind. The interviewees made more comments about the continuing significance of race, and the significance of racial identity more than anything else in this study.<sup>6</sup> They mentioned these topics at least 650 times, and all of the interviewees whether they said they felt race as an oppressive weighty issue in their lives or something that because of their ambiguity they had been able to avoid discussing most of the time, said that the U.S. is not a “colorblind society” and that race still has a major effect on many areas of life. If the U.S. were truly a colorblind society as many want to believe, then the race(s) of individuals would not be so important to ascertain and the impact of certain current events, such as the election of President Barack Obama, as the first self-identified black president of the U.S. would not receive the attention or stir the bitter dissension that they have witnessed. Obama’s election was mentioned 18 times in various interviews, without having been mentioned in the Interview Script.

Racially ambiguous people said that race is still extremely significant in U.S. society and that it has an impact on every part of their lives, including work and school, mate selection, family life, social interactions from the most fleeting with strangers to the most enduring friendships and how they see themselves. In the U.S. people do continue to fixate on race.

I think it’s very significant still. I think it’s very significant still. If you have to sit there and say you’re not a racist or you’re not prejudiced, then you probably are. You know, you might not be to somebody’s face, but when you’re behind closed doors, it wouldn’t surprise me that you’re saying something that you would not dare say in public. And I

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<sup>6</sup> The racial/ethnic designations the interviewees chose for themselves is used in this dissertation.

don't think history has really grown all that much. I don't think it's changed that much. It's maybe not as obvious, but it's still there. (Sandra, 24, a black/white woman)

I think it has been really significant because it has always, like permeated every aspect. I kind of feel like I can't meet anybody, date anybody, I mean uh like, it's an issue. Even though I say I try to avoid it and act like it doesn't matter, it does hurt a bit. (Brenda, 23, black woman)

I still think it's pretty significant. And a lot of people say race is dead, but I don't think that it is because everybody's still afraid to talk about it. If it were dead, then people would feel like it's okay to talk about it because it would not be a heated issue, but since Obama was elected, you know it's a good thing, and it's a bad thing because people are like 'okay we don't have to worry about race anymore.' It's like no, you still do. (Barbara, 23, black woman)

It wasn't really growing up; throughout my life I just thought I was a regular white kid. Didn't know much about race until I got to the United States and saw that people judge people by color. I'm like, that's when I found out who I really was. Yeah, I'm Native American. When I saw people judging people by color, I didn't like it. (Tom, 40 year old Native American man)

The interviewees said that being in a position to have to negotiate a racial identity that may not match the one that society has designated for them as individuals has made them even more cognizant of the social construction inherent in racial categories. They are said that when everyone from strangers to employers and even spouses questions their racial identity that race is still an integral part of U.S. society. Omi and Winant and other social thinkers would say that clear identification of everyone's racial identity is necessary for a racialized society to exist. Race is supposed to be instantly identifiable in this kind of society by visual cues. Many people with whom racially ambiguous people come in contact or encounter in the social environment don't know how to read ambiguous racial cues, so they ask questions about the racially ambiguous person even if the racially ambiguous person is a stranger. This process is testament to how compulsive and strong the social construction and border patrolling connected with race is in a racialized society. A person does not have to see him or herself as being particularly racist to take part in the categorization that goes on constantly in a racialized society, but whenever

racial questioning takes place, it is definitely a part of the perpetuation of racialization that keeps racial stratification in place.

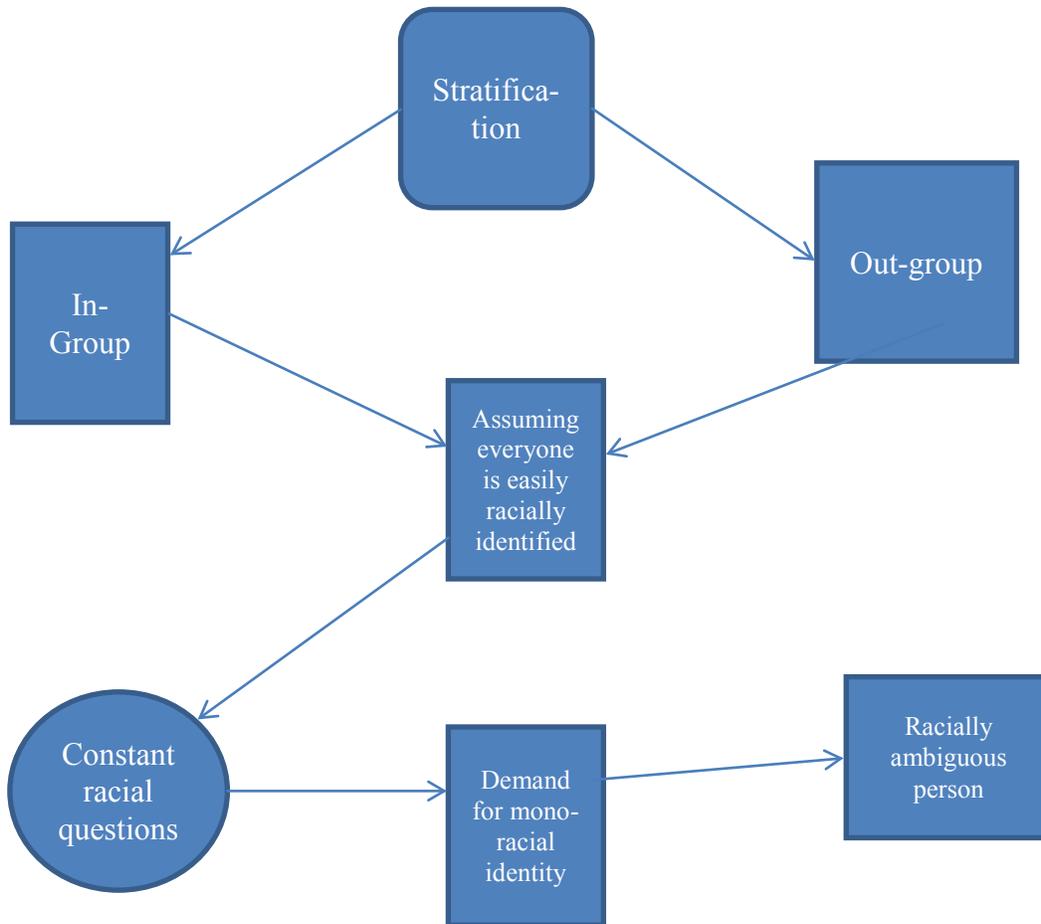


Figure 1. Racialized society.

There are several areas of life in which race is significant and determines the life chances of people in the U.S. Some of the most important of these areas are work and school, family life, and romantic and spousal relationships.

### Race in Work and School

For Beth, a 46-year-old light skinned black woman from Atlanta, how she is perceived racially at work is the difference between climbing the rungs of the corporate ladder and being

dismissed as someone who isn't worthy of promotions. She says that her race has held her back at work even though she is quite successful.

For me I feel like it's always been a detriment because I feel like my color has definitely been a career staller for me. I think that had I not been black, if I had been a little bit more white, I probably could have done a lot more, been a lot more successful, but I think because I'm black, it's been a hindrance. Either because I'm black or because I'm on the bubble of being black. I think it's been a hindrance, and so in my professional career, I've watched people with my same qualifications, experiences or whatever basically get better opportunities at work, better assignments because they were white but they didn't necessarily have any more skills than I have but because they were 'white' they got better assignments or things like that.

She has thought about the significance of race to others in her corporation so much that she said gave her daughters names that would not mark them racially or by gender to anyone who had not met them so they would be in better positions to compete in the work place when they grow up. She uses her initials often to avoid others realizing that she is black or a woman. When she used to do sales calls, she said often clients would talk to her on the telephone, not realizing that she was black only to be "shocked" when a black woman showed up to meet them face-to-face. She said race is "extremely, extremely, extremely" important in the U.S.

Although Beth has found her race to be a "career staller" for her, other interviewees said that race is significant on the job and in school, applying for scholarships and admissions, because of affirmative action. They believe that their minority status should be emphasized so that they can enjoy whatever competitive edge they can get from it. Sandra, a 23-year-old black/white woman, said she feels she is white because she was raised by her white mother to think of herself as white, but she knows that other people perceive her as black, and so when she applies for a job, she "plays the game." "...but if anything, I think it would probably help me get a job. If they have affirmative action in place... You know, 'we'll kill two birds with one stone with this applicant right here.'

Miki, a 43-year-old woman who was born in Japan to a Japanese mother and white American father, is also trying to maximize opportunities for her sons under affirmative action by listing their racial identity as Asian American, “only because being a white male today is more of a hindrance than anything.” Her sons “don’t look Asian at all” and her husband is Italian American, but she has seen in her workplace that members of minority groups seem to have the advantage in competition to get ahead, and she wants her sons to use their minority racial identities to work for them.

Well, I mean with the affirmative action and getting into colleges and stuff, or especially in the workplace. I mean I’ve seen it in my company that if somebody is a minority versus somebody who is a white male, the minority will get the position, if they have the same qualifications. So that’s why I was like, these boys are going to be Asian. And that’s how I enrolled them in school. When we have to write down what their ethnicity is, I put them down as Asian.

Robert, a 30-year-old Filipino immigrant, said that he is frequently mistaken for Latino by recruiters who were hired at the company where he works because they speak Spanish. “They’re just more upfront about it. They ask ‘what are you?’” and when he answers the question, the recruiters are stunned. “A lot of times they find it hard to believe I’m Asian versus Hispanic or anything like that.”

Maria, 21 a college student, is coming to grips with her racial ambiguity. She grew up Mexican American, but in recent years has confirmed that she is also Native American. Her mother has Kiowa ancestry, but she believes there may be other tribal groups in her family tree. The reason it has taken her until young adulthood to find out about her American Indian ancestry is that her mother’s family were adopted out to different white families when they were children and tracing down her ancestry was something that the family could not accomplish until recently. “On my forms, I don’t know what to put. Hispanic or American Indian. I tend not to put Hispanic any more. We have enough of those. The American Indians need more.” People assume

that she is getting scholarships and going to school for free because she is American Indian.

“That’s insulting. I go to school because I want to go to school.” Although she gets no financial aid because of her racial identity, she has been able to get a job on campus working with American Indian programming.

Most of the interviewees in this study were recruited and live in Texas, the fourth state in the U.S. not to have a racial/ethnic majority group. The interviewees who talked about the advantages of minority group membership in the job and school markets tended to be from Texas. Those who perceived of minority group status to be a barrier to career advancement tended to have worked or to live in states where the significance of race is heightened by heavy discrimination. Susan, a Native/white/black woman, said that although the subject of her race doesn’t usually come up in daily interactions, when it does, it is very telling. She was thinking about applying for a job and a friend of her said, “‘you look too ethnic for that around here.’ Oh, okay, I get it. I hadn’t considered it. But she was right in pointing out that this will change things for you around here.”

Anne, a 40-year-old white/Native American woman who lives in South Dakota, said she has to pass for white in order to have her job because American Indians face severe discrimination where she lives. She grew up in a family that passed for white in order to survive and although her mother tried to instill some Native pride in the children, Anne learned other powerful lessons.

At home, my mother did try. My mother wasn’t terribly well educated. She never graduated from high school and neither did my father. So there wasn’t a lot of real discussion about it. When she was a kid, her own father had said ‘Don’t tell anybody that you’re an Indian or you won’t get a job.’ And fortunately she’s from Oklahoma. And fortunately she was pale enough and her family was pale enough that they could pass as white. It was one of those shameful things you didn’t really discuss. When she tried to research history about it, a lot of the family would not help her and told her ‘don’t stir this up, you don’t need to bring this up any more.’

Race is also significant because it sometimes defines professional ethical issues. David, an American Indian man, said that his being Native American has sometimes caused him to be involved in controversies at work, especially when he was an archaeologist. “I don’t dig burials. I lost tons of jobs over not digging burials. I’ve been ridiculed by my peers as somebody who’s stuck in mysticism, you know. I don’t dig burials for the same reason that you probably wouldn’t want to go dig up your grandmother.”

### Family life

Race is significant in racially ambiguous people’s families. There is both pressure to identify mono-racially and the confusion that others outside the family exhibit when the family doesn’t look racially uniform. For some interviewees in this study there is significant diversity within their families. Some of them have brothers or sisters or parents who choose different racial identities from the interviewees or who look to outsiders as members of different races than the interviewees belong to. Tom, a large Native American man with dark eyes and dark hair, has a twin sister whom he described as petite, blonde and blue-eyed, and they both value their Native American heritage.

Barbara is a black woman who said that both her parents are black, but her mother has very fair skin. When she and her mother are seen together, friends and strangers alike question that they are biological mother and daughter because of the difference in their skin tones; these people did not realize how widely skin tones can vary even within the same family.

I don’t know my mother is, actually she looks white and so a lot of times people say ‘so your mom’s white right, or you’re mixed or something, right?’ and I’m like, no I’m not and they wouldn’t believe me because they look. They look at appearances plus the thing that a lot of people don’t understand is that black people come in several shades and so they would say like ‘oh so but why does she look like that then?’ And my mom I think has always felt uncomfortable with that. She was always trying to tan. I was like ‘Mom

you're not gonna go to bed one day and wake up Wesley Snipes. That's not going to happen so don't damage your skin over this.' She would always go out there and stay for hours and hours to tan. 'Mom it's not gonna happen, but it's alright, suit yourself.'

Barbara's statement that black people come in several shades is the acknowledgement for some racially ambiguous people that racial mixing can affect the skin tone or phenotype of families for generations, but there seems to be ignorance on the part of a lot of people that racial mixing is a phenomenon that can affect the way people in that family look for many generations.

Some interviewees said that their brothers and sisters adopt a different racial identity from the rest of the family. Theresa, who describes herself as biracial (black/white), said that her sister adopted a Hispanic racial identity. Theresa's mother, a white woman married to a black man, had tried to raise her daughters to think of themselves as "golden" but the reality of racial social construction does not include people who say their race is golden, and so Theresa and her sister developed identities with which they were each comfortable. Theresa said that hers was the identity of a black woman. Her sister's was different

I think (my mom) knows I consider myself black, and my sister, she considers herself Hispanic, which is weird because she's not.

SMITH: Your sister considers herself Hispanic?

THERESA: Yes, she watches the Spanish channel. I remember this one conversation I overheard her with her friend over the phone. She was saying how she was the only non-black person there at the baby shower, and I was just kind of confused. I'm like, ----, 'you're black too.' But she thinks...she thinks she's a lot more consistent with Hispanic because she is lighter than I am; she has softer hair than I do; she doesn't have black facial features. She could pass for white or Hispanic easily, and all her partners have been Hispanic men. All of her children look Hispanic. And so she thinks she is more or is closer in line with them.

Similarly, Guadalupe, who has a strong Hispanic identity even though she has blonde hair and blue eyes, has a brother who identifies as white, even though he has the dark hair and features associated with looking Hispanic. "He always wants to say 'I'm white, I'm white.' And I say 'I'm Hispanic.' And so it's just kind of funny because we don't look anything alike, but it

just comes up...” Guadalupe said that the subject of her brother’s and her race usually comes up when they have to choose a racial identification on various forms.

As long as people see advantages to identifying as a member of one race over the other, they will be more likely to obtain those advantages by identifying with the “better” group even at the cost of having a different racial identity than their family. They will also try to avoid some of the shame of being identified as members of a marginalized group. Ronald, a Native American man, described it this way. “I think historically people felt they had to hide or be ashamed of being Indian. They didn’t hide being white. Being Indian is tough.” David, who has blue eyes and fair skin, described the moment when he was a boy, and he realized he looked white,

Looking back, I would think people of color would think they were different, but I remember being in a situation where I was out in the yard playing, and the mother of these kids, yelled, screaming and yelling ‘Get in here and get away from that white boy.’ And I suddenly realized I was white, and that has always stayed with me. I realized that I was white. But I didn’t grow up on a reservation but my family heritage is American Indian. It was just one of those things that no one ever talked about because, uh, neighbors called my grandmother a nigger. Um, to be Indian when my dad was growing up, and I heard all these family stories, it was shameful, you know, not being white, you were shamed by it.

A few of the interviewees said they took in on as a personal responsibility carrying on the minority racial group traditions in their family. They said that although they were racially ambiguous and even married to white people, they saw their racial heritage as important to them. They did not become white by marriage even though they know to many people they might appear white. Guadalupe, the blonde, blue-eyed Hispanic woman, is married to a white man and has a German married name, but she says her race is Hispanic (notwithstanding the U.S. government rule that Hispanics are members of an ethnic group and may be members of any race) and she asserts this all the time, even when her husband laughs at her and says she is not Hispanic but white. She speaks Spanish; she cooks Mexican food; she makes sure her family

celebrates Mexican traditions; she plans to work with Hispanic children; and she chides her friends for making anti-Mexican jokes.

I really just think of myself as I'm Hispanic. I'm not gonna be viewed that way physically. But that's who I am. I can't change where I came from and I don't want to change where I came from. I'm proud of it. There's nothing to be ashamed of no matter what race or ethnicity you associate yourself with or you identify yourself as, so I'm proud of it. I'm not ashamed of it or anything like that.

Several interviewees expressed anger, frustration and sadness with how they are perceived racially in the U.S. because in most circumstances they are not allowed to talk about the full diversity of their families. Most of them don't want to be known only as members of one racial group, as default whites, nor do they necessarily find a racial identification as biracial or multiracial to be satisfactory. Delores, a Filipino and white woman, said that she was concerned about the perception that when a person has mixed racial parentage, they somehow putting down the white parent by choosing to identify as a member of a minority group.

I don't know, it bugs me more when they say 'Oh you're white' as opposed to 'oh you're Filipino.' I don't know if that's because I feel so much more strongly about it. And the thing is I don't think (stars like Halle Berry and Alicia Keys) are abandoning or neglecting the importance of their mothers making them be half white especially with the accomplishments that they have made. There is nothing wrong with Halle Berry saying she is the first black woman to win an Oscar because she is. So I don't think she has to specify that I'm the first half white, half black woman to win. She doesn't have to say that. Neither does Obama have to say I'm the first half white, half black guy to be president.

The imperative for racially ambiguous people who are proud of their racial/ethnic minority group heritage is to validate that minority ancestry by telling people that they have it. This also was true for interviewees with more than one minority group represented in their ancestry. Charles, a young sailor, grew up in Hawaii, the first state to have a majority-minority population and he is used to not living under the constraints of the one-drop rule that apply on the mainland. "Well, at home, before the service, since I'm half Filipino and half black, I preferred being Filipino. It seemed to be important somehow because of my mom." Charles' Filipina mother had been

murdered by a disgruntled tenant in one of her rental properties when Charles was a boy. On the mainland U.S. with his hair cut short to fit military regulations, everyone just assumes that he is black, he said.

Several interviewees said that even though the issue of race is supposed to be rendered beside the point because U.S. society is “colorblind,” others have trouble understanding how they can grow up in mixed racial families and not be damaged by it. The pervasive social construction of race dictates that if one’s family is not mono-racial, then there is probably a problem caused by race. Theresa said that other people have trouble understanding how it was to grow up in a biracial household. People assume things about her that make her uncomfortable when they first hear she is biracial.

I get a variety of reactions. ‘Oh, okay that makes sense.’ Or I get, ‘so what was that like? You must have grown up so confused.’ ‘People must have treated you like you didn’t fit in,’ and all these things, or you get the stupid reaction which is not as bad I guess, which is ‘all biracial babies or mixed babies are so beautiful,’ ‘you’re so lucky to be mixed.’ And I roll my eyes like an idiot.

### Romantic and Spousal Relationships

The interviewees in this study had the full range of marital statuses from single and never having been married to widow. Eleven of the interviewees were married at the time of the interviews, and nine of them were married to white people. Beth was married to a black man, and Susan was married to a Native American man. One of the interviewees was the widow of a white man. The rest of the interviewees were single, divorced or in serious relationships. The subject of mate selection and how they see their racial identity being affected by their choice of a spouse or romantic partner was mentioned often as an emotional *leit motif* to all the other relationships in

their lives and gave extraordinary insight into the challenges they face, even with their closest loved ones living as racially ambiguous people in the U.S.

Brenda is a black woman who is racially ambiguous and who has only dated black men, but she finds that her partners often inflict pain on her by teasing her and telling her that she is not black to the point that she sometimes breaks down in tears. “So I don’t know I just cope with it. I just go ‘whatever, they don’t know me.’ But even people who know me, even my boyfriend and stuff, just joke about it all the time. I just really have to act like it just doesn’t bother me. That’s how I cope with it. I don’t know.” Racial ambiguity was also a sensitive issue when Brenda was in high school and a cheerleader. Some black students accused her of being too white, and they disapproved of her, even though she saw herself as having a black identity.

There wasn’t that big a split, but I still had some black friends in high school. I had a black boyfriend. I’ve only dated black guys, so I mean it wasn’t that I had to choose one or the other, but I guess you can think of it like there was one large group of black people that I couldn’t be around them because they were kind of like the stereotypical kind of black people, and then there was like the in-between and then there was like the white kids. I would never be around them (the stereotypical blacks) I would be around these two (the in-between blacks and the whites), because it made everything easier, than to conform to be the acceptable kind of black people. Oh my gosh, that sounds horrible but that’s how people think.

For Theresa, the dating rituals of high school led to beginning to appreciate and understand her black heritage. Although she is biracial, and her mother is white and her father black, her father was in the military and away at war while she was going through formative experiences as a child, and she did not have positive black role models or peers growing up until she had a high school boyfriend who was black.

Well I didn’t really date in high school. I just went out with friends. I didn’t like anyone because after freshman year, my love went away. (Boy’s name) went away. He was a senior and he was a dark, dark black man, but he was oh so beautiful. He played the saxophone. He could sing. He could dance. He was just oh...And after he left, it was like what do I have to look forward to?

Since her high school days, she has dated two white men, including one who is racially ambiguous himself. She referred to him as “technically white” but he is often mistaken for being Middle Eastern partly because of his dark hair and eyes. Relationships with black men tend to pose more problems for her because of the stereotypes she encounters from both black men and women. The women think that she is

Uppity, you know Little Miss Thing with my hair, and I had some experiences with black women who are darker than me thinking I was a snob, and I’m really not. You’re a nice person; you’re not a nice person. A lot of black men are attracted to me, I don’t know if it’s skin color or what not, but that’s all they ever talk about is hair, skin color and booty, and that’s just three red flags to me. I’m like see you later. I have no time for you.

Robert, an Asian American, is married to a woman he described as “white as a snowflake,” but when he was single, he dated women of many races. The only women he had problems dating were Asians.

One the first girl I ever dated, she reminded me of my sister a lot. So it was just the uncomfortable feeling. But also for the fact that a lot of the Asians that have immigrated here and not been Americanized are a little bit high strung, high maintenance, and like my family likes to say, sometimes crazy. So it just, I always wanted someone who was equally low key, low maintenance as I was and of course I stereotyped my own race that way.

Even though almost half of the interviewees are married to white people, they say they are proud of their minority ancestries. For them there is absolutely no contradiction between having a white spouse and proclaiming minority identity. They talked about how they are raising their children to appreciate minority racial identities in very specific ways like taking their children to powwows and having them learn Spanish, Japanese and other languages reflective of their heritages. Most married interviewees said they have their children use a minority racial identity on forms and in other situations, even though the children may not look very much like members of minority groups. However racially ambiguous people are exposed often through

relationships with their in-laws to the more bitter side of race relations as the relatives of their mates feel free to say negative racial things in front of the racially ambiguous people.

Deborah is a Mexican woman married to a white man and living in suburbia. Both her husband and her in-laws have no problem with expressing racist sentiments in her presence. She described her husband as “Caucasian to the core.”

He’ll tease me and say I’m a half breed, and there’s nothing pejorative about it whatsoever, I think he really likes the fact that I’m Mexican and he married a Mexican. He’ll even tease like with his family. His mother and his father are not prejudiced, they’re great, but...his mother’s mother and his mother’s sister and one of his uncles are very prejudiced, and they know I’m Mexican and (my husband) will kind of interject that...And he’ll make all these comments and unless you knew him, it’s not in a pejorative sense because he plays softball with Mexicans and he has known those guys for easily 20 plus years, and they’re really close to him, you know and he’s, um, there’s just something about that...but the only thing that makes me uncomfortable is knowing that his aunt and his grandmother and his uncle will tell racist jokes and I’m sitting here, and I’m just like are you trying to start something or are you trying to?

Deborah was not the only racially ambiguous person to report disturbing comments and taunts on the part of their less racially ambiguous spouses. Beth is a black woman married to a black man who says that her husband does not understand how sensitive she is about being racially ambiguous. Guadalupe’s husband laughs at her when she writes on various forms that she is Hispanic. She said he told her, “No you are not.” However, when she got married she said her aunt said “*M’ija*, your husband, he looks like you.” And I was like, “yeah, he does. I guess he’s white.” She said her family had to get used to her husband because she is “the only white person on that side of the family.”

Race is not however, is not the only challenge that racially ambiguous people face in romantic relationships. Indira said she feels she is the “black sheep” of her family because she has not followed the path in life her parents, who brought her to this country from India when she was a toddler, wanted her to follow. Indira is divorced after marrying an Asian Indian man

who was Hindu while she is Christian. They had too many other differences besides race to stay together.

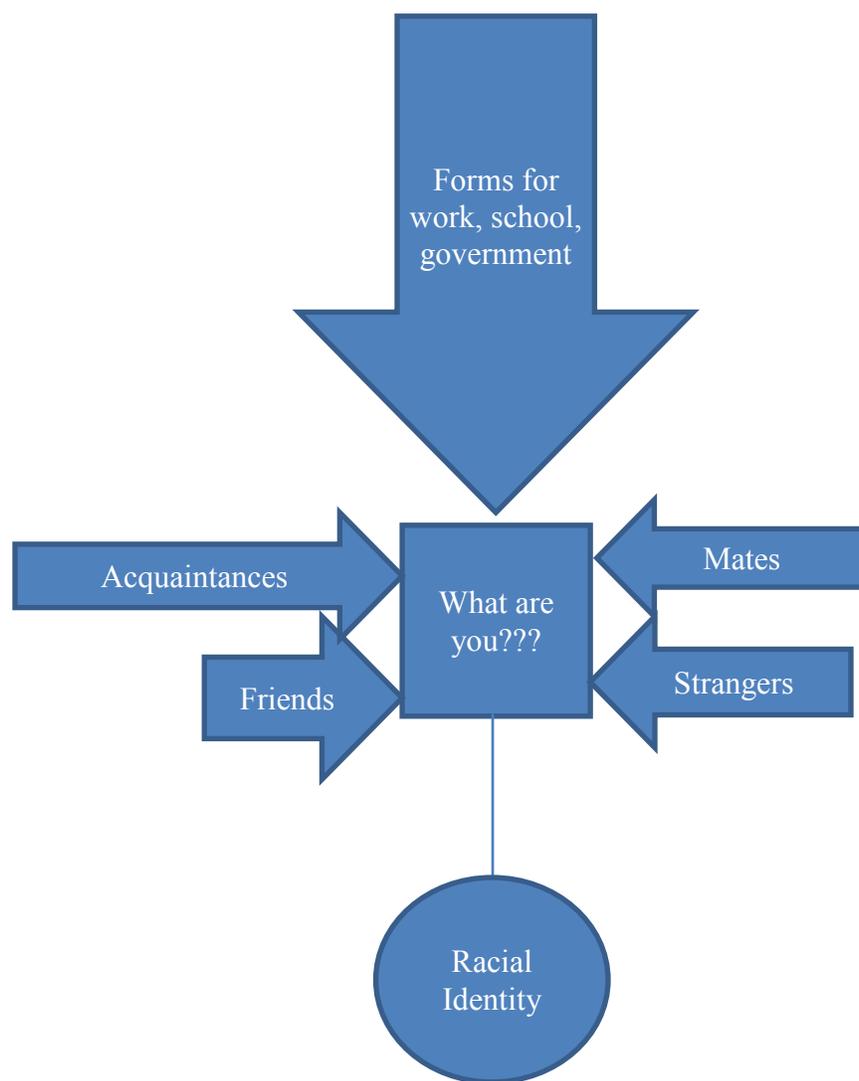
## CHAPTER 6

### CONSTANT OBJECTIFICATION

A racialized society demands that every person be classified racially. Until, each person is classified racially, he or she cannot be treated appropriately in a racialized society. These unknown racial quantities must be turned into racialized objects so they can be sorted, and then the appropriate behaviors can be followed. If a person is racially ambiguous, then he or she is objectified throughout his or her life. The questioning and the sorting are so constant that it becomes an imperative for social interaction with almost everyone racially ambiguous people meet. Interviewees in this study mentioned being asked “What are you?” or some form of that question, such as “what nationality are you?” or “you look Jewish?” or “you look Italian, are you?” 180 times. They also mentioned being objectified in various ways 182 times. One hundred percent of them had been asked “what are you?” at least once in their lives.

Figure 2 illustrates the objectification of racially ambiguous people in nearly every aspect of their lives. As citizens of the U.S., they have to fill out various forms from the government, school, and work that ask them for a racial identity. Acquaintances, friends and potential mates also ask them their racial identities. What is even more revealing is that complete strangers will ask them “what are you?” without hesitation. Both the grammar and the hermeneutics of the question, “what are you?” suggest the cascade of intricate social interactions that are going on whenever it is asked. Although it does not mention race, as in a more complete version of the question (what race do you belong to, or even what nationality are you), there seems to be little doubt as to what the questioner is intending to find out, and that is the race, or nationality, or ethnicity of the person who is being questioned. The question is like a part of the national racial shorthand that people use because they don’t know how to talk about race, yet they must talk

about it because it is always a priority. It indicates how imperative it is to identify, or sort racially every person in the space which one inhabits, most benignly so that one does not do or say anything that could possibly offend, less benignly because the social hierarchy requires constant in-group and out-group assessment (Allport, 1979) and racial border patrolling (Dalmadge 2007). The interviewees in this study because they are racially ambiguous are likely to be the constant objects of this curiosity.



*Figure 2.* Objectification of racially ambiguous people.

In a society where some claim race is of diminishing importance, racially ambiguous people can say that it still elicits a lot of attention judging by the rapidity with which it comes up even with complete strangers. Most of the interviewees said that they have come to accept the rude inquiries as a fact of life.

Well, work study always has those boxes that you check. And I always put Native American because now they're asking really, really questions. They've got white, not Hispanic, or Native American not Hispanic, and I'm going what's going on with this question? Why are they, is Hispanic a bad thing? (Laugh) But I put Native American and it really doesn't come up as an issue at work. (Tom, 40-year-old Native American man)

I've had so many people come up to me and ask, 'what are you?' Which drives me crazy. I think it's rude. I'll tell them what I am now. I used to, I would say, I'd be a smartass about it and say 'um, I'm a human being. I'm female. Or whatever.' (Sandra, 24-year-old black/white woman)

Yes, I'll be passing someone on the street and they will just stop me or something, like it's their entitlement to know and for me to give them an explanation. Sometimes it will be friendly, but then when they don't get the answer they're looking for sometimes it goes on and on. (Brenda, 23-year-old black woman)

And then we moved to Arizona and that's when I started having more difficulties with shall we say, my very ambiguous sort of race because I don't look Indian enough Indian to be Indian and don't quite look enough white to be white. (Anne, 40-year-old white/Native American woman)

What astonished many interviewees was how free even complete strangers who would never see them again felt to get the interviewees' entire racial history in a casual encounter. Sandra said that in the small town where she grew up, strangers would approach her mother and her in the grocery store and inquire about her race. Brenda told of restaurant employees asking her about her racial identity as she was using the drive-thru window to get her meals or people just approaching her on the street. Often these strangers would not accept the first answers to the question of "what are you?;" they would ask more questions, and the only way to satisfy their curiosity would be to explain the interviewees' racial lineage. The interviewees said that the

inquiries and demands were intrusions on their privacy. They did not feel they owed strangers their complete family history, but the strangers seemed to feel entitled to answers.

Many interviewees reported feeling dehumanized and confused by the constant interest in their race. Race was a notable visual marker that even strangers had no hesitation to ask about. Some interviewees said they were treated in the most clumsy and intrusive ways by other people simply because they became conversation pieces in that social space. One interviewee described an encounter with a man who petted her hair like she was an animal

It's like I'm a thing and being treated like I'm not a person. I don't know how many times people asked me or just touched my hair. I used to have a lot of hair, big afro or just a lot of curls and people would just 'can I touch your hair?' And I want to say to them 'no, I'm not your fucking pet. I'm not an animal.' I remember going to this one party after my friend's graduation, and I was on the floor playing with this dog, (and this guy) he petted me like I was that dog. I'm like 'why are you touching my hair?' 'Oh this looks nice, I just wanted to see what it felt like.' Of course he was a white guy. It's not cool to do that; you make me feel like I'm not a person.

As some of them asked, how important is it to know the racial identity of a six-year-old child or someone whom one passes on the street and will likely never see again?

I think they ask me because I have a lot of different features that they can't figure out what race I am. You know I've had people come up to me in the gas station or just at the grocery store, random places and ask me. One lady said 'I hope my daughter turns out to look like you.' And I said 'what are you talking about? You don't even know what I am.' So they just try to figure it out or they'll say 'Are you Puerto Rican? Or are you this?' When I have extensions in, then they all think I'm from the Dominican Republic or Puerto Rico or somewhere like that. If I don't have my extensions in, then they're like 'what are you? Are you black? Are you white?' You know. I never have anybody ask me if I'm white. It's not a question I guess, ever. (Sandra, 24-year-old black/white woman)

Although people do not ask Sandra if she is white, she believed she was white growing up in the family of her white mother. Strangers, especially white people would be caught off-guard by her answers to their racial questions.

Now, no they just oh, okay that's cool because I think it's more common now to see mixed couples. But when I was younger and thought that I was white growing up before I knew, they would look at me like I was crazy. What is this girl talking about? She doesn't

look like me. They would not so much question me, but look at me like I was crazy. Like they wanted to but just didn't have the balls to, so they wouldn't do it. So yeah, it's changed a lot.

For some interviewees the reactions of strangers would lead to some awkward and insulting follow-up questions. Barbara, said that people often think she is racially mixed because not only does her mother have a much fairer complexion than she does, but also because if they see her alone, they think she is part Asian. When she tells them she is black, the clumsy response is "well why are your eyes like that then?"

### Objectification of Native Americans

Interviewees in this study who had Native American ancestry said that this tendency to objectify people is exacerbated in their cases because American Indians are thought to be extinct. Susan said that "being Native means that you're in a group that people tend to view only in a historical context. You're not allowed a present. You're allowed a past and that's it...And you're still not allowed a future." At one time Susan said that even the U.S. government put out a publication in which American Indians were called "vanishing cultural artifacts." Susan and David said that often children are taught in school that the Indians were killed or run off from this or that state, or all the Indians live on reservations. Such mythology bothers them because when they identify themselves racially, people are doubly incredulous that individuals who claim to be descendants of the indigenous people of the United States still walk the earth, and that they don't look like the Indians in American western films and television shows.

David, a Native American man, said that sometimes people can't even identify American Indians when a group of them are standing nearby.

It's funny though because you can be like, you could be standing next to people that look Indian, and if the prevailing mythology is that there are no Indians here, people say that

right in front of your face. I was at a July Fourth parade in Lexington, Kentucky one time. And people say there's no Indians in Kentucky either. I was standing there talking to some people that were clearly Indian, you know, they were selling stuff on the street, and wares, bee wares, porcupine quill wares, things they had made, and the deputy mayor, I asked him why are there no Indians in the parade. And he says "there are no Indians in Kentucky" standing there right in front of an Indian family!

David was flabbergasted that the mayor would say that when Native Americans were right in front of him.

Mary, an Eastern Shoshone woman who was born on a reservation in Wyoming, described herself as a very passive person who had been bullied and ostracized by both her white classmates because she was Native and participating in extracurricular activities that other Natives didn't take part in, and her Native playmates on the reservation because her family did not take part in all the American Indian rituals and community activities. She described how it felt to be excluded, especially by whites in town at school after they realized she was American Indian:

Yes, and it's very hurtful some of the things that they can do; the looks that they give you, or they talk behind your back, and then you find out what they're saying. It's very hurtful and so you just (stay away) from those situations because if you're not wanted, then why be there? You don't want to be miserable, and it wasn't that important to me, so I didn't fight the system, I just gave up on it because if you're not around people that really like you, then why be there? I'm a very passive person anyway. But I'm not sure how I got that way.

Later, when Mary was an adult married woman she lived with her white husband for several decades in southern California where most people assumed she was Latina until the subject of her race came up in conversations.

When I lived in California, I went to a party that my husband, that his work people gave, and they found out that I was Indian, and several of the ladies walked up and said 'can I touch you? I've never touched an Indian.' And it's like where did you (inaudible), why do you want to touch an Indian? I mean, man, I just looked at them like they lost their marbles or something.

When the couple got home and Mary told her husband about her experience he was shocked at

what his wife had experienced with being objectified and embarrassed by supposedly well-meaning people.

Maria, who has Latino and Native American ancestry from the Kiowa tribe, just found out about her Native heritage about two years ago. In the pride and happiness she experienced about finally confirming that she is a Native, she enjoys turning racial curiosity on other people, by asking them “are you a Native American?” before they can ask her anything about race. She also says she doesn’t answer the question of race on forms in the same way all the time. Sometimes she will check the Hispanic box, sometimes the Native American because “the Indians need more people.”

The interviewees in this study because they are racially ambiguous face certain challenges when it comes to the question of their being Natives. None of them fit the stereotypical image of American Indians as having long black hair, dark eyes and dark skin. They are instead the living evidence that Natives have survived sometimes by interracial marriage and hiding their American Indian heritage. Some relatives of some of the interviewees in this study still have to deal with ruptures in their families that were caused when children of American Indian families were taken from their parents and sent to boarding schools where draconian measures were taken to rid the children of their Native heritage. Some interviewees have documentation of their American Indian heritage; some do not. Ronald explained it this way:

I am a citizen of two nations. I am a citizen of the Cherokee Nation, and I am a U.S. citizen. (To determine Indian identity) they are interested in your skin color, your tribal affiliation, etc. They look at everything across the board to assess your general connection. Who is your family? What have you done to be related to the tribe? But some people do not have a visible identification as Indian. A lot of urban Indians are mixed, and the Indians were exploited.

Ronald does not “look Indian” but he works with various tribes all the time. He teaches

his children about their Indian identity, and he is involved in mentoring young Natives at work. Like many other Native American interviewees in this study, he said his Native identity is precious to him, but he has had to earn acceptance among other Natives by becoming known as a committed and active participant in Native communities.

There is no question that American Indians have suffered terrific decreases of their population since the arrival of Europeans in what is now the U.S. Not only were their numbers decimated through genocide, but some people want try to appropriate Indian spirituality and culture and commercialize it at the same time the Native Americans are trying to preserve it for their own future generations. Some Native American nations are struggling to revive and reclaim their languages and their religious practices in the midst of persistent and deep poverty, especially on the reservations. The seven people who identified themselves as having a Native American racial identity discussed the forces on them to prove their Indianness in various ways. For most of them blood quantum was not as important as being active in Indian activities over the long-term of at least several years, committed to Native communities, and being known and recognized as American Indian by other Natives.

Mary is the only one who lives on a reservation currently. She described herself poetically as someone who “would always be found on a mountain with a feather in my hair.” She has no documentation that her family is partly Indian because a fire at the Bureau of Indian Affairs office at her reservation decades ago destroyed the records. Now it would take an act of Congress to make her mother, who is in her 80s, officially American Indian, and her family has decided it is not worth the effort. They know they are Natives and so does everyone around them. But for other Native people who do not have a connection to a reservation, proving that one is an American Indian can be extremely difficult. Urban Indians may choose not to connect

with their Native heritage or may not know they have any Native ancestry because the information may have died with ancestors who were hiding it because it was so shameful or dangerous to divulge to anyone.

The demand to know what you are even when it is couched in positive terms still opens the door to objectification and feeling less than because of the sorting or classification involved. A lot of presumptions about racial groups are often revealed. Observations such as those often made to the parents of Brenda and Sandra such as “black people and white people when they get together have the prettiest kids” or “your skin is so pretty” made to Barbara are just another way of verifying someone’s racial identity.

### Being Constantly Doubted

Nineteen of the interviewees in this study say that not only have people asked them “what are you” frequently but also the questioners very demanding of an answer. It is as if the questioners believe is it their right to know the race of everyone in their environment. The questioners use the most awkward, dehumanizing and almost insulting language when they doubt the answer to the question. Sandra reported there is sometimes name-calling (yellow bone) and David, Brenda and Sandra said aspersions were “jokingly” cast on the marital fidelity of their parents, such as the racially ambiguous person was probably the milk man’s child.

Brenda said that when she was younger,

Like the black kids at that school they just didn’t, no matter what I said they didn’t believe me. And sometimes they would be joking and sometimes...like even now...I don’t know. My friends joke about it. Like ‘whoa, your parents lied to you. Most of the time, I just brush it off, but... (Starts to weep. Pause) So most of the time I have to just desensitize my...and don’t think about it, but it’s brought up every single day.

Although the interviewees said most of the time, they did not feel that these doubters were trying

to hurt or insult them, the jokes and the barbs were sometimes still very painful, definitely not amusing, and revealed some of the biases and stereotypes that the questioners use to justify doubts.

Some of the interviewees said that as a form of rebellion, they would lie about their racial classification, especially to strangers, or string them along with elaborate untrue stories. To them it did not matter if the answer they gave was the truth or not because the person asking the question had no right to expect an answer. Brenda, a black woman, would often say she was Chinese or Filipino; Sandra would say she was British; and Robert, who was born in the Philippines and brought to the U.S. as a toddler when his parents emigrated, spun a story about being Japanese to a cashier in a store who was excited about having customer whom she thought was part Japanese. His story was really the plot of the movie “The Karate Kid,” but the woman seemed to believe him as they conversed while he was in her checkout line. Interviewees would tell strangers what the strangers wanted to hear -- whether it was true or not -- just so the strangers would stop asking them questions. The constant pressure to reveal their racial identity was something they encountered from the time they were small children.

Racially ambiguous people have to think through all these kinds of issues because they are constantly being asked about their racial identities and constantly objectified by others. It doesn't matter whether to these curious people the racially ambiguous person is a child or a stranger; others want to know how to classify this person. This is another example of the way that the racial hierarchy in the U.S. manages to be held in place by constant “border patrolling” (Dalmadge, 2007) and threat assessment (Pate, 2006; Allport, 1979). The process is similar to that learned by soldiers everywhere who must ascertain friend from foe of everyone who approaches their territory.

It is perhaps ironic that four interviewees in this study said that the only time they were not questioned in a rude or demanding way or when they felt as if diversity of race or nationality was just the way things were was when they were children living on U.S. military bases in Germany and Asia. On these bases as they went to school with other kids from interracial marriages and children who were of different nationalities, they said they became inoculated against the harsh racism in the U.S. Only when their fathers and families came back to the U.S. did they learn that race was even considered something problematic and divisive, and perhaps more importantly, that they were racially ambiguous in a country where having a singular easily marked racial identity was so crucial that they became objects of curiosity because they did not. The critical factor in this freer, less tense setting for interracial interaction was the institutional imperative from the military that racism was not to be tolerated. Because of these childhood experiences, they said they seek out friends and mates who are not so concerned about perpetuating the racial hierarchy or racial identity.

In a society where some believe that race is no longer an issue because of the successes of the civil rights movement or the election of President Barack Obama, who self-identifies as black but has mixed racial heritage, the experiences of these racially ambiguous individuals are highly illuminating. In the absence of an institutional imperative, like the one in military communities, many Americans feel a necessity to determine the race of everyone in their environment even complete strangers. It is often not just a more or less benign matter of wanting to know this information so as not to say or do anything to offend someone (although that intent in itself is problematic); it is more subtle and complex than that. Some people, interviewees in this study reported are all too willing to offend racially ambiguous people in the process of trying to determine what race the racially ambiguous person belongs to. If indeed the U.S. did not have

a racial dictatorship or stratification based on race, there would be much less of an imperative to police the borders of race. Individuals would not feel justified in taking it upon themselves to behave like sentries in hostile territory demanding imperiously “who goes there?” or in common everyday language “what are you?” and then feeling they must get an answer that satisfies their own preconceived notions about race.

Unlike the interviewees who were the children of military families stationed overseas, most other Americans do not get this childhood experience of living in a sub-group that does not observe all the rules of the American racial dictatorship. They are fully immersed in a constant stream of stereotypes of all kinds about the people around them. As racial ambiguity becomes more common, there will be more confusion, and people may use stereotypes as if they were reliable information about different groups. The problem with stereotypes is by definition they are unreliable. The unreliability does not prevent stereotypes from becoming accepted as fact among large numbers of people. In the next chapter, I discuss stubborn stereotypes and how they affect the lives of racially ambiguous people.

## CHAPTER 7

### STUBBORN STEREOTYPES

Expectations of racial/ethnic characteristics are deeply ingrained in most people in the United States and frequently manifest themselves as stereotypes of various groups. Basically, stereotypes are generalizations about groups based on inadequate and/or false information (Schaefer, 2011). Racially ambiguous people would seem to be in a perfect position to dispel stereotypes because they tend to be the catalyst for racial curiosity, and thus may participate in conversations about race, but instead they find that other people are not easily dissuaded from racial preconceived notions, even those founded on stereotypes. Interviewees mentioned stereotyping 269 times. Because stereotypes are based on inadequate or incorrect information, one would hope stereotypes would be debunked whenever more and better information is provided, but racially ambiguous people know that this debunking process does not always work in casual encounters or even in ongoing relationships as coworkers, friends or even spouses. Racially ambiguous people report when they tell who they are racially, other people disbelieve them, taunt and tease them, reject them and sometimes get angry enough to fight them. Racially ambiguous people very often disprove racial expectations and stereotypes, but find that the odd racial etiquette of the United States allows not only any person to demand to know one's race but also to reject the answer if it defies stereotypes. If these stereotypes are to hold the force of shared truth, then everyone must conform to them, and therefore, as the flawed logic of racialization goes, racially ambiguous people have to be lying about their race.

Racially ambiguous people are constantly told that because they do not fit racial/ethnic stereotypes, they cannot possibly be a member of the groups to which they belong. Ignorance is the genesis of some of these stereotypes. The interviewees report that in school, in the media, in

their families, and other settings, there is a lot of ignorance about the diverse peoples who live in the U.S. They report that many people, even in positions of authority don't know enough about geography or other racial groups to function well in a U.S. increasingly shaped by global migration. In this study the most common topics about which people were ignorant were Asian geography and diversity; the U.S. (and the world) history of racial intermingling; and the current situation of Native Americans.

Asian American interviewees in this study say that frequently they are misidentified because in the U.S. there is a flawed understanding of which countries are in Asia, and there is no understanding that Asians have a broad variety of phenotypes. Indira, who works for a federal security agency described an incident at work.

We contact the FBI to get fingerprints and I had an incident happen where (there was a form) and there was no space for Hispanic, so I asked someone 'where is the box?' The person said 'just put it under white, but what I don't understand is Asian. How could you be an Asian person?' To me that was obvious because India is in Asia. When they hear you're Asian, they think you're Chinese, or Japanese or something. No, it's not about that. So that was the most recent thing that happened. I thought that was interesting that she thought that.

Robert, who was brought to the U.S. as a toddler from the Philippines, hardly ever gets identified by strangers as an Asian American.

I pretty much, I think I've been everything in the book as far as my knowledge probably the only thing I haven't been called is strictly African American. I've been asked it...one of the first things I was asked when I first came to Texas was was I Mexican; was I from South America, was I basically Latino, was I Hispanic? I was like no; I didn't think I looked Hispanic or anything like that. I got everything from 'you're half white and you're half what else?' No, I'm very much Filipino.

Ignorance of geography is not the only kind that racially ambiguous people encounter.

They find that people in the U.S. don't realize that racial intermingling has been a feature in the history of peoples all over the world and because of this individuals who have the same nationality may not have the same phenotype. It seems ironic because Americans have a variety

of phenotypes, so why wouldn't the same be true of people from other nations? However interviewees in this study said that many Americans become accustomed to seeing only a limited number of racial groups in their own neighborhood or town. Therefore when anyone who is not a member of the groups who are usually present moves into the area, the locals assign the strangers to a racial group, even if it is not rational.

Robert said the locals in the small, agricultural, white town in Iowa where he grew up, is mistook him for an American Indian because some American Indians lived in town. He did not resemble the local Indians.

No, there wasn't another Asian family there. The only other Asian that was there was in an adopted child. He was actually in my grade as well. His name was ----, and his parents were missionaries and they adopted him while they were there in China, and he was the only other Asian in the community. And everyone always assumed that we were related. And what was odd was they didn't think that instinctively at first when they would see me, and I, of course wasn't white, they naturally assumed that I was Native American because that town had a local tribe the Missaukee Indians.

Sometimes the results of this kind of mistaken identity are almost comical, but this phenomenon shows just how prone some people can be to limit the number of racial categories in their community and refuse to recognize that their community is becoming more diverse. In this study, interviewees who had Filipino heritage were frequently misidentified by non-Filipinos. The Philippines are a cosmopolitan place where many cultures from around the world have left their imprint. Five interviewees in this study have some Filipino heritage. Two of them including Robert and Rolando were born in the islands and brought to the U.S. as immigrants. These two interviewees do not resemble each other. Rolando said that he is frequently mistaken for a Latino.

Beth, a black woman, said that because she is racially ambiguous, she was singled out by the other black children in her all-black neighborhood and called "white girl," and then when she

moved to mostly white Nebraska as an adult, people thought she was American Indian instead of black. In Atlanta, the predominant racial groups were black and white, but in Nebraska, Native Americans were more common. Class also plays a role in this misidentification because people so often rely on negative stereotyping to exclude the individuals with whom they are interacting from the racial/ethnic group to which these individuals belong. Beth said that often people in Nebraska would assume she wasn't black because her family was well educated and upper middle class. They had never heard of black people living well and doing such things as having lavish weddings.

The expectation that all members of a racial group will exhibit a relatively narrow range of skin tones is fallacious. A common stereotype racially ambiguous people encounter is that one's look and one's race come only from one's parents, not generations of ancestors. Often these incredulous people are the most poignant reminders to racially ambiguous people that they don't know everything about their own family histories.

I think also the problem is that I identify with being black but obviously there's mixtures in my family, but I don't know exactly what they are, so I'm a little bit unsure about it. But when people ask me they expect me to say one parent is white and one parent is black, but that's not how my family is. I think another reason why I get frustrated is that I don't know quite what to say. Because I don't know what race my grandparents are, you know. I think that's a lot of it is that I'm not 100 % sure.

Many people cannot trace their family trees for several generations back to see what races are represented. Beth, an African American woman, has mapped her family tree, and she cannot find anyone of any race other than black, but she and a few other members of her family are light-skinned and have light-colored eyes, and a broad range of skin tones is represented among her relatives. Not being able to provide the race of every member of their family tree is a problem that bothers many Americans, but it is less of a problem if one believes that all one's ancestors were European American.

Although being Irish, Italian or even Jewish was once considered being racially different from white people (Spickard, 1989), over the decades of U.S. history this has changed as they all assimilated as European Americans or white people. Waters (2004) described European Americans as harboring a belief in symbolic ethnicity, in which one has the option of saying that it doesn't matter what country one's ancestors came from; anyone can choose almost any path in life in the U.S. White Americans "tend to think that all groups are equal...This leads to the conclusion that all identities are equal (Waters, 2004)." Beliefs like this make it harder to dispel stereotypes and to argue that there is still discrimination in the U.S. because white people who subscribe to the idea of symbolic ethnicities tend to dismiss stories about racial/ethnic inequality as untrue. Subscription to ideas of symbolic ethnicities facilitates ignorance of racial/ethnic suffering and tends to make it easier to believe that if individuals of different races experience social problems, it is probably their own fault.

An example of how this works was provided by the Native American interviewees in this study. They say that the negative stereotypes about Indians revolve around every Indian being an alcoholic or lazy, looking for a handout, on welfare, and poor. All of these stereotypes ignore the historical facts that the American Indians were deprived of their lands and driven to reservations where they could not support themselves. One of the most disheartening more recent stereotypes Native Americans said they run into is the misconception that all the reservations are doing fine.

Mary lives on a reservation in Wyoming where she described life as a struggle even for young people.

And so they know that they're going to have to live off the reservation or get a good education and go off the reservation to get that. And a lot of them have a real hard time when they go on into college. They always usually drop out and come home because they've been so confused and so they get homesick...It's just really hard for them. They

just have a hard time. And I think a lot of them get into drugs. We have a real bad drug problem and drinking problem here on the reservation. There's starting to be gangs now. We have people coming up from the Sioux reservations and they're very gang-oriented down there. They bring a lot of the gangs and propaganda up here and giving it to the young kids and so there's a lot of trouble going on here now.

Mary also described poverty and high unemployment on her reservation, where young people growing up wanting to be the next Michael Jordan are usually disappointed. The stereotype is that these tracts of land where Indians were forced to live while Europeans "settled" the U.S. are now like parks and pleasant neighborhoods is so pervasive that Susan, a Native American woman, said her professor told her that not only was she not Native because she didn't look like it but reservations were parks nowadays. This stereotype is enhanced by the fact that a few reservations have gotten more prosperous because of casino gambling.

The Native interviewees in this study were angered by this false image of reservations. The Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis (Clement, 2006), whose region includes Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wisconsin, states which include several reservations, released a report that documents the poverty, high unemployment rates and economic distress that still plague American Indian reservations. Only 10 % of the tribal nations in the country have become prosperous on earnings from casinos. The rest of the reservations are in such remote rural areas that they cannot make gambling a successful tribal venture. Still the bank reports in its newsletter that there is a general perception that all reservations are growing wealthy and self-sufficient from casino earnings instead of only a tenth of them.

Racially ambiguous people see how much progress has not been made in more harmonious race relations, especially if they are passing like Anne, who says she doesn't disclose her Native ancestry because she lives and works in an area where there is a lot of racism against Native Americans. She remembers the stereotypes her white father used to torment her Native

mother. Her father thought it was funny to say that “He married an Indian princess. If she kills you in your sleep, don’t come crying to me” or “he used to say that he married his wife by running her down and putting shoes on her.”

Anne learned as a child that being known as a Native American does not help one get jobs, so in order to have job and live in town, she does not tell people, even the only other Native where she works, that she is Native American. She hears the negative stereotypes white people have of Indians and their deep-seated fears about Natives. “They (white people) have an absolute inborn fear that they’re (Native Americans) going to come get them in their sleep.” Anne said that once a person is known to be an Indian or known to be a white person, he or she is treated accordingly and accepted by one group while being shunned by the other. Anne is living in a state of heightened awareness of the separation that exists between Native Americans and white Americans in the area where she lives. She feels she has to be alert to anything that might give others a clue to the fact that she is American Indian because she has constructed her life on a basis of presenting herself as white to all those around her, but many interviewees in this study reported that they had difficulty in being accepted because stereotypes were different from reality and people with whom the interviewees were trying to interact trusted the stereotypes more than racially ambiguous human beings.

Besides what interviewees report as widespread ignorance about the true experiences of American Indians and negative stereotypes, there are also misconceptions about how Indians look and act. Many people believe that Indians have to have long black hair, dark eyes and like to hit the “warpath” making the woo-woo-woo noise that was featured in old movies. The truth, as many interviewees, said is that Indians’ looks cover the whole range of racial phenotypes from

the darkest brown skin and darkest hair to the palest fair skin to light eyes and hair. All Native Americans never looked the same.

Perhaps more subtly problematic is the fact that interviewees in this study reported that they harbor negative stereotypes of their own groups and others themselves. Sometimes they have acted on these stereotypes, perpetuated them, failed to challenge the stereotypes and harbored the stereotypes against their own groups in order to survive. For Deborah, who is trying to get along with family members who make racist comments knowing how to handle uncomfortable situations is a trial. She said she gets so flustered when she hears racist comments from her relatives that she ends up not challenging the relatives. “I wish I had a good comeback, but they always catch me off-guard.” Her silence may be the price she pays for getting along with her in-laws, but silence also provides a fertile ground for prejudice and discrimination.

Interviewees, who tried to speak up about stereotypes and racism, also were not completely immune to stereotypes of all kinds as well, but they were more self-aware. They mentioned conversations in which they made other people aware that they were members of the groups being disparaged and asked that other people stop discriminating. At the same time, some interviewees feel a heavy responsibility to defy negative stereotypes that they know exist by presenting themselves well in accordance with Anglo-conformity when they go to job interviews and other events. They know that they can say they are members of minority groups as long as they don't confirm negative stereotypes of those groups in their self-presentation. Even positive stereotypes can be internalized. Miki, who is the daughter of a Japanese woman and a white American man, talked about the stereotypes of Asians as high achieving students and how she pushes her sons to achieve academically. She said she is no “tiger mother,” referring to a recent best-seller in which a Chinese mother detailed how she relentlessly drove her daughters to

achieve in life, but she also said also that as Asians her boys are expected to bring home As from school, and they do.

The famous black historian Woodson (1999) once said the power of manipulation in the racial dictatorship to a great degree comes from the ability to control how people are educated or “miseducated.” In his book *The Miseducation of the Negro*, he argued that African Americans are not given an education that prepares them unite and effectively battle for their rights in the U.S. This misguided education or socialization prepares them to internalize negative stereotypes about themselves and perpetuate the racial dictatorship that oppresses them. While Woodson was writing about black people, his ideas can be extended to any racial/ethnic minority group that is oppressed by the dominant group. Stereotypes can be compared to miseducation because they are flawed beliefs about different groups handed down from generation to generation and spread by word of mouth. If they remained in the informal realm of what people say, they still would have the power to cause serious damage to the way different groups are viewed. The unfortunate thing is they are institutionalized in the American education system, in the media and other places and passed along as facts. As the population in the U.S. becomes more global in its makeup, stereotypes whether arising from ignorance or from deliberate misinformation have to be attacked and replaced with more factual information.

The interviewees in this study were not so naïve about stereotypes as to deny that they exist. They have been hurt and disheartened by the perpetuation of negative images about their groups, but even though some have to announce that they are members of minority groups, they still have such a strong identification with those minority groups that most of the interviewees take this extra step to challenge the ignorance and misinformation of others. They are sophisticated in their understanding of stereotypes, even so-called positive ones, as something

that no one is immune to harboring. Some of them say they even subscribe to some of those stereotypes themselves. Being a walking talking refutation of negative stereotypes is one of the mechanisms they use to get through life. The next chapter discusses how racially ambiguous people learn to develop adult core racial identities.

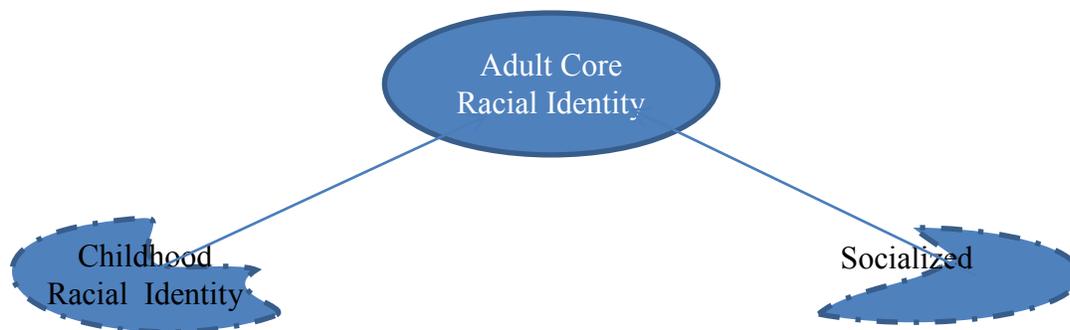
## CHAPTER 8

### DEVELOPING AN ADULT CORE RACIAL IDENTITY

The interviewees in this study reported on various struggles they had with developing their own core racial identities in a world where they defied the social construction of race looking racially ambiguous. They referred to the process of looking for a racial identity 129 times, but also they talked about their own racial identities and how they viewed themselves. For some of them this process was extremely difficult because they were not prepared by their families as children to encounter society's racial identification of them. They found themselves at young ages having to deal with the negative stereotypes of racial groups to which they belonged without having had the training at home to figure out how to combat the daily assaults on their dignity that a racialized society perpetuates. They also found themselves dealing with a dynamic racial environment in the U.S. that is rapidly changing even as the demographics of the population moves toward a new balance in the proportions of different racial groups. Developing a core racial identity is a process that involves much thought and inner fortitude for racially ambiguous people.

Figure 3 is an illustration of the process of identity formation for racially ambiguous people. They begin life with a racial identity that is used by their families of origin for them. This childhood racial identity may or may not conform to the identity that others outside the family (especially strangers) assign to the racially ambiguous person but, like all children who must go through some kind of process of individuating so they can become adults. For many racially ambiguous people the identity they learned at home will be constantly disputed as they are questioned and objectified. The interviewees said that they soon learned to suspect that some of the lessons they learned about race in general and their own racial identities from their families

were not really accurate. At school and other places as they grew older, they began to develop a racial identity that had some elements of what they would have learned as children at home, and some elements of what they were being socialized with as they began to be exposed to institutions and individuals in the wider world. What they eventually develop as a adult core racial identity has elements of both their childhood identities and the socialized identities, but also is a product of their internal efforts to keep elements of both that work for them as well as something that provides them with a core racial identity that may or may not conform to how they are identified racially by anyone else. This is the identity that holds together at the center of their being to allow them to both withstand constant challenges and assaults and to navigate through different environments in life using the identity that will work best. There will be more said about the multifocal racial identity in the next chapter, but first what some of the interviewees said about developing their core racial identities.



*Figure 3.* Adult core racial identity.

“We’re All the Same in God’s Eyes, Then How Come I Don’t Look Like You?”

Some of the racially ambiguous interviewees said that despite all their parents tried to do to shield them from racialization; they found out that they were regarded as different racially from their parents. Sometimes this discovery came from picking up undercurrents from their

parents and sometimes it came about from humiliating incidents. For some the big hint that race was a loaded subject was the reluctance of their families to talk about the subject. Their parents may have refused to discuss race out of embarrassment, or misplaced idealism, but for the often bewildered racially ambiguous children the difficulty in finding satisfactory guidance on the subject of race was often painful.

Hope, 55 a mixed woman who lives in New York, said that she had a confusing childhood because although her family lived in New Jersey surrounded by members of many racial and ethnic groups, she did not feel that she personally resembled anyone. She described herself as a child as having “strawberry blonde hair...what I would call pale olive skin and dark eyes, so I looked kind of Mediterranean with red hair.” Her mother’s family tended to be blonde and they said of her, “It’s a good thing she’s smart, because she’s sure not pretty.” She did not know how her father’s relatives looked until after he died and she found out that he had been passing and the dark eyed, black people who had associated with her family when she was a child had actually been family members. But as a child, she had been curious about race and looked for people who resembled her.

Once when she was about five years old, she came home from a St. Patrick’s Day Parade excited to tell her mother that she had seen people who looked like them.

The more important thing was I saw men and women with red hair. My hair isn’t that red, but comparatively, that was my color scheme. I was enthralled. This is going to sound silly but I thought, oh my God those people kind of look like me. I came home very excited and I walked up to my mother. My mother had dark hair. I said “hey, I figured it out, I figured out what we are, we’re Irish!” She took one look at me and she said “We do not discuss those things in this household.”

It was years later when she began to learn more about her family that she realized that her mother had been uncomfortable discussing race with her. She said that in her life, people had guessed that she was Jewish, Italian or White Anglo-Saxon Protestant. She said she felt at home in

Argentina because she looked like people there, but for now her core racial identity is that of “mixed.” She has a hard time identifying herself as being a black woman, as hypo-descent would demand because “she doesn’t look it,” and at the same time, she has deep concerns about white privilege and many other issues.

Theresa’s mother told her and her sister that they were “golden,” but there was no golden racial classification at school where Theresa was bullied by other children during the time her family was in a mostly white rural area in Wisconsin. Theresa’s mother was white and her father was black and a soldier who did not talk about race with the girls. Theresa said she was bullied all the time for being brown skinned, and she learned to think of blackness as a bad thing. Her classmates said her mother was a “bitch” who married a “nigger” and they made all kinds of disparaging remarks associating blackness and the color brown with disgusting things. She finally found out that “golden” wasn’t her race when her teacher told her in school in front of her mostly white class to mark the “black” box for herself on a form. She was thrown into confusion because she said she had always been a good girl, and she knew black was bad. How could she be black?

She tried to talk to her mother, who told her

You’re going to be okay. God made you the way you are. You’re beautiful the way you are. And I said ‘well how come I don’t look like you? We’re all the same in God’s eyes then how come I don’t look like you?’ And she never could really answer that. My aunt, who is German, who is from Germany, she would tell me how wrong it was, and how evil people were but really there was no behavior that they taught me or thinking that I could use to defend myself.

She said her struggle was a lonely one because no one was available or equipped to give her advice on how to deal with her racial identity and the bullying. Finally, she came to develop an adult racial identity that was not “golden” but that took in the complexities of race in the U.S.

For me now, I have my personal identity; I have a political identity and then a social identity. My personal identity is biracial. When my friends or people ask me when they're coming from a place, they're just curious and not trying to judge me and want me to tell them if I'm biracial and what I'm mixed with. In terms of my political identity, I think I always affirm myself with black causes, or just in terms of minorities, I'm all about equality. And in terms of social identity, I know when I walk out my door, people see me as a light-skinned black woman and I know the stereotypes or the things they believe about black women and it's not like I'm trying to personally undermine those stereotypes, I'm trying to be me and be the best representative of myself, but people expect me to act a certain way because I'm a light skinned black woman.

### Black is Bad

One of the most difficult parts of developing an adult core personal racial identity for Theresa was getting over the childhood messages she got that black was bad. With the messages she was inundated with about black being associated with negativity, she said she formed some conclusions about herself.

When I was in fourth grade, I thought black was bad. I had black friends, but I always thought that they were not as good as the white kids. And I knew that I was different because I wasn't all black. I wasn't all bad, and until high school, college when I started researching more about what being biracial and being mixed is, I felt kind of like weird, like I never fit in.

Similarly Sandra had a bewildering and painful childhood because of contradictory messages she received about race. She had a white mother who raised her in a small Texas town with the white side of her family.

My whole family will say even now will say --people will treat me or see me and they'll say I'm black. And my family will say "You're not black, you're white," because to them I am, you know. So that's how it's always been. I've always just been white. There's no question about it, and to other people if I were to walk into a place and somebody asks "what do you think she is?" They're going to say "You're black." So my family, they don't see it that way just because they know me, they've raised me, and that's how they've seen me.

However as she grew up, Sandra's family could not protect her from conflicting perceptions of her race. Her mother took her to a service at a white church in suburban Dallas where the

preacher said that interracial marriage was a sin. Sandra, who was only six at the time, said she was humiliated. As she grew up, she learned not everybody saw her as a white person. She learned to identify herself as black or biracial, but that was not her adult core racial identity.

No, I always considered myself as white even now. Like when I fill out applications and things like that I'll put both just for demographic reasons or scholarship reasons and things like that but I think a person relates to the way they were raised and what they were comfortable with and that's what I'm comfortable with and that's all I've really known...Because technically I guess I'm only a quarter black and so it's really (inaudible), you know the math of it.

### Making up Your own Racial Identity

One of the ways that racially ambiguous people said they grappled with the differences between their childhood family identities and the challenge of developing their adult core racial identities was to make up their own racial categories. Deborah, whose father was a white Canadian and her mother was Mexican American, would call herself a MAC (Mexican American Canadian). Sandra would call herself a “zebra cake” because to her a zebra is more white than black. What perhaps is most revealing about these personal concepts of identity is that the interviewees realized even at an early age that these identities had to be kept private. There were no “zebra cakes,” or “blexican” (black/Mexican) or “blite” (black/white) people in the world at-large. Those identities were to be kept to oneself or to be giggled about with close friends.

Much of the work done on this experience of racial confusion and identity formation has been done with people whose parents are in interracial black/white relationships, and that makes it problematic to extend the conclusions of that work to people who can be seen as products of combinations of other races besides black and white. Because of the unique practice of using the one-drop rule in the U.S., supporting a biracial identity can both be seen as supporting an identity that only affects people who have some black ancestry and a challenge to the one-drop rule.

Biracial identity can be seen as a racial category or a border identity, but most of the racially ambiguous people in this study who have mixed racial ancestry don't have much resonance with it because they don't see biracial as an identity that has a shared history or culture. Interviewees spoke of themselves as being biracial but the identity had no deep meaning to them. They used it as a vague term, "I guess you can say I'm biracial..." But what they meant was I'm Hispanic and white or I'm Filipino and white, and biracial was not a term they had any strong feelings about applying to themselves, nor did it have any of the emotional resonance that activists for a biracial or multiracial category on government forms hoped it would have.

As racially ambiguous people matured, they also learned to use their racial ambiguity in ways they believe will help them in life. They use a multi-focal racial identity to navigate the often harsh and complicated racial landscape of the U.S.

## CHAPTER 9

### NAVIGATING THE RACIAL LANDSCAPE: THE MULTIFOCAL RACIAL IDENTITY

To navigate the often harsh racial landscape of the United States, racially ambiguous people develop a multifocal racial identity, which insulates them and defends them against attacks on their often fragile selves. A multifocal racial identity is made up of different perceived identities which are used to negotiate whatever interaction is at hand. A racially ambiguous person realizes that to a certain extent he or she can manipulate the perception of his or her racial identities because other people usually will focus on whatever is presented to them, so racially ambiguous people learn to make others see or focus on what the racially ambiguous people think will be most appropriate for the situation. A racially ambiguous person may realize at an early age that he or she will have to use one racial identity at home with his or her family, another with friends, and yet another for negotiating economic situations like work or earning scholarships. All these identities are authentic but since so much of U.S. society is focused on making people adopt a mono-racial identity (on government forms or recognition of racial identity by phenotype), racially ambiguous people have to learn how to use each one for different situations.

Other people expect that they will be able to tell the racial identity of anyone with whom they interact, but racially ambiguous people know that this isn't true sometimes. Phenotype or looks do not always reveal a person's racial background. Even when people think they know what to expect a Native American or Asian American, for example, to look like, those expectations are too often based on ignorance or stereotypes to be accurate. What the interviewees in this study have become very adept at doing is reading different social environments and calibrating their presentation of self to focus attention in very subtle ways on their differing racial identities.

A multifocal racial identity is different from a mono-racial identity because the individuals who use it first have to recognize that they are racially ambiguous. That can be a tricky process. The interviewees in this study said they came to perceive that other people will get a variety of racial messages from the way they look or they speak or act or the cues they give about themselves. Once racially ambiguous individuals recognize that there are many ways others perceive them racially, then they can begin to grapple with how to use their various racial presentations to achieve different ends in life.

Coming to the realization that other people don't see you racially in the same ways your family, or your friends or even you see yourself can be a difficult experience. Interviewees said that they came to this often painful realization as children. Miki, an Asian American woman, alternated between hating to attend Japanese school on Saturdays where other children did not accept her as Japanese, and having classmates who were hostile to her in her mostly white public school because they misidentified her as Hispanic. The more dissonant the messages the racially ambiguous person received at home from his or her parents from the messages about race promulgated in the media, educational system, the government, and other institutions, the harder and more painful the process of realizing that other people perceived them racially in ways that they had not been taught to see themselves at home.

### Pride in Minority Identity

Many of the interviewees used their identities as sources of pride, especially since so many of them could easily pass for white and so would have to tell people about their racial/ethnic minority status. This pride is a key but often overlooked aspect of identity formation. What makes people feel good about themselves is as critical sometimes to identity

formation as the penalties they might suffer under a racial dictatorship or in racial stratification. This has to do with the purpose for their self-identification. They prefer to use their different racial identities as statements of pride. Delores explained it this way.

I think sometimes because to me I think that the fact that I'm white is obvious. When someone says, 'what are you?' I think they are asking 'what are you in addition to being white?' When I say Filipino, they say 'and what else?' and I'll say white. Then again when it's on forms and stuff when it says 'Pick one,' I'll choose 'Other.'

Delores said she wants to make sure people know that she had Filipino heritage out of respect for her mother who was born in the Philippines. She is proud of her mixed heritage and she wants people to know all of its components. Similarly, Charles said that he has to tell people that he is not just black, but he is also Filipino. For him, it is a matter of remembering his late mother who was murdered by a disgruntled tenant in her rental property when he was a boy. Maria, who is Native American and Mexican American, only discovered her mixed racial heritage a couple of years ago. She said she delights in identifying herself as Native or Mexican American as a way of catching other people off-guard. Sometimes, she will randomly ask someone else "are you American Indian?" as a way of "messing with them."

Racially ambiguous people said that they want to make sure that the part of their heritage that is most likely invisible to others is identified. They have a vested interest in letting other people know their specific racial and ethnic heritage, and they make sure people know they aren't white. They engage in a number of actions that show they want others to treat members of racial/ethnic minority groups with respect. They don't ignore racially-based rude comments or behavior. As much as possible, they try to divest themselves of white privilege. Rosa, whose parents brought her to the States illegally from Mexico, says that she gets disgusted with her mother who grumbles sometimes about "those Mexicans." She reminds her mother that "we are those Mexicans."

The primary motivating factor for many racially ambiguous people is not white guilt but pride in being a member of a minority group. It is a coping mechanism and a way to never let others forget, even spouses, that they can't insult or pretend that the minority group doesn't exist. Racially ambiguous people do not see having a minority identity as negative even though they know there are negative stereotypes in the world and their fellow racial minority group members still face hardships because this country is a racial dictatorship. They try not to internalize the stereotypes, (even though they can't escape them), but instead make minority heritage an issue of pride. Even Theresa, who identifies as biracial has taken great pains to learn about black history, politics, culture, music.

#### Learning to be Resilient

Self-defense is one of the skills that racially ambiguous people have to master in a society where they are often objects of curiosity and the targets of racial bullies. They learn to put up with the objectification and constant questioning about their racial identity as just a part of life, but putting up with it is not the same as approving of it or liking it. Some interviewees in this study said that they would rather people just ask them about their race, and most of the interviewees said they don't think most of the questioners are malicious. But even the most patient interviewees said that constantly being doubted and even ridiculed takes its toll. Racially ambiguous people soon realize that they have to develop defense mechanisms to protect themselves from these invasions of privacy.

Many interviewees said as soon as they realized that they did not owe complete strangers any information, including their racial identities, they became liberated. They learned to navigate these encounters with strangers who wanted to know their race by not caring about the

interactions so much. Once they didn't feel that they owed strangers the truth, they could lie about race or at least not be so emotionally invested in the various reactions of strangers, friends and even spouses.

When I was younger like in high school, I used to just say whatever I wanted to. And people would believe anything. (Laughing) Sometimes I would say 'Yeah you know I'm Chinese or Filipino' and people would believe that. And so that proved to me 'why does it matter to you?' You're just accepting it... (Brenda, 23 year-old Black woman)

Most interviewees who admitted lying about race just to "get someone off their backs" said they stopped doing it when they were in their late teens. Other interviewees talked about just agreeing to any racial guess that strangers offer. Many said that Latinos often approached them speaking Spanish, and they would have to tell the strangers that they didn't speak the language. This wasn't a problem for anyone except Rolando, who is Filipino and often mistaken for a Latino by Latinos. As his neighborhood has become more Latino in recent years, he finds himself dealing with socially awkward and potentially violent situations in which he has had to figure out how to stop Latino men from trying to beat him up because the men believe he is snubbing them by refusing to speak Spanish.

All the interviewees in this study have racial heritages that include racial/ethnic minority groups, but only one of them considers herself to be passing for white. Others have been in situations where they did not see it as wise to remind people of their minority ancestry. Hope is a counselor who says that for professional reasons she does not divulge her racial identity to any of her clients. In her counseling practice she prefers to focus on their problems instead of her own personal history even though many of her clients have tried to question her about her racial/ethnic background.

Deborah said she didn't always tell other people, especially in work-related environments that she was Mexican even when they made insulting racial remarks about

Mexicans to her. An example would be an encounter Deborah had with a white woman who didn't realize that Deborah was Mexican. The woman said she was surprised that "they let" Mexicans be professors.

Another example was recounted by Sandra, who is a black/white woman. She was traveling with her white fiancée to meet his grandparents in Oklahoma. When the couple got to the grandparents' house, his grandfather, who hadn't seen Sandra yet, greeted the grandson with a question, "Hey, why do you have that nigger cap on?" While Deborah suffered in silence with her encounters with racism, Sandra said that she immediately burst into tears when her potential grandfather-in-law made his racist comment. Her grandparents-in-law try to use more tact when they are around her because the family has accepted her, but Deborah still struggles with how to retort to racist comments by family members and strangers alike. Perhaps her silence is perceived as assent especially by her husband and white in-laws because she said they will keep saying racist things until she gets angry and leaves the room or otherwise gets visibly upset and then, usually her husband will apologize to her and comfort her in private.

### Being Flexible under Globalization

Some interviewees in this study consider it a very practical advantage to be Asian American, Latino and bilingual, or even African American in a global economy. They say advances in race relations and the promise of affirmative action programs have made it less necessary to be white than in the past. For many racially ambiguous people for the first time, it may be more advantageous in the job market to be considered a member of a minority group. So for them the idea that there may be benefits to being a member of a minority group if one can

claim minority ancestry is part of the racial manipulation used to navigate the U.S. racial landscape.

As Latinos comprise more of the U.S. population, they are asserting their racial identification. Although the U.S. government considers Hispanics members of an ethnic group instead of a racial group, every interviewee in this study who could do so, used Hispanic or Mexican as at least part of their racial identification. They were aware that they had to tell other people about their racial identities. Several interviewees who were Latino would speak Spanish to other Latinos so they would be accepted and English when most of the people they were surrounded by were non-Latinos. Rosa, who is Mexican, works in a major bank and uses her knowledge of Spanish to make Spanish-speaking customers feel more comfortable. Cecilia, a Mexican American woman who works in a hair cutting salon speaks Spanish with some customers and reassures both them and the curious black customers who visit the shop that she can cut all kinds of hair. Although most of the Hispanic interviewees in this study know they are often perceived as white, they maintain being Mexican or Hispanic is different from being white.

Being a member of a minority racial group is an advantage in the job and higher education markets is more common among interviewees who live in states with populations comprised of large percentages of people with minority group ancestry. Charles is from Hawaii, the first state to become “majority-minority,” where he said it was a definite advantage to be a member of a minority group. He compared the advantage of being a member of a racial/ethnic minority group there to “being on a volleyball team that always wins.” He has more flexibility to choose his racial identity in Hawaii where he says he tells people he’s Filipino in honor of his mother.

As the racial/ethnic makeup of the U.S. changes, racially ambiguous people are both evidence of and affected by the ongoing shift in the population. As more people come to the U.S. from different parts of the world and as social prohibitions on interracial mating relax, racial ambiguity will likely become more common. The racially ambiguous people in this study have to learn to use their complex racial identities as an edge. If others cannot grasp the complexity of their racial/ethnic backgrounds, then it is not the racially ambiguous person's fault. To them it is not necessarily contradictory, for example, to be perceived as black while having a largely white identity. Sandra, for example, said "when you do the math," she is actually 75% white.

The knowledge that one can manipulate how one is perceived racially is often coupled with a recognition that race is still very significant in the U.S. Racially ambiguous people have an interesting seat to observe the continuing significance of race in the U.S. They are in a sense on the borders of racial classification and see how important those borders still are, especially when they have to interact with other members of minority groups.

## CHAPTER 10

### HURTFUL LIVES

Jim, a Native American, described his maternal grandfather as “an American Indian man. He was dark-skinned; he had the full complement of American Indian features,” but he also described his grandfather as a racist. Jim talked about his grandfather in a way that illuminates the difficulties members of one racial/ethnic minority group have in relationships with members of another racial/ethnic minority group.

...but like I said he was a racist man in a lot of ways. He didn't care for black people. And in the early 70s when I was about 12, I remember spending a summer with him. I would see him do all these racist things and I said ‘well, grandfather why are you mean to black people?’... I remember a time when we were driving down the street, and it had rained. And we were in the city in Des Moines. There was a single file line of black family walking down the sidewalk. It could be a mom, or grandma, or an aunt, and children just like stair step little ducklings following, and like I said, it had rained. And he swerved his car in the gutter where there was a lot of rain water, and he put a wall of water on these people! And he just drenched them, and he laughed, and he laughed.

This petty, random meanness against strangers because of their race was something Jim said he saw so often on his grandfather's part that he asked his grandfather why did he treat people like that, and he never got a good answer. He said as an adult he realized that his grandfather had lived a “hurtful life” because he was Native American. Discrimination and severe poverty had always been part of his grandfather's life, yet his grandfather could not admit to being an American Indian.

And he just was real solemn...real terse and to the point: ‘cause my mom's an Indian.’ He didn't say because I am; he didn't say because my relatives are. He said ‘because my mom's an Indian.’ And that's the extent of anything I ever knew about my Native heritage from him. It wasn't until a long time later until I grew up, and I realized that his feelings towards other minority groups were because he had a hurtful life.

Living a hurtful life because of discrimination is a common experience shared by members of racial\ethnic minority groups which breeds shame, pain and anger which members

of minority groups may be only able to express against each other. Interviewees cited minority relationships 269 times in their interviews. Among the most frequently cited events in their lives they mentioned were being attacked by other members of minority groups for claiming to be members of minority groups, especially vigorous and sometimes cruel questioning by other minority group members and rancorous relationships with other minority groups. Even members of the same racial group, such as light-skinned blacks who appear white or Natives who look white, are often the target of ostracism and cruelty from other blacks or American Indians because they are presumed to be able to have less hurtful lives because they are closer to being white. In some cases they are seen as being able to opt out of minority status any time they wish and thus not to be trusted as being capable of enduring the permanent, inevitable hardships that being identified as a member of a minority group might bring.

In short, they are sometimes treated as if they are not members of minority groups but members of the dominant group. This severe mistrust and animosity can result in acrimonious interactions both between members of the same minority groups and between members of different minority groups as shown in Jim's story about the mean-spiritedness of his grandfather towards blacks. It would seem natural that in the grand scheme of things members of different minority groups would turn to each other as allies in the fight against discrimination and stratification along racial lines, and although that kind of alliance often happens, it is stories of bitter struggles for racially ambiguous people to be accepted by members of minority groups that were especially striking in this study.

The freedom of choice in racial identity was something that many racially ambiguous people in this study acknowledged as a cause of confusion for themselves and other people. If, as the social construction of race in the U.S., everyone is supposed to be fairly easily identifiable

racially by visual cues, racially ambiguous people and often their racially ambiguous relatives do not conform to social construction.

Most of the racially ambiguous people in this study said that their families include a wide variety of phenotypes and some even include different racial identities because some members of the family decide they want to be identified as members of one racial/ethnic group, and others decide on a different racial/ethnic identity. Rolando, a Hispanic looking Filipino, said "...my brother really looks Asian. My family looks all kinds of ways. There's another brother who looks like Brad Pitt; he's blonde. And I have a cousin who is very dark." Guadalupe, as noted before, identifies as Hispanic, but her brother who has dark hair and darker skin than she does, identifies as white. Theresa identifies as biracial, but her sister identifies as Hispanic. Theresa is puzzled because their family is not Hispanic, but she can understand that maybe her sister feels most comfortable with Hispanic people and has Hispanic children. Several Native American interviewees, for example, said that they believe that nowadays their brothers and sisters have enough Native pride to identify themselves as Natives instead of white.

Members of minority groups realize that those who were racially ambiguous had options not to suffer as much or any of the discrimination to which the racial dictatorship subjects nonwhite peoples. It is the fact that racially ambiguous people have historically had options to escape racial discrimination that other members of minority groups did not, that causes them such difficulty in being accepted by minority group members who have had no such options. It can take years for racially ambiguous people to gain acceptance by other members of the minority groups to which they belong.

Although Jim's grandfather's racism was directed at blacks, it also had a very inhibiting effect on anyone in the family connecting in a significant way with other Indians. His

grandfather could not acknowledge being Indian, and it sent a powerful message that there was something forbidden and profoundly embarrassing about being an Indian oneself. This message was only vaguely offset by fleeting interactions with other Indians outside the family and occasional visits to powwows. Jim had to learn about his Native ancestry for himself after he was an adult and his nagging questions about it would not go away. Although he is a professor of Native American Studies now, his path to developing a strong Native identity has been a stony one. Sometimes the most painful obstacles involved not being accepted by other Natives.

South Dakota is an extremely racist state towards American Indians. In fact, people constantly say Indians are South Dakota's black people, if that makes any sense. Even young people in my class say things like that. So in a way when I saw this is how I was treated by the Native people when I approached them and they treated me in a stand-offish way, I said 'okay I'm just gonna retreat into my whiteness,' and just forget this, go back to how it was when I was a child, and say I'm part Indian, my mom's Indian, that's my little secret. Something that's interesting for me to know, but I don't have to act on it. For a long time it was that way, but then gradually I came back.

There is no shortcut or easy way to prove authenticity for Natives. Mary said she had to wait and behave appropriately by showing her respect for her tribe in her actions and her speech to gain acceptance when she returned to the reservation where she was born after leaving it with her husband. She took part in Native ceremonies that previous generations in her family had ignored and tried to show that she was sincere, but there are still some people on the reservation who don't accept her, and her son has chosen not to pursue a Native American identity because he was so badly bullied when she brought him for visits to the reservation. He has married a white woman who dislikes the reservation. Mary is pretty sure that her granddaughter will not enjoy the Native presents she sent the little girl, such as a cradle board, because the child will not be raised to understand what it is to be an American Indian.

Racially ambiguous people who have black ancestry also have a difficult time trying to prove they are authentic members of the minority group, especially if they are light enough or

have the features to conceivably pass for white. Interviewees said that fellow blacks have no hesitation being cruel in the process of policing the boundaries of the black race from would-be interlopers.

If they are female, the relationship for the racially ambiguous person can be fraught with violence. These darker skinned African American women sometimes live “hurtful lives” because they cannot be as pretty or cute as the light skinned and white women that racial stratification places in the most desirable category (Russell, Wilson & Hall, 1992; Graham, 1996). Sandra, who is light-skinned with light eyes and sandy hair, said that a black girl became jealous of her because she started dating the black girl’s ex-boyfriend. The girl became enraged and brought a knife to school to attack Sandra, who not only dated the angry girl’s ex-boyfriend but also was a cheerleader and homecoming queen at her high school. These positions are often reserved for girls who were popular and pretty. Fights in school were part of the way children and young people, especially females, expressed their frustration and competitive urges in a society that deemed them inferior or less attractive than light-skinned females.

School is not the only place where being racially ambiguous can be seen as an advantage. Several studies have shown that there is a preference on the part of employers for light-skinned, well behaved blacks (Russell, Wilson & Hall 1992; Kirschenman & Neckerman, 2009), and the elitism that was part of having light skin for some blacks still divides the group. This continuing undercurrent of resentment and stratification causes problems for racially ambiguous people who often have ambivalent feelings about their relationships with other black people, especially when the racially ambiguous people have few or no close relationships with black people, even though they have black relatives. Sandra, for example, had difficult relationships with her father and his side of her family because she was taught that she was white like her mother. She said her black

aunts mistreated her when she finally met them. She has a history of being excluded by blacks and excluding herself from a black racial identity.

Proving authenticity as a black person is not much of an issue for Sandra, but it is for most of the other interviewees in this study who have black ancestry. Interviewees reported ugly encounters with black people who refused to believe the racially ambiguous people were black. The idea that one's racial identity comes only from one's parents was especially strong among blacks. Brenda said her black classmates would accuse her of lying about being black, even though her biological parents were both black. When they saw her white stepfather at her house, they would say he was her biological father, and there was the proof that she had lied. These kinds of incidents show how hard it can be for racially ambiguous people who are black to gain acceptance among their darker skinned peers who have no choice under the one drop rule but to identify as black. The black interviewees in this study reported being harshly judged by other blacks who could not give up the suspicion that the racially ambiguous people were not really one hundred % black people and elitists as well.

It is perhaps a lingering aftereffect of the misinformation about racial mixing that black people seem to be more aware that racial mixing happens than whites, but unaware that a variety of phenotypes can be present over many generations in the same family because of it. Racially ambiguous people reported that black people seem to believe that light skin, straight hair and other features can only come from having parents who are of different races. Proving that one is authentically black is particularly difficult under such conditions. Even though the one-drop rule or hypo-descent declares one black, other black people may condemn racially ambiguous people for believing they are superior because they have known white ancestry. As was noted earlier in the literature review section, most black people are racially mixed but there is a strong

mythology among blacks that ignores this fact and instead says that light skinned people who are suspected of being mixed are not authentically black.

This lack of trust for a fellow member of one's own minority group is a form of border patrolling within the group that comes from the oppression and lack of resources available to members of minority groups in a racial dictatorship. Mistreatment of minority groups by the dominant group has often been described, but the distrust, defensiveness, and outright hostility with which some minority group members treat any other member of any minority group, whether their own or a different one is perhaps harder to track, unless one is a racially ambiguous person who has been subjected to distrust and abuse or perhaps been in the middle of a struggle between minority groups.

This interracial animosity translates into interactions among members of the same racial group if there is a failure to recognize racially ambiguous individuals as being part of the group. While the racially ambiguous person's ancestors and even the racially ambiguous person may have used the option to identify as white or a member of the dominant group, in the U.S. many people do not feel they have this option. Phenotype is not a matter of choice, but it fixes destiny and identity. Although many racially ambiguous people in this study have a lifelong strong mono-racial identity, they reported that because other members of minority groups perceive them as having a choice about how they identify themselves racially, they are not to be trusted. In other words, they are rigorously detained, often with hostility at the racial borders. This animosity has little to do with what the racially ambiguous person believes about his or her own identity, or in some cases how the racially ambiguous presents him or herself in any given situation. Sometimes only with time and repeated interactions can the racially ambiguous person be accepted by his or her own group. This kind of animosity can be particularly damaging or

puzzling to racially ambiguous people who are in the process of developing their own racial identity and do not realize that self-perception is not the same as how others perceive them racially.

Ultimately racial identity can become a matter of personal resilience. Many interviewees said they have to learn to adopt a thick skin about the accusations and attacks from others as a matter of self-defense. They learn that they cannot be overly concerned about what others think about their race or ethnicity because what is most important is what they know and determine about their racial identities for themselves. Racially ambiguous people know that others project on them ignorance, prejudice, resentment, and a sort of envy that racially ambiguous people might be better situated to enjoy privileges that white people enjoy instead of racial/ethnic minority group members who are more visibly members of minority groups.

## CHAPTER 11

### THEORY REVISITED

The racial theories of Omi and Winant and Bonilla-Silva are applicable to the topic of this grounded theory research on the social construction of race, as well as the assimilation theories of Gordon. In this chapter, their ideas will be revisited to determine if those theories could provide insight on what the interviewees in this study said in their interviews. I will start with Omi and Winant (2008) who provide a definition of race as a “concept which signifies and symbolized social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies (p. 405).” From the interviewees in this study it is clear that this definition of race has deep resonance in their lives because so many of the interactions they have with other people are controlled by the perception of their type of human body, specifically skin color, eye shape, and texture of hair. Were they dark skinned enough to be members of a minority group? Why were their eyes a certain color or shape if they claimed to be a member of a racial/ethnic minority group that wasn’t usually associated with that eye color or eye shape? Interviewees in this study say that their lives have been frequently marked by encounters based on other people’s perception of their race as other people expect individuals in each racial group to appear. These expectations of everything from looks to behavior form what Omi and Winant called the common sense of race in the U.S. A racially ambiguous person defies this common sense and in doing so causes a crisis of meaning for the people who are expecting everyone they meet to conform to the common sense rules of race in the U.S.

The interviewees in this study were very familiar with the common sense rules of race because they are in an unusual position to observe how limiting and incorrect the common sense expectations of race are when they are subjected to the expectations of other people. The

interviewees in this study are racially ambiguous because they have mixed racial ancestry or because they or their forbears come from parts of the world that are very cosmopolitan or where people closely resemble those who come from a different part of the world (an example would be some Latinos and some Arabs who have similar dark hair, eyes and skin tones). In a United States where there is worldwide immigration, a history of racial mixing and a rapidly changing racial population, which is shifting from a traditional white numerical majority to a predicted “majority of minorities” by 2050, these common sense expectations about race are constantly being challenged in everyday encounters. These encounters may be humorous as when Robert, a Filipino immigrant, heard a woman who had been his coworker for several years but had never spoken to him, chide his white friend for pretending to speak an Asian language with him. She told the young man, “Don’t you know he’s Mexican, not Chinese?” Robert does not deem himself to look particularly Mexican, but he and his friend got a good laugh out of the woman’s expectations that he had to be Latino, not to mention the fact that he was not Chinese either. Or they may be much more serious as when a preacher warned in his Sunday sermon that racial mixing was a sin while six-year-old Sandra, who has a white mother and black father sat there knowing that he was talking about her, the only person in the congregation who was nonwhite. Even though she thinks of her racial identity as white, Sandra says that she knows that other people can see that she has black ancestry because they constantly questioned her about her racial background from the time she was a child growing up in a small mostly white town.

Omi and Winant (2008) theorized that this racial common sense set of expectations helped in the construction of a racial dictatorship in the U.S. This dictatorship is based on the assumption that the abilities from athletic to academic, the physical beauty, the temperament, the sexuality, the talents of the members of all races could be deduced from perceiving their racial

identities and that the racialized stratification of society in the U.S. is therefore more destiny than social construction. Racially ambiguous people throw this set of assumptions into question by their very being. Not only that but they call into question the idea that we can have a set of common sense rules based on race going forward in the 21<sup>st</sup> century because the nation is comprised increasingly of groups that come from places, like Asia, that traditionally were not allowed to migrate freely to the U.S. but now are contributors to the overall growth of the U.S. population.

This study highlights some of the racial expectations or stereotypes that people in the U.S. still harbor. The interviewees reported that they were often dumbfounded by the stereotypes that some people cling to. Susan said that one of her professors told her in front of the class that she couldn't be Native American because she did not look like an Indian to him. At the same time, she said that if someone is knowledgeable about the "look" of Native Americans, it would not be difficult to perceive her as being Indian. As Susan reported, a blonde toll booth worker greeted her by saying "so you're coming home?" when she drove into Oklahoma, a state with a large American Indian population.

The racial dictatorship in the U.S. is based on a rather amorphous set of racial expectations that often turn out to be specious. Racially ambiguous people are exposed to these expectations because people often take it for granted that they belong to a different racial group from the one with which they actually identify. Racially ambiguous people, thus, are present when the true racial ideologies of others come out. Among the interviewees in this study are people who have heard others say out loud that the black and Hispanic children were purposefully not treated as well as white children at a training facility where she worked; that it was a disaster for the country to have a black president, simply because he was black, not

because of his politics; and that Asian Indians and Filipinos could not be Asians because the only Asian people are Japanese or Chinese. One hopes that racial expectations will dissipate as the racial/ethnic minority segments of the population grow, but it is not clear that this will happen. Racism is a multi-faceted thing, as Omi and Winant posit, and it is as difficult to eradicate as it would be to slay a Hydra-headed beast in Greek mythology.

One of the aspects of slaying this multiple headed monster that the racially ambiguous people in this study talked about was the insidiousness of racial expectations and the resulting treatment of members of racial/ethnic minority groups of other racial/ethnic groups and their own racial/ethnic groups. Racially ambiguous people talked of their Native American or African American or Asian American relatives and friends discriminating against members of other minority groups and their own minority groups. In many cases, it was the racially ambiguous person who was the target of mistreatment and mistrust because racially ambiguous people historically had the option of passing for white or de-emphasizing their racial minority heritage to survive. Indeed this was a recurring theme among the Native interviewees in this study who said at different times up until the present day their families could not divulge their Native heritage and, in some cases, had almost forgotten that it existed or still claimed to be white. In such an environment, members of minority groups treated people who were more obviously members of racial/ethnic minority groups just as white people treated groups who were below them on the racial stratification ladder. It was also a recurring theme among African Americans because other blacks resented the racially ambiguous people because they presumed that the racially ambiguous people were enjoying privileges in the racial dictatorship that they being more obviously African American could not.

If, as Bonilla-Silva posits, the U.S. is developing a system of racial stratification with collective blacks on the bottom level, then more attention has to be paid to the policing mechanisms collective blacks use to keep out apparent outsiders, especially as members of minority groups comprise a larger percentage of the population. Is this self-policing a defense mechanism comparable to closing the ranks against an attacker or is it evidence that the unity within minority groups must be promoted and protected and that people who seem to be capable of a measure of white privilege cannot be trusted to do that? These questions have to be answered and these mechanisms have to be understood better to avoid racial/ethnic balkanization. As the numerical majority of the population in the U.S. shifts from majority white to no majority, strife is generated on fronts that perhaps this country may have never seen before. What historically had been minor local skirmishes in the power struggles between minority groups, for example the blacks and the Latinos over the Dallas school district, may become national battles with much huger implications. As members of minority groups remain permanently in combat mode, policing the borders of their own groups, they hamper the development of alliances that could stand them well in a population whose racial/ethnic dynamics are rapidly changing. There absolutely must be more open purposeful discussions to educate people about their commonalities and better prepare them to take part in a country where the appropriate alliances, not policing borders, will be the most important goal for most people of any racial group.

When Omi and Winant and many other racial theorists talk about racial stratification in the U.S., most of the discussion is centered on the privileges and the marginalization that derive from the racialization that gives whites hegemony in the U.S., but there is much work to be done in dismantling the walls that have been built between different minority groups if this system of

stratification is to be dismantled as well. European Americans have historically maintained their hegemony in the U.S. by playing minority groups against each other. An obvious example is the use of black cavalry men to protect white forts and settlements from Native Americans in the late 1800s. Racially ambiguous people are in a prime position to see how damaging the lingering aftereffects of mistrust and envy generated by this kind of cruel gamesmanship can be. Racially ambiguous people can report that there are still pits of mistrust and prejudice remaining among members of minority groups that can be particularly intractable because past wounds have not healed but continue to fester for generations.

Although most of the racially ambiguous people in this study are proud of their minority racial/ethnic heritages, they also report that they suffered the pain of rejection from members of their own minority groups and members of other minority groups. Some of the cruelest objectification of racially ambiguous people came from other minority group members who doubted the racial authenticity of the racially ambiguous people. The acrimony that the racial dictatorship engenders through imposing oppression on minority groups often cannot be projected on the dominant group, but it can be projected on racially ambiguous people who resemble members of the dominant group. As the racial/ethnic makeup of the U.S. changes to include larger percentages of minority group members, the economic and political fate of the nation as shaped by minority groups will become more prominent, and competition to control the destiny of the country on the part of members of minority groups will ramp up. Racially ambiguous people may become vilified by members of their own minority groups and members of other minority groups in these battles. They are in a peculiar position to be marginalized and privileged under the racialized system at the same time.

Many of the racially ambiguous people in this study realize that their unique position in the racialized system of the U.S. presents opportunities for them to debunk stereotypes and forge alliances to combat racism. They can reclaim minority heritages that were hidden by previous generations and help members of minority groups who are still struggling with various disadvantages. Placing a priority on minority heritage over a white one allows them to reject much of the white privilege that they could enjoy, and even though their families consist of members of many races, in some cases living in harmony, in some cases living in tension, their reconciliation of these sometimes warring identities is to stand in solidarity with other members of minority groups.

Although most of the racially ambiguous people in this study are proud of their minority heritages, they report that they have a particularly difficult time dealing with the common sense rules of race in America that dictate an expectation that racially ambiguous people will choose whiteness because it is a privilege under this system to be white. It is like racially ambiguous people are in a Catch-22 where they can never convince some people that they are authentic minority group members because some people could never conceive of anyone forgoing the privilege of being white. Yet at the same time, racially ambiguous people who are of mixed race cannot deny that they are white as well as members of minority groups. The whole racial scenario reveals the gulf between a set of racial expectations based on Omi and Winant's ideas about ideology, especially an ideology leaning heavily on an expectation that everyone is easily identified as mono-racial, and the way that people have actually lived together as racially mixed.

As the country changes its racial demographics this ideology that everyone is mono-racial has to give way to more recognition of racial mixing and ambiguity. Already the U.S. has a president who identifies as black but has a white mother. Barack Obama's racial identity has

shown a bright spotlight on the phenomenon of racial ambiguity because his racial identity highlights the paradoxes involved in mono-racial ideology. He used a mono-racial identity to his advantage and captured the support of most voters who were members of minority groups and almost half of the voters who were white. His success in the election is definitely not the death knell of the one-drop rule, but rather it gives new life to mono-racial ideology. Some people are still confused that he does not self-identify as biracial. It may fall to other less public individuals who feel they can claim their minority group identities while acknowledging white ancestry, while the same time not privileging that white ancestry over their minority heritage, to make it more difficult for the racialized system to maintain a mono-racial ideology.

At the same time, the process of racial formation that Omi and Winant described as being heavily affected by politics, history, economics and culture and therefore unstable is continuing to unfold. As the numerical percentages of the U.S. racial/ethnic groups shifts so does the importance of deciding how Americans are counted and defined racially/ethnically continue to change. Now that Hispanics are the largest minority group in the U.S. and show that they will continue to be a growing part of the U.S. population, the question of how their identity is depicted in governmental, academic and social arenas must be re-examined. While this study is small and limited in scope, it suggests that Hispanics or Latinos have racial pride in themselves and that the U.S. government should recognize them as another racial group, which has the same staggering variety and diversity within it, just like the other racial classifications designated by the government.

As Omi and Winant elucidated race is not carved in concrete but it is being contested now and will be in the future. In the case of Hispanics, the possibility that Hispanics will be a racial group signals revolutionary change for the U.S. because a group that has the possibility of

assuming a white racial identity is rejecting it in favor of a minority identity that to them is more accurate.

In this study, there was a lot of behavioral assimilation on the part of the interviewees, who on the most part were well educated people. Some even talked about how they present themselves as a middle class white person would in job interviews and other such occasions by being well dressed, well groomed, well spoken, and well behaved, but they also said on these same occasions they identified themselves as members of minority groups. For them, there is no contradiction between having a minority racial identity and being educated and successful. This self-identification as a member of a minority group is counter to the process of assimilation as a white person, especially compared with the option many of them have of passing for white and not disclosing their minority identities at all. The interviewees in this study, except one who is currently passing for white, do not identify themselves as white. They see themselves as members of minority groups which have enough distinctive characteristics from whites to be discriminated against by white people.

For Gordon (1961), one issue in assimilation was the fact that it had never been a realistic scenario in the U.S. for blacks to assimilate as white because the one-drop rule so rigidly defined who was black. For blacks to be assimilated into whiteness there must be a willingness for blacks to give up their black identity, and a reciprocating willingness for whites to identify blacks as members of the dominant group. The interviewees in this study who have black ancestry reported being the targets of resentment among blacks who take it upon themselves to do the self-policing of the racial group, including those who are quite powerful and have a lot to gain politically and economically from maintaining from intra-race unity. But as historically hidebound as racial boundaries have been, there seems to be a redefinition of assimilation

especially as seen in the lives of racially ambiguous people. They do not feel a compulsion to give up all their racial minority identity in order to be fully successful in the U.S. Although many of them are good at Anglo-conformity, they hold onto their minority identity.

At the same time, there are some signs in popular culture that the one-drop rule is weakening. Several Hollywood stars who have been cast in roles which were deemed racially neutral, but which in fact would probably have been deemed inappropriate for a person who admitted to having any black ancestry in the past. Maya Rudolph, the daughter of late black soul singer Minnie Riperton and Jerry Rudolph, her white Jewish husband, was a regular cast member on *Saturday Night Live*, playing black women in many of the satirical skits, but Rudolph, who is light-skinned and racially ambiguous, has more recently been featured in the big hit movies where she played the romantic lead opposite white men and unlike in the past, interracial romance was not the theme of the movie.

Although the deft side-stepping of a few stars who are light-skinned (or dark-skinned) enough to be racially ambiguous provides a shaky base for generalization, it is more telling to look at the way using a multi-focal racial identity is salient in the lives of many Americans. Many racially ambiguous people can manipulate visual cues to appear more white to the casual observer, but not all racially ambiguous people look white. They raise the issue of how all minority group members use multifocal racial identities to some extent to navigate the racial landscape. Just as it is presumed in social construction that racial identity is easy to determine by visual cues such as skin color, eye shape and hair texture, there is also a strong underlying presumption that these physical features will lead to the development of rather static and permanent racial identities. Racially ambiguous people are evidence that this is not true; that one does not have to deny a racial identity in order to be able to have some control over how one is

perceived in different circumstances. Although it is presumed that a deep brown skinned person with kinky hair for example, has only one monolithic racial identity, racially ambiguous people encourage more examination of this presumption. This same hypothetical individual may have some minimal control over how others perceive him or her racially by presenting one racial persona in some situations, perhaps by speaking Standard English well, and putting the focus on another aspect of his or her racial identity by speaking in dialect with friends and family to navigate those different environments. At no time is this individual being disingenuous about being a black person racially (and the social construction of race would make that almost impossible because it relies so much on visuals and narrow definitions), but he or she is definitely choosing ways in which to focus the attention of others on varying aspects of racial identity. Not everyone is skillful with multifocal racial identities and not everyone wants to become skillful in manipulation of racial identities.

The interviewees who have African ancestry in this study attest to having a strong black identity, and most of them want to keep it. When asked what racial identity she would adopt if she could choose any racial identity, only one interviewee who identified as black said she would choose to be white because of the advantages she saw white people getting in her place of work. She said she knew that her career would be better if she was white because she had seen white people get consideration for promotions that she didn't receive. Also she felt she was under some pressure to conform to expectations of appearance in her work place. She had to straighten her hair, because she said that a more Afrocentric hair style "would not fly" at her corporation where she was an executive. In her family life and her personal life, having a white identity was not necessary, but at work she had to look and act corporate.

Her experiences are similar to those of minority group students who have to decide how they will live on white Protestant college campuses in the U.S. As documented by Yancey (2010) these campuses can be isolating environments for students who are members of minority groups because minority cultures and heritages may not be recognized. When cultural events like Black History Month are observed on these campuses, majority students complain that black people are getting a privilege that white students don't have and say that racial differences should be ignored, paying attention to them only exacerbated any racial problems by giving minority group members privileges that white people be accused of being racist for demanding for themselves. Yancey noted that racialized minority students questioned the philosophy of colorblindness and the attitude that recognizing race was unnecessary. But there were other minority students at these schools who agreed with majority students that talking about race was wrong. Yancey called these students assimilated minority students. They seem to not have been touched by the racial/ethnic oppression that racialized minority students had seen and internalized in their efforts to find a place for themselves in largely white environments. In this study there were some interviewees who were more assimilated than most of the interviewees who under Yancey's terms would be considered racialized. These interviewees were slower to protest when, for example they heard a racial slur, but for the most part there was strong racialization among all the interviewees. All of the interviewees said that race is still an issue in the U.S.

If Bonilla-Silva is right that the U.S. is developing into a Latin Americanized system that hides social problems that are rooted in race and ethnicity under the guise of proclaiming "we are all Americans," the attitudes of assimilated minority group members will have to predominate. Already there is a struggle between many majority group members and their assimilated minority

allies and racialized minority groups and their majority allies over whether the U.S. can afford to ignore the issue of race. Government officials, courts, social activists and others have said it is necessary to keep records by race to track progress on health issues, political apportionment, and economic discrimination. That is a very legitimate and pragmatic concern. One of the things that Latin Americanization has allowed to happen is that government and other institutions ignore suffering among members of minority groups, especially blacks, by ignoring the continuing social problems that have their roots in slavery, racial stratification, and life in societies that deem them inferior. One of the ways that institutional discrimination continues is for it to remain invisible. As long as no one questions the status quo, especially in connection with race and ethnicity, it continues. Latin Americanization in the U.S. would mean that long-standing problems would not be tracked to measure progress. This would mean likely that they would never be addressed.

If as Bonilla-Silva posits, the U.S. is moving toward a tri-level system of racial stratification, then it would be appropriate to look at how racially ambiguous people would fare under such a system. Most of them would be in the category that Bonilla-Silva calls honorary whites, which is the middle group in Bonilla-Silva's stratification system. They serve as a buffer between whites at the top level and collective blacks on the bottom level, and as such, they insulate whites from revolutionary actions on the part of collective blacks and enjoy some of the privileges of being white. While I do not think that most of the interviewees in this study want to be ersatz or honorary white people, I do believe that they are aware that in some arenas, it is easier for them to separate themselves from negative stereotypes of minority groups because of their appearance, speech and demeanor. Some of them understand and are capable of joining the white group simply by not emphasizing their minority identity. It should be pointed out here that

not all racially ambiguous people are easily mistaken for white. Many of them resemble members of other minority groups.

Perhaps a larger study with more interviewees with a variety of educational backgrounds would be a truer test of the privileges and problems of being an honorary white person. Most of the honorary whites in this study would be more likely to join a revolution than to defuse it because they are already taking part in social, religious, political protests and other voluntary activities that are intended to improve the lives of members of minority groups. Just as important is the fact that most of them lived in Texas, a majority-minority state, and they see advantages to being minority group members that may not be available in other parts of the country. Native American interviewees in South Dakota reported no advantage to being minority group members; in fact they reported that American Indians were strongly discriminated against in their area. This issue of the practical advantages of one's racial identity is key to determining what choices people will make. Nagel (1995) found that Native Americans who had previously identified as white, decided to switch their racial identification to Native American after they gained Native pride and saw that the U.S. government was providing economic benefits to American Indians. I believe that the interviewees in this study follow a similar process to the one that allowed whites to begin to identify themselves as American Indians in Nagel's study. I believe they have pride in their heritages, and some of them believe there are economic advantages to belonging to minority groups, in the job market and in competition for scholarships. That perception may be erroneous, but in a majority-minority area, it is hard to dispel. When people have easy and plentiful access to the kind of cultural, political and economic activities and institutions that support the value of a racial/ethnic heritage, they can see that there is less need for them to give it up.

The racial population of the U.S. is changing so quickly that many of the theories concerning race are perhaps becoming old before their time. At least the rubric of defining white people as the numerical and hegemonic dominant group will face more challenges as the decade progresses. It may be that as Hispanics continue their rise as the most rapidly growing part of the population in the country they may take over some of the privileges that white people have enjoyed at the top of racial stratification. If they do, the U.S. will become more like Latin America and the ways in which race has been identified and conceptualized will change.

What most of this study's interviewees show is that they have been living with a different paradigm of race than the one that leaves the hegemony of European Americans largely intact. As they interrogate their family histories and develop their racial identities, they have decided that they cannot afford to repeat the patterns of the past which allowed the forfeit of specific cultural heritages in order to survive and succeed. Instead they reclaim those heritages and announce their affiliation with groups, like the Native Americans and blacks and Latinos, who historically suffered horrifically under European oppression and domination. Living with strong racial/ethnic identities which they had to work hard to unearth and maintain, often over the ostracism and opposition of members of their own minority groups, they have come to a more complicated, nuanced and thoughtful understanding of racial identity than the U.S.'s social construction of mono-racial identity would ever allow them. The continued perpetuation of the racial dictatorship partly rests on the reliance on mono-racial identities that can be manipulated to support stratification. Both U.S. born and immigrant racially ambiguous people are in the position to question that approach to racial identity and to observe the inaccuracies and omissions of fact in the racial dictatorship.

But perhaps what the interviewees in this study also demonstrate in sharing their often painful memories of hostility among members of minority groups is that the national discourse on race and ethnicity will at some point have to deal with race relations beyond those that focus on the black/white dynamic, or even minority/white dynamic. As the country's racial/ethnic demographics change, the relationships among racial/ethnic minority groups will come to the fore increasingly as those groups try to assert newly enhanced influence over the politics, economics, and culture of the country. There are long festering wounds caused by being used against each other in hurtful ways, such as wars and colorism, that have bred mistrust and acrimony among members of minority groups both toward other groups and toward themselves as they internalized persistent racial stereotypes and self-loathing. Since many of the large cities in the U.S. in every region are becoming more diverse racially and ethnically, there will be more occasions where different minority groups will find themselves pitted against each other and animosity will result. There are historical instances of coalitions and cooperative efforts between minority groups to challenge white hegemony, like the decades long legal battle waged against educational inequality and school segregation by MALDEF (the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund) and the NAACP (the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) in Texas and further back, historically, the alliances between Mexicans and black slaves that caused the establishment of an informal Underground Railroad that funneled slaves into Mexico and freedom. But these alliances and coalitions are being severely strained and, in some cases, unraveled with the prospects presented by new opportunities to gain power and prestige that neither of these groups could have enjoyed under de jure and de facto segregation.

Painful and tumultuous examples are the fights between Latinos and African Americans over control of the Dallas public schools, which have largely minority enrollments and

administrators, and the exit of my former professional organization, the National Association of Black Journalists from Unity, Inc., the coalition organization comprised of the national Hispanic, Asian American and Native American journalistic groups. It is significant that the NABJ is the oldest and the largest minority professional group and that most of the successful black journalists with careers as editors in the most prestigious newspapers and broadcast journalism companies in the nation are members of the NABJ, which has waged a war against institutional racism in hiring and the depiction of racial/ethnic minority groups from inside the industry and been responsible for raising the profile of the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, redlining in lending and other issues.

Self-determination will be an inherent part of this struggle as groups seek to redefine their group racial identities and try to prevail upon U.S. government and other institutions to recognize those identities. At the forefront of this struggle are Latinos. As interviewees in this study explained, they see themselves racially as Latino or Hispanic or more specifically Mexican or Mexican American. They reject the proposition that Latinos are an ethnic group as the U.S. government has defined them. Because Latinos are the largest racial/ethnic minority group in the country and accounted for most of the overall increase in U.S. population in the 2010 census, they will likely demand self-determination of their racial identity. This issue is intertwined in some ways with challenges to U.S. immigration policies as shown by the demonstrations involving hundreds of thousands of largely Latino crowds in protests in just the past few years.

I hope that eventually the nurturing of a spirit of shared destiny and a realization that interracial cooperation is still the best way to bring down the racial dictatorship will prevail, but as racially ambiguous people report, and as history has shown, unity is not automatically the result of inter-group interactions. As the intense border patrolling and defensiveness of the

boundaries of race that many interviewees in this study have encountered shows, understanding the strength in solidarity is not a conclusion that some members of minority groups come to easily. The outcome of the struggle between the forces of unity and the forces of disunity on the rapidly changing terrain of race in the U.S. will likely continue for the foreseeable future as groups compete for the new opportunities that will be presented to them.

## CHAPTER 12

### CONCLUSION

This research project set out to explore the life experiences of racially ambiguous people, who are frequently misidentified racially by others because they are perceived as not have the phenotype that is associated with the racial groups to which they belong. Racially ambiguous people are usually individuals with mixed race ancestry or people who come from groups that resemble each other (such as some Latinos and some Arab Americans). Twenty-four people were interviewed about their lives and how they formed and used their racial identities. All but one of them said that their racial identity was a source of constant questioning from strangers, acquaintances and co-workers. It seemed that everywhere they went; they were the objects of curiosity and then in many cases incredulity as the questioners refused to take their responses as fact because in the U.S. as a racialized system the prevailing ideology is that race is an easily identifiable mark. Racially ambiguous people defy this ideology and they contradict the racial ideology in the U.S. that decries racism but at the same time promotes the idea that the races are somehow pure or at least visually identifiable.

The most profound desire among all interviewees in this study was to be treated with basic human respect. That is a cliché, but when one considers the public nature of race, then it becomes more of an indicator of how a society handles race. People believe they can tell race just by looking at other individuals, just as they believe they can tell gender. But perhaps the more apt comparison to race as public information or as easily readable is age. Some people take great pride in being able to guess the age of others, but they might hesitate to ask an adult complete stranger how old he or she is because it is not public information. Race is not

necessarily public information, but obviously many think it is because many racially ambiguous people are constantly questioned about it.

There should be several changes at the institutional level in the U.S. to help bring about the atmosphere of basic human respect that racially ambiguous people said they want to see. The high rate of global migration in the 21<sup>st</sup> century means that there has to be a better understanding of global diversity than the racially ambiguous people in this study said they saw on the part of their fellow Americans. Some of the stereotypes and ignorance that the interviewees reported on the part of other people was almost inexcusable. Better education, especially in geography and the true racially diverse history of the U.S. and the world, as well as a basic appreciation of cultural diversity has to be part of the curricula at all levels of education. The U.S. population is too diverse racially and ethnically for Americans to think that Asians come only from Japan and China, for example, or for students to be taught that all the Native Americans were killed and run out of this or that state. The stereotypes and ignorance being passed from person to person, generation to generation are not productive. In many cases, they are exacerbating old wounds and feelings of hostility and mistrust that reopen at volatile times such as economic crises.

The lack of good education on history and culture allows many to rely on racialized myths, including the myth of racial purity. The best replacement for mythology is facts. The perpetuation of myths about race, including the one of racial purity will only prolong the racial dictatorship in the U.S. As Wallerstein (1999) and as Omi and Winant (2008) said the myths and the ideologies of a racialized system are designed to support and enhance the economic, political and other interests of the racialized system. If racial dictatorships of any kind are to be perpetuated, the people have to remain focused on the myths of race instead of the facts. As long as the dominant group has something to gain by the perpetuation of racial mythology, and a large

part of that mythology is racial purity, then it will continue to be part of the public discourse on race, even if it is coded. Racially ambiguous people, while they cannot take on the entire burden of educating the nation, are by their very existence the embodiment of the facts of a diverse racial history and the refutation of the mythology of racial purity.

The interviewees in this study are aware that discussions of race can still easily turn acrimonious. They talked about the racial bitterness on the part of their white relatives and friends stirred up by the election of Barack Obama to the presidency of the U.S. In one way, Obama embodies the same kind of challenge to the ideology of racial stratification as the interviewees of this study because he looks like and identifies as a black man, but he had a white mother and was largely raised by his white grandparents. For him, as for many of the interviewees, it is not a contradiction to identify as a black person while at the same time having some European American ancestry. It has become a fact of U.S. history that a man whose genealogy defies the mythology of racialization was elected president and in some way all curricula will have to deal with that. His presidency will continue to spur a national dialogue on the contradictions, paradoxes and confusion of racialization, and that dialogue is one of the ways in which education can take place both in formal educational institutions like schools and other places such as the journalistic and entertainment media. It is also one of the ways in which racial ambiguity will continue to be highlighted as a fact of life.

Another fact of life in racialization in the U.S. is the role the government takes in the social construction of race by counting people racially in the U.S. census. In recent decades the census has not dealt with the growing diversity of people with origins in different places from around the globe and with racially mixed individuals, including most bothersome Hispanics, who are from dozens of countries and have a mixed race history dating back hundreds of years. Now

that Hispanics are the largest racial/ethnic minority group in the U.S., the question of how to count them will increasingly become a question of politics, economics and immigration that will not disappear, especially since Latinos accounted for the bulk of the increase in the U.S. population as noted in the 2010 census. As their portion of the U.S. population continues to increase, the preference of the majority of Hispanics to be identified as members of a Hispanic racial group should be implemented by the census bureau and other agencies of the U.S. government because it more realistically reflects the racial identities of most Latinos.

As Hispanics replaced blacks as the largest racial/ethnic minority group in the country, the public discussion on race became not just one that mainly focuses on the dynamics of the relationship between blacks and whites but one that takes in the more varied and layered portrait of race relations in the U.S. More attention has to be paid to the relationships among racial minority groups because often there seems to be as much or more animosity and competition among members of racial/ethnic minority groups as there is between whites and members of minority groups. The interviewees in this study reported that they often saw this hostility and pettiness expressed by their racial/ethnic minority groups relatives and friends and they often felt hostility directed at them because as racially ambiguous people, it was presumed that they had the option of not enduring racism on the part of whites. After all, they were racially ambiguous and in many cases all they had to do was not announce their minority heritage and they would be treated as whites.

As the racial demographics of the nation change, various pride movements occur and social programs that involve affirmative action are established, it is time for the national policies to take into consideration that the entire country may majority-minority if current definitions of who is white do not change, and more attention should be taken to minimize the possibilities of

hostility and competition. Perhaps it is time not to overhaul completely or to eradicate such programs as minority set-asides in government contracting, but to find a way to provide incentives for two or more minority vendors to work together instead of competing against each other for the same contracts. There has to be a more vigorous dialogue between minority groups and perhaps this can be encouraged by the government and private foundations. Such dialogue has to be among individuals at the grass roots level, and at times will be extremely contentious, but only in continuing to learn about each other can members of minority groups have a chance of to enhance their understanding of each other.

Such a dialogue could possibly help undermine the stranglehold that European Americans as the dominant group have over the economics and politics of the U.S., but so far three years into the Obama administration this has not been the case. While Obama's election is historic, he is still a politician who has not produced a particularly radical racial agenda. He has been skillful enough to get himself nominated by one of the two major political parties and he has been accepted by the members some of the major white liberal political dynasty members of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. The announcement that the scion of the Kennedy Family, the late Sen. Ted Kennedy, endorsed Obama was a major coup for him, and more than 40 % of white voters chose Obama. But the U.S. has seen hundreds of years of racialization and racial dictatorship under European Americans and as different groups try to maximize the possible political and economic gain from their burgeoning numbers, racial politics could get uglier and devolve into racial/ethnic minorities fighting each other while European Americans and whomever they define as white maintain political and economic control over one of richest and most powerful countries in the world. European Americans may be on the way to becoming a numerical minority group, but they still have the power to redefine race through the U.S. Census and other

means. Already northern Africans and Asians with origins in the Middle East have been redefined in the 2010 census as being white. This presents in some cases an oxymoronic situation. Egyptian Americans who have origins in Africa and thus are African Americans but have been defined as white in the U.S. census are an example of the kind of logic that the government engages in as partisan politics and other forces exert their control over race as a social construction.

As mentioned in the literature review of this dissertation, there has already been a serious effort to move Latinos toward choosing white as their race, but it was probably not as successful as its architects might have wished, especially after some Hispanic organizations encouraged Latinos not to identify themselves as white on the Census. The question of who is white will continue to be a salient one as the racial demographics of the nation change, and it will appear advantageous to the dominant group to define some people as white. Latinos as the largest and most racially ambiguous and racially diverse (under current government definitions) of the racial/ethnic minority groups are in a position to give tremendous political, if not economic power to their allies.

Because this is grounded theory research and exploratory in nature; it is meant to point the way to further work in the future. This project, because of its limited scope, could not systematically delve into how regional, socioeconomic and educational differences affect the shaping of racial identity when a people are racially ambiguous. Most of the interviewees in this study have at least some training after high school and some of them hold terminal degrees. They are aware that they have to present themselves differently in different arenas of life in order to be successful in each one. It would be interesting to determine how racially ambiguous people develop their racial identities when they belong to more varied educational and socioeconomic

backgrounds than the interviewees in this study. Most of the interviewees in this research live in regions where they can easily find plenty of community organizations and familial support for their diverse racial identities, but that is not true across the nation yet. Many members of minority groups, especially immigrants from various parts of the world, still live in areas where there are no or very few other people who are also members of their minority group. How they might respond to the questions asked of interviewees in this study may be different. These issues could be explored in both qualitative and quantitative studies with a diverse variety of research methodologies.

This project also suggests that there may be a profound shift in attitudes toward race and ethnicity tied to a region becoming majority-minority. Although this project could not verify empirically that there are advantages in being identified in the job market and other economic arenas to being a member of a minority group, many of the interviewees seemed to think so. They had pride in their minority racial identities that had not been possible for members of their groups in previous generations. This pride in identity and the corresponding willingness to claim minority group status should be tracked in academic research as it may become more evident in the social construction of race. As Nagel (1995) found in her study of Native Americans who changed from identifying in the census as white to identifying as Native American, racial groups can have fluctuations in their numbers as members of these racial groups recognize both the intrinsic and extrinsic benefits of being a member of a minority group when deciding how to identify themselves racially. This study suggests that there is a shift in perception of the advantages of being a member of a minority group that changes as the region becomes majority-minority. This shift in perception should be examined in relation to more empirical variables in determining minority well-being in majority-minority areas, such as changes in political power

and economic progress. This work may also consider racial ambiguity as it is specifically related to appearing or acting more like a white person in order to determine if this progress lessens or increases the divide between members of minority groups who are darker-skinned and those who are lighter-skinned. Such work may also focus on the issue of assimilation of groups previously deemed not to be white.

Further research on the issues included in this project must also focus on relations among minority group members. As racial/ethnic minority groups come to comprise the majority of the population of the U.S. (under the current U.S. government definitions of race), they are placed in more situations where they are in conflict with each other. Intergroup relations should be an area of research that increases exponentially both to track how communities are dealing with these interactions and to develop new models that can be used around the country to facilitate better minority group interactions. More case studies of how interactions among minority groups are handled need to be undertaken. This research area has profound implications for the well-being of the country. In the recent past it has exploded in violent upheavals in some places. A major example occurred in one of the Los Angeles riots when black and Latino rioters attacked Asian American shops in their neighborhood. The Asian Americans have long acted as a middle man minority group and operated business in majority black and Latino neighborhoods across the country. In this case, the riots broke out after a Korean American store owner shot a black teenager whom she suspected of shoplifting. What these riots showed is that communities do not have an effective method of dealing with the suspicion, animosity, bitterness and jealousy that are at the core of relationships among minority groups, especially if one minority group is perceived by the other(s) as being unfairly privileged. Social scientists should have a major role in documenting these tensions and researching ways to address them. Such research would be

immensely valuable in the healing of the wounds caused by racial inequality in the past and finding more ways to bring down the racial dictatorship in the U.S.

The racially ambiguous people in this study give me hope that as the next decades unfold that in areas with large minority populations, like Texas which is already a majority-minority state, there will be less necessity to identify as white. As the economic and political advantages of being a member of a large minority population become more apparent, I hope that strong identities less fettered by the limitations of the past when one had to be white to succeed or in some cases, survive, continue to develop.

In fall 1993, *Time* magazine did an audacious experiment on its cover by digitally creating a woman who was supposed to have a common American phenotype of the near future. A passerby who saw this woman staring out from the cover at a newsstand would have probably believed she was real instead of an image created by journalists who put some percentages of racial/ethnic ancestries from all over the world into their computers to produce a compelling female face. She was Anglo-Saxon, southern European, Asian, Middle Eastern, Hispanic and African, yet she did not exactly look like any of those groups alone. Maybe she would have followed the one-drop rule and identified as solely black; but perhaps not. Maybe she would have said she was white because more than half of her heritage came from ancestors who are European and Middle Eastern; perhaps not. She might also have been able to tell stories about her immigrant ancestors from Asia or Latin America. This new face of America, if she had been a real person could have probably done all of that, but perhaps, most importantly, this “new face of America” was racially ambiguous.

Table 2

*Thematic Coding*

| Interview # | Curiosity | Objecti-<br>fication | Racial ID | Sig of Race | Looking for<br>Racial ID | Stereo-<br>types | Minority<br>Rel | Navigation | Bio Info | Racial<br>Ambiguity |
|-------------|-----------|----------------------|-----------|-------------|--------------------------|------------------|-----------------|------------|----------|---------------------|
| 1           | 4         | 8                    | 21        | 33          | 16                       | 15               | 19              | 20         | 15       | 4                   |
| 2           | 16        | 24                   | 21        | 59          | 13                       | 12               | 4               | 5          | 4        | 14                  |
| 3           | 8         | 2                    | 13        | 20          | 5                        | 9                | 4               | 2          | 3        | 10                  |
| 4           | 13        | 7                    | 10        | 20          | 8                        | 18               | 9               | 19         | 9        | 14                  |
| 5           | 4         | 1                    | 4         | 2           | 1                        | 3                | 3               | 2          | 9        | 3                   |
| 6           | 9         | 8                    | 13        | 26          | 17                       | 12               | 10              | 23         | 10       | 9                   |
| 7           | 16        | 6                    | 7         | 33          | 0                        | 8                | 12              | 4          | 6        | 6                   |
| 8           | 11        | 11                   | 8         | 50          | 8                        | 10               | 15              | 10         | 3        | 14                  |
| 9           | 3         | 3                    | 10        | 14          | 2                        | 11               | 9               | 9          | 3        | 6                   |
| 10          | 6         | 3                    | 2         | 14          | 3                        | 6                | 5               | 2          | 4        | 2                   |
| 11          | 8         | 5                    | 8         | 12          | 3                        | 8                | 12              | 3          | 4        | 4                   |
| 12          | 5         | 2                    | 11        | 25          | 3                        | 9                | 9               | 6          | 7        | 2                   |
| 13          | 14        | 40                   | 51        | 91          | 22                       | 25               | 28              | 24         | 7        | 43                  |
| 14          | 1         | 7                    | 9         | 21          | 1                        | 17               | 4               | 6          | 3        | 4                   |
| 15          | 4         | 5                    | 3         | 21          | 0                        | 8                | 17              | 1          | 7        | 6                   |
| 16          | 14        | 1                    | 29        | 47          | 1                        | 16               | 3               | 6          | 7        | 28                  |
| 17          | 4         | 4                    | 3         | 14          | 0                        | 6                | 12              | 9          | 10       | 7                   |
| 18          | 2         | 1                    | 2         | 4           | 1                        | 2                | 4               | 0          | 4        | 1                   |
| 19          | 5         | 2                    | 2         | 2           | 1                        | 4                | 2               | 0          | 5        | 4                   |
| 20          | 11        | 14                   | 31        | 42          | 11                       | 18               | 18              | 9          | 7        | 22                  |
| 21          | 6         | 4                    | 12        | 14          | 2                        | 6                | 10              | 1          | 6        | 8                   |
| 22          | 3         | 9                    | 7         | 30          | 5                        | 30               | 14              | 2          | 6        | 5                   |
| 23          | 6         | 8                    | 34        | 45          | 3                        | 13               | 20              | 6          | 5        | 21                  |
| 24          | 7         | 7                    | 13        | 7           | 5                        | 3                | 2               | 7          | 5        | 16                  |
| Totals      | 180       | 182                  | 324       | 646         | 129                      | 269              | 269             | 176        | 152      | 255                 |

Table 3

*Sample of Thematic Coding for Indira*

| Phrase  | Curiosity | Obj | Racial ID | Sig of Race | Nav | Racial Amb | Look for Racial ID | Stereotypes | Minority Rel | Bio Info |
|---|-----------|-----|-----------|-------------|-----|------------|--------------------|-------------|--------------|----------|
| Compared to my sister, I'm very Americanized        |           |     | 1         |             |     |            | 1                  |             | 1            |          |
| My sister is upset that we don't speak the language |           |     | 1         | 1           |     |            | 1                  |             |              |          |
| why didn't they want to say Indian                  |           |     | 1         | 1           |     |            | 1                  |             | 1            |          |
| I say American when someone asks me.                |           |     | 1         | 1           | 1   |            |                    |             | 1            |          |
| I wish I was the majority, not the minority         |           |     | 1         | 1           |     |            | 1                  |             | 1            |          |
| my parents, they are about race                     |           |     |           | 1           |     |            |                    |             | 1            |          |
| I'm sorry I didn't understand what you said."       | 1         | 1   | 1         |             | 1   |            |                    | 1           |              | 1        |
| I just know both                                    |           |     |           |             |     |            | 1                  |             |              |          |
| ABCD, American Born Confused Desai                  |           | 1   |           | 1           |     |            |                    | 1           | 1            |          |
| FOB meaning Fresh Off the Boat.                     |           | 1   |           |             |     |            |                    | 1           | 1            |          |
| the call was outsourced                             |           |     |           |             |     |            |                    | 1           | 1            |          |
| Yeah, we see ourselves as Asian."                   | 1         |     |           | 1           |     |            |                    |             |              |          |
| Asians didn't look like me                          |           |     |           | 1           |     |            |                    | 1           |              |          |
| they think you're Chinese, or Japanese              |           |     |           |             |     |            |                    | 1           |              |          |
| How could you be an Asian person?                   | 1         | 1   |           | 1           |     |            |                    | 1           |              |          |
| associate better with who I grew up with.           |           |     | 1         | 1           | 1   |            |                    |             |              |          |
| I feel that I am an American                        |           |     |           |             | 1   |            |                    |             |              |          |
| used to say "not Indian. I'm an American."          |           | 1   |           | 1           |     |            | 1                  |             |              |          |
| I do my own thing                                   |           |     |           |             |     |            | 1                  |             | 1            |          |

*(table continues)*

Table 3 (continued).

| Phrase  | Curiosity | Obj | Racial ID | Sig of Race | Nav | Racial Amb | Look for Racial ID | Stereotypes | Minority Rel | Bio Info |
|---|-----------|-----|-----------|-------------|-----|------------|--------------------|-------------|--------------|----------|
| No she had an African accent.                             |           | 1   |           | 1           |     |            |                    | 1           | 1            |          |
| They didn't really believe I was from South India         |           | 1   | 1         | 1           |     |            |                    | 1           | 1            | 1        |
| it was so diverse   |           |     | 1         |             |     | 1          |                    | 1           | 1            |          |
| I joined the Asian American student association           |           |     | 1         | 1           | 1   | 1          | 1                  |             | 1            | 1        |
| you just look around and I couldn't believe it            |           |     | 1         | 1           |     |            | 1                  |             | 1            |          |
| I had culture shock                                       |           |     | 1         | 1           | 1   |            |                    |             | 1            |          |
| Tyler   |           |     |           |             |     |            |                    |             |              | 1        |
| I was a minority  |           | 1   |           |             |     |            |                    |             |              | 1        |
| which is Indian   |           |     | 1         |             |     |            |                    |             |              | 1        |
| I came here when I was two                                |           |     |           |             |     |            |                    |             |              | 1        |
| I got made fun of   |           |     |           | 1           |     |            |                    |             |              | 1        |
| I was teased  |           |     |           | 1           |     |            |                    |             | 1            | 1        |
| I've grown up not associating with Indian people          |           |     | 1         | 1           |     |            |                    |             | 1            |          |
| I think I thought I was white predominately white schools |           |     | 1         | 1           | 1   |            | 1                  |             |              |          |
| Hispanics and the Africans Americans                      |           |     |           | 1           |     |            |                    |             | 1            |          |
| There was with my people                                  |           |     |           | 1           |     |            |                    |             | 1            |          |
| you have such an East Texan accent                        | 1         |     | 1         | 1           |     |            |                    | 1           |              |          |
| I don't think I feel the necessity to be with my culture. |           |     | 1         | 1           | 1   |            |                    |             |              |          |
| I feel better with anybody                                |           |     |           | 1           |     |            | 1                  |             |              |          |
| It was hard   |           |     |           | 1           |     |            | 1                  |             |              |          |
| There really wasn't a lot of comment                      |           |     |           | 1           |     |            |                    |             |              |          |
| because I acted like them                                 |           |     |           | 1           | 1   |            |                    |             | 1            |          |

(table continues)

Table 3 (continued).

| Phrase  | Curiosity | Obj | Racial ID | Sig of Race | Nav | Racial Amb | Look for Racial ID | Stereotypes | Minority Rel | Bio Info |
|---|-----------|-----|-----------|-------------|-----|------------|--------------------|-------------|--------------|----------|
| spoke fluently in my language                     |           |     |           |             |     |            |                    |             | 1            |          |
| My parents stopped speaking to the children       |           |     |           |             | 1   |            |                    |             | 1            |          |
| she started speaking English                      |           |     |           |             | 1   |            |                    |             | 1            |          |
| maybe I assimilated too much                      |           |     |           |             | 1   |            |                    |             |              |          |
| Syrian Orthodox                                   |           |     |           |             |     |            |                    |             |              | 1        |
| divorced from the first generation                |           |     |           |             | 1   |            | 1                  |             | 1            | 1        |
| I thought that I was the only one to get divorced |           |     | 1         | 1           | 1   |            |                    |             | 1            | 1        |
| He's of a different religion                      |           |     |           |             |     |            |                    |             | 1            |          |
| It was more of a teasing                          |           |     |           |             |     |            |                    |             | 1            |          |
| Total   | 4         | 8   | 21        | 33          | 20  | 16         | 2                  | 14          | 14           | 15       |

APPENDIX A  
CONSENT FORM

Before you agree to participate in this research study, it is important that you read and understand the following explanation of the purpose and benefits of the study and how it will be conducted. The title of the study is *“What are you?”: Racial Misidentification and the Limits of the Social Construction of Race in the U.S.*, and the principal investigator is Starita Smith, a doctoral student in sociology at the University of North Texas. The study is being done to complete her dissertation and there may be academic articles published on the results.

This study explores the experiences of people who are frequently misidentified by others when it comes to race or ethnicity. If you think that your experiences in life fit this description, you will be asked for an interview which is to last about 30 minutes to two hours.

The potential risks in this study are that you may talk about experiences that are uncomfortable for you to remember. The potential benefit from this study is that others may understand better the lives of people who tend to be misidentified, and they may also begin to understand the complexities that may develop as our concepts of race and ethnicity change with the population. Issues of race and ethnicity are very important in sociology.

The confidentiality of your individual information will be maintained in any publications or presentations regarding this study. I will, however photograph you, with your permission, but your name will not be published with your photograph. I will keep the signed consent forms in a locked file cabinet in one place, and the coded interview transcripts and results in another.

If you have any questions about the study, you may contact Starita Smith at (xxx) xxx-xxxx or [ssmith@unt.edu](mailto:ssmith@unt.edu) or her faculty advisor, Dr. George Yancey at (940) 565-2296.

This research study has been reviewed and approved by the University of North Texas Institutional Review Board (IRB). The UNT IRB can be contacted at (940) 565-3940 with any questions regarding the rights of research subjects.

**Research Participants’ Rights:** Your signature below indicated that you have read or have had read to you all of the above and that you confirm all of the following:

- Starita Smith has explained the study to you and answered all of your questions. You have been told the possible benefits and the potential risks and/or discomforts of the study.
- You understand that you do not have to take part in this study, and your refusal to participate or your decision to withdraw will involve no penalty or loss of rights or benefits. The study personnel may choose to stop your participation at any time.
- You understand why the study is being conducted, and how it will be performed.
- You understand our rights as a research interviewee, and you voluntarily consent to participate in this study.
- You have been told you will receive a copy of this form.

---

Printed Name of Interviewee

---

Signature of Interviewee

---

Date

I certify that I have reviewed the contents of this form with the interviewee signing above. I have explained the possible benefits and the potential risks and/or discomforts of the study. It is my opinion that the interviewee understood the explanation.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Principal Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

APPENDIX B  
INTERVIEWEE PHOTO INSTRUMENT

Most of the interviewees had their photos taken at the time of their interviews, if the interviews were face-to-face. Because racial misclassification in social interactions has so much to do with looks, the interviewees readily agreed to have their pictures taken in hopes that others would see them and understand the diversity of phenotypes within each racial group.



Robert



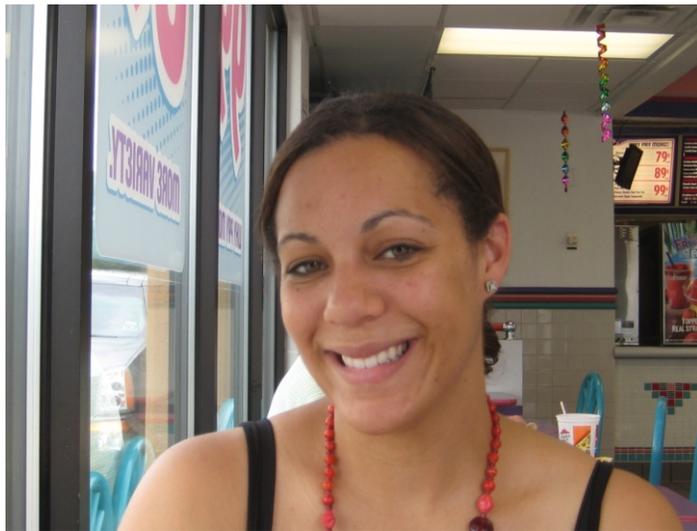
Charles



Rosa



Barbara



Sandra



Guadalupe



Beth



Deborah



David



Theresa



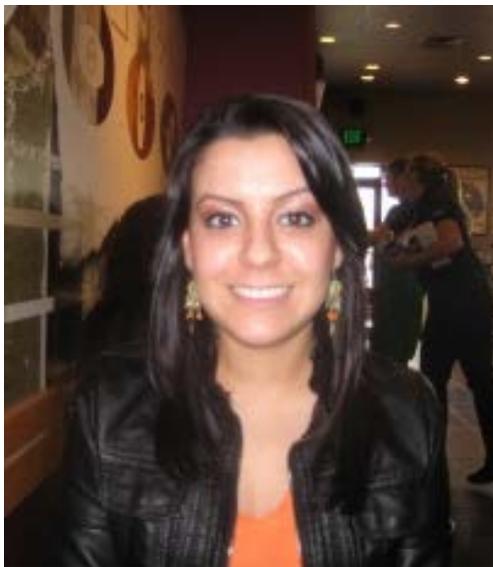
Tom



Rolando



Ronald



Cecilia



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